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Teresa Hu

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Social Implications of Violence in Sports

By

Teresa Hu

ABSTRACT.

This essay focuses on the relationship between competitive sports and violence both in and out of the sports fields. Major literature findings suggest that competitive sports such as boxing, hockey, MMA, and American Football, stimulate violence mainly among white male athletes and spectators and discriminate against minority groups (females, black athletes) in the sports fields. Such violence is not limited to aggression among athletes, fans, and spectators in the fields and courts but also exercises penetrating and far-reaching influence through televised sports events and pop culture and media representation on individuals' (especially males') construction of self-image and social interaction modes. In particular, violence serves as a catalyst that encourages male aggression, such as male athletes' high crime rates in domestic abuse. Besides, sports reflect power oppression of the dominating white male group on different gender, racial and social class groups. Sports serve as a filter that consolidates narrow and stereotyped social norms on gender roles of males being physically and thus socially superior to females. Sports also enhance racial hierarchy when black athletes receive relatively less or negative media coverage. Televised sports also widen social class division by promoting ableism and thus the admiration of powerful and successful athletes lead the public to tolerate violence in athletes and discriminate against the socially disadvantaged and the disabled.

The goal of sociology in analyzing any popular cultural trend is to investigate the underlying social norms and implications and demonstrate how the world and all the individuals' values and interaction modes are shaped and constructed through exposure to the social event. One such example that poses penetrating and long-lasting social influence across all societies worldwide is televised sports. This essay aims to center on the popular and universal social norms behind competitive sports and associate them with various forms of violence. The essay synthesizes three sociology papers and four sports videos in Module 1 to demonstrate how various sports are associated with the common theme of violence and how violence penetrates different societies in the formation of ideologies regarding gender, race, and social class. As the sociologist Jay Coakley (2003) proposed, the current sociological studies on sports aim to understand "the meaning of "ideology" and how ideologies related to gender, race, social class, and ability are connected with sports" (2). My thesis is to display how violence in sports has become culturally, socially, and even legally accepted. Such widely accepted violence not only stimulates aggression among athletes, fans, and spectators in the fields and courts but also exercises penetrating and far-reaching influence through televised sports events and pop culture and media representation on individuals' (especially males') construction of self-image and social interaction modes. In particular, violence serves as a catalyst that encourages male aggression, but also a social filter that excludes specific social groups, consolidates narrow and stereotyped social norms on gender roles and racial hierarchy, and widens social class divisions.

Sports Definition

First, why do sociologists investigate the social implications of sports? All authors from the three assigned papers decode the violence embodied in competitive sports to analyze influence on culture and society from the view of social constructions. Some may argue that there is no need to study and evaluate sports for the purpose of transforming or making them better, because they are already what they should be (Coakley, 2003:11). However, sociology has always attempted to “defatalize and denaturalize the present, demonstrating that the world could be otherwise” (*Global Dialogue*, 2011). Sociologists study sports because “they are socially significant activities..., they reinforce important ideas and beliefs in many societies, and they’ve been integrated into major spheres of social life such as the family, religion, education, the economy, politics, and the media” (Coakley, 2003:13). To this end, this essay highlights three concepts of understanding ideologies associated with sports: culture, social interaction, and social structure: “These three aspects...represent the central interconnected aspects of all social worlds” (Coakley, 2003:3). To explain, a sports team and the athletes and coaches on it form a small society, which over time develops a specific culture composed of a set of beliefs, values, and social routines that every member of the team adopts in their social interaction. Next, such social interaction form ideologies that originate from the sports team itself, and then penetrate throughout the sports field and industry, and have “potential implications for their prestige in the community, self-images and self-esteem, future relationships, opportunities in education and the job market, and their overall enjoyment of life (Coakley, 2003:2). Eventually, such social implications within a special group spread to other social groups (spectators, views of televised sports events) through media demonstration and form ideologies in a broader context of society.

