Chapter 2: Producing Knowledge

# 2.1. Sociologists use more than one theoretical approach

Most of the theorizing that sociologists have done over the past 150 years has been motivated by a desire to synthesize information about the social world and develop general explanations for how and why social life is organized in particular ways. Underlying this motivation has been the belief that if the key forces that drive and shape social life could be identified, human beings could become masters of their destiny. In other words, if a valid and reliable theory about how the social world works could be created, people could outline rational strategies for organizing societies in efficient, humane, and satisfying ways.

This hope that humans could make the world better and more controllable through the use of knowledge and science was the foundation of the Enlightenment period during the eighteenth century and marked the beginning of what we call “modernism” in Western societies. ***Modernism*** is an approach to life that is based on the idea that humankind can achieve progress through the use of rationality, science, and technology. This approach gave rise to the belief that people could use social science to discover the knowledge needed to make societies more efficient, just, and harmonious. As this knowledge accumulated, human beings could bring societies closer and closer to perfection.

Most sociologists traditionally have wanted to be a part of this process of collecting information, testing theories, and eventually discovering scientific “truths” about the operation of social worlds and how they can be controlled to serve the common good. Therefore, many sociologists have searched for “social laws” and “cause-effect relationships” that explain social life – regardless of time, place, and culture. These sociologists have tried to find the building blocks of social life by identifying the types of relationships and organizational structures that enable people to live satisfying lives in groups and societies. This search for the general foundations and building blocks of all societies has taken sociologists in different directions depending on their assumptions and viewpoints, as you will see in Chapter 3.

All sociologists are ***not*** convinced that it is possible to create a general theory of social life. Some argue that no theory can explain social life in all its forms and that the search for such a theory leads sociologists to ignore the diversity, complexity, and contradictions that are part of everyday life. Others argue that the quest for a general theory of society distracts sociologists from focusing on specific problems and identifying practical ways for people to solve problems fairly as they live their lives together. Finally, some sociologists have abandoned the search for a general theory of social life because they realize there are many different perspectives or standpoints from which to study and understand the world.

As a result, many sociologists today use multiple theories as they do research and try to explain various aspects of social reality. There are four additional reasons that multiple theories are used in sociology and the sociology of sport:

***First,*** feminist scholars and women around the world have made convincing arguments that theories based primarily or solely on men’s experiences and perspectives do not tell the whole story about social life. They note that theories ignoring the experiences and perspectives of fifty percent of the world’s population are incomplete at best and dangerous at worst. These scholars have explained how theories about social life as well as what occurs in social life are influenced by the relative power of men and women in society and by who does the theorizing about society. This has led to new feminist theoretical approaches in science, and especially in sociology.

***Second****,* global social changes have forced social scientists from North America and northern and western Europe to realize that their theories about social life are based on a “Eurocentric viewpoint” that is irrelevant in other parts of the world. As the world has become more interconnected, the people of Asia, Latin America, and Africa have contributed new ways of understanding and explaining social life. Their theoretical approaches are grounded in the experiences and perspectives of populations that have not experienced industrialization or have experienced it in forms quite different from those that have occurred in Europe and North America. Some of these new theories have been developed out of the experiences of those who have lived under the colonial rule of Euro-American nations. In general, the theories about social life that are developed by people living in current or former regions colonized by others are different from theories developed by descendants of the colonizers. They each have unique and different vantage points for viewing the societies and cultures.

***Third,*** new communications technologies now give rise to rapidly changing and diverse streams of digital and media-generated images and simulations that alter our sense of what is real and what isn’t. These mediated and image-based forms of reality have led some sociologists to develop new theoretical approaches that enable them to consider dimensions of social life outside traditional social boundaries and fixed social structures.

***Fourth,*** many sociologists realize that science itself is a part of culture, and they reject theories that don’t take this into account. These sociologists have worked to develop new theoretical approaches that focus on specific problems and generate knowledge that people, especially those who lack power and influence, can use to gain more control over their lives and make social worlds more just and inclusive. These approaches are very different from the approaches most sociologists used in the past.

# 2.2. Sports are more than reflections of society

When people study the social aspects of sports, they often say that sports are reflections of society. This is true, but sports are much more than reflections. They are social practices that actively influence what people do and how social worlds are organized. For example, many sports in the United States are organized in ways that perpetuate very limited ideas and beliefs about race, skin color, and race relations. This encourages people to accept these ideas and beliefs and avoid one or more of the following:

1. Asking critical questions about race in social worlds
2. Considering the meaning of race and the racial categories that people use to classify themselves and others
3. Identifying the ways that ideas about race influence people’s actions, their choices of what sports to play, and their expectations of how they might excel at certain sports
4. Becoming aware of how race is woven into the organization of sports and social worlds generally.

