

CHAPTER 2

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND RESEARCH¹

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Define theory and discuss its applicability to the study of sport and physical activity.
2. Summarize the major theories used to understand sport and physical activity in society.
3. Identify the different research methods for examining sport and physical activity in society.

INTRODUCTION

Social and behavioral scientists who study sport and physical activity in society are, in many ways, different from other people with an interest in the topic. They engage in a specialized form of inquiry called *research*, and in most cases, they draw from and seek to contribute to theory to help them better understand phenomena. The process in which they engage is more specialized than that of a journalist or reporter (who might also conduct research for an article) and also moves beyond common sense. Rather, researchers participate in science and scientific inquiry.

Kerlinger and Lee (2000) articulated five ways in which science and common sense differ:

1. *The use of theory.* To be sure, non-scientists commonly use theories to explain behaviors, but their theories differ from those scientists employ. Lay theories are frequently based on unfounded explanations not subjected to scrutiny. Scientists, on the other hand, systematically build theories subjected to scrutiny and systematic evaluation. Of course, some non-scientists (e.g., Gladwell, 2005) sometimes implicitly use theory, but this is the exception rather than the norm.
2. *Systematic and empirical examination.* Non-scientists test theories in selective fashion and against their own hunches and established beliefs. In this case, a supportive anecdote represents evidence, while they dismiss disconfirming evidence as an anomaly. Scientists, on the other hand, test predictions and theories in laboratory settings or field research, and others scrutinize their findings through the peer review process.
3. *Alternative explanations.* Scientists try to rule out factors that can provide alternative explanations for their findings. They might achieve this through the study design (e.g., conduct an experiment with a control group and an experimental group) or empirically (e.g., by statistically accounting for possible extraneous factors in their analyses). On the other hand, non-scientists will generally accept information in accord with their views and dismiss other factors. For instance, if they believe Blacks are genetically (naturally) more athletic than Whites, they will ignore or dismiss instances where this is not the case.
4. *Relationships among factors.* Social scientists are concerned with understanding and explaining how factors are related to one another, and as a result, they deliberately and systematically examine and scrutinize those relationships. Laypersons might also be interested in relationships, but they do not investigate them in any sort of controlled or precise fashion.

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5. *Explanations of observed phenomena.* Scientists examine readily observable factors and are not concerned with metaphysical explanations. For instance, to suggest that someone wins a boxing match because of God or that it is wrong to express a particular view is to speak metaphysically. They shy away from such discourse because these sentiments are neither testable nor observable. Non-scientists are not concerned with these limitations, and thus, frequently advance such proclamations

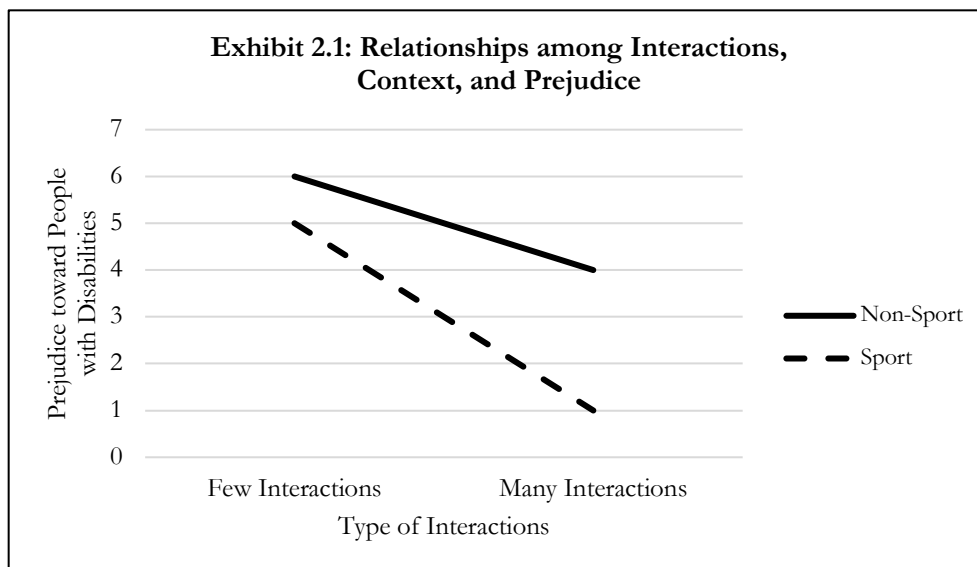
As these examples illustrate, social and behavioral scientists explore issues differently than do other persons. These distinctions are largely a function of theory and scientific research. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to explore these issues in greater depth. I start with an explanation of theory and why it is important in the sociological study of sport and physical activity. I then move to a discussion of the prevailing theories scientists use to understand sport and physical activity in society. In the final section, I offer an overview of the different approaches to conducting research and the steps scientists take to conduct their studies.

