Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the development of critical work on gender and sport and how this has changed over time. In tracing this history new questions emerge as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, thus pointing the way to potential future issues and debates. Our journey through the wealth of research on gender and sport involves an engagement with sports feminisms, interrogating how they have contributed to our understanding of sport and the impact (if any) this work has had on policy and practice. How we understand and explain gender and sport is influenced by social, political, and economic change and by developments both within and outside sport. It is impossible to cover all material or issues internationally relating to gender and sport, thus our own heritage as white women in the United Kingdom means that we draw particularly from our own histories and experiences although where possible we also reference research and writing in other societal contexts and cultures.

Early work on gender and sport within the Western academy provided a critique of the “mal-estream” of sport sociology with the focus very much on women and sport (Hall, 1996; Har- greaves, 1994); not only making women’s sport visible but also challenging inequalities seen to be founded on male dominance and male power. Over time the emphasis has shifted from “women and sport” to “gender and sport” with a critical engagement with discourses of masculinities as well as femininities. In the more recent past, the duality of male/female power relations has been further challenged by the developments in poststructuralism with its emphasis on identities, bodies, empowerment, and the significance of difference. This has raised fundamental questions about whether it is any longer appropriate to centralize gender relations or whether we need far more complex engagement with the intersections of difference relating to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, class, sexuality, disability, and/or age.

To explore this development we focus on sports feminisms and how different theoretical explanations have sought to answer very different questions relating to gender and sport. Our starting point is that gender relations are not static but change over time. There are many overlaps between different positions, writers shift their own understandings and “new” feminisms emerge out of existing theoretical positions. As we progress along our journey through sports feminism and gender and sport, we question
whether some of the “old” questions of early feminism are now outdated and surpassed by new more relevant concerns or whether some questions and issues continue to be pertinent for our sporting lives in the twenty-first century.

Liberal Feminism

Modern liberal feminism bears the legacy of early pioneers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor, who challenged essentialist notions of femininity and the dichotomy that posited rationality as masculine/male and emotionality as feminine/female. Second-wave liberal feminism since the 1960s and 1970s has focused on equality of access and opportunity, different socialization practices, gender stereotyping, and discrimination.

The underlying assumption of all liberal sports feminism is that sport is fundamentally sound and represents a positive experience to which girls and women need access. Differences in female sports participation are seen to be the result of socialization practices carried out by institutions such as the family, the media, and the school (Greendorfer, 1993; Oglesby, 1978). For example, girls are socialized into feminine activities such as netball, gymnastics, or hockey and into a female physicality, and boys are socialized into masculine sports such as football, rugby, or cricket and into a male physicality (Scraton, 1992). Furthermore, discriminatory practices prevent women from having equal access to sporting opportunities including facilities and resources. Despite new legislation, in most private golf clubs in the United Kingdom, in practice, opportunities for “lady” players to play remain unchanged and restricted to one day in the week or tee times later in the day at weekends (Crosset, 1995). Liberal feminist research also focuses on the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions in sport and in higher coaching and leadership posts (Knoppers, 1994).

Liberal feminism has placed these issues on the agenda of sports organizations, governing bodies, schools, and other institutions involved in delivering, providing, and developing sport. Pressure from activists working on women and sport initiatives such as Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF, UK), Women’s Sports Foundation (WSF, USA), Canadian Association for Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAWS), Women’s Sport International (WSI), and International Association of PE and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW), has resulted in a number of statements targeted at governments as well as national and international organizations. These statements argue for the vital importance of sport and physical education for girls and women (e.g., 1994 Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport; 1998 Windhoek Call for Action; 2008 IAPESGW “Accept and Respect” Declaration). Although there is little doubt that the liberal feminist agenda and the work of activists and pressure groups has opened up opportunities for some women, more radical sports feminists argue that this superficial change has simply hidden more complex gender inequalities that continue to impact on many women and some men.

The early feminist critiques of malestream sport are valuable for their rejection of biological explanations for women’s subordination in sport, and for establishing that gender is socially constructed. They are important, also, for documenting the real distributive inequalities between men’s and women’s sport and for highlighting the significance of women role models, both as participants and decision-makers in sport. Many of the questions raised by early liberal feminists remain pertinent to contemporary sport practice.

