“Sport, Femininities and Body Hierarchies”

David L. Andrews
Physical Cultural Studies Program
Department of Kinesiology

This gendered and gendering sport culture leads to the establishment of very different bodily conventions/expectations.

Body Size
Body Shape
Body Meanings
Body Images
Body Practices
Body Style
Body Identities

GENDERED BODY PERFORMANCE

Theme 1: Performing the Female/Feminine Body

Learned, Performed, and POLICED Embodiment of Gender

Sport, Physical Culture, and the Gender Binary

MASCULINE EXPERIENCES, IDENTITIES, AND BODIES

FEMININE EXPERIENCES, IDENTITIES, AND BODIES

Through social and cultural engagement, we learn the gender role, relations, and norms, which subsequently shape our gender identities and experiences.

In other words, we are socialized into our gendered bodies/beings.

The Social Construction/POLICING of Sporting Gender

Ideological Formations
(values, beliefs, ideas)

Institutional Structures
(rules, codes, organization)

Cultural Texts
(media forms and content)

Cultural Practices and Relations
(acts, performances and routines)
The traditional **Ideology of Femininity** (the notion that women should be beautiful, small, thin, and thereby relatively weak) physically constrains (constricts) female bodies. As women strive to meet this CONSTRICTED cultural norm/ideal of femininity, they construct their bodies as SEXUAL OBJECTS to be evaluated by the EXTERNAL (male) GAZE of society.

**CONSTRICTED PHYSICALITY**

**The Hierarchical Inequality of the Gender Binary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculinity (males)</th>
<th>Femininity (females)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superior social value, influence and power: DOMINANT</td>
<td>Inferior social value, influence and power: SUBORDINATE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Self-Disciplining/Constructing/Subordinating the Female/Feminine Body as SEXUAL Object**

- Diet/Weight Control
- Exercising
- Hair Removal
- Cosmetics
- Dress

Objectifying, controlling, and subordinating the body in order to be seen to perform gender norms and conventions.

**Self-Policing and Self-Disciplining Institutions I**

- The (Andrews) **Family** as a Gendered (feminized) and Gendering (feminizing) Institution?

**Self-Policing and Self-Disciplining Institutions II**

- **Commercial Culture** as a Gendered (feminized) and Gendering (feminizing) Institution?

**The (Andrews) Family**

- **Barbie Doll**: Unrealistic proportions, not enough room for organs, could not support own weight or walk.

**The Lammily Doll**

- Proportions Match those of the Average American 19 year old.
“The more you force us to lose weight and be small, the more designers have to make clothes to fit our sizes, and the more young girls are being made ill. It’s no longer an image I choose to represent.”


The State of Gendered Play?

Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue and Idealized/Objectified/Sexualized/Feminine Bodies
Sport and Exercise Culture as a Gendered (feminized) and Gendering (feminizing) Institution?

Disciplining Institutions IV

Sports Illustrated...

The Sporting EMPOWERMENT of Female Bodies?

Subway’s Lyndsey Vonn:
Objectification, Sexualization, and/or Trivialization of Female Athleticism?
Theme 2:

Sport and Feminine Performativity

The ACTIVE [female] BODY is not a WHOLLY NATURAL entity.

It is a also PHYSICAL and SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION:

The ACTIVE [female] BODY is shaped by, as it helps to shape, the SOCIAL CONTEXT/ENVIRONMENT in which it is located.

How do we begin to understand the socially constructed active [female] body?

The myth of female frailty/weakness becomes embodied, and thereby reinforced, through the sporting performance of gender:

“That is, doing masculinity builds strength, whereas doing femininity builds weakness”

(Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 247)


Males tend to accumulate muscles and relative strength (particularly upper body) according to their embodied socialization.

Females tend to accumulate flexibility and poise (and relative upper body weakness) according to their embodied socialization.

Disempowering Girls/Women?

Mr. Carter’s “girls’ push-ups”

“That is, doing masculinity builds strength, whereas doing femininity builds weakness”

(Roth & Basow, 2004, p. 247)
Throwing Like a Girl 1?
A study of 2nd graders found that:

- Boys through their dominant arm 72% faster than girls.
- Boys and girls performed identically with their non-dominant arms.

The conclusion was that throwing is not a factor of sex difference, rather it is a result of cultural practice.


