



Student Center

For list of chapters click on arrow



Chapter 2: Using Social Theories: What Can They Tell Us About Sports in Society?

| [Learning Objectives](#) | [Chapter Outline](#) | [True False Quiz](#) | [Links to Professional Resources](#) | [Suggested Readings](#) |

Suggested Readings

Topic 1. Some General Background Information on Theory in Sociology:

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.

Topic 2. Why do people in the sociology of sport use so many different theoretical approaches?

There are at least four 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, sociologists who realize that science itself is a part of culture have begun to reject theories they feel have maintained the power and privilege of an elite few rather than making social life more fair for everyone. 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. These approaches are very different from the approaches most sociologists have used in the past.

Topic 3. Summaries of studies using interactionist theory

The complexities of interactionist theory are difficult to explain. In fact, the best way to learn about interactionist theory is to review examples of research that use it. Here are some examples that I have found helpful in my teaching:

Example 1: The complex process of becoming an athlete

Sociologists Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young (1999) used a form of interactionist theory to guide their collection and analysis of ethnographic, observational, and interview data on mountain climbers and rugby players. Their analysis enabled them to develop a model showing that becoming a serious athlete involves problematic, long-term processes of identity construction and confirmation. According to their findings, becoming a mountain climber or rugby player involved more than simply receiving encouragement and rewards from other people and being exposed to opportunities to climb mountains or play rugby. Instead, it involved long-term processes through which individuals (1) acquired knowledge about their sport, (2) became associated with a group of recognized athletes in their sport, (3) learned the norms and expectations shared by group members, (4) earned the acceptance of group members, and (5) experienced repeated confirmation and reconfirmation of their identities as climbers or rugby players as they interacted with group members.

Donnelly and Young's study shows that becoming a serious athlete involves more than a single decision or event, and more than the influence of society or a particular collection of people, as many studies inspired by functionalism have reported. Instead, it involves extended interactive processes through which people come to identify themselves as athletes. This identity is gradually formed as they become knowledgeable and accepted members of particular sport groups or subcultures.

This study is summarized in a slightly different form in Chapter 4.

Example 2: The meaning of Little League baseball

Sociologist Gary Alan Fine (1987) used an interactionist approach in a study of the sport experiences of 10- to 12-year-old boys on ten teams in five different youth baseball leagues. Over a three-year period, he collected data through a combination of participant observations, informal conversations, and interviews. Fine's analysis showed that the boys on each team developed their own systems of meanings and understandings to assess their baseball experiences and guide their interaction with teammates through the season. Fine called these systems of meanings and understandings **idiocultures**. These idiocultures were important because they served as the contexts in which the boys interpreted and made sense out of their Little League experiences. For example, Fine found that the boys used idiocultures as "experience filters" through which they redefined and transformed the idealized rules and moral lessons coaches and parents presented to them during the season. Instead of taking the rules and lessons at face value, the boys changed them in ways that fit their own immediate needs, primarily needs for acceptance among peers. Coaches and parents did not notice these changes, because the boys were very good at presenting themselves in ways that led the adults to think that the boys understood and internalized everything they said.

The boys didn't completely ignore the moral talk offered by adults or see it as useless, but

they did transform it to fit their own definitions of the situation. For example, Fine found that while parents and coaches talked about the importance of effort and sportsmanship, the boys were concerned primarily with being socially accepted by their peers (social acceptance is developmentally important for 10- to 12-year-olds). And according to team idiocultures, social acceptance by the boys' peers generally depended on being able to present themselves to others as "men" in a traditional moral sense. This led many of the boys to choose behaviors that expressed independence and established distance between themselves and anyone defined as weak and submissive, such as girls and younger children. Being identified with girls or younger children was defined as disastrous by the boys, so most of them mimicked stereotypical models of traditional masculinity. They presented themselves as tough, emotionally controlled, and ready to take risks and be aggressive.

Most coaches encouraged this tendency, because they could use it to motivate the boys to play in aggressive ways. The coaches used aggressive behavior as proof of a player's motivation, effort, and "hustle." Therefore, Little League experiences perpetuated definitions of masculinity that valued toughness, risk taking, and dominance, and devaluation of girls as weak and unable to stand up physically to boys. This was not something that the adults wanted to happen, but it occurred as the boys defined their experiences in their own terms in the context of how Little League baseball was organized in their communities.

