

## Perspectives on outdoor sports: uncertainty between nature and culture

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** Outdoor Sports are frequently labeled as "Nature Sports", despite having a lot of other labels, such as adventure sports, alternative sports, extreme sports, lifestyle sports, and so on. Thus, just like every bodily experience, they tend to be commonly considered as natural manifestations both at the personal and social level. **Purpose:** The purpose of this paper was to discuss the theoretical model that has been used to define Outdoor Sports as "Nature Sports". It is then argued that this label, although interesting, does not ultimately capture the very essence of Outdoor Sports, namely, although practiced in a natural environment, they are culturally defined. To discuss these issues, not just Nature (or Outdoor) Sports label per se, but rather its cultural meaning, the theoretical framework of Motor Praxeology has been adopted. **Methods and discussion:** Throughout the adoption of a Motor Praxeology framework, this paper describes the criteria for classifying physical activities and sports as both personal and social expressions of communication (between people); and information (concerning the surrounding environment where sports and physical activities are held). It thus presents an analysis of which phenomena arise from this specific field, aiming at recognizing Outdoor Sports values both from the educational and societal point of view. **Conclusion:** To better understand and acknowledge the Outdoor Sports cultural wealth, it seems useful to adopt the scientific Motor Praxeology framework, which provides a clearer distinction between the role of environmental information and uncertainty, within the Outdoor Sports' field. Likewise, a further and broader conceptual theory development is needed.

**Key Words:** Outdoor Sports, Motor Praxeology, Environmental Information, Uncertainty.

### Introduction

Sport and physical activity are important tools for both personal and social development since they allow the improvement of different capabilities. When well managed (Fernández Rivas & Espada), they clearly have a very positive influence in terms of, for example: sense of fun (Sumption & Burnett, 2021), motor skills improvement in children (Valentini & Bartolucci, 2019) and adolescents (Fyodorov & Erlich, 2016), engagement in lifelong active lifestyles, and health promotion (Yi et al. 2020). Pro-inflammatory influence effects (Marinowski et al., 2021), social inclusion (Gaintza & Castro, 2020).

However, it is argued here that, generally, there is a little cultural recognition of the role physical activity experiences such as sport, motor play, traditional games, could play in both personal and social education. Even experienced practitioners struggle to grasp some aspects of socio-cultural relevance of what has been defined as "body techniques" (Mauss, 1934; Leech, 2009), which have a crucial role in introducing people within their societal rules and values, just like a kind of "Rite de Passage" (Van Gennep, 1909).

Outdoor Sports are frequently labeled as "Nature Sports", despite having a lot of other labels, such as action sports, adventure sports, alternative sports, Californian sports, extreme sports, gravity sports, lifestyle sports, nature challenge activities, new sports, outdoor sports, panic sports, risk sports or whiz sports. Nevertheless, it has been stated that "Nature Sports" provides the best contextual reference for these Sports (Melo, Van Rheenen, & Gammon, 2020). However, even Melo and others also argued that these definitions represent different ways of looking at a cultural (or better counter-cultural) phenomenon, and that they tend also to underline many socio-cultural characteristics of sports which are emerging in contrast to conventional sports (and their dominant values). That is, sport is a cultural practice defined by political values and ideals (Bourdieu, 1979; Van Rheenen, 2014). As such, dominant forms of sporting practice reproduce dominant ideology and its typical assets, particularly regarding races, classes, capability, ages, and gender relations of a particular time and place (Carrington & MacDonald, 2009). Viewed in this way, "Nature Sports" are forms of cultural contestation, and therefore they have great potential for resistance to hegemonic expression (Reinhart, 2019; Whannel, 2009). Essentially, these practices arose as social demands of new values; they unsurprisingly have also been recognized as able to globally reshape and transform modern sport. In conclusion, Nature Sports are activities which are predominantly nature-based, individualistic (chosen by autonomy-seekers), hedonistic and non-competitive, adventurous and sustainable, and therefore would correspond to a participatory ideology that contributes to a "risky", active, pleasant, and sustainable lifestyle (Melo et al., 2020). Frankly, these look like

cultural rather than natural expressions, so this is the reason why is here adopted the seemingly less confusing label "Outdoor Sports".

