



[CP(Ryan Remiorz)]

chapter

2

Using Social Theories

How can they help us to study sports in society?

Hockey is the Canadian metaphor, the rink is this country's vast stretches of water and wilderness, its extremes of climate, the player a symbol of our struggle to civilize such a land. Some people call it our national religion. Well, what better?

—Bruce Kidd and John Macfarlane, authors,
The Death of Hockey (1972)

[S]port provides a structured, organized world that satisfies some of our need for meaning.

—Robert Fulford, *journalist* (2006)

Those of us who study sports in society want to understand four things: (1) the social and cultural contexts in which sports exist, (2) the connections between those contexts and sports, (3) the social worlds that people create as they participate in sports, and (4) the experiences of individuals and groups associated with those social worlds. We are motivated by various combinations of curiosity, interests in sports, and concerns about social life and social issues. Most of us also want to use what we know about sports in society to promote social justice, expose and challenge the exploitive use of power, and empower people so they might resist and transform oppressive social conditions.

As we study and apply knowledge about sports, we use social and cultural theories. Theories provide frameworks for asking research questions, interpreting information, and uncovering the deeper meanings and stories associated with sports. They also enable us to be more informed citizens as we apply what we learn in our research to the world in which we live. Because those of us who study sports in society come from diverse academic backgrounds, and because social life is so complex, we use multiple theories to guide our work.

The three goals of this chapter are to

1. Identify and describe the theories used most widely to study sports in society
2. Explain the ways that theories help us to understand sports and the society in which we live
3. Demonstrate how theories influence our view of sports and the practical actions we take in connection with sports.

WHAT ARE THEORIES AND WHY DO WE NEED THEM?

Whenever we ask why our social world is the way it is and then imagine how it might be changed, we are “theorizing” (hooks, 1992). **Theorizing**

involves *a combination of description, analysis, reflection, and application*. When we theorize, it is not necessary to use complex terminology. In fact, the best theories are those we understand so clearly that they help us to make sense of our experiences and the social world.

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 the social world. Theories enable us to see things from new 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.

Many people think that theories do not have practical applications, but this is not true. Most of our decisions and actions are based on our predictions of their possible consequences, and those predictions are based on our “personal theories” about social life. Our theories may be incomplete, poorly developed, based on limited information, and biased to fit our needs, but we still use them to guide our behaviour. When our theories are accurate, our predictions help us to relate more effectively with others and control more directly what happens in our lives. When people make decisions about sports, formulate policies, or decide whether to fund or cut money from sport programmes, they base decisions on their personal theories about sports and society.

The theories discussed in this chapter are different from our personal theories about social life. This is because they are based on a combination of systematic research and deductive logic. They have been presented in books and articles so that others may evaluate, test, use, and revise them. When logic or evidence contradicts them, theories are revised or abandoned.

People who study sports in society have used many theories to guide them as they ask questions and interpret research findings. However, most



Functionalist theory assumes that social order depends on maintaining solidarity through established social institutions, including the institution of sport. [CP(Adrian Wyld)]

scholarly work over the past half century has been based on one or a combination of five major theories¹:

- Functionalist theory
- Conflict theory
- Interactionist theory
- Critical theory
- Feminist theory

Although there are important differences between these five theories, there are many 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 new explanations of society and social life. Therefore,

theories are *emerging* explanations of what we know about social worlds at this time.

Each of the five theories discussed in this chapter provides a different perspective for understanding the relationship between sports and society. This will be highlighted through the following: (1) a brief overview of each theory, (2) examples of the ideas and research that have been inspired by the theory, (3) explanations of how the theory can be used as we take actions and make policies about sports in our everyday lives, and (4) an overview of the major weaknesses of the theory.

Table 2.1 provides a summary of each theory and how it helps to understand sports in society. The table contains a large amount of material, but as you read through the chapter you will find it to be a useful reference guide to each theory. Most important, it will help you to identify and understand similarities and differences between the theories.

¹Figurational theory, widely used to guide research on sports in Europe, and to some extent in Canada, is explained and discussed in the Online Learning Centre at <http://mcgrawhill.ca/ole/coakley>.

Table 2.1 Using social theories to study sports in society: a summary and comparison

Functionalist Theory	Conflict Theory
I. ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE BASIS FOR SOCIAL ORDER IN SOCIETY	
<p>Social order is based on consensus and shared values, which hold the interrelated parts of society together.</p> <p>All social systems operate efficiently when each part of the system stays “in synch” with other parts.</p>	<p>Social order is based on economic interests and the use of economic power to exploit labour.</p> <p>Social class shapes social structures and relationships.</p>
II. MAJOR CONCERNS IN THE STUDY OF SOCIETY	
<p>How do the parts of social systems contribute to the satisfaction of “system needs” and the efficient operation of the system?</p>	<p>How is economic power distributed and used in society?</p> <p>What are the dynamics of social class relations?</p> <p>Who is privileged and exploited in class relations?</p>
III. MAJOR CONCERNS IN THE STUDY OF SPORT	
<p>How does sport fit into social life and contribute to social stability and efficiency?</p> <p>How does sport participation teach people important norms in society?</p>	<p>How does sport reflect class relations?</p> <p>How is sport used to maintain the interests of those with power and wealth in society?</p> <p>How does the profit motive distort sport and sport experiences?</p>
IV. MAJOR CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE SPORT–SOCIETY RELATIONSHIP	
<p>Sport is a valuable social institution that benefits society as well as individuals in society.</p> <p>Sport is a source of inspiration on both personal and social levels.</p>	<p>Sport is a form of physical activity that is distorted by the needs of capital.</p> <p>Sport is an opiate that distracts attention away from the problems that affect those without economic power.</p>
V. SOCIAL ACTION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS	
<p>Develop and expand sport programmes that promote traditional values, build the type of character valued in society, and contribute to social order and stability.</p>	<p>Raise class consciousness and make people aware of their alienation and powerlessness.</p> <p>Eliminate the profit motive in sports thereby allowing them to foster expression, creativity, and physical well-being.</p>
VI. MAJOR WEAKNESSES	
<p>It does not acknowledge that sports are social constructions.</p> <p>It overstates the positive consequences of sport.</p> <p>It ignores that sport serves the needs of some people more than others.</p>	<p>It ignores that sport can be a site for creative and liberating experiences.</p> <p>It tends to overstate the influence of economic forces in society.</p> <p>It assumes that people who have economic power always shape sports to meet their interests.</p>

