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# The Body and Sport

## 1. Introduction

It is difficult to question the central role of the body in sport and sports competition. Although sport is an area shaped by cultural, social, political, and economic factors, the tools of direct competition are the bodies of female and male athletes who fight against their opponents, as well as against the weaknesses and fatigue of their own bodies. Corporeality is subject to various modifications, it is improved through continuous training, but also by means of prohibited forms of doping or the processes of body cyborgization (described later in the chapter), as is the case with disabled athletes. However, corporeality is important not only in the context of sports competition, but also in the context of socio-cultural visibility and recognition. The athletic body has long remained synonymous with the male body, while the bodies of female athletes are still more valued for their physical attractiveness than their sports predispositions, and the bodies of disabled athletes, unless they are close to normative patterns, remain almost invisible. At the same time, sport is a field for questioning the prevailing ideals of physicality, mainly in the case of the female body, fighting for the legitimization of various patterns of female and male bodies and undertaking activities traditionally associated with the opposite gender.

The body in sport can also be viewed from the perspective of a person practicing sport, experiencing effort, fatigue, and pain, but also the pleasure associated with overcoming one's own weaknesses, an increase in adrenaline or improvement in fitness. In this case, the researchers' interest falls on amateur sport, often also physical activities undertaken by them. On the one hand, research focuses on professional sport – on the production of the sports body, its control and images, while on the other – on the experience of the body during sports training. Nevertheless, this does not exhaust the common areas of sociology of the body and the sociology of sport.

Two chapters may be helpful in presenting them: *Body Studies in the Sociology of Sport: A Review of the Field* by Cheryl L. Cole published in the *Handbook of Sport Studies* (2000) and *Sport and the Body* by Pirkko Markula published in the *Routledge Handbook of Sociology of Sport* (2015). Both authors, among the main researchers of the issue of the body and gender in sport, review the literature, indicating the

main areas of research. Cole has distinguished three forms of the body that appear in sports studies: (1) the contemporary athletic body, (2) the deviant/transgressive body, and (3) the commodified body (Cole 2000: 440). In the first context, she draws attention to, among others, the significance of the athletic body in creating identity, both individual and collective (e.g., national), the role of science and technology in the “production” of the athletic body, as well as contemporary corporeal discourses and norms. In relation to the deviant body, she points to, among others, research on violence in sports, research on bodybuilders, also in the context of crossing gender boundaries, and analysis of the images of athletes affected by addictions or diseases. And finally, in the third context, the athletic body becomes the subject of research into consumer culture, for instance, in relation to advertising or the fitness market.

Markula (2015), referring to Cole, has distinguished four issues in her literature review: (1) the physically active body as a representation of identity construction, (2) studies of “embodied subjectivities,” (3) Foucauldian studies of disciplinary techniques of the body, and (4) calls for the inclusion of the material body in social analyses (Markula 2015: 272). In the first area, the author mainly refers to numerous studies of the images of athletes’ bodies presented in the media, analyzed from a gender, race or class perspective, in addition to an increasingly intersectional one, i.e., combining the above-mentioned social categories. In the second area, she indicates studies analyzing the construction of individual identity through embodied experiences (lived body experiences), as well as studies of practices that reinforce or resist existing norms concerning the body. Finally, in the third area, in which Markula’s own publications are also important, she lists examples of studies of disciplinary practices in the field of sports and recreation that serve as tools to maintain domination.

The following chapter is consistent with the literature review presented by both the above-mentioned authors, but places greater emphasis on the issue of the body rather than sport. Sport is a field in which various issues related to the body and embodiment are analyzed. At the beginning of the chapter, readers will be introduced to the use of classical sociological concepts related to the body in sports research. Then, concepts related to the body and embodiment appearing within the framework of social analyses of sport will be presented, and in the further part, important research in this area. The chapter ends with a short summary and review questions. The review is not exhaustive because, as mentioned, it is impossible to separate the body from sport, and, as a result, a significant part of research in the field of the sociology of sport also refers to the body/embodiment. The key used in the selection was mainly that of the achievements of sociology of the body and the most important researchers from its point of view, as well as concepts and notions.

## 2. The most important theoretical concepts

### Classics of sociology (of the body) about the athletic body

In sociological analyses of sport, both amateur and professional, there are references primarily to three classics of sociology, whose works are also widely used in sociology of the body. They are: Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Norbert Elias, to whom entire chapters or significant parts are devoted in textbooks on the sociology of sport, such as the *Handbook of Sport Studies* (2000) or the *Routledge Handbook of Sociology of Sport* (2015). Marcel Mauss is referred to in the sociology of sport to a lesser extent. At the same time, with the growing popularity of research on the experience of the sports body, the phenomenological perspective is gaining importance, and thus the concept of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

### Michel Foucault

Using the scientific achievements of Michel Foucault within the sociology of sport is not surprising since the body – including the techniques of disciplining and managing it – was the focus of this researcher’s interest (Markula, Pringle 2006; King 2015). Foucault was interested in controlling the body both in relation to the individual and to society or the state, and both of these dimensions appear in analyses of the body and sport. As an example, we can give considerations on the status of physical culture in communist countries, which show that the authorities encouraged practicing sports in order to create healthy, vital, and strong employees and members of the nation (Jakubowska 2021). At the same time, as Peter Roubal (2003: 10) noted, docile bodies were not only produced to be used, but also to be displayed, as was the case during mass gymnastics shows organized in Central and Eastern Europe during communism, and also today, for example in China or North Korea.

