

GENDER • ETHNIC GROUPS • MEDIA • FITNESS • TECHNOLOGY

Sociological **DYNAMICS**

OF

SPORT

AND

EXERCISE

*James E. Bryant
&
Mary McElroy*

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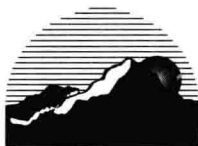
Sociological Dynamics of Sport and Exercise

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Preface

In our contemporary lives, sport will never be the same. A number of significant events occurring during the 1990s has seen to that. Most of us recall vividly the slow-speed chase of a white Bronco through the streets of Los Angeles. During the months to come, the O.J. Simpson trial played out in front of millions of people and altered forever the images associated with highly visible athletes.

During the same year, another group of exalted sport heroes lost their shine. Major league baseball players and owners engaged in a labor dispute that curtailed the baseball season and cancelled the World Series for the first time in nearly a century. Amateurism in the purest sense has not been a part of organized sport for some time. Even before the inclusion of U.S. professional basketball players in the 1992 Olympics, organized sport had become closely connected to the almighty dollar. Professional sport franchises abandoned cities in search of more lucrative markets; and colleges and universities marketed their sport teams more often with television revenues than educational motives in mind. Even youth sport has not escaped the economic realities of today's sport world. A number of young athletes have signed multi-million dollar contracts, and others will sacrifice almost anything for the opportunity to gain the national spotlight.

Events in the American sport scene were also inspirational. Many remember the storybook successes of speed skater Dan Jansen as he went for gold at the Lillehammer games, overcoming personal tragedies and failures that had plagued his life 4 years earlier. Perhaps more compelling have been the accomplishments of one baseball player born with a birth defect that left him with only one hand. Jim Abbott, pitcher for the New York Yankees and the California Angels, developed his own unique style of pitching and fielding, and has enjoyed a remarkable career.

During the decade of the 1990s, women have stepped forward and left their own mark. Female athletes such as Bonnie Blair, Janet Evans, and Shannon Miller have brought home gold medals at the Olympic Games. The tremendous growth of women's sports at all levels — youth, high school, and college — is undeniable. Women have also contributed to increased numbers in attendance at exercise and fitness clubs.

Sociological Dynamics of Sport and Exercise explores the highs and lows found in today's world of organized sport and exercise. Spanning a variety of current topics, this book lends insight into how social scientists examine the place of a variety of forms of physical activity in our complex and changing society. We will explore questions such as why organized sport provides opportunities to some social groups and restricts access to others, why the increased visibility of exercise has not been met with a corresponding increase in health-related fitness, and how high-profile sport settings such as the Super Bowl and the Olympic Games have been co-opted for a multiplicity of political and social purposes.

All of you have been impacted by sport and exercise — some of you as sport fans and many more of you as participants, whether through youth and interscholastic sport experiences, city leagues, or as weekend exercise warriors. Many of you are likely to pursue careers in the sport and exercise field: Some of you are likely to enter traditional careers as physical education teachers and coaches.

Others perhaps will pursue one of the emerging fields of sport and fitness management. This book is also for those of you who are simply interested in sport and exercise.

As you will soon discover, the world of sport and exercise permeates all aspects of contemporary life. Topics include the changing role of sport in the educational system, the growing business ethic of professional sport, and the multi-billion-dollar fitness industry. Throughout these pages we plan to take a journey through the world of sport and exercise, and we hope by the end of our trip, you will have considered sport and exercise in ways you have not given much thought previously.

FORMAT OF THE BOOK

Part I Sport and Exercise and the Social Process

In Chapter 1 we introduce you to some of the basic rules and assumptions social scientists use to explore topics related to sport and exercise. Chapter 2 focuses on the issues of socialization or how individuals enter and leave sport and exercise roles. In Chapter 3 we examine the mainstream values inherent in contemporary society and the extent to which physical activity both reaffirms and criticizes the values considered important to the culture as a whole. We give special attention to the changing definition of what is valued in American society. In Chapter 4 we examine how social class structure of American society largely determines the quantity and quality of sport and exercise habits. While we cling to the belief that physical activity opens doors of opportunities, this chapter comes to grip with the reality that avenues of social mobility are closed to the majority of Americans. Chapter 5 addresses the social problems that plague our sport and exercise programs. Among the problems discussed are violence, crime, cheating, and drug abuse.

