

Review

Sociology of sport in North America, 1992

— Theoretical, and methodological approaches —

Jay Coakley*

CURRENT ISSUES IN SOCIOLOGY

This is an interesting and difficult time for sociologists. As we move toward the next century the very idea of "science" is being challenged, "scientific truth claims" are being questioned, and scientists themselves are being asked to critically examine how knowledge is produced and used. The notion that science is the primary source of enlightenment, empowerment, and progress in society is being scrutinized and contested.

This critique of science has been expressed in various ways. In some cases it takes the form of cynicism and concludes that modern science is a myth, that all scientific truth claims are empty and baseless, that knowledge itself is a contradiction, and that so-called scientific expertise has been more often used to oppress and marginalize human beings than to achieve meaningful human emancipation. In other cases the critique takes the form of skepticism and concludes there is a need to recognize that science does not have a monopoly on truth, that all knowledge is ideological, that scientific expertise will never lead to a world free of domination, and that science lacking a "praxis orientation" (i. e., focused on political action, social transformation, and human emancipation) inevitably reproduces systems of oppressive inequality.

This post-modern critique of science is having a significant impact on sociology. Traditional methodological and theoretical approaches in sociology are being challenged and, in some cases, discredited.

The goal of developing grand structural theories or meta-narratives about the structure, organization, and dynamics of "the social world" has been abandoned by many sociologists. Structuralist theories as represented by functionalism, Marxism, and other attempts to discover "one correct...set of premises, conceptual strategy, and explanation" of society have been so heavily critiqued that they retain little credibility in the eyes of many of my American colleagues¹⁵⁾. A growing number of sociologists, especially younger scholars, now argue that generalized truth claims grounded in a totalizing theory of society are impossible to make in a fragmented social world a social world in which behavior is often grounded in creating, managing, resisting, responding to, and incorporating diverse images into lives constrained and empowered by access to cultural resources. In the place of totalizing theories, these scholars call for an increased emphasis on describing and explaining specific issues, problems, and events with the hope of producing localized, problem-based theories associated with political action and social transformation.

This means that many sociologists are becoming less concerned with the task of developing what might be called modernist sociological theory¹⁵⁾. Fewer sociologists are motivated by the hope of developing a set of general propositions and "laws" that can be used to explain "society as a whole"; fewer sociologists are searching for a universal theory of social order that can be used to plan and control social life. Instead, sociologists are raising questions about how the search for totalizing theories often leads to the use of general categories and explanations that not only expunge

* Sociology Department, University of Colorado,
Colorado Springs, CO USA 80933-7150

history and cultural context, but subvert a consideration of social differences that are relevant in the lived experiences of human beings (¹⁵p. 137). They note that this search has also led sociology to tell unidimensional stories about society, stories that are Eurocentric and patriarchal, stories that exclude much of human experience, stories that have not eliminated oppression nor led to human emancipation.

In other words, sociology is undergoing a penetrating critique. This critique calls for an emphasis on localized, problem-based social theories ; it calls for theories to be focused on particular, historically contextualized situations ; and it calls for theories developed for the purpose of facilitating practical, localized projects of social transformation.

One of the dangers of this post-modernist critique of sociology is that it sometimes leads to cynicism and the conclusion that meaningful political action is impossible because there is no basis for making truth claims that go beyond the experiences of specific individuals living at particular moments in history. Another danger is that the critique sometimes becomes so encompassing that sociologists get caught up in battles of words and abandon empirical research focused on describing and understanding the lived experiences of human beings. Finally, there is also the danger that the vocabulary and writing style used by many post-modernists can intimidate and keep quiet many of the same voices that have traditionally been marginalized or misrepresented in modernist sociological theories, voices that the post-modernists say must be included in any discourse about social life.

My personal response to contemporary critiques of sociology.

On a personal level let me say that when I first read post-modernist critiques of sociology I became very defensive. I was trained in a modernist tradition based on the belief that scientific knowledge led to progress, and that progress achieved through science was good. Initially, I

dismissed most post-modernists because many of them were cynical and apolitical, two things I was not. But as post-modernism continues to emerge I have concluded that parts of it offer something important to sociologists, something that encourages us to critically reflect on our relevance in a complex, changing, and socially fragmented world.

