Part One

Perspectives on Sport
The discovery of sociology can change your life. It can help you to understand the social forces you confront, the forces that constrain and free you as you go about living your life. This understanding offers a liberating potential: To gain insight into how these social forces influence your life allows you to stand somewhat apart from at least some of them, and thereby exert more creative control over your own life. (Henslin, 1999: 1–2)

In the epigraph, Henslin is paraphrasing from Berger’s (1963) *Invitation to Sociology*. Discovering the sociology of sport can also change your life – if you are an athlete, and/or a student in sport studies or the sport sciences. It can help you to understand the social forces that affect your involvement in sport and physical activity, and that knowledge may help you to exert more control over your participation. This chapter is concerned with the fundamental aspect of understanding in sociology – social theory. It begins with an
extended example, a demonstration of the way in which an analysis of the relationship between sport and social class reveals the two main schools of thought in sociology. The example outlines the strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches, and shows how they are connected to political decisions that are made about health, sport and physical activity. This is followed by a synthesis of the two schools of thought showing how, in combination, they provide a much clearer understanding of the ways in which social forces influence participation. The latter part of the chapter presents a brief history of the development of sociological thought in the sociology of sport, and a short analysis of the methods used in research in the sociology of sport. The chapter concludes with some ideas about the future of this field of study.

One of the most important bodies of research in the sociology of sport concerns the relationships between sport and social inequality – how does social inequality affect access to and participation in sports and physical activity? Research consistently shows not only that, in multicultural societies, racial minorities enjoy more limited access to sports and physical activity than the racial majority population, but also that racial minority participation tends to be limited to specific sports that are stereotypically associated with particular racial minorities. Similarly, research consistently shows that girls and women have lower rates of participation in sports and physical activity than boys and men; and that the higher a person’s income and/or level of education (social class), the more likely he, and increasingly she, is to participate in sport and physical activity. This leads to the first point to be made about such relationships: no one is characterised only by their race/ethnicity, their gender, or their social class: ‘Each of us has a gender, a social class background, a racial/ethnic affiliation, and a variety of other social characteristics that serve as advantages or disadvantages in the various structural and cultural circumstances of our lives, and we relate to each other on the basis of ours and theirs’ (Donnelly, 1995). Thus, any examples of research accounting for only one of these characteristics must be seen as partial.

Second, interpreting statistical relationships is tricky. They show that \( a \) is related to \( b \); they do not show that \( a \) caused \( b \). Thus, we need to be cautious before assuming that, and interpreting the reasons why there are relationships between sport and social inequality. If we find a relationship between, for example, wearing brown shoes and achieving high marks in examinations, we have no problem seeing it as a meaningless relationship – it is highly unlikely that wearing brown shoes caused the higher marks. Other relationships may lead us to suppose causality. If, for example, we found a relationship between bodybuilding and feelings of sexual inadequacy, we might think that there are reasons to expect such a relationship. It is certainly a theme that has recurred in some fitness industry advertising, where bodybuilding is supposed to relieve such feelings.

The explanation of such relationships is referred to in science (including the social sciences) as a theory. It is the best, currently accepted, explanation of the available evidence of a relationship or a natural phenomenon – why the apple fell from the tree; why the bath water rises when you get in; why everyone is soon aware that there is a flatulent person in the seminar room. New evidence may confirm the theory, or lead to newer
explanations – the theory of creation becomes the theory of evolution; Newtonian physics is supplemented by the theory of relativity. In the natural sciences, the process of explanation is continual, and in many cases relatively straightforward. The process of explanation in the social sciences – social theory – is not nearly so straightforward. As Giddens notes:

1. We cannot approach society, or ‘social facts’, as we do objects or events in the natural world, because societies only exist in so far as they are created and re-created in our own actions as human beings …
2. … Atoms cannot get to know what scientists say about them, or change their behaviour in light of that knowledge. Human beings can do so. Thus, the relation between sociology and its ‘subject-matter’ is necessarily different from that involved in the natural sciences. (1982: 13–15)

Thus, our theory about bodybuilders is easily overturned by ‘sexually inadequate’ individuals who decide to stop participating in bodybuilding because of what it might reveal about their sexual adequacy, or by ‘sexually adequate’ individuals who do not give much credence to the theory and decide to become involved in bodybuilding for other reasons.

THE TWO SOCIOLOGIES

To return to the relationship between social class and participation, sociological explanations tend to fall into one of the two main historical approaches to social theory – what we refer to here as agency theories and structure theories (sometimes called social action theories and social system theories). Our explanation is easier if we place participation in sport and physical activity in the larger context of health, and if we start with the idea of agency. A major justification for participation – for the existence of public and private fitness centres and for government expenditure on sport and physical activity – is that we are supposed to be responsible for our own health. A number of neo-liberal governments now claim that they can no longer afford public funding for health care for a population that does not take some responsibility for its own health. Thus we find a whole catalogue of advice, demands and moral suasion designed to encourage people to become more active and take better care of themselves. The following is a recent example, from the British Chief Medical Officer, Liam Donaldson:

TEN TIPS FOR BETTER HEALTH

1. Don’t smoke. If you can, stop. If you can’t, cut down.
2. Follow a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables.
4. Manage stress: e.g. talk things through, make time to relax.
5. If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.
None of these ‘tips’ is unfamiliar to us. We have heard similar messages often, in the media, in government statements, in health and physical education classes. The messages take many of the well-known causes of illness, injury and premature death and suggest how to avoid them. And what they all have in common is the assumption of individual responsibility and choice with regard to lifestyle decisions.

