Sport in America:  
(Coakley, 2001)

Using Social Theories:

What Can They 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
- 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
- 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
● 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
  - 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
- 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
  - How dominant discourses and power relations might be disrupted to promote progressive changes

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

Using Critical Theories to Take Social Action
- Use sports to challenge and transform exploitive and oppressive practices
● Increase the number and diversity of sport participation opportunities
● 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
● 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 Theoriesto Take Social Action
● Challenge aspects of sports that systematically privilege men over women
● Expose and transform oppressive forms of sexism and homophobia in sports
● Use sports as sites to empower women and promote the notion of partnership and competition with others
Weaknesses of Feminist Theories

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

Figurational Theory

• Social life consists of patterns of interdependencies among individuals and groups
• Sports are exciting activities that relieve boredom and control violence
• Research focuses on developing knowledge that is “reality congruent”
• Those who use it are concerned with
  ◆ How social figurations emerge and change
  ◆ How modern sports emerged and became so important in certain societies
  ◆ Outlining the complexities of global sports and how sports are related to local and national identities

Using Figurational Theory to Take Social Action

• Develop the knowledge that will give rise to strategies for controlling expressions of violence, exploitation, and the abuse of power
• Increase access to sport participation among those who have lacked power through history

Weaknesses of Figurational Theory

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

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