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The Inaugural Wendy Ey Women in Sport Essay Prize 1998: Exploring Perceptions  
of Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity in Australian Sport.

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### Abstract

Western society has stereotypical expectations of how men and women should behave, think, and act. Women are expected to be gentle, sensitive, emotional, and talkative; men to be competitive, independent, unemotional, and objective (Fiebert & Meyer, 1997). Women who violate these cultural norms may be punished or threatened with psychological isolation, economic hardship, and social ostracism (Unger & Crawford, 1996). In the sporting context however such violations are encouraged and deemed necessary for athletic success to be achieved. For example to be a successful female athlete it is necessary to possess the same traits, characteristics, and behaviours as male athletes (Anshel, 1994; Cote & Salmela, 1996). Hence what is considered appropriate outside of sport may not be considered appropriate within sport, and vice-a-versa. Researchers of gender issues within sport psychology have assumed the existence of stereotypical notions of sex and gender in sport without first establishing if these stereotypical notions are context specific. They have not investigated the particular construction of sex, gender, and gender identity within sport. By not investigating the existence of stereotypical constructs, researchers risk propagating old myths in a new context. This paper addresses the questions of what is male and female, masculine and feminine in sport? How are these notions constructed? Furthermore how do these influence sporting performance? This paper critically explores sex, gender, and gender identity in sport. It examines sport in Australia as a separate and unique social context that may produce and reproduce engendered behaviour.

### Exploring Perceptions of Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity in Australian Sport.

At the 1998 World Swimming championships two Australian swimmers did not perform in accordance with their world rankings. Scott Goodman, ranked world number one in the 200m men's butterfly before the championships, was judged to have deliberately false started in the final of this event. Officials subsequently disqualified Goodman from competing in the above final. Samatha Riley, ranked in the top three for the 200m women's breaststroke before the championships, finished out of the top four in the final of this event.

Don Talbot, the Australian head swimming coach, made the following comments to the media concerning these athletes unexpected performances and behaviour. Referring to Goodman who threw a pool side chair as he left the pool deck after disqualification, Talbot commented: "he was shattered ... you've got to understand, six or seven years' preparation, No.1 in the world, gets DQ-ed [disqualified]. Of course he doesn't feel good ... I bleed for him" (The Chronicle, 1998, p.48.). Concerning Riley who was suffering from tonsillitis during this meet, Talbot remarked, "her performances [have been] ho-hum" (Magnay, 1998, p. 21), "She got about as sick as I am ... that it's I've got a headache, wrong time of the month or something ... These kids are highly strung" (The Sunday Mail, 1998, p.151). From these remarks it appears that being male or female may matter in elite level sport, or at least in swimming.

### Does Sex = Gender?

One of the most common misconceptions held by sport psychology researchers is that sex and gender are synonymous. This assumption is not confined to sport psychology and it becomes a problem for many sex and gender researchers (Anselmi & Law, 1998; Marecek, 1995). Sex in most Western cultures acts as a category for two mutually exclusive groupings - male or female, with gender treated as if it naturally derives from being male or female. Further sex and gender are conceived as naturally occurring, self evident, and unambiguous categories

(Marecek). However close inspection of what appears self-evident reveals a common discourse permeated with uncertainty and confusion.

The use of sex and gender as synonymous has arisen from the ambiguity inherent in sport psychology definitions of sex and gender, and the assumption that sex determines gender. Further the use of the politically correct term gender when referring to biological sex has served to compound an already perplexing situation (Anselmi & Law, 1998). For example Gill (1988) examined male and female responses to sport-specific achievement orientation. She found that male athletes consistently scored higher than female athletes on sport competitiveness and win orientation. From this it was concluded that gender may influence competitive sport behaviours (Plaisted, 1995). However Gill did not define nor measure the gender of these participants, nor did she measure the gender identity of these participants. Hence it is unclear whether these gender differences were the result of their sex, gender or another construct.

One result of this confusion and ambiguity is that behavioural causality may become confounded. Consider the conclusion that perceived psychological or social differences between males and females reflect biological, genetic or chromosomal differences. This appears logical when sex is defined or prescribed to determine gender. Males and females behave the way they do because of their biological make-up, that is because they are biologically and genetically male or female. The belief that sex and gender are ordered so that sex determines gender can also infer that social change in gender relationships is difficult. One cannot change one's genetic composition after birth. Therefore one cannot change the way women and men think, feel and behave. Such inferences may have serious implications in sport.

