Conceptual and operational problems in measuring participation in sports

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1. Introduction

As the year 2000 approaches, sport is drifting further away from its original concept. On the one hand, the difference between sport and other physical-motor activities (including open-air, aesthetic, keep-fit activities and so on) is becoming less clear-cut. On the other hand, the gap is growing between ordinary sport and sport show sectors that are tending to replace the principles and rules of sport with those employed in the business world.

If we recall the interesting Heinemann’s classification of sport activities (defined as competitive, expressive, instrumental and spectacular), we discover that traditional competitive, organised and goal-oriented activities are supplemented on the one hand by expressive or instrumental ones in the sphere of Sports for all, and on the other by spectacular ones in Top-level sports.

In Europe, this trend is accompanied by the tendency to standardise sporting behaviour. While historical typologies are still in place (Scandinavian, British, Latin areas, etc.), the distances between them are growing ever shorter.

To analyse these trends UK Sports Council, English Sports Council and the Italian National Olympic Committee jointly funded a research initiative, called COMPASS (Co-ordinated Monitoring of Participation in Sports). The objective is to “examine existing systems for the collection and analysis of sports participation data in European countries with a view to identifying ways in which harmonisation may be achieved, so that greater comparability of data from different countries will become possible” (COMPASS 1999, Final Report).

Initial COMPASS results appear to suggest that in European countries, paradoxically, although styles are growing nearer, the statistical approaches to their understanding are growing further apart.

This fact has led to growing interest in performing a methodological analysis of surveys on participation in sports in Europe. We have pinpointed two problem areas in relation to data comparison: an operational area, technical-statistical in nature, in which it will be relatively easy to act through a standardisation process, and a conceptual area, concerned with concepts and definitions, in which work to be done is much more difficult and complex, and will require further study.

The surveys performed in the seven COMPASS pilot countries (Finland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom) have been analysed; Portugal is joining the project with a survey performed in the last months of 1998.

2. Conceptual problems

We may begin by looking at what is the most significant problem: what is sport, what activities should be considered as sporting, what is the role of physical-motor activities practised in leisure time and which is the borderline with sports practised at a professional level.

From this point of view the results obtained in COMPASS are not fully comparable. They include, for example, a partial approach adopted by Italy, where figures refer only to activities perceived by interviewees as sporting. This contrasts with the common European approach: it considers activities as sporting in the broad sense of the term, including physical-motor activities
performed in one’s leisure time with the aim of enhancing one’s physical and mental well-being (*keep-fit* activities).

Another difference between countries is their choice to use (or not to use) a prompt-card containing the activities to be considered. As literature on this matter has pointed out repeatedly, if there is not a prompt card, there is the danger of *under-estimating* the global phenomenon. On the other hand many drawbacks are implied by the use of a prompt card. The implicit positive opinion on the listed sport activities may induce several interviewees to answer affirmatively to the question, leading to *over-estimating* the number of participants to the listed activities in spite of the unlisted ones. Anyhow the question about the activities to be included in the prompt-card list, for allowing comparison among countries, is still open.

Other important problems related to this area are: to use (or not) the same questionnaire to study the participation of adults and of youngster and very young people (may be below and above the age of 16); to consider (or not) youngsters participation during school-time; how to analyse participation in a single sport activity; and so on.

### 2. Operational problems

This area is mainly concerned with technical aspects. We can open the list with the interviewing methods (self-compilation, via telephone, face to face), which differ from survey to survey and lead to different results. With regard to sample units too, there appears to be significant differences between surveys: in some cases are families, in others individuals, or proxies and so on. In particular, the use of *proxy* interviews appears to have a particular influence, so they should be reserved exclusively for interviewing the very young people (less than 11), supplied by their parents. The way of choosing the *sample* of citizens that are to be interviewed is different too, in the different countries: some uses random sampling, some quota sampling, some samples are stratified, some multi-stage, and so on.

The reference period of the interviews is not uniform, since they may take place in a single period of the year or in several periods, and because they refer to the whole year or to a shorter time frame (e.g. four weeks). In the same way, the interval between surveys is not uniform (every three or four years, sometimes more years): this fact should not raise problems of comparability, since sport is a quite *stable* phenomenon over time.

There are large discrepancies observed among surveys studied with respect to measuring the overall amount of time devoted to an activity: in some cases attempts have been made to measure it in hours, while in other cases the total number of annual *outings* (occasions) was estimated.

It is necessary to underline the importance of a standardisation of the measuring of *quantitative level* of participation in sports, as well as the *qualitative level* (competitions) and the *organisational level*. With regard to the last one, comparison difficulties arise in relation to the different organisation of *sports system* in the analysed countries.

### REFERENCES


### RESUMÉ

*La communication présente le projet COMPASS et décrit les problèmes conceptuels et opératifs que on doit analyser dans un étude comparatif sur la pratique sportive dans les pays de l’Europe.*