Critical Theory	Feminist Theory	Interactionist Theory
<p>Social order is negotiated through struggles over ideology, representation, and power.</p> <p>Social life is full of diversity, complexities, and contradictions.</p>	<p>Social order is based primarily on the values, experiences, and interests of men with power.</p> <p>Social life and social order is gendered and based on patriarchal ideas.</p>	<p>Social order is created by people as they interact with each other.</p> <p>Social life is grounded in social relationships and the meanings people give to social reality.</p>
<p>How is cultural ideology produced, reproduced, and transformed?</p> <p>What are the conflicts and problems that affect the lives of those who lack power in society?</p>	<p>How is gender ideology produced, reproduced, and transformed?</p> <p>How do dominant forms of gender relations privilege men over women and some men over others?</p>	<p>How are meanings, identities, and culture created through social interaction?</p> <p>How do people define the reality of their own lives and the world around them?</p>
<p>How are power relations reproduced and/or resisted in and through sports?</p> <p>Whose voices are/are not represented in the narratives and images that constitute sports?</p>	<p>How are sports gendered activities, and how do they reproduce dominant ideas about gender in society?</p> <p>What are the strategies for resisting and transforming sport forms that privilege men?</p>	<p>How do people become involved in sports, become defined as athletes, derive meaning from participation, and make transitions out of sports into the rest of their lives?</p>
<p>Sports are social constructions.</p> <p>Sports are sites at which culture is produced, reproduced, and transformed.</p> <p>Sports are cultural practices that repress and/or empower people.</p>	<p>Sports are grounded in the values and experiences of powerful men in society.</p> <p>Sports reproduce male power and distorted ideas about masculinity.</p> <p>Sports produce gendered ideas about physicality, sexuality, and the body.</p>	<p>Sports are forms of culture created through social interaction.</p> <p>Sport participation is grounded in the decisions made by people in connection with their identities and relationships.</p>
<p>Use sports as sites for challenging and transforming exploitative and oppressive forms of social relations.</p> <p>Increase the range and diversity of sport participation opportunities.</p> <p>Challenge the voices and perspectives of those with power.</p>	<p>Use sports as sites for challenging and transforming oppressive forms of gender relations.</p> <p>Expose and resist homophobia and misogyny in sports.</p> <p>Transform sports to emphasize partnership over competition and domination.</p>	<p>Allow individuals to shape sports to fit their definitions or reality.</p> <p>Make sport organizations more open and democratic.</p> <p>Focus on the culture and organization of sports when controlling “deviance” in sports.</p>
<p>It does not provide guidelines to assess the effectiveness of particular forms of resistance as strategies for making progressive changes in social worlds.</p> <p>It often uses confusing vocabularies making it difficult to merge critical ideas and theories.</p>	<p>It does not provide guidelines to assess the effectiveness of particular forms of resistance as strategies for making progressive changes in social worlds.</p> <p>It sometimes uses confusing vocabularies making it difficult to merge critical ideas and theories.</p>	<p>It does not clearly explain how meaning, identity, and interaction are related to social structures and material conditions in society.</p> <p>It generally ignores issues of power and power relations in society.</p>

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 that maintain the system in a state of balance or equilibrium. The most important social arrangements are social institutions such as the family, education, the economy, the media, politics, religion, leisure, and sport. If these social institutions are organized around a core set of values, functionalists assume that a society will operate smoothly and efficiently.

When sociologists use functionalist theory to explain how a society, community, school, family, sport 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 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 work together in contributing to the smooth operation of the society as a whole. An analysis based on functionalism focuses on the ways that each of these social institutions helps the larger social system to operate efficiently.

According to functionalist theory, social systems operate efficiently when they are organized to do four things: (1) socialize people so that they learn and accept important cultural values, (2) promote social connections between people so that they can cooperate with one another, (3) motivate people to achieve socially approved goals through socially accepted means, and (4) protect the overall system from disruptive outside influences. Functionalists assume that if these four "system needs" are satisfied, social order will be maintained and everyone will benefit. The first column in table 2.1 on page 28 summarizes functionalist theory.

Functionalist Theory and Research on Sport

Functionalist theory leads people to ask research questions about the ways that sport contributes to the organization and stability of organizations, communities, societies and other social systems. Using functionalist theory, researchers have studied some of the questions and issues that are discussed in the following chapters. Examples include the following:

1. Do sports and sport participation influence social and personal development? This issue is discussed in chapters 4 through 7, and 14.
2. Do sports and sport participation foster the development of social bonds and relationships in groups, communities, and societies? This issue is discussed in chapters 9, 10, 13, and 14.
3. Does playing sports have a positive impact on academic and occupational success, and does it teach people to follow the rules as they strive for success? This issue is discussed in chapters 4, 6, 7, 10, and 14.
4. Do sports contribute to personal health and wellness and the overall strength and well-being of society? These issues are discussed in chapters 4, 7 and 13.

Functionalist theory focuses on the ways that sports contribute to the smooth operation of societies, communities, organizations, and groups. This is why a functionalist approach is popular among people interested in preserving the *status quo* in society. They want sociologists to tell them how sports contribute to the smooth operation of the social systems in which they have been successful. Many people connected with organized competitive sports also prefer functionalist theory because it emphasizes the "functions" of sports and supports the conclusion that sports are a source of inspiration for individuals and societies.