Sports as Catalyst for Violence

The first aspect of analyzing competitive sports and their association with violence from the social construction perspective is by investigating how authorized sports leagues define an official competitive sport. Starting with the loose definition of sports, which were defined as “physical activities that involve challenges or competitive contests”(Coakley, 2003:7). This widely accepted definition implies that “organized sports” are composed of a group of participants who are organized and disciplined to achieve better performance so that the team can compete against opponents for victory, and sociological research focuses on the “physical culture, which includes all forms of movement and physical activities that people in particular social worlds create, sustain, and regularly include in their collective lives” (Coakley, 2003:7) and how violence in various sports have become legally and culturally accepted through the formation of rules to play the sports and compete in the courts and fields.

Another aspect regarding defining sports is to trace how mankind’s inherited violent nature, usually suppressed in civilized societies, turns out to be socially and legally approved as sports leagues and authorities formulate rules regarding what kinds of physical contact is deemed acceptable violence in sports (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:215). For example, official sports associations such as the NCAA define and legalize specific physical aggression and violent physical contact among athletes, so some forms of violent moves in play and in training, such as aggression and risky provocative behaviors have been unaddressed or even acceptable: “Mills (1859) argued that individuals should have the right to engage in risky behaviors (without

interference)” (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:215). As demonstrated in the video titled “Times When NBA Players’ Bodies Were Weaponized,” the notorious NBA player Vernon Maxwell “was always prone to getting physical and fighting with other players” (NBA Central). Thus, punishments elude athletes who violate rules of fair play and sportsmanship, or punishments were not severe enough to deter violence from recurring, so eventually repeated provocative and aggressive behaviors become a common scene (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:213-216). Furthermore, sports terminology and broadcast terms often involve military or war expressions, such as “sports is war” (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000:388), or “sports is war minus the shooting” (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:203). This rhetoric implies the violent nature in sports competition.

What’s more, not just athletes in play, but also fans or spectators of these competitive sports, such as boxing, hockey, MMA, and American Football, see violence as a necessary part of sports: “Fans still like to see fights. Athletes that play violent sports view such risks as “part of the game” (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:215). George Orwell proclaimed, “Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard for all rules, and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence. In other words, it is war minus the shooting” (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:203). Numerous fights among NBA players on rival teams were recorded in videos to prove this point, as one video shows three different fistfights in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s respectively (Adi 2022), it indicates that players would ignore referees’ warnings and would try to provoke opponents at the expense of fouls and suspensions. As a result, violence has gradually gained not just official recognition as the authorities and media promote sensational representation of violence in sports, but violence also gains unofficial approval among coaches, athletes, and spectators, to all viewers of televised competitive sports.

Violence is involved and even encouraged throughout the process of organizing a team, training athletes to achieve better performance, and competing and defeating opponents for advantages and victory. Therefore, violence is usually exercised when athletes try to defeat their opponents with physical aggression rather than fair play. Eventually, the concepts that violence is approved and celebrated in male athletes are carried through media and pop culture representation to construct biased gender stereotypes.

Sports as Catalyst for Violence: Violence spreads outside the sports fields

The sociologists in all three papers all infer that through the formation of official rules and social norms formulated in the sports fields, violence in particular forms have become identified, legalized, approved by the authorities, and finally accepted and even encouraged inside and outside the sports fields. Once athletes are accustomed to provocative behaviors in sports, as Delaney and Madigan argue, the sports players tend to transfer such learned aggressive behaviors in sport fields to domestic abuse, and thus studies have shown that male athletes tend to exert violence in the domestic domain of homes. The authors find that some athletes “may find themselves in off-the-field forms of violence, specifically domestic violence (Delaney & Madigan, 2021: 217). In their paper, Delaney and Madigan (2021) quote Pappas et al.’s (2011) research on male athletes in major U.S. universities, in which the researchers find “a correlation between athletes who participate in violent sports with sexual aggression” (218). The authors