The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London have been heralded as the most “female friendly” games, with every team having women competitors, women now taking part in previously male-only events such as boxing, and female Olympians from the United States outnumbering male Olympians for the first time. Since the Barcelona Games in 1992, the number of women athletes has increased from 25 percent to 45 percent, a significant improvement. However, issues of access and opportunity remain on the agenda. For example, despite these advances, women still do not have as many opportunities to compete, with fewer medals available, and funding is still unequal. Men continue to dominate key decision-making and the percentage of women in governing and administrative bodies in the Olympic movement remains low. As of January 2013, there were only 21 women out of 101 active members of the
This reflects sport more widely, where women are still not in decision-making positions, although some small inroads have been made onto committee structures (Talbot, 2001). For example, in 2002 Karren Brady became the first woman to be the managing director of a Premier League association football team in England and in 2012 is the vice-chair of another Premier League football team. Although Sport England (a government agency responsible for building the foundations of sporting success) has three women committee members out of nine, this reflects a minor shift towards gender equity in decision-making with women still very much in the minority.

In addition, the focus on socialization and sex-role differentiation by liberal feminism is problematic as it treats women as a homogeneous group. Although early liberal feminist work has had some impact on policy and practice (as evidenced in the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games), many of the early initiatives identified women as a target group, with little regard paid to differences between women (White, 1995). This approach also unquestioningly accepts men’s sporting practices and organization, and defines women and their world, not sport itself, as the problem requiring change; the focus is very much on reform, rather than on a fundamental challenge to broader structural power relations.

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism developed out of radical politics in the 1960s and 1970s which saw the development of women’s consciousness-raising groups and the beginnings of a women’s movement with women campaigning publicly against domestic violence, pornography, and for their rights over reproduction and health matters (Boston Women’s Health Collective, 1973). There has always been a strong link between this radical activism and the theories that developed to explain women’s oppression. Fundamentally the radical feminist explanation is concerned with underlying structural power relations that are the result of the systematic maintenance of male power through patriarchy, whereby men as a group dominate women as a group. Radical feminists explore the nature of oppression through the personal experiences of women (the “personal is political”) and centralize sexuality as a major site of men’s domination over women through the social institutionalization of heterosexuality. This has led to an analysis of compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian feminism. Adrienne Rich (1980) argues that heterosexuality is defined as the norm both for individuals and within institutional settings, thus it becomes the only legitimate form of sexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality acts as a form of social and sexual control by normalizing and naturalizing (hetero)sexuality. Through this, radical feminists argue, male power is manifested and maintained. Male violence against women is understood as part of this social control of women and is fundamental to women’s oppression (Dworkin, 1981). As men and male power are seen to be the primary cause of women’s oppression and inequality, a response has been to celebrate women’s values, raise women’s consciousness, and develop a separatist philosophy. The degree to which separatism is developed differs from women-only events and spaces to the adoption of a total separatist lifestyle.

Whereas liberal sports feminists argue that women have unequal access to decision-making positions, radical feminists are more interested in the power maintained over women by men within and through sport. Radical feminists working in sport have been interested in the role of sport in the social construction of male sexual dominance and female sexual submission. For example, Lenskyj (1986, 1994) argues that discussions about “femininity” in sport should be better focused on sexuality, such is the strong association between gender and sexuality. Femininity should be viewed as a code name for heterosexuality. Through sport, females are encouraged to develop an acceptable “femininity” central to which is heterosexual attractiveness and availability. Women’s involvement in sport is controlled and restricted through their clothing and their need to present a “heterosexual” image (Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 1994). For example, the clothing for international women’s beach volleyball competitions states that the bikini bottoms must not have a side deeper than six cm. This is less to do with appropriateness of dress for the sport and more about the objectification of women’s bodies. Women’s objectification in sport is evidenced
further in the media portrayal of sportswomen through an emphasis on their appearance, sexuality, and their motherhood/domestic role in the family (Creedon, 1994; Hargreaves, 1993; Pirinen, 1997; Wright and Clarke, 1999). This takes place in our print and broadcast media and is supported by the use of women as display in male sports such as motor racing and boxing.

Radical feminists have contributed to our understandings of lesbianism and homophobia in sport. Research in this area shows how lesbians in sport and physical education are constructed as deviant, silenced, delegitimized, and stigmatized as abnormal. Importantly, they demonstrate, also, the negotiations and resistances developed by lesbians to maintain a presence in homophobic sport contexts (Cahn, 1994; Cunningham, 2012; Griffin, 1998). They do this by the development of various strategies including avoidance, the construction of complex boundaries around themselves, deflection and “playing” the heterosexual (Clarke, 1998). This work has been extended by male pro-feminist writers to an analysis of gay men’s position and experiences in sport (Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990, 1998; Wellard, 2006, 2009).

