SPORT AND SOCIETY

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KEY WORDS: theory, socialization, political economy, inequality

Abstract

Sport is a very prominent social institution in almost every society because it combines the characteristics found in any institution with a unique appeal only duplicated by, perhaps, religion. The functional, conflict, and cultural studies perspectives are reviewed, with additional discussion on how sport relates to the processes of socialization and social change. The latter focusses on the evolution of sport from a playful, participation-oriented activity to one that resembles a corporate form guided by the principles of commercialism and entertainment. The role of sport in international relations and national development dramatizes the political meaning of sport to many societies. While sport may be integrative at the higher political levels, it has not been so at the interpersonal levels of gender and race. The inequality that characterizes society’s relations of gender and race is found in sport as well. The sociology of sport will be able to shed more light on all of these issues when theory informs more of the research in this subfield.

INTRODUCTION

Sport is an arena of patterned behaviors, social structures, and interinstitutional relationships that holds unique opportunities to study and understand the complexities of social life. Sport is an activity that commands
a degree of primary or secondary involvement unsurpassed by other institutionalized settings. Sport offers an opportunity for research on “highly crystallized forms of social structure not found in other systems or situations” (Luschen 1990:59). That is, field research in sport provides, for example, structured conflict and competitiveness in controlled settings rarely found in other aspects of social life. Group dynamics, goal attainment by social organizations, subcultures, behavioral processes, social bonding, structured inequality, socialization, and organizational networks are just a few sociological topics that can be studied in sport settings. This view presupposes that the structure or forms of behavior and interaction found in sport settings are similar to those found in other societal settings. In other words, sport like other institutions is a microcosm of society.

At the same time that sport is a product of social reality, it is also unique. No other institution, except perhaps religion, commands the mystique, the nostalgia, the romantic ideational cultural fixation that sport does. No other activity so paradoxically combines the serious with the frivolous, playfulness with intensity, and the ideological with the structural.

The purposes of this review are twofold: first, to describe the current understanding of sport and society through the work of sport sociologists in selected areas; and, second, to assess the adequacy of the research and theorizing in these fields. The paper is divided into five parts. The first part presents the theoretical perspectives guiding research in sport sociology. The next two sections examine sport and two social processes: socialization and social change. The fourth section looks at an institution—the polity—and its relationship to sport. The final section demonstrates how sport reinforces racial and gender inequality. Except for the section on the polity, the discussion focuses on North America, especially the United States.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

At the macro level, the focus of this paper, three theoretical perspectives—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and cultural studies—are prominent in the works of sport sociologists. The sociology of sport emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The earliest contributions to the field were efforts to delineate and justify this new subfield as a scholarly and important field of inquiry, and they tended to be informed by structural functionalism. The structural-functional paradigm focuses on social organizations, how they work, and how they are maintained. The functions (i.e. consequences) of patterned behaviors for the organizations in question, are emphasized (Frey 1986). Guided by the tenets of structural functionalism, these and subsequent works focused on socialization of youth through sport, sport as a vehicle for assimilation, sport as a social system, the relationship of sport to other
institutions, and the integrating functions of sport for participants, observers, and social organizations.

These works appeared at a time in American history when society was undergoing rapid changes, popular American beliefs were being challenged, and authority questioned. Many sport sociologists reacted against structural functionalism with its bias for accepting and rationalizing what is; they adopted, rather, a theoretical perspective—conflict theory—which argues that sport reflects and reinforces the hegemony of societal arrangements, thereby perpetuating class and power differentials (Haerle 1974, Brohm 1978, Gruneau 1983, Hargreaves 1986, Sage 1990). Those guided by conflict theory also focused on social problems in sport such as sexism, racism, classism, oppression, organizational conflict, and deviance.

Recently, a number of sport sociologists have embraced a cultural studies approach to sport-related phenomena. From this perspective both functional and conflict perspectives are challenged because they are deterministic, that is, they tend to ignore or dismiss human agency in social change. Also, both theoretical perspectives are considered faulty because they omit the significance of cultural imperatives, where sport is seen as a cultural expression. In this view, sport is a socially constructed arena where developmental and emergent features are of central significance. Canadian and European scholars have taken the lead in writing from this perspective (Gruneau 1983, Hargreaves 1986), followed recently by American scholars (MacAlloon 1987, Harris 1989, Birrell 1989).