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The key concepts from Foucault’s theory used in social analyses of sport are: disciplining and controlling the body, the subjection of the body, the docile body, and discourse.

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Analyses of contemporary sport, which is mainly driven by individual motivations, also refer to the concept of disciplining the body. Although a healthy and fit body is still more effective from a social (state) point of view, we ourselves are increasingly the subjects of disciplining it, which refers us to Foucault’s (1977) subjection of the body. At the same time, the body is disciplined through imposed training regimes, diet, rest, spatial arrangement, etc., which also becomes the subject of analyses in relation to both professional and amateur sport (see, e.g., Markula, Pringle 2006; Barker-Ruchti, Tinning 2010). Representatives of social sciences also draw on Foucault’s concept of the “technology of the self,” focusing not only on the disciplinary nature of sport, but also on the possibilities of self-creation that it offers (see, e.g., Markula, Pringle 2006).

As King (2015: 98) noted, “it would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Foucault’s discourse theory on the sociology of sport,” rightly stating, however, that it was not manifested “in extensive or profound analyses of his writings on the subject,” but rather in ubiquitous analyses of discourse on the sports body. These analyses are often undertaken from a feminist perspective, which also uses Foucault’s concepts in sports studies. The conducted discourse analyses show how the visual representations of athletes and sports commentaries sustain dichotomous and stereotypical thinking about gender and male dominance in sport. The authors who contributed to the development of this research trend include Margaret Duncan, Cheryl Cooky, and Michael Messner.<sup>1</sup>

### Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu is another of the classics of sociology, whose concepts are widely used in social analyses of the sports body, as well as in the sociology of sport more broadly (Clément 1995; Grenfell 2015). It is worth mentioning that he is the author of the article *Program for a Sociology of Sport* published in the “Sociology of Sport Journal” (1988), as well as other publications relating to sport, although it was never the main area of his scientific interests. In social analyses of sport, there are references to Bourdieu’s concept of the “field” (see, e.g., Connolly, Allen-Collinson, Evans 2016; Broussard 2020), but the concept of “habitus,” which is key from the perspective of sociology of the body, is primarily used. Its dissemination in the sociological studies of sport was largely contributed to Loïc Wacquant (one of Bourdieu’s closest collaborators), which will be discussed later in the chapter. The concept of “habitus” is referred to, among others, by researchers of sports and martial arts (see, e.g., Sánchez García, Spencer 2014); this concept is also used in research on other sports, e.g., Angela Pickard analyzed in her publications the process of acquiring the dancer’s “habitus” (Bailey, Pickard 2010; Pickard 2012).

The concept of “habitus” and, above all, “taste” is also important in physical activities differentiated by class, which Bourdieu presented in one of his most important books – *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984). In Poland, using Bourdieu’s theory, Michał Lenartowicz (2012) examined this phenomenon.

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Practicing a specific sport, the “marks” it leaves on the body (muscles, tan, slimness, etc.), as well as the place and company, are, according to Bourdieu (1984), tools for emphasizing belonging to a specific social class and distinction. Another criterion for both class and gender division is the (non-)contact nature of the sport.

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1 A list of selected publications by the indicated authors can be found, among others, on Michael Messner’s website: <http://www.michaelmessner.org/research/sports-media/> (accessed: 14.10.2021).

Middle and upper classes choose sports that require a certain financial outlay and allow them to separate themselves from other social groups; examples include golf and sailing. Sports practiced by the lower (working) class, such as football or boxing, involve greater physical effort and physical contact. And although many physical activities have now become accessible to the general public and, thus, play a less distinctive role than before, the physical predispositions and tastes associated with specific sports remain dependent on the socio-cultural context in addition to the capitals generated in the classes.

According to Bourdieu (1988: 154), all sports can be placed on a continuum, where the place of each of them is determined by the relationship to the (opponent) body required in a given sport. Contact sports are attributed to lower social classes, but are also more often defined as “masculine” (where masculinity is defined by physical strength, direct confrontation, and physical advantage as is the case in lower social classes), which is related, among others, to the creation of specific habituses in the process of gender socialization. This process is examined by numerous authors, using Bourdieu’s scientific achievements, as well as the achievements of gender studies in their research (see, e.g., Brown 2005; Thorpe 2009).

### Norbert Elias

Norbert Elias is another important author, both from the point of view of sociology of the body and the sociology of sport (Murphy, Sheard, Waddington 2000; Malcolm 2015), although his presence in analyses of the sports body is less visible than in the case of the aforementioned Foucault or Bourdieu. Nevertheless, as Malcolm (2015: 58) noted, Elias’s considerations, especially those concerning the interdependence of “nature” and “culture” (nature – nurture), have become the basis for research on the body in sport. Figurative sociology, of which Elias is considered to be the founder, developed in this subdiscipline focused, on the one hand, on research on sport, health, body control, as well as both the external and internal regulation of behavior or emotions (see, e.g., Malcolm 2011), and, on the other, on the relations between sport and the environment (see, e.g., Mansfield 2009).

