

TRENDS IN GENDER-RELATED RESEARCH IN SPORT AND EXERCISE PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, gender-related trends in Sport and Exercise Psychology (SEP) will be summarized. To begin key aspects of what gender-related research is, and is not will be outlined. Common problematic aspects of gender-related research in SEP will be illuminated, along with two theoretical frameworks that may help overcome traditionally problematic aspects. The first framework is Cultural Studies which blurs and dismantles disciplinary boundaries, where no one truth, way of knowing, or methodology reigns supreme, but where integrated knowledge that leads to complex understandings which make a difference to the communities and marginalized groups or individuals who need it most is desired and encouraged (Silk & Andrews, 2011). The second framework is the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979, 1993), which specifies human development reflects the influence of several environmental systems including individual, social, environmental, societal and cultural. This seminal theory has influenced how researchers approach the study of human beings and their environments, which varies from culture to culture. The remainder of the paper will provide a summary of selected gender-related trends in SEP including the gendered physical activity gap, females in positions of power in sport, and gender “differences” in coaching science.

KEYWORDS: Gender in sport; Sport and gender; Cultural competence.

TENDENCIAS EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN RELACIONADA CON EL GÉNERO EN PSICOLOGÍA DEL DEPORTE Y EL EJERCICIO

RESUMEN: En este artículo, se resumen las tendencias según género en Psicología del Ejercicio y el Deporte. Para empezar, se presentan los aspectos clave que definen la investigación según género. Se abordarán aspectos generalmente problemáticos de la investigación según género, y se expondrán dos marcos teóricos que pueden ayudar a resolver aspectos tradicionalmente problemáticos. El primer marco es el de Estudios Culturales, que acaba con las barreras disciplinares, en el que no destaca una sola verdad, ni un determinado modo de aprender, ni una metodología concreta, sino en el que se persigue y fomenta el conocimiento integrado que lleva a complejos entendimientos que marcan la diferencia para las comunidades y grupos marginales o individuos con necesidades (Silk & Andrews, 2011). El segundo marco es el de la Teoría del Sistema Ecológico (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1993), que especifica que el desarrollo del ser humano refleja la influencia de varios sistemas medioambientales, como son el del propio del individuo, el social y el cultural. Esta importante teoría ha influido en la manera como los investigadores abordan el estudio de los seres humanos y sus ambientes, que varían de una cultura a otra. El resto del artículo ofrece una selección de las tendencias según género en la Psicología del Ejercicio y el Deporte, que incluye lagunas en el área de la actividad física según género, en el área que concierne a las mujeres en posición de poder en el deporte y “diferencias” de género en la ciencia del entrenamiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Género en el deporte; Deporte y género; Competencia cultural.

TENDÊNCIAS NA INVESTIGAÇÃO SOBRE O GÉNERO NA PSICOLOGIA DO DESPORTO E DO EXERCÍCIO

RESUMO: Neste artigo, serão resumidas as tendências relativas ao género na Psicologia do Desporto e do Exercício (PDE). Para começar, serão destacados aspectos-chave sobre o que é, e o que não é, investigação relacionada com o género. Serão abordados aspectos problemáticos comuns relativos à investigação sobre o género na PDE, bem como dois enquadramentos teóricos que podem ajudar a superar aspectos tradicionalmente problemáticos. O primeiro enquadramento é o dos Estudos Culturais, que enevoa e desmonta fronteiras disciplinares onde não há verdade, forma de saber, ou metodologia únicas, mas onde o conhecimento integrado que leva a compreensões complexas que fazem a diferença para comunidades e grupos marginalizados ou indivíduos que mais precisam é desejado e incentivado (Silk & Andrews, 2011). O segundo enquadramento é o da Teoria dos Sistemas Ecológicos (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979, 1993), que especifica que o desenvolvimento humano reflete a influência de vários sistemas ambientais, incluindo os individuais, sociais, ambientais, sociais e culturais. Esta teoria seminal tem influenciado o modo como os investigadores abordam o estudo dos seres humanos e seus ambientes, que variam de cultura para cultura. No restante do documento, apresenta-se um resumo de tendências selecionadas sobre o género na PED, incluindo a lacuna na atividade física em função do género, mulheres com posições de poder no desporto e "diferenças" de género na ciência do coaching.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Género no esporte; Desporto e género; Competência cultural.

