

Authenticity – a major concern in sports

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The purpose of this article is to investigate why and how authenticity can be studied in sports, by summarizing the author's Master's thesis "A sweaty quest for authenticity – an analysis of five autobiographies written by five Swedish athletes" as one example. The article starts by stating the importance of understanding the quest for authenticity in life generally and in sport specifically, before moving on to previous research in the field. The theoretical framework for the analysis of the autobiographies is subjective and existential authenticity. Focus is on the being in ourselves and the being in relation to the physical and social surroundings, places and other people.

Two main themes were found: "The authentic athlete" and "The authentic training place". Authenticity is a complex theoretical concept because it can be applied both in sports people's quest for authenticity and for the authenticity of sport in and of itself. Future research could study these different forms more systematically.

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An introduction to authenticity

Have you recently bought beer made in a micro-brewery? Or maybe you have gone on a vacation beyond the most common tourist destinations, looking for a more “genuine” place? Do you consider yourself to be a “real” soccer fan? Finally, have you asked yourself: What is really my true, inner self? If you answered yes to one of these questions – good! Then you are not blind to the “master signifier” of our time according to Heidegren, Carleheden and Isenberg (2007). All the features in the questions above are related to authenticity, a broad theoretical concept that can be applied in many aspects of life, both in sports and in society as a whole. A quest for authenticity can be seen as a search for genuineness at different levels: in consuming and producing products and experiences as well as looking deep into yourself – trying to find an authentic core.

This quest for authenticity seems to be crucial in late modern society, where the individual according to Bauman (2000) is forced to find and express his or her subjectivity to a larger extent than before. Traditional institutions like church, family and workplace get weaker and weaker, and in Western countries, not least in heavily secularised Sweden, this has led to individualisation with more fragile identities that are no longer strongly linked to these institutions. Additionally, industrialisation and urbanisation have brought many people far from nature, perhaps with a feeling that life is a bit unnatural, unreal and imitated (Heidegren, Carleheden and Isenberg 2007).

These changes in society have probably increased the quest for authenticity. Even if this process may not always be a result of conscious behaviour on the part of the individual, authenticity can nevertheless be a helpful theoretical tool to understand certain aspects of life – especially sports.

Playing soccer as a quest for authenticity

To understand the connection between authenticity and sports it is perhaps a good start to try to separate between the authenticity of sport, and the athlete’s search for authenticity. Billions of people all over the world do sports on different levels and for of different reasons. Maybe a good point of departure is elite players, who do sports on a daily basis as professionals, whereby sport plays a larger role in their search for authenticity.

Maxim Grigoriev (2016) has analysed three autobiographies from some of the best soccer players in the world this century: Andrea Pirlo, Rio Ferdinand and Dennis Bergkamp. These artists, as he calls them, are driven by a strong need to express themselves in a language that's made up of dribbles, passes and goals. "It is important for each of the three millionaires to persist that they do not play for money, and they say that those who do so are not real soccer players" writes Grigoriev (2016). To create is to have fun; these ball artists want to express feelings from their inner soul, just like a painter or a musician. The passion for sport comes, according to the three players, from inside themselves and are based in the modern quest for authenticity in a world where everything is a fake, and for sale, Grigoriev concludes.

His analysis shows that there is an interesting existential perspective of authenticity, which is of course subjective but is even more oriented into the person's inner emotions. This is when the relationship between people and their sports gets really exciting.

Authenticity in sports studies

So, what has sports studies to say about authenticity, and how is it used in this discipline? In this section I will only highlight a few studies. It is interesting that authenticity is used in different disciplines, for instance philosophy, psychology and sociology. Sport science is a multi- and interdisciplinary field and authenticity is a good example of how different authenticities are used for understanding sports and the people watching and doing sports. A similar theoretical base can form differing points of departures depending of the nature of the scientific approach, as we will see below.