First, taken as a whole, post-modernism provides a penetrating critique of modernist science in general and modernist sociology in particular. **Second**, it encourages detailed, critical, contextualized analyses of specific problems, issues, and events. **Third**, it advocates processes giving voice to those who have been ignored or misrepresented in complex and multi-faceted cultural struggles. **Fourth**, it calls for projects emphasizing human emancipation informed by critical pragmatism rather than projects emphasizing general progress informed by foundational moral theory or universal human values. **Fifth**, it positions sociologists as advocates and catalysts rather than theorists/consultants/experts, and compels them to make explicit their values and clearly outline the consequences of the changes they endorse.

At this point in time, post-modernists have contributed most in the realm of deconstruction, or what I would call a critical interpretation of science in general and sociology in particular. In other words, they have identified the contradictions, inconsistencies, and presuppositions that underlie science as a cultural practice and that underlie sociological theories and methodologies. But the extent to which their contributions go beyond deconstruction is not yet clear to me (despite some politically influential post-modernist analyses of AIDS by Patton¹⁴) and Epstein⁷). Although they have done a good job of showing that all scientific explanations are social constructions, post-modernists have not yet developed any clear answers to the following questions :

How do we make distinctions between "bad" science and "good" science, between science that oppresses and science that liberates?

How do we arrive at "systematic and de-

fensible ways of drawing meaningful distinctions between different scientific claims⁷⁾?

How can we develop a progressive politics based on a democratic approach to science?

When post-modernists emphasize process and advocacy they raise serious questions about how science might be democratized and used to inform public moral and social debates that lead to the compromises that are inevitably involved in making collective decisions and taking responsive collective action. But they have done little to explore possible answers to those questions.

Methodological implications of a post-modern critique of science and sociology.

Let me say that in the past my politics have been informed by the belief that knowledge is power. Therefore, I focused my attention on the ways that knowledge could be used to empower those with limited access to resources. I saw knowledge as a form of "cultural capital" and my goal was to find ways to use that capital to empower people who were socially marginalized. This is why I have done research on problems and issues that affect children, older people, low income people, women, and racial and ethnic minorities. At this point my goals remain the same, and I still believe that knowledge is power, but the work of post-modernists has led me to qualify my understanding of the connection between knowledge and power.

I now realize that power rests as much in the production of knowledge as it does in access to knowledge. This realization has important methodological implications. Traditional social science research is based on the premise that human beings are the objects of study and, as such, they are defined in terms of categories that can be treated as variables. These variables, in turn, are useful to the extent they can be measured, controlled, and compared to other variables for the purpose of building knowledge about conceptual relationships. Of course, sociological knowledge has been used for

more than simply understanding conceptual relationships, but the point is that this entire methodological process is inextricably connected to power relations. It is not only likely to be driven by knowledge needs in the field rather than by the human needs of the so-called research "subjects", but those who frame the research questions, do the analysis, and develop conclusions are, by definition, the experts. They may sell their expertise to others or even give it away, but the hierarchy and the power relations that underlie the research process remain intact.

This awareness of how power relations are involved in traditional knowledge production has led some sociologists to ask questions about how we "do" science and how we "do" sociology. Even though there have been no revolutionary changes in the status system in sociology (i. e., those who do major quantitative research projects informed by established sociological theories remain highly rewarded in the field), there is a growing realization that we must use methodologies that more directly focus on the lived experiences of human beings. This realization has led to a renewed emphasis on qualitative research. Ethnographies, participant observation, observation, and in-depth interviews are being increasingly used on an expanding array of research topics. Furthermore, there is a growing realization that sociological research should be "need-based" and that research "subjects" should be involved in the research process as acting subjects who not only participate in the framing of research questions but also in the production of research results and the application of those results to their own lives. To the extent that research actually does this, sociologists are forced "to acknowledge the human implications of their methodologies" and the real life consequences of the research process (⁷⁾, p. 60).

