Analyzing Sport and Gender Issues: Reflective Thoughts of a Cisgender, Heterosexual, White Male Student Majoring in Sports Management

Revised Write-up to the Term Paper Assignment to the Course Sport and Gender (KINE 323) Which was taken in Partial Fulfillment of the General Education Requirements for a Bachelor of Science Degree Awarded by the California State University System

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Abstract

The student author performed a follow-up analysis of an end-of-term reflection essay, in a course that discussed sport and gender, specifically on how sport relates to gender equity and inclusivity issues on micro and macro levels (2022 Fall Quarter, KINE 323: Sport & Gender, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo). The present submission is a subsequently revised, and improved-upon, write-up of the student author’s KINE 323 term paper (reflection essay), which was revised post-course during the 2023 Winter & Spring Quarters. Through this submission, the student reflects on what he has learned about the following topics covered in the course on sport and gender: i.e., sports history, coaching and administration, feminist theoretical perspectives (e.g., perspectives from radical feminist theory, Black feminist theory), and the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQ+) individuals in sports. This reflection essay shows how dialogues and research regarding these topics forced the student author to recognize discrepancies in equality, equity, and inclusion existing in sports, historically, and within his own life. Additionally, through this submission, the student author reflects on how taking KINE 323 has led him to contemplate his position in the interrelating worlds of sports and gender. The ultimate aim of this submission is to create, and or, promote ongoing dialogue focused on fostering positive change, using a reflective analysis of sport and gender by one who identifies as a White, heterosexual, cisgender male and who aspires to positively impact his community through sport.

Keywords: discrimination and biases, diversity, feminist theory, gender roles, hegemonic femininity and masculinity, qualitative research
**Introduction**

As a cisgender, White, heterosexual male in the United States, I fit the bill of an “All-American” youth while growing up. I have experienced life in a different way compared to someone who does not possess these characteristics (Massey & Whitley, 2021; Wong, 2015). Sports is one facet of life that I have experienced differently than, for example, a Black, homosexual female (Herrick & Duncan, 2020). Sports played an integral role in my upbringing thanks to coaches, teammates, parents, and older role models. Not until recently, though, have I pondered how a child with different social identifiers than me experienced and viewed sports. After studying sports history, coaching and administration, feminist theoretical perspectives, Black feminist theory, and LGBTQ+ experiences in sports in an undergraduate general education course on sport and gender during the 2022 Fall Quarter (Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo), I have come to realize how important it is to recognize discrepancies in equality, equity, and inclusion in sport.

**Discussion**

**Lessons on History**

Evidence of little equity and inclusion persists throughout sports history, and KINE 323 deepened my understanding of this through the presentation of examples at both a micro and macro level over the last century. According to Ellen J. Staurowsky, author and professor in sports media at Ithaca College, before the 1960s, the experiences and achievements of girls and women within the arts, sciences, and public sphere were pretty much absent from the record (Staurowsky, 2016). The omission of so many wonderful and inspirational accomplishments of female and ethnic minority athletes is intentional, but can easily go unnoticed. Until recently, I had not paid much mind to it. At the risk of sounding arrogant, I had always thought: ‘Why should I?.’ I was a young, White male who had not experienced anything but praise and encouragement in sports throughout my adolescence.
After dissecting learning material from KINE 323, I am able to recognize instances and themes of discrimination in sports history. The film *Dare to Compete: The Struggle of Women in Sports* displayed themes of sexism, racism, and exclusivity in female sports throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, a former baseball player, interviewed by HBO Sports, who identified as a Black female described her experience pursuing her sporting dreams as having two strikes against her; those strikes were her gender and race (Oram et al., 1990). When observing sports history through a studious lens, it is apparent that privileged male athletes had unearned advantages over oppressed women who possessed unearned disadvantages in sports. This was evident in *Dare to Compete* when the narrator describes how in the early 1900s, women were forced to play basketball by a different and more restrictive set of rules than men. Even today as of this submission, certain sports subject women to different rules. In hockey, for example, girls and women are not allowed to check, but boys and men are (USA Hockey, 2021). The discouragement of sporting participation and suppression of athletic excellence of ethnic and gender minority individuals throughout the 19th century has contributed to a culture that perpetuates unfair gender roles today (Lorber, 1993; Quayle et al., 2019). KINE 323 enabled me to understand that these gender roles place an unfair set of expectations for attitude, emotional expression, dress, and behavioral response on all people.

