The Discourse of Gender and Sport: From Femininity to Feminism

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The argument presented here is that the sociological discourse of gender and sport, in other words the way the topic is approached, the assumptions surrounding its investigation, and the ways in which new knowledge is generated has been determined without sufficient recognition of its own ideological foundations. Gender, it is argued, is a major social and theoretical category that, along with social class, race, age, ethnicity, and others, must be incorporated into all theoretically based social analyses of sport. The paper reviews the development of the gender and sport discourse from its origins in social psychological research that focused on the supposed conflict between femininity and athleticism, to the more sophisticated yet functionalist notion of "sex roles" and its application to sport, and finally to the emerging feminist paradigm that is informed by a growing body of feminist social theory. The final section argues for a transformation of the gender and sport discourse toward a truly emancipatory one and provides some concrete suggestions as to how to bring this about.

When we speak of the discourse of gender and sport, we are in a sense speaking about speaking. In an everyday sense, discourse is about daily conversation and the ordinary things people talk about. Our social reality is in many ways our discourse. But discourse, in the sense I wish to use it here, can also mean the way in which a particular topic or subject area is approached, the assumptions surrounding its investigation, the ways in which new knowledge is generated, and how this knowledge fits with the zeitgeist of a specific discipline or field. There is, or should be, a direct connection between ordinary social discourse and more formal, theoretical discourse about which academics continually need reminding.

I want to discuss how the formal and theoretical discourse about the relationship between gender and sport came to be, what characterizes it now, and
how it could (dare I say should?) be changed. In doing so I want to argue the following: (a) that there are unrecognized gender assumptions and ideologies implicit in sport research; (b) that these gender assumptions and ideologies are rarely analyzed or related to social structure; and (c) that the only viable analyses of gender and sport are those that provide both a critical and historical analysis of the ideological foundations of our past and ongoing research. Finally, I will make some programmatic statements as to future directions in reshaping the discourse of gender and sport.

But first, let me say a brief word about my use of the term sport, and more important, how it should be conceptualized and theorized. The first point is that there are, both within a culture and among cultures, many diverse forms of sport. In my own society, for example, it makes sense to speak of professional sport, state-supported amateur sport, school and university sport, Olympic sports, domestic sports, youth sport, and so forth. Sport is conducted in a variety of social settings by individuals with different backgrounds, motives, and social characteristics. The second point is that play, games, and sports are real social practices that are reproduced and changed over time by human beings. They are not idealist abstractions with no connection to the making and remaking of ourselves as human agents, nor are they simple products of material conditions. Like all other forms of culture, sport is a creation of human agency and it can be transformed.

Gender is a major social and theoretical category just as significant and perhaps more so than the more familiar sociological categories of class and race. It is a conceptual tool to understanding the social world as well as a theoretical construct that requires careful, sustained analysis. As David Morgan (1986, p. 31) points out, "Feminist theory may, in part, be seen as an insistence that gender belongs up there with the more familiar categories of sociological discourse; that, indeed, it exists at the highest levels of generality." Paradoxically, as Morgan also points out, the higher the realm of sociological discourse, the higher the level of generality, the more likely that gender differentiation yields to more abstract categories such as role, social actor, organization, system, and class.

Also problematic is the tendency, certainly in North America, to translate "gender" to mean "woman." Courses, symposia, and texts with the label "gender and sport" are considered for women only and the issues discussed are relevant only to women, never to men. From a research perspective, gender differences mean that women are different from men, but rarely is the reverse question asked: How are men different from women? (Birrell, 1984). Women's experiences are seen as variations (or deviations) on men's; we know women only in relation to men. These studies become subsumed under gender research when implicit is the assumption that gender means women (and not men) or gender inequalities are subsumed under some broader category such as children, social class, athlete, and so forth.

What is the history of this discourse about gender and sport? What assumptions and ideologies are implicit here? My starting point, both within ordinary and formal discourse, is the pervasive obsession with the femininity (and masculinity) of female athletes and sportswomen but never with the masculinity (and femininity) of male athletes and sportsmen.
Culture, Femininity, and Athleticism

Since the 1960s a major focus of gender issues within North American sport sociology and social psychology has been to “prove” that sport competition does not masculinize female participants either psychologically or behaviorally. Between 1965 and 1987 I have located over 70 published articles, conference papers, and theses directed at this “problem.” The literature has followed, to a certain extent, the major trends in the larger sex role/sex identity research of social psychology. The earlier research was concerned primarily with the perceptions, stereotypes, and acceptance of the female athlete. Much of this work coincided with increasing numbers of female physical educators entering American and Canadian graduate programs whose personal concerns about the myths surrounding athleticism and femininity were reflected in the thesis topics they chose. Unfortunately, much of this work was essentialist, atheoretical, and as I argued in a substantive critique of this research (Hall, 1981), harmful because it continued to perpetuate the very stereotypes we wished to eradicate.