Cultural studies theorists reject the natural science model as the best means to know a phenomenon. Rather, a phenomenological approach is preferred. A leading proponent asserts:

The replication of so-called scientific studies of sport has done little to enhance either our knowledge or understanding of the nature and meaning of sporting practices. By separating sport from its developmental features, the ‘variable’ approach completely ignores the socio-historical and political dimensions of cultural life.

The specific contribution of cultural studies has been to link up the lived experience of human actors, and cultural meanings, texts, representations (culture as interpretation) with broader political and economic structures of modern industrial societies (Hollands 1984:70–71).

The existence of sport must be explained in terms of something more than simply the needs of the social system or the production needs of a capitalist economy. Sport is created by people interacting, using their skills and interests to make sport into something that meets their interests and needs (Coakley 1990).

Change is also important to cultural studies theorists. Sport is “produced” out of everyday life (Gruneau 1983). Thus, people act to create their in-
stitutions; they are not simply passive responders. At times, however, the design of sport is not always desirable (e.g. athletes cannot always transfer schools) because some of those involved are adversely affected, and they do not usually have sufficient resources to resist organizational change. For example, college athletes can do little or nothing about the way the NCAA runs college sports. Sport and any vestiges of culture can be forms of resistance (Fiske 1989, Foley 1990), although for the most part existing class relations, including those of gender and race, are reproduced (Foley 1990, Hargreaves 1986, Gruneau 1989, Adelman 1986).

SPORT AND SOCIALIZATION

The involvement of youth, particularly male children, in sport is typically encouraged by parents, school administrators, and community leaders because this activity is viewed as a very effective setting for learning acceptable values and beliefs and for acquiring desirable character traits. Despite a barrage of criticism, very strong societal support exists for sport participation because of the belief that sport teaches proper values such as self-discipline, sportsmanship, and an appreciation for hard work, competition, and goal attainment.

Most claims about the value of sport participation focus on sport as an agent of socialization. But despite strong cultural beliefs, there is little evidence to support the claims made for the contribution of sport to the socialization process. Studies comparing male athletes and male nonathletes (there are very few studies comparing women) yield little evidence to support the idea that sport is necessary for complete and adequate socialization, or that involvement in sport results in character building, moral development, a competitive or team orientation, good citizenship, or valued personality traits (Dubois 1986, Fine 1987, Coakley 1987, McPherson et al 1989, Rees et al 1990). Sport seems to make little difference. Athletes and non-athletes are comparable on various personality traits and value orientations. Sport participation has no general effect on self-image; it does not reduce prejudice; it is not necessary for leadership development; and social adjustment is not necessarily enhanced (Fine 1987). The widespread conclusion by sport sociologists is that when an apparent socialization effect is found, it is actually the result of a selection process that attracts and retains children and youth in sport who already have or are comfortable with the values and behavioral traits that coaches demand and that lead to success in sport. Those without these desired values and traits either show no interest in sport, or they leave sport voluntarily (i.e. they drop out) or involuntarily (i.e. they are removed by coaches) (Stevenson 1975, 1985).

The debate over the experience of youth in sport stems largely from cultural
myths rather than from empirical studies. The content is not so critical; the reaction and definitions of the child’s significant others are what make a difference (Sherif 1976, Fine 1987). Continued participation is likely if support and perception are positive; participation will not continue if the socializing influence from significant others is absent. Withdrawal takes place if the sport role is no longer crucial to identity, and non-sport activities and peers become more attractive (Ball 1976, Brown 1985). Aversive socialization or a dramatic negative experience can also stimulate withdrawal. Brown (1985) found that many swimmers, age 10–12, dropped out of the sport to protect their self-esteem in the face of declining success and reduced rewards for participation.

Finally, the socialization of youth and adults, whether participants or not, occurs through the media’s presentation of sport. The mass media socialize through image management, the manipulation of symbols, and commentary (Prisuta 1979, Jhally 1989, Wenner 1989, Sage 1990). The mediated sports product that reflects conservative, authoritarian, and nationalistic values is warmly received by the audience; it is not forced upon them (Wenner 1989, Prisuta 1979). There is implicit political content in the form of value messages in the mediated presentation of sport. For example, Wenner’s (1986) study of Super Bowl pregame commentary found that the value content strongly endorsed hard work, rugged individualism, and national pride. Media are in a sense the creators of culture, conveying information about what is acceptable and unacceptable. Thus, the media reinforce established order and value consensus by virtue of the presentation, by commentary and pictures of sport events. These media presentations can influence our ideas about sport, our perceptions of gender, race, social relations, and proper behaviors, and our adherence to certain values.