To begin, it is important to outline what gender-related research is—and is not. A common error researchers often make is to conflate sex and gender as the same constructs. To distinguish between the two constructs is imperative. According to the American Psychological Association (2011), sex refers to the biological aspects of being male or female (i.e., sex chromosome's, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia), while gender refers to the attitudes, behaviors, feelings, experiences and characteristics associated with being male and female. Examining gender pertains to how socially constructed and arbitrary conceptions of masculinity and femininity influence the sport and exercise experiences of all athletes. Gender-related research also pertains to how the structure of sport has traditionally privileged men and masculinity, and problematized or marginalized females in sport contexts.

Gender-related aspects of SEP have predominately focused on girls and women in sport, and three lines of research will be summarized later in the paper. In 1988 sport sociologist Ann Hall argued that in North America the tendency is to think 'gender' means 'woman', and this remains mostly true in SEP two decades later. The experiences, correlates and outcomes for females in sport are worthy topics of inquiry and may, but should not be assumed to, differ from the experiences of males due to social and cultural context of participation, historic influences, and gender socialization. Gender-related trends in

the U.S. should be used to guide research outside the U.S., but SEP researchers and practitioners are advised to use and apply the information in this paper in culturally competent ways, resist generalizations across cultures, and ask research questions that do not reify gender stereotypes. Certainly the norm of masculinity and femininity differs across cultures. Borrowing from Gill and Kamphoff (2010), cultural competence is "the ability of an individual to understand and respect the values, attitudes, beliefs and more that differ across cultures and to consider and respond appropriately to these difference in planning, implementing and evaluating sport psychology programs, interventions and research" (p. 429).

First, doing gender research does not simply mean "add females and stir" and inclusion of females in the sample criteria is not sufficient to qualify research as gender-related. Second, gender-related research in most major SEP textbooks is presented as a marginal "add on" topic tacked on at the end of the book, mentioned in passing, or not covered at all (Gill & Kamphoff, 2010). Gender, like other social constructions such as culture, class, race, able-bodies, and sexual orientation, is not privileged, primary SEP knowledge as is motivation, self-regulation skills, self-perceptions, and group dynamics (Fisher, Roper & Butryn, 2009).

Third, frequently in gender-related SEP research girls and women are problematized and framed as an "issue" that needs to be fixed, dealt with, or over-

come. For example, fear of success, attributional patterns, eating disorders, and self-efficacy are often framed as “problems” pertaining primarily to females. Duncan (2007) summarized a multitude of research which indicated girls’ lack of interest, motivation, or effort in sport is often explained by coaches and physical educators as the “problem with girls.” The same is true in the psychology of coaching popular press books, in that coaching females is often framed as “different than” coaching males, while similarities are rarely highlighted (LaVoi, Becker & Maxwell, 2007).

Fourth, female athletes are commonly and constantly compared to boys and men and the male norm (i.e., females are less competitive than males, females are more social, females lack the “killer instinct”). Beliefs of inherent social-psychological gender “differences” often originate from personal beliefs or experiential knowledge, rather than evidence. Difference hypotheses are then typically tested with quantitative statistics and results in turn provide irrefutable evidence that males and females are different—while similarities are often ignored, erased, or not discussed. Examining gender using quantitative, reductionist, positivistic methods is predicated on the assumptions of cause-and-effect relationships and objective scientific processes (Brustad, 2008). For example, a researcher might test how the confidence of male and female athletes influences cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses in sport. Athletes fill out

quantitative Likert-type scales and psychometric and multivariate statistics are run. Male and female scores are compared, variance is assessed, and gender “differences” will be proven or not. In reality, many other factors besides the sex of the athlete (note that sex, not gender, of athlete is used here) influence sport confidence levels. It is not to say psychosocial differences between male and female athletes do not exist, but researchers should use caution and not inadvertently reproduce gender stereotypes or marginalize female athletes through the types of research questions and methods employed. Silk and Andrews (2011) assert a variety of forces, institutions, processes, and discourses, among other factors influence how gender (or race, class, sexual identity) is articulated and experienced in sport.

