

FURTHER READINGS

CHAPTER 2

This file contains additional readings from earlier editions of *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, and some extra materials provided by Jay Coakley. These have not been included within the book as much of the content is explicitly focused on the USA, but users of the book may find these readings useful and interesting. Please feel free to send your feedback and/or suggest additional readings to us at jcoakley@uccs.edu or e.pike@chi.ac.uk.

Topic 1. Sociologists use more than one theoretical approach

Topic 2. Interactionist theory and the meaning of pain

Topic 3. Specific theories used in the sociology of sport

Topic 4. Feminist theories in the sociology of sport

Topic 5. Using social theories for practical purposes

Topic 6. Using a critical approach in research on sports in society

Topic 1. Sociologists use more than one theoretical approach

Most of the theorizing that sociologists have done over the past 150 years has been motivated by a desire to synthesize information about the social world and develop general explanations for how and why social life is organized in particular ways. Underlying this motivation has been the belief that if we could identify the key forces that drive and shape social life, we could become masters of our own destiny. In other words, if we developed a valid and reliable theory about how the social world works, we could outline rational strategies for organizing societies in progressively efficient and satisfying ways.

This hope that humans could make the world better and more controllable through the use of knowledge and science was the foundation of the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century, and marked the beginning of what we call “modernism” in Western societies. Modernism is an approach to life based on the idea that humankind can achieve progress through the use of rationality, science, and technology. Modernism gave rise to the belief that people could use social science to discover the knowledge needed to make societies more efficient, just, and harmonious. And as knowledge accumulated, human beings could bring societies closer and closer to perfection.

Most sociologists traditionally have wanted to be a part of this process of collecting information, testing theories, and eventually discovering scientific “truths” about how the social world works and how it might be controlled. Many have searched for “social laws” and “cause-effect relationships” that would explain all social life—regardless of time, place, and culture. These sociologists have tried to find the building blocks of social life by identifying the types of relationships and organizational structures that enable people to live satisfying lives in groups and societies. This search for the general foundations and building blocks of all societies has taken sociologists in different directions depending on their assumptions and viewpoints, as you will see in the following sections of this chapter.

But not all sociologists have joined in the search for a general theory of social life. Some have argued that it is not possible to develop a theory that explains all social life, and that the search for such a theory leads sociologists to ignore the diversity, complexity, and contradictions that are clearly a part of everyday life. Others argue that the quest for a general theory of society distracts sociologists from focusing on specific problems and identifying practical ways for people to solve problems fairly as they live their lives together. Finally, some sociologists have abandoned the search for a general theory of social life because they realize there are many different perspectives or standpoints from which to study and understand the world.

There are four major reasons for the use of so many theoretical perspectives in the sociology of sport:

First, feminist scholars and women around the world have made convincing arguments that theories based primarily or solely on men’s experiences and perspectives do not tell the whole story about social life. They note that theories ignoring the experiences and perspectives of 50 percent of the world’s population are incomplete at best and dangerous at worst. These scholars have explained how social life and theories about social life are influenced by the relative power of men and women in society and by who does the theorizing about society. This has led to new theoretical approaches in science as a whole, but especially in sociology.

Second, global social changes have forced social scientists from North America and northern and western Europe to realize that their theories about social life are based on a “Eurocentric

viewpoint” that is irrelevant to other parts of the world. As people around the world have become more interconnected, the peoples of Asia, Latin America, and Africa have contributed new ways of understanding social life. These new theoretical approaches are grounded in the experiences and perspectives of peoples who have not experienced industrialization or have experienced it in forms quite different from those found in Europe and North America. Some of these new theories have been developed out of the experiences of those who have lived under the colonial rule of Euro-American nations. And it is easy to understand that theories about social life developed by the colonized would be different from theories developed by the colonizers.

Third, new communications technologies have created a rapidly changing and diverse stream of computer-based and media-generated images and simulations that have altered our sense of what is real and what isn't. These mediated and image-based forms of reality have led some sociologists to develop new theoretical approaches that enable them to consider dimensions of social life outside traditional social boundaries and fixed social structures.