Norbert Elias is mostly associated with the field of sport through his publication *Quest for Excitement. Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (1986), written together with Eric Dunning. It refers to the process of civilizing society described by Elias (1980), indicating that one of its consequences was the need to create enclaves in which one could find and experience excitement. According to the authors, one of these was sport perceived as a type of “mimetic activity.” This means that the feelings associated with it are similar to those experienced in “real life,” but are only their imitation because they are not based on real danger (although it should be noted that sport can be dangerous), and the essence of sport is a “controlled lack of control over emotions” (Elias, Dunning 1986: 96). For athletes, sports competition becomes a substitute, an exciting alternative to violence and fighting, which is why, as Elias (Elias, Dunning 1986) has emphasized, the element of competition, including physical competition, is so important. The process of civilizing society is

also referred to in the analyses of the process of the sportification of certain sports activities or games conducted, among others, in relation to mixed martial arts (Sánchez García, Malcolm 2010).

### **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**

The use of the phenomenological approach, and thus the concept of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), concerns the growing popularity of research on the experience of the body in sport, the process of teaching sports skills, embodied or tacit knowledge (Jakubowska 2017), in addition to the increasing awareness of the researcher's own embodiment and its impact on the research process. The usefulness and application of the phenomenological perspective in sports research have been presented in numerous publications, among which one should mention the book edited by Irena Martínková and Jim Parry (2012) entitled *Phenomenological Approach to Sport*, as well as articles by Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson and John Hockey, which will be discussed later in the chapter (for more sources, see Jakubowska 2017).

The phenomenological approach has become the basis for analyses of, among others, martial arts, where the book *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World* (2011) edited by D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge can be cited as an example. The authors of the book's chapters focused on the forms of knowledge defined as "being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and embodied practices. Importantly, embodiment is understood here as "both an inevitable fact of martial arts training and a methodological guideline" (Farrer, Whalen-Bridge 2011: 1).

The phenomenological perspective is also present in the studies of the process of acquiring dance skills, e.g., in the perceived seminal publications by Sandra Fraleigh (1987) or Maxime Sheets-Johnstone (1999), as well as in later publications, e.g., Leena Rouhianen (2007; Ravn, Rouhianen 2012) and other publications on dance. Phenomenology has also become a theoretical basis in the study of other sports or physical activities, e.g., football (Hughson, Inglis 2002) or yoga (Morley 2001).

In Poland, it is worth mentioning the publications of sociologists from Lodz who research corporeality and the experience of the body in such physical activities as dance, yoga, or climbing (see Byczkowska 2012; Konecki 2012; Kacperczyk 2016).

### **Marcel Mauss**

Of the authors mentioned, Marcel Mauss is less popular among sports sociologists or the representatives of other social sciences analyzing this area of everyday life. Nonetheless, one can find studies in which the authors refer to the concept of "body techniques" (Mauss 1973) or reflexive body techniques (Crossley 2005). Crossley, discussing the concept of "body techniques," has stated that it enables the study of embodied knowledge and the "translation of 'embodiment' into a researchable format" (Crossley 2001: 87), as well as illustrated his considerations with an example from the world of sports – the knowledge acquired by a swimmer. Similar to the earlier theoretical approaches, exemplifications of the use of the indicated

concepts are again provided by analyses of sports and martial arts (see, e.g., Spencer 2009) and dance (see, e.g., Faure 2000). It is worth adding that the authors often refer to both the concept of “body techniques” and “habitus,” as was done, for example, by Faure and the aforementioned Pickard. This is also practiced by some of the sports and martial arts researchers mentioned in the chapter.

### 3. Key concepts

#### Overview of concepts related to the body/embodiment present in the sociology of sport

**Cyborgization** – a concept referring to improving the “natural” body of athletes. It can be related to the use of various forms of doping, to prostheses replacing “natural” body parts, as well as to sportswear that helps achieve record results in sports competitions, an example of which are swimming suits called “shark skin,” and currently, for example, shoes used by runners. The cyborgization of athletes raises various dilemmas (see, e.g., Magdalinski 2009; Nosal 2014; Łątka 2020), e.g., those related to distinguishing technology employed to treat athletes and enable them to participate in sports competition from technology used to improve their results, those related to unequal access to new technology or the question of to what extent we are still dealing with a display of “natural” human predispositions. The processes of cyborgization of the sports body also question the concept of disability in sports, which was best illustrated by the performances of the runner Oskar Pistorius with his carbon fiber prosthetic legs (see, e.g., Norman, Moola 2011; Nosal 2017). The use of special prosthetics not only questions the concept of disability, but can be treated as having an “unnatural” advantage over other (able-bodied) competitors. Here, we can refer to the distinction proposed by Shilling (2005: 187) between “physical substitution,” when prosthetics replace “natural” body parts, and “physical enhancement,” when prosthetics increase the capabilities of the “natural” body. As Corrigan et al. (2010: 292, cited in: Nosal 2017) noted, Pistorius “negated the prevailing bodily hierarchy in which able-bodied people are superior to disabled people”. What is more, he led to the creation of a new category – “neither disabled nor able-bodied, but too-abled” (Corrigan et al. 2010: 299–300).