THEORY

Definition

Theory represents “a statement of constructs and their relationships to one another that explain how, when, why, and under what conditions phenomena take place” (Cunningham, 2013, p. 1; see also Cunningham, Fink, & Doherty, 2016). Several elements of this definition warrant more attention.

First, theory consists of constructs and propositions. Constructs are approximated units that cannot readily be observed, while propositions represent the expected relationships among those constructs (Bacharach, 1989). For instance, suppose a researcher investigates prejudice toward people with disabilities and the degree to which spending time with those individuals helps reduce the negative attitudes toward them. In developing the study, she thinks that context matters, such that interactions spent while participating in sport will be especially useful in lessening prejudice (see Exhibit 2.1 for an illustrative summary). In this example, prejudice, context, and interactions represent constructs. The relationships among the constructs represent propositions.



Articulating constructs and their relationships with one another is just part of the story, though. Theory is concerned with explaining *how*, *when*, *why*, and *under what conditions* different activities take place. Drawing from the previous example, the researcher might explain that interactions with people who are different allow people to learn about others, thereby coming to see them as individuals. As a result, anxiety about interacting with people who are different—the very anxiety strongly linked with prejudice—should diminish (Paolini, Harwood, Hewstone, & Neumann, 2018). Further, she might intimate that interactions in sport spur a camaraderie and fellowship among people that other types of interfaces do not. Thus, context matters, maybe more so than the interactions themselves (Morela, Hatzigeorgiadis, Sanchez, & Elbe, 2016).

Applicability

Theory's utility is widespread, as it has the potential to influence research, teaching, service, and practice (Cunningham et al., 2016). Theory is the cornerstone of good research. In fact, Kerlinger and Lee (2000) suggested that theory represents the fundamental aim of science. It is both useful and testable (van Knippenberg, 2011) and allows researchers to frame their research questions, develop their research methods, analyze their data, and interpret their findings. Some scholars have persuasively argued that without theory, one's ability to advance scientific understanding is questionable (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

Theory's utility is not limited to research, though. Rather, it has the potential to inform teaching, service, and practice (Doherty, 2013). Kurt Lewin perhaps best illustrated these sentiments when he wrote, "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (1952, p. 169). Good theories help people make sense of the world around them. Rather than seeing each phenomena as a unique case or adopting a trial and error approach to solving problems, people can use theories to help understand activities they observe or phenomena that occur within their sport organizations. For instance, people have used theory to help them effectively deliver major sport events (Byrers, Hayday, & Pappous, in press) and use sport for community development and peace-building purposes (Schulenkorf, 2017), among many possible examples.

One way scholars effectively utilize theory is in their relationships with industry professionals (Irwin & Ryan, 2013). Specifically, researchers will sometimes partner with practitioners to solve industry-related problems, and in doing so, the researchers bring their scientific expertise and knowledge of theory with them so they can better address the issues at hand. This partnership benefits sport managers, as they are able to draw from the most recent scientific advances to combat the issues facing them. But, the relationship is not one-sided; instead, the researchers also develop keen understandings of new troubles facing the industry, as well as the limitations of their existing theories and research methods. As a result, the researchers can then take this new knowledge with them to refine and reformulate their theories to better encapsulate what is taking place in the sport industry.

USING THEORY TO UNDERSTAND SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SOCIETY

Given this background, I now provide an overview of the predominant theories used to understand sport and physical activity in society. Most sociologists and sport sociology textbooks focus solely on sociological theories. In this chapter, while I will address the most common sociological theories, I also include social psychological theories and theories found in the physical activity and community health literature. Doing so allows for a more robust understanding of people's experiences in the sport and physical activity context. For an overview, see Exhibit 2.2.

Sociological Theories

Sociological theories focus on societal factors, such as structural determinants, power, politics, status, and conflict, and how these influence groups and individuals. There are many such perspectives applicable to the study of sport and physical activity in society. However, rather than reviewing them all individually, I aggregate them into four large groups: functionalism theory, conflict theory, critical theory, and interactionist theory.