Within the social sciences, and particularly psychology, there is a long history of assuming that so-called cross-sex behaviors and preferences (e.g., athleticism among females) were indicators of emotional disturbance or sexual deviance (Spence, Deaux, & Helmreich, 1985). To be a woman and an athlete was to be in conflict and therefore psychologically unhealthy. With the reemergence of feminism in the 1960s and the tremendous explosion of feminist scholarship over the past decade, these assumptions have not only been challenged but investigated with increasing rigor, sophistication, and tenacity. The key construct to emerge is psychological androgyny, whose premise is that masculinity and femininity are independent, rather than bipolar, dimensions so that individuals high on both (now called androgynes) are mentally healthier and socially more effective (Cook, 1985). Sport researchers have leapt upon the concept and their studies typically find that female athletes are more androgynous, more masculine, less sex-typed, or less feminine than female nonathletes but no less psychologically healthy and often with a more positive self-concept (Hall, 1981; Marsh & Jackson, 1986).

In my original critique (Hall, 1981), I attacked this research with equal rigor. My argument, briefly, was as follows: since androgyny simply combines the old dualities of masculinity and femininity, which are themselves patriarchal constructs, the concept and the working models that define it will do little to bring about real change in a society that is fundamentally oppressive to women. This of course is a political argument and one I still hold. There is also a more specific theoretical and methodological critique (see Hall, 1981). Further, the important sociological question is not that a conflict between gender and culture exists, but why it exists only in the realm of the feminine. As Rosenblum (1986) so cogently argues, a key feature in the American conception of gender is the care/autonomy distinction: femininity is equated with and displayed by care for others rather than self, whereas masculinity is characterized by autonomy, self-reliance, and achievement, requiring an asocial, even antisocial, stance to the world. Prevailing American values, however, stress achievement, individuality, and self-promotion. Femininity must forego these values to be true to a feminine morality with its emphasis on self-sacrifice and responsivity to others’ needs. Therefore
the conflict between gender and culture exists only in the realm of femininity because masculinity is culture.

This explains the almost obsessive approach, by American sport researchers in particular, to explore the conflict relationship between femininity (never masculinity) and sport, and to "prove" that female athletic involvement has positive psychological benefits without producing a loss of femininity. I would also suggest, as have others (e.g., Griffin, 1987), that in reality femininity is a thinly disguised code word for heterosexuality. The real issue behind so much attention to an athlete's femininity is the fear that she may be a lesbian. Here are the summary statements from two of the more recent studies:

The results of this investigation show that female athletes apparently do not experience much role conflict, can be more M without being less F, and tend to have higher levels of self-concept—particularly in areas most logically related to sporting experience. The findings strongly refute the popular myth that female athletes are not, and cannot be, feminine. (Jackson & Marsh, 1986, p. 208)

One possible explanation concerns the relationship between engaging in gender-deviant activities and the culturally established value of the activities. Let us assume, for the purpose of argument, that masculine activities are indeed perceived as more valuable than feminine activities in our culture. For the cross-sex-typed woman, cross-gender identification may make gender-deviant behavior (participation in masculine activities) more likely. (Matteo, 1986, p. 430)

The obvious reification (e.g., "cross-sex-typed" and "gender-deviant activities") present in these studies continually reaffirms the belief that very normal, self-fulfilling activities (e.g., participation in sports for girls, or dance for boys) are in fact deviant in a psychological sense. What the researchers, many of whom would describe themselves as feminists, fail to recognize is that this unavoidable reification hinders political attempts to critique (and change) the pervasive gender ideologies of our culture. Most researchers, whose cognate field is psychology or social psychology, cannot and will not understand this because of the very nature of their disciplines (Walker, 1981). In a recent summary of social psychological research on sex roles in contemporary American society (Spence et al., 1985, p. 172), the authors admit to the following:

