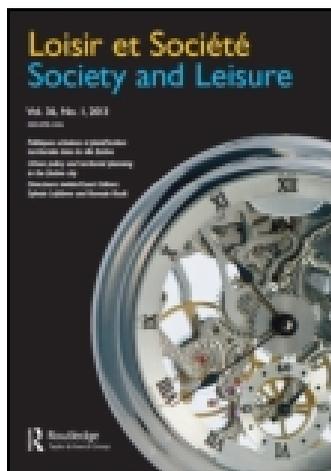


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Studying commitment from the perspective of collective action: the case of sport clubs in proximate surroundings

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This paper, using ethnographic research, approaches sport clubs in proximate surroundings as small societies. More precisely, the analysis of two sporting activities practiced by girls (baton twirling and football) highlights the fact that commitment is linked to a phenomenon of ‘familiarization.’ As a matter of fact, this phenomenon addresses two concurrent concerns: bringing the club to life, while dealing with sporting institution requirements as well as the social order more generally. In this regard, the politics of closeness sheds light on the ways in which the canonical models of the sporting institution are renegotiated in the clubs and the leisure activities are regulated in an effort to achieve proximity. As the clubs endeavor to maintain the practitioners within the sporting activities, regardless of the latter’s capacities and performances, this policy makes sustained commitment possible, contradicting the currently accepted view that girls tend to withdraw from sport.

Keywords: small societies; sport; commitment; familiarization

L’article, qui prend appui sur une étude ethnographique, aborde les clubs de sport de proximité comme des petites sociétés. Plus précisément, l’analyse en situation et dans les relations qu’elles configurent d’activités sportives juvéniles et féminines (le twirling bâton et le football) révèle que l’engagement, dans ce cas, est lié à un phénomène de *familiarisation* du loisir organisé. Il répond, par ailleurs, à une double préoccupation : donner vie à un club tout en (a)ménageant le rapport à l’institution sportive et à l’espace social plus généralement. À cet égard, la notion de politique du proche permet de saisir la façon dont, au sein des clubs, les formes institutionnelles de régulation des activités de loisir sont renégociées dans une visée de proximité. S’attachant à maintenir les pratiquantes dans une activité sportive, quelles que soient leurs capacités, cette politique rend possible un engagement durable, à l’inverse de la tendance avérée des parcours d’abandon.

Mots clés : petites sociétés ; sport ; engagement ; familiarisation

In his article on commitment, Howard Becker (1960) stated that the notion of commitment, despite the increasingly widespread use of it in the social sciences at that time, had yet to become an object of formal analysis. Not only did few studies theorize commitment, but when they did, the notion described a wide variety of phenomena on the sole basis of its power of evocation. In *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Becker (1963) argued that, in order to comprehend the marijuana smoker, it is important to pair the notion of commitment with the notion of career developed by Everett Hughes (1958) in his study of professions. Since then, the heuristic value contained in the question

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'How does one become...?' (Poussou-Plesse, 2010, p. 256) has inspired numerous fields of research, ranging from the study of deviance to anorexia (Darmon, 2003) to activism (Fillieule, 2001, 2005), and the use of these concepts has since extended well beyond American interactionist sociology. Nonetheless, one thing unites this particular research: in order to study the path of an individual (a jazz musician or a patient, for instance), or the path of a collective (Socialisme ou Barbarie, Act up, and so on¹), when either focusing on engagement (entering a role or an identity) or disengagement (abandoning a role or an identity), the unit of analysis remains the individual.² This perspective goes hand in hand with an utilitarian approach or even an economic vision of action (Ion, 2004) – though it dodges the descriptive language favored by neoliberal grammarians³ – and it goes back to Becker's initial conceptualization of commitment. In fact, Becker studies the 'coherence of human behavior' and the 'consistent lines of activity' (1960) an individual follows within the organizations encountered as well as the conventional behavior that these imply:

In speaking of commitment, I refer to the process through which several kinds of interests become bound up with carrying out certain lines of behavior to which they seem formally extraneous. What happens is that the individual, as a consequence of actions he has taken in the past or the operation of various institutional routines, finds he must adhere to certain lines of behavior, because many other activities than the one he is immediately engaged in will be adversely affected if he does not. (Becker, 1963, p. 57)

Towards a pragmatics of commitment

As fruitful as this perspective may be, a different approach in this article will be followed. Using a pragmatic perspective, the aim is to study commitment through the prism of organizations, inside sport clubs more precisely, given that a sport club is a traditional actor in organized leisure (Callède, 2008). This choice necessitates taking into account at least two elements. First, collective action needs to be understood as an action brought about collectively and should not be confused with an action called forth by a pre-existing collective subject. Thus, collective action treats collective subjects as 'a modality' of action (Quéré, 2003). In this respect, the positions held by the individuals, as well as the relationships which concern them, are organized by the action. Second, in studying association as a collective, the following is taken into account: 'endogenous dynamic of the action as that which is produced *in the experience of the action itself*,' following the suggestion of Jacques Ion (2004, p. 77). In other words, insofar as the collective ties are the correlate and not the preamble to collective action (Ion, 2004), the study focuses on the type of communal life developed inside sport clubs, which are viewed as *small societies*. These clubs are, in fact, characterized by both vulnerability and creativity as well as by their struggle for a place inside social space. (Thériault & Boucher, 2005, pp. 4–5).