Exhibit 2.2. Theories Relevant to the Sociology of Sport and Physical Activity

Sociological theories focus on societal factors, such as structural determinants, power, politics, status, and conflict, and how these influence groups and individuals. Prominent theories include functionalism, conflict theory, cultural theories, and interactionist theory.

Social psychological theories focus on interpersonal relationships and the manner by which identity is associated with attitudes and behaviors. Prominent theories include the social categorization framework and the similarity-attraction paradigm.

Physical activity and health theories focus how structural, community, group, and individual factors combine to influence-related health attitudes, behaviors, and opportunities. Prominent theories include social ecological theory and the sport-for-health model.

Functionalism Theory

According to Sage and Eitzen, (2016), functionalism holds that various institutions in society work together to maintain the whole social system. There is a focus on unity, working together, and perseverance in the face of hardship. Note the consistency with other systems, like the human body, where parts (e.g., cells, tissues, organs) work with one another so the whole can function properly.

Sport and physical activity are seen as parts of this system and serve to bring about positive change in society. People adopting a functionalist viewpoint see sport and physical activity as positively contributing to society and benefiting participants through the development of better health and wellness, character development, and the ability to learn life lessons.

As one example, the National Federation of State High School Associations (see www.nfhs.org) published a document outlining potential benefits of participating in high school activities, including athletics. According to the report, high school athletics (and other extracurricular activities):

- Support the academic missions of the schools;
- Are fundamentally educational in nature;
- Are associated with later life success;
- Represent a valuable part of the overall high school experience;
- Have a positive association with academic success in other areas, such as grades;
- Help fulfill basic student needs and minimize dropout rates; and
- Teach important life lessons.

As another example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention list several benefits of regular physical activity, including:

- Weight control;
- Reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes, and some cancers;
- Strengthening of bones and muscles; and
- Improved mental health, one's ability to engage in everyday activities, and the probability of living a long life.

As these examples illustrate, several people and agencies adopt a functionalist approach when discussing the role of sport and physical activity in society. Whereas they might acknowledge the potential detriments associated with sport and physical activity participation, they either dismiss these shortcomings or argue that they are outweighed by the benefits.

Conflict Theory

Whereas functionalism focuses on the benefits of sport and physical activity to society, conflict theorists examine the social processes that result in disharmony, social discord, and conflict (Sage & Eitzen, 2016). Drawing heavily from philosopher Karl Marx, conflict theory puts a primacy on power, status, and privilege, and holds that people tend toward competition, not cooperation. Consequently, the struggle for resources results in unrest in society and between groups. Conflict theorists argue that people use their resources and privilege as ways to secure their standing in society, ultimately subjugating others; hence, conflict theory highlights social structures and class differences. This reproduction of status and privilege is sometimes achieved explicitly, such as through force. In most other situations, though, the means are more implicit in nature. Here, media images and social institutions, such as churches and schools, reinforce the social structures that privilege some and disadvantage others. The use of social institutions to promote specific ideologies is particularly effective because people will adhere to those ideological tenets even if they are contrary to their best interests. Marx referred to this as *false consciousness*.

As one example, consider the structure and funding of schools in the US—something that affects spending on student learning initiatives and their extracurricular activities, like athletics. In most states, property taxes are used to finance schools, and this creates a system of “haves” and “have-nots.” To illustrate, suppose two districts have the same number of students, but one is in a largely affluent suburb, while the other is a dilapidated inner-city setting. The property values in the suburban district are likely to be higher than those in the inner-city setting; thus, taxed at the same rate, monies-per-student will be higher in the former district relative to the latter. Poorer districts can choose to increase revenues by increasing tax rates, but this doubly hurts the residents in that area—people who might already have difficulty meeting the taxation needs. Thus, the prevailing school financing system—one seen throughout most of the US—serves to privilege the wealthy and penalize the poor. Some states have developed “Robin Hood” systems to share money from richer districts with poorer ones, but such systems are largely panned by residents as unfair or, in other cases, have been ruled as unconstitutional. In either case, this form of institutional classism is maintained (see also Desmond, 2016, Putnam, 2015).

Cultural Theories

Social and behavioral scientists also employ cultural theories (Sage & Eitzen, 2016) to understand phenomena. Like the theories previously discussed, critical theories also focus on power and power relations. But, unlike those grand theories, which put an emphasis on societal norms and structures, cultural theories also focus on human agency, or the choices people make. Researchers adopting a critical lens frequently employ one of three theories: hegemony theory, feminist theory, or critical race theory.