Fourth, many sociologists now realize that science itself is a part of culture, and they reject theories that they see as maintaining the power and privilege of an elite few. These sociologists have worked to develop new theoretical approaches that focus on specific problems and generate knowledge that disadvantaged people can use to gain more control over their lives and make social worlds more inclusive. These approaches are very different from the approaches most sociologists have used in the past.

Jay Coakley

Topic 2. Interactionist theory and the meaning of pain

The complexities of interactionist theory are difficult to explain. In fact, the best way to learn about interactionist theory is to review research that uses it. Here is an example that I've found to be helpful:

The meaning of pain in an athlete's life

Sociologist Tim Curry* examined biographical data on the sport career of an amateur wrestler. He collected case study data through three two-hour interviews over a two-month period. These interviews followed several years of observing the college wrestling team on which this young man (in his early twenties) participated. Curry's analysis clearly outlines the social processes through which many athletes come to define pain and injury as normal parts of their sport experiences.

Curry's report showed that this young wrestler initially learned to define pain and injury as a routine part of sport participation simply by observing other wrestlers and interacting with people connected to the sport. As he progressed to higher levels of competition, he became increasingly aware of how the endurance of pain and injury were commonplace among fellow athletes and former athletes who had become coaches. Over time this young man learned what it meant to be a wrestler, and what was required to have others define him as a wrestler.

For example, over time he learned the following: to "shake off" minor injuries, to define special treatment for minor injuries as a form of coddling, to express desire and motivation by playing while injured or in pain, to avoid using injury or pain as excuses for not practicing or competing, to use physicians and trainers as experts who could keep him competing when not healthy, to define pain-killing anti-inflammatory drugs as necessary performance-enhancing aids, to commit himself to the idea that all athletes must pay a price as they strive for excellence, and to define any athlete unwilling to pay the price or to strive for excellence as morally deficient. As he participated in wrestling this young man applied all these things to himself; in fact, they became his identity guidelines.

Despite his identity as a wrestler, a combination of spine and knee injuries, and repeated injuries that disfigured his ears ("cauliflower ear" is common among longtime wrestlers) led this young man to stop wrestling. Even after he retired he was a role model for younger wrestlers because they saw him as a model of dedication and commitment.

The experiences associated with this young man's wrestling career clearly illustrate the way in which painful and potentially self-destructive experiences can be defined as positive in the life of an athlete, especially a male athlete. Athletes in certain sport groups may even come to use these experiences as proof of self-worth and evidence of a special form of character that separates them from others who are less dedicated and committed. The important thing about this study is that it shows how meanings and identity associated with sport experiences are grounded in social interaction processes. They are not simply the result of an exploitation process as conflict theorists might conclude.

*Curry, Timothy. 1993. A little pain never hurt anyone: Athletic career socialization and the normalization of sports injury. *Symbolic Interaction* 16, 3: 273-90.

Jay Coakley

Topic 3. Specific theories used in the sociology of sport

When we study sports in society, the best theories are those that describe and explain aspects of social life in logical terms that are consistent with systematic observations of social worlds. Theories enable us to see things from various angles and perspectives, understand more fully the relationship between sports and social life, and make informed decisions about sports and sport participation in our lives, families, communities, and societies.

People who study sports in society have used multiple theories to guide them as they ask research questions and interpret research findings. However, most scholarly work over the past half century has been based on one or a combination of five major theories:

- Functionalist theory
- Conflict theory
- Critical theory
- Feminist theory
- Interactionist theory

Although there are important differences between these five theories, there are points at which two or more of them converge and overlap. This is because people read and respond to the ideas of others as they do research and develop explanations of society and social life. Therefore, theories are not static—they are forever *emerging* explanations of what we know about social worlds at a particular point in time. Each of the five theories that is described below provides a different angle or perspective for understanding sports in society.

