

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA  
FACULTY OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY**

**ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

***SOCIAL CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE  
PERFORMANCE GYMNASTICS’ PRACTICING –  
A DIACHRONIC ANALYSYS***

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*Key words: gymnastics, social capital, sportive capital, sportive associations, sport management, performance, longitudinal perspective, cross-perspective, motivations, professional outcomes.*

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## **1. Introductory argument**

Dedicated sports market in the former communist bloc countries, but especially in Romania, gymnastics (especially artistic one) occupies a special place, Romanian interest for this sport became a true mania in the 70s and 80s, through the emblematic figure Nadia Comaneci, remains to this day a real “country brand”, a model of perfection, performance, ideal behavior etc. for generations of children of that period. Perhaps more than in other competitive sports, in case of gymnastics (especially artistic one), socializing effects of this brand (life gymnasts performing social value and role model especially for young girls) are evident in that period in our country. On the other hand, as with other national gymnastics schools, especially in countries of the socialists/communist (the case of tiny Chinese gymnasts is illustrative), sports child life also means a life dedicated to career, performance, club, nation. Basically, through the strict life (socializing is almost exclusive in gymnastic teams, the regulatory framework of gymnastics as extremely demanding sport) - this sport became then charged specifically with political symbolism during the Cold War - , athletes were part of a closed world, with specific rules, with special arrangements (exhausting training, guidance to overcome personal records, systematic training camps, boarding school program regimen reduced, limited contacts with ordinary children and shared social space).

Not coincidentally, some of the former child-performers teenagers have trouble adjusting to ordinary society, after they finish they are done with sport career. Is it a social problem or not? To some extent, it is, although the percentage of these children is still very small compared to the total population of children, practicing sports regularly or sporadically. Then, we should not overlook, weighing the advantages and disadvantages that performance option gives, of any kind, it brings many benefits, opens the possibility for an exceptional career and life, produces wealth for many performers and their families (some of them seeing the child as a source of the family to go out of poverty and reach prosperity), athlete reinforces positive model career, carrier of positive values, societal generally beneficial effects model (health, rule-based competition, cooperation, fair play, models of success, feeling of national pride).

Trying to determinate the location and fate of gymnastics in our society, through a complex doctoral research I intended to contour more than just a descriptive-evolutionary image of the sport, seeking causal springs and brakes that stimulate children’s enrollment

among athletes, and also consistent and sustainable solutions to vitalize advantageous actors involved in Romanian gymnasts, a register of multilevel analysis of problems in this sport, athletes quality of life, their future prospects. The analysis focuses on both structural and societal dimension (evolutions and statistic trends), as well as meso-social (sport institutions – federation associations, clubs – as a source of capital by promoting and dissemination of beneficial values to the individual and wider social level) and individual (values, motivations, aspirations and behaviors of athletes).

## **2. The main contents of the thesis chapters are:**

a) *Summary of significant theories and models* in sociology and sports psychology, with emphasis on those aimed at individual (motivational resorts), sports teams, groups, organizations and leadership.

b) *Vision and sociological studies* (and interdisciplinary), related to sports performance and weight, where is discusses issues/objectives dysfunctions facing clubs/associations professional sports in our country, in relation to the sporting dynamics western contexts and institutions. I tried to emphasize how important it is that these clubs are effective, to act as true social agents, highlighting the economic, symbolic, macro-social sport marketing and the dissemination of interest in grassroots sports, seen as leisure, and then it is treated by the prospects of producing capital of the sports club, health issues and healthy development. The mutation occurs in contemporary society focused vision that sport, increasingly more disseminated at the table, a change of perspective intrinsically linked to the quality of life of the modern sense (physical and mental).

c) *Developments and trends in artistic gymnastics* from us, relative to its progress worldwide, chapters who include the *qualitative research*: collections of opinions from specialists in the gymnastics area (former gymnasts, coaches, sport clubs managers) by semistructured interviews.

d) *The epistemology of the research*, where the ratio of common sense approach and systematic approach, theoretical – argumentative support of the methodology commonly used in empirical research.

e) *The research*: i) the analysis of longitudinal data, who describe the professional outcomes of the former legitimed gymnasts, by two generations at several decades distance between; ii) quantitative research (survey-based questionnaire and application of psychological tests) comparing the two sub-samples of subjects: children and young

gymnasts and gymnastics legitimated (performance), and respectively unpracticioners and practitioners of sports as a hobby or leisure (mass). iii) Qualitative investigation (through qualitative interview guide) among several subjects (5 performance former gymnasts who opted for the sport and competed before 1990, and 5 gymnasts who competed performance after that moment, to round analysis of generational, diachronic perspective).