Using Functionalist Theory in Everyday Life

Popularized forms of functionalist theory often are used when people in positions of power make

decisions about sports and sport programmes at national and local levels. For example, a functionalist analysis of sports in society would support the following actions: promoting the development and growth of organized youth sports (to build values), funding sports programmes in schools and communities (to promote organizational loyalty and attachments to schools and communities), developing sport opportunities for girls and women (to increase achievement motivation among girls and women), including sports in military training (to increase military preparedness and the fitness of soldiers), and staging the Olympic Games (to build international goodwill and unity).

Functionalist theory generally leads to the conclusion that sports are popular in society because they maintain the values that preserve stability and order in social life. For example, in Canada it is assumed that sports are popular because they teach people to feel comfortable in tasks that involve competition, goal achievement, and teamwork under the supervision of an authority figure. Sports are also considered to be tools of integration in a society with two official languages and a high level of immigration. Furthermore, because functionalist theory leads to the conclusion that sports build the kind of character valued in society, it supports policies that recommend the growth of competitive sport programmes, the development of coaching education programmes, the establishment of training centres for top-level athletes, and increased surveillance and drug testing to supervise and control the actions of athletes. In the case of youth sports, functionalist theory supports actions to expand developmental sport programmes for children, establish criminal background checks and certification requirements for coaches, and build a sport system that trains young people to become elite athletes. Overall, functionalist theory inspires research questions about the ways that sports contribute to the development of individuals and society as a whole.

Many people reading this book are attracted to functionalist theory because they like its emphasis on the positive aspects of sports in society. People in positions of power in society also favour functionalist theory because it is based on the assumption that society is organized for the equal benefit of all people and therefore should not be changed in any dramatic ways. The notion that the system operates effectively in its present form is comforting to people with power because it discourages changes that might jeopardize their privilege and influence. Because the functionalist approach is popular, it is important to know its weaknesses.

Weaknesses of Functionalist Theory

Functionalist theory has three major weaknesses. First, it does not acknowledge that sports are social constructions that take diverse forms as they are created and defined by people interacting with one another. Functionalists see sport as a relatively stable social institution that always serves specific functions in societies. Such an approach overlooks the diversity of sports, the extent to which sports promote the interests of powerful and wealthy people, and the possibility that sports may sometimes produce or reproduce social outcomes that actually disrupt the smooth functioning of society.

Second, functionalist theory leads to overstatements about the positive effects of sport in society and understatement about its negative effects. For example, it does not help us to understand that women in society are disadvantaged when sports are organized in ways that legitimize the use of physical power to dominate others. Nor does it help us understand how sport teams in some schools and communities may actually undermine social integration when status systems favour athletes and lead others to feel marginalized.

Third, functionalist theory is based on the assumption that the needs of all groups within a society are the same. This overlooks the existence



"Ya know, I can't relate to these kids' music anymore, but at least i know we'll always have sports in common."

FIGURE 2.1 Functionalists overlook the fact that sports can create divisions in society as well as unifying people.

of real differences and conflicts of interest in society and cases when sports benefit some groups more than others (see figure 2.1). This limits our understanding of difference, conflict, and the dynamics of change in societies.

CONFLICT THEORY: SPORTS ARE TOOLS OF THE WEALTHY

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 assumption that every society is a system of relationships and social arrangements that are shaped by economic factors. In capitalist societies, relationships and social arrangements are organized around money, wealth, and economic power.

Conflict theorists assume that all aspects of social life revolve primarily around economic interests and that people who control the economy use their power to coerce and manipulate workers and their families to accept the existence of economic inequality as a natural feature of social life. Conflict theorists often focus their research 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 conflict theory is similar to the goal of functionalist theory: to develop a general theory that explains the organization and operation of all societies. Conflict theory emphasizes that economic power in capitalist societies is entrenched so deeply that progressive changes are possible only if workers become aware of the need for change and take action to make major changes in the organization of the economy. Sports focus the attention and the emotions of the have-nots in society on escapist spectator events that distract them from the economic issues and policies that reproduce their own 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 competition, production, and 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 wealth and the economy.

Conflict Theory and Research on Sport

Conflict theory is often used by people who ask questions and do research on the connection between sports and the dynamics of power and privilege in society. This research will be used in subsequent chapters as we discuss the following issues:

1. Why do athletes become so alienated from their bodies that they will risk injury and physical well-being to play sports? This issue is discussed in chapters 4–7.

2. How are sports related to socioeconomic inequality in society? This issue is discussed in many chapters—especially chapters 8–11.
3. What happens to sports when they become commercialized? This issue is discussed in chapters 10–13.
4. How do wealthy and economically powerful people use sports to further their interests? This issue is discussed in chapters 10–13.

Like functionalist theory, conflict theory is based on the assumption that society is a social system. However, it focuses on “needs of capital” rather than “general system needs.” Therefore, conflict theorists explain that a capitalist society cannot survive and grow without exploiting workers for the sake of boosting financial profits. Conflict theorists also focus on the ways that sports perpetuate the unequal distribution of power and economic resources in societies. Therefore, they often identify the negative consequences of sports and conclude that radical changes are needed in sports and society if fairness and justice are to prevail. Only when those changes are made will sports become sources of expression, creative energy, and physical well-being.

Many people in countries with capitalist economies are not comfortable with the assumptions and conclusions of conflict theory. They say that the negative tone of conflict theory does not fit with their ideas about sports or society, and they are uneasy with conclusions that call for radical changes in the current structure and organization of sports and society. However, conflict theory calls attention to important economic issues in sports and to forms of inequality that create conflict and tensions in society as a whole.

Using Conflict Theory in Everyday Life

Conflict theory focuses on the need to change the organization of sports and society. The goal of these changes is to give workers, including athletes, control over the conditions of their work. Problems in society and sports are

attributed to the lack of power possessed by workers. Therefore, conflict theorists support policies and programmes that regulate or eliminate profit motives in sports and increase the control that athletes have over the conditions of their own sports participation. They also support policies that increase the element of *play* in sports and decrease the element of *spectacle* because it is designed to generate commercial profits. More play and less spectacle, they argue, would turn sport participation into a liberating and empowering experience for the masses of people in society.