In drawing from conflict theory, *hegemony theory* focuses on social class and power, but in doing so, also highlights issues of ideologies and culture. Hegemony theory focuses on the steps the powerful elite take to ensure that their privilege is maintained. As Sage (1998) noted:

A critical social perspective invites us to step back from thinking about sport merely as a place of personal achievement and entertainment and study sport as a cultural practice embedded in political, economic, and ideological formations. Relevant issues involve how sport is related to social class, race, gender, and the control, production, and distribution of economic and cultural power in the commodified sport industry.
(p. 11)

As one example, consider popular methods of funding sports arenas and stadiums. Historically, individual team owners and groups financed their stadiums and arenas. However, in recent decades, taxpayers have contributed more monies to these venues, such that public-private partnerships are now the norm in terms of stadium financing (Kellison, Sam, Hong, Swart, & Mondello, in press). In this case, private owners split the costs of multi-million (or even billion) dollar stadiums with the host community.

There are certainly some benefits to having a major league franchise in a city (Crompton, 2004), and having a quality stadium in which to play is a key ingredient in keeping and attracting teams. Nevertheless, these financing partnerships are largely one-sided in favor of the wealthy owners. In most cases, the city does not reap any of the monies generated from the venues, such as revenues from luxury boxes, personal seat licenses, and the like. Yet, it is the taxpayers in that area who provide half of the construction funds. Furthermore, even though taxpayers foot half of the construction bill, high ticket prices often preclude them from attending sporting events at the venue. The cost of attending all home games for a particular season accounts for 7 to 24 percent of the average American's annual income, thereby pricing them out of attending the games (Cunningham, 2019). Thus, the current stadium financing structure is consistent with hegemony theory tenets: wealthy owners develop structures and processes that advantage them while subjugating less affluent and less powerful citizens.

Another perspective requiring a critical lens is *feminist theory*. Two fundamental assumptions undergird this theory. First, people's experiences in their life, whether at a place of worship, in the workplace, or while participating in sport, are gendered in nature. In the context of the current discussion, this means that sport and physical activity represents a site more welcoming to boys and men than to girls and women, and where activities, skills, and values considered "masculine" are praised and esteemed, while "feminine" ones are devalued and demeaned (Birrell, 2000). Second, because girls and women are continually devalued and subjugated in sport and physical activity settings, there is a need to change the underlying structures and processes. In doing so, women might become more empowered and thereby alter their social surroundings.

Social and behavioral scientists adopt a feminist approach to study a number of issues, including the depiction of women in the media (Fink, 2015; Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017). Researchers have shown, for instance, that women receive less coverage than do men across a variety of media forms, including newspapers, magazines, television, and the Internet. When they do receive coverage, it is frequently in less desirable locations (e.g., back page of the sports section) or their pictures are smaller. More fundamentally, though, how women and men are depicted also differs. The media regularly focuses on men's athletic accomplishments, photographs them during competition, and highlights their masculine characteristics and ruggedness. It is a much different story for women, though. In this case, the media are more likely to focus on their personal lives, such as their husbands or children (though rarely their partners in the event that the athlete or coach is lesbian or bisexual). When photographed, women are more likely to be posing or in supportive roles than they are to be engaged in athletic competition. Similarly, the stories about women, when compared to those of men, are less likely to focus on their athletic accomplishments. Finally, the types of sports that receive media coverage also vary. For instance, Olympics coverage is more likely to focus on sports where women's femininity is accentuated, such as figure skating or beach volleyball, than on sports where this is not the case, such as crew or hockey.

Finally, researchers might also adopt *critical race theory* to study sport and physical activity in society. According to Hylton (2009), this theory is guided by five central tenets, the first of which is that researchers centralize race and racism in their analysis of systems, processes, and individual behaviors. Second, critical race theorists question the legitimacy of meritocracy, color-blindness, equal opportunity, and racial equality. Third, researchers adopting this paradigm have a commitment to social justice, including a belief in egalitarianism and liberation. Fourth, critical race scholars seek out and centralize people who are otherwise marginalized and have had their voices silenced. Finally, critical race theorists embrace a multidisciplinary approach to their scholarship. In addition, other critical race theorists stress the principle of interest convergence, which notes that "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (Bell, 1980, p. 523).

