

**Using Social Theories:
*How Can They Help Us
Study
Sports in Society?***



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Social Theories

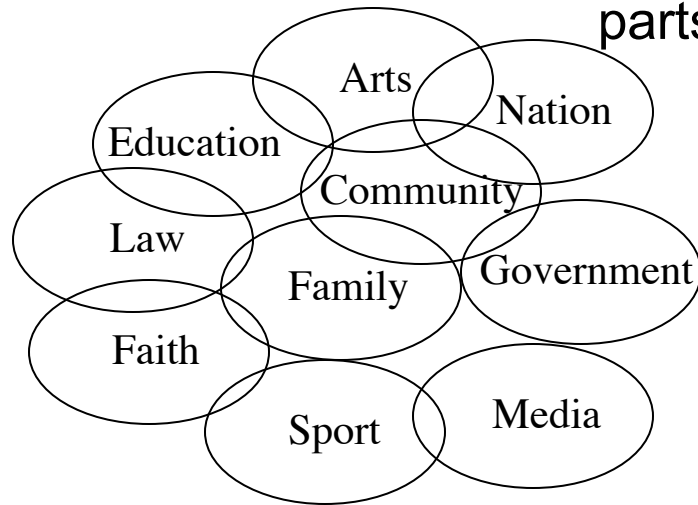
- **Theories** are based on questions about why the world is the way it is, and on ideas about how it might be different
- **Theories** involve a combination of
 - **Description**
 - **Reflection**
 - **Analysis**
- **Theories** have practical implication because they help us make choices

Six Major Social Theories Used to Study Sports in Society

1. Functionalist theory
2. Conflict theory
3. Interactionist theory
4. Critical theories
5. Feminist theories
6. Figurational theory
 - Nicely summarized in Table 2.1 (pp. 34 and 35)

Functionalist Theory

- Society is an organized system of interrelated parts



- Sports are studied in terms of their contributions to the system
- Functionalist Research focuses on sport participation and positive outcomes for individuals and society

Functionalist Theory (cont.)

- Many people like it because it assumes that shared values and agreement are the basis for social order (**Balance**)
- Those with power and influence often prefer it because it emphasizes stability and equilibrium in society
- Everyday discussions and media coverage often are based on assumptions used in functionalist theory

Functionalist Theory (cont.)

Youth Sport vs. Youth Crime

Evidence that youth engaged in organized sport are not likely to participate in criminal activities

By David Carmichael

This review of literature was developed with support from the Canada Games Council, the Ontario Track and Field Association and Brockville Sports

David is the former director of national projects at ParticipACTION, director of research and development at the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association and high performance director at the Ontario Amateur Wrestling Association. He was a course conductor on long-term athlete development at the National Coaching Institute Ontario and is the former workshop leader for "Make the Active Choice", a project of the Government of Ontario that promoted the role that recreation plays in preventing substance abuse among young people.

Few social issues get as much media attention as youth crime. Statistics Canada reported a 3% increase in crimes committed by 12- to 17-year-olds

in 1995. There were 54 cities in the United States with a gang population. In 1995, there were street gangs in approximately 800 cities and towns across the

Using Functionalist Theory to take social action

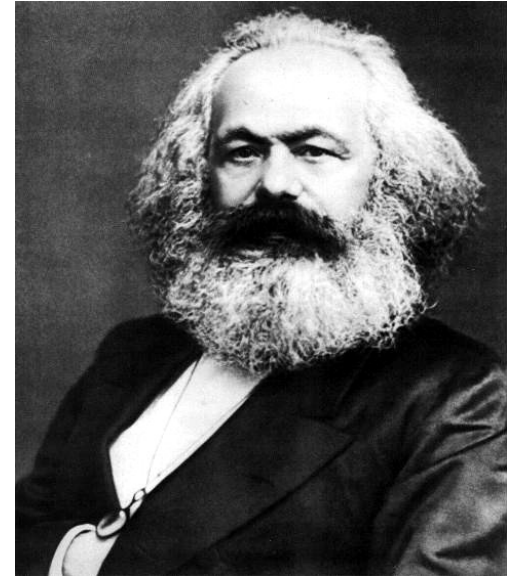
- Promote the development and growth of organized sports
- Increase sport participation opportunities to foster individual development
- Increase the supervision and control of athletes
- Mandate coaching education programs
- Highlight success in elite programs

Weaknesses of Functionalist Theory

- Overstates the positive consequences of sport in society
- Assumes that all social groups benefit equally from sports
- Does not recognize that sports are social constructions that privilege or disadvantage some people more than others
- Does not recognize sport as neutral entities

Conflict Theory

- Based in Marxism/neo-Marxism
- Society is a system of structures & relationships shaped by economic forces
- Sports are studied in terms of how they promote economic exploitation and capitalist expansion
- Research focuses on how sports perpetuate the power and privilege of elite groups in society



Conflict Theory (cont.)

- Those with power and influence dislike it because it emphasizes change and a redistribution of economic resources
- Many people dislike it because it focuses on problems in society
- Seldom used in everyday conversations because it portrays sport as an opiate that deadens awareness of social issues



Using Conflict Theory to take social action

- Focus on class inequality and how it might be minimized or eliminated in and through sports
- Develop awareness of how athletes and spectators are used for the profit and personal gain of the economic elite
- More emphasis on play and less on commercial spectator sports

Weaknesses of Conflict Theory

- Assumes that all social life is “economically determined”
- Ignores the importance of gender, race & ethnicity, age, & other factors in social life
- Ignores the possibility that sport participation can be a personally and socially empowering experience



Interactionist Theory

- Society is created and maintained through social interaction
- Sports are studied in terms of how they are created and given meaning by people
- Research focuses on how people experience sports and how identities are related to sport participation and sport cultures

Interactionist Theory (cont.)

