

Theses of doctoral (PhD) dissertation

Sporting as a supportive factor in higher education

The effect of sporting habits among Hungarian and Romanian students

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Research goals, problem statement

Youths' sporting habits changed tremendously during the last decades causing young people to turn away from classical sport traditions and follow new, trendy forms of sports. This does not mean that traditional, classical forms of sports disappear over time but new forms emerge and get preferred in which the traditional values (personality, community values, social competences besides physical development) of sports are not necessarily valid. What is more, we have to note that participation in these forms of sports is not equally accessible for all. It is a paradox that healthy lifestyle, sporty, strong and slim body, and health awareness are emphasized by social communication, fashion and education, the number of those who do exercise regularly is decreasing.

If we examine sports in higher education, we can perceive a unique phenomenon. Sporting possibilities and infrastructure are ensured locally and are highly dependent on university managements in charge for sport. As for students, the lack of doing sports or physical inactivity is rather an individual decision and possibly it is the most difficult attempt to change such attitudes. This is a huge problem as university students are considered the group with the highest social status and will hopefully exceed their peers both in terms of economic and cultural capital but their health behaviour is not a positive example. On the other hand, it is their last chance to be provided by regular in-class and extracurricular sport possibilities (by universities) before they enter the labour market. However we should also note that due to the massification of higher education, a number of low social status students enter universities/colleges that had not have opportunities to practice extracurricular sports before. Thus, universities might have a balancing role in this issue. Considering all this it is an even more serious problem that university students – based on their subjective decisions – do not utilise university possibilities. Their non-attendance is strongly related to the characteristics of consumer societies. Sport activity is sold as a consumer product, a service including sport achievements and athletes themselves. However, this is a two-sided process, consumers get the chance to choose from the supply, to decide whether they would like to consume sports and sport services. In the world of modernization and individualization, university students are making long-term decisions: whether they would like to utilise university sport opportunities. On the other hand it is a question whether everybody *can* utilise those or not.

All these individual and social characteristics call for an examination to investigate sports' role, place, and significance among students to identify factors that determine sporting habits. In our dissertation we attempt to examine the above problems in a cross-border region, among the students in the Partium higher education institutions. Our aim so to describe students' sporting habits, to identify the social, community-environmental and institutional factors that influence these, to determine the effect of students' sporting habits on their health behaviour, subjective health assessment, resilience, subjective well-being – as indicators of student well-being – and academic achievement.

In our dissertation we consider sports in social space and time to offer a theoretical framework for the research. Besides providing a multi-dimensional definition for sporting we also introduce the concept of sporting in different disciplines (educational studies, sociology, health sciences). We describe how the forms and significance of sports have changed in society and higher education, especially the roles associated with socialization that define students' sporting habits and the impact of sports on other fields of their lives. We embedded our theories (theories on capitals, habitus, milieus, social learning, positive social science, student well-being and achievement) into such topics. To examine student achievement, we relied on the developmental and social capital theories to identify the effects of sporting habits.

Our examination among university students is novel for multiple reasons. First, we rely on multiple theories and disciplines (the sociology of youths, sports and education) to answer our research questions. Second, our empirical research is unique in terms of methodology and content-wise as well. Research projects related to sporting in Hungary have involved the entire population (OLEF, Hungarostudy epidemiological examinations) or focused on big youth cohorts (Youth 2000-2012) or teenagers as a special, endangered group (Pikó et al.) until now. University students' health is not considered as a significant research topic by epidemiology. In international – mainly Anglo-Saxon – academic literature higher education sports and athletes are frequently examined (mainly the relation of sporting to other health behaviours and its impact on the different dimensions of student well-being) but it is hard to find items on non-sporting.

It is important to examine students' physical, psychological and mental status – above all – as university life, the beginning of studies and the new lifestyle associated with it, sometimes departure from family, learning difficulties, living difficulties and other personal problems might be the most stressful period in students' lives. High stress levels may cause more frequent depression symptoms, which may result in psychosomatic symptoms that may

decrease students' subjective well-being. To solve such issues it is important to identify protective-supportive factors against the above problems and also contribute to students' well-being, such as sports.

Applied research methods, research design and implementation

The analysis was performed on the 2012 HERD (*Higher Education for Social Cohesion – Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross-border Area* (HURO/0901/253/2.2.2.)) database. The population included all full-time first and final year students of all levels of education in the following higher education institutions: The University of Debrecen (Hungary), three faculties of College of Nyíregyháza (Hungary), Kölcsey Ferenc Teacher Training Institute of Debrecen Reformed Theological University (Hungary), Ferenc Rákóczi II. Transcarpathian Hungarian Teacher Training College (Berehove, Ukraine), Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences with the Hungarian Language of Education of Uzhgorod National University (Ukraine), The Satu Mare (Romania) branch of Babeş-Bolyai University. The survey was anonym and voluntary and was assisted by interviewers March-June 2012. The sample involved the 1st and 3rd year Bachelor population and the undivided programs and the 1st and 4th year Master and undivided study programs. The full sample included 2728 students. During sampling, we applied a combination of stratified, multi-stage sampling methods. We excluded the Ukrainian sub-sample from the analysis due to low response rate and distortion effects, thus the final headcount is 2619.

