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Final Paper: How do organized sports constitute expressions of larger social forces?

Sports are a large part of our society and how people bond together and share common interests. There are both benefits and challenges in our society as it relates to sports. In today’s society, sports play a major role in many ways and shape our society as a whole. Organized sports create expressions of larger social forces in many ways, which are shown within the four theoretical paradigms, functionalist theory, conflict theory, interactionist theory, and feminist theory. In functionalist theory, sports are the most widely used form of entertainment in the world. In every country, sports bring people together to bond, whether it is soccer in Europe or football in America, fans of all ages come together to cheer on their team. With the conflict theory, society is also shaped by economic forces with sports both for individuals as well as for team organizations. Individuals are able to bet on sporting events to make money and team organizations sell merchandise to make money. The interactionist theory shows how people’s identities are created and maintained by playing the sport themselves or by identifying as a player they look up to. The last theory, feminist theory, shows how gender plays a role in sports. The male sports are dominant over women’s sports on TV, how much they are paid, as well as how many fans go to their games. Overall, our society is shaped in many ways by sports and is demonstrated using these four theories.

There are many benefits with sports in our society. Sports teams create fans that are always cheering their team on and often form a special bond with each other. This is mostly seen in towns with major sports teams like football, baseball, basketball, and hockey. Mascots are used to help teams and their morale by dressing up and playing the part of the mascot. Team organizations also make a lot of money for the team as well as for the city where they play. Team merchandise is purchased by fans, which generates a great deal of money for the team. When they have home games, the cities make a lot of money because fans will go to dinner before games and sometimes hang out at bars after games. The ticket sales from these games also play a major role in how sports organizations make money.

With these benefits, there are also many challenges that sports are faced with each year. When a team does not do well, fans do not want to go to their games, which causes them to lose money. This also affects the city because nobody is going to the restaurants and shops during that time. There are also challenges in society with sports when teams are not playing well. People do not tend to get together as much to watch their team if they have a losing record. This can cause the city morale to be bad just as much as the team and their fans. In either case, society is affected by the performance of the sports team.

The functionalist theory in society relates to sports in many ways. For one, sports bring entertainment to societies around the world. People will travel very far distances to see a professional sports team play or they will watch their local team play on TV. Whatever the case is, sports brings people together as a society in different ways. Groups of people that like the same thing tend to bond together and sports are one thing that people have in common. Most people go to the games for the excitement and entertainment, but they also go because they feel a sense of being part of a group. Everyone at the game feels they are helping their team win by cheering them on, and when they do it together, the fans create a bond among themselves. Eitzen states: “As the game provided the opportunity for its performers and audiences (athletes and spectators), it muted their individual values, identities, and experiences in favor of the communal good. (Eitzen). The functionalist theory also explains that sports can actually provide people ways to improve their social status. People with season tickets to a particular sports team feel they have something that others do not, therefore, making them higher up socially. Society has caused people to feel important if they are able to attend sporting events, especially if they are expensive. The Super Bowl, NHL Championship, NBA finals and the MLB World Series are a few examples of sporting events that society views as very prestigious if a fan can attend those games. The cost for tickets to those games is very expensive, so people in our society think that if a person can go to that game, they must have a lot of money. Society also thinks this with the type of seat a person has at a game. For instance, if a person has a seat on the court of a basketball game, they are thought to be rich. Only celebrities and people with a lot of money can afford those seats, so society automatically gives them that status.

The conflict theory also plays a role in how society is influenced by sports. In the conflict theory, sports are used as an economic tool both for individuals as well as businesses. For individuals, people are able to bet on their favorite teams or other sporting events to make money. Betting can be an addiction, therefore, sports can affect our society by causing fans to be addicted to gambling and be used as a means of making money. This can have a positive effect on our economy and our society. Of course, the opposite is also true, when people lose their bets, they can become poor. This also has an effect on our society as a whole. If people are losing bets on sporting games and not being able to afford the necessities, this will have an impact on society. Individuals can also spend a lot of money on sports related things such as equipment, jersey’s, etc., causing them to be financially in trouble. Just as individuals are affected economically by sports and our society, business organizations are also just as affected. The team organizations make a lot of money throughout their season with their ticket sales and selling team merchandise. This also shows the conflict theory with sports and societies. Team organizations sell tickets to make enough money to keep their players paid and to also pay their employees. This has an effect on society because it supports the way the organization is run. The team owners also benefit from having the income to help run their organization. Team merchandise is also sold at their stadium as well as in retail and on-line. This plays a big role in the financial strength of the team organization. The merchandise can cost a lot of money which in turn, will benefit the whole organization. Now, with on-line as a way of selling merchandise, people are spending much more money and the teams are able to reach a much broader fan base than just the local fans. Fans from all over the world can purchase merchandise on-line which will increase the organization's revenues and affect society.