**SOCIAL CHANGE: FROM PLAY TO CORPORATE SPORT**

Although typologies are not intended to be accurate representations of reality, they are useful for analytical purposes. One such typology is that used to distinguish play from sport in the transformation of ludic, playful activity pursued for its own sake, to physical activity that is used for extrinsic purposes. Historically, this transformation has produced what Page (1973), Guttman (1988), and others have described as the secularization, commodification, rationalization, bureaucratization, quantification, and commercialization of modern sport.

Huizinga (1949), Stone (1955), Cailllois (1961), Edwards (1973), McPherson et al (1989), Coakley (1990), and many others who study sport have
found useful the analytic distinction between play and sport. Play is viewed as an activity where entry and exit are free and voluntary, rules are emergent and temporary, fantasy is permitted, utility of action is irrelevant, and the result is uncertain. Play has no formal history nor organization; motivation and satisfaction are intrinsic; and the outcome does not have serious impact beyond the context of the activity. On the other hand, modern sport as represented by the Olympic Games, big-time college athletics, and professional sports exhibits the opposite profile. This type of sport is hardly voluntary; rules are formal, generalizable, and enforced by formal regulatory bodies (e.g. National Collegiate Athletic Association—NCAA); the outcome is serious for individuals and organizations not actually participating in the physical activity, and winning (the outcome) is more important than participation (the process).

As sport becomes institutionalized, particularly at the highest levels of amateur and professional competition, it has come to reflect the corporate/commodity model. Sport is more like work than play. The locus of control has moved from the player/participant to the manager and audience. Morality and ennoblement are replaced by spectacle and entertainment. Play is replaced by display (Stone 1955). Attracting spectators and media sponsorships becomes more important than the playing process because sport is now driven by profit and the market. The ethics of the business and corporate world tend to guide sport, not the principles of play and enjoyment (Eitzen & Sage 1989:16–18, Sage 1990). We should not be surprised that high-level sport has been transformed into a commercialized, commodified, and massified phenomenon. Since the business organization has replaced the family as the basic unit coordinating economic activity, and monopoly capital has promoted consumer markets as the preeminent factor in economic organization, many institutions, including sport, in America have been rationalized and corporatized. The commercial factor is so prominent that even a Gross National Sports Product (GNSP) has been calculated. In 1988 the GNSP was $63.1 billion (Comte & Stogel 1990). This places the sport GNP twenty-second on the list of the top 50 industry GNP, ahead of the automobile, petroleum, and airline industries.

The consequences of the commercialization of sport are significant. First, changes may be made in the game format or rules. In football, for example, the forward pass and the narrowing of the hash marks were changes designed to make football more appealing to viewers and spectators. Second, the orientation or values of the participants may change from those based on self-development and satisfaction to those of entertainment and self-interest. Coakley (1990) has described this as a change from an aesthetic orientation that emphasizes the beauty and pleasure of movement, skill and ability, and lifelong activity to a heroic orientation that emphasizes danger and excitement, style, and a short-term commitment to victory. There is a developing
industry of sport sciences for the primary goal of performance enhancement. The emphasis is on strategies, technical improvement, nutritional and psychological intervention, or any technique to manipulate or engineer the athlete to perform better. This has been called the “scientization” of athletic sport; it is a trend consistent with the instrumental goals of corporate sport (Brohm 1978). Third, control and influence are largely in the hands of persons and organizations who are not direct participants. Leagues, regulatory groups like the NCAA, media, event sponsors, owners in professional sports, athletic departments and alumni in collegiate programs are examples of the centers of influence. This has forced professional athletes to take measures to enhance their own impact on decision-making; these include labor unionization, representation by agents, and recourse to legal challenges. The fourth consequence of commercialization is the decline of amateurism and the rise of professionalism (Sewart 1985, Eitzen 1989). Elite amateur sport is corporate sport, whether it is related to the Olympic Games or to collegiate sports. True, amateur sport is characterized by participation for the love of the sport, not the extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic motivation and reward are still relevant, but their significance seems to be devalued by the rising importance of monetary rewards (legal and illegal) for athletes, the exaggerated importance of winning that translates into treating athletes as interchangeable parts, the increase in the incidence of athletes using performance enhancing drugs, and the association of athletic success with outcome goals of profit, visibility, entertainment, and community/organization prestige.