Part 2 Social Groups in Sport and Exercise

Part 2 takes us through a variety of sport and exercise issues relevant to two social groups that often find themselves on the fringe or margins of American society. In Chapter 6 we examine the labels and expectations associated with gender. Chapter 7 centers on multicultural or race and ethnicity issues as they relate to sport and exercise.

Part 3 Social Institutions and Sport and Exercise

The final four chapters focus on the dynamic interplay between physical activity and significant social institutions in contemporary society. The exercise and fitness industry (Chapter 8), the educational system (Chapter 9), the professional world of sport (Chapter 10), and the mass media (Chapter 11) receive in-depth treatment, with special interest in how sport/exercise contributes to the status quo or, conversely, on some occasions that lead the movement for social change within these social institutions. Finally, in Chapter 12 we consider what the future might hold for sport and exercise as we enter the 21st century.

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Sociological Thinking and the Study of Sport and Exercise



TERMS

contested terrain	positive social
culture	technology
dominant culture	social change
health-related exercise	social institution
macro-level analysis	of sport
microcosm	subculture
micro-level analysis	
negative social	
technology	
organized sport	
paradox	
popular culture	

Sport is an element of American life so pervasive that virtually every individual is touched by it. This was the conclusion of a national survey of American attitudes toward sport sponsored by the Miller Brewing Company nearly 15 years ago (Miller Brewing Co., 1983.) According to the study of more than 1,300 adults, seven of every 10 Americans watched sport or sport news on television, or they read the sport section of the newspaper, or they read books or magazines on sports, or they talked about sports with their friends.

During the same time period, a leading bottled-water company commissioned Fitness in America — The Perrier Study (Harris & Associates, 1984). According to conclusions drawn from approximately 1,700 telephone interviews, 90% of the general public believes exercise reduces the threat of catastrophic illness such as cardiovascular disease, especially heart attack. In summarizing the perceptions of the American public, the authors concluded that their finding

STUDENT OUTCOMES

- Explain the paradoxical nature of sport and exercise.
- Identify examples of dominant culture and subculture in sport/exercise contexts.
- Identify the four assumptions underlying the study of social action.
- Identify the five characteristics of organized sport.
- Identify the four levels of health-related exercise.
- Identify what is meant by positive and negative social technology.
- Distinguish between the structural-functional, conflict, symbolic interaction, and social critical paradigms.
- Identify two recent frameworks sociologists use to study sport and exercise.



Major league baseball crowds.

“unmistakably documents our increasing national consciousness of the physical and psychological benefits of exercise” (p. 6). They further asserted, “It appears the public as a whole understands the fundamentals of fitness and is aware that strenuous exercise increases the efficiency of the heart, lungs and circulatory system” (p. 6).

At first glance, these survey conclusions do not seem particularly surprising. Nor are they likely to run counter to your sense of the place of sport and exercise in contemporary American society. You, too, probably have encountered the visibility of sporting images in your daily life — in movies, books, magazines — in addition to the high-profile images on television. Sporting events comprise the majority of most-watched television shows, and in recent years a number of full-time sports networks have emerged. In addition to ESPN, now in its third decade of delivering a 24-hour-per-day sports menu, the major commercial networks CBS, NBC, and ABC, as well as the super-station cable networks PSN, WGN (Chicago), TBS (Atlanta), and WOR (New York), among others, cover the entire world of sport. Even more recently, the FOX

network has emerged as a formidable challenger for the television sport dollar.

Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of households tuned into the Super Bowl in the years between 1967 and 1994. The interest in American sport is unmistakable in other sports as well. Attendance at many sporting events has continued to grow as sports are marketed more aggressively and professional sport franchises continue to expand. In addition to the leagues associated with the popular professional sports of baseball, basketball, football, and hockey, we now see professional leagues in less visible domains such as indoor soccer, team tennis and, more recently, inline hockey. Similar expansion has occurred outside professional sport, as illustrated by the growth of intercollegiate sports for women, and by the high interest in international events such as the Olympic Games held in Atlanta in 1996.

While attention to the sporting scene is at an all-time high, more recently, a number of high-profile incidents have rocketed the sport scene and have suggested a growing distrust directed at the sport establishment. For example, during the two years following the 1994 baseball strike major league attendance rates sharply declined.

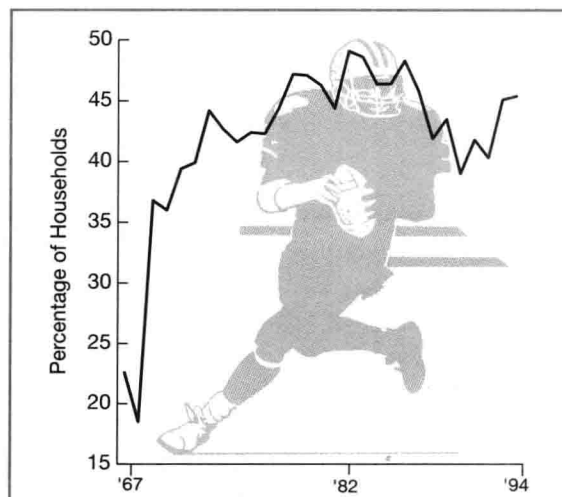


Figure 1.1 Percentage of TV Households Tuned in to the Super Bowl

The 1996 World Series — despite a thrilling conclusion and human interest stories — was one of the least watched by television viewers. The growing number of athletes experiencing off the field problems has cast a gloom over the world of organized sport.

Likely your life, too, has been touched in some way by the highly touted fitness boom. According to a recent survey, Americans annually spend more than \$10 billion on health and fitness products (LeUnes & Nation, 1996). The proliferation of exercise equipment and fitness facilities and the emergence of the personal trainer and home gym have generated a new vocabulary of fitness terms and greater public awareness of the importance of exercise.

While many Americans are investing large sums of money in sporting equipment, health clubs, and home gyms, many health professionals are questioning the actual physical activity

habits of most Americans. Caspersen, Christenson, and Pollard (1986) estimated that no more than 10% of the adult population participates in exercise at the minimum level for cardiovascular health benefit. More than half of the people who join exercise programs drop out within the first 6 months (Dishman, 1982). Similarly, close to half of participants in cardiac rehabilitation fail to complete the prescribed post-coronary exercise program (Oldridge & Streiner, 1990).

Perhaps the most compelling reason for alarm is seen in the findings of the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (Caspersen & Merritt, 1995). In this study of more than 87,000 adults, nearly 60% of the respondents classified themselves as physically inactive. Concern arising from this finding prompted the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1990) to issue a report confirming a crisis in the exercise habits of American citizens. The *Healthy People 2000* report set goals for exercise participation and called for a radical change in health and fitness behaviors as we enter the 21st century. Preliminary follow-up concluded that we are falling short of these objectives and called for a more aggressive approach in tackling this problem.