**Empowerment (body empowerment)** – in relation to the body, it means that the body – its image or undertaken activities – becomes a source of subjectification or strengthening of the individual. In sports studies, this concept is most often used in the studies of sports and physical activity of women (see, e.g., Bradshaw 2002; Lim, Dixon 2018). It is indicated that despite the ongoing changes and the increasing accessibility of sports for women, it is still dominated by men and heteronormative images of the female body. Athletic female bodies contradict the frailty myth (Dowling 2000), and, at the same time, attract attention not only because of their appearance, but also their physical capabilities. Studies have shown that female

athletes practicing, for instance, contact sports, by developing physical strength, become more confident in their bodies, perceive them more positively, while the skills they acquire and the experience of the physical capabilities of their bodies become a source of their empowerment (see, e.g., Velija, Mierzwinski, Fortune 2013; Paul 2015; Liechty, Willfong, Sveinson 2016). The concept of “empowerment” in relation to sport often appears in the context of the studies of countries in the Global South, where the participation of women in physical activities and sports programs is treated as one of the sources of their empowerment (see, e.g., Toffoletti, Palmer, Samie 2018). Additionally, this concept is also used in relation to people with disabilities (see, e.g., Ashton-Shaeffer et al. 2001; Purdue, Howe 2012), for whom sport becomes a source of physical and mental empowerment.

**Hyperandrogenism** – this term means the excessive secretion of androgens in women. According to the regulations of the International Association of Athletics Federations IAAF (currently World Athletics) established in 2018, in order to compete in running events from 400 m to 1 mile (1609 m) women diagnosed with hyperandrogenism (a testosterone level of 5 nmol/L or higher) must reduce their testosterone level and maintain it for 6 months before the given sports event.<sup>2</sup> This decision was made after studies have shown the advantage of female athletes with hyperandrogenism in those running distances. Without reducing their testosterone level, they could compete in unofficial competitions with other women and/or in official competitions in the men’s category. This issue came in the public’s focus in 2009, when Caster Semenya became the world champion in the 800 m race. After her victory, doubts arose regarding the athlete’s gender, described many times in the literature on the subject and numerous press articles. According to sports organizations, the new regulations contribute to ensuring equal opportunities in sports competitions, but, at the same time, they raise numerous controversies related to defining gender, normativity, crossing gender boundaries, etc. In their context, it is also worth familiarizing oneself with the history of gender tests used in sports from the mid-1960s to the 1990s, aimed at verifying whether the competing female athletes were actually women (Jakubowska 2014a, 2014b; Montanola, Olivesi 2016; Erikainen 2020).

**Naturalness (the construct of the “natural” body)** – “naturalness” is a socially constructed category used in sports to judge fairness and equal opportunities (Miah 2006, after: Nosal 2017). The construct of the “natural” body, as Tara Magdalinski has noted (2008: 38; see also Jakubowska 2014a), is built by a hierarchical opposition, one side of which is represented by the “natural,” “pure” or “authentic” body, and the other by the “unnatural,” “polluted,” and “inauthentic” body. This opposition is, however, problematic, as it is difficult to define what “naturalness” or the “natural” body is today, and to set the boundaries between what is “natural” and what is not.

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2 As of 18 October 2021.

Magdalinski, describing these boundaries, points to their characteristic features: (1) fluidity and changeability over time, (2) their hierarchical nature, (3) difficulty in the practical determination of them, and (4) the presence of “gatekeepers” who watch over the boundaries and decide on the possibility of crossing them. The discourse of naturalization in fact marks the division into “normal” and “abnormal,” acceptable and unacceptable (McCullough 2010: 6 et seq.); it is also used to maintain the division into “female” and “male” (Jakubowska 2014a). According to many authors, references to “natural” differences are among the dimensions of strengthening male domination and discrimination against women in sports. Pierre Bourdieu (2001) has written about this in a broader context, arguing that the relation of domination is legitimized by being inscribed in biological nature, and the biological difference between the sexes may present itself as a natural justification for the socially constructed difference in genders.

**Supercrip** – a term used in relation to disabled athletes, perceived by sports researchers as a negative stereotype describing them. It presents disabled people (athletes) as people who must overcome their own disabilities and limitations in order to achieve incredible “success” (Silva, Howe 2012). The negative connotation of this term results from the fact that almost every activity of a disabled person is considered a success, everything that would be considered “ordinary” in the case of able-bodied people. In relation to disabled athletes, terms such as “super heroes” or “super people” are used – although it should be noted that they are used less and less often – which, paradoxically, deprives them of the status of “real athletes” (Silva, Howe 2012; see also Niedbalski 2015). Often, in accordance with the stereotype, participation in sports competition itself, regardless of sports achievements, as is the case in able-bodied sports, is treated as a success. Attention is also drawn to the negative impact of this stereotype on disabled people, who are unable to do many of the things that disabled athletes do (Silva, Howe 2012), and, at the same time, the existing discourse suggests that disabled people can overcome their disabilities if they want to and put in enough work.