At the same time, sports are also **identifiable social contexts** where people can challenge and even change ideas and beliefs about race and skin color – as Jackie Robinson did when he became the first African American to play in modern Major League Baseball in 1947 or when Doug Williams became the first Black starting quarterback to win a Super Bowl in 1988.

This way of thinking about sports in society recognizes that people organize, perform, and give meaning to sports in many different ways and that sports are sites at which ideas, beliefs, and approaches to social relationships are created, maintained, and changed. Therefore, instead of merely reflecting society, sports comprise the “social stuff” from which society and culture are forever being created and reproduced. In other words, sports not only reflect society but also have the ability to change it. This makes them sociologically important.

When we understand the dynamic nature of social life, we realize that each of us is an agent that is involved in creating, maintaining, and changing the social and cultural worlds in which we live. Therefore, we are not destined to think about or do sports as they are portrayed in the narratives and images presented by media companies, Coca-Cola, Nike, Red Bull, Budweiser, or other sponsors of sports today. This opens our minds and makes it possible for us to think critically about sports and to work with others to make them what we want them to be in our lives.

# 2.3. The meaning of pain: Interactionist theory as a research guide

The complexities of interactionist theory are difficult to explain. The best way to learn about interactionist theory is to review research that uses it. Here is an example that can be helpful:

## The meaning of pain in an athlete’s life

Sociologist Tim Curry\* examined biographical data on the sports career of an amateur wrestler. He collected case study data through three two-hour interviews over a two-month period. These interviews followed several years of observing the college wrestling team on which this young man (in his early twenties) participated. Curry’s analysis clearly outlines the social processes through which many athletes come to define pain and injury as normal parts of their sport experiences.

Curry’s report showed that this young wrestler initially learned to define pain and injury as a routine part of sport participation simply by observing other wrestlers and interacting with people in the sport. As he progressed to higher levels of competition, he saw that the endurance of pain and injury was commonplace among fellow athletes and former athletes who had become coaches. Over time this young man learned what it meant to be a wrestler, and what was required to have others define him as a wrestler.

These lessons included the following:

1. “shake off’’ minor injuries
2. define special treatment for minor injuries as a form of coddling
3. express desire and motivation by playing while injured or in pain
4. avoid using injury or pain as excuses for not practicing or competing
5. use physicians and trainers as experts who could keep him competing when not healthy
6. define pain-killing anti-inflammatory drugs as necessary performance-enhancing aids
7. commit himself to the idea that all athletes must pay a price as they strive for excellence
8. define any athlete unwilling to pay the price or strive for excellence as morally deficient

As he participated in wrestling this young man applied all these lessons to himself; in fact, they became the foundation for his identity as an athlete.

Despite his identity as an athlete-wrestler, his career was cut short by a combination of spine and knee injuries. Chronic injuries also disfigured his ears—“cauliflower ear” is common among longtime wrestlers and they often perceive them as a symbol of their former identity. Even after he retired, this former wrestler was identified as a role model for younger wrestlers because he was perceived as a model of dedication and commitment; his injuries even confirmed his status as a role model and were perceived as proof of his positive character in wrestling culture.

The experiences associated with this young man’s wrestling career clearly illustrate how painful and potentially self-destructive experiences can be defined as positive in the life of an athlete, especially a male athlete. In certain sport cultures, these experiences are used as proof of self-worth and evidence of a special form of character that separates them from others.

The important thing about this study is that it shows how meanings and identity associated with sports experiences are grounded in social interaction and social relationships. Tim Curry did his study many years ago, but research in recent years has indicated that his findings remain timely and can be used to explain how pain and injury become normalized in the lives of many athletes.

\*Curry, Timothy. 1993. A little pain never hurt anyone: Athletic career socialization and the normalization of sports injury. *Symbolic Interaction* 16, 3: 273–90.

# 2.4. Specific theories used in the sociology of sport

When we study sports in society, the best theories are those that describe and explain aspects of social life in logical terms that are consistent with systematic observations of social worlds. Theories enable us to see things from various angles and perspectives, understand more fully the relationship between sports and social life, and make informed decisions about sports and sport participation in our lives, families, communities, and societies.