The commercialization of sport is strongly influenced by the role of the media, particularly television, in programming the sports product and in the monies paid to sports organizations for broadcasting rights. The role of the media has increased rapidly in recent years. For instance, in 1980 the three major television networks broadcast live sports programming only 787 hours. In 1989, however, the three networks plus ESPN, SCA, and TBS channels broadcast 7341 hours of live sports programming (Stogel 1990:48), an increase of nearly 900% in the last decade. The influx of media money is obviously substantial. The National Football league, for example, sold rights to its games from 1990 through 1993 for a total of $3.6 billion, increasing the league’s yearly income from television about 90% over 1989.

The athletic establishment covets television coverage of its events because of the contribution the media make to profits and to exposure to a mass audience. The media pursue sports programming because it is cheaper to produce than other types of programs and it enables the media to reach a normally difficult-to-reach audience of young, college-educated males with disposable income (Coakley 1990:281). This makes sports programming attractive to certain advertisers. Thus, the media and sport emerge in a symbiotic relationship, particularly economically. It is important to under-
stand that the media play a dominant role because sport is primarily directed by commercial guidelines.

Television simply expands the commercial interests that are already an inherent part of spectator sports in capitalist societies. Although some changes are uniquely linked to the special needs of television coverage, the real reason for most of the changes occurring over the past 3 decades has been the desire to produce more marketable entertainment for all spectators and a more attractive commercial package for sponsors and advertisers (Coakley 1990:280).

However, once a sports entity has been displayed on television and received the financial support from television, the sports organization is forever changed (Parente 1977, Altheide & Snow 1978).

The nature of sport has been changed by the media with its emphasis on display or what has been called “entertainmentization.” Many changes in the nature of sport have resulted from media’s influence and the desire of both media entrepreneurs and representatives of the sport establishment to enhance the appeal of their sport product to maintain profit margins. Thus, the media sometimes glorify violence, create heroes and heroines, demand that athletic schedules be shifted, and that rule changes be made to enhance the product, increase the audience, and generate greater revenues from advertisers.

The preeminent role of media in sport means that TV media’s presentation of sport is “mediated.” That is, viewers see a representation of sport as it is depicted by commentary, shot or scene selection, and editorialization (Comisky et al 1977, Coakley 1990). Because the public rarely questions the media’s construction of reality, particularly that treated by the press and television, the media play a role in shaping images and opinions regarding sport (Greendorfer 1983, Tuchman 1978). The media’s representation of an event is taken as reality, overlooking the reality that it is a staged event mediated by commentary. What is presented is generally consistent with the commercial and entertainment agendas of media and sport establishment.

One of the sport-related behaviors that has been projected as a result of media’s definition of sport is gambling. Not only do media outlets provide the information a gambler needs, they also are a source of legitimation of gambling. The inclusion of point-spreads and injury reports in descriptions of upcoming games and the promotion of gambling celebrities and analysts together communicate the message that gambling is an acceptable activity and that gambling on sport is a natural accompaniment of sport, even though it is legal in only two states. Thus, the symbiotic relationship of sport and the media is enhanced by the provision of gambling information that appeals to viewers and readers (D’Angelo 1987).

As an activity, gambling is widespread and essentially a legitimate activity
to most (Rosecrance 1988). The dated (1974) but very comprehensive study of America’s gambling behavior reported that just under two thirds of Americans had gambled in the previous twelve months. Over 40 million persons had bet on sport. A 1984 Gallup Poll and the 1983 Miller Lite Sport Survey reported, respectively, that 17% and 23% of the population bet on sport (Frey 1985). In 1989, Americans gambled $290 billion on all types of games, an increase of nearly 100% from 1982. Of this amount $43 billion was bet illegally, and nearly 70% of that was bet on sports. Sports betting in 1989 represents approximately 11% of all gambling, an increase of 42% over 1982 (Christianson 1990:8). Sports betting is very popular, and this popularity is promoted by the fact that the natural association of sport and gambling is frequently part of the content of the media’s presentation of and commentary on sport events.

SPORT AND THE POLITY: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Two major motives govern a country’s political and economic activity. The first is that of building an efficient but dynamic modern state. In other words, the country should exhibit an acceptable standard of living, a stable political order, an equitable system of social justice, and social behavior governed by controlled, rational, not impulsive, procedures. The second national motive is to be recognized as a responsible actor in the international community of nations (Geertz 1963). In other words, nations seek internal stability and external status. Sport is commonly viewed as a vehicle to achieve both.

