THE BOOK

Sport | Fitness | Culture focuses on the influences of culture and society on human movement, such as sport, physical activity, and fitness. The text introduces and analyzes current issues of importance for those concerned with human movement and culture, whether it is in the context of teaching physical education, coordinating/marketing sport and recreational programs, coaching or serving the general population – young and old – with any form of physical activity. Sport | Fitness | Culture incorporates interdisciplinary, cutting-edge work reflecting various research paradigms from these theoretical perspectives: sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, anthropology, gender and race studies and cultural studies.

The fact that more and more people of all ages are participating in sport and physical activity means that serious attention must be paid to increasing awareness of the positive as well as the negative effects of such involvement. Indeed, sport has become a major socio-cultural factor in people’s lives. In the USA, there is hardly anyone who is not touched by this movement; however, people have very different experiences based on their cultural and socio-economic background, including gender, race/ethnicity, age, ability, as well as their sexual and religious orientations. This book will educate people about the importance of socio-cultural as well as psychological factors influencing people’s choices, opportunities, experiences and limitations in the domain of human movement.

THE AUTHOR

Karin Volkwein-Caplan, PhD, German and American, is a Professor of Cultural Studies in the Department of Kinesiology at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She has widely researched and published on gender and racial issues, HIV/AIDS in sport, ethics and sport, as well as healthy aging and fitness. Her books include: Fitness as Cultural Phenomenon; HIV/AIDS and Sport; Sexual Harassment in Sport; Sport, Culture & Society – A Workbook; Cultural Contours of the Body and The Social Geography of Healthy Aging (both with J. Tahmaseb McConatha). She also co-edits two book series with Meyer & Meyer Sports: Sport, Culture & Society and Healthy Aging & Fitness.
CONTENTS

Dedication ................................................................. 6
Foreword ................................................................. 7
Introduction ............................................................ 8

Chapter 1: Sociology of Sport – Fitness – Physical Activity .............. 14

Chapter 2: Psychology of Sport – Fitness – Physical Activity .......... 26
  with Margaret Ottley

Chapter 3: Culture and Values in the 21st Century ......................... 38
  Issue 1 Changing Values and their Impact on Movement Culture ..... 42
  Issue 2 Fitness – The Global Sport-for-All? .......................... 50
  Issue 3 Culture, Aging and Well-Being:
      The Importance of Place and Space .................................. 58
      with Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha
  Issue 4 The Paradox of Top-level Sports ............................... 68

Chapter 4: Health and Sport – Fitness – Physical Activity ............. 78
  Issue 1 Exercise, Health and Life Satisfaction .......................... 81
      with Christiane Jennen & Gerhard Uhlenbruck
  Issue 2 Physical Activity and the Perceptions of Aging .............. 91
      with Jennifer Sutera & Judith Ray
  Issue 3 Obesity – The Pandemic ....................................... 101
      by Christine Williams
  Issue 4 The Threat of HIV to the World of Sport? .................... 117

Chapter 5: Youth Involvement in Sport – Fitness – Physical Activity .... 129
  Issue 1 Social and Moral Development through Sport and
      Physical Activity ....................................................... 132
  Issue 2 Kids, Sport and Peril – An International Dilemma ........... 136
  Issue 3 The Detrimental Decline of Mandated
      Physical Education in the United States ............................ 147
      by Matthew Cummiskey

Chapter 6: Race/Ethnicity and Sport – Fitness – Physical Activity .... 169
  Issue 1 Racism in US Sport? ......................................... 172
  Issue 2 Capoeira Angola –
      A Symbol of Cultural Resistance and Survival ....................... 186
      by Margaret Ottley
DEDICATION

To the people I love and who inspire me, – most of all James and Benjamin, and my parents. And to the many students at West Chester University who will not stop being inquisitive, and thus, keep me going…
FOREWORD

Universally, in the world throughout the years, sport and all its associated facets are part of daily and weekly communication media in every country on Earth. Historically, it has been principally a major part of male life. The 20th century provided for the emergence of women into this “sacrosanct” men’s world. Associated with the phenomenal development was the creative need for it to encroach upon education for all women.