Agency, or action, refers to the freedom that individuals enjoy to act in a manner of their own choosing. It refers to behaviour that is not thought to be determined by outside forces; and it tends to be associated with individualism, voluntarism and free will. At its extreme, it leads to statements such as Margaret Thatcher’s view of ‘society’: ‘There is no such thing as society, only individuals’. Sportspeople, and students of sport, often concur with this view of society. They produce, observe and are impressed by individual efforts; some even tend to see team sports only as a collection of individuals temporarily working together. They are often impressed by psychological explanations of motivation, individual effort, and success or failure. Furthermore they are likely to be convinced that individuals ought to be active and live healthy lifestyles because people are, or ought to be, responsible for their own health; and they are likely to attribute ill health or overweight to personal shortcomings and failures on the part of the individual. In sociological terms, agency theories tend to focus more on the ways in which individuals create and give meaning to their world. Sociological theories emphasising this approach include: ethnomethodology, methodological individualism, phenomenology and some of the other interpretive sociologies (cf. Donnelly, 2000).

Agency theories represent one of what Dawe (1970) termed ‘the two sociologies’. Standing in contrast are structure theories, which are based on the premise that our actions are determined by social forces and social structures. Sociological theories emphasising this approach include: some forms of Marxism, structuralism and some forms of structural functionalism. At its extreme this approach argues that, so powerful are the institutions, social processes and social forces that govern people’s lives, individual actions (agency) are ineffectual. However, the emphasis given to structure in sociology tends to be on relationships between social structures, or on social relations, rather than individuals.

If we return to our social class, health and physical activity example, a search of the literature indicates that a great deal of solid evidence is ignored when the causes of illness, injury and premature death are attributed only to lifestyle choices. Numerous articles in leading medical journals, and a great deal of evidence summarised in books such as Evans et al. (1994) Why Are Some People Healthy and Others Not? and reports such as Raphael’s (2001b) Inequality Is Bad for Our Hearts, suggest that (in addition to genetics) poverty and lack of education are far better predictors of disease than inappropriate lifestyle
choices. In other words, these data indicate that social structure (e.g. the class system, social inequality and social relations between the social classes) is a better predictor of disease than agency. The evidence is summarised by Giddens:

Working class people have on average lower birth weight and higher rates of infant mortality, are smaller at maturity, less healthy, and die at a younger age than those in higher class categories. Major types of mental disorder and physical illness including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, pneumonia and bronchitis are all more common at lower levels of the class structure than towards the top. (1989: 215)

The magnitude of the effect is quite striking. Raphael (2001b) cites a study in Toronto, Canada, which showed that one’s chance of dying from a heart attack increased 10 per cent for each drop of $10,000 in income.

Raphael (2001a: A8) notes that ‘23% of all premature years of life lost prior to age 75 in Canada can be attributed to income differences’. Of these lost years, 22 per cent result from heart attack and stroke, 17 per cent from injuries and 14 per cent from cancers. Thus, ‘the material conditions under which we live – especially during childhood – are far greater determinants of whether we die from illness than our adult “lifestyle choices”’ (Raphael, 2001b: A8). Evans et al. (1994) show that ‘top people live longer’, and they do so despite statistical controls for ‘lifestyle choices’ such as smoking and physical activity. Current views of this difference point, not to greater knowledge of health care due to higher levels of education, or the ability to purchase ‘better’ nutrition and health care, but to the sense of being in control of one’s life:

Higher incomes are related to better health not only because wealthier people can buy adequate food, clothing, shelter and other necessities, but also because wealthier people have more choices and control over decisions in their lives. The sense of being in control is intrinsic to good health. (National Forum on Health, 1997)

This sense of the effects of structure (the social and material conditions of our lives) rather than agency (our lifestyle choices) led David Gordon at Bristol University to devise the rather tongue-in-cheek:

**ALTERNATIVE TEN TIPS FOR BETTER HEALTH**

1. Don’t be poor. If you can, stop. If you can’t, try not to be poor for long.
2. Don’t have poor parents.
3. Own a car.
5. Don’t live in damp, low-quality housing.
6. Be able to afford to go on a foreign holiday and sunbathe.
7. Practise not losing your job and don’t become unemployed.
8. Take up all benefits you are entitled to, if you are unemployed, retired or sick or disabled.
Population activity studies – which define some people as ‘inactive’ or ‘sedentary’ – raise serious concerns about research that is usually based on middle-class assumptions about white-collar jobs and exercise as a lifestyle choice – they often only measure recreational physical activity:

Housework, child care, manual labour, work that involves being on your feet, and the activities that some define as leisure and others as a chore (e.g. gardening) … [which] account for the majority of energy expenditure of Canadians – remain unrecorded in most surveys. (Donnelly and Harvey, 1996)

Since lower-income people are far more likely to be involved in manual work or work that involves standing, to use public transport, and to have less access to child care and house cleaning and maintenance services, assumptions about and measures of ‘inactive’ populations are likely to be misleading.2

THE TWO SOCIOLOGIES: A SYNTHESIS

This extended example provides an ideal account of ‘the two sociologies’ – what Gouldner (1975) referred to as ‘man on his back’ (structure) and ‘man fighting back’ (agency). Each provides a highly plausible explanation of the relationship between social class and sport and physical activity, and each is well supported by evidence. As individuals (agents) we ought to make healthy lifestyle choices; but can we be blamed for the circumstances of our lives – for having poor parents or for having to live and work in unhealthy environments? Those adopting an agency perspective attribute lower levels of participation among lower-class individuals to a lack of motivation, and a lack of concern for personal health and well-being. Structural interpretations are likely to point to involvement in manual labour, low incomes, low education levels, and other structural and environmental circumstances in the lives of low-income people to explain lower levels of participation. In addition to the dilemma this creates, each interpretation is quite political, another element of sociological theory that must be considered. Agency explanations of the relationship, when attempting to account for the failure of some people to participate in sport and physical activity, or engage in other healthy lifestyle practices, can have the following consequences:

• they lead to victim-blaming – moral sanctions, or threats to withdraw health care from individuals who appear to have made unhealthy lifestyle choices;
• they lead to patronising attitudes about individuals who are considered not to know better, or to be too weak-willed to make healthy lifestyle choices; and
they lead to poor policy decisions with regard to creating education programmes, public service advertising campaigns, and the provision of sport and fitness programmes and facilities that do not take into account the circumstances of people’s lives.

Structural explanations of the relationship, when attempting to account for the failure of some people to participate in sport and physical activity, or to engage in other healthy lifestyle practices, can have the following consequences:

- they lead to criticisms about cuts to public spending on programmes and facilities, when such programmes and facilities were not necessarily ones that were supported by all individuals;
- they lead to compassion, and occasionally patronising attitudes, about the structural circumstances of people’s lives without any real sense of how to involve people in changing those structural circumstances; and
- they lead to poor policy decisions with regard to creating sport and fitness programmes and facilities which address some of the structural barriers to participation, but often fail to take into account individual needs, interests and choices.

In political terms, agency interpretations are preferred by the neo-conservative end of the political spectrum while structural interpretations are preferred by the social democratic end of the spectrum. Unfortunately, the political centre often combines the worst of both approaches (see Box 1.1).

**Box 1.1 An example of the relationships between structure and agency**

Consider the example of Women Organizing Activity for Women (WOAW), a programme of physical activity for low-income single mothers with pre-school children developed in British Columbia, Canada, by Wendy Frisby. An enlightened group of health, physical activity and recreation professionals and academics met, together with representatives of the target population, to plan the programme. The details of the programme were developed, and were about to be finalised, when the mothers announced that they would not be able to participate. When asked why, they in turn asked, “who will look after our children?” It became clear that none of the academics or professionals had considered the issue of child care. Child care provisions were added to the programme, and it became a success because the participants also had an opportunity to determine the form of the programme. (The most popular activities reflected the interests and structural conditions of the lives of the target population – see if you can guess the two most popular activities before you check the

(Continued)
end note. Without the participation of the target population in the decision-making process day care provision would not have been made, very few people would have become involved in the programme, and the professionals and academics might have concluded that low-income mothers of pre-school children were not interested in physical activity programmes, and further concluded that, therefore, there was no need to make provision of such programmes. The participants were interested, but were also far more aware than the usual policy makers of the structural circumstances of their lives. Without their input, even a well-meaning policy decision would have failed.

In sociology, the struggle to develop a synthesis, or a compromise, between ‘the two sociologies’ has been under way for some time. In fact, 150 years ago Marx recognised that: ‘Men make their own history [agency], but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past [structure]’ (1852/1991: 15). Thompson and Tunstall asked: ‘Do the two approaches of social systems and social action theory simply correspond to our own ambivalent experience of society as something that constrains us and yet also something that we ourselves construct?’ (1975: 476). Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) ideas about ‘the social construction of reality’, Giddens’ structuration theory, the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, and the critical cultural studies developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, have all consciously attempted to effect this compromise. For Berger and Luckmann, ‘society forms the individuals who create society [social construction of reality] in a continuous dialectic’ (Jary and Jary, 1995: 664). Giddens argues that ‘societies only exist in so far as they are created and re-created in our own actions [agency] as human beings’ (1982: 13), and he resolves the dilemma by proposing the ‘duality of structure’ – ‘“structure” is both the medium and the outcome of the actions which are recursively organized by structures’ (Abercrombie et al., 2000: 8). Bourdieu’s approach is evident in the work of one of his former students, Loïc Wacquant’s (1992) study of boxing in an African American neighbourhood of Chicago. Wacquant locates the actions (agency) of the boxers within the class and racial structures of the United States, and the subculture of the boxing gym. Although each of these theoretical approaches has influenced the sociology of sport, it is critical cultural studies which have had the greatest impact on the field in the last 20 years.