Radical feminists’ work on male violence to women has been applied to sport by demonstrating the continuum of violence from sexually derogative comments to sexual abuse and rape (Brackenridge, 2001; Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997). Within sport, this is a relatively new area of concern dealing with important and sensitive issues; male violence is experienced in sport, both “on and off the field.” Examples include domestic violence and male professional sportsmen; the sexual abuse and rape of athletes by male coaches; and sexual assaults by male student athletes on university campuses in the United States (Brackenridge, 2001; Crosset, Benedict, and McDonald, 1995; Fasting, Brackenridge, and Walseth, 2007; Kirby and Greaves, 1996). The conviction in 2012 of a long-serving football coach at Penn State university for child sexual abuse is a recent example, together with the appalling killing in May 2010 of Yeardley Love, a varsity female lacrosse player at the University of Virginia, by her boyfriend, himself a lacrosse player at the university. A radical sports feminist approach emphasizes the importance of consciousness-raising about violence and sexual abuse and supports the development of anti-discriminatory policies challenging homophobia and discrimination against lesbians and gays. In 2006 the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity published a discussion paper entitled “Seeing the Invisible, Speaking the Unspoken” on homophobia and sport. This was part of their strategy for making all sport inclusive and safe. In the past few years the Football Association in England has also included in their equality strategies the need to challenge homophobia. There are now clear statements about their commitment to “ensure every door is open for members of the gay and lesbian communities to participate and progress within football” and to “combat all forms of homophobic language and behaviour – whether by spectators, players or other participants.”

However, a statement such as this, whilst welcome, is a liberal response to a radical issue and there remains little evidence about how such a statement impacts on actual practices and behaviors.

Radical feminism challenges unequal gender relations in sport particularly by influencing institutional understanding of male violence and homophobia as well as the significance of women-only and gay and lesbian space. This separate provision ranges from local initiatives (e.g., women-only sessions in leisure and sport centers) to large-scale, international sporting events (e.g., women’s sports organizations and the Gay Games). Radical sports feminism further encourages the reconstruction of sport into forms that celebrate women’s values rather than those more traditionally associated with masculine aggression and competition (Birrell and Richter, 1987; Mitten, 1992).

Radical feminism is criticized for its tendency to essentialism and biological reductionism. Essentialism suggests that there is an essence to being a woman thus emphasizing women’s perceived natural or biologically determined qualities. There is a real danger in celebrating the importance of women’s values that femininity is reified and becomes fixed and reduced to a biological explanation. In addition, the concentration on patriarchy and the shared oppression of women by men fails to fully explore the divisions between women based on class, race, and ethnicity and homogenizes all men as oppressors.
**Marxist/Socialist Feminism**

Whereas patriarchy is seen to be the primary structure of oppression in radical feminism, Marxist feminism identifies gender inequalities as deriving from capitalism, class, and economic exploitation. The sexual division of labor is fundamental to this approach and focuses on how capital benefits from women's unpaid domestic labor, maintenance of the future labor force (childcare), and the day-to-day care of male laborers. Because of this narrow focus on capitalism, socialist feminism looks more specifically at the relationships between class and gender and the systems of capitalism and patriarchy. To a large extent socialist feminism has replaced the economic determinist approach of Marxist feminism and remains the feminist approach that seeks to explore the complex dynamics of class and gender relations. Women's oppression cannot simply be explained by class relations and the sexual division of labor (Marxist feminism) or by men's power over women (radical feminism). Socialist feminism attempts to provide a more comprehensive explanation that incorporates both of these areas.

A major problem for socialist feminists is how the relationship between class and gender can be theorized without giving primacy to one over the other—a problem we will return to later when discussing more recent approaches to difference and intersectionality. This has become more complex as socialist feminists have responded to the work of black feminists (which is discussed in the next section) who have argued powerfully against the ethnocentricity of white feminism. Socialist feminism has responded by looking more closely at the interrelationships of gender, race, and class located within capitalism, patriarchy, and neocolonialism. Within sport, socialist feminism highlights the part played by women in servicing and supporting roles. Women's dual role in the paid labor force and in domestic labor impacts on their time and energies for sport and recreation. Socialist feminism is critical of the disparities between men's and women's opportunities for sponsorship, prize money, and sporting careers (Hall, 1996).