Functionalist theory: sports preserve the status quo

Functionalist theory is based on the assumption that society is an organized system of interrelated parts held together by shared values and established social arrangements. These interrelated parts and social arrangements work together so that society is maintained in a state of balance or equilibrium. The most important social arrangements in any society are social institutions such as the family, education, the economy, the media, politics, religion, leisure, and sport. If these social institutions are organized around a core set of values, functionalists assume that a society will operate smoothly and efficiently. When sociologists use functionalist theory to explain how a society, community, school, family, sport team, or other social system works, they study the ways that each part in the system contributes to the system's overall operation. For example, if Canadian society is the social system being studied, a person using functionalist theory wants to know how the Canadian family, economy, government, educational system, media, religion, and sport are related to one another and how they collectively maintain the society as a whole. An analysis based on functionalist theory focuses on the ways that each of these social institutions helps the larger social system to operate efficiently.

According to functionalist theory, social systems operate efficiently when they are organized to do four things: (1) socialize people so that they learn and accept important cultural values, (2) promote social connections between people so they can cooperate effectively with one another, (3) motivate people to achieve socially approved goals through socially accepted means, and (4) protect the overall system from disruptive outside influences. Scholars using functionalist theory assume that, if these four "system needs" are satisfied, social order will be maintained and everyone will benefit.

Conflict theory: sports are tools of the wealthy

Conflict theory focuses on the ways that sports are shaped by economic forces and used by economically powerful people to increase their wealth and influence. It is based on the ideas of Karl Marx and his assumption that every society is a system of relationships and social arrangements that are determined by the organization and dynamics of the economy. In the case of capitalist societies, relationships and social arrangements are organized around money and wealth (capital), and the power that people possess or lack because of their relationship with capital.

Scholars using conflict theory assume that all aspects of social life revolve around economic interests and that people who control the economy use their power to coerce or convince workers and their families to accept the existence of economic inequality as a natural part of social life. The research of these scholars often focuses on **class relations**—that is, *social processes that revolve around who has economic power, how that power is used, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged by the economic organization of society*. Studies of class relations focus on the consequences of social inequality in all spheres of social life.

The primary goal of those who use conflict theory is similar to the goal of those who use functionalist theory: to develop a general explanation of the structure and operation of all societies. Those using conflict theory emphasize that economic power in capitalist societies is entrenched so deeply that progressive changes are possible only if workers become aware of the need for change and take action to make major changes in the organization of the economy. Sports, they argue, focus the attention and the emotions of those workers, who constitute the have-nots in society, on escapist spectator events that distract them from the economic issues and policies that reproduce their powerlessness in society. Therefore, sports, especially mass spectator sports, are organized and sponsored by wealthy people and large corporations because they perpetuate capitalist values and a lifestyle based on unquestioned competition, ceaseless production, and mindless consumption. When people accept capitalist values without question, sport becomes an opiate in society—an aspect of culture that deadens their awareness of economic exploitation and perpetuates the privilege and positions of people who control capital and the economy.

Critical theory:

Sports are sites where culture and social relations are produced and changed

Critical theory comes in a variety of forms, and it offers a useful alternative to functionalist and conflict theories. It is based on the following three assumptions: (1) Groups and societies are characterized by shared values *and* conflicts of interest, (2) social life involves continuous processes of negotiation, compromise, and coercion because agreements about values and social organization are never permanent, and (3) values and social organization change over time and from one situation to another as there are shifts in the power balance between groups of people in society.

Critical theory has been developed as people realized that societies and cultures were too messy, complex, and fluid to be described as “systems” and that it was not possible to create a grand explanation of social life that is applicable everywhere and at all times. Therefore, instead of focusing on society as a whole, critical theory focuses on the diversity, complexity, contradictions, and changes that characterize social life as it is lived and experienced by people who interact with one another and struggle over how to organize their lives together.

