
Reflections on ‘Sport, Myth and History’

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The mandate that I was given was to react to Professor Edmonds’s paper, ‘Sport, Myth and History’, from an anthropological perspective. My comments, however, range beyond purely anthropological matters and embrace issues that concern all social scientists, namely those of a methodological nature. It was, thus, the purpose of this reaction to touch upon the shortcomings of Edmonds’ paper, to suggest ways in which these weaknesses could be avoided, and finally, to underscore the strengths of this particular piece of work.

While the manuscript is fascinating and readable, it does suffer from a lack of direction and structure. To illustrate; the problem under investigation is not outlined until mid-way through the paper and even then leaves one wondering as to whether the author intends to examine “sport *as* mythology”, or “sport as a *functional substitute* for mythology”.

In a similar fashion, the major terms employed in the study are poorly defined. The word “sport”. for example, goes unexplained and is used interchangeably with “games”, “athletics”, and so on. Likewise, the authors’ concept of “history” remains an enigma. Although “myth” is defined, the definition selected is not an operational one and is, therefore, of limited value when classifying data.

Finally, the author does not explain his method of analysis. The reader is not informed as to whether he came by his conclusions through employing Malinowski’s functionalistic approach to ritual, a Jungian psychoanalytic approach, the structuralistic methodology of Levi-Strauss, or some other method.

In order to avoid methodological problems of the type referred to here, it is suggested that during the embryonic stages of a study, scholars utilize a procedural template based on the scientific method, similar to the following:

1. Statement of the Problem - clear and concise
 - A) sub-problem(s) - where necessary
2. Definitions of the Major Terms - operationally defined
3. Limitations of the Study - factors beyond control
4. Delimitations of the Study - established boundaries
5. Justification of the Study - pragmatic and theoretical
6. Assumptions Underlying the Study

7. Hypotheses (Directional Propositions)

- A) general - qualitative, and
- B) statistical - quantitative (if any)

8. Methods and Procedures - model(s), theoretical constructs, etc., employed to:

- A) extract,
- B) categorize, and
- C) analyze data.

Despite certain methodological weaknesses, Edmonds' thesis is both stimulating and intriguing. He argues that much of sport's appeal lies in the fact that it allows an individual to move in and out of oneself; to briefly escape from reality either by actually playing, or by fantasizing about something to do with sport - scoring the winning touchdown, hero and/or team identification, and so on. He has arrived at this stance from the 'mythical' angle but his conclusions are remarkably similar to those of Gregory Bateson, who has written extensively on what he terms 'play-frames', and Irving Goffman who examined the 'fun component' in play. More recently Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has expounded upon what he labels as the 'flow experience', an experience which may be associated with religion, sport, art, and other such endeavours. He too believes that the appeal of sport can be largely attributed to feelings of vicariousness and freedom provided by the activity. When we find an anthropologist, a sociologist, a psychologist and an historian drawing similar conclusions as to why sport occupies such a prominent position in American society, we, as scientists interested in homo ludens, must take heed. To my knowledge, this is only the second attempt to view contemporary sport through "mythological glasses". Professor Edmonds has dared to walk where others fear to tread.