

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?