The relationship between social class and participation in sport and physical activity is much more complex than it is possible to explain by either agency or structure interpretations alone. Individuals do choose whether to participate or not, if the circumstances of their lives permit such a choice. And even if the choice is available to an individual, a whole host of circumstances from that person’s past (e.g. whether his/her family had been involved in sport, or had encouraged participation; the person’s experiences in school physical education
classes, etc.) and present (e.g. whether transportation and child care are available; whether they are safe; and whether people are made to feel welcome and comfortable participating) may affect his/her decision. Donnelly and Harvey (1996: 23–4) outline the structural barriers to participation in sport and physical activity, which they classify as:

- **infrastructural barriers** – associated with the material means of access (e.g. cost, available transportation, time, etc.);
- **superstructural barriers** – associated with ideas about access (e.g. policies, knowledge, prejudice, etc.); and
- **procedural barriers** – associated with the course of action available to individuals to attain access (e.g. social support, citizens’ rights, organisational structure and management style).

In addition, two types of access are identified:

- **participational access** – when individuals have information; when they are able to cope with procedures associated with access (e.g. registration); and when they meet competent staff who are sensitive to diversity; and
- **representational access** – when participants (i.e. those with participational access) are also present in the structure and decision-making process.

Donnelly characterised the latter as ‘a fully democratised sport and leisure environment [which] include(s) both the right to participate, regardless of one’s particular set of social characteristics, and the right to be involved in determination of the forms, circumstances and meanings of participation’ (1993: 417). In other words, the agency of participants is involved in creating and recreating the structural circumstances of their participation.

**ANOTHER EXAMPLE**

An additional example, involving athletes’ use of performance-enhancing drugs, shows, first, how agency and structure interpretations have become a part of our everyday lives and, second, how social theory helps to resolve these overly simplified interpretations of human behaviour. An athlete has to decide to ingest or inject a banned substance; it is a conscious act, and the athlete is almost always aware that it is an illegal act in the world of sport. Thus, given the assumption of agency, it is appropriate to blame the athlete, who is attempting to win by illegal means, and to impose what sanctions there are available.

This would be fine if athletes lived alone in a vacuum, but they are also a part of society and act within and are influenced by its structures. Those defending rather than blaming athletes for taking banned substances may point to the larger cultural and structural context in which athletes now live:
the ‘culture of excellence’ which only values winning;
• the medicalisation of society, in which drugs are developed and sold for a whole range of conditions that were not previously defined as ‘medical’;
• the rationalisation of the body, in which athletes’ bodies are treated and trained as ‘objects’ somehow removed from the personhood of the athletes;
• the professionalisation of sport, which has added income to the prestige of winning (in a culture of excellence) – a dangerous combination encouraging individuals to take risks in order to be the best; and
• public demand for records, and for more spectacular athletic performances.

In addition, they might consider the subculture of sport, and look at drug use from an athlete’s perspective. In 1991, after the Ben Johnson scandal and the exposures of the Dubin Inquiry, Canadian sprinter Angella Issajenko made the following statement: ‘Athletes will do whatever they have to to win. They know that random testing is in [introduced in Canada as a result of the Dubin Inquiry], and they are still prepared to take the risk.’

The elements that help to explain such risk taking from an athlete’s perspective include:

• positive deviance – athletes overconforming to the norms of sport (Hughes and Coakley, 1991), which includes taking such risks in order to win;
• the social relations of sport, which often involve controlling relationships between coaches and athletes, and may extend to a coach’s implicit or explicit condoning of drug use;
• an athlete’s commitment to sport, which involves so much time, cost and sacrifice on the part of the athlete, and his/her family, and which may lead to an athlete seeking an ‘edge’ in order to justify their sacrifices;
• the structure of sport, in which government and sponsor funding, and a place on national teams, are only available to athletes who achieve and maintain a certain level of performance;
• the abusive nature of sport, which always includes punishing one’s body, and which may include abusive dietary practices, a variety of therapies (some ethically questionable) for the rapid rehabilitation of injured athletes, and ‘psychodoping’ (Coakley, 1992), creates a context in which the use of ‘natural’ chemicals (e.g. testosterone, HGH) seems normal; and
• the athlete information network, in which information is informally and easily shared among athletes competing internationally – information concerning drugs and ‘supplements’, who is using drugs, what they are using and in what dosages, and how they are getting away with it.

So, is it the athlete’s fault? Is it society’s fault? Or is the fault in the system of sport that we have created? Of course, the ‘fault’ (a word which implies that we have already judged the
situation, so ‘cause’ might be a better term) lies in all three. The society in which the athlete lives, and the social formations and networks in which the athlete trains and competes, exist in a dialectical relationship with the athlete. Decisions made by the athlete cannot be independent of those contexts; the athlete will make a decision about the use of banned substances, but that decision can only be understood in light of the circumstances in which it is made.