Critical race theory can be applied to the sport setting in a number of ways, including coaching (Rankin-Wright, Hylton, & Norman, 2016), media depictions (Lawrence, 2016), and youth sport (Dagkas, 2016), just to name a few. Other researchers have drawn from critical race theory to interrogate social justice movements, such as the integration of various sports (see Exhibit 2.3).

Exhibit 2.3: Critical Race Theory and Sport Integration

Branch Rickey was the Brooklyn Dodgers owner who signed Jackie Robinson to a professional contract, thereby breaking the “color barrier” in baseball. From one perspective, Rickey is a pioneer and forward-thinking leader who bravely helped integrate Major League Baseball. From a different perspective, critical race theorists might suggest that Rickey might be forward-thinking, but his primary motivation was likely the good of the baseball club, not social justice. That is, if Robinson were not an exceptional player who could meaningfully help the club (he was Rookie of the Year, after all), then he would not have been signed, even with the social benefits of racial desegregation (for further discussion, see DeLorme & Singer, 2010). Such a position is consistent with Donnor’s (2005) use of interest convergence (see the previous paragraph, Bell, 1980), and others who have presented similar arguments with respect to Paul “Bear” Bryant and Adolf Rupp integrating their collegiate sport teams (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Interactionist Theory

Unlike many of the previous theories outlined in this chapter, interactionist theory focuses chiefly on how people interact with their environment to give meaning to their lives. As Sage and Eitzen (2016) noted, people attach meanings to the symbols, behaviors, and attitudes of others with whom they interact in their environments. This process, which is on-going, helps people to make sense of their social worlds and develop their identities, as coaches, athletes, exercisers, and the like. In doing so, they socially construct their reality, while also forming, creating, and recreating their social identities.

A number of researchers have drawn from interactionist principles in their analysis of sport and physical activity, with a focus on topics such as the social construction of race (see Adair, 2011) or the experiences of women who coach (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Anderson (2008) provided an intriguing analysis of how heterosexual men who are cheerleaders socially constructed sexual orientation and masculinity. While some people maintain that men who sleep with other men are gay or bisexual, these cheerleaders rejected such notions. Rather, they constructed same-sex behaviors as either a form of sexual recreation or as a means of also engaging in sexual behaviors with women. Consistent with an interactionist perspective, these men constructed their sexual identities based on their social surroundings, others’ behaviors, and the feedback they received from their cheerleading peers.

Social Psychological Theories

As previously noted, most sociological texts and chapters focus on functionalism, conflict theory, critical theories, and interactionist theory, but do not address social psychological theories. This is an unfortunate omission for a number of reasons. First, while it certainly has psychological roots, social psychology is a sub-discipline of sociology. Second, social psychological theories can help explain people’s behaviors in the sport and physical activity context. Finally, including social psychological theories brings a focus to the intersection of the individual within social contexts, and thus, with the possible exception of interactionist theory, provides a more inclusive understanding of how people operate in social settings than do other theories. Two theories are particularly relevant to the current discussion: the social categorization framework and the similarity-attraction paradigm.

Social Categorization Framework

Two theories contribute to the social categorization framework: social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). These theories hold that people classify themselves and others into social groups based on salient characteristics. These might include one’s race, sex, religion, sport fandom, and the like. Thus, they come to see the self and others in terms of a social identity. When the particular diversity dimension is salient and personally meaningful (among other factors), people

will use these differences to evaluate the self and others. People with characteristics similar to the self are considered in-group members, while those different from the self are considered out-group members. *Ceteris paribus*, in-group members are liked more, receive more help, and garner more positive evaluations than do out-group members. Furthermore, these differential evaluations are likely to transfer from one situation to the next, thereby generating stereotypes.

The social categorization framework is useful in analyzing people's experiences in sport and physical activity. Consider, for instance, the case of people choosing an exercise club to join. The social categorization framework suggests that people will be more likely to engage in situations where they feel like they are an in-group member, or where they are surrounded by similar others. Thus, a novice exerciser is unlikely to join a fitness club that emphasizes bodybuilding, just as a woman might prefer to exercise at women-only clubs (like Curves). Reflective of these dynamics, Woods and I have observed that most people, irrespective of their gender or exercise habits, feel they fit better with exercise gyms that emphasize health and wellness, as opposed to an appearance focus (Cunningham & Woods, 2011). Pickett and I observed similar patterns among people considered overweight and their physical activity preferences (Pickett & Cunningham, 2017, 2018). Thus, the notions of fit and preferring to be around similar others impacts a number of decisions, including where people exercise.