Although critical theory comes in many forms, it focuses primarily on the following topics: (1) the processes through which culture is produced, reproduced, and changed, (2) the ways that power and social inequalities are involved in processes of cultural production, reproduction, and change, and (3) the ideologies that people use as they make sense of the world, form identities, interact with others, and transform the conditions of their lives.

People using functionalist and conflict theories often say that “sport is a reflection of society,” but critical theorists explain that in addition to reflecting society, sports are sites where culture and social organization are produced, reproduced, and changed. This makes sports much more than mere reflections of society.

Unlike functionalists or conflict theorists, critical theorists realize that there are many vantage points from which to study and understand social life and that the relationship between sports and society is always subject to change. Therefore, they study sports in connection with changes in (1) the organization of government, education, the media, religion, the family, and other spheres of social life, (2) cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and physical (dis)ability, and (3) the visions that people have about what sports could and should be in society.

Critical theory also encourages action and political involvement. It has been developed by scholars dedicated to identifying issues and problems for the sake of eliminating oppression and seeking justice and equity in social life. Critical theory is a valuable tool when identifying and studying specific social problems. People who use it assume that social relationships are grounded in political struggles over how social life should be defined and organized. They study sports to see if they are organized to systematically privilege some people over others. Their goal is to explain how sports have come to be what they are and to inspire new ways to think about, define, organize, and play sports.

Feminist theory: Sports are gendered activities

Feminist theory is based on the assumption that knowledge about social life requires an understanding of gender and gender relations. It has grown out of a general dissatisfaction with intellectual traditions that base knowledge on the values, experiences, and insights of men and do not take seriously the values, experiences, and insights of women. People use feminist theory to explain the ways that women have been systematically devalued and oppressed in many societies, and they assume that gender equity is a prerequisite for social development and progress.

Many scholars in the sociology of sport use critical forms of feminist theory as they study issues of power and the dynamics of gender relations in social life. Critical feminist theory focuses on issues of power and the ways that power is involved in gender relations. It also provides a framework for studying the ways that gender ideology (that is, *ideas and beliefs about masculinity and femininity*) is produced, reproduced, resisted, and changed in and through the everyday experiences of men and women.

Critical feminist theory explains that sports are *gendered activities*, in that their meaning, purpose, and organization are grounded in the values and experiences of men and celebrate attributes associated with dominant forms of masculinity in society. Therefore, in sport organizations, a person is defined as “qualified” as an athlete, coach, or administrator if he or she is tough, aggressive, and emotionally focused on competitive success. If a person is kind, caring, supportive, and emotionally responsive to others, he or she is qualified only to be a cheerleader,

a booster, or an assistant in marketing and public relations. These latter qualities, often associated with femininity and weakness, are not valued in most sport organizations.

Interactionist theory: Sports are given meaning as people interact with one another

Interactionist theory focuses on issues related to meaning, identity, social relationships, and subcultures in sports. It is based on the idea that as human beings interact with one another, they give meanings to themselves, others, and the world around them, and then use those meanings as a basis for making decisions and taking action in their everyday lives.

According to interactionist theory, we humans do not passively respond to the world around us. Instead, we actively make decisions about our actions as we consider their potential consequences for us, the people around us, and the social world in which we live. Culture and society, according to scholars using interactionist theory, are produced as patterns emerge in our actions and relationships with others.

According to interactionist theory, our ability to *reflect on* our actions and our relationships with others enables us to develop **identity**—that is, *a sense of who we are and how we are connected to the social world*. Identities are key factors as people interact with one another and construct their social worlds. They are the foundation for self-direction and self-control in our lives. Identities are never formed once and for all time; they change over time as our actions and relationships change, as we meet new people, and as we face new situations. Interactionist theory explains the processes through which people define and give meaning to themselves, their actions, and the world around them. Unlike functionalist and conflict theories, it explains society from the bottom up rather than the top down; it begins with the perspectives of the people who create, maintain, and change society as they interact with each other.

Jay Coakley

Topic 4 (p. 39). Feminist theories in the sociology of sport

There are many variations of feminist theory today. When scholars first used feminist theories in the sociology of sport, they were identified as liberal feminists or radical feminists. These distinctions help us understand more fully the roots of feminist theory.