In terms of specific issues, conflict theorists favour players’ unions, organizations that represent the interests of people in communities where tax money is being used to subsidize wealthy pro-sport team owners, and radical changes in the overall organization of sports. Ideally, public resources would be used to sponsor sports designed to promote fun, fitness, and political awareness; spectator sports would exist for enjoyment in local communities rather than as tools for creating celebrity athletes and financial profits for a few wealthy people.

Weaknesses of Conflict Theory

Conflict theory has three major weaknesses. First, it tends to ignore the possibility that sports in capitalist societies may involve experiences that empower individuals and groups. Conflict theorists talk about sports being organized to maximize the control that wealthy people have over everyone else in capitalist societies. They see sports as activities through which athletes learn to define their bodies as tools of production, becoming alienated from their bodies in the process. This approach does not acknowledge that sport can take forms that could serve the interests of the have-nots in society, and it denies that sport participation can be a personally creative and liberating experience that inspires people to make economic changes that promote equality and eliminate the vast income and power gaps that currently exist in capitalist societies.

Second, conflict theory assumes that all aspects of social life are economically determined—that is, shaped by the profit motive and the needs of capital in society. It focuses on the inherent conflict between the economic haves and have-nots, and assumes that the haves always use their power to control and exploit the have-nots who live in a state of powerlessness and alienation. These assumptions lead conflict theorists to focus exclusively on economic factors when they study sports. However, many sports, especially those emphasizing recreation and mass participation, are not completely shaped by economic factors or the interests of wealthy people in society.

Third, conflict theory underestimates the importance of gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability, and other factors when it comes to explaining how people identify themselves, relate to others, and organize the social worlds in which they live. Therefore, it often leads people to overlook the possibility that power and inequalities in society are based on factors other than social class and economic differences.

Beyond the Needs of Society

Functionalist theory and conflict theory both focus on societal needs and how sports are related to the satisfaction of those needs. They give us a view of sports in society from the top down, but they do not tell us about sports in everyday life or the ways that people are active agents who participate in the processes through which sports and society are organized and changed. They ignore a view of society from the bottom up—from the perspectives of people who “do” sports and give meaning to them in their everyday lives. They also ignore the complexities of everyday social life and that sports and society are social constructions that emerge as people struggle over what is important in their lives and determine how their collective

lives should be organized. The theories that focus attention on these issues are critical, feminist, and interactionist theories.

CRITICAL THEORY: SPORTS ARE SITES WHERE CULTURE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS ARE PRODUCED AND CHANGED

Critical theory exists in a variety of forms, and it offers a useful alternative to functionalist and conflict theories.² 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

Today, sports has come to pit race against race, men against women, city against city, class against class, and coach against player.

—Frank Deford, sportswriter (1998)

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. Forms of critical theory were developed as people realized that societies are too messy, complex, and fluid to be described as “systems” and that it is

realized that societies are too messy, complex, and fluid to be described as “systems” and that it is

²This chapter is a basic introduction to using theories, and the goal is to provide a general explanation and overview of the valuable work done by scholars using forms of critical theories to study sports in society. We attempt to pull together major ideas from the following theories and theoretical frameworks: *neo-Marxist theories*, *traditional critical theory* (combining ideas of Marx and Freud), *hegemony theory* (based on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci), *cultural studies* (as it focuses on cultural production, power relations, ideology, and identity), *poststructuralism* (based on cultural studies, semiotics, and forms of literary analysis dealing with language and the construction of power, meaning, representation, and consciousness under the unstable, fluid, fragmented, and often contradictory conditions of postmodern life), and *queer theory* (combining feminist cultural studies and poststructuralism). None of these frameworks is specifically identified, but we highlight issues raised by people using these approaches.

not possible to develop a general explanation of social life that is applicable to all societies at all times in history.

Instead of focusing on society as a whole, critical theory focuses 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, and (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. This issue is discussed in the box “Sports Are More Than 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 discuss, define, organize, and play sports.

Critical Theory and Research on Sports

Those who use critical theory to study sports generally focus on one or more of the following issues:

1. Whose ideas about the meaning and organization of sports are used to determine funding priorities for sports, who will participate in them, how they will be covered in the media, and how they will be used for social, political, and economic purposes?
2. How are sports and sport experiences influenced by the dynamics of power in social life, and how do sports reproduce patterns of privilege in society?
3. How are sports related to people’s ideas about economic success or failure, work and fun, physical health and well-being, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and physical ability and disability, and what is “natural” or “deviant” in society?
4. What are the ways that people struggle over the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports in their lives?
5. When do sports become sites where people challenge, resist, and change prevailing ideas and the organization of social life?
6. What are the narratives and images that people use to give meaning to sports and their sport experiences?
7. Whose voices and perspectives are represented in the media coverage of sports?

REFLECT ON SPORTS

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 in that many aspects of society are represented in its sports. However, sports also are social constructions that have an impact on relationships and social organization in society as a whole. For example, sports in Canada are organized in ways that represent outdated ideas and beliefs about masculinity and gender relations. Therefore, they do not reflect the forms of masculinity and gender relations that are increasingly accepted by many people. At the same time, sports have been a social arena in which women athletes have displayed physical strength and skills that have long been defined as unacceptable in most spheres of life. As a result, new ideas about femininity and body image have become widely accepted in the rest of society.

The notion that sports are more than a reflection of society can be demonstrated by shifting our attention to another sphere of social life, such as the family. Like sports, families are reflections of society, but our personal experience tells us that everyday family life is more than that. Families are created by particular groups of people as they interact with one another in their own ways, depending on their abilities,

resources, and definitions of family life. Of course, the opportunities and choices available to the members of any particular family are influenced by factors in the larger society, including laws, economic conditions, government policies, and cultural beliefs about the actions and interactions of husbands, wives, parents, and children.