Apart from exploring the complex interrelationships between capitalism and patriarchal power relations, socialist feminism shifts the emphasis from solely concentrating on women's experiences to looking more critically at gender. In order to do this they explore male power through the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2008). This has developed into a large area of study (men and masculinities) and has created the space for men to engage with feminist theorizing. The early work by Sabo and Runfola (1980) recognized the significance of feminist work for an understanding of men and sport but it is primarily through the work of Sabo (1985), Messner (1992), and Messner and Sabo (1990) that there have developed critical theoretically informed studies of men, masculinity, and sport. This work looks at the historical construction of masculinity and masculinity through sport, male hegemony, and hegemonic masculinity and the relationship between masculinity, male power, and sport. Importantly it explores how men as a group enjoy privileges in sport through the construction of unequal gender relations; how men also pay the cost for their adherence to narrow definitions of masculinity; and the importance of differences and inequalities between men (Messner, 1992, 1997; Wellard, 2006, 2009; Anderson, 2005).

**Black Feminism**

Black feminists have challenged dominant white feminist theorizing and activism since the early days of second-wave feminism, arguing that black women's experiences have been largely excluded and made invisible (Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 1981, 1984, 1989). They highlight the fact that the sites of their oppression may be different to those of white women. For example, many white women see the family as a major site of their oppression by both men and the sexual division of labor. Yet for some black women the family is
an important site for their resistance and solidarity, where they have control and can wield power (Hill Collins 1991). By focusing only on gendered power relations, white feminist theories have neglected to problematize racial power as central to the production of white feminist knowledge. White women within the feminist movement have not only failed to address the marginalization of black women but have failed to seriously interrogate their own whiteness. Whiteness is the taken-for-granted central position that relegates blackness to “otherness” (Mirza, 1997). The invisibility and marginalization of black women in feminism “speaks of the separate narrative constructions of race, gender and class; it is a racial discourse, where the subject is male; in a gendered discourse, where the subject is white; and a class discourse where race has no place” (Mirza, 1997: 4).

The interrogation of whiteness and sport has begun to be addressed in sport although much of the research remains focused on sportsmen (e.g., Long and Hylton, 2002; King, 2005) with work such as that by McDonald (2009), Fusco (2005), and Azzarito (2009), beginning to shift attention to mapping whiteness in relation to gender, women’s sport, and physical education.

Much of the current discourse about women and sport remains ethnocentric and is viewed through a “gendered lens” (Dworkin and Messner, 2001). There is little work that could be defined as offering a black feminist perspective on sport. As Birrell (1990: 193) concludes “we need to increase the awareness of issues in the lives of women of colour as they themselves articulate these issues.” Although written over two decades ago, there is little evidence that these omissions have been addressed. Birrell (1990) argues that most of the work that has been done on black women and sport has been categoric (emphasizing differences between categories) or distributive (providing statistics on inequality of opportunity, access, and distribution of resources) (see also Smith, 1992). Often the early work on gender, race, and sport tended to present a simplistic, additive, theoretical model where black women’s experiences are simply “added on” to an understanding of gender oppression (Scraton, 2001).

Raval (1989) provides one of the first critiques in the United Kingdom from the position of a South Asian woman in challenging the appropriateness of white academics researching the sporting experiences of black and South Asian women. She argues that their conclusions pathologize South Asian culture, and universalize the notion of South Asian women, failing to recognize differences between these women in relation to ethnicity, religion, and class. Work on the racialization and gendering of sport has been developed by, amongst others, Benn (1996), Benn, Pfister, and Jawad (2010), Kay (2006), and Ratna (2007) on Muslim women and sport and/or physical education; Wray (2001, 2003) in relation to physical activity, exercise, and health of older Muslim Pakistani women; Scraton, Caudwell, and Holland (2005) on race, gender, and women’s football, Parashak (1996, 1997) on native peoples in Canada, and Ifekwunigwe (2009) on sporting celebrity, class, and black feminism. This latter work is located within a theoretical framework of difference that challenges the universalistic approaches of the liberal and radical feminist analyses and will be discussed more fully in the next section.