In sport, essentialism or biological causality would postulate that males are biologically determined to be more aggressive, competitive, independent, and skilled than females. Females are biologically determined to be more dependent, co-operative, and needing to affiliate with others more than males. From these assumptions ideas around male and female appropriate sport develop. Females should

be encouraged or restricted to sports and sporting arrangements that best reflect these natural characteristics (e.g., girls' only sporting events, non-competitive sporting activities).

There is little scientific evidence that males and females are psychologically different (Hyde, 1981; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Sherman, 1978). Sex has been found to account for less than five per cent of the variance in sex difference psychology research (Hyde). So what does this mean for sport? Consider the finding that girls want affiliation from sport, whereas boys want competition (Australian Sports Commission (ASC), 1996). As a result of this sex difference, boys and girls may be segregated into differing sport arrangements that reflect these sex-based needs (e.g., girls' only sporting events). This decision ignores the evidence that biological sex accounts for at the most, five per cent of the difference found between boys wanting competition, and girls wanting affiliation from sport. It ignores the evidence that factors other than sex account for 95 per cent of the difference.

Proponents of male/female only sports fail to recognise that social, cultural or historical factors may also influence the needs and wants of males and females. They further assume that all males and all females are homogeneous, thus perhaps denying some girls the opportunity to legitimately express their aggression, dominance, independence, skill, competitiveness and competency. Sex segregation in sport may reinforce the construct of sex-based differences, and may inadvertently reinforce, reproduce, and re-establish the very stereotypical social perceptions that segregation wished to eliminate.

Ways of Thinking about Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity in Sport.

Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity

Scant sport psychology research has examined what it means to be male, female, masculine, and feminine in sport (V. Krane, personal communication, November 16, 1997). Historically researchers of gender issues within sport

psychology have assumed the existence of stereotypical notions of sex and gender in sport without first establishing if these stereotypical notions are context specific. Researchers have not determined the construction of sex, gender, and gender identity within sport. By not questioning the existence of these constructs, researchers may unintentionally propagate old myths in new contexts. For example, consider the myth that being an athlete and being feminine is incompatible. The Women and Sport unit at the Australian Sports Commission in 1991 released a policy paper regarding teenage girls and sport. Within this it was suggested that 'girls may experience a social conflict between being feminine and athletic' (p.7). Further the paper suggests that girls may 'feel that they have to choose between being one or the other, because reconciling the two is just too difficult' (p.7). The paper does not consider how femininity may be constructed in sport nor does it consider that there may be a sport specific femininity.

One way to conceptualise sex and gender in sport is to view them as separate but related entities. Anselmi and Law (1998) delineate sex as the biological, genetic, anatomical or chromosomal characteristics of being male, female or other. Other recognises that at least five chromosomally distinctive sex categories exist (Fausto-Sterling, 1998). Gender whilst related to sex is not synonymous with sex (Anselmi & Law, 1998). Numerous definitions of gender exist that reflect differing underlying theoretical epistemologies (Marecek, 1995). This paper views gender in sport as the sociocultural stereotypes or prescriptions related to being male or female (Unger & Crawford, 1996). According to this position, social (e.g., sport) and cultural (e.g., Australian) contexts shape our reality and identity which in turn influence our behaviour, attitudes, and feelings. Hence what we often observe in males and females are not sex determined behaviours, but learned gender appropriate behaviours. The social roles associated with gender influence how we behave toward others (Anselmi & Law), if we violate these gender roles, we violate social expectations of gender.

Gender, according to this definition, is conceptualised as a social category. It is the shared meanings that we hold about the prescribed characteristics of maleness

and femaleness, and the behaviours, attitudes, and feelings associated with these characteristics. Such a definition does not implicitly assume that sex is a biological entity and gender sociocultural. Rather it contends that both biological and cultural factors influence sex and gender. Biological sex does contribute to our gender orientation, just as our social and cultural notions contribute to our sex (Gill, 1995). Thus there exists a complex interaction between biological and sociocultural factors. This definition suggests gender is in a constant state of flux, as multiple, fragmented, and local (particular to the situation or context). It contradicts the notion of gender having a single fixed meaning with salience from one culture to another, being consistent from one social group to another, from one point in time to another (Marecek, 1995). This notion of gender allows sport to be treated as a unique social context that may produce views of gender that differ from other social contexts.