People who study sports in society have used multiple theories to guide them as they ask research questions and interpret research findings. However, most scholarly work over the past half-century in North America has been based on one or a combination of five major theories:

* Functionalist theory
* Conflict theory
* Critical theory
* Feminist theory
* Interactionist theory

Although there are important differences between these five theories, there are points at which two or more of them converge and overlap. This is because people read and respond to the ideas of others as they do research and develop explanations of various aspects of social life. Therefore, theories are not static—they are forever *emerging* explanations of what we know about social worlds at a particular point in time. The five theories that are described below provide different angles or perspectives for understanding sports in society.

## Functionalist theory: Sports preserve the status quo

Functionalist theory is based on the assumption that society is an organized system of interrelated parts held together by shared values and established social arrangements. These interrelated parts and social arrangements work together so that society is maintained in a state of balance or equilibrium. The most important social arrangements in any society are social institutions such as the family, education, the economy, the media, politics, religion, the law, and sport. If these social institutions are organized around a core set of values, functionalists assume that society will operate smoothly and efficiently.

When sociologists use functionalist theory to explain how a society, community, school, family, sports team, or other social system works, they study the ways that each part in the system contributes to the system’s overall operation. For example, if Canadian society is the social system being studied, a person using functionalist theory wants to know how the Canadian family, economy, government, educational system, media, religion, and sport are related to one another and how they collectively maintain the society as a whole. An analysis based on functionalist theory focuses on the ways that each of these social institutions helps the larger social system to operate efficiently.

According to functionalist theory, a social system operates efficiently when it is organized to do four things: (1) socialize people so that they learn and accept important social values, (2) promote social connections between people so they can cooperate effectively with one another, (3) motivate people to achieve socially approved goals through socially accepted means, and (4) protect the system from disruptive outside influences. Scholars using functionalist theory assume that, if these four “system needs” are satisfied, social order will be maintained and everyone will benefit.

## Conflict theory: Sports are tools of the wealthy and powerful

Conflict theory focuses on the ways that sports are shaped by economic forces and used by economically powerful people to increase their wealth and influence. It is based on the ideas of Karl Marx and his assumption that every society consists of a system of relationships and social arrangements that are determined by economic arrangements. In the case of capitalist societies, relationships are organized around money and wealth (capital) and the power that people possess or lack depending on whether they own the means of producing capital or serve as workers in the process of producing capital.

Scholars using conflict theory assume that all aspects of social life revolve around economic interests. The people who control the economy use their power to coerce or convince workers and their families to accept the existence of economic inequality as a natural part of social life.

The research of these scholars focuses on **class relations**—that is, *social processes that revolve around who has economic power, how that power is used, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged by the economic organization of society*. Studies of class relations focus on the consequences of social inequality in all spheres of social life.

The primary goal of those who use conflict theory is similar to the goal of those who use functionalist theory: to develop a general explanation of the structure and operation of all societies.

Those using conflict theory emphasize that economic power in capitalist societies is entrenched so deeply that progressive changes are possible only if workers become aware of the need for transforming the economy and take action to bring about such a transformation.

Sports, they argue, focus the attention and the emotions of workers on escapist spectator events that distract them from the economic issues and policies that reproduce their powerlessness in society. Therefore, sports, especially mass spectator sports, are organized and sponsored by wealthy people and large corporations because they perpetuate capitalist values and a lifestyle based on unquestioned competition, ceaseless production, and mindless consumption. When people accept capitalist values without question, sport becomes an ***opiate*** in society; an aspect of culture that deadens their awareness of economic exploitation and perpetuates the privilege and positions of people who control capital and the economy.

## Critical theory: Sports are sites at which culture and social relations are produced

Critical theory comes in a variety of forms, and it offers a useful alternative to functionalist and conflict theories. It is based on the following three assumptions: (1) Groups and societies are characterized by shared values ***and***conflicts of interest; (2) social life involves continuous processes of negotiation, compromise, and coercion because agreements about values and social organization are never permanent; and (3) values and social organization change over time and from one situation to another as there are shifts in the power balance between groups of people in society.

Critical theory was developed when some sociologists realized that societies and cultures were too messy, complex, and fluid to be described as “systems,” and that it wasn’t possible to create a grand theory of social life that explained all social life under all conditions. Therefore, instead of focusing on society as a whole, those using critical theory focus on the diversity, complexity, contradictions, and changes that characterize social life as it is lived and experienced by people who interact with one another and struggle over how to organize their lives together.