The simple assignment of blame/cause to the athlete or the system makes a good pub argument, and is carried out in the media. But, as we have seen here, it is quite as sociological. To paraphrase Douglas et al., ‘human actions [cannot only] be explained in terms of concrete individual factors (such as individual will, choice, or the concrete situations individuals face) or in terms of something outside of the individual (such as culture or social structure) that determines or causes what they will do’ (1980: 183). Our understanding of human behaviour can only be developed when we tease out the complex interactions between individuals and the social structures in which they live. And, as Henslin notes: ‘This understanding offers a liberating potential: To gain insight into how these social forces influence your life allows you to stand somewhat apart from at least some of them, and thereby exert more creative control over your own life’ (1999, p. 2).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

In many ways, the theoretical development of theory in the sociology of sport parallels the process outlined above. Separate and often unreflexive concerns with structure and agency in the early stages of development eventually lead to a more sophisticated synthesis of the two in more recent research. A separate subdiscipline of sociology recognised as the sociology of sport began to emerge in the mid-1960s in the United States (Kenyon and Loy, 1965; Loy and Kenyon, 1969). Its origins were in both sociology and physical education, its practitioners were often advocates for, and fans of, sport and, as a consequence, little of the early work was critical in nature. This is problematic since sociology is often considered to be a ‘critical’ science – everyday assumptions about social relations, and aspects of social life that are considered to be ‘common sense’, are exposed to analysis to determine whether such assumptions and aspects of common sense are supported by evidence. The development of the sociology of sport can be traced through three relatively distinct phases of theory, interpretation and explanation: namely, reflection, reproduction and resistance.

Reflection

The early, uncritical work in the sociology of sport was rooted in the assumption that ‘sport reflects society’ or, to put it another way, ‘sport is a mirror [or microcosm] of society’ (the reflection thesis). This view is not incorrect; in fact, it is quite obvious. How could a major cultural institution such as sport not reflect the societies in which it is
practised? If the economy is capitalist, and women have less social power than men in a particular society, is it likely that the major cultural institutions such as sport will be characterised by socialist economic principles and gender equity? This approach was connected to structural functionalism, the predominant theory at the time in US sociology, and the most significant initial influence on sociology of sport almost everywhere that it began to emerge. And within structural functionalism:

If there was a theme that seemed to best articulate the mission of the sociology of sport in the early period, it was socialization. It was inclusive: Within it one could look at ‘sex’ differences, race differences, child development, who entered into organized sport and how, categoric differences in enculturation, moral development, and so forth. (Ingham and Donnelly, 1997: 367)

Thus, sport was considered to be beneficial and functional. Through sport individuals learned how to become members of their social system – to set goals, maintain discipline, manage aggression and adapt to change.

Since structural functionalism, especially as expressed in the work of Talcott Parsons, is often considered to flip-flop between agency and structure (as opposed to subsequent attempts to discover a synthesis between the two), this was evident in the sociology of sport. Agency was evident in the assumed voluntary nature of social action – individuals participated in sport, and behaved in the ways they did, because that was their choice. The emphasis on individuals was also evident in the close relationship between the sociology and psychology of sport during their early manifestations; and in the early studies of sport from a symbolic interactionist perspective, which examined the individual actors’ definitions of the situation and creation of meaning in sport subcultures. In contrast, the individual disappeared when analyses turned to structure, deriving from Parsons’s later emphasis on social systems. The sociology of sport focused on social processes (e.g. socialisation, social change), and social institutions such as sport and the related institutions (e.g. education, politics). This also represented a more valid adaptation of Parsons’s system needs (see note 9).

While the reflection thesis is accurate, it is also obvious, and passive, but not necessarily uncritical (if one takes a dim view of gender inequity, that criticism is unlikely to stop short of criticising sport). The consensus view outlined above came to be challenged by a conflict view of sport which focused on social problems, and began to emphasise the sexist, racist and exploitative nature of sport (cf. Hoch, 1972; Scott, 1971) – issues that reflected those concerns in the larger society. Sport was seen as the new ‘opiate of the masses’ (in the nineteenth century Karl Marx had referred to religion as the ‘opiate of the masses’), socialising individuals into an uncritical acceptance of status quo inequities.

Reproduction

It soon became evident that the reflection thesis did not explain the relationship between sport and society. However, although it only served to describe a status quo, it was an
important initial stage for the sociology of sport. It helped to overcome a view that sport was a distinct sphere, somehow separate from, and perhaps even transcending, social life (e.g. Novak, 1976). The rather primitive Marxism of the conflict perspective was an important transitional stage, leading those concerned with a critical sociology of sport, and those critical of the status quo in sport, to search for more sophisticated theoretical tools. They found them in European sociological theory, and in a sociology of sport that was emerging in France and Germany. Work by Brohm (1978), Rigauer (1969) and Vinnai (1973), in English translations, began to have a powerful impact on North American and British sociology of sport, and became part of what Ingham and Donnelly (1997) referred to as the ‘critical shift’ in the subdiscipline.

