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

In this fragmented age, it often seems that only sports can bind together the world's diversions—its divides of class, race, and gender—through common cause and celebration. [Sports are] a portal through which we view some of our most complex [social] issues.

—Mark Stern, New Yorker (1997)
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Is There a Best Theoretical Approach to Use When Studying Sports?

Summary: How Can Social Theories Help Us Study Sports in Society?

A complete outline is available online at www.mhhe.com/coakley7e.

Sports are a tremendous force for the status quo. . . . They do distract millions from more serious thoughts—as do . . . all other “escape” entertainments. As mass entertainment, they are definitely antirevolutionary.

—Leonard Koppett, sports reporter and columnist (1994)
Those of us who study sports in society want to understand the social and cultural contexts in which sports exist and how those contexts are influenced by sports. We also want to understand the social worlds that people create in connection with sports and the experiences of individuals and groups associated with those social worlds. We are motivated by various combinations of curiosity, interests in sports, and concerns about social life and social issues. Most of us also want to use what we know about sports in society to promote social justice, expose and challenge the exploitive use of power, and empower people, so that they might resist and transform oppressive social conditions.

As we engage in this project of studying and changing sports, we use social and cultural theories to assist us. These theories help us identify issues and problems to study. They provide frameworks for asking research questions, interpreting information, and uncovering the deeper meanings and stories associated with sports in particular cultures. They also enable us to be more informed citizens as we apply what we learn in our research to the world in which we live. Because those of us who study sports in society come from many different academic backgrounds and because social life is so diverse and complex, we use a wide variety of theories to guide our work.

The three goals of this chapter are to

1. Identify and describe the theories that have been used most widely to study sports in society
2. Explain how various theories assist us in our efforts to understand sports as social phenomena as well as the society and culture in which we live
3. Outline how various theories lead us to see sports in different ways, take different types of action, and support different types of policies about sports in everyday life

WHAT ARE THEORIES AND WHY DO WE NEED THEM?

Whenever we ask why our social world is the way it is and then imagine how it might be changed, we are “theorizing” (hooks, 1992). Theorizing involves a combination of description, reflection, and analysis. When we theorize, we aren’t required to use big words and complex sentences. In fact, the best theories are those we understand so clearly that they help us make sense out of the social world.

When we study sports in society, the best theories are the ones that describe and explain aspects of social life in terms that make sense and are logical and consistent with systematic observations of the social world. Theories developed by social scientists are useful because they provide frameworks that we can use to ask good sociological questions and then interpret information about the social world. When it comes to studying sports in society, theories enable us to see sports from new angles and perspectives, to understand more fully the relationship between sports and social life, and to make informed decisions about sports and sport participation in our lives, families, communities, and societies.

Many people think that theories don’t have practical applications. 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 theories about social life. Our personal theories may be incomplete, poorly developed, based on limited information, and biased to fit our own needs, but we still use them to guide our behavior. When our theories are accurate, our predictions help us relate more effectively with others and control more directly what happens in our lives. When we make decisions about sports, formulate policies, or decide whether to fund or cut money from sport programs, we usually base decisions on our personal theories about sports and their connections to social life.
None of the theories discussed in this chapter is perfect, but each can be useful as we move beyond our limited personal perspectives and develop a more broadly informed set of ideas about sports in society. Theories about society and social life are based on a combination of systematic research and deductive logic. Ideally, they are presented in published books and articles, so that other people can evaluate, test, use, and revise them. Most theories are the products of more than one person. They may be refined and improved over time as people test them in research, or they may be abandoned as people discover that they are not very useful in their efforts to understand social life.

Theories of all types are very important in our lives. They help us ask questions, seek answers, make decisions, take action, and evaluate what we do. Without theories, we lack the frameworks we need to make sense out of life and to learn from our experiences.

Six major theories have been used to study sports in society:

- Functionalist theory
- Conflict theory
- Interactionist theory
- Critical theories
- Feminist theories
- Figurational theory

Although there are important differences among them, there are many 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 their own ideas about society and social life. Therefore, even though I will summarize these six theories in separate sections, we should remember that all social theories are fluid, changing sets of ideas about how social worlds work. They are not completely separate frameworks that have nothing in common with each other (Calhoun, 1998) but each theory gives us a different perspective for imagining and studying the many complex connections between sports and society.

As each theory is discussed in the chapter, there are sections that cover the following: a brief overview of the theory, examples of the ideas and research that have been inspired by the theory, explanations of how the theory can be used as we take actions and make policies about sports in our everyday lives, and an overview of the major weaknesses of the theory. Table 2.1 provides a summary of each theory and how it helps us understand sports in society. The table contains a large amount of material. It may look confusing at first, but, as you read through the chapter, you will find it to be a useful reference guide to each theory. Most important, it will help you identify and understand similarities and differences among the theories.

FUNCTIONALIST THEORY: WHAT DO SPORTS CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY?

Functionalist theory is based on the assumption that it is possible to study society, discover scientific “truths” about how societies operate, and then develop a system of “social laws,” which we might use to understand, control, and even change societies for the better. Those using functionalist theory view society as an organized system of interrelated parts held together by shared values and social processes that transcend differences and promote consensus among people.

According to functionalist theory, the driving force underlying all social life is the tendency for any social system to maintain itself in a state of balance, so that it continues to operate efficiently. This balance is achieved “naturally” as people develop consensus, common values, and coordinated organization in the major spheres of social life, such as the family, education, the economy, the media, politics, religion, leisure, and sport.

