

## A foundational contribution to a comparative sociology of sport

Siegfried Nagel, Karsten Elmoose-Østerlund, Bjarne Ibsen & Jeroen Scheerder, functions of sports clubs in European societies: a cross-national comparative study. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020) ISBN: 978-3-030-48534-4

**Maikel Waardenburg**

To cite this article: Maikel Waardenburg (2021) A foundational contribution to a comparative sociology of sport, *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 18:4, 385-388, DOI: [10.1080/16138171.2021.1931651](https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.1931651)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.1931651>



Published online: 31 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 38



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

## A foundational contribution to a comparative sociology of sport

**Functions of Sports Clubs in European Societies: A Cross-National Comparative Study**, Siegfried Nagel, Karsten Elmoose-Østerlund, Bjarne Ibsen and Jeroen Scheerder. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. (2020). ISBN: 978-3-030-48534-4

Sports clubs have developed into important local actors in organising a vital society. This social actor has become a sought-after object of study in the sociology of sport, particularly from a European perspective (see Breuer et al., 2015; Nagel, Ibsen & Scheerder, 2016; Waardenburg & Nagel, 2019). What to date has been lacking was a harmonised comparative approach, that could inform the topic from a truly pan-European and multi-level perspective.

This perspective has now been elaborated in the book *Functions of Sports Clubs in European Societies*. The book is edited by Siegfried Nagel, Karsten Elmoose-Østerlund, Bjarne Ibsen and Jeroen Scheerder, all established academics in the discipline. The book is an outcome of the Erasmus + research project ‘Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe’. Central in the book is the analysis of four functions of sports clubs: sports participation and health promotion, social integration, decision-making and involvement, and as the fourth and final function, volunteering. A major objective of this project was to collect, analyse and discuss comparable data across European countries, through a harmonised approach and focussing on the functions sports clubs play in our contemporary societies. A selection of senior and emerging sports sociologists from across Europe have contributed to the development of this book. These authors bring with them the necessary perspectives of the ten selected countries: Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland. With this collection of countries, the book lives up to its aim for a European perspective, although the representation of some regions, especially Southern Europe, could have been improved.

Each chapter starts with an abstract. Although this interrupts the readability of the book as a single running story, I consider this a good choice because it makes the most important components and insights per chapter visible at a glance. For a comparative study, in which a large amount of quantitative data on the situation in ten countries is processed, this is very useful. As this book is especially valuable for policymakers in the field of sports, the abstracts function not only as a summary but also as a selection guide. For readers who are less interested in the specific details of each country, the abstracts have a signalling effect that helps to place the situation of their own country in a European comparative perspective in a relatively short amount of time.

Chapter 2 offers the necessary conceptual ‘meat on the bone’. The in-depth approach that the authors take here is grounded in the most important studies that have appeared on the functions of sports clubs over the past twenty years. After a more general conceptual discussion of sports clubs as voluntary organisations, the authors present the multi-level framework that underpins the data collected and the analyses later presented in the country chapters. The macro-level concerns the historical roots of voluntary sport organisations in a country, the respective sport policy system, and more specifically the policies aimed at sports clubs. The meso level concerns the structural characteristics of sports clubs,

their overall goals, resources, and the organisation of the management of clubs. The micro-level is defined as the members and volunteers of sports clubs, and their characteristics, participation in activities, and democratic and voluntary involvement in a club. Then, from a narrative review approach, the chapter discusses the four highlighted functions of sports clubs. These four functions are well-chosen and the editors already introduce them on p. 2 of the book. Although they are aware that more functions could have been discussed - e.g., the identity function of sports clubs - the choice to limit this analysis to the four functions mentioned is convincing. It thus provides focus to the analysis of the data.

The core of the book starts with Chapter 3; the analysis of the functions of sports clubs per country. The country chapters have a uniform structure. The abstract is followed by a section on the broader sports policy in the country and the historical context, and a section on the structure and context of sports clubs. This is followed by an analysis of the four functions of sports clubs. Each chapter ends with a conclusion in which the authors summarise the most important insights. This part of the book is highly informative and descriptive. The laid-out tables and figures benefit the readability of the chapters and help to understand the data discussed. Due to the number of countries and the large amount of data presented, these chapters are not necessarily the most enjoyable parts of the book for the reader, but they are essential. Each in its own right, they form a valuable reference work.

Chapters 13 and 14 are the actual cross-national comparative part of the book. This is where the book starts to cover new ground. By connecting the country-specific data from the previous 10 chapters with data from the Eurobarometer, which covers all European member states, a pan-European sketch of the functions of sports clubs emerges. Although there are national or regional differences, the cross-national comparative analysis mostly indicates the similarities in the social functions of European sports clubs. A striking finding of the book is that club-organised sports participation declined in all countries (p. 315), while in most countries clubs experience an increase in the number of volunteers (p. 367). Another important finding concerns the motives for club-organised sport participation, which underscores the dominance of the discourse on personal health and fitness in all European regions. Another relevant finding is that we should consider voluntary work as the true backbone of the European sports club model. This study underscores that we cannot underestimate the cultural and practical value of volunteering in European sports participation. In regards to the four functions of sports clubs, it is relevant to mention that sports clubs themselves experience these functions as ingrained in their core business and view integration, active citizenship, or health promotion as a positive side effect. Following this observation, the authors suggest there is potential for a more committed position for sports clubs to contribute to public welfare.