This approach to sociological knowledge production is often difficult to put into action. Furthermore, just because there is grassroots participation in the production of knowledge does not guarantee that inequities or oppression will be de-

fused or eliminated as a result of research. Unless care is taken, research may simply promote a shift in expert power from one group of people to another "in traditional interest group fashion" (7, p. 60). In order to link research with emancipatory political practice, sociologists must also engage in structural analyses so they are aware of the social, political, and economic organization of the settings in which they do research. Only through this awareness can they serve as facilitators or advocates in furthering democratic processes and human emancipation.

Summary.

Over the past 20 years sociology has become characterized by increasing fragmentation. There is no longer a single, unified set of agreed upon standards to guide the production and evaluation of sociological knowledge. Some people in the field think this is good, others see it as indicative of the ultimate demise of the field as a whole ; my conclusion falls somewhere in between. I think it is important for political purposes within the academy to maintain sociology as an identifiable discipline, but I also think it is good that we raise questions about the extent to which we can and should promote our identities as scientists in the traditional modernist sense of the term.

Other disciplines in the social sciences have not been as likely as sociology to respond to post-modern critiques by engaging in critical self-reflection. This is probably due to the fact that they are more closely tied to and supported by powerful interests in society. For example, political scientists work for and are supported by government, economists work for and are supported by business, and psychologists are supported by ties to clinical practice. These external sources of support may keep people in these fields "in business", but they also guarantee that the interests of the state, capitalist production, and a professional status shape the entire knowledge production process. Sociologists seem to be in a position that facilitates a questioning of this process ; this questioning has begun, although we are unsure as to where it might lead.

SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

The current situation in the sociology of sport is very similar to the current situation in sociology as a whole. Many of us in the field are less concerned about the relative merits of structural theories and grand narratives than we were in the past. For example, few of us still debate the usefulness of structural functionalism and conflict theory. This is not to say that these sociological theories are forgotten and irrelevant. Some people in the sociology of sport still do research grounded in a functionalist tradition, and some still use conflict theory notions of power and class relations in their analyses, and some may talk about these theories in their courses. But an increasing number of people in the sociology of sport are using various forms of critical theory to inform their work, and they are having their students read critical theory.

This shift in theoretical emphasis is reflected in the number of conference papers and journal articles using approaches and analyses informed by feminist theory, cultural studies, and various forms of poststructuralism (i. e., analyses focusing on discourse, language, meaning, symbols, and deconstruction). Along these lines there have been an increasing number of papers that incorporate ideas related to cultural ideology, social construction, identity and identity politics (especially as related to femininities and masculinities), the body (as socially constructed), hegemony, resistance, social reproduction, and social transformation. For example, instead of studying racial and ethnic differences in performance and opportunity in sport there is an increasing emphasis on studying intergroup relations and how sport is a site for the social reproduction or transformation of dominant forms of intergroup relations in specific organizations and communities. And instead of simply studying gender differences in sport more people are studying gender relations and the ways that sport serves as a site for the reproduction of the dominant gender order or how it might be a site for resistance and the social transformation of gender relations.

In more specific terms, two of the most important recent changes that have come with the increased use of critical theory in the sociology of sport are the following :

- (1) Gender/gender relations has become the single most popular topic in journal articles and conference papers ; in fact, nearly 1 of 3 papers in the last 2 NASSS conferences and the last two volumes of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* have explicitly focused on critical issues related to masculinity, femininity, and gender relations.
- (2) Social class is no longer the primary focus of critical analyses of sport ; although class remains very important there is agreement that social relations are grounded in complex struggles involving power relations associated with more than class interests.

At the same time that more work in the sociology of sport is being informed by critical theory there is an increased emphasis on "applied sociology of sport." This emphasis comes from two sources. First, critical theory itself emphasizes emancipatory political practice. And second, some people in the sociology of sport are interested in serving as consultants for public, private, and commercial sport organizations. This latter group is interested in the ways sport sociologists might serve the needs of these organization and use their connections with the organizations as a source of income, status, and political support for the field as a whole. This orientation has been expressed and critiqued in recent issues of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* (16), (17), (9) . All I will say here is that many of us in the sociology of sport have serious reservations about doing contract research framed in terms of the needs of organizations whose goals generally emphasize the reproduction of dominant cultural ideology.

Methodological issues.