Although critical theory comes in many forms, it focuses primarily on the following topics:

1. the processes through which culture is produced, reproduced, and changed
2. the ways that power and social inequalities are involved in processes of cultural production, reproduction, and change
3. the ideologies that people use as they make sense of the world, form identities, interact with others and transform the conditions of their lives.

People using functionalist and conflict theories often say that “sport is a reflection of society,” but critical theorists explain that in addition to reflecting society, sports are sites where culture and social organization are produced, reproduced, and changed. This makes sports much more than mere reflections of society.

Unlike functionalists or conflict theorists, critical theorists realize that there are many vantage points from which to study and understand social life and that the relationship between sports and society is always subject to change. Therefore, they study sports in connection with changes in (1) the organization of government, education, the media, religion, the family, and other spheres of social life, (2) cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and physical (dis)ability, and (3) the visions that people have about what sports could and should be in society.

Critical theory also encourages action and political involvement. It has been developed by scholars dedicated to identifying issues and problems for the sake of eliminating oppression and seeking justice and equity in social life. Critical theory is a valuable tool when identifying and studying specific social problems. People who use it assume that social relationships are grounded in political struggles over how social life should be defined and organized. They study sports to see if they are organized to systematically privilege some people over others. Their goal is to explain how sports have come to be what they are and to inspire new ways to think about, define, organize, and play sports that meet the needs and interests of the participants.

## Feminist theory: Sports are gendered activities that perpetuate male privilege

Feminist theory is based on the assumption that knowledge about social life requires an understanding of gender and gender relations. It has grown out of general dissatisfaction with intellectual traditions that base knowledge on the values, experiences, and insights of men and do not take seriously the values, experiences, and insights of women. People use feminist theory to explain the ways that women have been systematically devalued and oppressed in many societies, and they assume that gender equity is a prerequisite for meaningful social development and progress.

Many scholars in the sociology of sport use critical forms of feminist theory as they study issues of power and the dynamics of gender relations in social life. Critical feminist theory focuses on issues of power and the ways that power is involved in gender relations. It also provides a framework for studying the ways that gender ideology (that is, *ideas and beliefs about masculinity and femininity*) is produced, reproduced, resisted, and changed in and through the everyday experiences of men and women.

Critical feminist theory explains that sports are *gendered activities*, in that their meaning, purpose, and organization are grounded in the values and experiences of men and celebrate attributes associated with dominant forms of masculinity in society. Therefore, in sport organizations, a person is defined as “qualified” as an athlete, coach, or administrator if he or she is tough, aggressive, and emotionally focused on competitive success. If a person is kind, caring, supportive, and emotionally responsive to others, he or she is qualified only to be a cheerleader, a booster, or an assistant in marketing and public relations. These latter qualities, often associated with femininity and weakness, are not valued in most sports organizations.

## Interactionist theory: Sports are given meaning as people interact with one another

Interactionist theory focuses on issues related to meaning, identity, social relationships, and subcultures in sports. It is based on the idea that as human beings interact with one another, they give meanings to themselves, others, and the world around them, and then use those meanings as a basis for making decisions and taking action in their everyday lives.

According to interactionist theory, we humans do not passively respond to the world around us. Instead, we actively make decisions about our actions as we consider their potential consequences for us, the people around us, and the social world in which we live. Culture and society, according to scholars using interactionist theory, are produced as patterns emerge in our actions and relationships with others.

According to interactionist theory, our ability to *reflect on* our actions and our relationships with others enables us to develop **identity**—that is, *a sense of who we are and how we are connected to the social world*. Identities are key factors as people interact with one another and construct their social worlds. They are the foundation for self-direction and self-control in our lives. Identities are never formed once and for all time; they change over time as our actions and relationships change, as we meet new people, and as we face new situations. Interactionist theory explains the processes through which people define and give meaning to themselves, their actions, and the world around them. Unlike functionalist and conflict theories, it explains society from the bottom up rather than the top-down; it begins with the perspectives of the people who create, maintain, and change society as they interact with each other.

# 2.5. Feminist theories in the sociology of sport

There are many variations of feminist theory. When scholars first used feminist theories in the sociology of sport, they were identified as liberal feminists or radical feminists. These distinctions help us understand more fully the roots of feminist theory.

***Liberal feminists*** identified discrimination and unequal opportunities as gender issues in the greatest need of attention. Their goal was to promote gender equity in all spheres of social life, including employment, education, politics, and sports. In the case of sports, liberal feminists focused on the issue of fair and equal access for women to participate and share in the rewards available in sports, coach at all levels of competition, and gain positions in the power structures of sports organizations. Their guiding assumption was that “if it’s good for males, it’s good for females, too.”