When sociologists use functionalist theory to explain how a society, community, school, family, sport team, or other social system works, they
Table 2.1 Using social theories to study sports in society: a summary and comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functionalist Theory</th>
<th>Conflict Theory</th>
<th>Interactionist Theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE BASIS FOR SOCIAL ORDER IN SOCIETY</strong></td>
<td>Social order is based on economic interests and the use of economic power to exploit labor.</td>
<td>Social order is created from the bottom up as people interact with each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social order is based on consensus and shared values, which hold the interrelated</td>
<td>Social class shapes social structures and relationships.</td>
<td>Social life is grounded in social relationships.</td>
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<td>parts of society together. All social systems tend toward a state of balance.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MAJOR CONCERNS IN THE STUDY OF SOCIETY</strong></td>
<td>How is economic power distributed and used in society?</td>
<td>How are meanings, identities, and culture created through social interaction?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do individual parts of social systems contribute to the satisfaction of major</td>
<td>What are the dynamics of social class relations?</td>
<td>How do people define the reality of their own lives and the world around them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>system needs and the overall operation of the system?</td>
<td>Who is privileged and exploited in class relations?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MAJOR CONCERNS IN THE STUDY OF SPORT</strong></td>
<td>How does sport reflect class relations?</td>
<td>How do people become involved in sports, become defined as athletes, derive meaning from</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does sport fit into social life and contribute to social stability and efficiency?</td>
<td>How is sport used to maintain the interests of those with power and wealth in society?</td>
<td>participation, and make transitions out of sports into the rest of their lives?</td>
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<td>How does sport participation influence personal and social development?</td>
<td>How has the profit motive distorted sport?</td>
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<td><strong>MAJOR CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE SPORT-SOCIETY RELATIONSHIP</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport is a valuable social institution, which benefits society as well as</td>
<td>Sport is a form of physical activity that is distorted by the needs of capital.</td>
<td>Sports are forms of culture created through social interaction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>individuals in society. Sport is a source of inspiration on both personal and social</td>
<td>Sport is an opiate that distracts attention away from the problems that affect those without</td>
<td>Sport participation is grounded in the decisions made by people in connection with their</td>
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<td>levels.</td>
<td>economic power.</td>
<td>identities and their relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIAL ACTION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS</strong></td>
<td>Raise class consciousness and make people aware of their own alienation and powerlessness.</td>
<td>Allow individuals to shape sports to fit their definitions of reality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop and expand sport programs that promote traditional values, build character,</td>
<td>Eliminate profit motives in sports and allow sports to foster expression, creativity, and</td>
<td>Make sport organizations more open and democratic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>and contribute to order and stability in society.</td>
<td>physical well-being.</td>
<td>Focus on the culture and organization of sports when trying to control deviance in sports.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MAJOR WEAKNESSES</strong></td>
<td>It ignores that sports can be sites for creative and liberating experiences.</td>
<td>It fails to explain how meaning, identity, and interaction are related to social structures</td>
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<tr>
<td>It does not acknowledge that sports are social constructions.</td>
<td>It overshates the influence of economic forces in society.</td>
<td>and material conditions in society.</td>
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<td>It overstates the positive consequences of sports.</td>
<td>It assumes that people who have economic power shape sports to meet their interests.</td>
<td>It ignores issues of power and power relations in society.</td>
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<td>It ignores that sports serve the needs of some people more than others.</td>
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<td>Critical Theories</td>
<td>Feminist Theories</td>
<td>Figurational Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social order is negotiated through struggles over ideology, representation, and power.</td>
<td>Social order is based primarily on the values, experiences, and interests of men with power.</td>
<td>Social order is based on interdependencies among individuals and groups. Connections between people take the form of social figurations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social life is full of diversity, complexities, and contradictions.</td>
<td>Social life is gendered and based on patriarchal ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How is cultural ideology produced, reproduced, and transformed?</td>
<td>How is gender ideology produced, reproduced, and transformed?</td>
<td>How do social figurations emerge and change?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the conflicts and problems that affect the lives of those who lack power in society?</td>
<td>How do dominant forms of gender relations privilege men over women and some men over others?</td>
<td>How do power balances within figurations influence relationships between individuals and groups?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How are power relations reproduced and/or resisted in and through sports?</td>
<td>How are sports gendered activities and how do they reproduce dominant ideas about gender in society?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whose voices are or are not represented in the narratives and images that constitute sports?</td>
<td>What are the strategies for resisting and transforming sport forms that privilege men?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports are social constructions. Sports are sites where culture is produced, reproduced, and transformed. Sports are cultural practices that repress and/or empower people.</td>
<td>Sports are grounded in the values and experiences of powerful men in society. Sports reproduce male power and distorted ideas about masculinity. Sports produce gendered ideas about physicality, sexuality, and the body.</td>
<td>Sports are exciting activities that relieve boredom and control violence and uncivilized behavior. Sports celebrate masculinity and male power. Global sports are complex activities with local and national significance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use sports as sites for challenging and transforming forms of exploitation and oppression. Increase the range and diversity of sport participation opportunities. Challenge the voices and perspectives of those with power.</td>
<td>Use sports as sites for challenging and transforming oppressive forms of gender relations. Expose and resist homophobia and misogyny in sports. Transform sports to emphasize partnership over domination.</td>
<td>Develop a fund of valid knowledge, which can be used to enable people to control expressions of violence, exploitation, and the abuse of power. Increase access to sport participation among those who have lacked power through history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They have no clear guidelines for identifying and assessing forms of resistance and the value of ideas and actions across situations. They have no unified strategies for dealing with problems, conflicts, and injustice.</td>
<td>They have no clear guidelines for identifying and assessing forms of resistance and the value of ideas and actions across situations. They give little attention to connections between gender and some other categories of experience.</td>
<td>It gives too little attention to problems and struggles that affect day-to-day lives. It understates the immediate personal consequences of oppressive power relations. It gives little attention to the experiences of women and to gender inequities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
focus attention on how each part in the system contributes to the system's overall operation. For example, if Canadian society is the system being studied, a person using functionalist theory is concerned with how the Canadian family, economy, government, educational system, media, religion, and sport are related to each other and how they work together in contributing to the smooth operation of the society as a whole. An analysis based on functionalism focuses on how each of these spheres of social life helps keep the larger social system operating efficiently.

According to functionalist theory, social systems operate smoothly when they have efficient, built-in mechanisms for doing four things: (1) socializing people to learn and accept important cultural values, (2) promoting social connections between people, (3) motivating people to achieve cultural goals through accepted methods, and (4) protecting the system from disruptive outside influences. Functionalists assume that, if these four “system needs” are satisfied, social order will be maintained and everyone will benefit. The first column in table 2.1 (pp. 36–37) summarized functionalist theory.

**Functionalist Theory and Research on Sport**

Functionalist theory usually inspires discussions and research about how sport as a social institution fits into social life and contributes to stability and social progress in organizations, communities, and societies. In fact, people have often used functionalist theory to guide their thinking as they study many of the issues discussed in the following chapters of this book. Examples include the following:

1. Do sports and sport participation influence social and personal development? This issue is discussed in chapters 4 through 7, 14, and 15.
2. Do sports and sport participation foster the development of social bonds and relationships in groups, communities, and societies? This issue is discussed in chapters 9, 10, 13, and 14.
3. Does playing sports have a positive impact on success in school and work and does it teach people to follow social rules as they strive for success? This issue is discussed in chapters 4, 6, 7, 10, and 14.
4. Do sports contribute to health and wellness and the strength of society as a whole? This issue is discussed in chapters 7 and 13.

Functionalist theory focuses attention on how sports help keep societies, communities, organizations, and groups operating smoothly, as well as how they influence individuals to contribute to the social systems in which they participate. This is why a functionalist approach is often popular among people who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo in society. These people want sociologists to tell them how sport contributes to the smooth operation of the societies, communities, organizations, and groups in which they live. Many people like functionalist theory because it fits with how they have learned to view the social world and because it leads to the conclusion that sport is a source of inspiration for individuals and societies.

**Using Functionalist Theory in Everyday Life**

Many people around the world use popularized forms of functionalist theory to make decisions about sports and sport programs at national and local levels. A functionalist approach leads people to promote the development and growth of organized youth sports (to build values), to fund varsity sports in high schools and colleges (to promote organizational loyalty and attachments to schools), to develop sport opportunities for girls and women (to increase achievement motivation among girls and women), to include sports in military training (to increase military preparedness and the fitness of soldiers), and to fund and televise the Olympic Games (to build international goodwill and unity).
One assumption underlying functionalist theory is that social order depends on consensus and common values. Functionalists assume that established social institutions, including the institution of sport, contribute to consensus and common values. (USA Volleyball)

Functionalist theory leads people to promote changes in sport that emphasize what they see as traditional values in society. If individualism, competition, and success were important values in society, a person using functionalist theory would call for changes leading to increases in individual achievement, winning records, and overall participation in competitive sports. Since functionalist theory generally leads to the conclusion that sport builds the kind of character valued in the society as a whole, it also leads to policy recommendations for more organized competitive programs, more structured sport experiences, more supervision of athletes, more coaching education programs, more training centers for top-level athletes, and increased surveillance and drug testing to control disruptive deviance among athletes. In the case of youth sports, for example, functionalist theory would emphasize actions to increase developmental sport programs, coaching certification requirements, and a sport system that promotes success at elite levels of competition. Functionalist theory leads people to look for and do research on how sports contribute to the development of individuals and society as a whole.