**Embodiment** – the concept of embodiment originating from phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Allen-Collinson 2009) used in social studies of sport refers to the experience of the body during physical activity, as well as the acquisition of specific sports skills that become part of the embodied “self” (see embodied knowledge and the experience of the body in sport in the next part of the chapter). Its growing popularity is related to a turn that can also be observed in sociology of the body, where, in addition to the studies of body representations, discourses on the body or the body as an object of social control, there are also analyses of the experience of the body (Hockey, Allen-Collinson 2007; Woodward 2009).

**Embodied knowledge** – the concept of embodied knowledge appears in social analyses of sport mainly in relation to the process of transferring and acquiring specific skills (Jakubowska 2017). This type of knowledge is inevitably associated with sport as sporting skills are acquired through the body, practice, and embodied during training. The body is both a source of knowledge and a tool for acquiring it. Jaana Parviainen and Johanna Aromaa (2017) distinguished three main approaches to the study of embodied knowledge in the area of sport and physical activity. The first one is based on the post-structural theory and is widely used in the analyses of physical education. The second approach emphasizes the practical nature of knowledge and motor skills, and emphasizes the embodiment of learned skills. There are references here, among others, to the concept of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966, see also Jakubowska 2017), in addition to body techniques (Mauss 1973). Finally, the third approach is related to the adoption of a phenomenological perspective and is largely inspired by Merleau-Ponty's work, and hence by the concepts of habitus and body schema. According to Crossley (2001: 123), the latter concept means “embodied know-how and practical sense; a perspectival grasp of the world from the ‘point of view’ of the body.” Thanks to “body schema,” a person “knows without knowing”, e.g., how to swim or ride a bike.

#### **4. The most important studies**

##### **Research on the (gendered) body in sports**

The following review of studies and publications presents, on the one hand, works and authors whose analyses of the body/embodiment are well-recognized in the sociology of sport, and, on the other, those issues and studies that scientifically inspired me to conduct my own analyses of the sports body from a gender perspective. As a consequence of such a choice, this part of the chapter describes: (1) Iris M. Young's article on gender differences in the performance of movements by girls and boys, (2) Loïc Wacquant's research and book on the acquisition of the boxing habitus, (3) publications by Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson and John Hockey important for the development of a phenomenological perspective in the study of the sports body, and (4) studies on the images of the sports body in the media.

##### **Throwing like a girl**

Iris M. Young's now classic article *Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Compartment Motility and Spatiality* was first published in 1980. Referring to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the “lived body” and Simone de Beauvoir's “situation of woman,” among others, the author stated that “there is a particular style of bodily behavior that is typical of female existence, and this style consists of particular ‘modalities’ of the structures and conditions of the body's existence in the world” (Young 1980: 141).

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Differences in the ways of moving and performing certain physical activities, such as throwing, result not so much (not only) from physiological conditions, but from different ways of using the body by both genders (Young 1980).

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Girls and women are less likely to use the full physical possibilities of the body space, e.g., when throwing a ball; they do not use the whole body, they do not set the whole body in motion, but only use a part of the body, in this case the arm. In her essay, Young paid special attention to women's attitude to space, which is not fully used by them; it is rather treated as a limitation, not a field allowing improvement in the quality and result of the performed task. She also drew attention to women's limited trust in their own bodies and their capabilities, manifested both by a lack of faith in their own skills and a fear of hurting themselves.

Young's article is referred to by, among others, Sandra Lee Bartky in her article, also considered a classic today, entitled *Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, first published in 1988. In it, Bartky distinguished three categories of practices related to the body: (1) those aimed at giving it a specific shape and size, (2) those related to gestures, posture and the ways of moving, and (3) those oriented towards showing the body as an ornamental surface (Bartky 1988). References to Young appear in the context of the second of the distinguished practices, in relation to which the author has stated that significant differences in the behavior of women and men are mainly manifested in women's less freedom in moving and their lesser use of space. Less freedom and the constraint of the body translate into a different way of performing various physical exercises, but also into a different body posture in everyday life. Young was also referred to by Colette Dowling in her book *The Frailty Myth: Redefining the Physical Potential of Women and Girls* (Dowling 2000), in which she presented the differential socialization of girls and boys in sports. According to this author, girls are denied the opportunity to develop physical fitness and strength, and, therefore, the female weakness in the title is, at least to some extent, a learned weakness (Dowling 2000: 51 et seq.)