***Radical feminists***, on the other hand, believed that problems in sports and society as a whole went much deeper than issues of discrimination and equal opportunity. They argued that if fairness and equity were the only issues addressed and if success was measured only by women’s participation in activities and organizations created by and for men, feminists would unwittingly produce the very orientations toward social life and social relationships that led women to be devalued and exploited in social worlds. Radical feminists believe that since many activities and organizations were shaped to represent and promote the power and privilege of men, goals had to go beyond equal participation opportunities. Radical feminists did not agree with the idea that “if it’s good for men, it must also be good for women.”

In the case of sports, radical feminists questioned the merits of wanting to play and work in sports activities and organizations where aggression, competition, goal orientation, and rational efficiency were the most important standards for evaluating organizational success and individual qualifications.

Most radical feminists did not dismiss the approach or goals of liberal feminists, but they argued that liberal feminists did not go far enough in their analysis of sports or social life. Radical feminists contended that to fully understand the history and social significance of organized sports in our lives, we also had to understand the gendered character of sports and the ways that sports were organized to privilege some people over others. They noted that organized sports were developed at a time when many men feared that home life was controlled by women and that boys raised by women would not learn to be tough enough to control colonized peoples around the world, fight wars, and expand capitalist economies. This fear of the “feminization of social life” also fueled the development and sponsorship of organized, competitive sports in nineteenth-century England. Early sport forms were developed to teach “manly” values and actions to boys and men.

Organized, competitive sports became associated with making boys tough, creating men who fit dominant definitions of masculinity, and demonstrating that men’s bodies could endure and engage in violence in ways that made them superior to women’s bodies. Boxing, rugby, football, and other contact sports were not only used widely in military training, but also seen as proof that men were naturally superior to women and that power, aggressiveness, and the ability to physically dominate others were uniquely male qualities grounded in biology itself.

Over the years, women were systematically excluded from contact sports and discouraged from participating in most strenuous physical activities because their bodies were seen as incapable of aggression, physical power, and stamina. Of course, the more important implications of this exclusion and discouragement were the definition of women’s bodies as naturally inferior to men’s bodies and the perception that it was women’s biological destiny to be controlled by men. This ideological rationale for the development of organized sports also existed in other cultures, including the United States and Canada.

Radical feminist theorists also noted that when physical strength had practical utility in employment and when force and violence were widely used in society, the balance of power between men and women would always favor men. In societies where physical strength was not needed in the economy and displays of force and violence are controlled, men would seek other ways of maintaining a rationale for their superiority. This rationale was at least partially provided by football, boxing, ice hockey, and other sports defined as “manly” or “aggressive.” According to radical feminists, these sports were promoted and popularized partly because they perpetuated the beliefs that force and aggression were important parts of life and that men were fundamentally and naturally superior to women because they were more physically powerful and aggressive. Radical feminists were more likely than other feminists to raise questions about the ways that many sports, especially those emphasizing physical dominance over others, reproduced an ideology that disadvantages women in society. Therefore, they argued that full gender equity in sports could be achieved only through the transformation of the ideology on which sports were founded.

Feminist theory today is no longer just about women. Its primary focus now is on social justice, equality of opportunities in all spheres of life, and revising traditional ideologies related to gender, sexuality, social class, race, ethnicity, and (dis)ability. Theoretical approaches deal with the intersections of multiple aspects of people’s lives.

This expansion of feminist theory is based on the recognition that issues of gender cannot be fully understood unless there is an awareness of how gender intersects with social class, race, and other socially significant factors to influence the everyday lives of women.

Many younger women today don’t use the word *feminist* to describe themselves even though they strongly endorse gender equity and use various forms of feminist theory. They agree with feminist principles but they question the fact that feminism in the past was associated with the concerns and orientations of white, upper-middle-class women and was not as inclusive as it should have been. They know that the meaning and implications of gender for relatively wealthy, heterosexual, able-bodied women are different than they are for women from working-class or poor ethnic families where jobs, quality medical care, and community resources may be scarce. Gender remains important in the work of these scholars, but they are sensitive to how it plays out in different ways for women in various social circumstances.

The approach and theories that have emerged out of feminism are now widely accepted in the sociology of sport. They have been integrated into other theories and used by many scholars in the field.

# 2.6. Sociology of sport research today is based on a critical approach

A critical approach in the sociology of sport focuses on the ways that knowledge can be applied to real-world decisions, actions, policies, and programs so that sports can better serve the interests of more people.