To compound an already confusing situation, sport psychology researchers have used the terms gender synonymously with gender identity. For example researchers have used the Personality Attributes Questionnaire - PAQ as a measure of gender in sport when in fact it measures gender identity. Gender identity here is our subscription to sociocultural stereotypes or prescriptions related to being male or female. Gender identity is the existential sense of our maleness or femaleness. It is the internalisation of our sex and gender (Spence, 1984). Gender identity is the psychological sense we have of being male or female, masculine or feminine. Spence states that our gender identity is one of the central components of our personality and social identity. It forms the basis of our self-concept, self-esteem, and self-perception. Gender identity influences how we think, how we feel, and how we behave.

Numerous sport psychology studies have examined gender stereotyping and gender identity within the sporting context (e.g., Csizma, Wittig & Schurr, 1988; Harris & Griffin, 1997; Kirkby, 1995). However most of these studies have used researcher generated constructions of masculinity and femininity, or non-sporting generated constructions of masculinity and femininity. Researchers themselves have defined and constructed masculinity and femininity for use by research participants or

have used definitions and constructions developed from specific groups of participants (e.g., North American white middle class college students) and then used these with a different group (e.g., North American black athletes). Doyle and Paludi (1995) are critical of researchers who fail to define and construct gender from the participants' perspective. They argue that researchers who engage in this practice, impose their own preconceived cultural standards of gender upon participants. Standards often associated with the dominant or majority culture. Researchers who generalise these preconceptions to other groups, do so without consideration of cultural diversity and possible differences. Therefore findings and conclusions based on previous sport gender identity and gender studies that have used these methodologies are tenuous.

The relationship between gender, gender identity, and sport is unclear. Vealey (1997) asserts that our sexual identity and gender identity may impact upon our self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-perception. She argues that self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-perception are critical precursors to sport performance skills (e.g., optimal attention and optimal arousal). Furthermore she posits that our sexual identity and gender identity can influence our sport choices and goals. To illustrate she cites research by Sheaffer (1992) and Weisfeld (1986) who found young women (high school athletes and college level athletes, respectively), purposefully depressed their athletic performances to levels that were below their best. They did this to avoid appearing masculine and overtly competitive when competing against men or when being watched by men. Vealey speculates that issues surrounding our sexual identity and gender identity may act as powerful stressors that influence behaviour in sport (e.g., anxiety, burnout, attrition, avoidance of participation). Unfortunately there is little empirical research evidence to support Vealey's assertions.

### Sport as a Separate Social Context

Wetherell and Maybin (1996) argue that the way we construct our world, reflects our particular social and cultural contexts. In sport, athlete and coach



constructions of gender and gender identity will reflect their particular social and cultural contexts. Acknowledging and understanding these unique perspectives are important, as it is through these constructions that athletes and coaches make sense of their world. How athlete and coach think about gender will influence their evaluations of self and others, their definitions of self and others, their behaviour, emotions, and their self-concept (Potter, 1996). Sport as a unique social context may therefore influence the way in which athletes and coaches construct their gender and gender identity.

Research has found that sport, or more specifically competitive sport, is perceived as a male domain and 'owned' by men (ASC, 1996). Furthermore, competitive sport is perceived as a context where the idealised masculine image is constructed and promoted (Connell, 1987). A review of the relevant literature suggests competitive sport values and overtly rewards traits such as competitiveness, aggression, dominance, independence, self-confidence, risk taking, and emotional control. Whilst these traits are seen as being characteristic of the successful athlete (Anshel, 1994), they are also reflective of the traits and behaviours used to describe the 'typical' man (e.g., Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Fiebert & Meyer, 1997).

Given the above, some researchers could argue that the sporting context merely reflects the wider general social context. A context that overtly rewards and values masculinity and hence maleness, and devalues femininity and femaleness (Miller C, 1974; Miller T, 1986). However the sporting context may differ from the wider social context in terms of the valuing and rewarding of male and female behaviours, appearances, traits, roles, and so forth. Unger and Crawford (1996) have argued that women in the wider context may be punished or threatened with psychological isolation, economic hardship, and social ostracism when they violate the cultural norms associated with being a women. Consider the sporting context. Here such violations are encouraged and deemed necessary for athletic success to be achieved. Successful female athletes need to be aggressive, competitive, and confident and so forth to be successful (Anshel, 1994; Cote & Salmela, 1996). It is

necessary for female athletes to possess the same traits, characteristics, and behave in the same manner as male athletes. Therefore the characteristics of the successful athlete reflect the necessary characteristics of 'the' successful athlete, regardless of sex or gender (Tuffey, 1995).