Since many people use a “systems model” to understand how the social world works, their view of sports fits with functionalist theory. In other words, they assume that society is held together by shared values, and they see sport as a part of social life that contributes to the order and stability of society. This is the viewpoint that many students have when they take courses in
the sociology of sport, and it leads many of them to feel comfortable with questions, ideas, and research based on functionalist theory and to be uncomfortable with questions, ideas, and research based on other theoretical approaches.

People with power and influence in a society also favor functionalist theory because it provides guidance for maintaining society the way it is. People with power and influence like to keep things the way they are, so that their power and influence can be preserved.

Because the functionalist approach is so widely used in popular explanations, everyday discussions, and media coverage of sports in society, it is important for us to know its weaknesses.

Weaknesses of Functionalist Theory

Functionalist theory has three major weaknesses when it is used to study sports in society. First, it does not acknowledge that sports are social constructions that take many forms as they are created and defined by people interacting with each other. Functionalists talk about sport instead of sports. This is because they see sport as a relatively stable social institution that serves specific functions in societies. Such an approach generally leads people to overlook the diversity of sports, the extent to which sports promote the interests of powerful and wealthy people, and the possibility that sports may sometimes produce or reproduce outcomes that upset the smooth functioning of society.

Second, functionalist theory leads to overstatements about the positive effects and understatements about the negative effects of sports in society. For example, functionalist theory would not help us understand that the emphasis on physical power and the domination of opponents that is so common in many sports has worked to the disadvantage of women in society. Nor would it help us understand how varsity sport teams in high schools and colleges may actually undermine social integration and lead some students to feel marginalized in their schools because of status systems that favor varsity athletes.

FIGURE 2.1 This man is making the functionalist assumption that sport is grounded in common values and unite people in a society. However, this cartoon suggests that many young people view sports as diverse social constructions that do not link them with many older people in society.

Third, functionalist theory is based on the assumption that the needs of all groups within a society are the same as the needs of the society as a whole. This causes us to underestimate the existence of differences and conflicts of interest within a society and to ignore cases in which sports benefit some groups more than others (see figure 2.1). This limits our understanding of difference, conflict, and the dynamics of change in societies. Conflict theory has been used by those who are interested in these issues.

CONFLICT THEORY: ARE SPORTS ALL ABOUT MONEY AND ECONOMIC POWER?

Conflict theory is based on the ideas of Karl Marx. People using conflict theory view society as a system of social structures and relationships, which are shaped ultimately by economic forces. In other words, society is shaped and organized around money, wealth, and economic power.

Conflict theorists assume that social life revolves around economic interests and that people
use their economic power to coerce and manipulate others to accept their view of the world as the correct view. This means that those using conflict theory are concerned with 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 and the processes of change in society.

The main goal of conflict theory is similar to the main goal of functionalist theory: to develop a general theory about how society operates as a system. Thus, conflict theory is designed to show that economic power in capitalist societies is entrenched so deeply that progressive changes are possible only if people without economic power become aware of the need for change and take action to make major changes in the organization of the economy and society.

Conflict theorists assume that dominant forms of sport in a society ultimately promote the interests of people with money and economic power. Sport in all its forms, they argue, focuses the emotions and attention of the have-nots in society on escapist spectator events, which distract them from the need to change the economy. In fact, sport, especially spectator sport, is organized and sponsored by those with money and economic power in an effort to affirm the capitalist values of competition, production, and consumption. Thus, conflict theorists see sport as an opiate in society, as activities and spectacles that deaden awareness of economic exploitation among those without power while perpetuating the privilege and position of those who control wealth and the economy.

**Conflict Theory and Research on Sport**

Conflict theory usually inspires discussions and research about how sport perpetuates the power and privilege of elite groups in society, as well as how sport serves as a tool of economic exploitation and oppression. Those using conflict theory have studied and discussed the following issues:

1. How and when do athletes become alienated from their own bodies? This issue is discussed in chapters 4 through 7.
2. How does sport contribute to the existence of socioeconomic inequality in society? This issue is discussed in many chapters—especially chapters 8 through 11.
3. How do the processes of commercialization change sport and influence social relationships in society? This issue is discussed in chapters 10 through 13.
4. How do people with economic power use sport to further their own interests? This issue is discussed in chapters 10 through 13.

Conflict theory focuses attention on how powerful people use sports to promote attitudes and relationships that enable them to maintain power and privilege. Like functionalist theory, it is based on the assumption that social life is driven and shaped by specific societal needs, although conflict theory emphasizes the "needs of capital" rather than the general "needs of social systems."

Conflict theory also focuses attention on how sports reflect and perpetuate the unequal distribution of power and economic resources in societies. This leads to an emphasis on the negative consequences of sports and the conclusion that radical changes are needed in sports and society as a whole. According to conflict theorists, the goal of these changes is to bring about the development of a humane and creative society, so that sport can become a source of expression, creative energy, and physical well-being.

Most people in countries with capitalist economies are not comfortable with the assumptions and conclusions of conflict theory. They say that the negative tone of conflict theory does not fit with their ideas about sports or society, and they are uneasy with conclusions that threaten the current structure and organization of sports and society. However, conflict theory has been very useful in calling attention to important economic
issues in sports and to forms of inequality that create conflict and tensions in society as a whole.

**Using Conflict Theory in Everyday Life**

Conflict theory focuses attention on economic factors, class inequality, and the need for changes in how society and sports are organized. These changes emphasize making athletes and spectators aware of how they are manipulated and oppressed for the profit and personal gain of the economic elite in society.

Conflict theory often leads to the conclusion that problems exist in sports because those who participate in sports have no effective control over the conditions of their participation. Therefore, those who favor this approach would support policies and programs that regulate or eliminate economic profit motives in sport, and they would promote the idea that athletes should have more control over sports and the conditions of sports participation. They would call for more emphasis on play and less emphasis on business, so that sports participation could become more liberating and empowering for a greater number of people. They would favor players’ unions, as well as organizations that represent the interests of fans and people in communities where large amounts of public money are used to subsidize wealthy team owners.

Actions and policies inspired by conflict theory would emphasize the material conditions of those who lack money and power and the need for radical changes in the overall organization of sports. These actions and policies would discourage the development and growth of spectator sports and would promote the idea that physical games should be for the players themselves. Finally, these actions and policies would promote new sports organized at the grassroots level for fun and would promote doing away with sports organized by people with money for economic profit.

**Weaknesses of Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory has three major weaknesses. First, it ignores the possibility that sports can be sites for experiences that empower individuals and groups in capitalist societies. Conflict theorists talk about sport as always being organized to maximize the control that wealthy people have over everyone else in capitalist societies. They see sport as a site where people learn to define their bodies as tools of production and then become alienated from their bodies in the process. They do not acknowledge that sport can take forms that might serve the interests of people with little power or wealth in society. Such an approach generally leads people to overlook cases in which sport participation is a personally creative and liberating experience, or a means of challenging the interests of economically powerful groups and transforming social life in progressive ways.