also quote Grange and Kerr's (2011) study that presents four kinds of motivation for aggression: play, power, anger, and thrill (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:218). Athletes with past domestic violent behaviors may have trouble controlling the final three types of motivation. Delaney and Madigan further assert that violence is not only demonstrated in athletes of rival teams, but also in spectators, "There are a number of occasions when violence occurs in the stands between rival fans. Among the variations of spectator violence are verbal assaults, disrupting play, throwing objects, physical assaults, and vandalism" (Delaney & Madigan, 2021:220). All the assigned video clips provide evidence that shows spectators engaging in aggressive behaviors with athletes on opposing teams. The video titled "Twenty Disrespectful Moments in Sport History 18 minutes" captured the highlights of the most moments disgraceful moments in all of the sports, especially the most notorious NBA brawl: Malice at the Palace, which occurred in 2014, when Indiana Pacers and the Detroit Pistons fight began on the court, and "quickly took to the stands after a spectator threw a drink at the man... pro b-ballers and fans began throwing punches and drinks at each other... led to multiple player suspensions and criminal charges for several fans" (WatchMojo). In other videos, spectators' violence is demonstrated when some NBA fans crossed the line and tossed a water bottle that nearly hit the player or called rival players names in the stands (Golden Hoops; NBA Central). Delaney and Madigan (2021) further listed more severe spectator violence incidents in the U.S. and other continents, particularly the spontaneous and deliberate soccer hooligans, who behave similarly to street gangs by looting, rioting, burning cars, and shops, and causing chaos.

Ironically, even though sports leagues have tried to curb violence and aggression by identifying unacceptable violent behaviors in sports to reduce confrontations among opposing teams and reduce injuries, such as concussions and Alzheimer's, Delaney and Madigan (2021) argue that "such efforts are often inconsistent" because charges of violent athletes are often dropped (213-218) and thus proven ineffective of combating violent behaviors. As a result, violence becomes unstoppable and is contagious like virus that quickly spread outside the courts and fields.

Violence in Sports as Social Filter: Ideologies in gender, race, ableism, and social class

As mentioned above, competitive sports and violence are indicated both inside and outside the sports fields and courts, and thus with televised sports broadcast and pop cultural representation, violence has become imprinted, widely accepted, or even celebrated in societies, and thus form ideologies such as stereotyped gender roles, racial discrimination, ableism, and widened division of social classes.

As proposed by Coakley (2003) in his reflection on sports titled "Who Plays and Who Doesn't: Contesting Place in Sports," the author points out that one detrimental effect of defining sports and formulating rules for competition is that sports become a social filter that "exclude" specific social groups, "Being in a category of people that is wholly excluded from all or some sports ... is unfair and occasionally illegal. Most cases of categorical exclusion are related to gender and sexuality, skin color and ethnicity, ability and disability, age and weight, nationality and citizenship, and other "eligibility" criteria" (10). Hence, sports widen the division among social groups and construct a hierarchy in gender, races, ableism, and social classes.

Gender Ideology

Based on all three papers, the most apparent excluding the influence of violence in competitive sports is to form a binary of gender images: “Gender ideology ... are widely used to define masculinity and femininity, identify people as male or female, evaluate forms of sexual expression, and determine the appropriate roles of men and women in society” (Coakley, 2003:14.). In competitive sports, the male-dominated authorities define who gets to play in sports and who doesn't, thereby marginalizing and excluding specific groups, especially women (Coakley, 2003:4). Section with questions such as these: Physical violence prevails in male athletes and is officially recognized and promoted in pop culture, and thus aggression is accepted and hailed as a significant trait tied to manhood and masculinity. In contrast, female athletes are marginalized, invisible, and ignored in the official sports arena, and thus women's rights are repressed as femininity is often associated with the voiceless, frail, weak and vulnerable and subject to male aggression in domestic and social domains.

Such opposite binary views of aggressive and oppressive masculinity versus passive and oppressed femininity consolidate and fossilize rigid, narrow, and biased gender stereotypes that boys must become violent to be a man and that females are physically less inferior to men so women are projected as minor roles, ignorable, unimportant, and thus voiceless and passive in broader social contexts. For example, Coakley (2003) argues that through hailing male physical strength in sports, it is easy to draw biased gender assumptions such as “Men are physically stronger and more rational than women; therefore, they are more naturally suited to possess power and assume leadership positions in the public spheres of society” (15). It implies men's dominance over women.