Similarity-Attraction Paradigm

Another social psychological theory is the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971). From this perspective, people who are similar to one another are likely to also be attracted to and express liking toward one another. The similarities they share, particularly on visible characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race) might also lead them to assume that they share other commonalities, such as shared life experiences, congruent values, or similar world views. For instance, people who are the same age might also believe that they have common attitudes toward life or experiences (e.g., struggling through the Great Depression). Of course, these underlying similarities are not always present, but the perceptions of such likeness is important, as it is associated with greater interpersonal attraction, helping behaviors, and overall affect. Thus, while the underlying processes differ from the social categorization framework, the end result is the same: similarity breeds attraction and positive affect.

Researchers have used this theory less frequently than the social categorization framework, but there is evidence of its utility in understanding people's attitudes and behaviors in sport. For instance, I conducted a study of college students enrolled in physical activity classes to determine how being different from others in the class impacted their overall satisfaction with the class (Cunningham, 2006). Consistent with similarity-attraction paradigm predictions, I found that students in the class perceived a link between demographic dissimilarity from others and subsequent differences based on values, attitudes, and beliefs. That is, if they thought they were different from others based on their race (for instance), then they were also likely to believe that they differed from others in the class based on more deep-level characteristics. The latter judgments were particularly important because the more people thought they differed from others based on values, attitudes, and beliefs, the less satisfied they were with the class. Thus, the similarity-attraction paradigm helps explain, at least in part, students' satisfaction (or lack thereof) with their physical activity experiences.

Physical Activity and Health Theories

Most theories related to physical activity and health adopt a psychological approach. This is likely because of the notion that the amount of physical activity in which one engages or one's overall physical well-being is largely a function of personal choices, attitudes, and behaviors. Increasingly, though, researchers have recognized the need for multilevel perspectives to understand health behavior. That is, one's attitudes and behaviors related to being physically active are shaped by individual factors, such as personality or motivation, but also by other elements, including their family, neighborhood, workplace, and community in which they live, to name a few.

I outline two such perspectives in this section: the ecological approach to physical activity and health, and the sport for health model.

Ecological Approach to Physical Activity and Health

Ecological models recognize that individuals, their social environments, the physical environment in which they live, and policies set at the local, state, and national levels all influence people's attitudes and behaviors (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). As Sallis and colleagues have noted, "Rather than positing that behavior is influenced by a narrow range of psychological variables, ecological models incorporate a wide range of influences at multiple levels" (p. 299).

The ecological approach helps researchers to better understand what factors shape behaviors and also inform policy-makers decisions regarding physical activity interventions (Anderson et al., 2019). That is, the most effect interventions are likely those that (a) target one's community spaces to ensure that they are safe and convenient places for exercise, (b) activate motivational and educational programs aimed at improving one's attitudes toward being active, and (c) use various means, such as the mass media or community-based initiatives, to change the norms and values related to being active (Sallis et al., 2006). Kahn et al. (2002), in their impressive review of physical activity interventions, recognized as much in advocating for physical activity interventions that took into account individual factors (e.g., motivation) with more macro-level factors, such as community-wide education campaigns, school-based physical education interventions, and capacity building activities in the community.

Let us consider one example of how social ecological models might be used to understand physical activity in society. Demographics can frequently help predict physical activity behaviors, such that racial minorities, the poor, and the elderly are all less active than are their counterparts (Cunningham, 2019). Psychological models would focus solely on issues related to motivation or their desire to be active. However, a social ecological approach would recognize that inactivity is due to both personal factors, such as those previously mentioned, and environmental factors. For instance, because they are more likely to work multiple jobs and have less autonomy in their work, the poor have less leisure time available to engage in exercise than do their more affluent counterparts. They are also less likely to have access to worksite physical activity programs—something that can meaningfully impact how frequently they exercise. Because their peers also experience similar constraints, social norms for physical activity are likely to be low. Finally, active living environments might also impact activity rates, such that well-lit, safe, attractive neighborhoods needed for leisure time physical activity are likely to be in short supply. As this brief example illustrates, social ecological models offer an encompassing perspective for understanding physical activity.