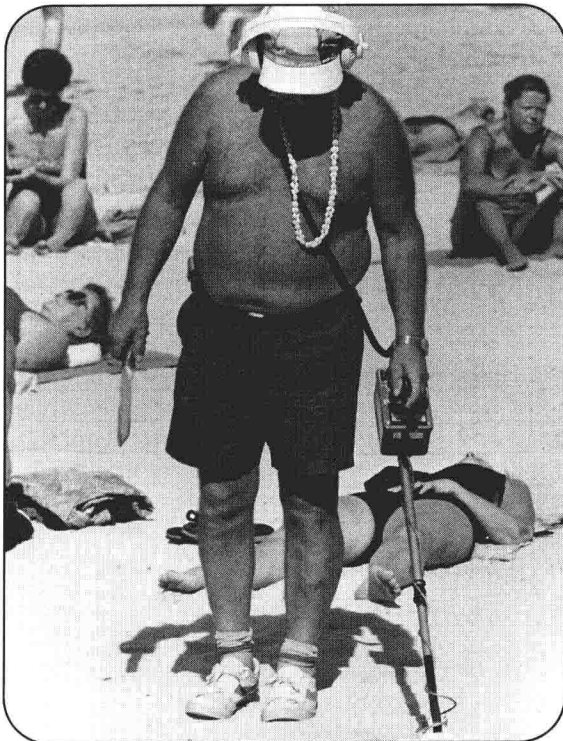
The statistics illustrated in Figure 1.2 raise two important questions:

1. Why do some people embrace sport and exercise and others virtually ignore physical activity?
2. Why does one of the most advanced countries in the modern world have such high rates of physical inactivity?

Answers to these questions belong to the domain of the sociological study of sport and exercise. These and other topics are the subject of this book.

THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF SPORT AND EXERCISE

A well known sociologist, Peter Berger (1963), warned readers more than 30 years ago of the



Clinically obese individual.

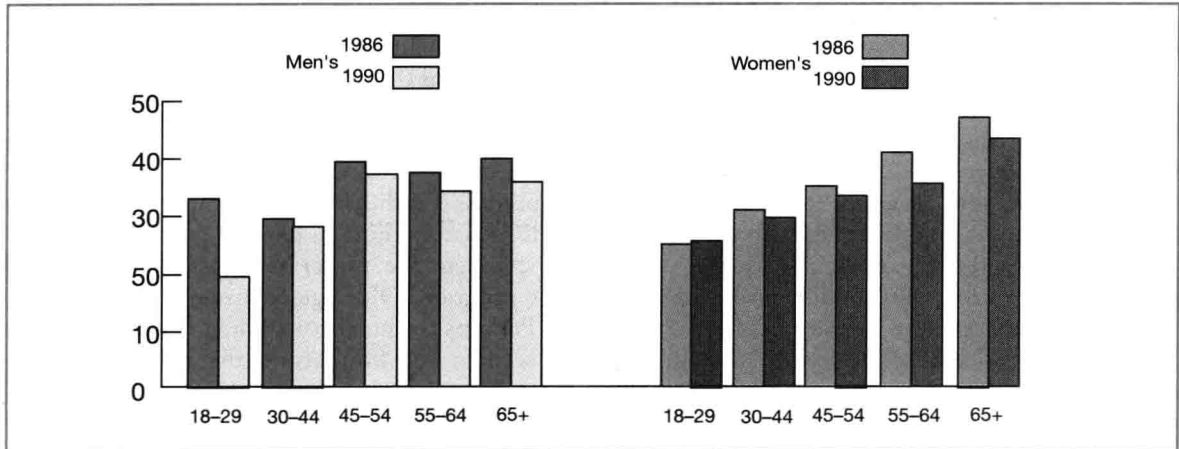


Figure 1.2 Percentage of Physically Inactive Americans

Adapted from Caspersen & Merritt, 1995.

first wisdom of sociology: Things are not what they seem. His warning, just as valid today, reminds us of the popular expression, "What we see is not what we always get." This paradox certainly applies to the analysis of today's sport and exercise. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a **paradox** is *a statement or proposition which on the face of it seems self-contradictory, absurd, or at variance with common sense, though on investigation or when explained, it may prove to be well founded.*

The world of sport and exercise is filled with other apparent contradictions. Many of these anomalies will be explored in depth throughout this book. For now, here are some questions covering a wide spectrum.

- Why do so many professional athletes, in occupations requiring optimum physical conditioning, have drug and alcohol problems?
- Why do more than half of Americans who have had heart attacks fail to stay involved in their cardiac rehabilitation exercise program?