Delaney and Madigan (2021) further echo Coakley's gender ideology and present facts to support the male-have-power ideology to explain why male athletes often exert violence on women in domestic abuse: Men demonstrate power through sexual aggression on females. That's why male athletes are more likely to exercise aggression on women and that violence is found to be highly associated with violence in boys and male adult spectators and viewers. As shown in all assigned videos, the aggressors in the sports arena are mainly male athletes and spectators (NBA Central; WatchMojo; Adi; Golden Hoops).

In contrast, women are excluded and marginalized in sports and in other social domains. To start with, female athletes are limited in sports competitions: “Research shows that women, ...have lower rates of sport participation than do other categories of people” (Donnelly & Harvey, 2007; Eilling & Jassens, 2009; Tomlinson, 2007; Van Tuyckom et al., 2010, quoted by Coakley, 2003:10). These reasons all contribute to the fact that “many women worldwide don't see sports as appropriate activities for them to take seriously” (Coakley, 2003:10). It indicates women's minor and vulnerable roles in sports and other social contexts.

In Messner, Dunbar & Hunt's (2000) study on how boys learn to gain manhood through violence by watching televised sports events, the findings also support Coakley's and Delaney and Madigan's observations in the masculine aggression and dominance over frail and vulnerable femininity stereotypes. The authors present the “Televised Sports Manhood Formula,” which is a gender ideological narrative that is well suited to “discipline boys' bodies, minds, and

consumption choices in ways that construct a masculinity that is consistent with the entrenched interests of the sports/media/commercial complex” (Messner et al. 2000:380). Main findings are as follows: white men are the voices of authority; sports are a man’s world; Men are foregrounded in commercials; aggressive players get the prize, while nice guys finish last; get some balls and guts to win; boys will be violent boys. On the other hand, women are sexy props or prizes for men’s successful sport performances or consumption choices (Messner et al. 2000:382-392). All these findings suggest that media representation of violence in sports will lead to hierarchy and oppression of men over women.

Racial Ideology

Another violence in sports is the dominance of white male athletes over other ethnic groups. In Coakley’s reflection on how definitions and rules of sports exclude certain kinds of people, the author suggests one form of “categorical exclusion ... related to skin color and ethnicity” (Coakley, 2003:10). He also infers that black and Asian athletes face obstacles in entering certain sports fields (Coakley, 2003:12). Similarly, Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt (2000) point out that “whites are foregrounded in commercials” (385) and that “Asian American people almost never appear in commercials unless the commercial also has White people in it” (386). These phenomena are systematic patterns of white men’s dominance in all aspects of social realms.

Social Class Ideology

Social class ideologies are interrelated beliefs that explain economic success, failure, and inequalities. Coakley (2003) suggests that “The United States is a meritocracy, where deserving people become successful and where failure is the result of inability, poor choices, and a lack of motivation” (14). This ideology leads to the conclusion that power and success are earned through hard work, and thus success in sports is seen as result of smart decision making and diligence, which shape successful sports stars into idols for the public, and thus violence in sports are often dismissed due to admiration of the athletes and violence as a means of competition to achieve success. Hence, violence in sports can be tolerated, or even modeled in other social practices and social interactions.

Ableism Ideology

According to Coakley, ableist ideology is composed of interrelated ideas and beliefs to justify treating the disabled as inferior, and thus to organize social worlds and physical spaces without considering the needs of the disabled. The idea of seeing disabled people as inferior to normal people is the general perspective of ableism, that is, “attitudes, actions, and policies based on the belief that people perceived as lacking certain abilities are inferior and, therefore, incapable of full participation in mainstream activities” (Coakley, 2003:21). Therefore, when people use ableist perspectives, they unconsciously exclude and marginalize the disabled group in daily social interactions. Violence in sports, for the disabled, is shown when the physically challenged athletes cannot compete in an arena where able athletes receive most of the public attention.

In conclusion, all the sources in Module 1 suggest that violence is highly associated with sports events both in the arena and in other social fields. Playing in sports and watching sports events

as well both help shape our experience and understanding of social norms and our individual roles in society. As all the papers and videos reveal, violence is often associated with and in favor of male able athletes. Such notions are consolidated not just within the sports team, but also projected in media representation, all of which combined to shape ideologies of race, gender, and social classes. Consequently, violence is constructed through the projection of these ideologies that determine the power relations among participants in social contexts.

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