The integrative role of sport for a nation is similar to the structural-functional role assigned to sport in communities, in the classic studies by the Lynds (1929), Hollingshead (1949) and Stone (1981) and the recent study by Wilkerson & Dodder (1987). Integration to counteract internal racial, ethnic, regional and class diversity and conflict is a major reason that nations promote participation in highly visible international events. Lever’s study of soccer in Brazil documented the way that sport gave a diverse population something to share in the name of national solidarity (1983:19). Thus, sport can contribute to a national identity or sense of nationalism that temporarily overrides differences. The world rugby championships provide an interesting example. Annually when national teams are selected, the warring factions in Ireland and Northern Ireland lay aside their bitter animosities, combining players to form the Irish national team which members of both nations cheer. Governments will often encourage international competition in acknowledgment of the unifying role of sport (Anthony 1969, Frey 1984, Riordan 1986). However, critics employing a conflict perspective assert that the use of sport to encourage the homogenization of a population represents an effort to
control that population by instilling certain dominant values, which reduce the likelihood of a challenge against those in power (Klein 1989).

Involvement in international sport requires participation in networks of organizations that are transnational in scope. Before this participation can be effective, an organizational base staffed by competent personnel must be developed. Sport provides a mechanism to link organizations and to develop managerial and administrative skills among the local population. Several Latin American countries, including Cuba, have done this (Arbena 1985). Nicaragua used baseball as a mechanism to rebuild internal institutions after a revolution and to reestablish regional and intranational communication and coordination. In some cases, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, for example, the use of sport to enhance the human capital of an indigenous population serves to reduce the dependency of a nation of smaller size and limited resources on the larger nations (Frey 1988, Klein 1989).

The primary role of sport in international relations is one of public diplomacy. That is, sport serves to articulate secondary national interests (e.g. visibility, ideological expression, status enhancement, legitimacy), to test foreign relations initiatives (e.g. ping-pong diplomacy between the United States and China), to enhance cultural exchange and understanding, and to reduce the potential for actual conflict by playing out hostilities in a restricted and controlled setting (Reich 1974, Frey 1984, Riordan 1986). Thus, sport is an activity of international cooperation and interaction, but it is peripheral to the survival of a state political system (Frey 1984:72). Olympic record performances are irrelevant to hard-core negotiations over primary national interests that if unresolved could lead to war.

Nevertheless, status in the community of nations is ultimately related to success in athletic events. The gold medal count in the Olympics is important precisely because that count becomes a measure of political legitimacy, of modernization, or of a people’s resolve (Espy 1979, Frey 1984, Heinila 1985).

The motivation to achieve acceptable status in a community of nations and thus to translate this status into political advantage is not limited to developing countries. Eastern bloc nations have spent enormous resources to achieve success in international competitions. The United States and other western nations have been reluctant to admit their keen interest in international sports success, but it is there nonetheless. International sports success is a very serious goal in the United States, for success is interpreted internally and externally as “proof” of the superiority of a nation’s social, economic, and political systems. Thus, the only difference between the United States and the nations of the Eastern bloc and the Third World is that the United States does not admit that its international sporting efforts are serious (Frey 1984, Riordan 1986).
SPORT AND INEQUALITY: RACE

American sport sociologists have devoted considerable attention to the examination of racial discrimination in sport. The major conclusion of this work, devoted for the most part to comparing whites and blacks, is that just as racial discrimination exists in society, it exists in sport. Blacks do not have equal opportunity; they do not receive similar rewards for equal performance when compared to whites; and their prospects for a lucrative career beyond sport participation are dismal.

Americans remain comfortable with the cultural myth that the United States is an open society and that athletic excellence is an avenue of upward social mobility. Black subcultures reinforce this belief (Edwards 1984). The myth seemingly is supported by two facts. First, although blacks make up 11–12% of the US population, they are vastly overrepresented in sport, with (1988 data) blacks comprising 21% of major league baseball players, 57% of professional football players, and 73% of professional basketball players. Second, many black athletes receive very high pay, some the highest in their sport. Research by sport sociologists, however, provides irrefutable evidence that blacks are the objects of discrimination in sport.