The cultural impact along with the differentiated anatomical and physiological variations between the sexes has expanded into medical, psychological, and social complications that increased the total complexity of athletics/sport for all females. Thus, Dr. Karin A. E. Volkwein-Caplan and her professional associates have, like Jason and the Argonauts, built a ship to invade the technical and controversial field.

Dr. Volkwein-Caplan’s professional life coupled with her extensive experience in the educational field has provided the rather unique qualifications required to successfully captain this project. To completely enhance and magnify her reputation, drive, and dedication, she has fearlessly proceeded with not only her education in a number of universities in several major countries but has been a principal investigator and participant in professional international conferences with many successful presentations and subsequent publications. Like the success of Jason and the Argonauts, I predict Karin and her “educational crew,” though the production of texts like this, will bring back the “golden fleece of Colchis!”

Russell L. Sturzebecker, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
West Chester University
September 2004
CHAPTER 1:

SOCIOMETRY OF SPORT – FITNESS – PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

What does sociology have to do with sport? “Sociologists study social behavior of all kinds, from interpersonal social relations to group formations to formal social organizations. Sport is fundamentally a social phenomenon that encompasses all of these social forms of human activity. ... Sport is an extraordinarily popular and pervasive worldwide social endeavor, and therefore a suitable subject for study and analysis. ... Newspapers in North America devote more space to sports than any other topics, including business news, which would seem more important in a capitalist economy.” (Sage & Eitzen, 2013, 2)

The sociological imagination requires that we consider people in their social contexts. This means considering how historical, cultural and structural factors relate to and connect with each other. (Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2012, 3)

Sport has become a major institution in the North American society, as well as in other highly industrialized nations. However, our understanding of it remains limited. There are many statements people make about sport that are either overstated, understated, misinterpreted or simply mythical. Can sport truly contribute to the improvement of modern society? It is certainly true that sport is a tremendous force for the status quo, and it distracts millions of people from more serious thoughts or painful existences. Does sport hold society together and does it empower women as much as it has men?

The question a sociologist might ask is: Why is social life organized in particular ways? Most people agree that the field of sport sociology “is the sub-discipline of sociology that studies sports as part of social and cultural life” (Coakley, 2004, 6). More recently, sport sociologists have also investigated the phenomenon of physical activity, fitness and health, and not only competitive, organized sports. In doing this research, people theorize about social life and the meaning of sport, fitness, and physical activity in it. Theorizing includes a combination of description, reflection, and analysis of social phenomena. This is based on the assumption that humans could make the world better; that is, more efficient, just and harmonious, as well as more controllable through the use of knowledge and science and technological advancements. Thus, sociologists first try to dissect what society is all about and what its various components are. It is assumed that social institutions, such as politics, education, media, and religion, are the general foundation and building blocks of a society.
The sociology of sport as an organized field of study is about 50 years old; it emerged around the same time that sport psychology, sport history, and sport philosophy arose as systematic academic disciplines of study applied to sport and most recently exercise and fitness as well. Sport sociologists are mainly employed at colleges and universities, teaching and publishing in this area, but they are also thought after “experts” and consultants by newspapers and sports television broadcasting when a story has sociological relevance. The field of sport sociology is organized nationally through the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) with about 400 members, and internationally through the International Sociology of Sport Association (ISSA), which was founded in 1965. These organizations hold annual conferences and sponsor scholarly publications and research journals, such as the Sociology of Sport Journal, the Journal of Sport and Social Issues, and the International Review for the Sociology of Sport.