As they pertain to collective action, the collective activities under consideration in this study were conducted to scale inside a baton twirling club and in women's divisions of football clubs.⁴ Inside these clubs, recreational practice is contingent on a vulnerable framework owing to the idea that the longevity of the club or team relies not only on the funding provided by local government, but is mostly tied to the commitment of volunteers as well as the continuous renewal of the athletes themselves. This vulnerability helps us to appreciate all the more the importance of sustaining the long-term commitment of the girls participating in these clubs.

The use of a pragmatic approach to commitment offers a means to analyze ‘in full’ the maintenance of commitment and to measure the depth and temporality of commitment as a phenomenon *per se*. This theoretical framework also leads us to distance ourselves from the notion of career (Hughes, 1958). As M. Poussou-Plesse (2010) reminded us, the concept of career is linked to the concept of ‘turning point,’ since engagement and disengagement are undeniably paired. The sociological focus is then directed toward how an activity is entered (including the individual motivations behind it), what changes in status or identity are experienced, and at which turning points an activity is sometimes abandoned. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to locate these turning points or successive engagements and disengagements, but rather to understand how commitment is upheld. From this standpoint, the goal is to examine temporality not with relation to an individual’s life span, but rather as it relates to the activity itself within its own time frame. To put it another way, the study sheds light on the social logics that produce and maintain commitment.

A sociological conundrum: maintaining the commitment of girls in a sport club

The pragmatic approach to commitment enables us to address a conundrum at the origin of the study. It so happens that girls from low-income backgrounds choose to pursue organized sporting activities over some time. However, this finding contradicts the statistics that show the existence of weak exposure to continuous membership in this social category. It may also be noted that disengagement has been the object of numerous contributions which mainly treat the question of physical athletics and sport activity from the perspective of withdrawal.⁵ These studies have revealed significant inequalities between boys and girls both in terms of the amount of time each gender devotes to sport practice and in terms of the access, integration and participation of girls in sport clubs (Lamprecht, Fischer, & Stamm, 2008). The gap between girls and boys is particularly wider when the gender variable is intersected with the variables of class and socio-cultural origin. Consequently, girls from migrant families raised in low-income households clearly participate less in clubs than do boys, in general, but also less than girls from higher income households (Dagkas & Benn, 2006). Moreover, when young girls do participate, their length of stay is shorter and their sport attendance is lower (Fontayne, Sarrazin, & Famose, 2002). These observations, valid for France and the UK, concur with those in Switzerland. The study led by the Swiss Sports and Physical Activity Observatory (Lamprecht *et al.*, 2008) clearly shows a strong presence of these variations. Finally, a recent study conducted in Zurich (Tomatis *et al.*, 2010) shows that children from low-income households exhibit lower coordination skills during physical education classes and obtain poorer scores on motor skill aptitude tests.

These separate observations attest to the existence of early inequalities between children, and between boys and girls, more specifically, as they pertain to physical exercise and athletic abilities and as they affect the differential commitment of each gender to sport clubs. Nevertheless, some girls, as we have noted, become more committed to a club and to a sport over time. In order to resolve this contradiction, we consider commitment as *a result* of collective action. This leads us to formulate the following hypothesis, which appears quite simple: if girls engage in sport activities over some time, is it because togetherness encourages their commitment? More precisely, their commitment is tied to the ‘participation framework’ (Goffman, 1991) that organizes collective life. This is the line of investigation that was chosen for study during the ethnographic investigation that was conducted in four sport clubs, and from which two

aspects have been discussed in detail. The first part is an attempt to show how the activities produced and the relationships forged inside these clubs are tethered to a 'regime of proximate surroundings' (Thévenot, 2006, 2011) which is created by the attachments between individuals, as they concern intimacy, closeness, reciprocity, cooperation, face-to-face encounters, and may best be described in terms of convenience, commodity, ease, care, solicitude, benevolence, love and friendship. More precisely, this particular 'regime of proximate surroundings' refers to a 'mode of relating' (Pattaroni, 2005, p. 192) that is characterized by familiarity and habit (Breviglieri, 2008, 2010; Genard, 2011). It consists of creating shared bonds from familiar attachments and emotional interactions. Yet this particular type of communal living is not limited to community. As is shown in the second part, collective action in these sport clubs arises from public action, in the sense that it mediates between the sport institution (the Federations) and the young sport members. Specifically, this type of togetherness displays a genuine 'policy of proximity' (Thévenot, 2001) because the rules within the sport clubs are renegotiated in order to achieve proximity. Whereas the sport organizations are responsible for upholding the rules and regulations that produce proper sport practice, the purpose of this renegotiation in the clubs is to permit each player to participate in their chosen activity according to their own skills and abilities. To put it another way, these sport clubs have developed a particular relationship with the sport organizations because they reinterpret the rules, the codes and the canonical models, tweaking them in order to adapt them to the individual abilities of the athletes.⁶ The proximity policy⁷ consists in 'making the sporting activity familiar' or adjusting it to the 'size' (Boltanski, Darré, & Schiltz, 1984) of the players, thus encouraging the consistent commitment in the sport over some time for those girls who would ordinarily tend to disengage.

