Theorizing nationalistic biases in ski jumping

The empirical literature finds evidence for nationalistic and other evaluative biases in a variety of sports. What are the root causes of such bias?

The crudest form of nationalist bias is taste-based discrimination, which refers to individuals’ preferences for certain categories of people and is often used to explain discrimination against women or ethnic minorities in the labour market (Becker, 1957). Applied to ski jumping, this mechanism refers to judges’ conscious nationalistic impulses that bias their evaluations in favour of their own, and against competitors. A subtler form of this mechanism leads to subconscious bias for jumpers from one’s own country, where own preferences or social expectations lead judges to biased evaluations. Importantly, this discrimination does not by itself predict variation in the magnitude of biases across countries. Rather, the scope for nationalist biases is regulated by the regulatory and social space in which judges operate.

Judges’ efforts can be considered as a form of evaluation work. Evaluative work and the justification for evaluations as a sociological study has been profoundly influences by the works of Boltanski & Thévenot (???), although rarely used in research on the sociology of sport (however, Issanchou et al., 2015; Giulianotti & Langseth, 2016). A critical factor shaping evaluation work is the “room for evaluation”, which decides what is relevant and good in a field, and is a central tenet in the sociology of evaluation (Boltanski & Thévenot, XXX). The evaluative room may be wide, and allow for many different evaluative statements, or narrow, and restrict evaluative statements.

In ski jumping, the evaluative room is narrowed by standards imposed by the International Ski Federation (FIS), which regulates judges and can sanction their performance. FIS imposes professional standards on judges and monitors their performance, for instance by licencing judges for international, high-level assignments, by requiring national associations to hold at least one national-level judge seminar every year to contribute to educating new judges, requiring all judges to participate in such seminars at least once every two years, and subjecting judges to an evaluation by FIS Sub-committee working together with a data team that screens for non-fair scoring practices. Such strict screening and sanctioning regimes should reduce the scope for nationalistic bias by imposing career penalties on non-complying judges (Zitzewitz, 2006). Finally, competition rules limit the influence of such biases by removing the best and worst of the five scores from the total score.

Even though the rules and practices adopted by FIS, and other sports organizations, limit the magnitude of nationalistic bias and their impact of contest rankings, the research reviewed above suggests that they are not fully successful in ruling them out. The framework of evaluative rooms allows for criticisms, which over time can change the room for evaluation and its standards for judgment (Boltanski & Thévenot, XXX). In ski jumping, a famous case of this was when Jan Boklöv, a Swede, pioneered the V-style in ski jumping. Despite its geography, Sweden has not enjoyed long ski-jumping traditions unlike its Nordic neighbours Norway and Sweden, which plausibly allowed a broader evaluative room for Boklöv to develop his personalistic style. Though not *comme-il-faut* among judges and competitors at the time, and thus heavily penalized by judges, Boklöv’s success led to other competitors to mimic his style (Müller 2008) and eventually a change in the room for evaluations, where V- became completely dominant in the field (Pfister, 2007).

Despite standardization work to narrow the room for evaluation, there remains scope for variation in judges’ scoring. First, international standardization may not completely cancel national differences in jump evaluation “cultures”. As Boklöv’s example showed, national evaluative rooms may co-exist, and even conflict, with international ones even when the differences are less extreme than above. In such a case, nationalistic bias may reflect a taste for a specific, national, style rather than (sub)conscious discrimination (Basset and Persky 1995; Campbell and Galbraith 1996, for figure skating). One can expect that national and international cultures are likely to concur more closely in countries where ski jumping is an important sport, the national associations highly professionalized, the pool of potential judges deeper, and which have more power in setting the international standards—such as Austria, Finland, Germany, and Norway—and larger in countries where the sport is more marginal. This would imply that nationalistic bias—though not caused by discrimination—is more likely in countries where ski jumping is a smaller sport. Second, judges’ career incentives may conflict at the national and international levels. In other words, judges that may get sanctioned for the biases at the international level may be awarded at the national one. Such incentives are likely to be more idiosyncratically distributed by the judges’ nationality.

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