Hall (2002) points out researchers often seek to delineate how females are different from males, but the reverse question is rarely posed. Gender-related research fits most effectively with qualitative methodologies (i.e., interviews, case studies, focus groups) where complex gendered interactions, identities, experiences, and life histories of female (and male) athletes can be illuminated. Researchers interested in gender-related questions should examine the individual within the social, political, cultural and historical context which influences the sport and physical activity experiences of both males and females. Methods and theoretical frameworks that help researchers place the individual within

complex ecological layers of social influence (see Bronfenbrenner) will help forward and deepen gender-related SEP research.

Fifth, gender stereotypes about what is “appropriate” and “inappropriate” behavior based on gender norms (i.e., being aggressive and competitive is not ladylike or feminine, playing certain contact sports like rugby or football is inappropriate for females) limits and restricts the full potential and development of all athletes. Oftentimes, in gender-related SEP research the focal point is on female athlete conformity or deviation from femininity, while the masculinity of male athletes is rarely questioned or examined. Lastly, in applying principles of cultural competence, researchers and practitioners should not assume all females (or males) are identical, and make blanket generalizations that reinforce stereotypes (Peters & Williams, 2009).

Conducting gender-related research in the ways described above does little to advance the field of SEP. In this paper, gender-related trends and areas of inquiry will be outlined that forward productive examination of gender that leads to social change, awareness, and positive outcomes for participants.

Two frameworks that are potentially helpful in moving gender-related SEP research forward include, 1) Cultural Studies and, 2) Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Engaging Cultural Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology

Given that historically SEP researchers have embraced a limited approach to examining gender, a blurring of disciplinary boundaries is necessary if this area of inquiry is to progress. A discipline that encourages and embraces “open analytic, critical and political conversations by encouraging people to push the dialogue into fresh, uncharted territory” (Taylor & Francis, 2011) is needed. Arguably, the academic field of Cultural Studies may help expand gender-related research in SEP. Cultural Studies provides a space for scholarly dialogues that draw on theory and methods from several disciplines: anthropology, history, literary studies, philosophy, political economy, media/communication/film studies, feminist studies, and sociology. But whereas the traditional disciplines tend to produce stable objects of study, research in Cultural Studies attempts to account for cultural objects (i.e., athletes, coaches, teams) under conditions constrained by power and defined by contestation, conflict, and change (George Mason University, 2011). Researchers concentrate on how a particular medium, message or social institution relates to ideology, social class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or gender, rather than investigating a particular culture or area of the world. Recently, a loosely aggregated and emergent group of scholars who study power, power relations, the body and physical culture located their work in what they term Physical Cultural Studies (PCS; see

Andrews & Silk, 2011).

Cultural Studies, and specifically PCS, offers a way for SEP researchers to study and integrate gender within their work, as gender is located on and performed by the physical body. Gender, an arbitrary construct of what it means to be masculine and feminine in a particular historical time and space, is part of a negotiated and subjective identity that influences optimal performance, experience and development of an individual—in sport and physical activity contexts. Silk and Andrews (2011) state in Cultural Studies it is “assumed that societies are fundamentally divided along hierarchical ordered lines of differentiation (i.e., gender) and are realized through the operations of power and power relations with social formation” (p. 10). Indeed gender is performed, engaged and interpreted on the physical body as a fluid, dynamic category. For example, what it means to be both “feminine” and an “athlete” has changed over time, and varies culturally. However, what has not changed is that the feminine remains secondary and marginalized to the masculine. Even with record number of girls and women competing in sports at all levels in the U.S. due to the landmark federal law Title IX, female sport participation, the feminine, and the female athletic body remains contested.