Assuredly the recent elevation of phenomena related to sex-roles and gender to major research topics among social and behavioral scientists have been motivated more by concern with societal action than by dispassionate scientific curiosity. . . . Attempts to describe and explain these temporal trends and their profound impact on societal institutions require an appeal to political, technological, economic, and sociological factors and to macrotheories of social change. Although not indifferent to the role of such factors, social psychologists have ordinarily left their investigation to members of other disciplines, preferring to focus (as is their wont) on the individual within the immediate group rather than on the group and larger sets of social forces.
This is all very well, and I certainly do not oppose a division of labor in our research, but in the specific case of gender and sport research it has been social psychology (to say nothing of biology and physiology) with its emphasis on the individual and individual differences, to the exclusion of social and political factors, that has largely determined the discourse about gender and sport. In part this is a reflection of the ways in which gender is taught and reproduced in our university physical education courses and curricula. The dominant framework in our programs is one that utilizes knowledge from the biological and behavioral sciences to analyze human physical performance and therefore presents gender as an issue of sex differences (Dewar, 1987). This approach focuses on individuals, and what is usually missing is an analysis of the powerful ways in which the gender system and gender ideologies inform our research. There is, in other words, no feminist analysis and critique. This is not to say that there has been no sociological discourse, feminist or otherwise, on gender and sport, but it is, as I will show now, replete with its own problems.

The Inadequacy of Role Theory and Functionalism

Much of the North American literature on gender and sport is subsumed within the general sex-roles literature that has grown from a trickle to a torrent over the last 15 years. The term sex role (or gender role) is now so common that many new researchers coming into the field do not realize there is a very substantive critique both of the notion of sex role and role in general. Here we see how the discourse on gender and sport has been determined more by ignorance and sloppy scholarship than by an analysis of gender ideologies and assumptions implicit in the research.

In my original 1981 critique, I outlined the major concerns about the notion "sex roles": (a) It is sociologically illogical in that we do not speak of race roles or age roles or class roles because we do not attempt to explain differential behavior patterns on the basis of race, age, or social class alone, but we do explain them in terms of a power differential that certainly coincides with race, class, and age distinctions. (b) The notion of role focuses attention more on individuals than on social structure and depoliticizes the central questions of power and control in explaining gender inequality. (c) Terms like "sex role stereotyping," "sex role socialization," "sex role orientation" are used as if they exist concretely rather than being analytical constructs; in other words, they become reified. (d) Role terminology is not fully applicable to gender because sex or gender, like age, race, and social class, infuse the more specific social roles one plays (e.g., teacher, athlete, coach, university professor).

Carolyn Sherif, a well-known and respected social psychologist, likened the term "sex roles" to a "boxcar carrying an assortment of sociological and psychological data along with an explosive mixture of myth and untested assumptions" (Sherif, 1982, p. 392). More important, she argued that stereotypical attributions of instrumental versus expressive, which are the basis of sex roles and seen as universal, are part of the very ideology that inhibit women's entry into more egalitarian role relationships with men. Her advice, never taken, was to drop the concept altogether.

Several sociologists (e.g., Coulson, 1972; Giddens, 1979), although more concerned with the general concept "role" than the more specific "sex role,"
have also argued that the concept be abandoned, certainly by sociologists. Giddens points out that within functionalist theories of social systems, role (to quote Talcott Parsons) is "the primary point of direct articulation between the personality of the individual and the structure of the social system." For Giddens, and others who eschew functionalism, "social systems are not constituted of roles but of (reproduced) practices; and it is practices, not roles which (via the duality of structure) have to be regarded as the 'points of articulation' between actors and structures" (p. 117). This is an important point because the concept of sex roles is a functionalist conception of gender deeply shaped by the concepts—instrumental versus expressive—developed by Parsons and used by others (Stacey & Thorne, 1985). The implications of this are that gender is thought to be more central to the family than to other institutions (sport is a good example here) and that gender arrangements function primarily to ensure social maintenance and reproduction. What is interesting is that functionalist assumptions seem more deeply ingrained in sociological conceptions of gender than in other forms of social inequality.

As for the sociological discourse of gender and sport, the implications I think are obvious: functionalist conceptions of gender applied to sport fail to recognize that femininity (and masculinity) are socially constructed, historically specific, and mediated by social class, race, ethnicity, and other social categories of inequality.

