Sport in America: KIN 101

(Coakley, 2001)

Using Social Theories

What Can Theories Tell Us About Sports in Society?

Social Theories

- Are based on questions about why the world is the way it is, and on ideas about how it might be different
- Involve a combination of:
  - Description
  - Reflection
  - Analysis

Intro to theories...

Have practical implication because they help us make choices

Six Major Social Theories Are Used to Study Sports in Society
- Functionalist theory
- Conflict theory
- Interactionist theory
- Critical theory
- Feminist theories
- Figurational theory

Functionalist Theory

- Society is an organized system of interrelated parts
- Sports are studied in terms of their contributions to the system
- Research focuses on sport participation and positive outcomes for individuals and society
- Many people like it because it assumes that shared values and agreement are the basis for social order
Functionalist Theory (cont)

- Those with power and influence often prefer it because it emphasizes stability and equilibrium in society
- Everyday discussions and media coverage often are based on assumptions used in functionalist theory

Using Functionalist Theory to take social action

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

Weaknesses of Functionalist Theory

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

Conflict Theory

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

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

Using Conflict Theory to take social action

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

Weaknesses of Conflict Theory

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

Interactionist Theory

- Society is created and maintained through social interaction.
- Sports are studied in terms of how they are created and given meaning by people.
- Research focuses on how people experience sports and how identities are related to sport participation and sport cultures.
- Those who use it often employ “interpretive research methods” to study social processes associated with becoming involved, staying involved, and changing involvement in sports.
Interactionist Theory (cont)
- How people develop and maintain identities as athletes
- How people give meaning to sports
- The characteristics of sport subcultures

Using Interactionist Theory to Take Social Action
- Change sports to match the perspectives and identities of those who play them
- Make sport organizations more democratic, less autocratic, and less hierarchically organized
- Question identity formation processes that involve the normalization of pain, injury, & substance use in sports

Weaknesses of Interactionist Theory
- Does not explain how meaning, identity, and interaction are connected with social structures and materials conditions in society
- Ignores issues of power and power relations in society and how they impact sport, sport participation, and sport experiences

Critical Theories
- Focuses on cultural production, power relations, & ideological struggles
- Sports are social constructions that change as power relations change and as narratives and discourses change
- Research focuses the meaning and organizations of sports, and on sports as sites for cultural transformation
- How dominant discourses and power relations might be disrupted to promote progressive changes
Critical Theories (cont)

- Those who use them assume that sports are more than reflections of society, and they study.
- The ways people struggle over the organization & meanings of sports.
- The discourses and images people use to construct sports.
- Whose voices and perspectives are used in discourses about sports in society.

Critical Theories (cont)

- SPORTS are more than reflections of society.
- Sports consist of sets of relationships that are produced by people in society.
- Sports are the creations of people interacting with one another.
- Sports are the "social stuff" out of which society and culture come to be what they are.

Using Critical Theories to Take Social Action

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

Weaknesses of Critical Theories

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

● Social life is pervasively gendered
● Sports are gendered activities grounded primarily in the values and experiences of men with power and influence
● Research focuses how sports reproduce gendered ideas and practices related to physicality, sexuality, and the body

Feminist Theories (cont)

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

Using Feminist Theories to Take Social Action

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

Weaknesses of Feminist Theories

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

- Theories are tools that help us ask questions, collect and analyze information, and interpret the implications of the analyses.
- Our choice of theories is influenced by our goals and political agendas.
- The best theories are those that help us find ways to make the world more democratic and humane. Aren’t they?