A portrait of sport clubs in proximate surroundings and their proposed activities

The four sport clubs at the heart of this study are each located in French-speaking Switzerland. These clubs offer either football or baton twirling to girls (aged 6 to 18, approximately). At the onset of this ethnographical study, these clubs were chosen because they met two criteria: the characteristics of the activities and the club itself and the long-term presence of some of the girls. Fundamentally, these clubs are said to be 'in proximate surroundings,' because, rather than aiming to train an elite athlete, they seek to welcome everyone.⁸ They offer sport activities which either encourage mainly women's participation or contain a women's division. Moreover, popular culture predominates in these clubs on different levels and is marked in the social origins of the members, the positions they hold within the sport, the music they listen to, the fashions they follow, the body codes and language they use, and the ways the girls interact together and socialize. Some of these girls have practiced their sport activity for several years. Lastly, it can be added that these clubs are located in urban settings and their surroundings.

Football

Since the 1970s, women's football in Switzerland has been divided into two components. The first component is competitive and highly selective and is affiliated with the Cantonal Football Associations. Since it trains elite athletes, it can lead to a limited number of young women players entering competitive sport clubs, playing in championships and playing on Swiss national or foreign professional teams. The second component regroups a larger number of players inside co-ed clubs that contain women's divisions. At the

junior level, where the girls are between the ages of 9–15, the girls' teams play against both the boys' teams and other girls' teams. Starting at the age of 15, girl football players participate in exclusively female championships, whether they become members of the senior teams or whether they remain at the junior level. Women's football is organized according to two paths: one that can lead the players toward professional championships, and the other which promotes the enjoyment of the sport among girls. At present, women's football divisions are found in most Swiss clubs, whose members include 24,000 licensed women football players for 240,000 licensed men football players.

Baton twirling

Baton twirling is a sports activity that combines gymnastics, dance and baton twirling. It is composed of different events, namely Solo, Freestyle, Solo 1-Baton or 2-Baton, Pairs and Teams. Although, historically, baton twirling originated with the majorettes, today some aspects have evolved and include changes concerning venue (the events are now performed in gymnasiums), body movements and choreographies, and the sports competitions, themselves. The Swiss Federation (2013) defines baton twirling as 'a combination of gymnastics and sport performed individually or in groups which coordinates rhythmic and precise interactions between the body and the baton, all set to music.' The choreographies play a central role in most categories of competition and they demonstrate musical tastes and body dexterity. Despite what is commonly thought about baton twirling, it is a very complex and physical sport, necessitating many hours of practice. According to the twirlers, it requires a lot of dedication and tenacity. In Switzerland, baton twirling appeals mostly to women, though the sport is open to boys. Today, only a few dozen clubs are affiliated with the Swiss Federation.

These two sports – baton twirling is women-centered, and women's football continues to be relatively unpopular in Europe – are associated with a certain number of gender stereotypes or even unflattering social representations. The forms of life (Honneth, 2000) associated with these two sport activities suffer from a lack of recognition and of self-esteem. However, taking into account the stigmatization attached to these two sports, the study is less concerned with the formation of gender identity or the concept of socialization with respect to an atypical sport⁹ than with understanding the process by which the clubs and the girls engaged in these sport activities deal with disparaging criticism. Similarly, this article attempts to analyze the effects these deriding judgments produce on the girls' commitment and the shape of their togetherness. In other words, the study is concerned with the question of recognition, which is tied to citizenship, public space and communal life.¹⁰

To conduct the fieldwork on baton twirling, a year was spent immersed in two clubs – one in the inner city and the other on the periphery. The practice sessions were observed and the competitions and events were followed over that period of time. Informal interviews were conducted with selected informants as well as group interviews with the baton twirlers and individual ones with their coaches and managers. These interviews, conducted within each of the two clubs, led to the understanding of the ways in which the implementation of competition and integration was finely articulated in the clubs. Finally, the Swiss Federation of Baton Twirling was contacted to understand the challenges the organizers face concerning funding issues and the efforts made toward recognizing their sport activity as a sport. The diversity of tools used in the compilation of the data resulted in highlighting the importance of the life of the club itself as well as its educational environment that was responsible for influencing the ways in which the girls perceived their baton twirling as a

sport, and the extent to which this perception plays a role in the longevity of their membership in the club.¹¹ Regarding the women's football clubs, the inquiry began with the same methodological device, to which was added participatory observation since one member of the research team volunteered to be an assistant trainer.¹²

A common bond made of benevolence and attachments

In the baton twirling clubs, the feeling of togetherness among the girls arises not only from their participation in competitions, meets and practice sessions, but also from the nourishment which the feeling of belonging to a group of athletes provides. Thus, this mode of participating in this sport activity occurs at the intersection of two dimensions: an internal one that occurs and is defined inside the social group during the practice sessions and an external one produced by what is perceived outside – for instance a ‘small society’ that faces adversity. If official rules largely depend upon the sport being played, the girls are not limited to these. During the interviews with the twirlers, the girls discussed tacit rules that bring them together inside a team or a group and reveal their attachment to each other. In general, it seems inconceivable for the individual girls to view themselves as being anything other than a ‘friend’ even if internal tensions exist among them.