**Social Theory, Sport, and Feminist Theory**

Elsewhere (Hall, 1986) I have argued that the concept of gender is only beginning to emerge as a major social category to be treated seriously, and with some care, in our theoretically based social analyses of sport. I outlined what I consider to be the major paradigms (shared perspectives on how research should be conducted) that currently inform primarily North American sport sociology:

(a) the dominant idealist/positivist paradigm whereby sport is seen as part of a larger societal system and is studied to assess how it contributes to individual personal growth and the maintenance of social order; (b) the materialist/socialist (political economy) paradigm, more Canadian in content, which focuses on the relationship of sport to the emergent features of industrial capitalism; (c) a social definition paradigm whereby the focus, in the context of sport, is on how individuals define their social situation (e.g., small groups, teams, athletic subcultures) and the meaning they attach to their actions; (d) a lesser known cultural studies paradigm, whose origins are in Britain, that examines the ways in which culture and ideology are relatively autonomous in relation to economic and political pressures and, more important, the mediating role of human agency in the making of culture (sport being an important aspect of culture); and finally (e) an emerging feminist paradigm which, quite frankly, is seeking to find its focus at present but which is concerned primarily with the "gendered" practice of sport.

Obviously there are very different epistemological assumptions inherent in these paradigms and, as in sociology in general, the ensuing debates focus on which paradigm should take precedence. Those advocating a critical sport sociology (e.g., Marxists, socialists, feminists, cultural theorists) are at odds with the idealist/positivist paradigm because of its inability to recognize its own ideology, and with the social definition paradigm because of its seemingly apolitical
stance to the social world. Feminists have been accused of substituting a logic-of-patriarchy for an equally reductionistic logic-of-capital explanation of domination, and on it goes. There has to be some paradigm resolution here, although admittedly the ideological differences between the idealist/positivist paradigm and the others is so great that we must settle for a more unified, theoretically informed, critical sociology of sport. The best possibility for resolution, it seems to me, is between the cultural studies and feminist perspectives.

What this solution recognizes is that there is a growing and sophisticated body of literature we can now define as feminist social theory. My definition of feminist in this context is taken from Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1983, p. 423): "a point of view that (1) sees women as exploited, devalued and often oppressed; (2) is committed to changing the condition of women; (3) adopts a critical perspective toward dominant intellectual traditions that have ignored and/or justified women's oppression." Feminist social theory, as Sondra Farganis (1986a, 1986b) points out, has much in common with classical (i.e., critical) social theory, certainly as expounded by Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, and Mannheim, and more recently by the writings emanating from the Frankfurt School and the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas. What is central to classical social theory and feminist social theory is the critique of positivism and scientism, and more important, that theory is essential to informing practice (praxis). Whatever the theory, it must be an emancipatory one.

Nonsexist, Women-Centered, and Feminist Scholarship: Transforming the Discourse

I said earlier that the feminist paradigm or perspective within the sociology of sport is an emerging one whose focus at present is unclear. Some confusion and uncertainty is to be expected because modern feminist scholarship is not much more than 20 years old. It has literally exploded over the last decade, so that keeping up with the volume of papers, books, conferences, symposia, even in one field, is now impossible. For those of us whose academic careers have coincided with this political and intellectual movement, it is a terribly exciting, stimulating, if not somewhat frightening, time. We have moved far beyond the "add women and stir" phase of our scholarship to a perspective that is highly critical and challenges the dominant intellectual traditions of our time. There has also been a substantial challenge to the sexist bias of all social science, both in content and methodology. Any researcher, male or female, who still engages in sexist or androcentric research now has no excuse (e.g., see Eichler, 1988; Eichler & Lapointe, 1985). Feminist scholarship is here to stay. Perhaps at present it only rattles the cages of the traditional disciplines, but over time it will transform the entire academy (e.g., Davis, 1985; Dubois, Kelly, Kennedy, Korsmeyer, & Robinson, 1985; Farnham, 1987; Keller, 1985; Schuster & Van Dyne, 1985; Spender, 1981). In the process, feminist scholarship and research will begin to transform individual and specific discourses, which is precisely what is happening in this tiny little field called the sociology of sport, and more specifically still the discourse of gender and sport.3

What, precisely, makes scholarship feminist? How do we distinguish it from nonsexist scholarship, or from woman-centered scholarship? To do feminist scholarship is to apply a fundamentally political concept—feminism—to the world
of academic research. Earlier I defined feminism as a point of view that sees women as exploited, devalued, and often oppressed, and that is committed to changing their condition. To do feminist scholarship in the world of sport is to recognize that female athletes and sportswomen are devalued, often exploited, and very often oppressed. Those of us who consider ourselves feminist are committed to bringing about fundamental change in the world of sport to counter not just exploitation and oppression based on gender but also on race, class, age, ethnicity, and so on. However, there has to be some division of labor. Some choose to work in academe, focusing on research and scholarship, whereas others choose the more frontline work such as the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport in Canada, the Women’s Sports Foundation in Britain and the USA, the Women’s Committee of the Norwegian Sports Federation in Norway, and others. Hopefully, those in academe and those in the frontline are working hand in hand. We can ensure that this happens by communicating with each other and respecting the value of each other’s work.