Authenticity has been used in studying extreme sports like mountain climbing (Rickly-Boyd 2012) and skydiving (Brevik 2010) but also to analyse soccer fans (Walsh and Gulianotti 2001; Davis 2015) and meaning making in athletes' careers (Ronkainen et al. 2015). The authors define authenticity rather differently in their studies. Davis (2015, p 423) writes that being authentic "is to associate one's self in the world of football supporting on differing levels to gauge one's depth of authenticity in a contemporary fandom landscape". However, Ronkainen et al. (2015), who used ideas from Heidegger and Kierkegaard, sees authenticity as that which reflects and makes responsible existential decisions instead of escaping the choices in life by doing as other people do.

Sport is neither just a mirror of society, nor something outside society. Sport is a unique arena in society with conditions that are separate from other spheres. Furthermore, the sometimes extremely tough and competitive environment of elite sports makes the contrast to other parts of society even more interesting. So far, previous research in sports science has been interested mostly in authenticity in extreme sports and fandom, but has not used authenticity as a wider concept, except partly for Ronkainen et al. (2015), for understanding life stories from elite sportswomen and sportsmen. The subjective quest of authenticity, constructed both inside and outside the athlete, can probably best be studied in sports autobiographies where the athletes describe their relationships to themselves, different places and other people.

An analysis of five autobiographies

The purpose of my magister study and thesis was to analyse how five Swedish athletes – Janne Lundqvist 1964 (tennis); Tomas Gustafson 1994 (speed skating); Martin Bengtsson 2007 (football); Åsa Sandell 2009 (boxing) and Björn Ferry 2014 (biathlon) – construct or search for authenticity in their autobiographies. Two of them have won an Olympic gold medal, and two of them have been among the world's best athletes in their sport.

The flora of autobiographies from athletes seems to grow, and gets increased attention from researchers as an analytical source (Sparkes and Stewart 2016). In Sweden, Zlatan Ibrahimovic's autobiography (Ibrahimovic and Lagercrantz 2011) is perhaps the best known. However, this book and many other have been written by various ghost writers and might be less interesting to analyse, because the voice in the books is a delicate mix of the athlete and the ghost writer. This is a major reason why only books actually written by athletes themselves were used in this thesis.

The theoretical frame for the thesis is developed from Wang (1999) who defines authenticity in tourism studies by separating objective, subjective and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity is to say that no copy can be authentic and there are measureable criteria, for example, to say if a Persian carpet is real or merely a fake. Subjective authenticity, by contrast, is contextual and in the eye of the beholder. For instance, Disneyland can be seen as an authentic world. These two approaches have opposite views of reality, but how about existential authenticity? This form of authenticity does not generally care for physical environment, but instead focus on

being. What the places we go to do to us and our emotions thus becomes important. Focus is directed towards the being in ourselves and the being in relation to the physical and social surroundings (places and other people). For that reason, the theoretical departure in my thesis is where the subjective and the existential authenticity meet.

“The authentic athlete” and “The authentic training place”

The five athletes have much to say about their physical and social surroundings in light of authenticity. A narrative analysis resulted in different themes, two of which were “The authentic athlete” and “The authentic training place”. To feel and to have freedom to follow their own voices are central for the athletes. Tomas Gustafson for example, a skater who won Olympic gold in 1988, admires the US where athletes seem to enjoy a bigger freedom to make decisions (p 50), and does not want circumstances to lead him, and when they do – it is a sign of weakness (p 97). Four of the five athletes have a negative view of “the law of Jante”,¹ but Janne Lundqvist, a successful tennis player in the 60s, has a different view and says that it is positive that the great sportsmen he has met had mostly avoided speaking about themselves (p 106). Honesty and naturalness are important qualities for both Gustafson and Lundqvist themselves as well as, in their opinion, for the ideal athlete. Bengtsson, a youth soccer pro in Juventus, sees other players as monkeys or robots (p 140), unable to develop their personalities in such an environment. He even asks himself where his own true person behind the mask is.