Liberal feminists identified discrimination and unequal opportunities as the gender issues in greatest need of attention. Their goal was to promote gender equity in all spheres of social life, including employment, education, politics, and sports. In the case of sports, liberal feminists focused on the issue of fair and equal access for women to participate and share in the rewards available in sports, coach at all levels of competition, and gain positions in the power structures of sport organizations. Their guiding assumption was that “if it’s good for males, it’s good for females, too.”

Radical feminists, on the other hand, believed that problems in sports and society as a whole went much deeper than issues of discrimination and equal opportunity. They argued that if fairness and equity were the only issues addressed and if success was measured only by women’s participation in activities and organizations created by and for men, feminists would unwittingly produce the very orientations toward social life and social relationships that led women to be devalued and exploited in social worlds. Radical feminists said that since many activities and organizations were shaped to represent and promote the power and privilege of men, goals had to go beyond equal participation opportunities. Radical feminists did not agree with the idea that “if it’s good for men, it must also be good for women.”

In the case of sports, radical feminists questioned the merits of wanting to play and work in sport activities and organizations where aggression, competition, goal orientation, and rational efficiency were the most important standards for evaluating organizational success and individual qualifications.

Most radical feminists did not dismiss the approach or goals of liberal feminists, but they argued that liberal feminists did not go far enough in their analysis of sports or social life. Radical feminists contended that to fully understand the history and social significance of organized sports in our lives, we also had to understand the gendered character of sports and the ways that sports were organized to privilege some people over others. They noted that organized sports were developed at a time when many men feared that home life was controlled by women and that boys raised by women would not learn to be tough enough to control colonized peoples around the world, fight wars, and expand capitalist economies. This fear of the “feminization of social life” also fueled the development and sponsorship of organized, competitive sports in nineteenth century England. Early sport forms were developed to teach “manly” values and actions to boys and men.

Organized, competitive sports became associated with making boys tough, creating men who fit dominant definitions of masculinity, and demonstrating that men’s bodies could endure and engage in violence in ways that made them superior to women’s bodies. Boxing, rugby, football, and other contact sports were not only used widely in military training, but also seen as proof that men were naturally superior to women and that power, aggressiveness, and the ability to physically dominate others were uniquely male qualities grounded in biology itself.

Over the years, women were systematically excluded from contact sports and discouraged from participating in most strenuous physical activities because their bodies were seen as incapable of aggression, physical power, and stamina. Of course, the more important

implications of this exclusion and discouragement were the definition of women's bodies as naturally inferior to men's bodies, and the perception that it was women's biological destiny to be controlled by men. This ideological rationale for the development of organized sports also existed in other cultures, including the United States and Canada.

Radical feminist theorists also noted that when physical strength had practical utility in employment and when force and violence were widely used in society, the balance of power between men and women would always favor men. In societies where physical strength was not needed in the economy and displays of force and violence are controlled, men would seek other ways of maintaining a rationale for their superiority. This rationale was at least partially provided by football, boxing, ice hockey, and other sports defined as "manly" or "aggressive." According to radical feminists, these sports were promoted and popularized partly because they perpetuated the beliefs that force and aggression were important parts of life and that men were fundamentally and naturally superior to women because they were more physically powerful and aggressive. Radical feminists were more likely than other feminists to raise questions about the ways that many sports, especially those emphasizing physical dominance over others, reproduced an ideology that disadvantages women in society. Therefore, they argued that full gender equity in sports could be achieved only through the transformation of the ideology on which sports was founded.

The approach and theories of radical feminists are now widely accepted in the sociology of sport. In fact, they have been integrated into other theories used by many scholars in the field.