“Sociology is the systematic study of social behavior, in groups, and in organizations. Sociologists are especially interested in the social patterns that emerge whenever people interact over periods of time” (Sage & Eitzen, 2013, 4). They study human groups that could be as small as a couple, a family, a business, a community or a nation. Similarities and differences exist in any of these groups, big or small, which are analyzed through a sport focus in the field of sport sociology. The human interactions in and through sport center on values, rules, hierarchical structure of ranks, power, prestige, criteria for evaluating people’s behaviors, reward and punishment, and more. All social scientists are interested in the underlying order of social life, whether it is from a political perspective, historical, psychological, economic or anthropological venue. Each of these social sciences is useful to aid sport sociology research, since they are important indicators of the general social conditions people live under in a given period of time and place. Issues might include leisure time, inflation, unemployment, restricted opportunities for minority groups, and more. Furthermore, the meaning people attach to these external influences are important indicators of what constitutes culture (see Chapter 3).

Sociologists in general bring with them different viewpoints of the world, which then leads to several different interpretations and theories. Societies are complex phenomena; they have their own histories, dynamics and cultures, and they can be viewed from many different perspectives. It is recognized that no single perspective can tell us all we need to know about social life. Thus, we have a multitude of theories today. For example, feminist scholars have made very convincing arguments that theories based on men’s experience of the world do not tell us all about social life, because 50% of the population is left out of this equation. Global social changes have shown us that we are operating from a Euro-centric viewpoint that is irrelevant to other parts of the world.
New communication technologies, computer-based and media-generated, have altered our sense of what is real and what is not. Thus, new dimensions of social life have been created. For example, you can meet someone over the internet and think you know them, but you really do not. This is a different kind of reality that has been created that is not “real” anymore. Furthermore, scientists have come to understand that science itself is part of culture; thus, the system is reflected in the theories and not free from them. That is, only certain views are present and represented, which reflect the world experienced by the powerful and the educated; many other voices are not expressed or not heard. Worst yet, they are not acknowledged, and therefore do not exist.

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of sport sociology will be discussed as well as the various theories about sport, fitness, physical activity and society. The pros and cons of these theories help us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each one. It will become obvious that there is not one best theory that can explain the complexity of social life; rather a multiplicity of approaches helps to form a better understanding of the social phenomena of sport and physical activity in the modern world.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Sport sociologists uncover and discover “things are not as they seem” (Bryant & McElroy, 1997, 4). They try to debunk existing myths and misconceptions about sport, fitness, and physical activity. One very widely held belief is that sport is free from racism and discrimination, which we will see is not true (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8). Other myths are that everyone has access to sport, fitness, and physical activities or that women’s sport is inferior to men’s sport. Social scientists challenge these popular misconceptions; they hold that each event in sport, fitness, and physical activity affects various social groups differently, which then produces a multitude of causes and effects.

However, all sport sociologists agree on the following assumptions that sport is used in several ways: as a social, political, and/or economic agenda. These purposes are recurring themes throughout this book. For example:

1. **Social Agenda:** Analyzing sport and physical activity in the social context will reveal that not everyone has equal access to these societal goods. In fact, inequalities in social conditions are reflected in the participation patterns of exercise and sports. For example, “advocates of women’s issues have used sport situations to highlight practices that discriminate against women” (Bryant & McElroy, 1997, 5). Other minority groups in society, e.g., African-
Americans, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, or disabled people are also not receiving the same tolerant attitude as the dominant group in society, which is white men (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8).

(2) **Political Agenda:** Sport is used to advance certain political views, i.e., during various Olympic Games, World Cup soccer matches, or even Super Bowl events. In Chapter 10, the governmental involvement in the former communist East Germany and the democratic West Germany is spelled out to illustrate the importance of government in advancing certain political views and the influence of exercise and sport practices of individuals.

(3) **Economic Agenda:** Economics is an underlying force in sport and exercise. At the international level, for example, Olympic competitions would not be possible without the sponsorship of big corporations. “Perhaps the single best illustration is corporate America’s partnership with the city of Atlanta in the 1996 Olympic Games” (Bryant & McElroy, 1997, 5). Private business is helping every day to finance sporting events, whether they are held locally or nationally (e.g., building sport stadiums, underwriting youth competitions, and more).