The European neo-Marxist critique of sport argued that sport socialised individuals into work discipline, hyper-competitiveness and assertive individualism. In other words, sport not only reflected capitalist society, but also helped to reproduce it, to reproduce dominant social and cultural relations in society as a whole (Hargreaves, 1986). The idea of social reproduction was drawn, in part, from Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1970) work on education, in which they demonstrated how the French educational system helped to reproduce the social class structure of French society. Thus, in the sociology of sport, rather than passively mirroring society, sport could now be seen as actively helping to maintain a particular set of power relations in an inequitable society.10

A further shift in the sociology of sport in the 1980s led to far greater attention being paid to gender and race than to social class, and here the reproduction thesis proved to be invaluable. Sport came to be seen as a ‘school for masculinity’ – at a time of rapidly changing gender relations and increasing social power for women, sport was considered to be one of the last bastions of masculine power. In addition to helping to reproduce gender relations, sport also came to be viewed as one of the barriers to changing race relations – helping to maintain the notion that certain racial characteristics (mental and physical) existed, and promoting stereotypical views of them. However, the reproduction thesis is rooted in structural thinking. There is no agency evident in analyses that focus on social processes and social relations of power. The reproduction thesis came to be considered as an accurate and dynamic, but partial attempt to characterise the relationship between sport and society.

Resistance

The reproduction thesis characterises a dynamic, but one-way relationship between sport and society. If the status quo is effectively reproduced from generation to generation, then no changes in the relative power of social groups, and their social and cultural relations, will occur. Individuals are rendered as passive agents: either as falsely conscious consumers of the new ‘opiate of the masses’ (namely, sport), unaware of the forces involved in producing and reproducing inequality and maintaining their subordinate status; or ‘as passive learners “molded” and “shaped” by “society”’ (Coakley, 1993: 170). If individuals
are to play some part in understanding, giving meaning to and shaping their destiny, then it is necessary to reintroduce agency. Despite the overwhelming differences in social power that exist between a wealthy ruling elite and everyone else, we are not powerless. The resistance thesis attempts to capture the two-way process in which reproductive forces are resisted – in which agency confronts structure.

The first, and still one of the more valuable attempts to characterise this process, to synthesise agency and structure in the sociology of sport, is Gruneau’s (1983) *Class, Sport, and Social Development*. His solution is developed from the ideas of Gramsci, Williams and Bourdieu. The resistance thesis, sometimes referred to as hegemony theory, is rooted in Antonio Gramsci’s ideas about social power. Before Gramsci, hegemony referred to the straightforward domination of, for example, one nation or social class over another. Gramsci recognised that hegemony worked in more subtle ways, often aided by the compliance of those in the subordinate position. As Williams noted:

> A lived hegemony is always a process … Moreover … it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own … That is to say, alternative political and cultural emphases, and the many forms of opposition and struggle, are important not only in themselves but as indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to control. (1977: 112–13)

These ideas permitted sport to be seen as not only dominated by elites such as the International Olympic Committee, FIFA, sporting goods manufacturers and media conglomerates, but also ‘contested terrain’, as the ‘site of struggles’ over ‘the forms, circumstances and meanings of participation’ (Donnelly, 1993: 417; see also Donnelly, 1988).

In the resistance thesis, individuals are seen as active, self-reflexive agents (a) who ‘might quite consciously value sports as meaningful and beneficial aspects of their lives, while at the same time being aware that ruling groups attempt to use sport as an instrument of control’ (Hargreaves, 1982: 43; see also Gruneau, 1983: 151–2); (b) who have the capacity to change the conditions under which they practise sport and recognise and change the conditions that maintain their subordinate status; and (c) whose attempts at resistance sometimes have an opposite effect, serving to reinforce the conditions of their subordination (cf. Donnelly, 1988). Thus, the resistance thesis focuses on sport as an aspect of culture, produced (socially constructed) by the participants but not always in the manner of their own choosing. Critical cultural studies of sport have examined, among other things, sport subcultures, sport media, gender and racial relations in sport, and more recently globalisation processes. As such, these studies become part of the ‘struggles’, because they expose the hegemonic process. For example, some studies of gender and the media (Cluer et al., 2001; Duncan and Messner, 2000) appear to show that a sustained, evidence-based critique of media sources regarding their marginalisation and trivialisation of women’s sports is having an impact in terms of increasing and more equitable sports coverage for women.
A NOTE ON FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