Jay Coakley

Topic 5. Using social theories for practical purposes

Many people think that theories don't have practical applications, but this is not true. Most of our decisions and actions are based on our predictions of their possible consequences, and those predictions are based on our "personal theories" about social life. Our theories may be incomplete, poorly developed, based on limited information, and biased to fit our needs, but we still use them to guide our interpretations of events, our decisions, and our actions. When our theories are accurate, our predictions help us relate more effectively with others and control more directly what happens in our lives. When people make decisions about sports, formulate policies, or decide whether to fund or cut money from sport programs, they base decisions on their personal theories about sports and society or on one or more of the following theories.

Using functionalist theory for practical purposes

Popularized forms of functionalist theory often are used when people in positions of power make decisions about sports and sport programs at national and local levels. For example, a functionalist analysis of sports in society would support the following actions: promoting the development and growth of organized youth sports (to build values), funding interscholastic sports programs in high schools and colleges (to promote organizational loyalty and attachments to schools), developing sport opportunities for girls and women (to increase achievement motivation among girls and women), including sports in military training (to increase military preparedness and the fitness of soldiers), and staging the Olympic Games (to build international goodwill and unity).

Functionalist theory generally leads to the conclusion that sports are popular in society because they maintain the values that preserve stability and order in social life. For example, in the United States it is assumed that sports are popular because they teach people to feel comfortable in tasks that involve competition, goal achievement, and teamwork under the supervision of an authority figure. Furthermore, because functionalist theory leads to the conclusion that sports build the kind of character valued in society, it supports policies that recommend the growth of competitive sport programs, the development of coaching education programs, the establishment of training centers for top-level athletes, and increased surveillance and drug testing to supervise and control the actions of athletes. In the case of youth sports, functionalist theory supports actions to expand developmental sport programs for children, establish criminal background checks and certification requirements for coaches, and build a sport system that trains young people to become elite athletes.

Overall, functionalist theory inspires research questions about the ways that sports contribute to the development of individuals and society as a whole. Many people reading this book are attracted to functionalist theory because they like its emphasis on the positive aspects of sports in society. People in positions of power in society also favor functionalist theory because it is based on the assumption that society is organized for the equal benefit of all people and therefore should not be changed in any dramatic ways. The notion that the system operates effectively in its present form is comforting to people with power because it discourages changes that might jeopardize their privilege and influence.

Using conflict theory for practical purposes

Conflict theory focuses on the need to change the organization of sports and society so that workers, including athletes, gain control over the conditions of their labor. Problems in society and sports are attributed to the lack of power possessed by workers. Therefore, conflict theorists support policies and programs that regulate or eliminate profit motives in sports and increase the control that athletes have over the conditions of their own sports participation. They also support policies that increase the element of *play* in sports and decrease the element of *spectacle* because it is designed to generate commercial profits. More play and less dis-play and spectacle, they argue, would turn sport participation into a liberating and empowering experience for the masses of people in society.

In terms of specific issues, people using conflict theory favor players' unions, organizations that represent the interests of people in communities where tax money is being used to subsidize wealthy pro-sport team owners, and radical changes in the overall organization of sports. Ideally, public resources would be used to sponsor sports designed to promote fun, fitness, and political awareness; spectator sports would exist for enjoyment in local communities rather than as tools for creating celebrity athletes and financial profits for a few wealthy people.

Using critical theory for practical purposes

Critical theory is based on a desire to understand, confront, and transform aspects of social life that involve exploitation and oppression. Critical theorists emphasize that changes in sports depend on more than simply shifting the control of sports to the participants themselves, because many of those participants accept sports as they are and know little about sport forms that have different meanings, purposes, and organizational structures. Therefore, critical theorists emphasize the need for multiple and diverse forms of sport participation in society. This, they claim, would increase participation, diversify the stories told about sports, and add to the voices represented in those stories. As a result, sports would become more humane and democratic, and less subject to the exclusive control of any particular category of people. This is exciting or threatening, depending on one's willingness to view and experience sports in new and different ways.