This means that similarities will exist between families in the same society, but it does not mean that all families are destined to be the same or to be mere reflections of society. Society serves as a context in which individuals produce, define, and reproduce specific family practices. But real families are sets of relationships produced by people as they determine how they want to live with one another. This is why your family is different from many other families. At times, families even become sites (social locations) where people raise questions about the meaning and organization of family life.

These questions often force people to rethink larger issues related to cultural values and the organization of society as a whole. In this way, what we do in our families becomes part of a general process of cultural production, the impact of which goes far beyond family life. For example, between 1960 and 1980 some

8. What strategies can be used to empower people who are regularly excluded from the processes through which sports are organized and played?

One or more of these issues are discussed in each of the following chapters. Critical theories inspire interesting and provocative research on sports in society. This research is based on the assumptions that sports are complex and sometimes internally contradictory activities and that there are no simple or general rules for explaining them as social phenomena. The intent of research based on critical theories is to understand the structure, organization, and meaning

of particular sports in connection with changing relationships in and between groups that possess different amounts of power and resources over time and from one place to another.

Critical theorists also study how sports affect the processes through which people develop and maintain **cultural ideologies**—that is, *the webs of ideas and beliefs that they use to explain and give meaning to the social world and their experiences in it*. They want to know how and when sports become sites for questioning and changing dominant ideologies related to social class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, age, and (dis)ability. One of the mottos of critical theorists is a statement made by C. L. R. James, a native of Trinidad in

people in Canadian families asked questions about the rights of women within the legal structures of marriage and family. These questions fostered discussions that ultimately led to changes in divorce laws. These changes encouraged people to rethink other ideas about intimate relationships, gender, gender equity, parent–child relationships, children’s rights, and even the organization and delivery of community-based social services. In other words, families have always been much more than mere reflections of society. They are the creations of human beings and sites for producing and changing social worlds and the ways of life that constitute culture.

This means that human beings are active agents in the construction of social worlds—not just in their immediate family lives but also in the larger social settings in which they live. Through the things they do in their families, people reproduce and occasionally change the culture and society of which they are a part. So it is with sports and all the people associated with sports. People construct sports as they interact with each other. No voice comes out of the sky and says, “I am society, and sports shall reflect my image.” Social conditions clearly influence the structure and dynamics of sports, but within the parameters set by

those conditions, people can change sports or keep them as they are. It is even possible for people to create and define sports in ways that differ from or even defy dominant ideas and norms and, in the process, to turn sports into activities that contradict the culture and society of which they are a part.

This way of thinking about sports in society recognizes that sports can have both positive and negative effects on participants, that people define and create sports in many different ways, and that sports are involved in reproducing and changing culture. This makes sports important in a sociological sense. Instead of being mirrors that simply reflect society, they are the actual “social and cultural stuff” out of which society and culture come to be what they are. When we understand this, we become aware of our capacity as agents of cultural production and social change. This helps us realize that we are not victims of society, nor are we destined to do sports as they are portrayed in the images promoted by Nike or Kokanee. We can create new and different forms of sports if we think critically about the contexts in which we live, and learn how to work with others to change them. *What do you think?*

the West Indies, who learned to play cricket after the British colonized his homeland. James said, “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?” (James, 1984, preface). Critical theorists would answer this question by saying, “We know nothing about sports if sports is all we know.” This means that if we want to know about and understand sports, we must also know about the social and cultural contexts in which sports are created, maintained, and changed.

Using Critical Theory in Everyday Life

Critical theory is based on a desire to understand, confront, and transform aspects of social life that

involve exploitation and oppression. Critical theorists emphasize that changes in sports depend on more than simply shifting the control of sports to the participants themselves, because many of those participants accept sports as they are and know little about sport forms that have different meanings, purposes, and organizational structures. Therefore, critical theorists emphasize the need for multiple and diverse forms of sport participation in society. This, they claim, would increase participation, diversify the stories told about sports, and add to the voices represented in those stories. As a result, sports would become more humane and democratic, and less subject to the exclusive control of any particular

category of people. This is exciting or threatening, depending on one's willingness to view and experience sports in new and different ways.



Critical theory calls attention to the possibility that sports can be sites for transforming social life. When Alwyn Morris, and his kayak partner Hugh Fisher, won a gold medal for Canada at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Morris raised an eagle feather on the victory podium: "I raised the feather to... identify the fact that I was a Mohawk person, and I was very proud of that aspect; of being able to share that experience of being an aboriginal person, share that aspect of my grandfather, and the honour that I wanted to bestow on him...." Morris had obtained prior permission from the IOC (and his partner) to make what was clearly a political statement in support of aboriginal rights. It is interesting to compare the support for his political statement with the reaction 18 years earlier to Tommy Smith and John Carlos (see page 511). [CP(Crombie McNeil)]

Weaknesses of Critical Theory

There are three general weaknesses associated with most forms of critical theory.

First, most critical theory does not provide clear guidelines for determining when sports reproduce culture and social organization and when they become sites for resisting and transforming them. Although research has identified cases when sports were believed to be sites for resistance, critical theorists do not outline the criteria they use to determine when resistance occurs and the conditions under which it is most likely to create enduring changes in sports and the organization of social life. This is partly because most critical theorists focus on specific problems and do not think in terms of changing social systems as much as creating the processes through which previously underrepresented people can participate in social life. They explain that all knowledge is situation specific; therefore, there is no single way to explain or solve all social problems. This is a useful approach when dealing with a particular problem, but it does not provide guidelines for determining when oppositional actions are most effective and when they are most likely to produce changes that go beyond particular situations and problems.