Second, conflict theory assumes that all social life is driven and shaped by economic factors, by the needs of capital in society. It focuses on the relationship between the economic haves and have-nots, and it assumes that the haves always use their power to control and exploit the have-nots. It also assumes that the have-nots live in a state of powerlessness and alienation. These assumptions lead people who use conflict theory to focus exclusively on economic factors when they study sports. However, many sports, especially those emphasizing recreation and mass participation, cannot be explained totally in terms of economic interests or economic power in society.

Third, conflict theory underestimates the importance of gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and other factors when it comes to explaining how people identify themselves, relate to others, and organize social life. Instead, it emphasizes that history and social organization revolve around economic factors. Therefore, those
who use conflict theory to study sports often overlook the possibility that inequalities in society are based also in forms of social relations that are not shaped exclusively by struggles revolving around social class and economic differences.

Beyond the Needs of Society

Functionalist theory and conflict theory both focus on societal needs and how sports are related to the satisfaction of those needs. In a sense, they give us a picture of sports in society from the top down. They do not tell us much about sports in everyday life or how people create sports and the overall society in which they live. They ignore a view of society from the bottom up, from the perspectives of people who “do” sports and give meaning to sports as parts of their everyday lives. They also ignore the complexities of everyday social life and the fact that sports and society are social constructions that emerge in connection with multiple struggles over what is important in people’s lives. The theories that focus attention on various aspects of these issues are the interactionist, critical, and feminist theories.

INTERACTIONIST THEORY: HOW DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE SPORTS?

Interactionist theory focuses on issues related to meaning, identity, social relationships, and subcultures in sports. It is based on the idea that human behavior involves choices and that choices are based on the definitions of reality that people form as they interact with others.

According to interactionist theory, we humans do not simply respond in an automatic fashion to the world around us. Instead, we actively make decisions about our behavior based on the consequences that we think our behavior will have on our lives, the people around us, and the social world in which we live. Furthermore, as we interact with others, we create culture and society.

According to interactionist theory, our ability to reflect on and assess our decisions and actions enables us to develop a sense of who we are and how we are connected to the social world. This sense of who we are in the social world is our identity. Identities are key factors as people interact with each other and construct their social worlds. In other words, identity is a basis for self-direction and self-control in our lives. Identity is never formed permanently, because it emerges out of our relationships, and our relationships are constantly changing as we meet new people, as people change, and as we face new situations.

Research based on interactionist theory helps us understand how human beings define and give meaning to themselves, their decisions and actions, and the world around them. It also helps us understand how those meanings are connected with identity and social interaction. Therefore, when people use interactionist theory, they study human beings as choice makers and creators of meaning, identity, and relationships; they do research that focuses on “seeing” the world through the eyes of the people they observe, interview, and interact with. They often do studies of particular groups of people or identifiable cultures, and they try to understand them from inside, from the perspectives of the people themselves. In a sense, they view society from the bottom up rather than the top down.

Interactionist Theory and Research on Sports

Interactionist theory usually inspires discussions and research about the experiences of athletes and how the athletes define and make sense out of their participation in sports. A common goal of interactionist research is to reconstruct and describe the reality that exists in the minds of athletes, coaches, spectators, and others involved with sports in society.

Interactionists use research methodologies designed to gather information about how people see their social worlds and their connections
Interactionists study the meanings and identities associated with sports and sport participation. Meanings associated with youth sports vary from one cultural setting to another, as do the lessons players learn in connection with participation. (Jay Coakley)

to those worlds. Therefore, they do studies that involve participant observation and in-depth interviews. These are the best methods for understanding how people define situations and use those definitions to form identities and make choices about their behavior.

Those who use interactionist theory have focused on the following issues:

1. What are the social processes through which people become involved in sports?
2. How do people come to define themselves and be defined by others as athletes?
3. How do people give meaning to and derive meaning from their experiences in sports?
4. What happens when people retire from sports and make the transition into the rest of their lives?
5. What are the characteristics of sport cultures, how are they created by the people involved in sports, and how do they influence identities and actions on and off the field?

One or more of these issues are discussed in all chapters. They are also discussed in various ways in many other chapters. This is because I feel that interactionist research provides vivid descriptions of sports experiences, which we can use to understand human action and social life.³

Using Interactionist Theory in Everyday Life

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 associated with sports define situations through their relationships with others.

Those using interactionist theory would call for changes in sports that more fully represent the perspectives and identities of those who play sports. This could involve restructuring sports

³Peter Donnelly and I edited a book entitled Inside Sports (1999), in which examples of this type of research are described specifically for students interested in studying sports to learn about the social world.
organizations, so that all participants have opportunities to raise issues about the purposes and conditions of sport participation. Therefore, interactionists would support sport organizations that are open and democratic.

For example, in the case of youth sports, those using interactionist theory would call for changes in games that reflect the needs and interests of children, rather than the needs and interests of adults. They would caution parents and coaches about problems that occur when young people develop identities and relationships that overemphasize sports to the exclusion of other identities and relationships. In the case of other sports, they would call for changes that discourage athletes from defining pain and injury as normal parts of the sport experience. They would see the use of performance-enhancing substances as connected with identity and sport cultures, and they would argue that controlling the use of these substances demands changes in the norms and culture of sports. They would say that identifying users as "bad apples" and punishing them as individuals will not change the culture in which athletes learn to sacrifice their own bodies for the sake of the team and their sport.

Weaknesses of Interactionist Theory

Interactionist theory has inspired many informative studies of meaning, identity, interaction, and cultures in sports. However, it has weaknesses. First, it focuses our attention almost exclusively on relationships and personal definitions of reality without explaining how interaction processes and the construction of meaning in sports are related to social structures and material conditions in society. Interactionist research has generally ignored connections between sport experiences and sport cultures, on the one hand, and the systems of power and inequality that exist in societies, communities, organizations, families, and small groups on the other hand. Therefore, interactionist theory does not tell us much about how sports and sport experiences are related to issues of power and power relations in society as a whole. Second, interactionist theory does not provide us with a critical vision of what society could and should be when it comes to social organization.

Issues of power and critical visions of what society could and should be are central concerns among people who use critical and feminist theories.

CRITICAL THEORIES: HOW ARE SPORTS INVOLVED IN CREATING AND CHANGING CULTURE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS?

Most people who study sports in society today use critical theories. Although critical theories take many forms, they focus primarily on explanations of culture, power, and social relations.\footnote{Because this chapter is written as a basic introduction to using theories, I present "critical theories" as a general category. My goal is to give a brief, general description of the valuable analyses being done by those engaged in critically analyzing sports in society. Therefore, I attempt to pull together major ideas from the following theories and theoretical frameworks: neo-Marxist theories, traditional critical theory (combining ideas of Marx and Freud), hegemony theory (based on the ideas of Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci), cultural studies (based on ideas about culture, power, and ideology as they are contested and struggled over in everyday life), feminist theories (primarily those informed by critical theory: cultural studies, or poststructuralism), poststructuralism (based on cultural studies, semiotics, and forms of literary analysis dealing with language and the construction of power, meaning, representation, and consciousness under the unstable, fluid, fragmented, and often contradictory conditions of postmodern life), and queer theory (combining feminist cultural studies and poststructuralism). Of course, none of these frameworks is done justice in my summary. However, my goal is to highlight the exciting issues and questions that various scholars have discussed and analyzed while using one or more of these critical theoretical approaches, as well as to give you a basis for entering these discussions and analyses and learning more about sports, culture, and society in the process.} They consist of various approaches...
Sports Are More Than Reflections of Society

When people study the social aspects of sports, they often say that "sports are reflections of society." This idea is helpful to someone who is just beginning to think about sports as parts of society and culture. However, it is not very helpful to those of us who want to do in-depth studies of sports. The problem with assuming that sports are reflections of society can be demonstrated by shifting our attention away from sports and to another sphere of social life, such as the family.