To identify sporting habits, we examined different variables. We defined student groups with cluster analysis based on the frequency of sporting, attitudes to the importance of sporting – considered as a motivational factor, form of sporting (free-time sports, competitive sports, institutional forms). We recoded the responses into high-level variables and formed student groups with cluster analysis.

We measured social background with economic, cultural and family capital: subjective family financial status, objective financial status (owning certain items), parents' level of education, type of residence, and the frequency of discussions with parents as family social capital. We formed milieus based on the following variables: free-time activities, cultural consumption, organisational memberships, value preferences and religiosity.

We measured health behaviour by the frequency of alcohol, drug and cigarette consumption, depressive symptoms, and the perception of health. We identified resilience

with a ten-item-scale whose validity of very high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). Based on the European Value Survey, we measure two dimensions of subjective well-being: the level of happiness and life satisfaction. We combined the self-assessment variable on health, resilience and subjective well-being scales to create an indicator of student well-being that suits concepts.

To measure the relation of achievement and sporting habits, we constructed a complex achievement index of six components: 1. Perseverance for continuing education and educational goals, 2. Extracurricular activities and commitment to these, 3. Intensity of studying, 4. Student conduct according to academic norms, 5. Affinity and willingness to work, 6. Willingness to continue education and self-education.

Research results, analysis and interpretation of results

The highest ratio, 26.2% of students exercise weekly, 17% more frequently but it is seriously worrying that one-quarter of them never or almost never (annually) does physical activities. Based on attitudes to sporting, the frequency of sporting and belonging to athletes we identified four groups with cluster analysis: 1. *Experience-seeking competitive athletes*, 2. *Regular free-time sporting students*, 3. *Occasional, social-community-focused sporting students* and 4. *Non-sporting students*.

The first group involves students that consider all forms of sports important, exercise the most frequently and partake in competitive sport the most likely. This is also supported by the fact that for them, competitive sport attitude is the most important, thus we consider them athletes. The second groups is the largest (involving almost half of the respondents), students here exercise in their free-time once or twice a week to preserve their physical and mental fitness, to gain entertainment. The third group includes students who also consider the health-protective effect of sports as important and enjoy sporting but sporting is defined by the common entertainment experienced with fellow students (they are also characterized by competitive-community-oriented sport attitude) but despite all these, they exercise rarely, a number of times a month. Thus we presume that this activity is not competitive sport, as their sport attitude is explained by its community-oriented nature rather than the importance of competition and victory. The fourth group of students also considers the health-protective effect of sports as important but sporting does not mean entertainment and experience, and

even mental fitness does not motivate them to exercise, which they actually almost never do. They are the non-sporting students involving one-third of the respondents.

1. Social and societal factors defining sporting habits

In our dissertation we identified the social, community-environmental and institutional factors that define the likelihood of students belonging to different sporting groups. Binominal analyses revealed that men belong to the competitive or occasional sporting groups, while women belong to the free-time or non-sporting groups. Students with better financial status, coming from parents with higher levels of education, or communities of sporting families, friends, high school or university societies (including fellow students and teachers), religious, community-oriented, sport-elitist or multiple civil membership milieus are more likely to sport than their peers.

We used these social background variables in a logistic regression analysis to control for each other's effect and to examine which factors sustain their influential power that increase the likelihood for students to belong to one of the sporting groups as compared to their non-sporting peers. Belonging to any of the three sporting groups is determined by three common factors: respondents' gender, the country where their institutions are located at (similarly to binominal analyses, men and Romanian students belong to the competitive or occasional sporting groups, women belong to the free-time or non-sporting group, and Hungarians belong to the free-time sporting group) and social background. Analyses on respondents' social background revealed surprisingly that none of the classical, class-specific social background variables (cultural and economic capital, family support as capital, residence) shape students' sporting habits – related to Bourdieu's theory on capital and habitus. Thus we could not verify this theory in relation to students' sporting habits. Besides, the likelihood for competitive sports is increased by sporting parents, siblings, best friends or high school teachers serving as good examples. The likelihood for regular, recreational, free-time sports is increased by religious, community-oriented, sport-elitist, civil initiative milieus, or sporting partners and best friends, while occasional sporting is strengthened by university lecturers' sporting activity. Based on the above we can state that we can partly verify Hradil's milieu theory and Bandura's theory on social learning.