As I have witnessed throughout my upbringing in sports and society, such gender roles have led to the popularity of hegemonic femininity, female ideals that are spread and are arbitrary and problematic through being framed as the opposite of hegemonic masculinity (@DocGore, 2019; The Open University, n.d.). The encouragement of hegemonic femininity and masculinity is commonplace in advertising, everyday conversations, and, unsurprisingly, sports (Quayle et al., 2015). Not until studying in KINE 323 did it occur to me just how frequently we encounter this in daily life. In KINE 323, we watched a Frosted Flakes commercial that portrays stereotypical hegemonic femininity in the home as the norm (@OfficialVeronicaPowers, 2014). In the ad, a family of a mother, father, son, and daughter are in the home together. The father and son play football with the daughter joining in sporadically while the mother prepares Frosted Flakes for them in the kitchen. In the kitchen, the father and son strategize with cereal
flakes as football players. The daughter eats one of the flakes, which turns out to be the “quarterback.” Although subtle, this commercial implies normalcy in females both not participating in sports and not understanding sports. Thus, the ad perpetuates the stereotype of hegemonic femininity and masculinity. Societal ideals normalize inattention to women’s interests and achievements, noticeably in sports (CorrectTheInternet.com, n.d.; @stellamills__, 2020). These occurrences have led to the creation of feminist theoretical perspectives to elucidate and investigate these and other issues (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013; for example, we learned about Liberal Feminist Theory, Radical Feminist Theory, Marxist Feminist Theory, and Black Feminist Theory (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

**Lessons on Radical Feminist Theory**

One of the feminist theories which I resonate the most with is the Radical Feminist Theory. I feel that this theory has touched me in a way that has forced me to open my eyes to empathize with those who have experienced sports in different manners than me. I, wholeheartedly, agree with this theory’s belief that feminine and masculine genders should have equal rights and that any group differences are due to socialization. Additionally, this theory has encouraged me to, in my social realm, promote the elimination of homophobia and compulsive heteronormativity, gender roles, and the causes of stereotypes, expectations, and interactions that control and marginalize girls and women, boys and men, and those without a gender-binary identity (Sage et al., 2019; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Until now, I have allowed my gender identity to discourage me from doing my part to dispel hegemonic femininity and masculinity in my social and family life. I now understand that my passive language around friends and family impacts our perceptions of femininity and masculinity. For example, if someone consistently uses phrases such as "be a man" or "man up" when encouraging a male friend or family member to be brave or tough, this reinforces the idea that masculinity is associated with strength and emotional stoicimism. Similarly, if someone frequently uses passive language when referring to women, such as saying "she was objectified" rather than "he objectified her," it can reinforce the idea that women are passive victims rather than active agents in their lives. These subtle
linguistic choices can shape our perceptions of gender roles and reinforce gender stereotypes. When we use language that reinforces traditional gender roles, we may inadvertently perpetuate harmful beliefs and behaviors that limit people's potential based on their gender. By being mindful of my language and avoiding passive constructions that reinforce gender stereotypes, I can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable social climate.

**Lessons on Black Feminist Theory**

Another feminist theory that I was presented with in this course that opened my eyes regarding discrepancies in equality, equity, and inclusion in sports is Black Feminist Theory. The KINE 323 lectures and course materials regarding this theory presented me with different and valuable perspectives. This theory states that Black female athletes are already faced with the same struggles that White athletes are presented with (i.e., sexism), but Black athletes (and other athletes of color) have more odds stacked against them in sports and society due to racism (Scranton & Flintoff, 2013). In KINE 323, the film *Dare to Compete* discussed Wilma Rudolph's story as an Olympic gold medalist who grew up as a Black female athlete in Tennessee. The watching of this film prompted the class to further learn, through a Black feminist theoretical lens, how Wilma, who contracted polio at age seven, and her family, were forced to deal with racism in the 1940s and 1950s (Shelley, 2021). According to a 2021 online article discussed in class:

There were no doctors available for Black children in Clarksville, Tennessee so her mother took her to Nashville to a Black medical college [to receive medical care for Wilma’s polio]. The bus was segregated and there was no consideration for a Black child with a disability. Only a White child could find a seat, use a restroom, and grab something to eat at the train station. Wilma didn’t know anything different. The doctors said she needed to do water and heat therapy, as well as therapeutic massages to increase the use of the leg. They stuck her leg in blindingly hot water to relax the muscles. When they went home her family took turns massaging her legs four times a day.
Eventually, she learned to walk again with a limp. (Shelley, 2021, para. 3-4)