- Why does today's definition of "amateur" Olympic ideals include athletes from the professional sports world?
- Why do some athletes who ascend rapidly to fame and fortune return with equal rapidity to their impoverished beginnings?

The first wisdom of sociology is that things are not what they seem.

The study of paradoxes in sport and exercise means probing far beneath the surface. Such an undertaking requires consideration of four basic principles important to sociological inquiry: sport and exercise as contested terrain; dominant and sub-culture relationships; debunking popular myths in sport and exercise and macro-level and micro-level analyses.

Sport and Exercise as Contested Terrain

As we will explore throughout this book, sport and exercise give social scientists fertile ground to examine many of the social complexities of American life. The above-mentioned public

opinion surveys raise questions that perhaps you have not considered. For example, why would the beer industry and the imported bottled water company sponsor surveys related to sport and exercise in the first place? Are they interested in helping to describe what Americans are all about, or are they interested in something else? For example, would an association conducting a survey that confirms the popularity of American sport and exercise prove beneficial to the products it sells? The answer, of course, is yes. Let's look at a second example. In 1992, major league baseball rewarded Steve Howe, a New York Yankee relief pitcher back in baseball after his eighth cocaine offense, with a 2-year contract worth a reported \$4.2 million (*San Jose Mercury News*, December 8, 1992).

On the one hand, major league baseball perhaps should be commended for being humanistic in its treatment of a troubled athlete. On the other hand, the same sport organization might be reprimanded for "using" the athlete's talents. Has the athlete been reduced to a unidimensional product whose talent is so prized that the structure is willing to accept personal and social failures of athletes as a part of the business? A recurring theme throughout these pages is the way in which groups have seized upon sport and exercise to advance its own purposes. These purposes often take the form of social, political and economic agendas.

1. Social agenda. In some instances the context of sport and exercise is used to illustrate inequities in social conditions. For example, advocates of women's issues have used sport situations to highlight practices that discriminate against women. Similarly, gay activists hope that the recent public disclosures by five-time Olympic gold medal winner Greg Louganis and figure skater Rudy Galindo will further a more tolerant attitude toward gays in American society. For other social groups the sport and exercise domain is seen as a place to promote active social change. For example, the demonstrations associated with recent Super Bowl competitions

provide a strong public voice to advocates of Native-American Indians concerns regarding the use of team logos and nicknames which in their opinion demean their heritage.

2. Political agenda. As an example of political involvement in sport is the U.S. Congress's intrusion on university policies and procedures, including legislation regarding mandatory reporting of graduation rates of collegiate athletes. Politicians seize upon high-profile sporting events whenever the opportunity presents itself. Presidential phone calls to the victors of major sporting events have become commonplace. Terminology such as "team play," and "throwing my hat into the arena" have become common language among aspiring politicians. Politicians such as Bill Bradley, Jack Kemp, Jim Ryan, and J.C. Watts, Steve Largent, and new baseball Hall of Famer Jim Bunning use their sporting backgrounds to help connect with potential voters.

3. Economic agenda. Economics plays an enormous role in defining sport and exercise involvement. Corporate America, in particular, has jumped into the sport and exercise arena. Private businesses have helped to finance professional sports stadiums and underwrite the costs of local events such as road races and youth sport competitions. They are highly visible at many charitable and other worthwhile causes. Perhaps the single best illustration is corporate America's partnership with the city of Atlanta in the 1996 Olympic Games. Although heavily criticized, even by members of the International Olympic Committee, this arrangement resulted in the most-watched Olympic Games ever. The impact on the sponsors remains to be seen.

The ability to examine competing forces within a society makes the context of sport and exercise a contested terrain, a social site for playing out a number of different social, political, and economic agendas. Sport and exercise activities are not restricted to one segment of society. Various groups in American society involve themselves in sport and exercise in different ways because they bring with them a

perspective filled with different levels and kinds of knowledge, unique experiences, and desired outcomes. In many instances, the groups also create a situation of competing goals or outcomes. For example, as we will discuss in greater detail later, many of the rules the NCAA sets up to govern collegiate sport may serve to benefit certain groups (such as alumni, athletic departments) at the expense of others (such as student athletes, faculty).