When doing research in sociology, we also need to be aware that there are different levels of thinking, dominant culture vs. subculture. The dominant thought processes reflect the viewpoints of the majority in a given culture, while the subculture thinking is the thinking of a smaller group that is different. Because dominant thinking has evolved over a longer period of time, it is usually difficult to change. It requires a lot more effort to challenge the focus of sport as being male-dominated, competitive and profit driven. Not all groups in society identify with the dominant culture; for example, the all-male sports clubs that are still prevalent in parts of the country are not necessarily receiving support by women, minorities and members of disadvantaged groups (such as low income, low education). The thinking of these various groups or subcultures reflects values that are opposite to those of the dominant culture. “Differences between the dominant culture and subcultures make their point of interaction a place of social struggle” (Bryant & McElroy, 1997, 7). Several of these social groups’ struggles will be examined throughout this book.

Sport sociology research takes place on the macro as well as the micro level. Macro-level studies examine social life and social structures on a larger scale. They use categories, such as social class or social institutions (family, education, politics, etc.) and social systems (war, unemployment, or divorce), to explain social existence. Micro-level studies, on the other hand, analyze the immediate social environment, such as an individual’s experience or the interpretations of an event. They attach personal meaning to engagements in sport and physical activity. Both sides are correct.
Sociologists are interested in making a positive change in social life; sport sociologists are particularly interested in social action pertaining to sport and physical activity. Questions they would ask are regarding the social environment (i.e., Why don’t women play football?), regarding social relationships (i.e., It is not what you know but who you know), regarding social dynamism (i.e., Does sport provide grounds for upward social mobility?), and in the cultural context (i.e., Are the dominant American values reflected in sports?).

Theories about Sport, Fitness, Physical Activity, and Society

Each author writing a textbook on sociology groups theories differently. Theories are useful tools to describe, explain and predict behavior of people and events. There are a great number of theories and theoretical paradigms, which are based on a set of fundamental assumptions about society that guides sociological thinking. However, there is great disagreement on what the important questions are in the field, as well as which theory is the best approach to use when studying sport, fitness, and physical activity. The array of currently existing theories include (see Coakley 2004 or Sage & Eitzen, 2013):

- Functionalist Theory (asking what sports can contribute to society)
- Conflict Theory (asking whether sports are all about money and economic power)
- Critical Theory (asking how sports are involved in creating and changing culture and social relations)
- Interactionist Theory (asking how people experience sports)
- Feminist and Race Theories (asking what the connections are between gender, race, and sports)

Although there are tremendous differences between the various theoretical approaches, there are also points where they overlap. These six theories will be explained and analyzed separately, but they are fluid and often have similar frameworks. However, each theory gives us a unique perspective for imagining and studying the complexity of the relationships between sport - fitness - physical activity, culture, and society.

1) Functionalist Theory

Social science researchers who are functionalists assume that the driving force behind all social life is to continue to operate and function efficiently; that is to support the status quo of a given society. They believe that social change is dysfunctional unless it occurs in a gradual, evolutionary manner. It is believed that society and the social institutions in it function efficiently when the following needs are met by:
• Teaching people the system’s basic values and rules they have to live by.
• Establishing cohesive social relationships and bringing people together (i.e., through sport).
• Teaching what goals in life and society are important and how to achieve these goals.
• Responding to social and environmental changes that are occurring outside the system/society while maintaining equilibrium within the system.

The research questions that functionalists seek to answer are affirmative in nature. Examples include: What is the relationship between sports participation and the development of good moral character? Can sport and physical activity foster social integration of various groups? What is the relationship between sport participation and achievement motivation? Can sport participation build character? Most people would answer these questions with a resounding YES.

**Weaknesses:** Functionalist theory has several limitations. First, theorists exaggerate about the positive effects sport, fitness, and physical activity have on people who are involved, while the dysfunctional parts of sport and the social system are eliminated or not acknowledged. For example, the statement that “sports builds character” is used in the promotion of sporting activities. A failure of character building (e.g., an athlete taking performance-enhancing drugs) is solely attributed to the athlete’s personal failure rather than a combination of internal and external pressures.