Although quantitative data are still widely used in sociology of sport research, an increasing number of researchers are using various types of qualitative methodologies. Current papers and

articles are more likely to report data that have been gathered through ethnographicis, case studies, indepth interviews, textual analysis (of film, media coverage), observation and participant observation, and comparative historical analyses. Survey research is still common, and survey data are still analyzed with wide array of statistical tools. But more people are raising questions about the extent to which quantitative data provide a thorough basis for describing and understanding the lived experiences of people associated with sport. The argument is that these data are so far removed from lived experiences that they tell us little about human behavior and social relations.

This critique of quantitative methodologies and the shift toward more qualitative approaches reflects is happening in sociology as a whole as well as what is happening in many other fields. For example, even business researchers now use focus groups rather than survey research to gather information related to product development and marketing. In part, this shift is due to a general realization that qualitative data are often more useful than quantitative data when it comes to developing an in-depth understanding of the meanings underlying people's behavior and when it comes to making policy decisions that reflect and impact the lived experiences of people. Additionally, this shift among sociologists is due to the fact that critical theory has called attention to the need to do research focused on human needs and informed by participation of the research "subjects" themselves.

My personal response to changes in the sociology of sport.

The diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches utilized by sociologists studying "sport-related topics" has led some people in the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport to worry that our field is too fragmented, that the consensus needed to maintain a viable organization is lacking, and that the work of NASSS members is taking them away from a consideration of what many members define as "sport". Others

see the diversity as healthy, exciting, and necessary if we are to make real contributions to emancipatory political practice. I generally side with the latter group ; I see the diversity as positive in the sense that it encourages us to view sport in alternative ways ; diversity also encourages critical self-reflection.....something that all social scientists need to take more seriously.

Small academic organizations sometimes generate such an extreme amount of consensus that they cut themselves off from what is going on in the world around them. This is self-defeating, especially in organizations whose members profess an interest in describing and understanding what is going on in that world. In the sociology of sport we cannot afford to cut ourselves off from the world around us. We must be sensitive to new critiques of science and of sociology in particular. At this point, these critiques are forcing some of us to become familiar with a wide range of topics and theoretical approaches. For example, the 1991 NASSS Conference theme was "The Body and Sport as Contested Terrain" and the 1992 theme was "Sub/Versions : Rethinking Resistance/Remaking Sport." In these two conferences there were papers on "Dialogues 'on' the body : Feminist cultural studies and Foucault" (C. Cole), "Form, function and physical activity : The medicalization of women's bodies" (P. Vertinsky), "Firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin : The post-modern aerobicizing bodies" (P. Markula), and "The black body and the eroticization of sports in gay porn" (G. Conerly). Of course, there were also papers on more traditional topics, but the new topics and the new approaches enable us to see sport in new ways and reflect on the implications of current approaches in light of our concern with facilitating social transformation.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON SOCIALIZATION : THREE EXAMPLES OF NEW APPROACHES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

Some of the changes described in this presentation are best illustrated through actual examples

of research. Since I am most familiar with socialization research I will use it as a source of examples.

New theoretical approaches to socialization focus attention on the fact that people create their own identities and spaces as they interact in particular situations and relationships. Research based on these new approaches is informed by the notion advanced by cultural studies that identities are problematic in the sense that they are relational, contextual, unstable, and contested in connection with cultural struggles. Sport socialization research is becoming more concerned with the problematic dimensions of this process and with uncovering unspoken, unrecognized ideological processes through which social relations and economic systems become "normalized" and "naturalized." This focus is influenced by Gramsci and his discussion of hegemony and counterhegemony.

In other words, socialization research based on various forms of critical theory is not concerned with who influences whom as much as with the way certain cultural practices are socially constructed and implicated in forms of social relations characterized by power inequities ; researchers are interested in how inequities are reproduced and how are they contested, especially by socially marginalized groups. The three studies below each illustrate different aspects of these general concerns.¹

(1) Sport rituals and community socialization processes : A study of sport in the culture of a small town.