Although it is not within the scope of this review to discuss all the interesting findings presented in this part of the book, I would like to stress the importance of the European-wide insights these chapters provide. Both for practitioners and academics.

The editors rightly note that this book is of value to policymakers, administrators, and managers of governing bodies of sport and sports associations. To evaluate the practical contribution of the book we can refer to a recent editorial in this journal (Evans, 2020), in which the perspective of seven practitioners on the value of sports sociology is elaborated. One of the major barriers for practitioners the editorial identifies is the limited time to read around a subject. This book offers practitioners a convenient up-to-date starting point for academically informed information on the functions of sports clubs and a helpful alternative to independently reading various academic papers. The book is also theory-light and in its conceptual language close to the policy language and, as a result highly relatable for

practitioners. The book has the potential to serve as a basis for further dialogue and cross-pollination between academics and other professionals in the sports sector.

*Functions of Sports Clubs in European Societies* is grounded in a functional sociological perspective. I would have appreciated it if the authors connected their work more to alternative perspectives that are relevant to our community. Other voices that analyse the roles sports clubs play in our society can be found in for instance the institutional or critical theoretical approaches. From these alternative sociological perspectives, we know that organisations should not solely be understood in their functional role to society. Selznick (1953) and many others after him have convincingly shown that the functions organisations play in society should further be understood from their institutional embeddedness. This perspective has also found its way into studies of sport sociology and sport management (e.g. Fahlén & Stenling, 2019). Among others, it raises a question of how volunteering as an institutional practice, and related norms and symbols, shape voluntary work as a function of sports clubs. Likewise, while one of sports clubs' functions may be the inclusion of vulnerable or underrepresented groups, hegemonic power relations affect to which extend and in what ways representatives of such groups are allowed to be active in sports clubs (e.g. Smits et al., 2021). This exclusionary function of sports clubs has also been described and discussed from a more functional perspective (see van Haaften, 2019). I would have liked the authors to discuss their findings more in light of these existing insights.

Having said this, the books' focus on four functions of sports clubs from a comparative approach has much to offer to our scholarly community. Because of the book's more dominant focus on policy relevance, the editors are less explicit about its scientific relevance. Nevertheless, *Functions of Sport Clubs in European Societies* also serves our scientific quest for more grounded knowledge. This book shows that cooperation on a European scale can lead to rich analyses and well-founded insights into sports developments, and in particular the functions of sports clubs. The publication is one of the first in the sociology of sport to take a truly comparative approach. This methodological approach is highly developed in other scientific fields, e.g., political science, but has only limited application in our discipline (exceptions are Albrecht et al., 2019; Bergsgard et al., 2007). Especially when it comes to understanding sports clubs and sports participation, we can consider this book as a significant foundation for the further development of a comparative approach in the sociology of sport. The researchers' hard work in arriving at a harmonised approach has borne fruit and deserves to be further embraced and replicated in the years to come.

## ORCID

Maikel Waardenburg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3629-6531>

## References

- Albrecht, J., Elmose-Østerlund, K., Klenk, C., & Nagel, S. (2019). Sports clubs as a medium for integrating people with disabilities. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 16(2), 88–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2019.1607468>
- Bergsgard, N. A., Houlihan, B., Rommetvedt, H., Mangset, P., & Nødland, S. I. (2007). *Sport policy: A comparative analysis of stability and change*. Routledge.
- Breuer, C., Hoekman, R., Nagel, S., & van der Werff, H. (2015). *Sport clubs in Europe* (pp. 243–272). Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.
- Evans, A. B. (2020). Research impact in the sociology of sport: views from stakeholders outside academia. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 17(3), 185–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2020.1737447>

- Fahlén, J., & Stenling, C. (2019). (Re)conceptualizing institutional change in sport management contexts: the unintended consequences of sport organizations' everyday organizational life. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 19(2), 265–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2018.1516795>
- Nagel, S., Ibsen, B., & Scheerder, J. (2016). Sport organizations in Europe—changes and challenges. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 13(2), pp. 185–86.
- Selznick, P. (1953). *TVA and the grass roots: A study in the sociology of formal organization* (vol. 3). University of California Press.
- Smits, F., Knoppers, A., & Elling-Machartzki, A. (2021). Everything is said with a smile': Homonegative speech acts in sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(3), 343–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220957520>
- van Haafden, A. F. (2019). Do birds of a feather play football together? A study on ethnic segregation in Dutch amateur football. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 16(2), 146–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2019.1620411>
- Waardenburg, M., & Nagel, S. (2019). Social roles of sport organisations: developments, contexts and challenges. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 16(2), pp. 83–87.

Maikel Waardenburg 

*Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands*

 [m.waardenburg@uu.nl](mailto:m.waardenburg@uu.nl)

Received 15 April 2021; accepted 16 April 2021

© 2021 European Association for Sociology of Sport  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.1931651>

