

Theoretical perspectives in the sociology of sport



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Social and cultural theories are often used when studying and applying knowledge to sports. The theories in society often provide a framework for asking research questions, interpreting information and being able to uncover the deeper meanings and stories that are associated with sports, they also enable citizens in the society to become more informed so that we can apply what we have learned from the research and being able to apply it in the world that we live in. Theories also enable people to see things in new angles and perspectives and give us the ability to make informed decisions about sports and how sports participation can be used in our lives, communities, families and societies. The six main theories used in sport have many points and can overlap with each other but only two are going to be discussed in this study. The two theories chosen to compare are functionalist theory and conflict theory.

Functionalist theory is a macro sociological theory that is based on the characteristics of social patterns, structures, social systems and institutions such as family, education, religion, leisure, the economy, media, politics and sport. If all these social institutions are organized and co-operate with one another around a set of core values functionalist theorists assume that the entire social system will function properly and efficiently. Society in functionalism has a view that it is an organized system of interrelated parts that are held together by shared values and established social arrangements that help maintain the system in being in a state of equilibrium and balance. When sociologists use functionalist theory they split it into two parts, the first concept of interdependent parts is all of the social institutions (media, religion, sports, politics and economics) and how they are linked together.

In the tradition of Talcott Parsons and his conception of functional imperatives (goal attainment, adaptation, latency and integration) functionalists argue that there are four basic “ system needs” for any society in sports (team, clubs etc) to run smoothly and that everyone will benefit.

The four principles are

Adaptation - In order to survive in a society it is essential that members learn to adapt to changes in the social structure and culture. Another important element to survival is the emphasis on being physically fit as it is required for most sports.

Goal Attainment - This is the motivation of individuals to achieve society's goals through socially accepted means. Sport is preoccupied with tracking the success and failures of its participants however it also teaches participants that if they work hard enough it will lead to victory meaning success.

Integration - Sport promotes social connections between people and gives them the opportunity to co-operate with each other in a group and a community. It also provides a feeling of social identification as well as a source of personal identity. The society must keep itself together.

Latency (pattern maintenance and tension management) - Each system must maintain itself in a possible state of equilibrium for as long as it can without any outside disruptive influences. Many forms of pattern maintenance are provided by sport primarily through participation where the participants are taught to accept an authority structure that is well defined

for example athletes knowing that referees have the authority over them to make sure they stick to the rules of the sport.

Functionalist theory in sport generally leads to the conclusion that it is popular in society because it can maintain the values of character that help to preserve stability and order in social life. Functionalist theory also supports sporting policies that help and recommend the growth of competitive sport programmes, developing coaching education programmes, in the case of youth sport there is an establishment on criminal bureau checks and qualification checks on coaches before working with younger children. The theory also supports the establishment of training centres for elite athletes so they can maintain their top-level performance and making sure to have increased surveillance and drug testing so they are able to supervise and control the actions of athletes by preventing those taking drugs so they can't cheat their way to attaining a better sporting performance. People in society who have positions of power tend to favour functionalist theory as it is based on the assumption that society is organised for benefiting the people in that society of equality and that in any dramatic way it should not be changed. While functionalist theory is a popular approach it does have some weaknesses.

The weaknesses of functionalist theory is that it tends to lead to exaggerated accounts of positive consequences of sports and sports participation however it mistakenly assumes that there are no conflicts of interests between the different citizen groups in society such as women, people with disabilities, racial groups and people who are economically poor in society yet it doesn't recognise that sport can privilege or disadvantage people more

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than others. The theory also ignores the powerful historical and economic factors that have influenced social events and social relationships.

Functionalist theory is centered on the idea that there is a consensus in the values and norms of society and that social institutions found within a society are integrated and function together. In contrast conflict theory looks at the role of power and the inequality found throughout society and how sport is shaped by these economic forces and used by people with economical power to increase their influence and wealth. Conflict theory is based on the ideas of Karl Marx (1818 - 1883) which rose to importance during the 1970s because of the growing disenchantment with functionalist theory. This theory of Karl Marx views sports as being built on the foundations of economic power. In society's that are capitalistic you see that relationships and social arrangements are organised around wealth, money and economic power for example in the United States it's easy to point out the owners of the sport teams as they are benefiting financially from the expense of elite athletes, the coaches that work alongside the athletes and the spectators who watch the sport.

Like functionalist theory conflict theory is based on the assumption that society is like a social system however conflict theory focuses on the " needs of capital" rather than the " general system needs". Theorists of conflict theory explain that a society which is capitalist will not be able to survive and grow without exploiting any workers for the sake of boosting financial profits; they also suggest that if radical changes are to be concluded in sport and society by prevailing justice and fairness they need to identify the negative consequences that sport has. Once these changes are made sport

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will become a source of creative energy, expression and physical well-being. People who live in capitalist economies are generally not comfortable with the assumptions and conclusions of conflict theory because they say it has a negative effect and does not fit into their ideas about society and sport as they feel uneasy with the conclusions of calling for radical change in the current organisation and structure that they already have.

Much of conflict theory is directed at sports which are dominated by spectators. Conflict theorists if they had the choice they would increase the control that athletes and other sporting participants have to promote sport at local community level so that it benefits all classes of people rather than just all elite athletes. Meaning the working class would have more influence of sport than the rich class giving them more motivation for participation and eliminating profits. Many conflict theorists favour player's unions that confront pro-team owners and are supporting organisations that help to guard against public tax money being used to benefit wealthy people. Ideally any public resources would be used to help aid sponsoring sports that are designed to improve physical fitness, political awareness and include placing the element of fun into activities. Conflict theorists (Leonard 1980; Rigauer2004) would also campaign for athletes at all levels to have representation with making decisions about sport in organisations so Olympians would be able to vote on policy questions that concerned the staging of the Olympic Games.

Conflict theory also has three major weaknesses. The first weakness is that the theory tends to ignore the possibility that sport in capitalist societies can and may involve experiences that give individuals and groups power. Conflict

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theorists talk about how sport is organised to maximise the control that wealthy people have over other members in a capitalist society. The conflict theory approach doesn't acknowledge that sport can take many forms of serving interests in the have-not society and denies that any participation in sport can be a personal creative and liberating experience that will inspire members of society to make economic changes that will help to promote equality in exiting capitalist societies. Secondly conflict theory ignores the importance of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age and many other factors when it comes to explaining how people want to identify themselves, how they relate to other members in the society and how they organise the social world in which they live. Often it's leading people to overlook the possibility that inequalities and power in any society are based on factors other than economic and social class differences. Thirdly the theory assumes that all aspects of social life are determined economically and is shaped by the needs of having capital in society and profit motive. Theorists of conflict theory focus on the assumptions that of economic factors when studying sport however they tend to overlook participation and recreational port for healthy living.

Functionalist theory and conflict theory both focus on the needs of society and how sport can relate to the satisfaction of the system needs. The theories don't inform us about sport in everyday life and the ways in which people are active agents who are participating in the processes of sports and societies that are organised and changed. They both also ignore that sport and social constructions emerge in people's everyday life when they struggle

to decide what is important and how they are going to collect organisation in their lives.