This discussion of agency and structure in sociological theory – as evidenced in the sociology of sport – would not be complete without taking note of the important contribution of the work of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning to this field of study (e.g. Dunning, 1999; Elias and Dunning, 1986). Their work, and that of others following Elias’s figurational (or process) approach to sociology (e.g. Maguire, 1999), have been prominent in sport studies in the UK and The Netherlands, and increasingly in Japan. Rather than attempting a synthesis/dialectical relationship between agency and structure, or the individual and society, Eliasian sociologists argue that these are artificial distinctions. Their focus is on constantly changing social configurations produced by the interactions among interdependent individuals, and on the social processes that are simultaneously produced by, and produce, these social configurations. Work in this area of theory tends to take a much longer-term historical view of social processes than other sociologies, and important research on sport is evident in analyses of such processes as globalisation, democratisation, sportisation (the process by which sports developed and spread), parliamentarisation, and the civilising process. In addition to studying the development of sport (and specific sports such as rugby and boxing), Elias, Dunning and others are best known in the sociology of sport for their work on soccer hooliganism, the globalisation of sport, and health and injury issues in sport.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The growing sophistication of sociological theory (for the interpretation of data) occurred in parallel with the use of increasingly sophisticated sociological methods (for the collection of data). Some of these methods were developed in sociology, but others have been borrowed from history, anthropology and literary studies. Perhaps the best known of these is survey research, employing written or oral questionnaires. Methods range through various forms of textual analysis (from content analysis to discourse analysis), to observation, participant observation and in-depth interviewing. The last group of methods is now often referred to as ethnography – an in-depth analysis of a social setting or social phenomenon in an attempt to understand it from the participants’ perspectives. Growing sophistication is most evident in the use of multiple methods, not just for the purposes of ‘triangulation’ (Denzin, 1970) – where various methods are used in order to determine the validity of results from one of the methods – but also in recognition of the complexity of social phenomena, and the need to obtain as many sources of data as possible in order to generate a more complete understanding.

For example, a comprehensive study of Olympic television coverage might include analyses of the following:
• **The audience** – a broad-based audience survey to determine who they are and what they watched (this might include secondary analysis of the media’s own audience surveys); in-depth interviews with selected audience members to discover the meanings they attached to the coverage; focus groups of audience members to discuss their observations of Olympic coverage; and participant observation with individuals or groups watching the Olympics in order to understand how they watch, what they see, and how they interpret what they see.

• **The content** – quantitative content analyses to determine exactly what was shown, when and for how long; and more qualitative textual or discourse analyses to discover how sports were shown, and what meanings were given to the coverage by the broadcasting crews, the sponsors, etc. This could include analyses of the commentary, the content, and the way in which that content was selected and presented, and in commercial media sources, the types of advertising shown.

• **The production** – in order to discover how Olympic broadcasts are made, a researcher (or research team) might interview key production staff; examine (content and textual analysis) broadcast policy documents produced by the International Olympic Committee, the local organising committee, the host broadcaster, sponsors and advertising agencies, and the actual broadcaster (CBC, BBC, etc.); and observe planning and production meetings, editing and production suites, and on-site commentary and electronic news-gathering crews.

Even if the research team decides to limit its research to one Olympic sport, it is evident that a complete study – taking into account the three primary elements of media analysis (production, content and audience) – is a complex and expensive undertaking.

Similarly with reference to the example given above, a research project on the use of banned substances in sport using, for example, a critical cultural studies perspective, might take into account:

• the perspectives of the athletes (using participant observation and in-depth interviews);

• the perspectives of those individuals who ‘support’ high-performance athletes (coaches, medical staff, psychologists and other sport scientists, agents, sponsors, sport organisation officials, the media, family and friends, etc.);

(These first two sources of data involve the researcher gaining, and honouring, a great deal of insider information and trust in what has traditionally been a secretive and closed system of sport.)
the structure of the sport system; and
the values of the society that support the sport system and the athletes.

And such a study might ask searching questions about power relations and vested interests in that sport system; or why athletes are the main focus for punishment for taking banned substances and rarely the suppliers of drugs, the suppliers of information about their use, and those who turn a blind eye to undetected use because their position and income depend on the performances of athletes.

FUTURE TRENDS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

Predicting future trends is always risky, especially at the time of writing when the events of 11 September 2001 appear to be having a long-term impact on, for example, processes of globalisation, and systems of surveillance and social control. The sociology of sport is also an extremely wide-ranging and active field of research, so any predictions must also be partial. However, the following issues seem to be attracting attention:

- the globalisation of sport, including its relationship to local and regional sport practices, and to issues of identity;
- continuing critical analysis of the commercialisation of sport, including the parts played by sponsors, media conglomerates and national and international sports organisations;
- growing interest in the contradiction between sport as a healthy practice and the high degree of risk and injury evident in many sporting practices, and the institutionalisation of sports medicine;
- the interests in commercialisation and health also combined in growing research interest in labour practices and legal issues in sport and sports-related industries;
- the production of sporting mega-events (Olympics, World Cups, etc.), including the involvement of various levels of government, citizen involvement (or lack of), the development and construction industries, the spaces that are dedicated to such events, the legacy of such events, and environmental concerns;
- a revival of interest in social class, and its intersections with gender and ethnocultural heritage, in relation to sport and physical activity practices and barriers (e.g. the earlier example of WOAW concerns the intersections of class, gender and age/parenthood);
- an increasing body of research on sport policy and policy-related issues ranging from the use of sport to combat social ills such as obesity and social exclusion, to the
continuing struggle for resources between high-performance sport and sport for all, to the use of sport as a foreign policy tool in programmes of sport development, and development through sport;

- growing interest in postmodern analyses of sport, which have provided important cautions with regard to the politics of research methods, and with regard to the types of claims and generalisations that can be drawn from sociological research.