In short, Cultural Studies blurs and dismantles disciplinary boundaries, where no one truth, way of knowing, or methodology reigns supreme, but where integrated knowledge that leads to com-

plex understandings which make a difference to the communities and marginalized groups or individuals who need it most is desired and encouraged (Silk & Andrews, 2011). Cultural Studies is “aggressively non-reductionist” and researchers recognize and embrace the multiple factors which impact an individual actor, outcome or variable; and therefore reject the possibility of reducing causality to one factor. Reconstructing SEP by infusing Cultural Studies has not been widely used or accepted in Sport Psychology (Fisher, Roper, Butryn, 2009), nor gone uncontested. In sum, a scholarly approach that challenges the current “hyper-fragmentation and hyper-specialization” within human movement science would encourage transcending “intellectual boundaries and exclusivities” (Andrews, 2008), that is currently normative in SEP research. Another theoretical model that may help challenge non-reductionistic research has its origins in developmental psychology.

The Ecological Systems Theory

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1979, 1993), posits human development reflects the influence of several environmental systems including individual, social, environmental, societal and cultural. This seminal theory has influenced how researchers approach the study of human beings and their environments, which varies from culture to culture. In combination, the Ecological System Theory and Cultural Studies may pro-

vide a comprehensive understanding of any one gender-related phenomenon. Using the issue of the physical activity of females as an example, this approach will be illustrated.

In a report titled *Developing Physically Active Girls: An Evidence-based Multidisciplinary Approach*, three trends of girls physical activity were summarized (Wiese-Bjornstal & LaVoi, 2007). First, adolescent girls participate in a broader array of physical activities, ranging from informal, play-like environments to the pressure-cooker world of Olympic sports, more than ever before in U.S. history. Second, girls' participation in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity or MVPA (the level of activity needed to accrue and maintain health benefits) outside of organized sports is declining, and declines are greater for girls of color and low income girls. Third, girls' participation rates and behaviors in all types of physical activity—from organized sports, to outdoor recreation, to youth clubs, to physical education—consistently lag behind those of boys. Male participants outnumber their female peers, girls are less physically active than boys, and girls participate with less intensity than boys. While a gendered gap in physical activity exists (LaVoi & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2007), it is also clear that geography, gender, class, and race intersect in complex ways that prohibit or make it challenging for underserved girls to be physically active. Girls of color and girls from low-income communities have limited sport opportunities (Sabo et al., 2004), therefore it is not

surprising that underserved girls are one of the least active populations in the United States and become increasingly inactive as they move from childhood through adolescence.

A wide variety of barriers for girls' physical activity at all levels of the environment have been identified by researchers across disciplines. Sport and Exercise Psychology (SEP) researchers have studied the gendered gap in physical activity using individual-level factors (i.e., self-perceptions, values, beliefs, motivation). Based on the data, girls who report lower levels of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and physical self-competence are less likely to participate in or persist at physical activity. However, girls' "choices," "lack of interest," or comparatively "low" self-perceptions fails to acknowledge that values, choices, expectations, effort, interest, and enjoyment are also shaped by the cultural and societal values and beliefs, and social and physical environments in which girls live (Wiese-Bjornstal & LaVoi, 2007).

SEP researchers also study social factors such as parental influence. Underserved girls in studies around the U.S. report low levels of physical activity participation because they lack time due to family obligations, some parents believe "sports are for boys," value physical activity to a lesser extent for their daughters, provide fewer opportunities for girls to be active, or feel girls are less interested in sports than boys. Sport Sociologists examine the gendered physical activity gap by critically questioning and interrogating societal structures (i.e.,