Anthropologist Doug Foley (1990) studied the connection between sport events and community socialization processes in a small Texas town by using field methods (observation, participant observation, and informal and formal interviews) over a two-year period. His analysis was guided by popular culture theory and his goal was to

¹These examples are adapted from longer discussions of sport and socialization that will be published in other sources.^{3), 4), 5)}

view the socialization process from a broad, holistic perspective. In particular, Foley wanted to examine the extent to which sport served as a site for cultural practices through which community members might resist and transform the capitalist, racial, and patriarchal order that defined social life in their town. In particular, he focused on the cultural/linguistic capital possessed by young people from various class, ethnic, and gender backgrounds as they presented themselves to others, including adults from their school and the community at large, during ritualized communicative situations occurring in connection with sports, the social scene, and the classroom. He found that sport in general and high school football in particular were important community rituals that partially constituted a general socialization process in the social life of the town.

Although Foley set out to examine sport as a site for progressive practices challenging the dominance of a small elite group who controlled capital resources in the town, he found few examples. Resistance and counterhegemonic cultural practices did occur, but they produced few effects beyond specific individuals and immediate situations. This led Foley to conclude that high school sports in small towns are quite likely to reproduce and reaffirm the status quo even when the status quo works to the disadvantage of many, especially women, minorities, and low income people. In other words, Foley found sports to be socially "unprogressive" cultural community practices, even though many people find them enjoyable and self-serving on a personal level. Foley's work indicates that socialization through sport occurs in connection with the economic, political, and cultural systems that make up the everyday culture of a community. Although sport as a process of socialization offers possibilities for making changes in the culture of a community, sport rituals generally reproduce forms of social inequality in race, class, and gender relations that characterize life in many communities. Ethnographic research done by Eder and Parker⁶⁾ in a racially mixed high school in a medium size,

American midwestern community supports Foley's findings : highly visible extracurricular activities such as varsity sports and cheerleading reproduce gender inequities in the peer culture of the school. Other research indicates that this process has occurred through history¹²⁾ and in other cultural settings.²⁾

(2) Sport participation and the social construction of masculinity : A study of socialization among male athletes.

Michael Messner¹¹⁾ used a form of critical feminism to study the ways in which masculinities were socially constructed in connection with men's athletic careers. Open-ended in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 former athletes from different racial and social class backgrounds to discover how gender identities developed and changed as men interacted with the socially constructed world of sports.

Messner notes that the men in his study began their first sport experiences with already gendered identities ; in fact, their emerging identities during childhood were associated with their initial attraction to sport. The men had not entered sports as "blank slates" ready to be "filled in" with culturally approved masculine orientations and behaviors. Instead, as their athletic careers progressed, these men constructed orientations, relationships, and experiences "consistent with the dominant values and power relations of the larger gender order" (p.150-151). Overall, their masculinity was based on (a) limited definitions of public success, (b) relationships with men in which bonds were shaped by homophobia and misogyny, and (c) a willingness to use their bodies as tools of domination regardless of consequences for health or general well-being. This socially constructed masculinity not only influenced how these men presented themselves in public but it also influenced their relationships with women and engendered a continuing sense of insecurity about issues related to their "manhood."

Messner found that socialization through sports is a complex process that does not always simply

and unambiguously reproduce a gender order in which all men have power and privilege. For example, sport participation brought temporary public recognition to many of the men interviewed by Messner, but discouraged formation of needed intimate relationships with other men and with women. Sport participation enabled the men to develop physical competence, but it frequently led to chronic health problems. Sport participation offered career opportunities to many of the men, but these opportunities varied depending on their sexual preferences and racial and class backgrounds. Sport participation provided many of these men guidelines on how to be a man, but the involvement and success of women in sport raised serious questions for those who had learned that becoming a man necessarily involved detaching themselves from all things female.

Messner's research indicates that sport participation involves a socialization process through which men enhance their public status, create nonintimate bonds of loyalty with each other, perpetuate patriarchal relationships with women, and construct masculinity in a way that privileges some men over others. This process is sometimes challenged by participants, but transformations of sport and sport experiences are difficult to initiate because sport itself has been constructed in ways that perpetuate the notion that male privilege is grounded in nature and biological destiny.

Messner's work calls attention to the fact that gender is a social construction and that sport offers a fruitful site for exploring the formation of gender identities as part of the overall process of socialization through sports. This has also been noted in Palzkill's research¹³⁾ on women in elite, amateur sport.