Twirling is not just a sport, it's really . . . we have friends over there, people we trust, people we can talk to and all and . . . In fact, it's also, it's not just the sport where there's a trainer and then other athletes . . . It's more than that . . . We are friends [. . .] When we're little, it's more . . . It's the girlfriends, like that . . . And then afterward, I think, when we grow up, there's something more because, really, we talk and everything. We spend more time together also because we've known each other for years. (J., Athlete, age 17)

The feeling of belonging to a group is constructed over time. From the start, it requires that certain rules be followed, ‘not ostracizing others,’ for instance, and ‘not expressing negative feelings,’ or, at the very least, ‘not voicing these negative feelings outwardly.’ In fact, togetherness implies coming together in order to reach a common objective, as when facing other athletes or teams during competitions.

We're a little more together against . . . winning all together and then everyone gets a medal. Reaching the podium together. (B., Athlete, age 15)

From this standpoint, even in a sport where individual performances are judged, all the forms of competition are understood as necessitating a collective effort that excludes purely individual interests. This is a particular way of considering athletic ability and personal investments, since each athlete's performance relates back to the club as a whole, eliciting from the girls (young and old alike) benevolence and team spirit:

Before a girl's turn, they're all in the bleachers screaming, cheering, and all, so . . . And then we go back to the locker room, they all say ‘Yay, that was too awesome! Hurray!’ Like that. I say to myself, yes, we're a team! (M., Athlete, age 16)

Beyond these athletic performances, baton twirling is guided by the principles of collective life that take place in these clubs during both practice and competitions, that is, at moments when teamwork and cooperation are highly salient and occupy a lot of space, for instance when the older girls apply make-up on the faces of the younger girls before a

contest. Reinforced by the educational framework in which it occurs, the attachment to the group is established between the girls and the instructors, but it develops most strongly within the group of the young athletes themselves, regardless of the evaluations made by the individuals who lead the training. A similar observation of commitment and participation in collective life was brought to our attention with respect to the football teams. In one of the clubs that was investigated, players as young as 14 trained younger players and even became entirely responsible for them in certain cases. These girls demonstrated a definite attachment to the team in which they played and they expressed it in their own words, making the terms *team* and *family* analogous.¹³

It's a little like family, when we are on the field, we are, like, when we miss a shot, it's not a big deal, it's a little like family (D., Defender, age 11)

I love everything about football... Yeah, we're a family. (B., Defender, age 12)

This sense of belonging emanating from the team is composed of the rules of the game and those of a shared experience exhibited during practice and games. When the rules are transgressed, this affects not only the individual performances, but also the team's performance. Thus, the tensions among the girls are specifically influenced by the relationships forged outside the club at school, namely outside the club especially at school. These relationships have a direct influence on the atmosphere and the pleasure they experience during their activity.

... But sometimes, there are conflicts then afterward, there are tensions on the field, and after, there are groups, and we think that she criticized us, 'cause we did a thing, after we think that it's worse and we can't manage to really concentrate [...] it's not the same thing, concentrating on the ball and pleasing others. (B., Forward, age 12)

Perhaps given the value the football players ascribe to team spirit, the conflicts between them lead to a lack of concentration. Moreover, many of the girls mentioned the expression 'lack of concentration' to mean something contagious which contaminates the entire group.

Well, sometimes, we're playing a game, then after that, the whole team stops and we all get discouraged. (O., Midfielder, age 11)

This is the reason the behaviors responsible for inducing a lack of concentration that sometimes discourages the team are denounced because they impair the collective interests, whether during a game or practice, and are viewed as detrimental to the group.

She (D.) is not concentrating, she's talking. (L., Midfielder, age 11)

She's laughing and all, she's not being serious. [...] (O., Midfielder, age 11)

We have noted that the rules to be followed are not only limited to the sport activity itself, but concern, more generally, the way the girls associate in the team. As in the case of baton twirling, the sense of collective belonging is revealed through facing adversity. The games serve as a reminder to the players that the team exists in relation to other teams, including boys' teams. In women's football, commitment to the team and to the sport implies defending a common interest which involves demonstrating that a group of girls can measure up to the boys.