- Those who use it often employ “interpretive research methods” to study
 - Social processes associated with becoming involved, staying involved, and changing involvement in sports
 - How people develop and maintain identities as athletes
 - How people give meaning to sports
 - The characteristics of sport subcultures
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLLS8j9ait8>

Using Interactionist Theory to Take Social Action

- Change sports to match the perspectives and identities of those who play them
- Make sport organizations more democratic, less autocratic, and less hierarchically organized
- Question identity formation processes that involve the normalization of pain, injury, & substance use in sports
- **WHAT DO YOU DRAW FROM SPORT?**

Weaknesses of Interactionist Theory

- Does not explain how meaning, identity, and interaction are connected with social structures and materials conditions in society
- Ignores issues of power and power relations in society and how they impact sport, sport participation, and sport experiences
- **Constraints to experiencing life (in this case) entirely on our own terms?**



Critical Theories

- There are many different types of critical theorists and theories
- At the foundation is the questioning of society and culture itself and the constructive forces that shape it/ them
- Society-culture must be critically examined, as do the activities they produce, and the forces that shape them

Critical Theories

- Society involves cultural production, power relations, & ideological struggles
- Sports are social constructions that change as power relations change and as narratives and discourses change
- Research interrogates the meaning and organizations of sports
- If sport is a construct it is more recognizably transformative

Critical Theories

- First steps in understanding critical theory is to question the very construct of normalcy
- Nothing is normal; normalcy is a construct
- The body and what bodies do is an interesting starting point
- <http://www.granthamlet.co.uk/treatments-vaser.php>



Critical Theory

- This extends to the sporting/active body
- Play through pain?
- Active body = responsible; inactive body=lazy?
- Racialized bodies and their involvement in sport?
- What forces shapes these constructs of normalcy and what are the consequences?

Critical Theories (cont.)

Those who use them assume that sports are more than reflections of society, and they study:

- Struggles over the organization & meaning of sports
- The narratives and images people use to construct and give meaning to sports
- Whose voices and perspectives are used in narratives about sports in society
- How dominant narratives, images, and power relations can be disrupted to promote progressive changes

SPORTS are More than Reflections of Society

- *Sports* consist of sets of relationships that are produced by people in society.
- *Sports* are the creations of people interacting with one another.
- *Sports* are the “social stuff” out of which society and culture come to be what they are.

Using Critical Theories to Take Social Action

- Use sports to challenge and transform exploitive and oppressive practices
- Increase the number and diversity of sport participation opportunities
- Challenge the ideological implications of the stories told about sports in a culture
- Challenge the voices and perspectives of those with power in sports and society

Weaknesses of Critical Theories

- No clear guidelines for identifying and assessing forms of resistance and strategies for producing transformation
- No unified strategies for dealing with social problems, conflicts, and injustice

Feminist Theories

- Society life is pervasively gendered
- Sports are gendered activities grounded primarily in the values and experiences of men with power and influence
- Research focuses how sports reproduce gendered ideas and practices related to physicality, sexuality, and the body
- Feminist theory is a type of critical theory, but the site of interrogation is gender
- What are gender norms?
- What are the power structures that perpetuate these norms and why?

Feminist Theories (cont.)

- Those who use them study:
 - How sports are involved in the production of ideas about masculinity and femininity
 - How women are represented in media coverage of sports
 - Strategies used by women to resist or challenge dominant gender ideology
 - The gendered dimensions of sports and sport organizations

Using Feminist Theories to Take Social Action

- Challenge aspects of sports that systematically privilege men over women
- Expose and transform oppressive forms of sexism and homophobia in sports
- Use sports as sites to empower women and promote the notion of partnership and competition *with* others



Weaknesses of Feminist Theories

- Lack clear guidelines for assessing forms of resistance and the value of ideas and actions in producing social transformation
- Have not given enough attention to connections between gender and other categories of experience

Figurational Theory

- Society consists of patterns of interdependencies among individuals and groups
- Research focuses on the historical processes in which these networks have been formed
- Key is that they are always shifting



Figurational Theory (cont.)

- Those who use it are concerned with
 - How social figurations emerge and change
 - How modern sports emerged and became important in certain societies
 - Outlining the complexities of global sports and how sports are related to local and national identities

Using Figurational Theory to Take Social Action

- Figurational theory seeks to understand historical and global issues more clearly
- The focus is on sports interconnectedness with larger social-historical developments
- Globalization?

Weaknesses of Figurational Theory

- Gives too little attention to problems & struggles that affect day-to-day lives
- Understates the immediate personal consequences of oppressive power relations
- Has not given enough attention to the experiences of women and the gender inequities that affect their lives

WHAT THEORIES ARE BEST?

- Theories are tools that help us ask questions, collect and analyze information, and interpret the implications of the analyses.
 - Our choice of theories is influenced by our goals and political agendas.
 - The best theories are those that help us find ways to make the world more democratic and humane.
- (Right?)*