Sport for Health Model

Other researchers have focused on the ways in which sport managers can design programming and interventions to promote health and well-being (Edwards & Rowe, 2019). Research from around the world shows that sport and sport-for-development programs (see Chapter 1) can improve health outcomes among Indigenous women in Australia (Stronach, Maxwell, & Pearce, 2019), refugees in the Netherlands and Germany (Anderson et al., 2019), and men engaging in a grassroots program in the US (Warner, 2019), just to offer a few examples.

Schulenkorf and Siefken (2019) drew from their considerable work in this domain to develop a theoretical model. Their focus was on ways in which sport managers could use sport to promote health. They argued that to realize health goals, managers must focus on the design, management, implementation, and assessment of the programs. They further outlined five areas that warranted specific attention:

- Sociocultural context, which includes listening to local experts and being adaptable when designing the sport-for-development program.
- Health promotion, as sport managers should adopt a broad approach to health, emphasizing the physical, psychological, and sociocultural domains.

- Sport management, such that managers should plan and deliver culturally relevant programming, leverage health promotion activities, and monitor the success (or lack thereof) of the programs.
- Policy, with an emphasis on designing inclusive sport and physical activity policies that are specific to the local context and the health needs of the population.
- Sustainability, or ensuring that any immediate health-related changes achieved through sport can continue over the long term.

Schulenkorf and Siefken’s model thereby emphasizes the need designing sport programs so they are specifically careered to the target population. This method means that the sport manager considers the needs and preferences of the preferences, as well as the history, constraints, opportunities, and sociopolitical context of the broader community.

RESEARCH METHODS

Having reviewed the primary theories used to understand sport and physical activity in society, I next turn to research methods. That the two topics are presented in different sections might suggest that they are completely distinct from one another. This is not the case; instead, the most effective researchers use theory to guide the entire research process, including how the data are collected, what questions are asked, the manner in which the data are analyzed, and the interpretation of the results. Thus, theory informs and is interwoven into every element of the research process (Cunningham, 2013; Cunningham et al., 2016).

Exhibit 2.4: Researching Sport and Physical Activity in Society

Researchers can employ a number of techniques to gather information about sport and physical activity. These include participant questions, observation, and secondary data. Their use varies depending on whether the researcher employs quantitative or qualitative data collection techniques.

Participant questions:

Quantitative: Participants complete questionnaires or other measures where the data are recorded in numerical units. Examples include survey research involving questionnaires and experimental studies.

Qualitative: Participants respond to open-ended questions posed by the researcher. Examples include in-depth personal interviews and focus groups.

Observation:

Quantitative: The researcher observes the activities of others and then converts the observations into numerical units. Examples include observing a video of participants in an experiment or observing coaching behaviors at practice.

Qualitative: The researcher is deeply embedded in a social context and records others’ feelings and behaviors. Examples include ethnographic research and autoethnographies.

Secondary data:

Quantitative: The researcher retrieves quantitative data from existing sources to explore research questions. Examples include using Census data to explore physical activity patterns or drawing from longitudinal datasets.

Qualitative: The researcher retrieves qualitative data from existing sources to explore research questions. Examples include conducting a content analysis of magazines or analyzing internal organizational documents.

As Coakley (2009) noted, broadly speaking, researchers employ one of two research methods—quantitative and qualitative—by either observing people, asking people questions, or analyze existing documents (see Exhibit 2.4). I explore these possibilities in greater depth in the following space. In doing so, I present ways in which researchers could address a single research question—the under-representation of women in

coaching and leadership positions—by employing any of the six research methods (see also Cunningham, 2016, for another example).

Finally, while I present the different approaches separately, it is important to remember that (a) some researchers employ mixed methods approaches, where they conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses, and (b) other researchers will use multiple forms of a particular research method within one study, such as when scientists conduct interviews, observe the workplace, and conduct textual analyses of workplace documents.

Quantitative Research Methods

Social and behavioral scientists using quantitative research methods collect information about people in the sport and physical activity context, convert the information into numerical data, and then use statistical analyses to examine the relationships among the variables. Quantitative research usually entails large datasets with many people, or when experimental designs are employed, smaller datasets are used but with tighter control over possible extraneous variables.

One way of conducting quantitative research is by asking participants questions, either through surveys or experiments. As one example, Burton et al. (2009) asked participants to rate what type of characteristics were important for various jobs in an athletic department. Participants indicated that masculine roles (e.g., delegating, managing conflict) were most congruent with the athletic director position. These assumptions disadvantage women because, even though they can and frequently do engage in “masculine” behaviors, people frequently think that they cannot. Thus, when personnel directors think about who might be well suited for an athletic director role, they frequently envision people who stereotypically exude masculine characteristics: men.