Black athletes (and other athletes of color) are faced with struggles and setbacks that White athletes simply are not, and Wilma’s experience exemplifies this. The media’s substantial role in the public’s perception of Black female athletes is something that this course also spotlighted for me (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016). Sports media outlets may often use verbiage that perpetuates harmful bias against minority athletes and positive bias toward athletes of lighter skin tones, as reported by researcher Danny McLoughlin. McLoughlin’s research has been featured in *The Guardian, BBC, New York Times, and Washington Post.*

As seen in the figure below, Black athletes are often subjected to unfair and prejudiced biases and portrayals in the media (McLoughlin 2021). Beyond trope labels of black men, research also shows a large omission of black women’s sporting achievements or implies that they are unfeminine (e.g., rude and hypermasculine, Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016).

![Distribution of Sport Commentator Comments During 80 Live Soccer Matches within Europe's Top 4 Leagues](image)

**Figure 1:** The photograph is a reproduced bar graph from McLoughlin (2021). Reprints are allowed when the source material is cited.
I am a believer in the notion that sports are a microcosm of life. When observing research regarding racial and ethnic diversity in the corporate world, I have learned how it behooves companies and organizations to foster diverse, welcoming workforces and communities. According to McKinsey & Company, a reputable management consulting agency, “Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35 percent more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians” (Hunt et al., 2015, para. 1). I think that this statistic can support the notion that diversity benefits sporting teams and organizations, too. It is worth noting that Black feminist theory is not limited to studying only Black cisgender female athletes, and can be expanded to examine a variety of intersecting issues, including those related to gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. For example, intersectional research on the experiences of Black transgender athletes can provide important insights into the ways in which multiple forms of oppression intersect and impact lived experiences in sports (Fischer & McClearen, 2020).

Lessons on Coaching & Administration

Perhaps the message that resonates with me the deepest from KINE 323 is how underrepresented the female community is in coaching and administration, perpetuating exclusion. Whilst I had always recognized, growing up, that there were many more male coaches and administrators than female, I had never considered any of the contributing factors until taking this course. I have come to realize through this course that the main reason why there is such a gap in gender representation is the stereotype that male coaches will lead teams to success more than female coaches. According to the film Game On: Women Can Coach, “While there has been an explosion of women participating in athletics since Title IX, only about 40% of them are coached by women” (Clark & Lamke, 2018). Compare this statistic to the fact that only 4.6% of all head coaches in collegiate men’s sports are female, and it is clear that the opportunities for men in coaching and administration vastly outnumber the opportunities for women in the same field (Wilson, 2017).
In 2017, 45 years after Title IX’s passage, female sports participation was at an all-time high; about 43% of girls participate in sports, compared to only 3% before Title IX (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017). However, in 1972, when Title IX was enacted, over 90% of women’s teams were coached by females. As of 2014, 43.4% of women’s teams are coached by females (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). This decrease in female representation is jarring to me. Unsurprisingly, female head coaches make up far more of a percentage in female team sports than in male team sports. As of 2017, women made up approximately 40% of all head coaches of women’s teams and a meager 4.6% of all head coaches of men’s teams (Wilson, 2017). From 2012 to 2017, the University of Minnesota’s Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport tracked the percentage of female coaches of women’s teams at the NCAA Division I level. The research determined that the percentage of female coaches of women’s teams at the NCAA’s D-I level has “not increased (or decreased) in any statistically significant way” (Caple et al., 2017, p. 2). These statistics gathered inside and outside of KINE 323, have given me the necessary knowledge to recognize how stereotypes maintain gendered representation in sports coaching and administration; I have come to realize that I have a role to play in challenging it. I hope that I have the strength and confidence to do so. To ensure that I will, I can continue to educate myself about the issue, including the barriers that women face in coaching and strategies for promoting gender equity in sports leadership (Voelker, 2016). Second, I can seek out mentorship and support from women in sports, including coaches, administrators, and athletes, who can offer guidance and encouragement. Third, I can advocate for change within my own sphere of influence. By taking these steps, I can build the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equity and inclusivity in sports coaching and administration.