To begin, while blacks are overrepresented in some sports, they are underrepresented in others. Phillips (1976) argues that the reason blacks excel and are disproportionately found in some sports lies in what he calls the “sports opportunity structure.” Blacks are found in those sports in which facilities, coaching, and competition are available to them: in the schools and community recreation programs. They are rarely found, however, in those sports that require the facilities, coaching, and competition usually provided only in private clubs or that are otherwise too expensive or exclusive to obtain.

Once blacks enter the ranks of sport, at whatever level or whatever sport, discriminatory practices continue. These take three forms: position allocation, analysis of performance differentials, and reward structures. One of the best documented forms of discrimination at both the college and professional levels is popularly known as “stacking.” This term refers to situations in which minority group members are relegated to specific team positions and typically excluded from competing for others. Thus, sport reproduces the race relations found in society. Blacks tend to be “stacked” in those team positions that match racial and ethnic stereotypes, that is, they are placed into positions that require physical skills while whites are disproportionately found in positions that require intelligence, leadership, and that have greater outcome control.

In an early analysis Grusky (1963) observed that the importance of a position in an organization depends upon that position’s spatial location or
relevance to outcome, and the degree of interaction associated with that position. He said the more central one’s spatial location: (a) the greater the likelihood dependent or coordinative tasks will be performed; and (b) the greater the rate of interaction with the occupants of other positions (Grusky 1963:345–46). Centrality has become a significant concept in analyzing the allocation of blacks and whites to positions on sport teams (Loy & McElvogue 1970). Racial segregation in sport is positively related to position centrality. Whites are typically found in central positions that require intelligence, coordinative and decision-making skills, and high rates of interaction, and thus greater outcome control—positions such as offensive center, quarterback, and middle linebacker in football, pitcher and catcher in baseball, and point guard in basketball. Blacks are channeled to noncentral positions that require physical skill such as speed and quickness, less interaction, and that have less impact on outcome—positions such as running back, receiver, defensive line, and corner back in football, the outfield in baseball, and forward in basketball (Loy & McElvogue 1970, Scully 1974, Yetman & Eitzen 1984, Leonard 1988).

Since Loy & McElvogue first noted the stacking phenomenon in team sports (1970), research ongoing to the present finds these patterns for college sport (Schneider & Eitzen 1979) and women’s sport (Eitzen & Furst 1989), as well as for professional sport, although it is no longer found in professional basketball where blacks have such a numerical superiority. Moreover, this pattern of racial stacking has also been found in other sports such as rugby, soccer, cricket, and hockey in other societies such as Canada, England, and Australia (Best 1987, Maguire 1988, Lapchick 1989, Lavoie 1989).

Biological explanations of stacking, which are reflections of racial stereotypes, have been refuted (Eitzen & Sanford, 1975). Another explanation focuses on modeling, arguing that blacks choose to play certain positions because they desire to emulate role models (McPherson 1975a). This makes the exclusionary system self-perpetuating since most role models tend to fill noncentral positions. Economic explanations assert that the economic costs of developing play skills at certain positions such as quarterback are greater than for others (e.g. outfield); because blacks occupy lower socioeconomic status in American society, they will choose to play noncentral positions where the development of required skills is less costly. As black education improves, the proportion found in central positions will improve (Medoff 1986). Presumably, improving SES is the result of better education and improved experience in decision making and developing intellectual skills. However, no evidence supports this trend in the broader society (Yetman 1987, Phillips 1988). In fact, black economic income, defined as a percentage of white income, has declined over the years.

Moreover, the economic hypothesis presumes that blacks will enhance their
human capital through educational achievement. It is well documented, however, that on every measure of educational progress blacks score less well than whites. Eitzen & Purdy's study (1986) of college recruiting confirmed that sports tend to recruit the academically marginal blacks, thereby projecting a higher failure rate. Black athletes are exploited for their skill and given a scholarship, but they receive no education. The higher academic failure rate perpetuates the myth that blacks have superior physical skills, but inferior intellectual skills.