The more recent development of critical work on gender, race, ethnicity, and women’s sport (as discussed above) to some extent redresses the previous androcentric focus by much sports research on black sportsmen. There are also now critical gendered explorations of sportsmen that engage with hegemonic masculinity, recognizing that the image of athletic masculinity is not only about being a man, a dominant powerful image seen in opposition to a subordinate femininity but is also a racialized image that distinguishes between black athleticism and white athleticism (Messner, 1993; Dworkin and Messner, 2001). Sport can be an important site of masculine self-expression for black males that can provide some means of resistance but can also serve to reinforce and lock them into their marginalized positions within a racist society (Majors, 1990; Messner, 1997; Woodward, 2004, 2009). Carrington’s (2001) early work on race, racism, and sport is an example of the development of a critical engagement with the complexities of black masculinities and sport. His work suggests that an understanding of sport as a site of black cultural resistance to racism does not always recognize that this is black male resistance, often dependent on gendered power relations.
of racialized masculinity politics, reiterates Carrington’s analysis in suggesting that in foregrounding the oppression of men by men, these studies risk portraying aggressive, even misogynist, gender displays primarily as liberating forms of resistance against class and racial oppression. What is obscured or even drops out of sight is the feminist observation that these kinds of masculinity are forms of domination over women. (1997: 77)

Carrington (2007, 2008) has extended his earlier analysis to areas of racialized performativity, bodies, and identities interrogating the complex relationships between racialization and sport.

The policy and practical responses to black feminism have included greater awareness of the needs of different women. In the United Kingdom this has included specific community-based strategies, for example, to encourage South Asian women into physical activity and active lifestyles (Scraton and Stoddart, 2000). However, although some sports organizations may have antiracist policies, these have had little impact on the experiences of many black sportsmen and women (Long et al., 2000; Spracklen, Hylton, and Long, 2006; Hylton, 2009). Indeed, the sporting world has some way to go before the concerns of black feminists become central to sporting practice.

The Impact of Poststructuralism, Queer Theory, and Postcolonialism

Poststructuralist feminists provide conceptual challenges to the macro-analyses of the structural approaches of liberal, radical, and socialist feminism. They argue that it is no longer relevant to seek the truth or a single explanation of a particular issue. They reject the view that it is a lack of equal access or opportunity (liberal), patriarchy (radical), capitalism (Marxist) or a combination of patriarchy and capitalism (socialist) that explains women’s oppression. Rather they focus on difference and diversity and argue that the very term “women” has little significance in the fragmented and changing world that we live in today. Poststructuralist accounts often draw on the work of Foucault (1980, 1983) who challenges the structuralist definitions of power (top down, repressive) and considers power as plural and productive in a multiplicity of sites such as the body, discourse, knowledge, subjectivity, and sexuality. Foucault highlights the significance of discourses, such as medical, scientific, and sexual, through which meanings and people are made and, importantly, through which power relations are maintained and changed. His conception of power provides opportunities for women’s resistance and struggle, with more of an emphasis on the everyday experiences and agency of individual women. Poststructuralist feminism argues for the deconstruction of the term “woman” and the recognition of a diversity of femininities, masculinities, and sexualities. Judith Butler’s (1990) work has been particularly influential to feminist thought, arguing that gender is performative. There is seen to be no inherent identity behind acts that “perform” gender, thus the categories of gender/sex are culturally constructed through the repeated performance of bodily acts.

Research and writing on gender and sport has continued to evolve as it engages with poststructuralist analysis and particularly the work of Foucault and Butler (Rail, 1998; Markula and Pringle, 2006). The focus on the body in poststructuralism is particularly appropriate for analyses of gender and sport. Foucault’s work is used in feminist research to explore the notion of the “docile body” and the “disciplined body.” Bordo (1993) shows how women engage in self-surveillance of their bodies, disciplining themselves through diet and exercise. Markula’s (1995) early work looks at aerobics as a site for disciplining the female body, but it concludes that although they work hard to achieve the ideal body, women also gain pleasure, self-confidence, and self-esteem through their aerobics workout. The body has also been the focus of critical work exploring and deconstructing femininity. Sport is an ideal arena for the display of gender and sports feminists are engaged with the embodiment of femininity often through analyses of women who take part in sports that have been traditionally defined as “men’s sports” such as rugby (Howe, 2001; Wright and Clarke, 1999), ice hockey (Theberge, 2000; Lock, 2006), boxing (Halbert, 1997), body building (Obel, 1996), wrestling (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009), and football (soccer) (Caudwell, 1999; Scraton et al.,
Women who play these sports are negotiating their display of gender particularly in relation to muscles, tough and aggressive gestures, and the clothes they wear. The women in these contexts are doing gender via a body aesthetic but often are still disciplining their bodies in order to adhere to rules of femininity. For example, in body building women’s bodies are made to comply with compulsory heterosexual femininity through their swimwear, make-up, breast implants, and styles of walking (Wesely, 2001). However, most importantly this work raises questions about how sport can not only reproduce gender norms in relation to femininity but can also begin to trespass gender frontiers and the potential to recreate and (re)define new femininities. Gender codes or stereotypes are no longer seen as polarized and some commentators argue that female athletes are challenging the boundaries of femininity and masculinity through the development of strong, muscular sporting bodies (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003).