**3. The main ideas of the work** can be demarcated thus:

**A. Conclusive elements of theoretical analysis**

- As in any field, and in the description and explanation of performance in sports (gymnastics), it requires a multifactorial vision. It is very clear in the study exposed that both environmentalists and the biological approach (genetic), as well as personality traits when taken separately, may not realize the complexity of sport or performance. It has to be analyzed how interact various factors and multiple variables. Moreover, it is necessary to see this dynamic axis of temporality, custom, whenever possible, each athlete.
- Summarizing the main ideas of the trends found in contemporary sociology and studies in the area of sport, it can be concluded that there was a significant shift in the vision of sport, amplitude of changes in the era of late modernity requires a paradigm shift: dynamic social processes are connected to different forms of power relations: intra-societal and inter-societal. Balance continuity-change in the social life of the modern period has been replaced with an acceleration of change, by the partial loss of the widely assumed rules. In turn, the sport is engaged in this flow of globalization and diversification, widening its range of meanings and social economic, political and cultural functions.
- Although performance sport has retained much of valences which established him as a social phenomenon, it catches more ground in the public consciousness, with the effects on government strategies and clubs and sport associations, benefits related to the development of social networks through these organizations, networks that include both formal and informal dimensions, with individual effects and macro-social positive ones. These changes in optical and social commitment are increasingly invoked and considered in the sport policy area.

- Regarding to groups, team and leadership are emerging importance of this area for gymnastics. Although when it comes to artistic gymnastics, the problem of team cohesion, relationship between the trainer and team captain, relationship between the club-manager-trainer are not as big as it is in rhythmic gymnastics, I started the following three ideas: a) How and how much the gymnastic clubs are financed, what is the politics in this direction on the macro level, knowing that there is no big competition between clubs, the attention is focused on the results of the national team in global confrontations; b) Workout style, conception of the relationship between authoritarian and democratic permissive is changing over time in Romania; c) Relationship between gymnastic clubs (schools) and parents.

## **B. The research**

The overall aim of the investigation was connecting multiple dimensions of anchoring interest in sports, in this case, gymnastics, with more specific objectives. To identify trends in values, aspirations, motivations and ideas about sport options, we built items questionnaires after several relevant indicators: influences in decision making process (for gymnastics), motivations (for gymnastics), sport benefits (for the entire specimen), aspirations, future plans (for the entire specimen). Besides the actual survey, we introduced tests that pursue three operational psychological dimensions in assessing values, attitudes and motivations of respondents: self-esteem, place of control, existing topics. We sampled two groups of subjects, each constitute into other two sub-groups, as follows: GYMNASTICS group (G) consists of legitimated gymnasts (of artistic or athletic specialties - called GA – and rhythmic or aerobic – called GR); COMMON group (C), that comprising ordinary subjects that matches in general and by the genre group of gymnasts and comprises two sub-groups, called “common sport” (CS) and “unsportsmanlike common” (CN); two groups of gymnasts from two different GENERATIONS having as temporal distance three decades between their public performances and competitions participation (1984 and 2014), named G1 and G2.

*The most significant trends* arising are:

- The education level of parents and respondents over 18 years of GR and GA groups slightly exceeded, up or down from the national average of persons by the study levels in the adult age category (over 40 years old) – corresponding to gymnast’s parents –

which strengthens contrasting profile of bathes of this view. This confirms the theory of sporting selectivity by the family of origin, in sports that are “expensive” or “cheap”, costs of practicing a sport is important in the decision of families to enroll their children. And between level of education and income there is a direct association.

- For those in the GR group the option for gymnastics is considered to have “no influence” in 47% of cases compared to 24% of cases from GA batch. In GA group this was largely influenced by the media and Olympic champion model (cumulating 44% in this group, compared to 19% in group GR!). Next, stands high frame influence the selection of gymnastics (selections being made from primary school and sometimes in kindergarten). Clearly, beyond the partly illusory decision without influences, fascination for gymnastics, especially in girls, derive from halos that gymnastics spreads (the artistic one), both through its special beauty as a spectacular sport and through iconic figures, models, promoted by the media. But actually influences exist in a greater scale than individuals want to recognize, especially during childhood and adolescence. This way the Olympic and world champions, known through the media, select media campaigns itself (“Country, Country, we want champions”), then significant persons who are in search for talents and offer benefits, including material ones to the families (scholarships, accommodation and financial maintenance for Olympic Club) and do on, there are factors that conjugates in decision making process, as you can see in following studies (see Albion and Fogarty, 2002; Betz, Borgen și Harmon, 2006; Dauncey și Hare, 2014). However, mostly, the decision is perceived rather be taken alone, it is an indicator of orientation towards independence, a phenomenon encountered in adolescence and youth, also illustrating social change in mentalities and attitudes: compared to the past, children and adolescents are now encouraged, both in the family, school and society, to express themselves, to show their personality and to strengthen through the empowerment decision, the effectiveness of self (Bandura, 1997; Jordan, Nigg, Norman, Rossi, Benisovich, 2001).
- The hierarchy of influences in the CS group knows a different configuration compared to the configuration of the sample declared G. Although even here the majority is declared the decision to be taken without influences, the folowing factors appear to influence as friends and media. This supports the hypothesis of extending and sustaining social capital networks through grassroots sport, as leisure, indicated and proven by numerous studies (Koski, 2008; Gomboș, 2008; Sabău, 2010), and in hte



same time globalization is reflected in the importance of sport in the media release (Bryjak și Soroka, 2011; Maguire, 2006; Robertson și White, 2003).