Second, because critical theory emphasizes the need for actions that disrupt current forms of social organization, there is a tendency among those who use it to see value in all actions that violate prevailing norms or oppose prevailing ideas; this is especially true when critical theorists study the actions of marginalized or powerless people in society. However, prevailing norms are not always unfair or oppressive, and the interests of marginalized or powerless people are not always based on concerns about fairness and justice. It is important to respect the voices and creative potential of people who are marginalized or oppressed, but it is not politically wise to assume that the disruptive actions of all people and groups have equal value when it comes to making progressive changes in social life. Critical

theorists do not often provide the criteria needed to identify the characteristics of effective forms of resistance. Therefore, they are often not able to assess the value of change-producing strategies from one situation to the next.

Third, some critical theories use vocabularies that are confusing and make it difficult to merge different critical ideas into theoretical frameworks that expand our knowledge of the strategies that, under certain conditions, are most likely to produce progressive change.

FEMINIST THEORY: SPORTS ARE GENDERED ACTIVITIES

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 a 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. Feminist theory explains the ways that women have been systematically devalued and oppressed in many societies, and emphasizes that gender equity is a prerequisite for social development and progress.

Many scholars in the sociology of sport use critical feminist theory as they study issues of power and the dynamics of gender relations in social life.³ Critical feminists focus on issues of power and seek to explain the origin and consequences of gender relations, especially those that privilege men over women and some men over other men (see figure 2.2). They study 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.

³There are many forms of feminist theory, including liberal, radical, gynocentric, socialist, Marxist, black, and postmodern, among others. However, critical feminist theory focusing on issues of ideology, power, and change is most commonly used in the sociology of sport today.



"Feminists say that sports are organized around an ideology that emphasizes domination, conquest, and male superiority. Isn't that ridiculous?!"

FIGURE 2.2 Refusing to acknowledge the contributions of feminist theories leads people to overlook important and sometimes obvious aspects of sports.

Critical feminist research has shown 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 (Birrell, 2000; Burstyn, 1999). Therefore, in the world of sports, a person is defined as "qualified" as an athlete, a coach, or an 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 volunteer worker, or an assistant in marketing and public relations. These latter qualities, often associated with femininity and weakness, are not valued in most sport organizations.

Critical Feminist Theory and Research on Sports

Critical feminist theory emphasizes the need to critique and transform the culture and organization of sports, so that they represent the perspectives and experiences of women as well as men in society. Critical feminists argue that ideological

and organizational changes are needed before there can be true gender equity in sports or society as a whole.

Studies based on critical feminist theory generally focus on one or more of the following research questions (see Birrell, 2000):

1. In what ways have girls and women been excluded from or discouraged from participating in sports, and how might gender equity be achieved without promoting sports that jeopardize the health and physical well-being of girls and women who play sports?
2. How are sports involved in producing and maintaining ideas about what it means to be a man in society, and forms of gender relations that privilege tough and aggressive men over everyone else?
3. How are women and men represented in media coverage of sports, and how do those representations reproduce or resist dominant gender ideology?
4. What strategies effectively resist or challenge the male-centred gender ideology that is promoted and reproduced through most competitive sports?
5. How are sports and sport participation involved in the production of gendered ideas about physicality, sexuality, and the body?

When critical feminists do research, they often focus on whether sports are sites for challenging and transforming oppressive forms of gender relations, including expressions of sexism and homophobia. For many critical feminists, the goal is to change the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports so that caring for and competing *with* others is more important than dominating and competing *against* others (Duquin, 2000).

Using Critical Feminist Theory in Everyday Life

Critical feminist theory has had a major impact on the sociology of sport. It has increased our

understanding of sports as a part of culture, and made us aware of gender-related issues in sports. For example, critical feminists focus on questions such as these: Why do many men around the world continue to resist efforts to promote gender equity in sports? Why do some women fear being called lesbians if they become strong and powerful athletes? Why are some men's locker rooms full of homophobia, gay-bashing jokes, and comments that demean women? Why are people not more concerned about the 40,000 young men who incur serious knee injuries every year in North America as they play football? Why do church-going mothers and fathers take their children to football games and cheer for young men charged and sometimes convicted of physical and sexual assault? Why do many people assume that men who play sports must be heterosexual? Why has there never been an openly gay, active male athlete featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*? Why are so many women's high school and university teams called "Lady so-and so's" and "Something-ettes"? These questions, inspired by critical feminist theory, deal with issues that affect our lives every day. In fact, if we do not have thoughtful answers to these questions, we really do not know much about sports in society.

Weaknesses of Critical Feminist Theory

Critical feminist theory has some of the same weaknesses of critical theory. Although critical feminists have become increasingly aware of the connections between gender and other categories of experience related to age, race and ethnicity, social class, disability, religion, and nationality, they have been slow to theorize these connections. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for more research on the sport-related experiences of women of different ages, abilities, religions, and nationalities (Nakamura, 2002; Walseth and Fasting, 2003).

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 human beings, as they interact with one another, give meanings to themselves, others, and the world around them, and 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 interactionists, are produced as patterns emerge in our actions and relationships with others.

According to interactionist theory, our ability to reflect on our actions and 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.

Research based on interactionist theory helps us to understand how people define and give meaning to themselves, their actions, and the world around them. It also helps us to understand human beings as choice makers and creators of identities and relationships. Interactionists generally carry out in-depth research that involves observations of and interviews with people who are members of particular groups or identifiable cultures. The goal of this research is to understand social worlds from the inside—through the perspectives of the people who create, maintain,

and change them. Unlike functionalists and conflict theorists, interactionists view culture and society from the bottom up rather than the top down.

Interactionist Theory and Research on Sports

Interactionist theory is often used in research on the experiences of athletes and the ways that athletes define and make sense of their sport participation. A common goal of interactionist research is to reconstruct and describe the reality that exists in the minds of athletes, coaches, spectators, and others involved in sports.