## Example 1: Creating alternatives to dominant forms of sport

Susan Birrell and Diana Richter (1994) used a critical approach when they studied how a specific sport experience was socially constructed by a group of women playing on certain teams in slow-pitch softball leagues in two communities. For four years the researchers did intensive interviews and observations that focused on how the feminist consciousness of these women might inform and structure their sport experiences, their interpretation of those experiences, and the integration of sport experiences into their lives.

Birrell and Richter reported that the women in their study were concerned with developing and expressing skills, playing hard, and challenging opponents, but that they wanted to do these things without adopting orientations characterized by an overemphasis on winning, power relationships between players and coaches, social exclusion and skill-based elitism, an ethic of risk and endangerment, or the derogation of opponents. In other words, the women attempted to create alternative sports experiences that were “process-oriented, collective, supportive, inclusive, and infused with an ethic of care” (p. 408). Transformations in the way teams were organized and the way games were played came slowly over the four-year research period; many women found it difficult even to try an alternative to the sport forms that had been created out of men’s values and experiences, the forms that were presented to them as the ways to do sports. But as changes occurred on their teams, the women experienced a sense of satisfaction, enjoyment as softball players, and a reaffirmation of their collective feminist consciousness and feelings of political empowerment.

Birrell and Richter’s study shows that sports are not so much “reflections of society” as “social inventions” of people themselves. The definition and organization of sports are grounded in the consciousness and collective reflection of the participants themselves, and this means that people can alter sports through their own efforts. In other words, sports are social constructions; people can define them and include them in their lives to serve many different purposes. This research finding makes a significant contribution to our overall understanding of sports in society.

## Example 2: The social construction of masculinity in sports

Michael Messner (1992) used a critical approach to study how masculinities were socially constructed in connection with men’s athletic careers. Open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty former athletes from different racial and social class backgrounds to discover how gender identities developed and changed as men lived their lives in the socially constructed world of elite sports. Messner noted that the men in his study began their first sports experiences with already-gendered identities; in other words, when they started playing sports, they already had certain ideas about masculinity. They had not entered sports as “blank slates” ready to be “filled in” with culturally approved masculine orientations and behaviors.

As their athletic careers progressed, these men constructed orientations and relationships and had experiences consistent with dominant ideas about manhood in American society. Overall, their masculinity was based on (a) trying to make a public name for themselves and make money in the process, (b) relationships with men in which bonds were shaped by homophobia (fear of homosexuality) and misogyny (a disdain for women), and (c) a willingness to use their bodies as tools of domination regardless of consequences for health or general well-being. This socially constructed masculinity not only influenced how these men presented themselves in public but also influenced their relationships with women and generated a continuing sense of insecurity about their “manhood.”

Messner also found that the consequences of sport participation in the lives of the men he interviewed were complex and sometimes confusing. For example, sports participation brought many of the men in his study temporary public recognition, but it also discouraged the formation of needed intimate relationships with other men and with women. Sports participation enabled the men to develop physical competence, but it also led to many serious injuries and chronic health problems. Sports participation opened some doors to job opportunities for these men, but opportunities also varied depending on the sexual preferences and the racial and class backgrounds of the men. Sports participation provided these men guidelines on how to “be a man,” but the involvement and success of women in sport also raised serious questions for those who had learned that becoming a man required detaching oneself from all things female.

Overall, sports participation for the men was a process through which they enhanced their public status, created non-intimate bonds of loyalty with each other, perpetuated patriarchal relationships with women, and constructed masculinity in a way that privileged some men over others. Even though the men sometimes challenged this process, transformations of sports and sport experiences were difficult to initiate because dominant forms of sport in the U.S. have been constructed to perpetuate the notion that male privilege is grounded in nature and biological destiny. Messner’s work calls attention to the fact that gender is a social construction and that sports offer fruitful sites (“social locations”) for studying the formation of gender identities.

## Example 3: Sports rituals and social life in a small town

Anthropologist Doug Foley (1990) used a critical approach when he studied the connection between sport events and community socialization processes in a small Texas town by using observation, participant observation, and informal and formal interviews over two years. His analysis was guided by a form of critical theory that he describes as “performance theory.” One of his goals was to examine the extent to which sports might be used by certain community members as sites for challenging and making changes in the capitalist, racial, and patriarchal order that defined social life in their town.