Social theory provides the interpretive tools for analysis of these and many other issues of interest to those involved in the sociology of sport.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

» There are two main schools of thought in the sociology of sport, one which emphasises agency, the freedom of individuals to act in a manner of their own choosing, and the other which emphasises structure, the extent to which individual actions are constrained by social forces and social structures.

» A synthesis of these two schools of thought is possible whereby variation in participation in sport, for example, may be explained in terms of the involvement of participants as agents in creating and recreating the structural circumstances of their participation.

» Sociology of sport has moved through a number of phases of analysis – reflection, reproduction and, most recently, resistance.

» Future concerns within the sociology of sport include globalisation, critical analysis of commercialisation, the tension between health and injury in sport, mega-events and social exclusion.

**FURTHER READING**

Henslin (1999) provides a sound introduction to the major concepts and schools of thought in sociology and Donnelly (2000) illustrates their application in the sociology of sport. Wacquant’s (1992) analysis of boxing in the black community of Chicago illustrates the insights to be gained from a synthesis of structure and agency approaches in sociology. Ingham and Donnelly (1997) provide an overview of the development of the sociology of sport.
NOTES

1 While the focus of this chapter is on sociology and sociological theory, it should be pointed out that social thought regarding the structure and agency dilemma is evident in all of the social sciences – anthropology, political economy, history and even economics.

2 Of course, physical activity does not automatically lead to good health, as many coal miners, injured athletes and anorexic figure skaters could attest. We do have concerns about the health of those involved in heavy physical work, and physical activity, in unhealthy environments. Ingham put this in perspective with regard to recreational physical activity when he wrote: ‘The fusion of new right ideology and right-thinking common sense … promotes a lifestyle which exhorts us to save our hearts by jogging in the arsenic filled air of Tacoma’ (1985: 50). His comment has proven to be prophetic since a fairly recent California study shows a direct link between lung disease and air pollution among children involved in outdoor sports: ‘the most active children in high-smog communities developed asthma at a rate three times that of children in the low-smog areas’ (Mittelstaedt, 2002: A8).

3 However, as Jary and Jary have noted, despite many disagreements regarding the relationships between the two concepts, and problems of definition, ‘most forms of sociological theory can be located … as recognizing the importance of both structural determinacy and individual agency’ (1995: 663–4).

4 The two most popular activities were dance (reflecting a need for pleasure and sociability) and self-defence (reflecting another reality in the lives of some low-income women).

5 Athletes in East Germany in the 1970s were often not aware that they were being given banned substances; and, until athletes were warned about contamination of health food supplements, a number of those who tested positive for nandrolone were probably unaware that they had ingested a performance-enhancing drug. This example of the structural circumstances in which athletes use drugs is drawn from Donnelly (1991).

6 Readers might wish to try a similar case study, exposing explanations of athletic success, for example, to detailed analysis. Is it only a result of individual effort involving both mental determination and physical prowess? Or is it a result of a sophisticated talent recognition and sport development system using all of the most up-to-date knowledge, equipment and personnel from sport science and coaching science?

7 Parts of this section are drawn from Donnelly (1996), who develops reflection, reproduction and resistance theses from Alan Ingham and John Loy, and from Ingham and Donnelly (1997). The section provides a simplified description of the development of this field of study.

8 Students often view criticism as destructive. However, in science criticism is considered to be a constructive process involved in the development of knowledge. In the social sciences, criticism often exposes the assumptions and power relations that exist in everyday views of what is considered to be ‘common sense’. Lazarsfeld (1949) exposed the dangers of ‘common sense’ when he revisited the findings of a well-known study of the American soldier in World War II. He presented a series of findings of the study (e.g. ‘As long as the fighting continued, men were more eager to be returned to the States than they were after the German surrender’) that appeared to be ‘common sense’ (of course, they didn’t want to be killed); and then revealed that he had reversed all of the findings (the eagerness to return to the United States increased after the surrender – during the war, there was an important job to be done; after the war, they wanted to get on with their lives). Since both the false and the actual findings can be explained by ‘common sense’, the actual data, and the way in which they are interpreted, are shown to be of far more importance than ‘common sense’.
9 The system needs identified by Parsons – adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance – were intended to apply to aspects of social systems (e.g. pattern maintenance was related to socialising institutions such as families and schools), but were often presented in the sociology of sport in terms of the socialisation of individuals.
10 It is interesting to note, however, that focus on the reproduction of social class had a far more significant impact on the sociology of education than the sociology of sport.
11 Subordinate compliance may be determined by feelings of powerlessness, or by the belief that the social order is appropriate (such beliefs often being encouraged by institutions such as education, politics, religion and the media). In British terms, it has been noted that the Conservative Party, often considered to represent the interests of wealth, would never be elected without a working-class ‘deference vote’. And the widespread support for the Royal Family often surprises outside observers who see royalty as enshrining ideas of inherited privilege, rather than merit.
12 Following work by Ingham and Gruneau, Donnelly (1996) presented three levels of analysis – categorical, distributive and relational – that tend to parallel the reflection, reproduction and resistance theses.

REFERENCES