Years later, Iris M. Young returned to her text in the article *Throwing Like a Girl: Twenty Years Later* (Young 1998). The author noted that, from the perspective of time, her essay from twenty years earlier could seem somewhat archaic since girls and young women came to have much greater opportunities to engage in sports. The author also noted certain theoretical shortcomings or simplifications of her article. Nevertheless, many of the observations described by Young seem to have retained their relevance. Undoubtedly, girls today have greater opportunities to be physically active, as well as to choose disciplines that were once almost inaccessible to them. At the same time, however, one can still observe differences in the sports socialization of girls and boys – in the case of the latter, encouragement to engage in sports is more frequent, and more attention is also paid to improving sports skills; additionally, gender stereotypes are still present, reinforcing the status of some disciplines as “masculine” or “feminine” (Jakubowska 2014a; Jakubowska, Byczkowska-Owczarek 2018).

### How to become a boxer

Loïc Wacquant's book *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of An Apprentice-Boxer* (2004)<sup>3</sup> has become a "cult book" (Sánchez García, Spencer 2014: 6), and, at the same time, one of the most frequently discussed in the literature on the subject, as evidenced by, among others, special issues of the journals "Qualitative Sociology" (2005)<sup>4</sup> and "Theory and Psychology" (2009). Wacquant's publication is based on ethnographic research (participant observation supported by interviews) carried out in a boxing club located in Chicago. It is divided into three parts. The first presents the boxing club, the place of research, the people who frequent it, and introduces the world of boxing and boxing training. This part, referring largely to Wacquant's previous publications, can be read as an ethnography of a small group. The boxing club is treated, as research shows, as an "island of order and virtue" in relation to the unfavorable social conditions and threats that characterize the district in which the club is located. The second part of the book is a record of an entire day of a fight by one of the young boxers training at the club. In the third and final part of the book, Wacquant presents his own preparations for his first fight. Here we have a detailed presentation of a day in the life of a boxer, the events before the fight, as well as the people involved in the fighter's preparations and those accompanying him.

As Wacquant himself (2004) wrote, the aim of his book was to "introduce the reader to the everyday moral and sensual world of the ordinary boxer" (Wacquant 2004: XII). The author showed that boxing required highly technical (embodied) skills, tactical know-how, hard work, dedication, and discipline. In this way, he clearly distinguished the boxing craft from the violence with which boxing was often associated and which the young men from American ghettos who frequent such clubs often encountered on the streets. The entire book is strongly "embodied" through its focus on specific physical skills, as well as bodily regimes related to training or diet, but also to pain and pleasure. Wacquant drew attention to the various skills and types of knowledge that a boxer had to acquire, among which he mentioned the ability to "read the body" (of the opponent). The publication can be treated as an analysis of the process of acquiring a boxing habitus, which takes place through embodied social practices, and according to the author, takes into account three elements: a body of flesh and blood, consciousness, and the collectivity of the club.

The book can also be read as a book about masculinity, although it does not provide an in-depth or critical analysis of gender relations. The world of the boxing club is a male world, from which women are generally excluded. When they appear

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3 Four years earlier, in 2000, the book had been published in French under the title *Corps et Âme: carnets ethnographiques d'un apprenti boxeur* (Marseille: Agone), but almost all references to this publication refer to its English-language version.

4 Wacquant referred to the texts devoted to his book collected in this issue of the journal in the article *Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership*, "Qualitative Sociology" 2005, vol. 28, pp. 445-474, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-005-8367-0>

in boxing narratives, they appear primarily in passive and/or sexualized roles. Boxing is treated here as a “male art,” and, thus, Wacquant’s analysis is limited to the male body.

It is worth noting that Wacquant dealt with the issue of acquiring boxing skills or the functioning of boxing clubs in American ghettos in many other publications (see, e.g., Wacquant 1995, 2011), in which one of the central theoretical categories was the concept of “habitus” introduced to sociology, as previously said, by Pierre Bourdieu. Wacquant (2004) understands habitus as “a set of bodily and mental schemas” that is acquired through “a largely hidden and barely codified pedagogy” (Wacquant 2004: 16). The author has pointed out four properties of habitus that emphasize its social nature: (1) it is a set of acquired dispositions, (2) it changes depending on the social position and life trajectory, (3) it functions below the level of consciousness and discourse, and (4) the socially constituted conative and cognitive structures that create it “are plastic and transferable because they result from pedagogical work” (Wacquant 2011: 86).

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For Wacquant (2011), “habitus” is both a topic and a research tool. In the first case, it becomes the subject of research, and the process of its acquisition is analyzed. In the second case, having a specific habitus facilitates access to specific sports, physical activities and allows it to be studied by means of the body. His way of perceiving habitus has been adopted by other researchers of martial arts and sports (see, e.g., Sánchez García, Spencer 2014).

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In the context of Wacquant’s publication, it is worth mentioning the Polish book *Na dystans. Rozważania socjologiczne o boksie* (2019) by Marcin Darmas. Although the books differ significantly from each other, their common feature is that they are based on participant observations conducted by the authors. Darmas trained boxing for over three years, exploring the boxing world while observing other boxers and keeping a journal. His book is less “corporeal” than the publication of the French sociologist, but worth reading by dint of the possibility of getting to know the boxing world and the employed methodology.