The interactionist theory in society “focuses on how people’s identities are created and maintained due to participation and interaction with sports and cultures.” An example of this is when fans incorporate their favorite team’s merchandise in their everyday life. This can be by making their home or car decorated in their favorite team’s colors and logos. It can also be shown by how they dress. Many fans will wear the team uniform or other team gear to show their support for the team. This also shows how they identify with society and how the team affects their ability to live a normal life. Some fans actually take on the identity of their favorite player by wearing their jersey and even by doing certain things the player likes to do. Eitzen explains: “Another area of concern has to do with normative violence. Boxing is all about fighting. Professional hockey accepts fighting as part of the sport. Many popular sports demand aggressive moves, such as body checking, blocking, and tackling, but the culture of these sports sometimes goes beyond what is needed to move or take down an opponent”(Eitzen). Sometimes, a fan may think they know the player because they have done so many things like him or her, that they do not realize that they are taking on the player’s identity. This can become an obsession with some people which has a negative effect on our society. The social aspect of this is shown by individuals obsessing with players and taking on their identity which can then affect our society because people feel the need to act certain ways without realizing they are doing anything different. Interactionist theory can also create subcultures in sports. Many times, sports teams and organizations can create a division between different groups of fans which can have an effect on society. This can be an age group difference, where as, one group, young people, like to see a lot of home runs hit in a baseball game, whereas, the older group of fans would rather see more baserunning and bunting in the game. The subgroups of society are created based on how people grew up and what they like to see in sports. The younger group of people like to see sports in a different way than older fans, which shows the subcultures in our society with sports. The interaction with each individual and how they perceive the sport is different and causes subcultures to be created.

The feminist theory has also had a great impact on our society in many ways. Society has shown to be grouped by gender when it comes to sports. There have always been men’s sports and women’s sports and each competes accordingly. Traditionally, men play in the men’s sports and women play in the women’s sports. The impact this has had on society is that we view sports in two ways, female sports and male sports, even though in many cases, they are the same sport. Most sports can be played by both men and women, such as basketball, soccer, and volleyball, however, there are some sports that are only meant for men, such as football and baseball, and some sports that are only meant for women, such as softball and synchronized swimming. This has always been taught in our society and has always been accepted as such. In recent years, some women have played men’s sports like football, but not at the professional level. Others have also been able to compete at much higher levels than our society ever thought. The other way the feminist theory is shown in our society is how they are portrayed on TV. The majority of professional sports games on TV are men’s sports, such as football, baseball and basketball. As a society, we do not see as much softball, swimming and other women’s sports on TV. This is changing, however, it still falls as part of the feminist theory of sociology and sports. There is also the fact that men and women are not paid the same in professional sports. This has been accepted over the years by our society, however, it is now becoming a major factor with a lot of athletes. Typically, men professional athletes are paid more than women professionals. This is how our society has always just accepted. Women are now fighting for the right to make as much as male athletes and that gender should not play a role in how much money an athlete should make. The feminist theory is a way to help our society become more equal when it comes to gender and athletes. Women should be paid the same and treated the same as men and most outsiders feel the same way.

Society as a whole has made sports what it is today. Over the years, sports have had effects on individuals, businesses, and genders in many different ways. The outcome has changed over the years and continues to change within our society. It is shown in the four Theoretical Paradigms, functionalist theory, conflict theory, interactionist theory, and feminist theory how society is affected by sports and how it has shaped our lives. This has evolved over the years and continues to have an impact on our society and how we are entertained by sports. Our society is shaped in many ways because of sports and sports will always be an important part of society in the future. The history of sports and society has changed and is now becoming even more interesting. Sports will always be part of our society, whether in a positive way or in some cases in a negative way.

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