Throwing Like a Girl 2?: Policing Physicality

Throwing/Running Like a Girl 3?

Modern sport could be said to be structured in a patriarchal manner, in that they provide a forum for the expression and celebration of masculinity.

Women’s sporting prowess is largely devalued since they are generally not able (or encouraged) to compete at the same level as men in these masculine oriented practices.

Traditionally Male Sports | Traditionally Female Sports
---|---
FOOTBALL | VOLLEYBALL
HOCKEY | TENNIS
BASKETBALL | GYMNASTICS
BOXING | S. SWIMMING
BASEBALL | SOFTBALL

Thus, through sport, the active and aggressive body became synonymous with the male body and masculinity.

Whilst, through sport, the female body and femininity was further tied to expressions of passivity and docility.
Things are changing...

Male/Female Athletes at Summer Olympics 1980-2012

Ten events in 1980 were single-sex, or open to both men and women. These later became associated with track for men and women. The proportion of different events that the total events for men and women was also used for sports in the 2012 Olympics.

The Women’s Olympics?

- A record 4,847 women (44.7% of total athletes) took part
- First Olympics to feature a women in every national team
- US females (269) outnumbered US males (261) for the time
- US females earned more medals than US males: 56% of nation’s medals, 66% of gold medals

Women’s boxing a medal event for the first time at London 2012.
From 2016, [women’s] rugby and golf will be Olympic events, effectively replacing baseball (men) and softball (women).

But, traditional female/feminine relations, roles, and identities would seem to be still in evidence within sport and exercise culture?
**Theme 3:**

**Sport, Emphasized Femininity, and Constricted Bodies**

Evidently, women are influenced by pervasive cultural norms related to the way that feminine bodies should act and look within and through sport and physical culture...

According to cultural norms, codes, and conventions, which is the more female/feminine athletic body, and why? Are any of these athletic bodies deemed unacceptable according to cultural norms, codes, and conventions of femininity? If so, which ones and why?

Clearly, as with masculinity, there is no **SINGULAR FEMININITY**. Rather, there are competing and often contradicting **FEMININITIES** operating within contemporary culture.

The most prevalent form of FEMININITY has been described as culturally **EMPHASISED** or **PREFERRED** femininity.

The cultural convention of **EMPHASISED FEMININITY** exists at the opposite end, and in relation to, the physicality of **HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY**.

**The Gender Binary and Bodily Performance**

Hence, certain sporting forms-and the bodies that derive from them--are considered suitable expressions of **EMPHASISED FEMININITY**.
Sources of Emphasised Femininity (Adolescent Girls)

- Body Shape and Size
- Body Adornment
- Physical Activity

Emphasised Feminine Sport Performances
- Physical structure and form
- Physical grace and beauty
- Capacity for physical expression

Such sporting emphasised femininity demands:

**A body which is petite, slender, toned, yet not overly muscular!**

**A virtual physiological impossibility...**

Within many of these emphasised feminine sports, the **CODES of FEMININITY** are written into the structure of the sport.

Certainly, with regards to figure skating, gymnastics, and synchronised swimming individual's are evaluated/scored by judging criteria based on traditional assumptions of what the female body should look like (size and proportion), and how it should act (poise and grace).
The irony, of course, is that in order to conform to the feminine body ideals demanded by these sports, female athletes are compelled to work tirelessly to CONSTRIC**T** their body size, while still creating bodies which are sufficiently strong and agile enough to produce their seemingly effortless (but nonetheless hugely demanding) performances of emphasised femininity.

“Figure skating is a girl thing. Athletes in sequins and “sheer illusion sleeves” glide and dance, their tiny skirts flapping in the breeze. They achieve, but without touching or pushing anyone else. They win, but without visible signs of sweat. They compete, but not directly. Their success is measured not by confrontation with an opponent, nor even by a clock or a scoreboard. Rather, they are judged as beauty contestants – by a panel of people who interpret the success of the routines. Prettiness is mandatory. Petite and groomed and gracious, figure skaters – like cheerleaders, gymnasts, and aerobic dancers – camouflage their competitiveness with niceness and prettiness until it no longer seems male or aggressive or unseemly.”

Through emphasised feminine sports, the general public is reminded:

“not that women’s bodies are capable of incredible strength, but that they are expected to demonstrate incredible femininity”

(Roth and Basow, 2004, p. 252)

Many athletes in traditionally female sports are thus compelled to involve themselves—and their bodies—in unhealthy physical and dietary regimes, with sometimes unfortunate physiological and psychological consequences.