Well, actually, the boys, at the beginning, they say: 'Ha! It's a girls' team' so there. We've already beaten boys, then after when we beat them, we tell them 'Yeah, well, we're girls, but, damn, we beat you.' (B., Defender, age 12)

During the games, the boys, they see the girls in front of them, and they say 'Ah, it's easy, we're gonna win,' but, when we won, and, they insulted us when they were leaving, they can't stomach that girls could beat them. (L., Forward, age 13)

Even though baton twirling is as stigmatized as women's football, these sports have value for and give value to the young players whom we met. Baton twirling continues to be little known and, as such, is original. Women's football is reserved for people other than themselves. In other words, according to the girls, choosing to participate in either sport originates from a willingness to transgress certain norms. This choice has direct consequences on the intensity of the commitment because participating in this sport activity has intrinsic value, despite the derision surrounding the activity or the game.¹⁴

Yeah, I swear, they say this, really: 'Did ya buy your dribbles at Denner's?' (N., age 12, football player)¹⁵

Since choosing an activity is no trivial matter, the girls who commit themselves to either sport demonstrate their commitment on many levels through defining the rules that apply to 'coming together' as a team or a group, becoming engaged or disengaged together in the face of adversity, fighting for the right to play football on an equal footing and calling attention to the singularity of their sport. Moreover, since these two sport activities take place in potentially hostile environments, the girls find the necessary resources available to them inside collective life, which then reinforces their activity. In this respect, during the confrontations the games and competitions provide, the internal cohesion of the group is strengthened. As these events are open to the public, visibility is also given to the girls' collective belonging. When the players of each club applaud the baton twirlers from the bleachers, their support intensifies and deepens the sense of interconnectedness the girls feel inside the different clubs. Similarly, during the football games for either the younger or the older players, the fans encourage, cheer and applaud every play, even when a pass is missed. The players on each team have their own fans and all the players also know one another. During baton twirling meets, the marks attributed by the judges are often contested. From their seats, the fans argue about what criteria ought to be used to judge the performances, making it clear that there is not a one-size-fits-all judgment to be applied to all the baton twirlers, detached from their personal experience or the number of hours of practice. In other words, the point to be made is that these activities combine the assessments derived from the different points of view expressed in proximate surroundings, and they also extend beyond the impersonal decisions sanctioned by the institutions. In both cases, however, the marks of the judges do not emanate solely from one authoritative source (the Federations), but are the combined result of the judgments voiced by manifold participants (the trainers, the instructors, the fans and the peers).

In this respect, everything concurs to create a climate of feelings that encourage the blossoming of familiar relationships. Consequently, the 'proximate' (Thévenot, 2006) is also the object, in these clubs, of a policy that aims to foster 'familiarizing' in the sport practice and that adapts it to the abilities of the athletes. In the next part, the process of how this occurs from the point of view of both the trainers and athletes will be demonstrated.

Promoting commitment through unity and singularity

The baton twirling clubs

Learning baton twirling involves acquiring a minimum of basic techniques. The instructors and athletes who were interviewed concur that baton twirling necessitates many hours of practice owing to the complexities of this sport:

It's really hard, you have to practice a lot. Me, I tell them that I practice twice a week and sometimes, even three times a week. (P., age 9)

Since baton twirling is such a demanding sport, the athletes demonstrate perseverance and commitment over some time¹⁶ in the clubs even when the search for excellence or sport achievements is not one of their stated aims. Conversely, athletes who seek to compete in championships are required to pass the Swiss Federation examinations, called levels ('degrés'), which roughly correspond to an age category. Advancing from one level to the next involves an increase in test difficulty. The younger athletes (called Benjamins) start at the Honor's level ('degré d'honneur') and the older ones (called Seniors) must reach the fourth level to become qualified for competing in international championships. The athletes' performances are judged according to body technique, dance steps and baton twirling routines. If the athletes are unable to attain the level required for competing in the international championships, they can nevertheless continue baton twirling even though they only meet the requirements for national championships, or for the 'Criterium' contests open to all age groups. All the girls in the clubs should be able to continue to practice the sport and participate in meets where there are no championship levels at stake. This is an on-going concern for the adults who train the girls:

[...] Now when we know that some of the girls can advance, of course, we'll encourage those girls and we'll push them more, obviously. When we see a girl who will unfortunately never be able to reach the world level in her category, we won't push her aside, we'll always have her compete, but only at her level. (A., Manager)

As a result, the managing volunteers (the instructors, more specifically) tweak the Federation requirements to enable the participation of all the athletes, including those whose performances do not meet the Federation's standards of excellence. This explains why baton twirling today continues to be considered as a less discriminating and less selective sport. What matters foremost to the instructors is the quality of the commitment of the athletes toward the sport activity.