(3) Changing sport to create alternative socialization experiences : A study of women softball players.

Susan Birrell and Diana Richter¹⁾ used feminist theory informed by cultural studies to study the way in which sport was socially constructed by selected women involved in recreation slow-pitch

softball leagues in 2 communities. Intensive interviews and observations over 4 years focused on the ways feminist consciousness might inform and structure women's sport experiences, the interpretation of those experiences, and the integration of the experiences into women's lives.

Birrell and Richter reported that the women in their study were concerned with developing and expressing skills, playing hard, and challenging opponents, but that they wanted to do these things without adopting orientations characterized by an overemphasis on winning, power relationships between players and coaches, social exclusion and skill-based elitism, an ethic of risk and endangerment, and the derogation of opponents. In other words, the women attempted to create alternative sport experiences that were "process oriented, collective, supportive, inclusive, and infused with an ethic of care" (p. 408).

Birrell and Richter found that creating an alternative to sport forms that promoted male interests could not be done without extended struggle. Transformations in the way teams were organized and the way games were played came slowly over the 4-year research period, but they did come. This provided the women with a sense of satisfaction, enjoyable sport experiences, and reaffirmation of their collective feminist consciousness and feelings of political empowerment.

Birrell and Richter's research illustrates that sport is not so much a product as it is a process of invention. This invention process is grounded in the consciousness and collective reflection of the participants themselves, and it is shaped by their conversations about experiences, feelings, decisions, behaviors, accounts of and responses to incidents, and a combination of individual and collective conclusions about the connection between sport and the lives of the participants. In other words, not only is sport a social construction, but so too are the consequences of participation. This is crucial to remember when socialization through sports is being discussed.

Summary.

These three examples of research illustrate current approaches to sport socialization. Each study highlights some dimension of socialization as it occurs in connection with sport participation and shows that participation itself is a social process with emergent qualities tied to the interests of those involved and the context in which it occurs. This means that it makes much more sense to frame discussions of socialization through sports in terms of human agency, cultural practices, struggle, power relations, and social construction than it does to frame them in terms of specific measurable character traits of athletes and former athletes as they might compare to the character traits of "nonathletes".

Researchers have more recently realized that sport and sport experiences are parts of larger processes of social relations encompassing gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientations. Since sport itself is part of general social and cultural formations, socialization through sports cannot be separated from the economic and political practices that often constrain people's choices and activities, nor can it be separated from human agency and processes of resistance and transformation. This means that socialization through sports cannot be approached in terms of unreflexive responses to specific events, relationships, and external forces. Socialization research has begun to take into account the fact that participation itself is a socially constructed process mediated by power relations and the consciousness and collective reflection of participants. New research has begun to uncover the dynamics of differing social realities in sport, and to contextualize those realities so we can better understand how sport practices are connected to larger social and cultural formations.

CONCLUSION

Sociology in 1992 is dealing with questions that go beyond who has access to knowledge ; questions today deal with who produces knowledge and how its produced. The notion of sociology as

an autonomous science is being challenged. This challenge is defined by many in the field as a threat because in their minds science in general and sociology in particular have since the 1950's been held up as source of resistance against unrestrained capitalism and totalitarian states (such as Nazism and Stalinism). However, contemporary critiques are forcing us, including those of us in the sociology of sport, to critically examine what we do as sociologists and how we do it. This critical self-examination will continue to create considerable anxiety because none of us knows where it will take us.² What are the alternatives to autonomous science? How can we as sociologists avoid cultural cooptation as we seek alternatives? How can sociology enable us to advocate for a progressive politics that challenges oppression and promotes human emancipation through social relations? Such are the questions that will beg answers as we move into the 21st Century.

²To my regret I do not know much about the sociology of sport in Japan, but I suspect that the ideas of Ken Kageyama¹⁰ create similar forms of anxiety among sport sociologists. As you know, Kageyama has asked his colleagues to engage in selfreflection leading to a critical sport sociology that could take many different forms ; he suggests that sport sociologists do research "from the standpoint of civil movements" (¹⁰ p. 147) so their work will be related to problems and issues. Kageyama's critique is similar to the contemporary critique of sport sociology in the United States.

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