Poststructuralist analyses of sport destabilize traditional notions of the relations between sex, gender, and sexuality (Sykes, 2006) and often provide a more celebratory view of constructions and performances of sexuality. Queer theory has developed from poststructuralist theory with its particular focus on gender and sexuality bringing a deconstructionist approach to sexual identity and heteronormative discourse (Drury, forthcoming). For example, Caudwell’s (1999, 2002) work on women who play football deconstructs the dichotomies of sex/gender and masculinity/femininity through an interrogation of the concepts of “butch” and “female masculinity.” Whereas radical feminism focuses on compulsory heterosexuality, lesbian/gay sexuality, and homophobia, queer theory is used by sport scholars to move away from “a lesbian and gay politics of identity to a politics of difference, resistance and challenge” (Caudwell, 2006: 2). Caudwell develops this in her examination of an “out” self-defined lesbian football team exploring how femme-ininity/ies disrupt sex-gender-desire imperatives. Broad (2001) also uses queer theory in her research on women’s rugby in the United States. In a similar vein to Caudwell, she argues that women’s rugby is a sporting context where gender boundaries can be blurred and space created for the expression of multiple sexualities. Ravel and Rail’s research continues to develop poststructuralist and queer readings of sport in their research on young women’s discursive constructions of gender and sexuality and their performative acts both in sport and in other contexts. Interestingly their findings suggest that their participants (located in Montreal, Canada), positioned themselves as “gaie” not lesbian or queer. “Gaie” sexuality is constructed as more “feminine” but, as the authors point out, this construction of alternative sexualities can also still reproduce some “lesbo/butch phobic ideas” (Raval and Rail, 2006: 395).

Pronger (1990, 2000) has been most influential in queering sport analysis particularly in his work on gay sport. Pronger, together with researchers such as Wellard (2006, 2009) and Anderson (2005), argues that we need to go beyond the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as developed most fully by Connell (1995, 2008), to a poststructuralist understanding of masculinities, gender relations, and sport which uses more complex and ambiguous workings of power (Pringle, 2005). Increasingly there are accounts of sportsmen’s subjectivities and an attempt to explore the performances of masculinities emphasizing agency, eroticism, desire, bodily pleasures, and subversive acts of gay sports. However, Wellard in particular, whilst using queer theory to analyze his empirical data of gay experiences of sport is mindful of the gap that still exists between academic queer theory and the lived experiences of sports participants. Whilst agency and transformative acts are evidenced in his work he still identifies the continuance of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity and its discriminatory and oppressive impact on his research participants.

Poststructuralism and queer theory have been criticized for their potential for relativism that emphasizes difference and thus loses the notion of women’s shared experiences in relation to gender. The issues central to the concerns of poststructuralist analyses are also considered by some, as discussed in relation to Wellard’s work above, to be somewhat distanced from the everyday realities of many people’s lives (Dworkin and Messner, 2001). Indeed these academic debates around transgressive bodies, female masculinity, and queering of sport are bought into sharp relief.
when they become a serious challenge to the normative views of the competitive sports world. In 2009, South African athlete Caster Semenya became the women’s world champion for the 800 meters in the World Athletic Championships. Her gold medal resulted in the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) instigating gender verification tests (Schultz, 2011). This is an example of the powerful retention, by those in power positions in sport (in this case the IAAF), of notions of gender/sex binaries and gender normativity together with essentialist notions of bodies having a stable sex that can be demonstrated through dress, body shape, muscle, hairstyle, voice, and so on. Anyone transgressing these expectations of normative femininity faces serious and humiliating actions including being asked to “prove” their sex/gender through biological sex testing. The history of gender verification tests goes back to the 1960s when the International Olympic Committee introduced these tests that involved chromosomal testing for the “true woman” with a chromosome XX. This is based on an acceptance of fixed, natural, binary categories of sex: male and female. Whilst academics have developed the work of Butler (1990), who argues for gendered performance and the disruption of any continuity between sex-gender-sexuality, the performance world of sport continues to deny the complexities of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex, and continues to submit athletes to humiliating and inappropriate testing to identify “deviant” athletes whom they see as gaining unfair advantage in women’s sports competition.