Using critical feminist theory for practical purposes

Critical feminist theory has had a major impact on the sociology of sport. It has increased our understanding of sports as a part of culture, and made us aware of gender-related issues in sports. For example, critical feminists focus on questions such as these: Why do many men around the world continue to resist efforts to promote gender equity in sports? Why do some women fear being called lesbians if they become strong and powerful athletes? Why are some men's locker rooms full of homophobia, gay-bashing jokes, and comments that demean women? Why aren't people more concerned about the 40,000 young men who incur serious knee injuries every year as they play football? Why do church-going mothers and fathers take their children to football games and cheer for young men charged and sometimes convicted of physical and sexual assault? Why do many people assume that men who play sports must be heterosexual? Why has there never been an openly gay, active male athlete featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*? Why are so many women's high school and college teams called "Lady this" and "Lady that"?

These questions, inspired by critical feminist theory deal with issues that affect our lives every day. In fact, if we don't have thoughtful answers to them, we really don't know much about sports in society.

Using interactionist theory for practical purposes

Interactionist theory focuses on the meanings and interaction associated with sports and sport participation. It emphasizes the complexity of human action and the need to understand action in terms of how people define situations and give meaning to their experiences as they interact with others. Interactionists generally recommend changes that represent the perspectives and identities of those who play sports. In many cases, this would involve restructuring sport organizations so that participants are given opportunities to raise questions and discuss issues related to the meaning, purpose and organization of the sports they play. Therefore, interactionists would support changes that make athletes more responsible for organizing and controlling their sports.

In the case of youth sports, for example, interactionists would support organizational changes that would give young people opportunities to create games and physical challenges that would more closely reflect their needs and interests, rather than the needs and interests of adults. Interactionists would caution parents and coaches about problems that occur when young people develop sport-related identities and relationships to the exclusion of other identities and relationships and to the point that burnout is likely.

In the case of elite sports, interactionists would support changes that discourage athletes from defining pain and injury as normal parts of the sport experience. Because the use of performance-enhancing substances is connected with issues of identity and the norms that exist in sport cultures, interactionists would argue that the use of these substances can be controlled only if there are changes in the norms and culture of sports; identifying substance users as “bad apples” and punishing them as individuals will not change the culture in which athletes learn to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of the team and their sport.

Jay Coakley

Topic 6. Using a critical approach in research on sports in society

A critical approach focuses on the ways that knowledge can be applied to real-world decisions, actions, policies, and programs so that sports can better serve the interests of more people.

Example 1: Creating alternatives to dominant forms of sport

Susan Birrell and Diana Richter (1994) used a critical approach when they studied how a specific sport experience was socially constructed by a group of women playing on certain teams in slow-pitch softball leagues in two communities. For four years the researchers did intensive interviews and observations that focused on how the feminist consciousness of these women might inform and structure their sport experiences, their interpretation of those experiences, and the integration of sport experiences into their lives.

Birrell and Richter reported that the women in their study were concerned with developing and expressing skills, playing hard, and challenging opponents, but that they wanted to do these things without adopting orientations characterized by an overemphasis on winning, power relationships between players and coaches, social exclusion and skill-based elitism, an ethic of risk and endangerment, or the derogation of opponents. In other words, the women attempted to create alternative sport experiences that were “process oriented, collective, supportive, inclusive, and infused with an ethic of care” (p. 408). Transformations in the way teams were organized and the way games were played came slowly over the four-year research period; many women found it difficult even to try an alternative to the sport forms that had been created out of men’s values and experiences, the forms that were presented to them as the ways to do sports. But as changes occurred on their teams, the women experienced a sense of satisfaction, enjoyment as softball players, and a reaffirmation of their collective feminist consciousness and feelings of political empowerment.

Birrell and Richter’s study shows that sports are not so much “reflections of society” as “social inventions” of people themselves. The definition and organization of sports are grounded in the consciousness and collective reflection of the participants themselves, and this means that people can alter sports through their own efforts. In other words, sports are social constructions; people can define them and include them in their lives to serve many different purposes. This research finding makes a significant contribution to our overall understanding of sports in society.