political, legal, financial structures of power), societal norms (i.e., stereotypes, taken for granted ways to thinking and behaving, how girls are expected to conform to feminine norms, how values and expectations around what it means to be a girl influence physical activity participation) and cultural factors (i.e., shared behaviors, values, and traditions passed down generations). Scholars in Public Health and Epidemiology examine individual, social and environmental (i.e., existence of green space, proximity of house to parks, safety) factors in concert, but often leave out motivation or how gendered beliefs impact physical activity and increase likelihood of obesity. Scholars in Sport History might study barriers over time that have prevented girls from engaging in sport and physical activity in the first place—barriers such as stereotypes about girls' inherent physical capacities, policies and laws, and inequities in funding priorities—and continue to limit girls' ability to reach their full potential. There are other academic sub-disciplines in which researchers study the phenomenon of girls' inactivity, but by highlighting the fragmentation of a select few disciplines I hope to shed light on how to advance gender-related SEP research.

By using an Ecological Systems approach to examine and illuminate multi-level and complex factors, along with opening up academic boundaries as suggested within Cultural Studies, a more complex understanding of gender-related phenomena is possible—as is the potential to make a difference to the

communities, marginalized groups or individuals who need it most. For example, Thul and LaVoi (2011) recently published an article about reducing physical inactivity in East African immigrant adolescent girls in which they employed the Ecological Systems Model, and merged the literatures of SEP, Developmental Psychology, Prevention Science, and Public Health to argue for and ultimately develop culturally relevant physical activity programming. Combining two robust theoretical frameworks will stimulate interdisciplinary research and help all researchers understand the gendered physical activity gap. In the following section, two additional gender-related areas of inquiry will be summarized.

Sport and Exercise Psychology Gender-Related Areas of Inquiry Lack of Females in Positions of Power

Many assume the rise in participation opportunities for female athletes in the U.S. since the passage of the federal law Title IX in 1972 has translated into increasing numbers of females in positions of power in sport—an assumption that has proven to be false. Despite the fact that female athletic participation at all levels of sport is at a historic high, females in positions of power at all levels and in nearly all positions have declined since 1972 and remain a scarce minority. This surprising and counter intuitive trend is often referred to as an “unintended consequence” of Title IX. In fact in the most visible and arguably

most important positions of power in sport -head coaches, athletic administrators, and sport editors- women remain marginalized and in many cases are statistical tokens (i.e., a member of a demographic category who occupies less than 15% of the workforce population). Tokens and marginalized groups are often alienated, highly visible and subjected to scrutiny, have to over-perform to gain credibility, feel pressure conform to organizational norms, and are at increased risk for gender discrimination in the forms of sexual harassment, wage inequities, and limited opportunities for promotion.

A by-the-numbers analysis paints a bleak picture of the landscape for females in positions of power in U.S. sport. In their longitudinal report, Acosta and Carpenter (2008) indicate that only 20.6% of all college teams are coached by a female head coach and the number of female head coaches of women's teams (42.8%) is lower than at any time in history except for 2006 (42.4%). No national data exists for the percentage of females in position of power for interscholastic sport, yet preliminary analysis in 2011 by researchers affiliated with The Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota, suggest numbers are similar to or worse than the collegiate data (LaVoi & Kamphoff, in progress). At the youth sport level data is also scarce, but based on numbers from one state level youth soccer association, LaVoi (2009) found females seldom occupied head coach (15.1%) and

assistant coach (18.9%) positions and were marginalized by being clustered within the less prestigious and less visible position of team manager and the less prestigious teams (i.e., younger age groups, less competitive recreational levels). The 2011 numbers for athletic directors is more bleak, only five of 120 (4%) athletic director positions in Division I-A -the biggest and most prominent programs- were occupied by females. Based on the data, 19% of collegiate athletic directors across all divisional levels are female, a number that has declined from the early 1970's when over 90% of females oversaw female athletics programs. The data pertaining to Associated Press sports editors are no better, 94 percent are men.

Recognizing the need for female representation both at the international and national level, the International Olympic Committee (IOC, 2004) mandated that by December 31, 2005 all National Olympic Committees must reserve 20% of positions involving decision-making for women (including coaches). Current data is not available to ascertain if U.S. National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of Olympic sports are in compliance with the IOC mandate. However, data from around the globe consistently indicate that women are underrepresented in coaching at the highest levels (Fasting & Pfister, 2000), including the professional and Olympic levels.