- Looking on motivation for choosing this specific sport for gymnastics, predominate reasons incumbent on job satisfaction ( the feeling of being present projected in the future) and the financial and material possibilities that they open the status of a professional athlete (which corresponds to the instrumental values). This pragmatic reason accents are greater in group GA. This way we can make a conclusion that children often come from poor backgrounds, whose parents and themselves have the ambition to get material benefit and succeed financially in the future, through the benefit of performance. Pecuniary size is very important, and together with job satisfaction, for both groups, visible ahead psychological benefits of sport for the corresponding expressive values.
- For respondents from common group (control group), motivations of sport choice have different configurations: “Health and wellbeing” and “passion” are more important in the common group than in the sample of gymnasts. It is relevant to distinguish “sport as profession” and “sport for pleasure”. Basically, the entire resort and motivational value of options life is expressed here, common individuals, practical or a regular exercise or physical activity is dominant expressive values and less the instrumental ones when it comes to the vision of sport. Thus, it notes the importance of friendly relations between practitioners of mass sports, followed at some distance from the grounds of affirmation and prestige. Although there are no major discrepancies between bathes, the consignment note various sporting visible assessments related to social relationships and friendship, compared with the group that doesn't practice sports. This reinforces the findings of studies (Brettschneider, 2004; Koski, 2008; Colțan, 2013) showing increased interest in this socia dimension in the modern sports clubs in developed countries.
- Regarding to future intensions or existing career, for the sample of gymnasts, it appears that athletes, overall, quite realistically assess the real chances on thei careers, labour in preparing or already have specialized the most frequent from the multiple onces. From the informal collected data ( talks with ex-athletes in rhythmic gymnastics), it seems that employment opportunities in another field are higher in artistic group, various other areas related (in the field of Entertainment and Dance for amateurs), often being targeted jobs abroad are attractive for these athletes (look at the French athletes in career development, described by Fleuriel and Schott, 2011). On the other hand,

gymnasts in group GA look to be less concerned about family and marriage than occurs on other batch, instead being more centered on work in the field. The same factors that differentiate the profiles lots (level of education of origin) have a sa here (Betz, Borgen, Harmon, 2006; Hatos, 2010).

- In the pooled sample, one can see that college and high professionalization is the intention of the future or formula already adopted most commonly by the subjects in the common lot. This is good indicator that young people, even children, see a positive element in studies, to which they aspire. It is interesting that existing work in the field or the present school specialization is not as satisfactory as the aspiration for something else, it reflects the desire to change the existing activity or the school specialization they are busy with, at the moment. It works otherwise with gymnasts, that, through the option for a professional sort, being legitimated, competition participants actively involved in the sports world seem more committed to the future potential of future bids.
- Looking ahead in life, to sample batch gymnasts significant differences about “ambition and perseverance”, “family that supports you” and “talent” where GA group considers that these conditions are very important for success in life. It also finds that group GR granted a significantly smaller number of gradations “very important”, the views being more moderate, nuanced in this group, adding the options that correspond to pragmatic expressions (instrumental vision of life) – talent, ambition and perseverance – it appears that more than half of group GA, family support, talent and ambition/ perseverance receive high credit equally.
- Comparison of self-esteem scores on four groups shows that both groups of samples, mostly have average scores of confidence in themselves, and that ots of gymnastics and he common unsportsmanlike, they are somewhat higher that the GR and CS. In contrast, a higher self-esteem have those in GR and CS group compared with the corresponding loads in their samples. Data is not likely to intrigue, the only remark is those higher scores in the group GR and CS can anchor the situation (statistics) social somewhat higher for these groups, variables arising indirectly own parenting and education (for those over 19 years), better urban origin represented here.
- The LOC comparison test scores obtained from respondents in the four groups, projecting that the locus of control is positioned internally rather (we indicate intuition and high self-esteem) for lots GR and CS. As well as it is with self-esteem, we are

dealing with the difference that we put on the factors “threshold age/stage”, association with educational status of parents and themselves, that are predominant in the consignments (socialization in the family, attitudes) and general social environment to which they belong.

- Controlling variable-esteem by linking them with locus of control, it showed that the strongest association occurs between category “average self-esteem” and place all of the pooled sample (control), and the same with facing internal profile of the sample of gymnasts, which does not indicate a statistically significant correlation between high self-esteem and internal locus expressly. Instead, there is a statistically significant correlation, between the reporting of a foreign place and ambivalent and low self-esteem at high statistical significance.
- Diachronic analysis (comparing old generation of gymnasts and the new ones) highlights that, in terms of generational, at a distance of four generations of Romanian gymnasts, appeared mutations in values and attitudes. This translated visible from performance aspiration, to materialistic, instrumental and external locus, and then to the expressive and associative profile, internal locus, high level of anxiety and search of the real self with some variations depending on variables and current professional position. It develops the idea that the destiny of Romanian gymnastics is marked by sports marketing need adapted, flexible and engaged in producing and sustaining quality sports, engaging vision of sport as a resource of valuable social capital.

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