Certainly body image and weight control related issues are prevalent within the world of sporting emphasised femininity.


**CONSTRIC**T**ED FEMININITY**

The female body constrained by, and shaped according to traditional codes and conventions of female physicality.

The Feminizing Discipline of Synchronised Swimming
Theme 4:

Sporting Femininities and Instrumental Bodies

In recent years, the amount of females participating in traditionally masculine, physically contact based “invasion” games has risen sharply. This has particular consequences for challenging hegemonic perceptions related to the accepted norms of femininine physicality (how the female body should act and look).

Sporting Challenges to Emphasised Femininity?

- Soccer
- Football
- Wrestling
- Weightlifting
- Boxing
- Hockey
- Rugby

The Female Athlete Triad

Intense levels of sport/exercise for women are at risk for the following conditions:

1. Eating Disorders
   Losing weight in order to improve athletic performance can lead to serious eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.

2. Amenorrhea
   Intense exercise can lead to decreases in estrogen and disruption/interruption of menstrual cycles.

3. Osteoperosis
   Low estrogen levels and poor nutrition can lead to a lowering of calcium levels and bone density/bone strength.
   [Not forgetting self-harming].

The Feminine Soccer Fallacy
Instrumental sporting femininities are not concerned with the shape/size (form) of the female body, but are concerned with its effectiveness (function) within the given activity.

As such, and within the context of the sporting activity, traditional feminine codes and conventions become irrelevant, and are effectively undermined.
Emergent and Negotiated Sporting Femininities

The growing popularity of these activities has challenged traditional assumptions about female physicality and femininity.

They are, to some degree, normalizing for women what have been traditionally perceived to be masculine attributes (strength, toughness, aggression, violence).

Thus, it is possible to discern the emergence of “masculine” femininities, or what has been described as a “female masculinity.”

The demonstration that power, strength, and aggression are as much female as male attributes.

According to cultural norms, codes, and conventions, which is the more female/feminine athletic body, and why?

Are any of these athletic bodies deemed unacceptable according to cultural norms, codes, and conventions of femininity? If so, which ones and why?

How does this female athletic body relate to the dominant cultural norms, codes, and conventions of femininity?

Does she challenge or reinforce dominant expectations of female physicality?

The Problem of Female Sporting Physicality

- Non-traditional sports
- Non-traditional bodies
- Overly successful

The powerful, aggressive, and successful female athlete challenges traditional assumptions about the female body/femininity.
Pushing the Boundaries of Emphasised Femininity

Challenging or reinforcing the traditional gender binary?

Elisa Cusma, the Italian who finished in sixth, told reporters: "She's a man."

"She's here with her girlfriend. She is half man" (Martina Hingis)

"her shoulders looked huge to me, I think they must have grown... a couple of times I thought I was playing a guy" (Lindsay Davenport)

The Heterosexual Matrix
(Judith Butler)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since emphasised femininity is closely linked to HETEROSEXUALITY, female contravening of cultural norms and conventions with regard to BODILY FORM (SHAPE) and FUNCTION (ACTIVITY) frequently leads to accusations/labelling of HOMOSEXUALITY.

Sport thus becomes a context for advancing HOMOPHOBIA (fear and hostility toward homosexuals).

Fearless: A photography project by Jeff Sheng

"Fearless" is the name of the photography project I started over 5 years ago about "out" high school and collegiate athletes who openly self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

www.fearlessproject.org/

In response some female athletes--fearful of the stigma of being labelled as homosexuals--engage in the "female apologetic defense":

"a coping strategy that allows a woman to compensate for for the perceived masculinizing effect of participating in sports by exaggerating her [traditional] femininity." (p. 1388)

The Female Apologetic Defense

"associated with a specific set of actions, which include taking care to present oneself as feminine outside of sports by wearing hair ribbons, makeup, dresses, and frilly blouses; downplaying the importance of competition, aggression, and athletic achievements; emphasizing the cooperative and social aspects of sports; and stressing one's desire for heterosexual relationships by talking about and interacting with boyfriends, husbands, and children" (p. 1388)


Former Softball player Jennie Finch

Poster Child for the Female Apologetic Defense?