Like sports, families are reflections of society, but our personal experience tells us that everyday family life is more than that. Families are the creations of people interacting with one another in many ways, depending on their abilities, resources, power, and definitions of family life. Of course, the opportunities and choices available to the members of any particular family are influenced by factors in the larger society, including laws; economic conditions; government policies; general beliefs about how husbands, wives, parents, and children should relate to one another; and even the words we use when we talk about families. This means that there are similarities among many families in the same society, but it does not mean that all families are destined to be the same or to be mere reflections of society.

Society serves as a context in which individuals produce, define, and reproduce specific family practices. Families are not shaped by society. In reality, they are sets of relationships that are produced by people in society. This is why each family has its own unique way of life. People create families, and they reproduce or challenge ideas about family every day as they go about their lives.

At times, families become sites (social locations) for raising questions about how family life should be organized. Some of these questions force people to rethink larger issues related to cultural values and the organization of society as a whole. In this way, what we do in our families becomes part of a general process of cultural production, the impact of which goes far beyond family life. For example, during the midtwentieth century, when people in the United States asked questions about individual rights, marriage, and family, there were discussions that ultimately led to changes in divorce laws. These and other discussions also encouraged designed to understand where power comes from, how it operates in social life, and how it shifts and changes as people struggle over the many issues that affect their lives and their relationships with each other (McDonald and Birell, 1999; Tomlinson, 1998).

Critical theories also offer a range of explanations of the following: (1) how culture is produced and reproduced, (2) how power relations operate in the processes of cultural production and reproduction, and (3) how people struggle over the ideas and meanings they use to make sense out of the world, form identities, interact with others, and transform the conditions of their lives.

People using functionalist and conflict theories often say, "Sport is a reflection of society," but those using critical theories explain that sports are much more than that. They say that sports are social places (sites) where society and culture are produced and reproduced, and this makes them much more important than they would be if they were mere reflections of society. This issue is discussed in the box "Sports Are More Than Reflections of Society."

Unlike people who use functionalist or conflict theory, those using critical theories do not believe that it is possible to discover a universal explanation of social life, which we can use to understand all societies at all points in the past, present, and future. In fact, they feel that such a goal inevitably leads us to ignore the diversity, complexity, contradictions, and changes that are
people to rethink their ideas about intimate relationships, gender, women’s rights, parent-child relationships, children’s rights, and even the ways in which community social services should be organized and delivered. In other words, families have always been much more than reflections of society. They are the creations of human beings, as well as sites for producing and transforming the ways of life that constitute culture.

This means that human beings are agents in the construction of social worlds—not just in their immediate family lives but also in the larger social settings in which they live. Through the things they do in their families, people produce and reproduce the culture and society of which they are a part.

So it is with sports and all of those associated with sports. Sports are more than reflections of society. They are constructed as people interact with one another. No voice comes out of the sky and says, “I am society, and this is the way sports should be.” Of course, social conditions have an impact on the structure and dynamics of sports, but, within the parameters set by those conditions, people can change sports or keep them the way they are. In fact, it is even possible for people to create and define sports in ways that differ from or even defy dominant ideas and norms and, in the process, to turn sports into sites for the transformation of the very culture of which they are a part.

This is a helpful way of thinking about sports in society. It recognizes that sports can have both positive and negative effects on participants, that people define and create sports in their own lives, and that sports are involved in reproducing culture as well as standing in opposing and transforming it.

This means that sports are very important in a sociological sense. Instead of being mirrors that simply reflect society, they are the actual “social stuff” out of which society and culture come to be what they are. When we understand this, we become aware of our capacity as agents of social and cultural production. This awareness helps us realize that we are not destined to do sports in a particular way or define sports as they are defined in the images promoted by Coca-Cola, Nike, or Budweiser. We can create culture and sports, if we make the effort. What do you think?

inherent in all forms of social life. Furthermore, they realize that there are many perspectives and standpoints from which to study and understand social life and that the search for general social laws or social truths about society and social life is fruitless. This makes them very different from those who use functionalist and conflict theories, even though they may borrow ideas from these theories as they extend and revise their own ideas.

According to critical theories, the relationship between sports and society is never set once and for all time: sports change as historical conditions and political and economic forces change. Sports change with new developments in government, education, the media, religion, and the family. Sports change with new ideas about masculinity and femininity, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability. And sports change with new ways of thinking and talking that offer visions of culture and social life, which people use to make sense of the world around them.

Critical theories are also about action and political involvement. All critical theories have grown out of desires among social scientists to identify issues and problems and to make social life more fair, democratic, and open to diversity. Critical theories have been valuable tools in identifying and studying specific social problems and in thinking about and putting into action practical programs and processes that eliminate
oppression and exploitation and promote equity, fairness, and openness.

Most people who use critical theories are interested in explaining that all social relationships are grounded in political struggles over how social life should be defined and organized. They realize that dominant forms of sports in most societies have been socially constructed in ways that systematically and arbitrarily privilege some people over others. Their goals are to study and explain all the ways that this occurs, to expose them, and to inspire new ways of talking about, defining, organizing, and playing sports.

Critical Theories and Research on Sports

Critical theories are diverse and deal with many dimensions of our lives. Therefore, they have inspired and guided a wide range of discussions and research on sports in society.

Those who use critical theories to study sports generally focus on one or more of the following issues:

1. Whose ideas about the meaning and organization of sports are most important when it comes to determining what sports will be funded, who will participate in them, how they will be covered in the media, and how they will be used for social, political, and economic purposes?
2. How are sports and sport experiences (as parts of culture) tied to various forms of power relations in society and to overall processes of social development?
3. When do sports reproduce systems of power and privilege and whom do sports privilege or disadvantage in society?
4. How are sports related to popular ideas about economic success or failure, work and fun, physical health and well-being, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical ability and disability, and what is natural or “deviant” in society?
5. What are the ways that people struggle over the organization and meanings of sports in their lives?
6. When do sports become sites for challenging, resisting, and even transforming how social life is organized?
7. What are the narratives and images that people use to construct sports and to connect sports and sport experiences to their lives and to culture in general?
8. Whose voices are represented and whose perspectives are used to frame how we think and talk about sports and whose voices and perspectives are not represented?
9. How might systems of power relations, as well as everyday narratives and images, be disrupted and transformed to give voice to those who lack power and representation in societies, communities, organizations, or groups?

One or more of these issues are discussed in each chapter in this book. I give priority to these issues because I think that critical theories inspire the most interesting and provocative discussions and analyses of sports in society. Research guided by critical theories emphasizes that sports are more than mere reflections of society. This research is based on the assumptions that sports have never been developed in a neatly ordered, rational manner and that there are no simple or general rules for explaining sports as social phenomena. The intent of research based on critical theories is to expose how the structure, organization, and meaning of sports vary with changing relationships in and between groups that possess different amounts of power and resources over time and from one social setting to another.

