Sport and Society: A Sociological Perspective

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Tuesday and Friday: 12:30-1:50
Office Hours: Friday, 2-3:00, or by appointment, Pearlman 211
UPI Course # 125a
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Course description

In the United States, our investment in sport takes multiple forms. For example, the expenditures for commercial sports exceed 17.7 billion dollars a year. Sports have their own full section of every major newspaper in the country. Sports fans line sidewalks for hours to secure the chance to watch their cherished teams in person. The list goes on. Through a sociological lens, this course will examine various dimensions of organized, competitive sport and their relationship with larger society: How have athletes engaged in sport in the past versus the present? How does the media portray professional athletes in terms of racial categories? And most centrally, how does sport (as both a spectator or consumer, or a player or producer of sport) socially construct men and women as masculine and feminine? Drawing on the works of sport sociologists, this course will unpack these dynamic connections between sport and American society.

Goals of the course

This is an overview of a socially significant topic for students (sport’s pervasive place in American culture is undeniable). This course, therefore, gives students the opportunity to think critically about sport and its important place in their own lives own and society as a whole.

The objectives of the course are as follows:

1) To introduce students to the discipline of sociology and the sociology of sport.

2) To interrogate and critique the character and common-sense assumptions attached to contemporary competitive sport in the United States.

3) To understand and explore sport’s various connections to larger social issues in American society. Specifically, how does the institution of sport relate to: other institutions (such as religion or the media), the construction of social categories (like race, gender, class), and socio-cultural beliefs/values (e.g. positive socialization versus social problems)?

4) To cultivate collegiate writing skills in completing the four essays required for the course.

Role I will play in the classroom
For the first part of the class, I will lecture on the assigned readings, while also drawing on other relevant sociological literature. I will then facilitate classroom dialogue, ideally fostering lively discussion about contemporary sport in the United States.

**How I will evaluate students**

There will be four essays assigned. The first three will be 5-6 pages and the fourth will be 10 pages. For each of these essays, students will be given several questions to choose from but they are also welcome to write on an essay topic of their own choosing.

Some questions and paper topics have included the following:

-- What positive aspects are traditionally bestowed upon sport? How has this research been critiqued? What is the counter evidence?
-- Title IX ushered in a new era for women and sports. How so? How does the institution of sport remain gendered?
-- Does sport function as an avenue of upward social mobility? Why is this such a popular belief?
-- How does gender operate at different levels within the institution of sport (i.e. social interactions, organizations, material resources, cultural beliefs)?
-- How do race, class, and gender intersect within sport?

Students’ final grades for the course will be based on the following criteria:

First essay: 20%
Second essay: 20%
Third essay: 20%
Final essay: 30%
Class participation: 10%

Attendance: If you miss more than 3 classes, you will fall 1/3rd of a grade (e.g. from a B+ to a B).

**Readings**

There are five required texts for the course:


I will provide all other texts electronically or through photocopies. Please print out all of the readings.

**University Policy on Academic Integrity**

You are expected to be familiar with and to follow the University’s policies on academic integrity (see: [http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/sdc/ai](http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/sdc/ai)).

**University Policy on Academic Accommodations**

If you are a student who has academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please see me this week and give me a copy of your letter of accommodation.

**Schedule and Readings**

***Week 1: Introduction***

January 15

Meet each other, review syllabus and expectations for the course.

Documentary: MORE THAN JUST A GAME

January 18

*What is the sociological imagination?*

--Reading: C. Wright Mills, “The Promise of Sociology”

*What is the sociology of sport?*


***Week 2: Socio-Historical Context: The Rise of Contemporary (Gendered) Sport***
January 22

January 25


***Week 3: Religion and Sport***

January 29

*What are the cultural connections between professional sport and organized Religion?*


*How can professional sport take on a spiritual or religious meaning?*

--Reading: Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 1-66) in *Faithful to Fenway: Believing in Boston, Baseball, and America’s Most Beloved Ballpark*.

February 1

--Reading: Chapters 4 and 6 (pp. 107-132; 179-196) in *Faithful to Fenway: Believing in Boston, Baseball, and America’s Most Beloved Ballpark*.

***Week 4: Positive Conceptions of Sport and Socialization***

February 5

February 8

*How does Little League function as a vehicle of socialization?*

--Reading: Introduction, Chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-102) in *With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture*.
***Week 5: Sport and Social Problems

February 12

Contra positive conceptions of sport and socialization, how do organized athletics relate to issues of individual deviance and violence?


February 15

Do contact sports offer a controlled environment for venting physical aggression or promote violence outside of sport?


FIRST 5-6 PAGE PAPER DUE

***Week 6: Gender

February 26

What is Title IX?


March 1

How is the institution of sport gendered at the individual and institutional levels?

--Reading: Chapters 5,6,7,8 (pp. 79-154) in *Higher Goals: Women’s Ice Hockey and the Politics of Gender*.

***Week 7: Gender

March 5

How are masculinity and femininity constructed in relation to each other through sport?

March 8

How does sport socially construct masculinity along patriarchal lines?


How does masculinity intersect with femininity and sexuality along patriarchal lines?


***Week 8: Sexuality

March 12

How is homophobia propagated in contemporary competitive sport?


March 15


***Week 9: Social Class

March 19

How can socio-economic status play out in sport?

--Reading: Chapters 1 and 3 (pp. 1-16 and 49-89) in Protecting Home: Class, Race, and Masculinity in Boys’ Baseball. Rutgers University Press.

March 22

How is sport seen as an avenue toward socio-economic mobility among disadvantaged groups?
SECOND 5-6 PAGE PAPER DUE

***Week 10: Race and Ethnicity

April 5

How is race and ethnicity embedded in the institution of sport?


What are the connections between race, class, and gender within the institution of sport?


***Week 11: Race and Ethnicity

April 9

How does sport serve to socially construct racial and ethnic categories?


April 12


***Week 12: Sport and the Media

April 16

How does the media portray athletes in terms of gender and race?


April 19


***Week 13: Sport and Politics

April 23

*How is sport a politicized phenomenon in American society?*


*How can the politics of sport relate to different groups of American society?*


April 26


**THIRD 5-6 PAGE PAPER DUE**

***Week 14: Conclusion

April 30

**10 PAGE FINAL PAPER DUE DURING FINALS WEEK**