Another weakness of the functionalist thinking is the assumption that the needs of all individuals in society are the same; differences are not accounted for. The assumption that everyone has equal access to sports, fitness, and physical activity is simply a myth. It ignores the sociocultural reality where research has clearly shown differences when it comes to gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, age, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, (dis-)ability, the environment, and more.

The third major limitation of the functionalist theory is the ignorance of the fact that sport - fitness - physical activity are the creation of people, and thus, they can be changed. However, since functionalists believe that there are no major downsides to sport - fitness - physical activity and how they are organized, they insist that no change is needed and that the system works well for everyone involved. “This causes us to underestimate the existence of differences and conflicts of interest within a society and to ignore cases in which sport benefits some groups more than others” (Coakley, 2004, 40). Chapters 6, 7, and 8 in this book will speak to these inequalities existing not only in the North American society but in the global world of sport, fitness, and physical activity.
(2) Conflict Theory

The general assumption of the conflict theorists is that sport is a reflection of the exploitative and unequal practices of capitalist society. Society is viewed as an ever-changing set of relationships characterized by inherent differences of interest and disagreements of various groups. The focus of conflict theorists is on processes of change and the consequences of inequality in society rather than on what is required to keep a society running. Based on Karl Marx’ idea that “religion is an opiate,” conflict theorists see sport as being the opiate for people in capitalist society. This means that the capitalist system is inherently based on the exploitation of workers; while sports are organized to benefit the owners of sport teams, the athletes are exploited. Furthermore, sport is seen as a perfect distraction for people, which occupies their free time and leaves little room for critical thoughts or any formation of rebellion against the inequalities in society. Thus, organized sports are a distorted form of physical exercise shaped by those possessing power and resources in capitalist systems.

Conflict theoretical researchers focus on issues that question the status quo and widely held beliefs. Questions they try to answer include: Does sport contribute to the alienation of people in capitalist society? What coercion and social control is executed in sports and organized forms of physical activity? Is sport reflecting destructive capitalist phenomena, such as commercialism, nationalism, and militarism? Are racism and sexism part of sport and organized physical activity, just as they are in society in general?

Weaknesses: The limitations of the conflict theory are threefold. First, these theorists exclude any factors other than the capitalist system in explaining the relationship between physical activity, sport, and society. “They see sport as a site where people learn to define their bodies as tools of production and then become alienated from their bodies in the process” (Coakley, 2004, 42). The focus here is that the people in power organize sport for their own benefits and the maximization of their wealth, while the possibility of sport being a force of empowerment for women (see Chapter 7) are totally ignored. Thus, we have an overemphasis on the extent to which sport is controlled by people in positions of power in capitalist society. And lastly, conflict theorists ignore the fact that sport and physical activity, even in a capitalist society, can still be personally creative, expressive, and liberating experiences for individuals. Functionalist and conflict theorists analyze sports and physical activity in society from its social structure. They do not provide a picture of the meaning of sport, fitness, and physical activity in the life of a person and the different needs of various groups in society. Through sport and physical activity, people do not only experience their world, they also form and create it and are formed in return.
These theories also ignore the complexity of social life and the struggles of what is important for different people in their lives. The theories that will pay attention to these facts are: critical, interactionist, as well as feminist and race theories.

(3) Critical Theory

Critical theories see sport as more than a reflection of society. They encompass a variety of theoretical approaches, such as functionalism, conflict, feminist, race, and cultural studies. With this broader focus, they can avoid the major problems of the functionalist and conflict theories when trying to explain the relationship between sport, physical activity, and society. The general assumption is that historical and economic forces are crucial for the understanding of the role of sport and physical activity in society, because these influences govern and shape how people experience and define exercise and sport in their everyday lives. Furthermore, critical theory recognizes that sport - fitness - physical activity in society must be explained in terms of something more than simply the needs of the social system (as done by functionalism) or the production needs of a capitalist system (as done by conflict theorists). Critical theory is based on the idea that both shared values and conflicts of interests exist simultaneously in society; people are not simply puppets following other persons’ order. The relationship between sport and society is never set for all time. It changes as history and economic forces change. Thus, the social structure changes from time to time as well and reflects the way things are in the rest of society. And critical theorists assume that sport - fitness - physical activity can also become a source of protest, opposition, and change.