Critical theorists also study how sports affect the processes through which people develop and maintain cultural ideology—that is, the interrelated orientations and beliefs they use to explain what happens in their lives. Critical theorists want to know how and when sports
become sites for questioning, opposing, and challenging dominant forms of cultural ideology and for transforming how people see and interpret the social world around them. One of the mottoes of critical theorists (see Hargreaves and MacDonald, 2000) is a statement made by C. L. R. James, a native of the West Indies, who learned to play cricket after the British colonized his homeland. James said, “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?” (James, 1984, preface). Critical theorists would answer this question by saying, “We know nothing about sports if sports is all we know.” In other words, if we want to know about sports, we must also know about the social and cultural contexts in which they exist.

Using Critical Theories in Everyday Life

Critical theories are based on concerns for fairness and desires to understand, confront, and transform systems of exploitation and oppression in social life. They lead to concerns about how sports either reproduce or transform the societies in which they exist.

Those using critical theories emphasize that changes in sports depend on more than simply shifting the control of sports to the participants themselves. They note that many people are aware of who controls sports in their societies and have learned to accept those systems of control and to define them as correct. Therefore, policies based on critical theories would usually call for an increase in the number and diversity of sport participation alternatives available in society. The goal of such policies would be to provide people with opportunities to participate in many sports and, in the process, create the critical abilities that could lead to progressive transformations in their relationships, organizations, communities, and societies.

Critical theorists also raise questions about the stories told about sports in a culture. They challenge those whose voices and perspectives dominate those stories, and they make space for voices that have been silenced and for perspectives that are not represented in those stories.

Critical theories force us to question what sports are and to think of what they might be from a variety of standpoints and perspectives. This can be either exciting or threatening, depending on your willingness to see sports in new and different ways.

Weaknesses of Critical Theories

There are many variations of critical theories, so it is difficult to neatly summarize their weaknesses. However, there are general weaknesses across the variations.

First, most critical theories do not provide clear guidelines for determining when sports reproduce dominant forms of social relations in society and when they become sites for resisting and transforming social relations. Although research based on critical theories has focused on cases in which sports are sites for resistance, it has not identified general guidelines for promoting the forms of resistance that lead to social transformations in sports or social relations. This is partly because most critical theorists give a higher priority to analyzing problems and taking political action to promote change than they do to building a general theory of social life. They say that all knowledge and truth depend on the cultural and social perspective through which they are constructed. Therefore, different problems and conflicts always call for different strategies and different forms of intervention. Of course, this can be a useful approach when dealing with a particular problem, conflict, or injustice, but it does not encourage the building of social theories that might be useful across many different situations.

Second, because critical theories emphasize resistance and transgression, there is a tendency among those who use them to see value in all resistant discourses and all actions that do not conform to dominant norms, especially when they represent the interests of marginalized people in
Critical theories call attention to the possibility that sports can be sites for transforming social life. WNBA player Lisa Leslie supported cultural transformation when she endorsed EARTHJUSTICE Legal Defense Fund in the late 1990s. (Provided by EARTHJUSTICE)
society. However, it is clear that dominant norms are not always unfair or oppressive and that the voices and perspectives of some marginalized and disadvantaged groups are not based on concerns about fairness, liberation, and tolerance of differences. It is important to respect the voices and creative potential of marginalized and oppressed groups, but it is not politically or morally wise to assume that the contributions made by all groups have equal value when it comes to transforming social life. Many critical theorists have not identified criteria to prioritize ideas and interventions that have an impact on people's lives. Therefore, they have a difficult time assessing the social and moral value of ideas and actions from one situation to the next.

Third, critical theories are so diverse that it is often difficult to understand their similarities and differences. Some use vocabularies that are confusing and that interfere with merging different critical ideas into more useful frameworks for social intervention and social change. Fortunately, some critical theorists are aware of this weakness and advocate coordinated critical analyses that reveal the dynamics of power relations in various cultural contexts and that can serve as a basis for effective forms of social intervention (McDonald and Birrell, 1999).

**FEMINIST THEORIES: WHAT ARE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN GENDER AND SPORTS?**

Feminist theories represent a diverse set of interpretive frameworks. However, they are all based on the assumption that, if we want to understand people's actions and social life, we must understand the meanings that people give to gender and the ways that those meanings are incorporated into social experience and the organization of society.

Feminist theories in all disciplines grew out of a general dissatisfaction with the intellectual traditions that base knowledge on the values and experiences of men and ignore women or do not take seriously the experiences and insights of women. Feminist theories are grounded in the awareness that women have been systematically devalued and oppressed in many societies and that there is a need to develop political strategies to eliminate oppression and to empower women to transform the cultures in which they are devalued.

Critical feminist theories are used by many people in the sociology of sport. Critical feminists are concerned primarily with issues of power and the dynamics of gender relations in social life. They give close attention to how gender relations privilege men over women and some men over other men (see figure 2.2). They study how gender ideology (i.e., ideas about masculinity and femininity) is formed, reproduced, resisted, and transformed in and through the everyday experiences of men and women.

Critical feminist approaches to sports in society are based on the assumption that sports are *gendered activities*. In other words, the meaning,
organization, and purpose of sports are grounded in the values and experiences of men and are defined to celebrate the attributes and skills associated with dominant forms of masculinity in society (Birrell, 2000; Burstyn, 1999). Therefore, in the world of sports, a person is defined as “qualified” as an athlete, a coach, or an 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 volunteer worker for the booster club, or possibly an assistant in marketing and public relations; these qualities, often associated with women and weak men, are not valued qualities in most sport organizations.

Critical Feminist Theories and Research on Sports

Critical feminist theories emphasize the need to assess critically and transform the ideology and organization of sports, so that sports give voice to and represent the perspectives and experiences of women in society. Those who use these feminist theories argue that, unless ideological and organizational changes are made, there will never be true gender equity in sports or in society as a whole.

Research done by those who use critical feminist theories generally focuses on one or more of the following issues (see Birrell, 2000):

1. How have girls and women been excluded from or discouraged from participating in sports and how can gender equity be achieved without promoting sports that privilege some girls and women over others or jeopardize the health and physical well-being of girls and women who play sports?
2. How are sports involved in the production of ideas about what it means to be a man in society, as well as in the production of a system of gender relations that privileges tough and aggressive men?
3. How are women and men represented in media coverage of sports and how do those representations reproduce dominant ideas about gender in society?
4. What strategies can people use to resist or challenge the dominant gender ideology that is promoted and reproduced through most organized competitive sports?
5. How are sports and sport participation involved in the production of gendered ideas about physicality, sexuality, and the body?

When critical feminists do research, they often have clear political goals: they want to use sports as sites for challenging and transforming oppressive forms of gender relations, and they want to expose and resist expressions of sexism and homophobia in sports. For many critical feminists, the goal is to change the meaning, organization, and purpose of sports to emphasize the notion of partnership and competition with others; they are opposed to sports that emphasize the notion of dominating and competing against others.