So-called "Nature Sports", then, although often (but not always) practiced in a natural environment, seems to be highly culturally defined. Participants show interest and spend time and resources in activities that have a hedonistic, individualistic ideology thus promoting critical commitment to commodification and heavily institutionalized competition; some refer to their activity as art. Most observers consider such activities as an alternative to traditional ways of understanding conventional and mainstream sport, thinking of them as "adventure and lifestyle sports activities", particularly in North America. Interestingly, the spaces in which these activities are performed very often come from a re-appropriation of both rural and urban (so, not at all natural) places. Moreover, spaces usually do not have expressed limits. These elements, however, are deeply rooted in local culture, landscape, ecology, and language, and as such do not necessarily travel well from one country to another, so concerns arise about the uncritical introduction of both outdoor activities and notions into non-English speaking countries.

Nevertheless, national cultures and languages can play an important role in labeling this kind of events: widely described as Adventure-based and Lifestyle activities by anglo-saxon corporations and media, in France they are instead well known as "Sports de Glisse" (Loret, 2003), a term that can be loosely translated as "Sliding Sports", which makes sense taking into account the fact that these are very often board activities such as surfing, skateboarding, and snowboarding, which require high sliding skills. Similarly, outdoor activities in the Czech Republic (Turčová, Martin & Neuman, 2005) and Scandinavian countries (Gurholt&Haukeland, 2020) are referred to as Turistika and Friluftstliv respectively. Both of these, however, are experienced as practices that relate the people to their landscape as home (Henderson & Vikander, 2007), a way to maintain the culture of people rather than explore new landscape (Neuman, 2000).

**Material and methods**

To study an issue such as the cultural meaning of Outdoor Sport, the theoretical framework of Motor Praxeology (Parlebas, 1999) was adopted. This declares that "Nature Sport", whether we like it or not, is a highly reductive label, as it reduces physical activity to a mere biological issue. In contrast, Motor Praxeology forges the concept of "motor conduct", which is based on the idea that every motor action is an expression of an entire personality. Doing sport, a participant manages and keeps information, figures out strategic solutions, and undertakes playing activities. In this sense, physical education can be seen as an effective problem-solving and decision-making school. Consequently, Motor Praxeology offers a very original approach, a new perspective that enables the classification of sports and physical activities, to an extent that it makes it possible to further investigate certain areas, better known as "domains". In this way, moving forward under the constraints of conceptual analysis and strict requirements of scientific methods, it is possible to carry out research with both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The key issue, though, is finding indicators for a full understanding which encompasses all physical activities, to classify them in terms of its most important traits, which are also referred to as "internal logic" of a single sport, game, or physical activity. Overall, there are three main criteria, namely: the participants' relationships, their interactions with each other (Partner-s and/or Opponent-s), and their interactions with the material environment (Standard or Uncertain). See fig. n. 1.

Three classes of characteristics are included in the classification: participants' relationships with each other (Partners and/or Opponents), and with the outdoor environment (Standard or Uncertain). Typical sports are indicated within each domain box. Every domain is also defined by its symbol, which once again reflects its specific traits (elaborated from Parlebas, 2013, p. 132).

<b>Relationships towards environment</b>	<i>Standardization</i>	<i>Uncertainty</i>
<b>Relationships between participants</b>		
<i>Solo Sports - without interaction</i>	{ Ø } Track & Field, Swimming, Gymnastic	{ Ø, U } Skiing race, Canoeing, Hang-gliding
<i>Cooperative Sports - Interaction only with Partner-s</i>	{ P } Couples skating, Team rowing competition	{ P, U } Caving, Mountaineering
<i>Opposite Sport - Interaction only with Opponent-s</i>	{ O } Judo, Fencing, Singles tennis	{ O, U } Windsurfing, Cross Country competition
<i>Teams Sports - Interaction with both Opponent-s and Partner-s</i>	{ P, O } Football, Basketball, Volleyball, Soccer	{ P, O, U } Racing sailboats with a crew, Traditional Outdoor Games

