

УДК 96

AN OVERVIEW OF VARIOUS THEORIES ABOUT SPORT AND SOCIETY

Nurkanat Anel Nurkanatkyzy

4582

The sociology of sport, also referred to as sport sociology, is the study of the relationship between sport and society. It examines how culture and values influence sport, how sport influences culture and values, and the relationship between sport and the major social spheres of life such as the media, politics, the economy, religion, race, gender and youth.

Sport, at a social, recreational or competitive elite level, can be considered as a microcosm, or small-scale version, of society. The same social issues that exist in larger society also exist in sport. These social issues, which can be seen in larger society and also in sport, are the concepts of values, race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, youth, politics, religion and economics. When we consider sport as a microcosm of society and/or we determine that sport teams mirror society, we see an important likeness between the two and must thus engage with social issues such as racism, discrimination, inequalities and homophobia that are revealed in sport and society. The sociology of sport uses essential and conflicting approaches that force us to explore alternative ways of viewing the place and organisation of sport in our society and how issues and problems presented by sport in society affect individuals.

When we study sport in society, we use theories of general views to understand how and why the world works as it does. In the sociology of sport there are six major theories that can be used to study sport in society.

The **functional theory** looks at how sport contributes to the stability and social progress in organisations, communities and societies. Sport is studied in terms of its contribution to the system and how it helps keep societies, communities, groups and organisations operating smoothly, as well as how it influences individuals to contribute to the social systems in which they participate. Sport is seen as a source of inspiration for individuals and society.

Many people use the functional theory to make decisions about using sport to promote social integration through development and growth in organised youth sport. Sport participation and individual development can combat deviance through elite programmes, build values and expose children to sporting role models.

Weaknesses of the functional theory include the following:

- It assumes that all social groups benefit equally from sport
- What is good for society must be good for all of its members.
- It argues that inequalities are good for society.

It overstates the positive consequences of sport in society. It does not recognise that sport is a social construction that privileges or disadvantages some people more than others.

People using the **conflict theory** view society as a continually changing set of relationships that exist because of different economic interests. In other words, society is ultimately shaped and organised around money, wealth and economic power. The people who hold the economic power use that power to coerce and manipulate others to accept their view of the world as the correct view. This means that those who use this theory are concerned with class relations. The social order exists because people do not all have access to equal resources. Thus conflict theorists see sport as a means of promoting capitalism in society, as a set of activities and spectacles that reduce awareness of economic exploitation among those without the power while maintaining the privilege and position of those who control wealth and the economy.

The **conflict theory** focuses attention on economic factors, class inequality and the need for changes in how society and sport are organised. Relationships between people with and

without economic power are highlighted. Athletes and spectators are not aware of how they are being manipulated and oppressed for profit and the personal gain of the economic elite – sport is used as an opiate. Those who play sport have no effective control over the conditions of their preparations; this is left up to the coach or trainer.

Weaknesses of the conflict theory include the following:

- It assumes that all social life is driven and shaped only by economic factors ('market needs')
- It ignores the importance of gender, race, age, sexual orientation and other factors in social life.
- It ignores cases in which sport participation consists of experiences that can empower groups and individuals.

The focus of the **critical theory** is explanations of culture, power and social relations. It consists of various approaches designed to understand where power comes from, how it operates in social life and how it shifts and changes as power relations (in the political, historical and economic context), narratives and discourses change. It sees sport as a social construct.

The critical theory assumes that sport is more than a reflection of society, so it studies the struggles about the meaning and organisation of sport and of sport as a site for cultural transformation. It focuses on how dominant narratives and images are used to form and give meaning to sport.

Critical theories are based on concerns of fairness and the desire to understand, confront and transform systems of exploitation and oppression in social life through sport. The critical theorists are interested in increasing diversity in sport, challenging the dominant debates and ideologies in sport, challenging those in power in sport and society, and giving

the marginalised a voice. South Africa is a good example of critical theory in that affirmative action in sport was brought about to rectify past power imbalances.

Weaknesses of the critical theory include the following:

the marginalised a voice. South Africa is a good example of critical theory in that affirmative action in sport was brought about to rectify past power imbalances.

Weaknesses of the critical theory include the following:

- There are no clear guidelines for identifying and assessing forms of resistance and strategies for producing transformation.
- There are no unified strategies for dealing with social problems, conflicts and injustice.

According to the **interactionist theory**, society is created through social interaction. It studies sport through the meanings and symbols that people create through social interactions. People use these meanings to make decisions in their everyday lives, which also govern their involvement in sport. Interactionist theorists are interested in researching how individuals experience sport and how identities are created through the social processes of becoming, being and unbecoming an athlete. Our identities influence our choices, actions, relationships and the processes through which we form and change our social worlds. In turn, the interactionist theory is often used when people study the experiences of athletes and their relationships with others, and the ways in which athletes make sense of their participation in sport. This theory sees sport from the individual's perspective.