Using Critical Feminist Theories in Everyday Life

Critical feminist theories have had a major impact on all of us who study sports in society. They have increased our understanding of sports as a part of culture, and they have made us aware of many other important questions to ask about gender and sports. For example, why do so 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 are strong and powerful athletes? Why are some men’s locker rooms full of homophobia, gay-bashing jokes, and comments that demean women? Why don’t we become concerned when 40,000 young men get carried off football fields every year with serious knee injuries? Why do church-going mothers and fathers who support “get tough” antitrime policies take their children to football games and cheer for young men charged and sometimes convicted of physical and sexual
assault? Why do so many people assume that men who play sports must be heterosexual? Why has an openly gay male athlete never been 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 theories, are worth serious attention. They deal with issues that affect our lives every day. In fact, if we do not have thoughtful responses to these questions, we really don't know much about sports in society.

**Weaknesses of Critical Feminist Theories**

Critical feminist theories are not without weaknesses. In fact, they have most of the same weaknesses of critical theories. Additionally, because of their focus on gender as a category of experience, they have sometimes given too little attention to other categories of experience that are connected with gender in important ways. These include age, race and ethnicity, social class, disability, religion, and nationality. Recent research (Hargreaves, 2000) has focused on the intersections of gender, race, and social class, but much remains to be done to explore the experiences of and problems faced by women of different ages, abilities, religions (for example, Muslim women), and nationalities.

**FIGURATIONAL THEORY: UNDERSTANDING SPORTS IN TERMS OF HISTORICAL AND GLOBAL PROCESSES**

Because the roots of figurational theory are based in intellectual traditions in Europe, most social scientists who study sports in North America are not familiar with it. However, it is a comprehensive theory that has been used for many years as a guide to forming hypotheses, doing research, and synthesizing research findings about social life and about sports in society (Dunning, 1999).

Figurational theory is based on the notion that social life consists of networks of interdependent people. Those who use this theory focus on the historical processes through which these networks, or sets of interconnections, between people emerge and change over time. These sets of interconnections are called "figurations."

Figurational theory assumes that human beings are "more or less dependent on each other first by nature and then through social learning, through education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs" (Elias, 1978, p. 261). In other words, people exist because of and through their connections with others, and, if we wish to understand social life, we must study the social figurations that emerge and change as social connections between people emerge and change. According to figurational theory, human beings "can be understood only in terms of the various figurations to which they have belonged in the past and which they continue to form in the present" (Gouldsblom, 1977, p. 7).

Those who use figurational theory study the long-term processes through which the relatively autonomous actions of many individuals and collections of people influence and constrain each other. These processes are complex and dynamic, and they involve a wide range of outcomes, which no single individual or group has chosen, designed, planned, or intended. These outcomes may be enabling or constraining for different individuals and groups, but they are never permanent. They shift and change as power within figurations shifts and changes over time. Power tends to shift and change over time in connection with constantly emerging economic, political, and emotional dimensions of social life (Murphy et al., 2000).\(^3\)

\(^3\)Figurational theory grew out of the work of Norbert Elias, a German Jew who fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and continued his sociological research in England until he died in 1990. Elias' theory of civilizing processes in western Europe is based on extensive historical research (see Elias, 1978, 1982). When Elias turned his attention to sports and leisure, much of his work was done with Eric Dunning (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Dunning has influenced students around the world through his writing and his lectures at Leicester University in England and many other universities.
Figurational Theory and Research on Sports

Figurational theory has inspired much research and discussion about sports in society. Although most of the research has been done in England and parts of northern and western Europe, it offers useful analyses of the following topics:

1. What are the historical, economic, political, and emotional factors that account for the emergence of modern sports during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in much of Europe?
2. What are the historical and social processes through which sport participation became increasingly serious in people's lives and through which sports became professionalized and commercialized in various societies during the twentieth century?
3. What are the historical and social dynamics of violence and efforts to control violence in sports, especially in connection with soccer in England and around the world?
4. What are the relationships among sports, national identity, and the dynamics of globalization processes in which the media, economic expansion, and consumerism play important roles?

Figurational theorists have acknowledged the importance of sports in society. Sports are important because they are "collective inventions," which provide people, especially men, in highly regulated, modern societies with forms of enjoyable excitement that reduce boredom while limiting the excessive and destructive violence that characterized many folk games in premodern Europe (Dunning, 1999).

Furthermore, the concept of figurations has been especially useful in studies of the complex economic, political, and social processes associated with global sports. Figurational research on the global migration of elite athletes, the global sports industry, global media-sports relationships, the impact of global sports on identity, and the manner that sports are incorporated simultaneously into local cultures and global processes have helped us understand sports in a global perspective (Maguire, 1999).

Using Figurational Theory in Everyday Life

Figurational theory is based on the ideas that knowledge about social life is cumulative and that the goal of knowledge is to enable people to control expressions of violence, exploitation, and power-driven relationships in their lives. Figurational theorists also emphasize that the application of knowledge in everyday social life is tricky, because applications are bound to produce unintended consequences, which could subvert intended positive and progressive outcomes. This, along with their desire to avoid the influence of ideology in their research, has led them to be cautious when it comes to social action and political intervention.

Most figurational theorists say that their role in social action is to generate valid forms of knowledge and to pass it on to others in a critical manner, so that people can use it as a basis for meaningful participation in social life. When it comes to problem solving, they have recommended policies that increase meaningful participation among those who have historically lacked access to power. In the case of sports, they have made general recommendations that support participation opportunities for women, working-class people, and ethnic minorities, but they have not made recommendations in explicit or assertive terms.

Weaknesses of Figurational Theory

The primary weakness of figurational theory is that its focus on long-term, historical interconnections between people minimizes attention to the immediate issues, current problems, and day-to-day struggles that are the "social stuff" of
people's everyday lives. The historical framework that is the backbone of figurational theory tends to diffuse the urgency and painfulness of everyday issues and problems, because it frames them in terms of complex, long-term processes. This is frustrating to those who want to deal with the here-and-now problems and issues that affect people's lives.

Another weakness of figurational theory is that it focuses so much on interdependence between people that it understates the immediate personal consequences of oppressive power relationships and the need for concerted political actions to change the balance of power in particular spheres of social life. For example, figurational research has explained how modern sports are a "male preserve" and how they have reproduced an ideology of masculinity and male power in many societies, but it has traditionally ignored the experiences of women in sports and the need for changes in the inequitable gender relations that characterize sport organizations. This has prevented figurational theory from being combined with critical feminist theories, and it has discouraged many action-oriented critical theorists from working with figurational theorists.

**IS THERE A BEST THEORETICAL APPROACH TO USE WHEN STUDYING SPORTS?**

In my experience as an involved citizen, a sociologist, and a person who has played and watched sports with friends and family, I have found all the theories discussed in this chapter useful. Each has made me aware of questions and issues that are important in my life or in the lives of those with whom I work and play.

In much of my own research, I have used interactionist theory because I have wanted to view sports from the inside, from the perspectives of those who make decisions to play or not to play and who integrate sport participation into their lives in various ways. However, as I have done interactionist research, I have been influenced very much by critical theories and critical feminist theories. This combination has helped me become more aware of the social and cultural contexts in which people make decisions about sport participation, and it has enabled me to see how access to participation opportunities is influenced by ecotonic, political, and cultural factors. Furthermore, critical and critical feminist theories have helped me think about very practical issues, such as how to vote on proposals to fund new parks or to fund a new stadium for a professional football team. They have helped me think about policies related to organizing sport programs for at-risk youth and to selecting candidates for coaching jobs at my university.