“The authentic training place” is, according to Ferry, Gustafson and Lundqvist, to be found in nature. Ferry for example, an Olympic champion in biathlon, writes about when he skied in the moonlight one late evening, starry and still, in grand desolation (p 89). Gustafson on his part brings positive, mental pictures from training in nature into competitions. However, Sandell, the female boxer, who once challenged Laila Ali, constructs authenticity away from nature, in Gleason’s training centre in New York. Gleason’s gets into her blood, she says (p 124)., she can be herself in the training centre, where there is aggression and tolerance at the same time, and black and white pictures of legends like Muhammad Ali on the walls. This is a good example for understanding that existential authenticity (the being) sometimes is connected to the construction of authenticity for a place. What

1 The Law of Jante is the description of a pattern of group behaviour towards individuals within Nordic countries that negatively portrays and criticises individual success and achievement as unworthy and inappropriate. (Wikipedia).

places are then constructed as the opposite of authenticity? Both Ferry and Lundqvist feel alienated by hotel rooms, which they describe as “a cell” (Ferry, p 49) or as “impersonal with mirrors staring at you” (Lundqvist p 59).

The athletes also describe existential authenticity itself in competitive situations. It is the state of flow they perceive when “everything works” or a feeling of “totally relaxation” appears (Sandell p 91), or when “the auto-pilot is connected” (Ferry, p 70). These extremely positive perceptions of being seem not to be connected to a certain place, nor able to be predicted or induced by the athlete. The opposite can, of course, also occur, as when Gustafson (p 24) once perceived time and space as “a black hole”.

Discussion

There are, as we have seen, both similarities and differences in how the autobiographies can be interpreted in light of authenticity. One interesting tendency is that it appears to be a change over time where a more general construction of authenticity (for example of genuineness and honesty) is slowly being replaced by a more individual construction (for example of identities and life meaning). The search for self-fulfilment is more present in the books of Bengtsson, Ferry and Sandell in the 21st century, than from Gustafson in the 80s and especially Lundqvist in the 60s. There are, in the latest biographies not only thoughts that there is simply an authentic core in the self to find and express, but the authors also emphasize their need to develop that core. In that process, elite sport sometimes can be a good tool but also a difficult obstacle.

Of course, the historic context in which the books have been written by the athletes must also be considered. Lundqvist played amateur tennis and he expresses the gentlemanly ideals of the time about how an athlete ought to be. Gustafson wrote his book in the beginning of the 90s when the neoliberal swing with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had reached and influenced Sweden. His book can actually be read, even though that might not be the purpose, as some kind of self-help guide for other athletes. The book is full of ideas on how the individual athlete must work harder, regardless of the social context. Gustafson is, just like the other four athletes, a child of his time. The quest for authenticity can therefore never be strictly individual and is always a result of the current structure and the will of the individual.

Finally, Heidegren, Carleheden and Isenberg (2007, p 102) conclude that we modern people are forced to paint our lives like an artwork, trying to become an (authentic) original and at every cost avoiding ending up as a copy. The freedom in modern societies forces us to fulfil and realise ourselves. This is a process that never seems to stop. Just as a consumer is never allowed to be totally satisfied (Bauman 2008), a person's quest for authenticity is hardly ever finished, and therefore must be considered as a never-ending process.

Overall conclusion and future research

Authenticity is an interesting and in many ways fascinating and intricate theoretical concept. The great width of the concept makes it everything but easy to apply. Hopefully, this effort has shed some light, but also raised questions, over the connections between objective, subjective and existential authenticity.

The major interest has been the search for authenticity among athletes and not the authenticity of different sports. This is an important difference. However, the authenticity of sport is of course also worth paying attention to. It is, for example, possible to argue that the global soccer industry with its flagship Champions League has lost some of its original objective authenticity and can be regarded as some kind of fake or at least unfair and predictable contest (Niva 2016). Only a few clubs actually have the financial resources, and therefore also all the best players, to win the tournament. Soccer might soon only work as an entertainment industry and will perhaps no more be considered authentic?

Questions like this can be applied in different contexts of different sports, and future research ought to increase knowledge in this field. It would be very interesting to investigate more systematically how sport sciences with its multidisciplinary approach has dealt with different forms of authenticity – regardless whether it is the search for authenticity among athletes or the authenticity of different sports.

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