I don't have a problem with putting a girl who doesn't have the level baton twirl on the dance floor. I have no problem with that. I don't select. My only condition is that the girl wants to do it. [...] (H, Instructor)

In fact, since all the girls take part in at least one meet per year, this flexibility drives the coaches to constantly adapt their coaching methods to the qualities of each of the baton twirlers. In other words, the trainers tailor their coaching methods to the technical and athletic abilities of the athletes by creating individualized sessions that acknowledge the desires and preferences of the young players (Golay, Malatesta, Perrin, & Jaccoud, 2011). In order to best prepare the girls for these meets, the instructors modify the requirements in the competitive categories instead of expecting the girls to make their bodies conform to the athletic standards:

Our goal is not about counting numbers. In fact, we will train every girl individually. This way we can manage their levels effectively. Afterward, depending on the 'program' we make, we tell them 'It might be better if you tried to do this because it might help you to go where you want to go.' But we always try to place them in the best circumstances possible, so they can get to where they want to go or so they can have the most fun, because some of them tell us straight out: 'I'm not interested in doing the Swiss championships.' (H., Instructor)

By continuously adjusting their routines to the technical and physical abilities of the girls, the trainers seek to keep the girls inside the club. This demonstrates the extent to which the adults endeavor to render familiar the rules and regulations of the Federation by adapting these to the abilities of the athletes. What must be highlighted here is that the implementation of solutions leading to keeping the girls within the clubs over time is favored by the nature of the sport activity and its relative independence from the institutional selection criteria guidelines. Thus the 'plasticity' of baton twirling reinforces the determination of the instructors to adopt several strategies enabling them to manage the diverse levels in the girls' performances. The instructors might assemble a group of athletes based on the intensity of their commitment (good attendance and active participation during the practice sessions) or on a category event (Solos, Solos with Batons, Pairs, Teams, Groups), but they can also adapt the choice of music and choreography to the twirlers' physical and technical abilities:

If the girl really has a great body, we can play much slower music because we can do a lot more with her body movements. For someone who doesn't have that much of a body we'll play much faster music. (J., Instructor)

These strategies are, in fact, derived from a conception of justice that rests on the theory of the redistribution of resources (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) in the sense that all of the athletes can remain in the club despite any poor performances or the lack of attendance during practice and they must also actively take part in at least one contest, in which they can perform in front of a public audience:

To my mind, those who want to advance, advance, but all of them advance together. Because if, all of a sudden, in this type of group, I have a girl who shows up when she just feels like it, it can't work anymore. I lose the group dynamic. So, we decided to split into two groups and my colleague, she doesn't have the good section because she has the girls who need to be motivated. Then again, they are the reason the club exists. (H., Instructor)

This type of organization of the sport training that unites the demands of the sport activity with the abilities of the athletes is doubly warranted because it facilitates the instructors' work while respecting the preferences of the girls. At the end of the day, the club is able to maintain all of the girls without excluding those who do not wish to subscribe to an athletic form of socialization.

The football club

From the girls' point of view, football necessitates acquiring technical skills, understanding the positions played on the field and overcoming the fear of physical contact. Playing football properly extends beyond making simple moves, like running behind a ball or kicking one:

[...] football, it's not just shooting a ball, it's not running behind a ball, [...] you have to know how to dribble, ... you have to know how to frame [...]. In fact, at the beginning, I thought that football was taking a ball and scoring, but it's not that at all, it's not just two things to know, there are millions of things, you have to dribble, run backward, be in position. (B., Defender, age 12)

Becoming aware of the complexities of the sport through learning and then mastering the game rules and techniques necessary to become a good player reinforces the players' drive to pursue the sport and dedicate their efforts to training on the field. This process validates their decision to play football, regardless of what level they perceive themselves as having reached.

A: When we started to play football, we had a lot of losses when we were little and now we are advancing all together. And so, now, we're seeing our victories. That's good. So, all this happens over time.

Q: Coming back to the victory, do you still lose sometimes?

L: Yes, but we make goals now, before we didn't score any points.

A: ... and, now, we play together more, we know each other better, and that's, that's what's also important. (A., age 11, and L., age 12, football players)

As a team sport, football is organized according to categories of juniors and teams. Usually, a club consists of several teams of children: ranging from the Junior Fs (7- to 8-year-olds) to the Junior As (17- to 19-year-olds). However, since these categories are not strictly enforced, players on an *ad hoc* basis can be advanced or kept at the same level. Beside the fact that the Swiss Football Association imposes the categories in which teams are distributed, players must also obtain a 'passport' (formerly known as a license) in order to participate in championships. However, since newcomer girl players can become members and train in the club without a passport, this ensures their commitment in the sport activity from the first day they join. A small number of young girl football players pursue a path toward championship selection, with the best players taking aptitude tests in order to become eligible for the Cantonal team, and eventually for the National team. In these clubs, the coaches and/or the technical directors seek both to retain the players within their clubs and to give the opportunity to the best athletes to enter a more competitive track:

The teams practice twice a week, with the best players attending two training practices.¹⁷ We want to keep both in order to have the numbers. (T., Coach)

The players are put on a team according to their age, which is the selection criteria used to compose the teams. Those who distinguish themselves by their performances and good attendance are invited to perfect their skills by participating in training sessions, for which they have been selected. In one of the clubs, these sessions were held at the club site, while in the other, the girls played at another venue. The clubs, therefore, allow for a certain amount of flexibility because they take into account the technical skills and physical abilities of the girls. Ultimately, the clubs aim to retain every one of the players – those with high attendance rates and who are highly self-disciplined, as well as those who simply want to play for fun. The best athletes 'extracted' from the clubs by external recruitment are placed on Cantonal and National teams. Inside the clubs, managing the diverse abilities of the players entails modifying the game time and the positions of the players on the field. The players with the least endurance play defense, while the fastest and strongest (in terms of physical strength) can play midfield or forward. Though the

coaches select player positions on the basis of the physical and technical potentials of each player, these positions can nonetheless be negotiated between the girls and their trainers:

[...] She looked at how we played on the field, which position would suit us and then she said to us, [...] she asked us which position we preferred and then afterward, she guided us a little... (D., Defender; age 11)

The logic that precedes the selection of players' positions on the field is tethered to a reinterpretation of the rules and regulations mandated by the Swiss Football Association. This logic relies on an economy brought forth by situational intelligence. To make their selection, what is being considered are the players' individual preferences and accomplishments or conversely their technical limitations and physical deficits. Therefore, although football as a social organization is dependent upon a set of powerful rules and guidelines that are meant to ensure the 'proper' playing of the game, the adult coaching teams in these clubs rework the rules in order to adjust them to the needs of the girl players on the teams. Accordingly, the coaches (of either gender) allow for a certain leeway within the categories in order to enroll the girl teams in the championships. Similarly, even though the positions to be played on the field are selected according to the physical and technical abilities of the players, the criteria of endurance – given that endurance can be a most discriminating factor – does not jeopardize team spirit. The coaches strive to reformulate the rules and regulations of the game to meet their needs: the framework of communal life helps the commitments that vary in intensity and density and adjusts the sport to the 'size' (Boltanski *et al.*, 1984) of the girls as well as to their abilities and individual temperaments. Therefore, the girls are in a position to freely accommodate the strength of their commitment inside the team, the club and the sport.

'Cause if they want us to succeed, well, they have to be a bit tougher, but they are nice at the same time, there's a little of both, because if they're too tough it helps us to learn, but after we feel a little disgusted, but even if she is too tough or too nice it balances out. (D., Football player; age 12)

As we have seen in the cases of baton twirling and football, collective action consists in 'promoting commitment through unity and singularity' inside the clubs of proximate surroundings so as to maintain the girls in the sport activities they offer. The adults who manage the clubs are determined to retain the groups of athletes, despite the disparities in their performances and the differences in their levels and skills. In order to achieve this, the coaches continuously adjust the models imposed on them by the sport federations, according to both the nature of the sport activity and the stated objectives of each club. However, the young athletes themselves play a considerable role in these adjustments since their physical attributes (both technical and physiological) as well as their individual preferences and wishes are taken into account. This leads us to state that the sport clubs in proximate surroundings also tend to promote the familiarization of sport activities, and this leads to two consequences. It favors the integration of each athlete in a sport group (a team of baton twirlers or a football team) and reinforces the feeling of belonging to a club, while facilitating a type of sporting experience that bends the rules of competition and excellence.

Overall, these clubs make room for physical and athletic commitment because they do not discriminate. In addition to the absence of recruiting policies and the lack of judgment based on physical characteristics, the clubs exhibit a wide acceptance of the diverse levels

and performances of the girls in their selections for the teams or for the categories of competition. The club directors, trainers and instructors empower the young girls in their drive to master the sport activity of their choice while simultaneously allowing some of the young girls to dodge at the same time the demands of competing or performing as well as the competitive aspects of the sports institutions. The effort made to unite the girls in these sport activities is a measured type of socialization that gives primacy to the players by strongly encouraging their pursuit of an activity implemented within a framework that also attempts to thwart any type of stigmatization regarding body-type expectations or the mastering of certain technical abilities, for instance. Moreover, in these clubs, the daily life of the athletes is not pushed aside. The interpenetration of communal life and the private lives of the girls is particularly remarkable in the oversight of the girls' academic performance inside the football environment; if, inside one club, access to specific training is geared toward the most assiduous players and leads to scholastic achievement, in the other, the school and teachers feared that playing football might obstruct the academic path of the girls.

Becoming committed and being committed

One of the aspects Becker (1960) emphasized and that has, unfortunately, been too often overlooked and seems particularly helpful to recall, is that sociological studies of commitment require understanding of the level of its two inherent poles. Becker argued that commitment must be tied to the idea of becoming engaged as much as to being engaged. This study has attempted to illustrate this point in order to demonstrate how collective action unites the different members inside the sport clubs of proximate surroundings. In order to maintain commitment over time, one must, no doubt, produce a constant line of action as much as feeling tied to it. In this regard, the ethnographic study proves to be heuristic. Through a detailed summary of the activities and practices, we have returned the experiences and associated actions to the temporality and depth that produce commitment. Our study brings to light more specifically both the existence of levels in the intensities of commitment and the variations in these involvements. This is how commitment is shaped in the communal life we have studied.