Postcolonial understandings of gender and sport tend to be textual-based, exploring representations of black sportswomen and sportsmen. There have been a number of interesting accounts of Serena and Venus Williams that seek to deconstruct black womanhood and explore the representations of black sporting bodies (Douglas, 2002; Schultz, 2005; Ifekwunigwe, 2009). This work, particularly the fascinating exploration of Serena and Venus Williams by Ifekwunigwe (2009: 136) engages with multiple subjectivities, agency, and the “nuanced complexities” of sport celebrity, class, and race. One of the few pro-feminist and queer readings of black masculinities is the work of Abdel-Shehid (2005) who again looks at how racism, exclusion, and diaspora shape black masculinities in Canadian sport. Reading representations of black sport stars allows for a better understanding of the contradictions and tensions surrounding national identities, gender, ethnicities, and sexualities.

New Avenues and New Questions for Sport Feminism: Middle Ground Theorizing and Intersectional Analysis

In the final section of this chapter we turn to consider what might be new avenues or questions for feminism, gender, and sport. As noted earlier, feminist theories are fluid and dynamic, with newer theories building on, or challenging, the knowledge and understanding that has gone before, reflecting changes in society and gender relations. However, in this section we also consider whether some of the older theories and questions continue to be relevant to our understandings of contemporary sport practice.

Whilst the contribution of poststructural feminism to our understandings of gender relations and sport has been significant, increasingly it has been criticized for its tendency to overemphasize both difference and diversity at the expense of enduring, material inequalities (Hargreaves, 2001; Walby, 2000). This has led to what could be called middle ground theorizing (Archer, 2004), a position that conceives of identities as “situated accomplishments” (Valentine, 2007) in relation to material and discursive structures of inequalities.
For example, in the United States, Heywood and Drake (1997) and Heywood and Dworkin (2003) make an interesting contribution to our understanding of gender and sport, arguing for a “third wave” of feminism. This notion of a third-wave agenda grows out of some of the African American feminist writings, particularly the work of bell hooks. The emphasis is on subjectivities, multiplicity, and difference with a view that a politics of hybridity is far more relevant to the twenty-first century. Whilst the third wave emphasizes desire, pleasures, empowerment, and activism, similar to many poststructuralist concerns, it also embraces much of the second-wave legacy particularly its critique of the beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures. Whilst moving understandings of gender and sport into new questions of identities, bodies, and empowerment it does this whilst seeing it as a progression from previous feminist theorizing rather than a replacement or rejection of what has gone before. Such middle ground theorizing, drawing on the valuable insights of poststructural analysis, whilst not losing sight of power structures and their impact on sport, is an important avenue for future feminist work. As Hargreaves notes:

More research is needed to help us understand the realities of injustice and discrimination in sport, the lived social realities of oppressed groups. This is not an argument to throw away all narrative methods but rather to remind ourselves that stories can be used as an aid for change, stories can persuade others of beliefs and notions of value, they can act as arguments, and they can influence public opinion. But to nurture such a potential we should link personal, individual, ‘different’ accounts to wider social circumstances. (2001: 199, original emphasis)

Whilst third-wave feminism begins to engage with this middle ground theorizing, some researchers and theorists are exploring the value of the concept of intersectionality for taking us forward. Davis (2008) has recently suggested that intersectionality has become a “buzzword” for contemporary feminism, precisely because, she argues, of the ambiguities and uncertainties linked to its use. Although, as we have shown, black feminism has always taken an intersectional approach in that it has always theorized across race, ethnicity, class, and gender, Patricia Hill Collins (1998) has also cautioned against the easy invocation of intersectional analysis. However, a number of feminist theorists are exploring the value of an intersectional approach including those working within sport and physical education (Plintoff, Fitzgerald, and Scraton, 2008; Ratna, forthcoming). Plintoff and colleagues (2008) use an intersectional lens to understand contemporary physical education, arguing that this approach moves us beyond the problems of a single category focus on gender or race or disability. Their work suggests that exploring the material body through an intersectional lens can help us understand the complexities of difference and the relationship of gender to other social categories in sporting contexts. However, whilst intersectional analysis helps move forward our understandings of gender and sport, we also caution against its uncritical theoretical use. There is a danger of slipping into a pluralist approach that potentially loses the significance of gender relations. We would argue that it remains a political and practical imperative, in specific contexts, to retain temporary boundaries if we are to avoid the relativism of difference.