The Williams’ Apologetic?

Objectified as Women, Trivialized as Athletes?

The Lolo Jones Factor

Gender Advancement or Sexualization and/or Trivialization?


The Danica Patrick Paradox

See Video Clip
The Rachel Rousey Paradox

Gender Advancement or Sexualization and/or Trivialization?

See Video Clip 9

Theme 6:

Bodywork, Femininities and Exercising Bodies

Sports based on the codes and conventions of emphasised femininity, do tend to discipline and create hyper-feminized bodies. This can lead to problems emanating from athlete’s perceived lack of control over what their bodies look like (body form), and what their bodies do (body function).

However, there are other elements of physical culture in which the individual has a perceived (and perhaps real) sense of control and autonomy over the shaping their bodies. This can be referred to as:

EXERCISE CULTURE

(and includes the various elements of individually based exercise, fitness, and health practices which are an important element of many women’s lives)

The various examples of exercise culture all provide a forum for the individual to involved themselves in BODYWORK:

“Bodywork is the effort put in to create a specific physicality and draws on the notion of an individual actively and consciously make an effort to create a kind of physicality...the body is an image or text and an active, lived, embodied personal self-projection”

(Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 404)


So, within exercise culture, what kind of BODYWORK is being done, and what type of EMBODED SELVES are being SELF-PROJECTED?
The BODYWORK (body practices, structures and meanings) women undertake in exercise culture is clearly diverse.

For some it is an expression and realisation of physical and personal EMPOWERMENT. However, this is often realised in a way which REINFORCES TRADITIONAL FEMALE/FEMININE CUSTOMS and CONVENTIONS.

Exercise culture is a site through which women’s bodies are often, if not always, controlled/shaped/experienced according hegemonic norms of “preferred (emphasised) femininity.”

Thus, much of exercise culture projects, and to some degree demands, adherence to elements of a constricted female physicality.


Women’s bodies come in a variety of SHAPES and SIZES. However, the commercial media tend to portray only two:

1. The “THIN” and “TIGHT” good body women are expected to have
2. The “FAT” and “FLABBY” bad body women are expected to be fearful of

See Video Clip 10

Exercise Culture

Fitness/Health → Appearance/Aesthetics

A non-necessary relationship between the two.

The (im)possibility of the “fat” and fit body

Cultural Impossibility

Physiological Possibility

Cultural Impossibility
Contemporary culture is centered around a commercialized ideal of the female body as “SLIM” and “TONED.”

If being “SLIM” and “TONED” is the criteria of attractiveness and social acceptance, any women who is not (or feels they are not) may well feel UNATTRACTIVE and SOCIALLY UNACCEPTED.

Therefore, in order to gain social acceptance, many women engage in activities designed to MASK or ALTER their NATURAL BODY shapes.

Because this is prompted by the perceived need to change bodies to attempt to conform to the “narrowly defined beauty ideal”...

Such practices can be seen as being CONSTRICING, OPPRESSIVE and DAMAGING to women.

The Contradictions of Exercise Culture (Aerobics)

Collins (2002) identifies some interesting strategies through which women use aerobics as a means of countering the oppressive/constricting aspects of fitness culture and thereby lead to a sense of personal empowerment.

These include:

1. Distancing themselves from (tuning out) the more sexist aspects of aerobics
2. Rejecting the feminist critique of aerobics as a site for reproducing female physical subordination and disempowerment
3. Asserting agency, or controlling the space, by performing practices they preferred rather than simply following the instructor
4. Making Do, or resigning themselves to the less acceptable aspects of aerobics, in order to continue to take part

Within the context of aerobics (as perhaps within other physical cultural activities), there is the possibility for either female empowerment or disempowerment.

According to Brace-Govan’s (2002) notion of “bodywork”, women become empowered through physical activity when they focus on pursuing their bodywork for INSTRUMENTAL (what the body does), as opposed to APPEARANCE (what the body looks like) purposes.

Exercise Culture

Empowering? Disempowering?

Empowering or Disempowering?

(Instrumental) (Appearance)
Clearly physical culture is a context in which understandings of femininity are being contested, with emergent (instrumental) and residual (emphasised) femininities presently competing for dominance/ascendancy in terms of defining the cultural norms and conventions of females/femininity...

See course website for related required readings, video clips, key concepts, thematic review questions, and essay question.