Foley thought that as he studied sports he would find progressive practices challenging the dominance of a small elite group of people that controlled the town’s economy. But he found few such challenges connected with sports. There were a handful of athletes, cheerleaders, and local townspeople who challenged certain traditions and ways of doing things, but they produced no real changes in who had power and how things were done in the town. This discovery led Foley to conclude that high school sports in general and high school football, in particular, were important community rituals in the town he studied, but that they ultimately reproduced existing inequities related to gender, race, ethnicity, and income.

Foley’s study shows that sports are tied to the economic, political, and cultural systems in a community and that it can be very difficult to use sports as sites for challenging and changing the way social life is organized.

## Section 2.6 Summary

These overviews of research demonstrate that sports are more than mere reflections of society; the conclusion often made by those using functionalist or conflict theories. A critical approach acknowledges that sports have never been developed in a neatly ordered and rational manner, and there are no simple rules for explaining sports as social phenomena. Instead, the structure and organization of sports in any society vary with the complex and constantly changing relationships in and between groups possessing varying amounts of power and resources. When these relationships are identified and understood, it is possible to develop strategies to change them so that power is more equally shared and social order does not systematically privilege or disadvantage particular categories of people.

Birrell, Susan., and Diana. M. Richter. 1994. Is a diamond forever? Feminist transformations of sport. In S. Birrell and C. L. Cole, eds. *Women, sport, and culture* (pp. 221–44)*.* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Foley, Douglas E. 1990. *Learning capitalist culture.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Messner, Michael A. 1992. *Power at play*. Beacon Press, Boston.

# 2.7. A European approach: Figurational theory

Figurational theory is widely used by sociology of sport scholars outside the United States. The following material provides a summary of this theoretical approach.

## Using figurational theory to study sports in society: A summary

### Assumptions about the basis for social order in society

* Social order is based on interdependencies among individuals and groups. Connections between people take the form of social figurations.

### Major concerns in the study of society

* How do social figurations emerge and change?
* How does the balance of power within figurations influence relationships between individuals and groups?

### Major concerns in the study of sport.

* How did modern sports emerge and become so important in society?
* What are the social processes associated with the commercialization of sports, expressions of violence in sports, and forms of global sports?

### Major conclusions about the sport-society relationship

* Sports are exciting activities that relieve boredom and control violence and uncivilized behavior.
* Sports celebrate masculinity and male power.
* Global sports are complex activities with local and national significance.

### Social action and policy implications

* Develop a fund of valid knowledge, which can be used to enable people to control expressions of violence, exploitation, and the abuse of power.
* Increase access to sport participation among those who have lacked power through history.

### Major weaknesses

* It gives too little attention to problems and struggles that affect day-to-day lives.
* It understates the immediate personal consequences of oppressive power relations.
* It gives little attention to the experiences of women and to gender inequities.

## Figurational Theory: Sports are Collective Inventions

Because the roots of figurational theory are based on intellectual traditions in Europe, most social scientists who study sports in North America are not familiar with it. However, it is a comprehensive theory that has been used for many years as a guide to forming hypotheses, doing research, and synthesizing research findings about social life and sports in society.

Figurational theory is based on the notion that social life consists of networks of interdependent people. Those who use this theory focus on the historical processes through which these networks or sets of interconnections, between people, emerge and change over time. These sets of interconnections are called “figurations.” Figurational theory assumes that human beings are dependent on each other and their survival and prosperity depend on their connections with others. Therefore, if we wish to understand social life, we must study the social figurations that emerge and change as social connections between people emerge and change. According to figurational theory, human beings are most accurately understood in terms of the various figurations to which they have belonged during their lives and the figurations through which they create current realities.

Those who use figurational theory study the long-term processes through which the relatively independent actions of many individuals and collections of people influence and constrain each other. These processes are complex and dynamic, and they involve a wide range of outcomes, which no single individual or group has chosen, designed, planned, or intended. These outcomes may be enabling or constraining for different individuals and groups, but they are never permanent. They shift and change as the power within figurations shifts and changes over time. Power tends to shift and change over time in connection with constantly emerging economic, political, and emotional dimensions of social life.

Figurational theory grew out of the work of Norbert Elias, a German Jew who fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and continued his sociological research in England until he died in 1990. Elias’ theory of civilizing processes in Western Europe is based on extensive historical research. When he turned his attention to sports and leisure, much of his work was done with sociologist Eric Dunning. Dunning has influenced students around the world through his writing and his lectures at Leicester University in England and many other universities.