Fine's study shows that sports and sport participation can affect young people in many different ways, depending on how sports are organized and what developmental issues are important in the lives of participants. In sociological terms, Fine shows that sport socialization is a complex process. This is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Example 3: The meaning of pain in an athlete's life

Sociologist Tim Curry (1992) 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.

(Note: see the bibliography in the text for the references cited in this reading)

Topic 4. Summaries of studies using various forms of critical theory

The complexities of critical theories are difficult to explain. In fact, the best way to learn about critical theories is to review examples of research that use them. Here are some examples that I have found helpful in my teaching:

Example 1: Creating alternatives to dominant forms of sport

Susan Birrell and Diana Richter (1994) combined two forms of critical theory (feminist theory and cultural studies) to study 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 form of critical feminism 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 nonintimate 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) 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.

In summary, these overviews of how critical theories are used in research emphasize that sports are more than reflections of society - the conclusion that is often made by those who use functionalist or conflict theories. Of course, like other spheres of social life, sports share things in common with the social settings in which they exist. But according to critical theories, 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. In addition to being concerned with how sports come to be what they are in society, critical theorists are concerned with how sports affect the processes through which people develop the orientations and beliefs they use to explain what happens in their lives. They want to know how and when sports become sites for encouraging changes in the way people see and interpret the social world around them.

(Note: see the bibliography in the text for the references cited in this reading)

Topic 5. Differences between liberal feminists and radical feminists

There are many variations of feminist theory today. However, when feminist theories were first developed, many people made distinctions between *liberal feminists* and *radical feminists*. These distinctions are helpful to understand as current theories are reviewed and assessed.

Liberal feminists identify discrimination and unequal opportunities as the issues in greatest need of attention. Their goal is to promote gender equity in all spheres of social life, including

employment, education, politics, and sports. In the case of sports, liberal feminists focus on the issue of fair and equal access for women to participate as athletes and share in the rewards available to athletes, to coach at all levels of competition, and to gain positions in the power structures of sport organizations. They live by the belief that "if it's good for males, it's good for females, too."

Radical feminists, on the other hand, believe that problems go much deeper than issues of discrimination and equal opportunity. They argue that if fairness and equity are the only issues addressed and if success is measured only by women's participation in activities and organizations created by and for men, feminists will end up reproducing the very orientations toward social life and social relationships that led women to be devalued and exploited in the first place. Radical feminists say that since many activities and organizations have been shaped to represent and promote the power and privilege of men, there must be goals that go beyond equal participation opportunities. Radical feminists would 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 would question the merits of wanting to play and work in sport activities and organizations where aggression, competition, goal orientation, and rational efficiency are the most important standards for evaluating organizational success and individual qualifications.

Most radical feminists do not dismiss the approach or the goals of liberal feminists. They do not claim that liberal feminists are going in the wrong direction, but they do argue that liberal feminists do not go far enough in their analysis of sports or social life.

Radical feminists contend that to fully understand the history and social significance of organized sports in our lives, we must understand how sports have been and continue to be ordered in gendered ways and in other ways that privilege some people over others. They remind us that organized sports were developed in England at a time when many people 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 other societies during the nineteenth century. Sports were intended to emphasize and teach "manly" values and behaviors 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 note that when physical strength has practical utility in employment and when force and violence are widely used in society, the balance of power between men and women is likely to favor men. In societies where physical strength is not needed in the economy and displays of force and violence are controlled, men will seek other means of maintaining a rationale for their superiority. This rationale is at least partially provided by football, boxing, ice hockey, and other sports defined as "manly" or "aggressive." These sports are promoted and popularized partly because they perpetuate the belief that force and aggression are important parts of life and that men are fundamentally and naturally superior to women because they are more forceful and aggressive. Radical feminists are more likely than other feminists to raise questions about the ways that many sports, especially those that emphasize physical dominance over others, reproduce an ideology that works to the general disadvantage of women in society. They would argue that full and equal participation are not the only issues when it comes to achieving gender equity. True gender equity depends on transforming ideology itself.



Copyright ©2001 The McGraw-Hill Companies.
Any use is subject to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).
McGraw-Hill Higher Education is one of the many fine businesses of the [The McGraw-Hill Companies](#).