Weaknesses: General weaknesses of critical theories are that they do not provide a tight, clearly understood framework on how to conduct research in sport sociology that will actually lead to social action; that is, to change society so that everyone will have equal access to the goods of sport - fitness - physical activity. Furthermore, critical theorists do not provide explicit guidelines for determining when sport reaffirms or opposes the status quo of society. In other words, when does sport participation result in the affirmation of societal expectation (i.e., How can sports participation build good character?) or the negation of social values (i.e., Why do some athletes take illegal drugs to enhance their performance?). These issues cannot be answered easily.

Furthermore, critical theory has seldom led to a consideration of the experiences of actual people in everyday life settings. “However, it is clear that dominant norms are not always unfair or oppressive, and that the voices and perspectives of some marginalized and disadvantaged groups are not based on concerns about fairness, liberation, and tolerance of differences. It is important to respect the voices and creative potential of marginalized and oppressive groups, but it
is not politically or morally wise to assume that the contributions made by all groups have equal value when it comes to transforming social life” (Coakley, 2004, 50). Thus, criteria to prioritize ideas and interventions that impact people’s lives need to be established, and how they will impact sport - fitness - physical activity and vice versa.

(4) Interactionist Theory

Interactionist theorists see sports as meaningful interaction between people. This view is based on the assumption that human behavior involves choices, and that choices are based on “meaningful definitions of the situation” that people create as they interact with others. Human beings choose to behave in certain ways, and our identities are formed through the interaction with people. They are never set. In fact, interactions can change over time. That is the reason, for example, why so many couples get divorced when a partner goes back to school. The interactions between partners change, one is advancing and the other is remaining the same, which then leads to different patterns of interactions.

Interactionist theorists research what meaning people give to things and events in their world, which tells us a lot about a person. They do not believe in the cause-effect model, as is used a lot in animal research and then applied to human beings. In many situations, people might react similarly, but they think independently which leads to numerous behavioral variations. Research methods include: ethnographic studies, observational methods, interviews, and more. Questions interactionists try to answer include: Why do some people get involved in sport and physical activity and others do not? How do people see their social worlds and their connections to those worlds?

Weaknesses: Interactionist theories almost solely focus on the interactions and personal relations of people in sport and physical activity. Thus, any explanation on how sport and physical activity partake in the construction of social reality and material conditions in society is missing. The connection between the personal experiences and the sport cultures or the systems of power and inequality that exist in societies, communities, organizations, families, and small groups are not addressed (Coakley, 2004). Issues of power, for example, are of central concern to people who use feminist and race theories.

(5) Feminist and Race Theories

Feminist and race theories are critical theories based on the experiences of women and minorities and the evidence that these groups have been systematically devalued, exploited, and oppressed in many societies. All feminist
and race theories recognize that the values and experiences of men and people in power have shaped science and the production of scientific knowledge. Although all feminists and race theorists are committed to changing the way social life is organized in order to achieve greater equality to all, they do not necessarily agree on what changes are needed. While liberal thinkers identify discrimination and unequal opportunities, radical theorists believe that problems go much deeper since many activities and organizations promote the power of men and the white majority race. Organized popularized sport, for example, reflects male traits, such as physical strength, aggression, and competition that are dominant in sports such as football, ice hockey, boxing, and more. The question of feminist researchers then is how does sport promote the power of women in sport and physical activity? And the question for race theorists is how is racism still entrenched in social life and what are the effects on the world of sport - fitness - physical activity?