## Figurational Theory and Research on Sports

Figurational theory has inspired much research and discussion about sports in society. Although most of the research has been done in England and parts of northern and western Europe, it offers useful analyses of the following topics:

1. What are the historical, economic, political, and emotional factors that account for the emergence of modern sports during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in much of Europe?
2. What are the historical and social processes through which sport participation became increasingly serious in people’s lives and through which sports became professionalized and commercialized in various societies during the twentieth century?
3. What are the historical and social dynamics of violence and efforts to control violence in sports, especially in connection with soccer in England and around the world?
4. What are the relationships among sports, national identity, and the dynamics of globalization processes in which the media, economic expansion, and consumerism play important roles?

Figurational theorists have acknowledged the importance of sports in society. Sports are important because they are “collective inventions,” which provide people, especially men, in highly regulated, modern societies with forms of enjoyable excitement that reduce boredom while limiting the excessive and destructive violence that characterized many folk games in premodern Europe.

Furthermore, the concept of figurations has been especially useful in studies of the complex economic, political, and social processes associated with global sports. Figurational research on the global migration of elite athletes, the global sports industry, global media-sports relationships, the impact of global sports on identity, and the manner that sports are incorporated simultaneously into local cultures and global processes have helped us understand sports in a global perspective. Figurational theoryhas helped researchers understand historical and global issues more clearly, and many have used figurational research findings to help them think about power and politics in a global perspective.

## Using Figurational Theory in Everyday Life

Figurational theory is based on the ideas that knowledge about social life is cumulative and that the goal of knowledge is to enable people to control expressions of violence, exploitation, and power-driven relationships in their lives. Figurational theorists also emphasize that the application of knowledge in everyday social life is tricky because applications are bound to produce unintended consequences, which could subvert intended positive and progressive outcomes. This, along with their desire to avoid the influence of ideology in their research, has led them to be cautious when it comes to social action and political intervention.

Most figurational theorists say that their role in social action is to generate valid forms of knowledge and to pass it on to others in a critical manner so that people can use it as a basis for meaningful participation in social life. When it comes to problem-solving, they have recommended policies that increase meaningful participation among those who have historically lacked access to power. In the case of sports, they have made general recommendations that support participation opportunities for women, working-class people, and ethnic minorities, but they have not made recommendations in explicit or assertive terms.

## Weaknesses of Figurational Theory

The primary weakness of figurational theory is that its focus on long-term, historical interconnections between people minimizes attention to the immediate issues, current problems, and day-to-day struggles that are the “social stuff” of people’s everyday lives. The historical framework that is the backbone of figurational theory tends to diffuse the urgency and painfulness of everyday issues and problems because it frames them in terms of complex, long-term processes. This is frustrating for those who want to deal with the here-and-now problems and issues that affect people’s lives.

Another weakness of figurational theory is that it focuses so much on the interdependence between people that it understates the immediate personal consequences of oppressive power relationships and the need for concerted political actions to change the balance of power in particular spheres of social life. For example, figurational research has explained how modern sports are a “male preserve” and how they have reproduced an ideology of masculinity and male power in many societies, but it has traditionally ignored the experiences of women in sports and the need for changes in the inequitable gender relations that characterize sports organizations. This has prevented figurational theory from being combined with critical feminist theories, and it has discouraged many action-oriented critical theorists from working with figurational theorists.

## Goals of Figurational Theory

Figurational theorists envision sports free of oppressive power, exploitation, and violence. Their primary strategy is to engage in rigorous programs of research that eventually inspire socially responsible and effective efforts to bring about change and social transformation. Figurational theorists realize that being an effective agent of social change is very difficult in a world where the interconnections between sports and other spheres of life are becoming increasingly complex. However, they hope that if research accurately identifies interconnections between collections of people and the processes of power used in social relations, it will be possible to design strategies for challenging and transforming social figurations that are exploitive and oppressive.

## Section 2.7 Summary

Figurational theory identifies the complex and long-term social processes through which modern sports have emerged and changed in societies. It emphasizes research that builds the knowledge needed to make effective and progressive interventions in the future. Its weakness is that it unintentionally diminishes the urgency of social problems by framing them in terms of complex, long-term processes and historical accounts of the changing balance of power in social relations. Despite this weakness, figurational theoryhas helped me understand historical and global issues more clearly, and I have used figurational research findings to help me think about power and politics in a global perspective.

# Key Terms

* Modernism
* Functionalist theory
* Conflict theory
* Critical theory
* Feminist theory
* Interactionist theory
* Figurational theory
* Liberal feminist
* Radical feminist