Another mechanism of discrimination is called the "the unequal opportunity for equal ability" hypothesis. Blacks must be better than whites to be admitted to college and to remain on athletic teams. Research has shown consistently that blacks are disproportionately found as starters and "stars" on the team, whereas whites are found disproportionately as nonstarters. After an elaborate study of baseball, Scully concluded, "Not only do blacks have to outperform whites to get into baseball, but they must consistently outperform them over their playing careers in order to stay in baseball" (Scully 1974:263). In Jonathan Brower's words, "mediocrity is a white luxury" (1973). This interesting relationship has been found in professional baseball and basketball, where the detailed statistics in those sports make such studies possible. This pattern also exists at the college level, where it is manifested in two additional ways. First, blacks must exhibit higher athletic skills than most of their white teammates in order to receive a scholarship (Evans 1979). And, second, blacks are more likely than whites to be recruited from community colleges, which means that universities make a relatively smaller investment in blacks, and that the universities are relatively assured of getting athletes with proven athletic abilities (Tolbert 1975).

Blacks are underrepresented in sports journalism, in officiating, and in sports administrative positions (Lapchick, 1990). Most visible is the paucity of blacks as head coaches or managers. Black women who aspire to coaching and management positions are victims of double jeopardy—their race and their gender. The lack of black coaches and managers is likely the result of two forms of discrimination. Overt discrimination occurs when owners ignore competent blacks because of their prejudices or because they fear the negative reaction of fans to blacks in leadership positions. The other form of discrimination is more subtle. Blacks are not considered for coaching positions because they did not, during their playing days, play at positions requiring leadership and decision-making due to stacking.

Most Americans believe that participation in sport is a mechanism to improve race relations (Miller Lite 1983). This view is an expression of the contact hypothesis which suggests that exposure to other racial groups through interaction reduces prejudice. Although one study (McClenond & Eitzen 1975) has found some support for this hypothesis in limited situations
(when both races on a team contribute to winning and the team is successful), most research does not find that interracial contact in sport reduces racial prejudice (Chu & Griffey 1989, Lapchick 1989, McPherson et al 1989).

The history of desegregation in American sport shows clearly that owners and coaches integrated teams when they realized that winning leads to profits and that skin color does not matter if teams win (Coakley 1990:209). Thus, the commercial interests of those who control sport override cultural views. This is substantiated further by the finding that attendance at sports events are not responsive to the racial composition of teams (Koch & Vander Hill 1988).

SPORT AND INEQUALITY: GENDER

Most of what is known about sport is based on studies of white males. Sport and the values associated with sport have traditionally been those relevant to males not females. Any research that did include gender typically assumed that there was an inherent conflict between being a woman and participating in Sport (Hall 1988). Thus, sport has tended to celebrate the achievements of men while marginalizing the status of women by placing women in expressive, supportive roles such as cheerleaders, or relegating participation by women to a secondary status. Sport has been as a result largely a “male preserve” supported by institutional practices of discrimination against women.

In a manner similar to the experiences of blacks in sport women have been prohibited from full and equal participation because of formal restrictions and cultural predispositions.

Several myths have evolved with respect to the participation of women in sport. These include the idea that sport is harmful to the female reproductive system and thus a threat to child bearing; that sport masculinizes a female in appearance; that the development of male masculinity is threatened if girls outperform adolescent boys in sport; that human and economic resources are wasted because the performance levels of females are significantly lower than those of males; and that sport is not important for the social development of women because the values of achievement, aggressiveness, and competition are irrelevant to the life experience of women. Even though all of the above have been refuted by evidence (for a summary, see McPherson et al 1989), these myths remain influential, causing stigma and role conflict for some women athletes. Although women athletes may experience role conflict, research shows that for most it is a positive experience. Data comparing women athletes and non-athletes from the United States, Australia, and India suggest, for example, that women athletes have a better self-image, a better body image, and a better outlook toward life than nonathletes (Snyder & Kivlin 1975). However, these results could be the product of selection, not
socialization, and the outcome of strong in-group bonds formed by a sub-culture of athletes who acknowledge their differences from most women.

The most serious problems women face in sport involve discrimination. Title IX or Affirmative Action Legislation (1972) was designed to rectify discrimination, particularly in access to facilities, financial aid, and opportunity for participation. Some improvement was made, but when the US Supreme Court ruled in Grove City v. Bell (1984) that Title IX language applied only to programs receiving federal funds, progress was stalemated, with some 800 federal investigations involving possible sexist practices dropped or narrowed (Sabo 1988). The original broader interpretation of Title IX was restored by the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988, but the pace of investigations has not resumed, since it depends on the will of the Justice Department.