Feminist scholarship must be distinguished from that which is nonsexist and that which is woman-centered. Research and scholarship in the social sciences is sexist if it is informed and shaped by a male viewpoint resulting in a distorted picture of social reality (Eichler, 1987). Research is truly nonsexist if its sexist elements have been removed from its language, concepts, questions posed, methods used, interpretations or policy recommendations made, as well as in overall perspective (see Eichler, 1988). Everyone, male or female, engaged in social science research must be forced to do nonsexist research; journals must no longer publish sexist research, and conferences must no longer be a forum for it. This obviously is no easy task.

Woman-centered research and scholarship are also sexist but in a reverse way. Studies focus totally on women, and women are seen only in relation to a social universe constructed around females (Eichler, 1987). This is a gynocentric model of social reality as opposed to an androcentric one, and it has been an extremely useful and productive way to recognize and counter androcentric, sexist scholarship. It has also added immeasurably to our knowledge about women and their lives. The development of women’s studies in North American universities is largely an outgrowth of this perspective.

Feminist research and scholarship are both nonsexist and woman-centered, but also much more. What that “more” consists of is difficult to define because not only is it evolving but it constantly changes. As Dubois et al. (1985, p. 196) point out, “it may be futile to define feminist scholarship by patrolling its borders or specifying its center. Rather what gives the field coherence is the relation of the parts to the whole and its link to the more general feminist movement that brought it into being.” Certainly there are competing feminist frameworks, not unusual for a new scholarly venture, but what is at issue is the potential of feminist scholarship, as a critical mode of inquiry, to transform the traditional disciplines so they are rid of their androcentric biases.

I suggested earlier that it is time the sociology of sport recognize the theoretical importance of feminism. This means that individual scholars, both male and female, must inform themselves about feminist scholarship. Gender should no longer be considered the prime interest of a few female sport sociologists; it must interest everyone. I also suggested that sport sociologists, if they wish to be truly critical, should consider a cultural studies approach to their scholar-
ship. Those who comprehend what this means warn that “he or she must master a rich body of interdisciplinary literature and come to grips with several very thorny epistemological, methodological, and theoretical problems” (Loy, 1987, p. 131). I agree, but that is precisely what is so exciting about feminist scholarship: It is interdisciplinary, it is constantly changing, it is beginning to work through its own epistemology and methodology, and feminist social theory leads one right back to what sociologists are supposed to be doing—making sense of differing social realities.

Feminist scholarship, and the social movement from which it grows, are a direct frontal attack on the masculinity-as-culture discourse of gender and sport. Of necessity, women have had to create their own culture and communities. This has been true of women’s sport. The central debate in feminism at present, however, is the extent to which gender differences, as manifested in cultural femininity and masculinity, ought to be eliminated or encouraged. The discourse about women and sport, on a practical level, is now about integration versus separation, engagement versus autonomy, and co-option versus ostracism (see Williams, Lawrence, & Rowe, 1985). There is also a slowly growing interest in how the patriarchal and gendered practice of modern sport has shaped men’s lives as well (see Carrigan, Connell, & Lees, 1985; Kidd, 1987; Messner, 1985; Sabo, 1985). Slowly but surely, the discourse of gender and sport is finally moving away from an exclusive and restrictive focus on women and femininity to the nature of gendered social behavior and the impact of gendered social structures on both sexes.

References


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Notes

1Gender is also a key variable in the sense that researchers commonly use “sex” or “gender” as an independent variable most especially in the now voluminous work on social behavioral sex or gender differences. This is equivalent to recording one’s socioeconomic status or ethnic background, and it is not without its problems. It is also not the sense in which I wish to deal with gender here. However, for an excellent summary as well as some useful suggestions, see Morgan (1986).

2Although there has been since the 1960s an increasing number of studies that use both male and female subjects, I found only one (Caron, Carter, & Brightman, 1985) that focused exclusively on males. It found that competitive team athletes were significantly more masculine, more tolerant of premarital sexual behavior for both sexes, and showed less egalitarian views toward women than did their nonathlete and individual athlete peers. There were no differences in femininity.

3For an example of some current work, see Hall (1987), which is a special issue of Women's Studies International Forum on “The Gendering of Sport, Leisure and Physical Education.”

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