The data collection methods used in this research are designed to gather information about the ways that people define and give meaning to their experiences as they form identities and interact with others. Those who use interactionist theory to study sports focus on the following issues:

1. What are the social processes through which people become involved in sports?
2. How do people come to define themselves and be identified by others as athletes?
3. How do people give meaning to and derive meaning from their sport experience?
4. What happens when athletes retire and make the transition into the rest of their lives?
5. What are the characteristics of sport cultures, how are they created, and how do they influence people's lives on and off the field?

One or more of these issues are discussed in all chapters. This is because interactionist research provides vivid descriptions of sports experiences and the social worlds in which they occur.

Using Interactionist Theory in Everyday Life

Interactionist theory focuses on the meanings and interaction associated with sports and sport participation. It emphasizes the complexity of human action and the need to understand

action in terms of how people define situations and give meaning to their experiences as they interact with others. Interactionists generally recommend changes that represent the perspectives and identities of those who play sports. In many cases, this would involve restructuring sport organizations so that participants are given opportunities to raise questions and discuss issues related to the meaning, purpose and organization of the sports they play. Therefore, interactionists would support changes that make athletes more responsible for organizing and controlling their sports.

In the case of youth sports, for example, interactionists would support organizational changes that would give young people opportunities to create games and physical challenges that would more closely reflect their needs and interests, rather than the needs and interests of adults. Interactionists would caution parents and coaches about problems that occur when young people develop sport-related identities and relationships to the exclusion of other identities and relationships, and to the point that burnout is likely.

In the case high-performance sports, interactionists would support changes that discourage athletes from defining pain and injury as normal parts of the sport experience. Because the use of performance-enhancing substances is connected with issues of identity and the norms that exist in sport cultures, interactionists argue that the use of these substances can be controlled only if there are changes in the norms and culture of sports; identifying substance users as “bad apples” and punishing them as individuals will not change the culture in which athletes learn to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of the team and their sport.

Weaknesses of Interactionist Theory

Interactionist theory has inspired many informative studies of meaning, identity, interaction, and cultures in sports. However, it has two primary weaknesses. First, it focuses our attention almost exclusively on relationships and definitions of reality without explaining the ways that interaction

and the construction of meaning in sports are influenced by social organization, power, and material conditions in society. Therefore, interactionist research often ignores power dynamics and inequality in connection with sports and sport experiences.

Second, interactionist theory does not provide critical visions of the ways that sports and society could and should be organized. However, many people who use interactionist theory now combine it with critical and critical feminist theories to provide a basis for developing such visions (Coakley and Donnelly, 1999).

IS THERE A BEST THEORETICAL APPROACH TO USE WHEN STUDYING SPORTS?

Each theory discussed in this chapter has made us aware of questions and issues that are important to us, to the people with whom we work and play, and in the social worlds in which we live. In most of our research, we have used combinations of *interactionist, critical, and feminist theories* because we wanted to view sports from the inside, from the perspectives of those who make decisions to play or not to play and who integrate sport participation into their lives in various ways. As we view sports from the inside, we also want to be aware of the social, economic, political, and historical factors that influence access to sport participation and the decisions that people make about sport participation. Critical and critical feminist theories have also helped us to think about very practical issues, such as how to become politically involved in proposals to fund new parks, or a new stadium for a professional football team. They have helped us to assess policies related to sport programmes for at-risk youth and to evaluate candidates for coaching jobs at our universities. More recently this combination of theories has guided much of our thinking about sports for people with a disability, as is shown in the “Breaking Barriers” box on page 44.



Interactionists study meanings associated with sports and sport participation. Meanings vary from one culture to another. Players in Japanese youth sports give meanings to sports that differ from meanings given to youth sports in other cultures. [Jay Coakley]



Social life is complex and is best understood when viewed from multiple perspectives. Each theory in this chapter can be used to ask sociological questions about this scene. Afghan boys (no girls) are playing baseball organized by U.S. ground troops after the U.S. military had bombed Afghanistan. Adult male refugees watch as the soldiers teach the rules and the skills involved in the game. [Wally Santana, AP/Wide World Photo]



Breaking Barriers

Language Barriers

We're Not Handicapped; We Just Can't Hear

Len Gonzales is deaf. But more important, he is head football coach at the California School for the Deaf at Riverside (CSDR). When his team capped its season by winning the 2004 regional high school championship, a reporter asked Gonzales what other teams thought when they lost to CSDR. Gonzales explained that “teams hate to lose to us because they think we’re a handicapped team. But we’re not handicapped. We just can’t hear” (in Reilly, 2004, p. 144).

Coach Gonzales is sensitive to the barriers created when people use the word *handicapped* to refer to physical and mental impairments and disabilities. Clear definitions of these words are necessary to understand and evaluate theories of disability.

An **impairment** exists when a person has a physical, sensory, or intellectual condition that potentially limits full participation in social and/or physical environments. Many people have impairments and, as we get older, impairments generally increase in number and severity. This is part of normal, everyday life. None of us is physically or mentally perfect, and we regularly make personal adjustments to limit the impact of impairments on our lives. If we are lucky, we have access to technologies that make adjustments more effective. For example, we wear eyeglasses that “correct” our impaired vision.

An impairment becomes a **disability** only when accommodations in social or physical contexts are not or cannot be made to allow the full participation of people with functional limitations. This means that disabilities are created when relationships, spaces, and activities present barriers that limit the opportunities and experiences of people with particular impairments. For example, prior to the late-1990s, if an athlete’s leg was amputated below the knee and he wore a prosthetic leg and foot, he could not have been a member of the Canadian Powerlifting Team because the International Powerlifting Federation rules stated that “Lifters without two real feet cannot compete in regular contests.” This rule created a barrier making the athlete disabled. However, after the rule was changed, the barrier was eliminated and the prosthetic leg and foot no longer disabled the athlete as a powerlifter. This shows that disability often has less to do with

impairment and ability than with social, environmental, attitudinal, and legal factors (Brittain, 2004; Hargreaves, 2000; Higgins, 1992; Morris, 1996; Oliver, 1996). Therefore, a person may be (dis)abled in one context but not in another (Friedman et al., 2004). Only when there are barriers that exclude or limit people with impairments do disabilities exist.

