



Sport as a Bridge for Social Mobility: Explaining the Strategic Capacities of Iranian Sport

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Abstract

The present study aims to explain sport as a bridge for social mobility by identifying the strategic capacities of Iranian sport. This research was conducted using a qualitative approach and a case study method. The participants consisted of 16 professors in the fields of sport sociology and sport management, who were selected through purposive sampling based on the principle of theoretical saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were applied. In addition, coding reliability was assessed using the test-retest method, yielding an average reliability of 79.4% across three interviews, which is considered acceptable. Data analysis was conducted based on the Strauss and Corbin (1990) grounded theory approach.

The findings identified four main causal conditions, including the development of educational pathways in sport management, the achievement of economic and class equality, the management of cultural change and public perceptions, and poverty alleviation through sport. Contextual factors included the creation of diverse career pathways, the strengthening of cultural diplomacy, the catalytic role of sport, and its globalization. In contrast, economic exploitation and institutional and structural barriers were identified as the most significant challenges. The core category of social mobility was conceptualized across four dimensions cultural, political, economic, and educational each providing distinct yet interconnected pathways for enhancing individual and social status. Awareness-raising and education emerged as the key strategic actions, with outcomes such as improved quality of life, increased social participation, and the strengthening of cultural symbols being emphasized.

Overall, the results indicate that Iranian sport, provided that integrated educational and economic policies are implemented and institutional barriers are addressed, can function as an effective strategic tool for promoting social mobility and reducing class-based inequalities.

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Introduction

One of the main research needs in this area is to examine inequalities in access to sports resources, facilities, and opportunities. Gaps in financial support, educational infrastructure, professional contracts, and institutional support can pose serious challenges for some athletes. These inequalities not only reduce participation and motivation, but also reproduce a cycle of limitations on social mobility. However, sport can be a powerful tool to reduce these gaps and empower disadvantaged groups. Success in sports can lead to strengthening social status, motivating future generations, and changing cultural and social attitudes. This is especially important in societies with cultural constraints or historical inequalities. Research on the social mobility of athletes can help identify solutions to create equal opportunities and promote social justice. These studies provide valuable information for policymakers, sports managers, and planners to facilitate social mobility pathways for all groups through infrastructure development, policy reform, and targeted support. Accordingly, the present study aims to improve social mobility with a focus on Iran's sports capacities.

Methods and Materials

In this study, a qualitative method and a data-driven approach based on the systematic method of Strauss and Corbin (1990) were used to identify and explain the pattern of improving social mobility with a focus on Iranian sports capacities. Since there was no predetermined pattern, the aim of the study was to discover the pattern based on the data. The participants included 16 professors of sociology of sport and sport management who were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria such as academic background, familiarity with the subject, diversity of perspectives, and policy-making experience. The data collection tools were semi-structured interviews (individual interviews and focus groups) and document review. In order to validate the data, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria were used. For credibility, questions were designed with the approval of the supervisors and consultants. Transferability was achieved through review of the results by independent experts. Dependability was achieved by fully recording the research steps and taking notes, and confirmability was achieved by carefully documenting the coding process. Qualitative reliability was assessed through "retest coding." Three interviews were recorded 8 days apart, with an average agreement rate of 84.6%, which is acceptable for qualitative research. In addition, permission was obtained to conduct the interviews, and data were collected at the designated time after gaining the trust of the participants. Finally, the data from the interviews were analyzed and coded using a data-driven analysis method to derive a local and practical framework for improving social mobility through the capacities of Iranian sport.

Results and Discussion

A total of 126 conceptual codes were extracted from the interviews. The codes identified in the previous section were then converted into codes or subcategories. After each interview, the codes identified in each interview were compared to determine their similarities and differences. Therefore, the codes were placed in a category based on similarity and formed a concept (subcategory). During the open coding process in the present study, a total of 351 conceptual codes were extracted without considering overlaps (126 categories considering overlaps) and formed 17 concepts (subcategories). In the second stage, axial coding, the main categories (causal conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, contextual conditions, and consequences) were considered as the axis and then other concepts (subcategories) were related to them according to commonalities or homogeneity and synonymy. In this model, four main categories were identified in the causal conditions section: developing sports management educational pathways, achieving economic and class equality in sports, controlling cultural changes and public perception, and alleviating poverty through sports. These categories were considered the initial platforms for improving social mobility through sports. Also, in the contextual factors section, components such as creating diverse career paths, strengthening cultural diplomacy, the catalytic role of sports, and its globalization were identified as contexts for the role of sports in improving the social status

of individuals. In contrast, factors of economic exploitation and institutional and structural barriers were identified as obstacles to the full realization of social mobility through sports. Finally, the central category of social mobility was defined in four dimensions: cultural, political, economic, and educational, each of which represents independent but intertwined paths for improving individual and social status through sports. The researcher introduced the strategy of awareness-raising and education as a key strategy for realizing these dimensions and highlighted the practical consequences of sports in improving individual lives, promoting social participation, and strengthening cultural symbols.

Conclusion

The consequences of improving social mobility, with an emphasis on the capacities of Iranian sports, include a wide range of cultural symbols, social impacts, individual changes, and talent discovery. These consequences not only indicate the success of the strategies and policies implemented, but also provide the basis for the country's sustainable cultural and social development. Given the potential capacities of sports in Iran and its prominent role in people's lives, focusing on strengthening and exploiting these consequences can effectively help promote social mobility and pave the way for broader developments at the national and regional levels.

Keywords: improvement, advancement, individual status, upward mobility, social mobility