As we have seen, commitment favors the modes of relating and the sociability practices among the young girls and between the young girls and the adults. These modes of relating are indeed influenced by the 'regime of proximate surroundings' (Thévenot, 2006, 2011). This way of referring to sport activities and the different players that it unites is the inherent exercise of these leisure practices. Similarly, if this manner of being in the world characterizes a community, it refers to an open community whose action reflects the qualities of *small societies* – namely vulnerability, creativity and a spirit of defiance (*esprit contestataire*). The result of this collective action is to test the boundaries of the political public space in which the clubs are located.

Hence, given the 'policy of proximity' (Thévenot, 2006, 2011) produced inside the sport clubs in proximate surroundings, one finds, most assuredly, recognition (Honneth, 2000) since those individuals who pursue recreational activities that are deemed of poor value and are, therefore, weakly legitimized, do receive public recognition. In this respect, though they are presented as a means of familiarization which aims to bring together the athletic standards of the athletes, the public action provided in the clubs adds positive value to previously stigmatized sport activities and may even be shifting the power in dominated forms of life (Adorno, 1980).

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Notes

1. These are some of the activist collectives studied in Fillieule (2005).
2. As O. Fillieule (2001, p. 203) explained: 'We become attached to the analysis of the collective conditions of an action according to the meaning the agents attribute to them. From this point of view, if the individual is taken as a unit, it needs to be considered in relation to the collective social logics the individual faces and to the conditions that tie the individual to other individuals in the social relations that determine the individual's commitments.'
3. From an analytical perspective, this 'entering' or 'leaving' a role is tied to the 'costs' and 'retributions' they entail. When an individual commits himself, he does so because 'there is a payoff' (Gottraux, 2005, p. 82), in the sense of an account, or, more precisely, an interest, that can take different shapes, which can be material, symbolic or even emotional (hence the pleasure experienced during an activity provides a good reason for maintaining it).
4. In fact, women's football occupies a particular place inside these clubs and it refers to a parallel organization, in the sense Goffman (2002) attributed to it.
5. A considerable number of works in both psychology and sociology give preference to the study of disengagement and/or the analysis of how young girls withdraw from sports. Among the list of works using a gendered approach, see Brown (1985); Brown, Frankel, and Fennel (1989); Chevalier (1998); Eccles and Harold (1991); Guillet, Sarrazin, and Cury (2000); Louveau (2004); Todisco and Melchiorri (1998). For a more general critical analysis of clausal approaches to gender, see Malbois (2011).
6. It should be added that the type of interpretation conducted in these clubs is not far removed from the idea of 'negotiated position' suggested by S. Hall (1994) in his seminal paper concerning the studies of reception, in which he demonstrates how television viewers are led to interpret the coded messages in relation to how the media institution has encoded them. Our work might also be usefully compared to the notion of 'interpretative reproduction,' developed in Corsaro (2005), and which is used to describe the active part played by children in their own socialization, in the sense that their socialization is not limited to the incorporation of norms, models, knowledge or skills that are transmitted by adults, but rather is the result of a type of reappropriation and reinterpretation. These processes of negotiation are supported by and participate in a culture of peers, which escapes the asymmetrical educational relationship between children and adults.
7. Our use of this term was strongly influenced by Thévenot's work on 'proximate,' even though the way in which we use it differs slightly from his meaning. He defined proximate in terms of the conditions of access to the public sphere from the standpoint of commitments that are implied by attachments of proximity.
8. These sport clubs rely on volunteers for the most part and they enact public policy in the Swiss state, which has made it a priority to encourage 'sports for all.'
9. For an example of this type of questioning, relying on a theory of domination and the production and reproduction of hierarchical power in relation to gender, see the works of Christine Mennesson (2006) and Mennesson, Visentin, and Clément (2012). However, the same critique we applied to the career approach mentioned above is operative here. Paradoxically, these studies implement a conception of social radical individualism.
10. For further information regarding this question, see Ion (2004); regarding communal sport life in particular, see Callède (2007); and regarding sociabilities in sports in low-income neighborhoods, see Gasparini and Vieille Marchiset (2008).
11. The study presented here contains seven group interviews (with 20 girls, aged from 6 to 16), 11 one-on-one interviews (3 athletes: a 12-year-old boy, a 16-year-old girl, and a 20-year-old girl who all also serve as instructors; 6 instructors; a club president; a judge in the Federation), as well as one focus group composed of instructors and another focus group which contained a gymnastics instructor; and, finally, about 30 observations.
12. Our data include, more precisely, 10 group interviews (with 24 girls, aged from 9 to 13), an individual interview with the director of the women's section of the Vaudoise Cantonal

Football Association, an interview with the technical director of one of these clubs, informal exchanges with the team's fans and parents of players, as well as a dozen observations of games and practice sessions.

13. The reference to family as a metaphor for an emotional and sustained bond appears in Golay and Malatesta (2012).
14. Baton twirling is linked with majorettes, who are often the object of derision.
15. Denner is a discount supermarket retail chain, known for its rock-bottom prices.
16. With an exception being made for the newcomers recently enrolled in the clubs in our study, the athletes we interviewed had been active members for more than two years.
17. These training sessions are specific to this particular club. They mandate strict dietary controls for the players and the academic supervision of the girls.

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