**Functionalist theory** helps me understand how other people think about sports in society, but it does not help me identify the social issues and controversies connected with sports in my community and in the sport organizations where I work with coaches and administrators.

**Conflict theory** alerts me to social class and economic issues, but critical theories help me combine those issues with issues related to gender, race and ethnicity, disability, sexuality, and media coverage of sports and sports figures.

**Figurational theory** has helped me understand historical and global issues more clearly, and I have used figurational research findings to help me think about power and politics in a global perspective.

**Critical and critical feminist theories** offer useful frameworks for thinking about how to change sports and to make sport participation more accessible to a wider range of people in society. I am much more interested in increasing choices and alternatives for people in sports than I am in making sports a more efficient means of maintaining the status quo in society (a goal of functionalist theory) or in dismantling sports altogether (a goal of conflict theory). I think that many aspects of the status quo in the United States and
Social life is so complex that it should be viewed from multiple perspectives as we study it. Each theory in this chapter could be used to ask sociological questions about this scene. Afghan boys (no girls) are playing Little League baseball organized by U.S. ground troops after Afghanistan had been heavily bombed by the U.S. military as it sought out terrorists. Adult refugees watch the game. (Wally Santana; AP/Wide World Photo)

in other societies are in need of change and that sports can be useful sites for making people aware of the changes that are needed and the forms that those changes might take.

Creating alternative ways of doing sports requires an awareness of the values underlying dominant sports in society today, as well as a vocabulary for thinking about creative possibilities for the future. A combination of critical and critical feminist theories is especially helpful in critically assessing those values and providing the vocabulary we need to assess existing sport forms and to develop new forms that offer human beings new possibilities for organizing their thoughts about the world and their connections with each other.

My theoretical preferences often conflict with the preferences expressed by students and people who work for sport organizations. Students who would like to work in sport organizations know that most of the people in those organizations see sports in functionalist terms, so they sometimes prefer functionalist theory. However, I remind these students that, if they become familiar with issues of power and culture, they will be able to critically assess organizational policies in terms of their impact on various groups of employees in the organization and on various segments of the surrounding community. When I work with coaches and sports administrators, they often tell me that my critical approach has helped them see things in their lives in new and helpful ways.

Finally, I believe that true empowerment involves enabling people to be critically informed actors, so that they can effectively "challenge and change unequal power relationships" (Mahiri, 1998). As I try to live by this belief, I find that critical and critical feminist theories, combined with interactionist theory, are especially helpful.
chapter 2: using social theories

how can social theories help us study sports in society?

theories are tools that enable us to ask questions, identify problems, gather information, explain social life, prioritize strategies to deal with problems, and anticipate the consequences of our actions and interventions. there are many theories that we can use to understand sports and society, and each offers a slightly different angle or perspective for viewing the connections between them. in this chapter, we have focused on functionalist theory, conflict theory, interactionist theory, critical theories, critical feminist theories, and figurational theory.

the purpose of the chapter is to show that each theory provides a framework to think about sports in society. for example, functionalist theory offers an explanation for positive consequences associated with sport involvement in the lives of both athletes and spectators. conflict theory identifies serious problems in sports and explains how and why players and spectators are oppressed and exploited for economic purposes. interactionist theory suggests that an understanding of sports requires an understanding of the meanings, identities, and interaction associated with sport involvement. critical theories suggest that sports are connected with social relations and culture in complex and diverse ways and that sports change as power and resources shift and as there are changes in social, political, and economic relations in society. critical feminist theories emphasize gender as a category of experience and sports as sites for producing, reproducing, and transforming ideas about gender and the structure of gender relations in society. figurational theory identifies the complex and long-term social processes through which modern sports have emerged and changed in societies.

it is also useful to realize that each theoretical perspective has its weaknesses. functionalist theory leads to exaggerated accounts of the positive consequences of sports and sport participation; it mistakenly assumes that there are no conflicts of interest between groups within society, and it ignores the powerful historical and economic factors that have influenced social events and social relationships. conflict theory overstates the importance of social class and economic factors in society, and it focuses most of its attention on top-level spectator sports, which make up only a part of sports in any society. interactionist theory does a poor job of relating issues of meaning, identity, and experience in sports to general social conditions and patterns of social inequality in society as a whole. critical theories provide no explicit guidelines for determining when sports are sources of opposition to the interests of powerful groups within society, and they lack clearly defined criteria for assessing the value of oppositional ideas and actions from one situation to the next. critical feminist theories have not sufficiently explored connections between gender and other categories of experience, including age, race, religion, nationality, and disability. figurational theory unintentionally diffuses the urgency of social problems by framing them in terms of complex, long-term processes and historical accounts of the changing balance of power in social relations.

despite their limitations and weaknesses, social theories are helpful as we explore issues and controversies in sports and as we assess research and ideas about sports in society. we don’t have to be theorists to use theory to help us organize our thoughts and become more informed citizens in our schools and communities.

suggested readings

functionalist theory

loy, j., and d. booth. 2000. functionalism, sport and society. in handbook of sports studies (pp. 9–27),
Critical Feminist Theories

Birrell, S. 2000. Feminist theories for sport. In Handbook of sports studies (pp. 61–76), edited by J. Coakley and E. Dunning. London: Sage (overview of how feminist theories have been used in sport studies; traces the history of this use and discusses critical feminist cultural studies as used by many people in recent years).

Edwards, J., and J. Hargreaves. 2001. Feminism. In International encyclopedia of women and sports (pp. 395–402), edited by K. Christensen, A. Gutmann, and G. Pfister. New York: Macmillan Reference USA (excellent discussion of how feminism has influenced sports since the late 1960s and inspired political efforts that account for many of the sport participation opportunities available to girls and women today).

Hargreaves, J. 2000. Herstories of sport: The politics of difference and identity. London/New York: Routledge (uses critical feminist theory as a basis for discussing groups of women whose stories have been excluded from many previous feminist analyses of sports in society; informative and insightful discussions of women from South Africa, Muslim nations in East Asia, and Aboriginal groups in Australia and Canada, as well as lesbians and women with disabilities from around the world).

Figurational Theory

Dunning, E. 1999. Sport matters: Sociological studies of sport, violence, and civilization. London: Routledge (definitive introduction to the study of modern sports from a figurational perspective; figurational theory is clearly distinguished from other theoretical approaches in each of the chapters).


Note: Websites often change. The following URLs were current when this book was printed. Please
Click on chapter 2 for summaries of studies based on some of the theories discussed in this chapter.

- www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/w3virtsoclib/theories.html Research source for information on sociological theory and theorists; it is not sports-related, but it provides numerous links to sites around the world.
- www.socpl.niu.edu/FYW/theory.htm Valuable links to helpful sites on social theory.
- www.tryoung.com/archives/108sports.html Contains a clear statement of how sport are viewed and analyzed when using a Marxist-based conflict theory as a guiding framework.
- www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/CST An advanced critical theory site.
- www.feminist.org/research/sports2.html Special coverage of “Empowering Women in Sports”; this site not only is a good example of applied feminist theories but also highlights the issues that are most important in a feminist analysis of sports.
- www.usyd.edu.au/su/social/elias.html Site devoted to Norbert Elias and figurational theory; provides links to many European sources.