Fig. n. 1: The eight domains of Motor Praxeology's classification

For the aim of this research, to deepen the relationships with space is absolutely fundamental. In this regard, there are two completely different points, each one at the opposite end of the spectrum: Standardization and Uncertainty. In the first case, the environment is completely managed as standard, as it is in track and field,

gymnastics, swimming, fencing, martial arts, football, soccer, and so on, where actions must be mainly automatic. Within this sector, learning approaches tend to ask for careful repetitions and fine-tuned training. These sports usually require exceptional strength, endurance, flexibility, precise timing, control, capability, and bravery, to perform difficult routines produced by a highly varied sequence of movements. However, everything must be programmed long in advance, since participants do not need to take information from the environment during their performances, nor do they make any decisions. At the other end of the spectrum, where a "wild" (not standard) environment is used, as in surfing, canoeing, free climbing and gliding, the scenarios are completely different: this is the realm of Uncertainty. Within this context, completely different to the previous one, participants carry on a continuous "motor dialogue" with places, so that they must collect information, try incessantly to evaluate possible obstacles in advance, take preemptive action and so on. This constitutes the sport's "internal logic", one that requires an individual's competence in dealing with certain kind of information. Therefore, two main dimensions are identified: they can be either "controlled" or "wild" - and depending on which of the two is the case, all sports and physical activities can be classified according to the degree of uncertain information, mainly produced by the place where the sport is held. In this way, all physical activities and sports can be classified along a continuum ranging from "wild" at one extreme to "controlled" at the other. Clearly, this information has a decisive influence on motor conduct and the corresponding specific learning traits. Interactions take place among participants too: these are defined as "motor communication". For the purposes of the present study, however, it is not so important to go into detail regarding this other main criterion of Motor Praxeological Classification. It is enough to say that there are four different relationships among sports and physical activities participants: absence (in solo), cooperative (with mates), opposite (against an opponent or more), and finally mixed (with both opponents and mates at the same time, like in every most common team sport such as soccer).

### Discussion

To better understand and acknowledge Outdoor Sports' cultural values, a clearer distinction about domains of action is required. To this end, it seems useful to adopt a scientific approach such as Motor Praxeology, which is not based on single studies, but rather on a systematic analysis of the overall context. In this way, we can take into account the relationships players have with both their environment and other participants. It is thus possible to carry out a detailed analysis of each physical activity, no matter whether it is a sport or a game and grasp its fundamental structure. Thanks to Motor Praxeology classification, then, it is possible to research into the field of sports and physical activities, using criteria focusing on motor action in its own right. In sport and physical activity science, the time has come to consider and study motricity as a "body technique", not only the result of individual choices and attitudes but rather an often relevant social event that bears witness to a culture. Sports and Games are shaped by culture, and thus the result of their local history, just like every form of authentic cultural heritage. In particular, spare time activities and games reflect the typical habits of the places where they are created and played.

They mirror ways of life, of interacting with the environment and other people. Linked to current beliefs, inspired by folk, popular and seasonal fashions, many of them are seen amongst the most deeply rooted and representative cultural forms of the societies from which they come. To make a long story short, cultural heritage involves play and game, along with other human expressions such as arts and techniques. However, considering bodily heritage, this domain is unique. Participants, thanks to their body actions, gesticulations, kinesthetic feelings and vibrations, motor interactions with others they play with, may breathe and bring new life into this cultural heritage. It is about a type of culture made by bodily actions, which anyone can literally re-live through his or her body.