However how gender and gender identity construction within the sporting context may influence these psychological constructs is unclear. Bredemeier, et al. (1991), in an innovative North American study, provide some support for the notion that gender and gender identity may be uniquely constructed within sporting contexts. They reported that elite female field hockey players particularised their ways of knowing. This follows Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) proposition that women have distinctive ways of knowing that are different from men and it is through these ways of knowing that a woman's view of herself in the world is formed. In the Bredemeier et al study, athletes acknowledged that when participating in competitive sport they deliberately tempered their behaviour to adapt to the sporting context. Elite sport competitors engaged in "bracketed knowing". That is, they adapted their use of knowledge methods to the demands of the sporting context. Bredemeier and colleagues speculated that if young female athletes particularise their knowledge to the demands of the sporting context, perhaps they might also particularise specific aspects of this knowledge – their gender constructions. Hence sport as a unique and separate social context may uniquely influence gender and gender identity.

#### Two Distinct Sporting Cultures? North America and Australia

The gender relations approach posits that gender relations, practices, and identities are socially constructed, historically produced, and culturally defined (Bem, 1993; Deaux & Major, 1987; Sherif, 1982). This approach recognises that gender practices, relations, and identity reflect societal norms, beliefs, values, and knowledge about men and women. Secondly, present gender practices, identities, and relations reflect historical gender relations, practices, and identities. Finally that gender

meanings will differ across cultures and needs to be defined from various cultural perspectives. The past actively influences the present. Finally gender is a principle of social organisation and not an objective property of the individual.

According to the gender relations approach our gender will be constructed so as to reflect our cultural identity. Therefore it follows that there may be intragender differences between athletes from America and Australia. Thus examining gender and gender identity from the Australian perspective is imperative, as what it means to be male or female in Australia may not be the same as being male or female in North America.

Sport is said to reflect a society's values and mores (Hall, 1996). Some scholars would argue that there is little significant difference between the North American sporting culture and the Australian. However when we examine the general values held by each culture differences are evident. Williams (1970) proposed a list of typical American values where achievement, success, activity, work, and moral orientation rated highly. Edwards (1973) drew parallels between sport and these cultural orientations by comparing these values to what he called the dominant American sporting creed. Achievement and success were said to parallel winning, activity and work were synonymous with playing, and moral orientation was said to resemble character building.

When we look at Australian values what appears initially to be two similar cultures may be quite dissimilar. Waters (1990) describes equalitarianism, achievement - through sport, egalitarianism, and mateship as values characteristic of Australian society. Although no Australian sporting creed has been suggested per se, equalitarianism may parallel fair play, mateship may parallel team spirit. Hence Australian sport culture may be different to the North American sporting culture. This connotation has implications for sport psychology research and practice. Currently consideration of cross cultural influences on sport behaviour is in its infancy. North American research and practice has often been transported to other cultures without consideration of cultural differences. Again such practices impose preconceived

North American cultural standards upon participants. Therefore such practices and use of research findings are tenuous.

Cultural differences may appear to be minimised because of the commonalities of the symbols and language in sport. That is rules and regulations for some sports are standardised across all countries which are members of a world governing body of that particular sport. Given the internationality of most modern sports, cultural influences on sporting symbols and language may not be as large as those on sporting behaviour. It can be argued that there is sufficient reason to doubt the similarity of Australian and American sporting cultures.

#### Conclusion - Where to Now?

Gender construction within the Australian sporting context is relatively unknown. Sport psychology researchers and theorists who have tried to understand and predict human behaviour within sport, have failed to acknowledge how gender construction may impact upon affect, behaviour, cognitions, and performance. The use of researcher and non-sport gender constructions serves to enforce selective cultural and social engendered perspectives upon participants. Such research becomes ethereal as findings reflect participants views based on the researcher's perspectives, which are not necessarily the participant's perspectives. These findings are also tenuous as they reflect non-sporting perspectives of gender and, for Australia, applicability and generalisability are questionable as they reflect North American constructions of gender and gender identity investigations. Failure to investigate the nature of sex, gender, and gender identity in sport may reinforce and reproduce the very sexist or stereotypical social perceptions that researchers wish to eliminate.

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