### Experiencing the body in sports

Although the body/embodiment plays a key role in sport, paradoxically, as John Hockey and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson (2007) pointed out, social studies of sport have long ignored the “corporeal” (“flesh”) nature of the body. The authors have attributed this to the popularity of Michel Foucault’s concepts in sports studies, which have led to the body being perceived mainly through its visual representation and as an object of discourse or disciplinary practices. These researchers, although of course not the only ones, have contributed significantly to the growing presence of the “lived” body in the social studies of sport and development within their phenomenological perspective. In their articles, written separately or together, Allen-Collinson and Hockey have focused primarily on the embodied experiences of

amateur running. The subject of some of their publications (see, e.g., Allen-Collinson 2008) is the experience of running together, and the conducted analyses are based on collective autoethnography. The articles were written from the perspective of phenomenological and ethnomethodological assumptions, which also applies to other publications by these authors. Focusing on the experience of the body during sports activities, the authors also analyzed the experience of injury and the rehabilitation process (Allen-Collinson, Hockey 2001).

Their publications are based primarily on autoethnography, which is increasingly popular among sports researchers. According to Allen-Collinson (2008: 39), one can even speak of an “autoethnographic turn” in the study of physical and sports experiences. The author’s publications contain numerous examples of very detailed autoethnographic descriptions, and she also undertook an analysis of the method itself in relation to sports research (Allen-Collinson 2008; see also Sparkes 2000). Hockey’s and Allen-Collinson’s publications are valuable as they combine a phenomenological approach, the sociology of embodiment, and the sociology of sport. They are also important from the point of view of developing the methodology of research on embodied experiences (see also the concepts of embodiment and embodied knowledge).

The turn towards embodiment and experiencing the body has also led to increased interest in various senses and the role they play in understanding the athletic body (Hockey, Allen-Collinson 2007; Sparkes 2009, 2016). Athletes, both professional and amateur, use various senses in competition or training, and regardless of the discipline they practice and the place of physical activity, their experience is always multi-sensory. It has been analyzed in numerous autoethnographies concerning, among others, running or diving (see, e.g., Sparkes 2009; Allen-Collinson, Hockey 2011; Merchant 2011), in which the researcher’s body, as Sparkes has noted, becomes the main “tool” for collecting sensory data (Sparkes 2016: 46).

In the Polish context, it is worth paying attention to the research on dance, yoga, and climbing by the aforementioned researchers from Lodz (Byczkowska 2012; Konecki 2012; Kacperczyk 2016), also in the context of autoethnography as a research method. The book by Karolina Szyma (2019) *Ucieleśnione w ruchu. Polskie biegaczki wyczynowe z perspektywy antropologicznej*, based on autoethnographic research is also noteworthy. The author describes, on the one hand, the experience of a female athletic body, and, on the other, the disciplining of the body, as well as female agency.<sup>5</sup>

### Images of the athletic body in the media

Analyses of the media images of athletes, as well as sports coverage, are an extremely popular topic in the sociology of sport and related subdisciplines. A significant portion of this research has been conducted from the perspective of

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5 The book is accompanied by a film that can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IG08ujGDrA&t=533s> (accessed: 23.08.2021).

gender studies or feminism, and focuses on gender differences in media coverage. Below, due to the issues covered by the book, I focus only on some of these analyses, those that concern the presentation of the sports body, while omitting the problem of the marginalization of women's sports in the media, which has also been given a great deal of space in the literature on the subject.<sup>6</sup>

As key authors analyzing the way female athletes are presented in the media (because the research mainly focuses on women), in addition to those previously referred to, Margaret Duncan, Cheryl Cooky, Michael Messner, Toni Bruce, Mary Jo Kane, and Marie Hardin should be mentioned. A very good summary of the many years of research on this issue constitute the “rules” governing sports media coverage formulated by Bruce (2016). Many of them refer to the gendered body of female athletes, and it is on them that attention will be focused here. Among the “rules” discussed by Bruce there are: (1) compulsive heterosexuality, (2) appropriate femininity, and (3) sexualization. This means that despite the increasing presence of women in sports and their participation in all sports disciplines, in the media their bodies and physical activities are described through features traditionally associated with femininity; more attention is paid to sports in which the physicality of female athletes fits into the prevailing heteronormative norms, and it still happens that attention is focused not so much (not only) on the physical skills of the athletes, but on their physical attractiveness. Other rules governing the media coverage, such as “pretty and powerful” and “ambivalence” show the changes taking place, or rather the clash of the “old” and “new” understandings of the female sports body. On the one hand, female athletes are constantly shown as the ideals of female beauty and they are sexualized, but, on the other, attention is focused on their physical strength and sports skills. In the latter context, female athletes' bodies are a tool for their empowerment, not objectification; they show “strength, poise, and beauty, not sexual availability” (Heywood, Dworkin 2003: 80). A positive change is the growing popularity of two other principles – presenting female athletes in action and presenting them as “serious athletes.”