Whilst considering new questions for sports feminism, it is important not to lose sight of some of the “old” questions that still have relevance. As noted earlier, the advances for women at the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games and in other sporting contests, whilst significant, do not mean that equality of opportunity and access have been fully achieved. In understanding gender relations and sport, we seem to have lost the focus on the relationship between gender and class that was so significant in the 1980s work of socialist feminists. As sport has become more commercialized and spectacularized there have been important debates in sport studies around globalization and late capitalism (Silk, Andrews, and Cole, 2005; Andrews, 2009). There are many questions that emerge around the commodification of sport, sport celebrity, and sport media that need to be addressed by sports feminism in the twenty-first century.

Similarly as demographics change and we have an increasingly older population the relationships between gender and aging would seem to be fertile ground for future work. What is the
impact of gender for older people previously or currently engaging in sport? Is aging a gendered process in relation to physical activity and sports performance? Similarly disability remains a much marginalized area in sport research generally but in sports feminism in particular. Once again the centrality of the body would suggest that we need to know far more about the disabled body and gender. Smith and Sparkes (2008) through narrative work have begun to explore the disabled male body through sport and this work could be extended, not only through narrative, to learn more about masculinities, femininities, and sexualities for disabled sportsmen and women.

As Birrell highlighted back in 1990, we still know very little about black and minority ethnic women’s experiences of sport. Over two decades later we would have to report a similar situation apart from the notable exceptions discussed earlier. We live in a world of complexity and in Great Britain we increasingly have communities with different and mixed heritage. We know little about the relationship of gender and sport in these settings nor the key questions pertinent to sport, physical activity, and active bodies for increasingly diverse, and often marginalized, communities.

Conclusion: Revisiting “Old” Questions in the Twenty-First Century

As we have journeyed through the development of gender and sport it has been increasingly obvious that just as we have new questions that need exploration, the notion of a “post”-feminist era for gender and sport simply does not hold true. Many of the liberal feminist concerns of the 1970s and 1980s may have shifted in detail but remain very much on the agenda. We do now have significant questions around difference, fragmentation, and identities but this does not mean that “old” questions about inequality do not remain pertinent today. We have a sports media that still provides limited coverage of women’s sport (despite the much improved coverage at the 2012 Games) and whilst the sexualization of women on the sports pages may not be so explicit, it remains an issue. In the United Kingdom, approximately 75 percent of all sport coaches are men and approximately 94 percent are white (Sports Coach UK, 2007; Norman, 2010). Similar statistics can be quoted for the United States (Lapchick, 2009). However, it is the continued everyday oppression and inequality experienced by women coaches described by Norman (2010: 100) that is a stark reminder that gender power relations remain at the center of sporting practices: “Women coaches’ emotional struggles illustrated that they worked within a male dominated culture. . . . Their oppression was not overt discrimination but more subtle, insidious ideologically based oppressions that contribute to women’s continued under-representation.”

These examples demonstrate that questions of inequality remain on the agenda for gender and sport. Equally we could highlight sexual abuse of young athletes, the continuing impact of the beauty culture and bodies, eating disorders, and sport amongst other things. What is most important is that sports feminism retains the fundamental principle of linking research to practice and so striving to make a difference in the sporting world. Questions of hybridity and difference are important and can exist alongside questions of inequality and oppression. Research on gender and sport has contributed much to our understandings of the sporting world and will continue to do so in the future.

Notes

1 “Malestream” refers to the mainstream of sport sociology which was seen to be dominated by male academics researching from the point of view of men with no regard for gender relations.
2 Biological explanations emphasize the supposed physical and psychological inferiority of women which, it is argued, make them unsuitable for sport and accounts for their limited ability and participation.
4 The Gay Games takes place every four years and was initiated in 1982. Its founding principles are those of participation, inclusion, and personal best. It is
the world’s largest sporting and cultural event organized by and specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Marxist feminism focuses on the economic as the primary source of women’s oppression. Socialist feminism tended to develop out of a Marxist approach (although some feminists would still label themselves Marxist) and is usually defined as a dualist theory that broadens Marxist feminism to consider economic and cultural aspects of women’s inequality.

Caster Semenya was withdrawn from international competition until July 2010 when the IAAF cleared her to return to competition.


References


about the issue.” Sport Education and Society, 13 (2): 131–145.


Further Reading