“Race theory’s primary mission is to analyze, deconstruct, and socially transform society to improve relationships among race, racism, and power” (Sage & Eitzen, 2013). Historical research of North American sport reveals that sport has been a powerful institution reinforcing stereotypes of women, as well as prejudice and racist thinking about people of color. Since African Americans play such an important role in the world of sports, researchers have incorporated race theory in their analyses of sport, culture, and society. The role of racial and ethnic minorities in sport - fitness - physical activity is examined in greater details in Chapter 6.

Regarding feminist research, in the gendered world of sport, being supportive, kind, caring, and responsive to others – typical so-called female traits – does not count for much; and it certainly does not make one qualified to do anything more important than being a volunteer on the hospitality committee. This is not to say that only women display these behaviors. However, without these voluntary activities, organized sports in our society would fail, especially for children and youth. Here, typically mothers take on the role of “taxi drivers” to the various sporting events, while fathers become the coaches of their children.

Critical feminists have asked uncomfortable questions, such as: Why have many men in the U.S. resisted the spirit of Title IX for over 20 years? This question offends the status quo of sport and society; thus, there have been concerted efforts over the past 10-15 years to portray feminists as social demons. Feminist theorists also assert that sport is more than a mere reflection of society; it takes on a life at its own, which can shape, influence, and change society.

Generally, feminist theories are based on a holistic approach. Stereotypical assumptions about feminists are that these women are not very attractive and
are constantly challenging the status quo in society, demanding abandonment of family, as well as abortion. However, feminists communicate issues regarding women’s role in the family, relationships, sport, and society as a whole. In order to develop the needed knowledge, it is important to look at diverse fields of study, including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, biology, political science, history, economics, religion, and more. There is not just one entity known as feminist theory; there are all kinds of views ranging from the conservative, liberal, radical, psychoanalytical, Marxist/socialist to postmodern feminist thought. The social meaning of feminism is constructed as the range of choices for women. Each perspective offers a challenging and compelling point of view. They all agree on the issue of oppression of women in society, but no coherent answer on how to solve this problem is provided.

The common bond of these various feminist views and race theories is the commitment to gender and racial equality, and an understanding that we are far from having reached that goal. Such equality is intertwined in issues such as Equal Rights Amendments, equal pay for equal work, Title IX, reproduction rights, quality child care facilities, violence against women, and so on. There is considerable disagreement as to the sources of sexism and inequality, and the actions that should be taken to fight the oppressive state. Some believe we need a radical change, some talk about a revolution, and others state that only minor changes have to occur. However, it is important to understand what these various theories all have in common – that they further communication rather than separatism. A common thread might be the identity concept: women and minorities share similar experiences; they face the same external situations, such as economic oppression, commercial exploitation, legal discrimination, and internal responses, such as feelings of inadequacy and the realization of a limited future.

**Weaknesses:** Feminist and race theories have most of the same weaknesses as critical theories. Additionally, because of their exclusive focus on gender or race, they have sometimes given too little attention to other influences that are related to gender in important ways, such as age, social class, (dis)ability, religion, race and nationality.

**Is there a best theoretical approach to use when studying sport and physical activity?**

Every theory serves a certain function. We might think that we do not need theory to make certain decisions in sport - fitness - physical activity, but in effect, everyone bases their choices on some kind of theory they believe in, even subconsciously. Every theory takes us in a different direction. If we do not want to go in that direction, then other decisions are needed, based on a different
theory. Functionalism focuses on the positive sides of sport/physical activity and sport involvement, while conflict theory emphasizes the problematic side. Critical theory suggests that sports are connected to social relations in complex and diverse ways, and that changes are needed in social, political, and economic relations. Interactionist theory focuses on the interpersonal relations of people in sports and physical activity and the subsequent meaning and identities that are formed thereof. Feminist and race theories point out how sport really is supporting the dominant white male culture. All theories have strengths and weaknesses, and no theory explains the complexity of social life. Some theories allow for more social change than others, thus leading to more choices and alternatives for people in sports. Creating alternative ways of doing sports and physical activity requires an awareness of the values underlying dominant forms of sport. This will be discussed in Chapter 3.

References