People become **handicapped** when others define them as inferior and “unable” due to perceived impairments. For example, when opposing players defined the football team from CSDR as handicapped, they hated losing to them because it meant that they lost to players who they defined as inferior and unable.

These three definitions are based on critical and interactionist theories. They locate handicaps and disabilities in the social processes through which (a) environments are organized to meet the needs of temporarily able-bodied people, (b) norms (rules) are created that disadvantage people with impairments, and (c) people learn to equate particular impairments with inferiority and inability.

Other definitions, based on medical and psychological theory, explain disability as a characteristic of individuals. Medical-psychological theories locate disability in the physical and cognitive “abnormalities” of individuals and they lead to interventions emphasizing personal coping strategies and assistive technologies. Critical interactionist theories, on the other hand, locate disability in social and cultural barriers that limit participation; they lead to interventions emphasizing the elimination of cultural, organizational, legal, and environmental barriers.

Both approaches are needed, but people too often overlook the need to eliminate barriers. Coping strategies and assistive technologies are crucial for individuals, but eliminating barriers makes disability less relevant for entire categories of people (DePauw, 1997). Leslie Little, a sailor with muscular dystrophy, helps us to understand what this means when she says, “Every day is a new adventure when I’m sailing... Plus, I’m not disabled when I’m on the water” (www.mdausa.org/publications/Quest/q82water.cfm). The goal therefore is to create social and physical worlds that are like being on the water for Leslie Little.

Although we have not used *functionalist theory* and only occasionally used *conflict theory*, in our research, we have used them to inform our general understanding of sports in society. For example, functionalist theory helps us to understand how other people think about sports in society, even though it does not help to identify the social issues and controversies connected with sports in our communities and in the sport organizations in which we work with coaches and administrators. Conflict theory alerts us to issues related to social class and economic exploitation as we use *critical theories* to help understand the dynamics of power in sports and society; the ways that power is related to gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality; and the ways that people use ideologies as they explain and give meaning to the world and their experiences. This use of a combination of theories to better understand social worlds, often termed “theoretical pluralism,” is increasingly being advocated in the sociology of sport (e.g., Giulianotti, 2005).

Overall, our preference for a combination of interactionist, critical, and critical feminist theories is based on our interest in making sport participation more accessible to a wider range of people in society. We are much more interested in increasing choices and alternatives for people in sports than we are in making sports a more efficient means of maintaining the *status quo* in society (a goal of functionalist theory). We think that many aspects of the *status quo* in Canada and other societies are in need of change, and that sports are sites at which we can learn strategies for effectively making creative and progressive changes.

Creating alternative ways of doing sports requires an awareness of contemporary sports culture as well as a vocabulary for thinking critically about the future. A combination of interactionist, critical and critical feminist theories provides a guide for developing that awareness and vocabulary, and for creating new sport forms that offer human beings additional possibilities for physical and social experiences.

Our theoretical preferences often conflict with the preferences expressed by some students and people who work for sport organizations. Students who want to work in sport organizations know that most people in those organizations see sports in functionalist terms, so they sometimes prefer functionalist theory. However, we remind them that it is important to understand issues related to power and culture so that they can critically assess organizational policies in terms of their impact on people in the organization and the surrounding community. When we work with coaches and sports administrators, they often tell us that our critical approach has helped them to see things in their lives in new and helpful ways.

Finally, we have learned that true empowerment involves enabling people to be critically informed actors so that they can effectively “challenge and change unequal power relationships” (Mahiri, 1998). As we participate in social worlds, we find that critical, feminist, and interactionist theories can be combined in ways that are especially helpful.

SUMMARY

HOW CAN SOCIAL THEORIES HELP US STUDY SPORTS IN SOCIETY?

Theories are tools that enable us to ask questions, identify problems, gather information, explain social life, prioritize strategies to deal with problems, and anticipate the consequences of our actions and interventions. Different theories help us to understand sports from different angles and perspectives. In this chapter, we discussed functionalist, conflict, critical, feminist, and interactionist theories.

The purpose of the chapter is to show that each theory provides a framework that we can use as we think about sports in society and make decisions in our own lives. For example, functionalist theory offers an explanation for positive consequences

associated with sports and sport involvement. Conflict theory identifies factors related to class relations and economic exploitation in sports. Critical theory shows that sports are connected with culture and social relations in complex ways and that sports change as power and resources shift in social, political, and economic relations in society. Critical feminist theory emphasizes that gender is a primary category of experience and that sports are sites for producing, reproducing, and transforming gender ideology and power relations in society. Interactionist theory helps us to understand the meanings, identities, and social relationships associated with sport involvement.

As we use these theories it is important to know their weaknesses. Functionalist theory exaggerates the positive consequences of sports and sport participation because it is based on the assumption that there are no conflicts of interest between groups within society. Conflict theory tends to overstate the importance of social class and economic factors in society, and focuses most attention on top-level spectator sports, which

make up only a part of sports in any society. Critical theory provides no explicit guidelines for determining when sports are sites where resistance leads to progressive transformations in society. Critical feminist theory has not sufficiently explained connections between gender and other categories of experience, including age, race, religion, nationality, and disability. Interactionist theory does a poor job of relating issues of meaning, identity, and experience in sports to general social conditions and patterns of social inequality in society as a whole.

Despite their weaknesses, social theories are helpful as we explore issues and controversies in sports and assess research and ideas about sports in society. We do not have to be theorists to use theory as we organize our thoughts and become more informed citizens in our social worlds.

Visit *Sports in Society's* Online Learning Centre at www.mcgrawhill.ca/olc/coakley for additional information, website resources, and study tools for this chapter.