A dramatic example of discrimination by denying access to the control of sport is found in Acosta & Carpenter’s (unpublished) analysis of the participation of women in the administration of athletic programs. Since Title IX, schools are offering more sports for women, and participation by women as athletes has shown a dramatic increase. However, the proportion of women who are coaches or administrators has declined significantly. In 1972, 90% of women’s teams were coached by women; in 1989, 47% were coached by women. Similarly, the non–coach administrators of women’s sports programs tend to be men, and the few women administrators in place are supervised by men.

The discrimination against women in sport has been documented in many areas and continues. The greatest promise of scholarship in this area, however, is theoretical. Feminist social theorists assert that sport is one of many social systems dominated by patriarchal value systems and dominance patterns (Birrell 1984, Hall 1988). The starting point of feminist social theory is the understanding of the dominance patterns found in patriarchal social structures (Hall 1984:88). Since sport is a cultural form, emergent, changing, and subject to the influence of gender and class, the meanings attached to sport participation cannot be properly assessed with traditional empirical methods. In the view of most feminist theorists, a feminist view must be cultural, humanist, interpretive, phenomenological, and value oriented. Thus, there is an affinity for the incorporation of the cultural studies approach by feminist scholars.

An interesting variant of gender scholarship and theoretical development has been through the study of masculinity and sport. Two of these developments appear to be especially fruitful (Messner 1990). Some pro-feminist, male scholars have used their own biographies to understand masculine worlds from a feminine viewpoint that emphasizes institutional patriarchy (Sabo 1986, Kimmel 1987). Thus, the emphasis is on the links between the
costs and privileges of masculinity. The other approach is called “inclusive feminism.” Messner, a leading proponent of this approach, summarizes:

Through an inclusive feminism that recognizes the importance of working from multiple standpoints, we can begin to build an understanding of how class, racial, and sexual struggles within hierarchies of intermale dominance serve to construct men’s global subordination of women (1990:149).

Just as scholars in other subfields in sociology, scholars in the sociology of sport are beginning to describe dominance and subordination and to analyze their complexity as they are simultaneously structured along racial, gender, and class lines (Birrell 1989).

CONCLUSION

Over a decade ago Gunther Luschen summarized the status of sport sociology as a subdiscipline of sociology in volume 6 of the Annual Review of Sociology (Luschen 1980). He asserted that sport sociology had garnered some followers who published sport-related articles in over 100 different scholarly journals. It appeared that sport sociology was on the verge of expanding as a field of social inquiry and of gaining acceptance in mainstream sociology. This promise, however, has not been realized.

Even with the formation of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) and the publication of its Sociology of Sport Journal, sport sociology remains somewhat of an orphan speciality. The critical mass of theorists and researchers required to promote collaborative efforts, network formation, and professional identity has not emerged (Kenyon 1986, Coakley 1987). Even with the routine inclusion of sport sociology sessions on regional, national, and international conference programs, the profession of sociology has not accepted the study of sport into its mainstream. Neither has sport sociology attained high status in physical education where there are more physical educators claiming sport sociology as an area of study than there are such members of the American Sociological Association. Few graduate programs are available, and fewer courses are found in standard undergraduate curriculums. Sport research is often an “after-thought,” pursued as an academic interest only after “serious” work is done.

The most serious charge against sport sociology is that the theoretical development is relatively weak (Luschen 1980, Kenyon 1986, Coakley 1987, MacAlloon 1987). Coakley summarizes this criticism:

Unfortunately, much of the research in sociology of sport has been neither cumulative or theory-based, nor has it been dedicated to theory development (Kenyon 1986). More often, research has been designed to describe sport in ways that call popular beliefs into question, or to document the existence for an issue or problem. This is true of the field as a whole,
but it is especially true of work done in the U.S. This is not to say that theory has not informed some of the work done by American sport sociologists, but little of their research has grown directly out of concern for theory testing or theory development in sociology (1987:14).

As a subdiscipline the sociology of sport is only 25 years old, and its professional association has been in existence just over a decade. This subdiscipline has the same problems found in the rest of sociology. While much of the research in sport sociology is not guided by theory, some very important work is. Leaders in the field are calling for theoretically based studies (see, Kenyon 1986, Birrell 1989), and some exemplars are leading the way. The work of gender theorists appears especially promising not only for the sport sociology but for sociology in general. This is because sport is such a fruitful arena in which "to take into account the contours of the particular relations of dominance and subordination that exist among groups located at the intersection of class and racial conflicts" (Birrell 1989:221).

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