Lessons on LGBTQ+ Athlete Experiences

Lastly, I have listened to and read about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQ+) athletes in sports within the course. I found it disheartening to hear stories of terrible experiences in sports I played growing up, which could have been also true for kids who I may have shared the field,
court, or pool with. I, sort of, feel guilty for having such a great time participating in organized sports after learning that many kids around me may have been dealing with unfair biases and prejudices to my benefit (e.g., I felt assured in my normality, that I fit in; Johnson, 2018). And in all honesty, I know that there were times, growing up, when I participated in disrespectful and sexist language and behavior to promote the “All-American” sports image. I regret that wholeheartedly. There is no place for such language and actions in either sports or society. And yet, it is far too common. As explained in an article published in *Frontiers in Psychology*:

> Of those within the LGBTIQ+ community, 79.7% [or study participants] had experienced (or witnessed) sexism in sport compared with 65.3% of the heterosexual participants. The majority of both LGBTIQ+ and heterosexual participants had experienced (or witnessed) verbal homophobia in sport (63.7% and 59.2%, respectively). 5% of LGBTIQ+ and 2% of heterosexual participants had experienced (or witnessed) physical homophobic assault in sport. (Drummond et al., 2021, p. 4)

In a male-dominated, centered, and identified sports culture, where hegemonic masculinity is highly valued and commercialized, athletes, who do not conform to traditional gender roles, or whose sexual orientation falls outside of the heterosexual norm, may face bullying and harassment. Furthermore, gender stereotypes and expectations may also contribute to the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ individuals in sports settings. Therefore, creating an inclusive and accepting sports culture that embraces diversity and promotes respect and equality for all individuals can help to reduce the prevalence of bullying in sports related to homophobia and other identity phobias (e.g., transphobia, Krane, 2016). Clearly, a change needs to be made to curb such language and behaviors.

In reflecting on my learning about gender and sports, I have come to understand that the prevalence of bullying and discrimination in sports related to homophobia and transphobia is closely linked to broader societal attitudes about gender and sexuality. For example, gender stereotypes that equate athleticism with masculinity and femininity with weakness or passivity can contribute to a climate in which LGBTQ+ athletes are
seen as less legitimate or deserving of respect than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. In a large-scale, multinational study, 80% of participants said they saw others, or were themselves, the target of homophobia, regardless of sexual identity (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). Despite greater acceptance of non-heterosexual relations in many societies at large, sports settings remain highly hostile environments for anyone stepping outside heteronormative, gendered lines (Denison et al., 2021). In KINE 323, we learned from the Krane reading that a major reason why sport culture remains extremely hostile is that many authority figures, like team captains, coaches, and other leaders, do not openly challenge homophobia/transphobia, or at the very least, include sexual orientation in teaching tolerance as part of lessons on sportspersonship (Krane, 2016). Moreover, I learned through watching the class film, *You Throw Like a Girl: The Blind Spot of Masculinity*, that the hypermasculine culture of many sports, with its emphasis on aggression, dominance, and toughness, can further reinforce harmful stereotypes and make it difficult for athletes who do not conform to orthodox gender roles to feel welcome or safe (Hutchison et al., 2020). As such, I have come to realize, through this reflective essay, that addressing homophobia and transphobia in sports requires not only changing attitudes and behaviors within sports communities (Krane, 2016). We must learn to recognize and challenge broader societal norms and expectations that conflate sport with orthodox gender ideology (Alper et al., 2022; Coakley, 2021), something which it seems corporate media, corporate sport, and others trying to fit that mold (i.e., monetize or popularize their programs/athletes) are complicit in maintaining and perpetuating (Alper et al., 202; Ancheta et al., 2020; Quayle et al., 2019).

**Conclusion**

After studying sports history, coaching and administration, feminist theoretical perspectives, Black feminist theory, and LGBTQ+ experiences, I now realize how important the recognition of discrepancies in equality, equity, and inclusion in sports truly is. I have experienced what it feels like to coast through organized sports as a celebrated young male who is heterosexual and White. However, reading, watching, listening, and conversing over these past eight weeks have led me to contemplate my
position in the interrelating worlds of sports and gender. What can I do to impact others in these realms positively? Upon deep reflection, I feel that it is necessary for me to no longer ignore the signs of inequality in sports and gender. I should say something if I see or hear something that could perpetuate inequality and mistreatment. There is no reason for me to ignore the promotion of hegemonic femininity and masculinity or exclusion in sports; there is no reason for me to not promote feminist theoretical perspectives in my everyday life. There is no reason why I cannot continue to educate myself on issues in sports, create dialogue to empower discussion and collectively address those issues, and work with others to promote positive change in something that I, and so many others, greatly value – sports!
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