Using the interactionist theory in everyday life is based on lived realities as people engage with others and give meaning to the complex world in which they find themselves. Interactionists call for changes that increase discussion and the mutual sharing of ideas, experiences and understanding of sport experiences.

The interactionist theory has two main weaknesses:

- It does not explain how meaning, identity and interaction are connected with social structures and material conditions in society.
- It ignores the issues of power and power relations in society and how they affect sport, sport participation and sport experiences.

The **feminist theory** is based on the assumption that knowledge about social life requires an understanding of gender and gender relations. This theory has grown out of a general dissatisfaction and frustration that intellectual traditions base knowledge on the values, experiences and insights of men and ignore or devalue those of women. Social life is regarded as pervasively gendered in a patriarchal, or male-dominated, world. Sport, in turn, is regarded as a set of gendered activities based on masculine values and experiences. The widely accepted norms and the celebration of strong, aggressive and tough male athletes exclude women, who are expected to display femininity and look beautiful in sports like tennis and gymnastics or fill caring and supportive roles. Feminists are interested in researching how sport reproduces patriarchy through physicality, sexuality and the body, how women are (mis)represented in media coverage of sport and how women can use strategies to resist or challenge dominant gender ideology.

Using the feminist theory in everyday life is mainly focused on our awareness of how culture informs sporting practices and gender-related issues in sport. For example, we know that gender equity is difficult to achieve because it often requires that men share resources, which mostly leads to competition. Homophobia influences the participation in sport as well as the experiences of heterosexual women, who may face being called gay if they participate in sporting activities usually associated with men. This theory also looks at the experiences of gay women in sport. Feminists use sports as sites of empowerment of women and promotes forms of sport that reflect women's interests.

Weaknesses of the feminist theory include the following. The feminist theory focuses on social justice, equality of opportunities and existing ideologies that undermine fairness related to gender, sexuality, social class, race, ethnicity and disability. However, there is no clear guideline on the interrelated experiences of women of different ages, race, ability and religions across cultures. Not every woman experiences the same discrimination and/or unfairness within the same context or in the same way. Secondly, feminists assume that there is a unified 'women's interest', while many women argue that this is not their interest. Certain women are happy to uphold the traditional gender role that is expected of them (i.e. motherhood and femininity) and believe that sport is a 'man's territory'.

The **figurational theory** is a theory in which figurations of humans – evolving networks of interdependent humans – are the unit of investigation. It sees sport as a social phenomenon. Also known as process sociology, the figurational theory explains that social life consists of networks of interdependent people in formations or 'figurations' over time (i.e. many amateurs in sport led to the social trend of amateurism; similarly, figurations of professional athletes surfacing in sport led to the sociological trend of professionalism in sport). These social connections shift and change, which gives special meaning to the social worlds that are formed and recognised through them. Shifts and changes within the figurations happen according to changes in power relations within the economic, political and emotional dimension of social life. Sport is seen as important as it is regarded as a set of 'collective interventions' that provides people in highly regulated modern societies with forms of enjoyable excitement. Those who use the figurational theory are concerned with how social figurations emerge and change over time, how modern sport emerged and became important in certain societies, and the complexities of global sport and local and national identities.

Studying the development of pastimes and folk games into competitive sport provides insights into national and global figurations. The global migration of athletes, the global sport industry, the global media, and the impact of global sport on national identity formation as global phenomenon have helped us to understand sport from a global perspective. This theory is based on the idea that knowledge about social life is cumulative and enables people to develop the knowledge that will give rise to strategies for controlling expressions of violence, exploitation and the abuse of power, and will increase access to sport participation among the historically powerless.

The primary weakness of this theory is that it gives too little attention to problems and struggles that affect day-to-day lives: it focuses on the long-term historical interconnections between people. It understates the immediate personal consequences of oppressive power relations and, in turn, has not given enough attention to the experiences of women and the gender inequities that affect their lives.

Theories are tools that help us to ask questions, collect and analyse information, and interpret the implications of our analyses. The decision about which theory is best is influenced by the goals and political agendas of the sport manager, organisation, community, or nation. The best theories are those that help us to find ways to make the world more democratic. In the management of sport, no single theory is suitable on its own. An integrated perspective and a combination of the various theories should be used to study and interpret social phenomena accurately so that the right strategy or plan is chosen and its implementation is successful. Take, for example, the need to introduce a sport programme, to compile a sport marketing plan or to organise a sport within a community. Failure to understand the community within which you are working in will make your strategy, sport programme or sport marketing plan ineffective.

Literature

1. Coakley, J.J. (2015). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
2. Crossman, A. (2014). *Sociology of sports*. Available at <http://sociology.about.com/od/ Disciplines/a/Sociology-Of-Sports.htm>. [Accessed 19 October 2014].
3. Brown, S.P. (2006). *Introduction to the Sociology of Sport*. Baltimore: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
4. KantarSport. (2009). *2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa: Television Audience Report*. United Kingdom: KantarMedia.