To address this issue, the International Working Group for Women and Sport (IWG) created the Sydney Scoreboard

(<http://www.sydneyscoreboard.com>), a legacy of the 5th IWG World Conference, with the aim to increase the number of women on the boards/management committees of all sport organizations at international, regional, national and local level. The Sydney Scoreboard operates as a powerful online tool through which women in leadership roles within sport organizations can be tracked both nationally and internationally. The site provides an internationally accessible, interactive and real time means of tracking progress and showcasing good practices with regards to the boards of sport organizations. Based on current data, in the U.S. very few (2.86%) of all Chief Executive Officers of sport organizations are women. No Sydney Scoreboard data currently exists for Spain.

Scholars have documented the many complex and dynamic societal, structural, familial, social and personal barriers that impede and influence the lack of females in power positions in sport. The many barriers, as well as supports, for U.S. female coaches are summarized within an ecological model by Dutove and LaVoi (2011). Yet in this post Title IX moment in the U.S., the role of personal agency -“a woman’s right to choose”- is often left out of the discussion. Is something afoot that influences women not to choose, to seek, or to desire high-powered positions in sport? Perhaps women are “opting out” of demanding, high profile, time consuming, stressful positions and choosing to remain in supporting roles such as assis-

tant coaches, associate and assistant athletic directors, and assistant sports editors where work-life balance and quality of life is more likely. Arguably the factors that facilitate and impede a woman’s pursuit of positions of power in sport are complex, vary culturally, and cannot be adequately addressed by only using traditional SEP frameworks.

Gender “Differences” in Coaching Science

Coaching Science encompasses many sub-disciplines of human movement studies, and articles about the coach-created motivational climate, coach feedback and instruction, coach goal orientation and its effect on athlete outcomes, and qualities of the coach-athlete relationship for example, regularly appear in SEP journals. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, gender differences in coaching are often constructed or discussed in ways that “other” or marginalize female athletes and coaches. Recently, LaVoi and Hamilton (under review) did a meta-analysis of the SEP literature on male and female athlete perceptions of coach variables in order to provide evidence of whether or not empirical differences existed based on sex of athlete. Based on the data, males and females largely preferred the same coach behaviors and few differences emerged. If this is true, then perceptions that coaching males and females requires different knowledge and different application of coaching science is just that -a perception not an evidence-based reality. This finding based on the SEP literature

challenges tacit assumptions of researchers and practitioners. It also supports the contention that a broader range of ecological factors and the application of a Cultural Studies perspective should be considered, evaluated and researched- especially given that coaching is a study power and power relations. Without a blurring of disciplinary lines, and additional research, it is premature to claim that coaching males and females is different.

Scholars who examine and assert gender differences often use the data a means to affirm and perpetuate traditional gender roles and do little to challenge or change existing power structures of male power or empower women (Douglas, 2010). Some suggestions for gender-related coaching science in SEP would include: examining the processes of how gender influences athlete perceptions of coach competence, the influence on athlete psychosocial outcomes of cross-gender coaching (i.e., males coaching females), how gender identity (an individual's performance of masculinity or femininity) influences coach behaviors, and how athlete gender identity is related to moral functioning, injury, and psychological recovery to sport injury.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, gender-related trends in Sport and Exercise Psychology (SEP) were summarized. The paper began by delineating between the constructs of gender and sex. Common patterns and assumptions of what gender-related

research encompasses were outlined and progressive suggestions were given to effectively move SEP forward in culturally sensitive ways. Embracing cultural competence as a way to conduct research was one important suggestion. Two theoretical frameworks, Cultural Studies and the Ecological Systems Theory, were presented as providing utility in overcoming traditionally problematic elements in gender-related SEP research. The paper also included highlights of focused areas of inquiry, specifically pertaining to the gendered physical activity gap between females and males, females in positions of power in sport, and gender differences in coaching science. To conclude, suggestions for future gender-related research were provided.

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