*Images of Sports Women: A Review* by Emma Sherry, Angela Osborne and Matthew Nicholson (2016) is also useful article that allows one to familiarize themselves with research on the discussed issue. The authors indicate, among others, that female athletes' bodies are more often shown in sports defined as “feminine,” where their image fits into the prevailing norms or ideals of the female body. Another observed trend is the more frequent presentation of women in passive poses, despite the fact that the photographs refer to physical activity. The article also confirms the sexualization of female athletes' bodies in press photographs. One of the main conclusions, which appears both here and in numerous other publications, is the

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6 I address this problem, among others, in the book *Gra ciałem. Praktyki i dyskursy różnicowania płci w sporcie* (2014), which I have cited several times. It is also discussed by the authors indicated in the next paragraph.

statement that the way in which women's sports and the bodies of female athletes are presented in the media contributes to maintaining male dominance in sports.

Social media, which are becoming increasingly popular in the world of sports, also among male and female athletes, may be an opportunity to change this situation. It is pointed out that in view of the marginalization of women's sports in "traditional" media, social media, where female athletes have the opportunity to create their own image, may not only attract more fans to women's sports, but also change the way it is perceived. As Tony Bruce and Marie Hardin (2014) have noted, despite the fact that the online world of sports is dominated by men and men's sports, it allows some female athletes to exist and gain a wide fan base. At the same time, the authors have noted that the dominant form of presenting the bodies of female athletes is showing both fitness and physical attractiveness. Hence, in the visual dimension, social media maintain rather than break the discourse of heteronormative femininity that dominates in sports.

## 5. Summary

As indicated in the introduction, the body and embodiment are key categories in sport, and, therefore, in the sociology of sport. This does not mean that most studies in this discipline focus directly on the body, but the number of studies that look at the sports body from a socio-cultural perspective is systematically growing. The sociology of sport indicates the importance of the body for individual agency, for building and maintaining individual capital, as well as social status. At the same time, it makes one aware of how the body becomes a source of inequality in relation to gender, race, (dis)ability or social class, as well as the basis for maintaining the prevailing normative discourses. The biological or biomedical dimension of corporeality analyzed in sport is also significant, as, on the one hand, it "claims" the biological body, often ignored by the sociology of the body, and, on the other, it makes one aware of the importance of interdisciplinary research and the need to perceive the body both through the prism of its physicality (flesh) and socio-cultural conditions.

The contribution of sociological and anthropological studies of sports activities is also important for the development of a phenomenological perspective and analyses of embodied experiences. In addition to developing theoretical concepts, they also provide knowledge about research methodology. Numerous examples of ethnographic studies of sport and embodiment have been collected in the book *Researching Embodied Sport: Exploring Movement Cultures*, edited by Ian Wellard (2015). The book focuses on both the awareness and significance of embodiment in the research process, and its aim is to show the usefulness of the embodied approach in sports and movement studies. Embodiment is treated not only as an object of analysis, but also refers to the bodies of researchers and their role, as well as significance in the research process. The publication presents the methodological challenges that the authors of the chapters had to face, and also provides many practical tips on how to overcome them.

Sociological studies of sport are important not only for sociology of the body, but also for many other subdisciplines, such as the sociology of disability, sociology of medicine or the sociology of gender. Some of the issues, such as the issue of hyperandrogenism or, more broadly, defining (female) gender or the participation of (dis)abled athletes in the Olympic Games, arouse public interest, being at the same time a challenge for both sports activists and scientists.

The approach to the issue of the gendered body in sport and the durability of the binary gender division makes sports research a counterweight to the increasingly widely accepted thinking about gender in non-binary categories or as a continuum. For the sociology of sport, this is an interesting issue because it requires, on the one hand, thinking about gender as a socio-cultural category, but also from the point of view of individual identity, and, on the other, thinking about gender in terms of sports competition. It seems that, at least for now, in almost all competitions, only the division into women's and men's competitions will provide the former with a chance for sports medals. At the same time, this calls into question the participation in sports competitions of people who do not fit into the accepted definitions of femininity, i.e., women characterized by hyperandrogenism or transgender women. The sociology of sport, therefore, provides interesting (counter)arguments for the ongoing discussions on gender identity and related corporeality.

The weak point of some of the conducted studies, such as those on the images of the female sports body in the media or the experience of the body in sports such as running or martial arts, is their repetitiveness (scientists rarely reach for new ways of studying specific phenomena; they rely largely on their own previous studies or similar sources). At the same time, the fact that subsequent studies continue to show, for example, the marginalization of women's sports in the media, indicates the durability of the studied phenomena, despite the passage of time and changes taking place in other areas. Nevertheless, thanks to studies of the sports body and the wide sharing of their results, it is possible to (qualitatively) change the way in which individual categories of athletes, e.g., women or disabled athletes, are perceived. Considering the constant development of technology, biomedicine and related fields, it should be assumed that sociologists of sports and the body will face new challenges and new, previously unexplored research fields.

## 6. Review questions

1. What does it mean that sports constitute a tool for class distinction? Answer using examples from different sports disciplines.
2. What is the cyborgization of athletes' bodies?
3. How did Iris M. Young and Sandra L. Bartky explain the fact that girls throw a ball differently than boys?
4. How is habitus understood by Loïc Wacquant?
5. How are female athletes' bodies represented in the media?

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