Related to students' peers and university lecturers, we paid attention to institutional effect. Our results revealed that institutions might motivate students to exercise via sport events and sporting university lecturers. We can see that universities are able to level the

differences originating from students' social background: classical class-related variables do not determine students' sporting habits. However, they are not able to level the lack of sporting family and friend milieus that are shaped by subjective social factors. We can raise a further research question on the degree on other institutional effects, such as students' social integration, among sporting students as compared to their non-sporting peers and the way such an analysis might modify the differences in academic achievement dimensions among sporting and non-sporting students.

However, sporting impact inter- and intra-generational relations as well. University lecturers' sporting habits, lecturer-student discourses on the topic positively influence students' occasional sporting and possibly, student-lecturer relations, too. This – related to Coleman's theory on social capital – contributes to students' higher educational achievement, which was also verified by our research. .

However, we should also note that high school teachers, above all, P.E. teachers have a significant role even among university student cohorts related to competitive sporting. High school teachers' sporting activity establishes such an example that promotes competitive sporting among university students – according to data.

2. Sporting habits, health and subjective well-being

In the next section of our research we aimed to describe sporting habits' effect (competitive, free-time and occasional sporting) on students' health behaviour, resilience, self-assessed health status and subjective well-being as indicators of student well-being, and academic achievement. We examined achievement from two approaches: academic and non-academic dimensions. The examination of the absence of health-risk behaviour – as a form of non-academic achievement – revealed that competitive sporting students are the least successful. Among them we may find more students that regularly consume alcohol, try drugs, thus we can say that competitive sports might serve as a risk factor. However, these students are less characterized by depressive symptoms, thus in this respect we can see a protective factor. It seems that the frequency of health-risk behaviours (alcohol and cigarette consumption, trying drugs) is the lowest among non-sporting students but we found no significant correlation with smoking. Free-time and occasional sporting has no effect on risky health behaviour forms except for occasional sporting having a negative impact on regular drug use (among them more students use drugs regularly).

Competitive and free-time sporting students have a significantly higher level of resilience and subjective well-being than their non-sporting and occasional sporting peers, while free-time sporting students indicate the highest frequency on the self-assessed health status. Thus we can state that regular physical activities serves as a protective factor in all the three dimensions of health: self-assessed physical health, mental well-being and social relations, happiness and satisfaction, which in sum results in regularly sporting students' higher level student well-being. All these presumably lead to a healthier young intelligentsia with higher life expectancy, better living standards, to which regular sporting – either in the form of competitive or free-time sporting – may substantially contribute.

3. Sporting habits and academic achievement

Our analyses on academic careers show that competitive and free-time sporting students reached the highest scores except for two of the achievement components. This supports our hypothesis that regular sporting contributes to student achievement, thus verifying the development theory. Competitive sporting students take part the most in extracurricular activities, they are the most successful in sum as they had the highest scores on the complex achievement index and they are the most willing to continue their education. Free-time sporting students consider their studies the most meaningful and adhere to academic norms the most and are characterized by the most intensive learning and class preparation routines (although the latter was not significant). All these support our hypothesis on sports having an impact on establishing values, transmitting norms, developing personality, all the socialization effects among students. Among social variables that impact the complex achievement indicator mental fitness had the biggest influence, which was followed by free-time sporting, then competitive sporting while controlling for social background variables. Free-time sporting and resilience increase the likelihood to belong to the above-the-average group the high-performing group (in the latter case competitive sporting also increases the likelihood).

The supportive function of sporting is also shown by the fact that sporting students are more committed to their studies and work and consider their studies more meaningful. Such an attitude provides enough motivation for finishing their studies successfully, to continue their education even at the doctorate level. Such positive attitudes and values that are also related to sports might mean further advantages in the academia, at the labour market and in their personal lives and possibly students might take advantage of these besides the world of

sports as well. Such attitudes may promote a better life outside universities, thus regular sporting makes students happier and more satisfied indirectly and via better academic achievement indicators.

A further research question is the in-depth analysis of institutional effects with a wide range and multi-dimensional investigation. Related to this it is important to explore the sports life, system, characteristics, role of the higher education institutions in the three regions of the Partium and these effects on students' sporting habits and life dimensions (health, well-being) and achievement components.

One novelty of our dissertation is the interpretation of sports as a social subsystem – related to the theoretical background – from a multi-angle and multi-disciplinary approach, the multi-dimensional conceptualization of student sporting, which has never been done before. Similarly, the diversity of the theoretical background of the research is also unique, in which we examined the validity of multiple theories and also, we applied a positive sociology of education approach besides listing risk factors. It is extremely important to emphasize that we examined the correlation of sporting habits and academic careers among students, in a cross-border region, which has no antecedents in the Hungarian academic literature.

In sum we can state that sporting types, behaviour images, gender roles, fashion – and obviously social possibilities and finances – all influence students' attitudes to sports that change over cohorts and societies (sometimes political systems). Attitudes to sports, sports-related behaviours have historical, systemic, political, social, economic, cultural, sub-culture, environmental and individual factors and determinants. One of the main outcomes of our research is to point to the complexity and variability of these factors.

List of publications related to the thesis

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