Dominant and Subculture Relationships

We also should distinguish between dominant cultures and subcultures. By dominant culture we mean a way of thinking that reflects the majority viewpoints within a given society. Dominant thinking usually evolves through a long and enduring process and, as a result, often is difficult to change. For example, male-dominated professional sport leagues that emphasize winning and making money reflect longstanding capitalist thinking in American society.

Not all groups within society identify with the dominant thinking. A subculture is a cohesive

cultural system that views society in a fashion that differs from the dominant culture. Subcultures then, are identifiable cultural systems that differ from the dominant culture. The subcultures of sport and exercise thus exist on the fringe of society's dominant thinking.

Sociologist Peter Donnelly (1993) provided a framework identifying the three types of subcultures listed in Table 1.1. Subcultures of resilience are those that resist the changes the dominant culture has undertaken. An example is the all-male athletic club, still prevalent in some areas of the United States. Subcultures of transformation provide a social environment that endorses a shift to a more progressive or socially liberating position relative to the established culture. Subcultures that champion the role of women, minorities, and members of disadvantaged groups (such as low-income, low-education) fit this category of transformation. Individuals who devote time and energies that promote fitness and healthy lifestyles belong to this classification of subculture. Subcultures of counterculture hold values directly opposite of the prevailing values of the dominant culture. The countercultures of bodybuilders and surfers, as examples, resist the dominant ideology by creating a set of

TABLE 1.1 Sport Subcultures

Characteristics	Reflected In	Examples
Resilience	Activities that have resisted change over time to conform to changes in the dominant sport culture	cock fighting all-male private golf clubs all-male athletic clubs English rugby unions Professional sports team ownership
Transformation	Activities that emphasize a shift to a more progressive position relative to the dominant culture	Special Olympics women's professional sports leagues fitness promotion programs urban sports programs
Counterculture	Activities that reflect values opposite of those endorsed by the dominant culture	wrestling lesbian softball anti-fitness programs gay athletic clubs

acceptable values countermanded in the larger society. The extent to which bodybuilders endorse the use of performance-enhancing drugs and surfers express a statement in defiance of the American work ethic gives rise to a conflict in value systems. Differences between the dominant culture and subcultures make their point of interaction a place of social struggle. We will examine a number of these social group struggles throughout this book.

Debunking Popular Myths in Sport and Exercise

Consider the following statements.

- Organized sport is one of the few areas of American life in which success is based on merit, and discrimination is largely absent.
- The physical fitness boom of the 1970s and 1980s has reached Americans from all walks of life and age groups.
- Participation in organized sports is a good predictor of cardiovascular health later in life.
- Women's sport is inferior to men's sport.

Although each of these statements seems reasonable, none is accurate. Each represents a popular myth that persists.

Although we cannot force people to change their minds . . . social scientists continually seek to gather evidence revealing that many stubbornly held "truths" are in fact myths. Since common-sense notions are themselves social phenomena, exploring who believes in them and why can tell us much about American society and its people. Sociologists get closer to the truth by testing common-sense views. Events in our sport and exercise world affect social groups differently. When we do attempt to explain some phenomenon, we almost invariably discover that it has not one cause and one effect but, rather, a multitude of both causes and effects, all interrelated and reciprocal (Olsen, 1968).

Macro-Level and Micro-Level Analyses

The study of sociology provides an effective means of describing and explaining human social organization and social life. While the study of human behavior leads us invariably to consider individual actions, some sociologists focus on the larger patterns of behavior related to large-scale social structures and processes called macro-level analysis. Social class categories, social institutions (e.g., family, education, politics), and social systems (e.g., war, unemployment, divorce) are included in this macro-level analysis.