Another way of conducting quantitative research is through observing participants, although this type of quantitative research occurs infrequently. As one possible example, researchers could videotape people discussing the pros and cons of different coaching applicants. They could then review the recordings and tally the number of positive or negative remarks made about women and men applying for leadership positions. von Rueden, Alami, Kaplan, and Gurven (2018) used observation to examine gender differences in leadership, though the context of their study was outside of sport.

As a third possibility, scientists can also draw from existing data sources to examine issues of interest. Secondary data analysis represents a popular method. Colleagues and I gathered data from all the studies related to occupational turnover—people’s decision to leave a profession—in sport (Cunningham, Ahn, Anderson, & Dixon, in press). We then statistically aggregated the findings through a process called meta-analysis. We found that women planned to leave sport sooner than men did. Women also had comparatively poorer experiences and lower aspirations for career advancement. Thus, the meta-analysis painted a picture of why women are underrepresented in sport leadership roles.

Qualitative Research Methods

When using qualitative research methods, social and behavioral scientists collect information about people and then analyze the data for emergent trends and themes. Relative to quantitative research, the sample sizes in qualitative research are usually smaller, with as few as 3 or 4 participants in the study. However, the method of inquiry usually allows for thicker, more in-depth description of the phenomena at hand.

Researchers frequently ask participants questions in qualitative research, such as through personal interviews or focus groups. As an illustrative example, Norman (2010) conducted interviews with six women coaching major sport teams in the UK, asking them about their background, their experiences coaching, the obstacles they encountered, and ideas for the development of future coaches. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Participants in Norman’s study believed that many factors contributed to the under-representation of women in coaching, including the trivialization of women’s accomplishments, the

marginalization of women through the existing organizational and institutional structures, and various forms of prejudice.

In addition to conducting interviews, scientists can also observe people in the sport and physical activity context. Ethnography represents one way to achieve this end. Here, the researcher is immersed into the social setting and thus conducts observation and interviews while living “in the field.” As an example, a researcher could spend extensive time (sometimes up to several years) as an athletic department employee. During that time, the researcher would attend meetings, engage in conversations with coworkers, and observe the day-to-day interactions and social processes of the workplace. Doing so would allow the researcher to better understand the lived experiences of the study participants.

Finally, social scientists adopting a qualitative approach might also analyze documents, artifacts, or media. As one example, Shaw (2006) examined the social processes within sport organizations that served to privilege men and disadvantage women. In addition to conducting personal interviews and observing workplace interactions, she also read through internal organizational documents. This data collection effort helped her better understand how subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) activities legitimated men’s power and privilege in sport.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter was to explore theory and research methods commonly used to understand sport and physical activity in society. Theory is “a statement of constructs and their relationships to one another that explain how, when, why, and under what conditions phenomena take place” (Cunningham, 2013, p. 1). Its applicability extends to research, teaching, services, and practice. The discussion then moved to the primary theories used to understand sport and physical activity in society, including sociological, social psychological, and physical activity and health theories. In the final section, I discussed different approaches to conducting research, including quantitative and qualitative analyses. Thus, the chapter provides a broad overview for understanding how social and behavioral scientists engage in the practice of scientific inquiry to better understand people’s experiences in the sport and physical activity settings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Using your own words, how do you define theory?
2. Why is theory useful in understanding sport and physical activity in society?
3. Which of the theories reviewed in this chapter do you most closely identify? Why?
4. With which of the theories reviewed in this chapter do you most disagree? Why?
5. Provide an overview of the different research methods social scientists can use to understand sport and physical activity.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Cunningham, G. B., Fink, J. S., & Doherty, A. J. (Eds.) (2016). *Routledge handbook of theory in sport management*. London: Routledge. (An edited volume that includes chapters on the sociological analysis of sport and physical activity.)
- Lox, C. L., Martin Ginis, K. A., & Petruzzello, S. J. (2010). *The psychology of exercise: Integrating theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb-Hathaway. (The authors provide an overview of the various theories used to understand sport and physical activity participation.)
- Sport Management Review*, Volume 16, Issue 1. (This journal issue provides a scholarly exchange focusing on theory and theory development in sport management.)

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