Example 2: The social construction of masculinity in sports

Michael Messner (1992) used a critical approach to study the ways in which masculinities were socially constructed in connection with men’s athletic careers. Open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty former athletes from different racial and social class backgrounds to discover how gender identities developed and changed as men lived their lives in the socially constructed world of elite sports. Messner noted that the men in his study began their first sport experiences with already-gendered identities; in other words, when they started playing sports they already had certain ideas about masculinity. They had not entered sports as “blank slates” ready to be “filled in” with culturally approved masculine orientations and behaviors.

As their athletic careers progressed, these men constructed orientations and relationships, and had experiences consistent with dominant ideas about manhood in American society. Overall, their masculinity was based on (a) trying to make a public name for themselves and make money

in the process, (b) relationships with men in which bonds were shaped by homophobia (a fear of homosexuality) and misogyny (a disdain for women), and (c) a willingness to use their bodies as tools of domination regardless of consequences for health or general well-being. This socially constructed masculinity not only influenced how these men presented themselves in public, but also influenced their relationships with women and generated a continuing sense of insecurity about their “manhood.”

Messner also found that the consequences of sport participation in the lives of the men he interviewed were complex and sometimes confusing. For example, sport participation brought many of the men in his study temporary public recognition, but it also discouraged the formation of needed intimate relationships with other men and with women. Sport participation enabled the men to develop physical competence, but it also led to many serious injuries and chronic health problems. Sport participation opened some doors to job opportunities for these men, but opportunities also varied depending on the sexual preferences and the racial and class backgrounds of the men. Sport participation provided these men guidelines on how to “be a man,” but the involvement and success of women in sport also raised serious questions for those who had learned that becoming a man necessarily involved detaching oneself from all things female.

Overall, sport participation for the men was a process through which they enhanced their public status, created non-intimate bonds of loyalty with each other, perpetuated patriarchal relationships with women, and constructed masculinity in a way that privileged some men over others. Even though the men sometimes challenged this process, transformations of sports and sport experiences were difficult to initiate because dominant forms of sport in the U.S. have been constructed to perpetuate the notion that male privilege is grounded in nature and biological destiny. Messner’s work calls attention to the fact that gender is a social construction and that sports offer fruitful sites (“social locations”) for studying the formation of gender identities.

Example 3: Sport rituals and social life in a small town

Anthropologist Doug Foley (1990a) used a critical approach when he studied the connection between sport events and community socialization processes in a small Texas town by using field methods (observation, participant observation, and informal and formal interviews) over a two-year period. His analysis was guided by a form of critical theory that he describes as “performance theory.” One of his goals was to examine the extent to which sports might be used by certain community members as sites for challenging and making changes in the capitalist, racial, and patriarchal order that defined social life in their town.

Foley thought that as he studied sports he would find progressive practices challenging the dominance of a small elite group that controlled the town’s economy. But he found few such challenges connected with sports. There were a handful of athletes, cheerleaders, and local townspeople who challenged certain traditions and ways of doing things, but they produced no real changes in who had power and how things were done in the town. This discovery led Foley to conclude that high school sports in general and high school football in particular were important community rituals in the town he studied, but that they ultimately reproduced existing inequities related to gender, race, ethnicity, and income.

Foley’s study shows that sports are tied to the economic, political, and cultural systems in a community, and that it can be very difficult to use sports as sites for challenging and changing the way social life is organized.

Summary

These overviews of research using a critical approach emphasize that sports are more than mere reflections of society—the conclusion often made by those using functionalist or conflict theories. A critical approach acknowledges that sports have never been developed in a neatly ordered and rational manner, and there are no simple rules for explaining sports as social phenomena. Instead, the structure and organization of sports in any society vary with the complex and constantly changing relationships in and between groups possessing varying amounts of power and resources. When these relationships are identified and understood, it is possible to develop strategies to change them so that power is more equally shared and social order does not systematically privilege or disadvantage particular categories of people.

Jay Coakley