An example of macro-level analysis of sport is the study completed by Curtis, Loy, and Karnilowicz, (1986). They were interested in the relationship between suicide rates and the conduct of major sporting events and civil holidays. Using a framework based on the sociological thinking of Emile Durkheim (1897), they hypothesized that public ceremonial occasions would increase social integration and lessen the incidence of suicide. The researchers obtained, from the U.S. Public Health Service publication *Vital Statistics of the United States*, information concerning the number and date of occurrence of suicides for a 7-year period. They then compared suicide rates for two major sporting events, the Super Bowl and the World Series. They confirmed a dip in the suicide rate during both sporting events. Although we must be careful not to attach a cause-and-effect relationship between watching sport and suicidal behavior, their study gives us reason to explore this relationship further.

A focus on the immediate social environment is known as micro-level analysis and relies heavily on the individual's experiences and interpretations of significant events. Micro-level approaches concentrate on the personal meanings attached to sport and exercise by those experiencing it. Take, for example, sociologist Charles Gallmeier's (1987) analysis of the world of ice hockey. His interest in studying the emotional preparation players undergo in readying

themselves for competition required daily interactions with the participants during the course of an eight month season. In another example, Susan Eastman and Karen Riggs (1994) studied rituals in televised sport through repeated observations and interactions with fans gathered in their living rooms.

The distinctions between macro-level analysis and micro-analysis can lead to different conclusions. Take, for example, one of the more hotly contested topics in today's society and in our sports programs as well, that of affirmative action. We will discuss affirmative action in more detail later but, for now, recognize that affirmative action is the process by which women and minorities are provided special opportunities for group membership such as college entrance or coaching position.

Taking a macro-level perspective, one can argue that certain social groups in our society have not been given opportunities to develop a level of skills similar to that accorded other social groups in society. Women, for example, have not been encouraged to acquire the necessary educational background for future success in many professional careers. Offering special circumstances may provide opportunities for qualified women to gain entrance to certain occupational roles. A micro-level perspective on the other hand, might consider these practices to be unfair and claim reverse discrimination, by which a qualified individual — in this case, a male — is passed over to rectify society's past history of exclusion.

Which side is correct? The answer is that both sides are correct. What is happening, in sociological terms, is a case of "mixing sociological apples with sociological oranges." Here we are mixing macro-level and micro-level explanations. Exclusion, in terms of women's involvement, is being measured from the macro-level perspective of women's role in American society. Discrimination of the male is being interpreted at the individual or micro-level. Although our overlooked male likely will not be pleased with the outcome, to conclude that the

entire group of white males is victimized by society would be inaccurate. The study of sociology can, and often does, address the individual and the group simultaneously. What is important, though, is to keep in mind the impact on the micro and macro levels as we explore topics in the sport and exercise domain.

SOCIAL ACTION

Sociology can be defined as the systematic study of human society and social behavior that interact to produce social action. Let's take a closer look at what we mean by social action and identify briefly some basic assumptions that underlie sociological analysis. Figure 1.3 depicts four characteristics of social action: social environment, social relationships, social dynamics, and cultural context.

Social Environment

The nature-nurture debate rages on among those interested in understanding human behavior. In the nature camp are social biologists, psychophysicologists who look for biological and genetic explanations for how and why people behave the way they do. Take, for example, the observation that women in American society do not play football. On the surface, one might

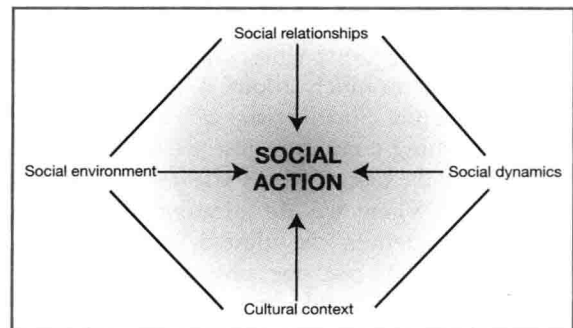


Figure 1.3 Characteristics of Social Action