Mauss (1934) founded this corporeal approach to culture, by demonstrating the highly societal aspect of what he defined as "body techniques". Mauss asserted that body techniques depend greatly on "habitus", which certainly appear as individual habits, but are also related to societal and educational standards and status. Thus a "habitus" is a socially acquired way of behaving, supported by an individual's philosophy, attitude, emotions, although influenced by people's connection with their (and other) bodies' techniques. This notion gained prominence when further elaborated Bourdieu (1979) as a basis for a theory of social styles, notably concerning sports. Body management, Mauss claims, depends on "systems of symbolic assemblages" created by social "habitus", whose presence Bourdieu underlines in class conflicts too. Thus, by playing a child unwillingly learns about his/her cultural world, and about the society to which he/she belongs, since games are usually shaped by their current civilization. It can thus be stated that physical activities such as outdoor sports, and traditional games and sports, are different forms of what is defined as an "ethno-ludic" phenomenon, as their "internal logic" largely reflects their contextualized social values. In short, Motor Praxeology theorizes the ethnology of motor activities, called "ethnomotricity", capable of expressing this point: there are very close relationships between "bodily techniques" and the social context in which they develop. In this respect, the notion of "deep play" stands as an "ethnoludic" example perfectly rooted in its culture, thus making a significant contribution both to its preservation and, of course, to that of its cultural environment (Geertz, 1972). From this point of view, physical activities span all along an extremely wide spectrum of different games and sports, since they are rooted in very different ages, landscapes, contexts, and cultural scenarios. Seen this way, outdoor sport

certainly not be considered as an exception. So much so that, Becker (2018) states that there are three culturally different, but intertwined histories underpinning outdoor activities development, particularly involving Nature, Body, and Technology. In other words, the way these latter are perceived depends on the cultural lenses people put on. Nature can be considered, for example, as an extended fitness room to balance a lack of movement, as a counter-world to everyday life, as an exploration room for aesthetic perceptions, as a space deserving respect in its own right, and so on. Physical activity such as walking, sailing, climbing and surfing are also part of the "somatic culture" of a country, which is evident even in the different ways of walking: habitus asserts itself by configuring posture, speed, clothing, according to cultural values. Technical equipment is also of particular significance, simply because without artifacts, specific outdoor activities and sports could not take place. However, it seems that the more technical equipment people have, the less attention they pay to the outdoor environment. For example, using a compass or not for orientation brings about very different behavior, making different demands on the senses, perceptions, and feelings. Once again we are facing a cultural dilemma: technical development improves safety and performance levels, but to what extent is it worth the effort, if it results in participants being unaware of themselves?

### Conclusions

Studies in biological and social sciences have shown that physical activity can positively develop every aspect of the personality, not only at the biological level, but also on levels which are cognitive, emotional, psychological, social, and so on. Whether playing a traditional game such as hide-and-peek, a sport such as baseball, or an outdoor activity such as canoeing, people are deeply involved in their different personal aspects and have numerous opportunities to express and develop themselves. Physical activities, games, and sports require decision-making and communication skills, so personal and social involvement, in ways that are at least as powerful and fertile as verbal expression. At an academic level, physical games and sport have traditionally been downgraded to a secondary rank. Therefore, a change seems necessary, to place physical and sport sciences in a more appropriate place, at the same level as other disciplines and epistemologies. For this reason, the concept of "motor conduct" was born, aiming at overcoming the mechanistic concept of movement; and even the term "body", due to the many ambiguous and confusing meanings it implies should be avoided. However, Physical Education studies need a strong epistemology, and that is why Motor Praxeology strives to provide conceptual tools such as its classification, developed by considering three main criteria, whose symbols are P (Partner-s), O (Opponent-s), and U (Uncertainty). Thus, a set of eight motor conduct domains, each with its specific characteristics regarding interactions both in terms of social milieu and physical environment, are elaborated. This gives an unquestionable identity to a field hitherto considered of minor importance, providing unity to a multitude of games and sporting practices that appear to be highly heterogeneous, but of which it is instead possible to find common socio-cultural traits. In conclusion, whether a sport is practiced in nature or not, does not change its (sporting) nature. Parkour is urban but is an outdoor sport, while football is played outdoors but is not an outdoor sport at all. Cyclocross is typically performed on tracks with wooded paths, grass, steep hills, but it is not natural in any way. By adopting Motor Praxeology epistemology, it is possible to easily understand, and thus affirm, that outdoor sports belong to the uncertain domain: this is the main criterion for considering physical activity as truly adventurous or "Sport de glisse" (Loret, 2003).

**Conflicts of interest** - I do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

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