

“She Plays Like a Man!”
Managing Femininity, Homophobia and the Lesbian Stigma
in Hyper-masculine Female Sport

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Abstract

This paper examines the gendered, male-dominated institution of sport through a secondary source analysis, specifically examining how and why female athletes who participate in hyper-masculine sports such as basketball, rugby, and softball, manage their athletic identities in order to prevent or conceal the lesbian stigma. It argues that female athletes participating in hyper-masculine sports are vulnerable to the lesbian stigma because they exhibit masculine characteristics that are deemed inappropriate by cultural and societal understandings of 'femininity' in the United States. The author will argue that notions of femininity and athleticism are incompatible for women participating in hyper-masculine sports. As a result, women who participate in hyper-masculine sports are devalued and stigmatized. This research is also concerned with the implications of the lesbian stigma, both individually and institutionally. While the establishment of sport has taken measures to increase gender equity, an example being the implementation of Title IX, the underlying homophobic and heterosexual attitudes inherent within the institution of sport are constantly being reproduced by the lesbian stigma.

Introduction

The institution of sport plays a large economic and cultural role in American society. In 1999, the US Census Bureau recorded \$17.7 billion dollars spent on commercial sports. In addition to this, \$21.4 billion dollars were spent on physical fitness, golf, bowling, sports and recreation clubs (US Census Bureau 1999: 46). The centrality of sport is depicted in a number of ways. In every major and minor newspaper, it can be assured that 'sports' is allocated a separate section. Hours are spent on the radio discussing or airing sporting events. Stadiums and arenas are constantly filled with people. Sport is a mandatory part of a child's education, and many individuals continue to involve themselves in sport in colleges and universities across the United States. Thousands of parents dedicate themselves every weekend to watching their children's sporting events. In the world of politics, sport has affected legislation and policy at a local and federal level. It is without a doubt that the primacy of sport in American lives should be a reason to delve deeper within this institution.

Sport is performed in diverse settings by a multitude of people. The world of sport is characterized by social practices that are constantly reproduced and changing over time by

human beings. The sporting world has been regarded as a wonderful source for exercise, fun and companionship. However, like any other institution, sport is not without underlying problems. Have you ever noticed that most sports aired on television involve men? Can you name more than one professional female soccer player, or basketball player? Where have all the female athletes gone?

It has been argued that sport is a territory characterized by freedom, whereby men and women are not confined to the constraints of society (Messner, 1988). Critcher (1986) argues that sport is genuinely set apart from the rest of life in time and space. By virtue of this, it has been professed that sport authentically illustrates a meritocratic system. Meritocracy in sport has led people to believe that an individual's class, race or gender do not influence behavior in athletics (Washington and Karen, 2001). Washington and Karen (2001) use the example of the Williams sisters, who have thrived despite their humble upbringings and the predominantly white, upper-middle class nature of tennis. Despite these exceptional examples, others consider sport is considered a space where dominant ideologies are perpetuated, challenged, and contested (Messner, 1988). This is especially the case with gender. While sport as an institution is largely comprised of micro social interactions, it is not without larger societal implications. Eric Anderson (2009) states, "competitive teamsports exist as a microcosm of society's gendered values, myths and prejudices about gender" (p.4).

Given these two paradigms that illustrate the competing sociological interpretations of how sport functions, meritocratic or patriarchal, this paper will challenge the claim that sport is meritocratic and explore the existence of patriarchy inherent within the institution. This will be achieved by the examination of female athletics, of women who participate in sports that are categorized as extremely masculine, and particularly the implementation of the lesbian stigma as

a way to reproduce the patriarchal function of sport. It will argue that sport is not meritocratic because women are not as revered or applauded when compared to men, even when the woman is arguably better at a particular sport than the man (Anderson, 2009). Sport is not meritocratic because women in sport who display remarkable athletic capabilities, but who simultaneously exhibit masculine tendencies, will tend to be overshadowed by their supposed masculinity and vulnerability to the lesbian stigma. Thus, a woman's experiences in the world of sport are viewed only in relation to that of men, suggesting an underlying, patriarchal dominance. It is from this premise that I began to formulate my research question, stemmed by my interest in the lesbian stigma in hyper-masculine sport and the ways in which female athletes may cope with it. Thus, I pose the question: Why, and how, do female athletes participating in hyper-masculine sports manage their identities in order to prevent or conceal the lesbian stigma?

While the participation of women in sport has increased throughout the course of history, sport is chiefly a male activity. Female participation in sport, and particularly in masculine sport, is viewed as a contradiction of feminine identity (Griffin, 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009). As a result, a woman's sporting achievements are denigrated, and female identities are subject to stigmatization. The stigmatization of female athletes generates negative consequences that motivate women to utilize a variety of techniques to control and manage information regarding their athleticism. By doing so, it is argued that women appear shameful of their position in athletics, and efforts to conceal their sporting identities serve to reproduce and reinforce their stigmatization and subjugation.

This paper will examine the ways in which female athletes participating in hyper-masculine sports manage their identities in order to prevent or conceal the lesbian stigma. This paper will also examine the implications of the lesbian stigma on female athletes individually

and collectively, and the way this particular stigma works to reinforce and reproduce homophobia and negativity towards female athletes in hyper-masculine sports.

Literature Review

There is a large amount of literature that argues that women in sport are regarded as inferior to men, and that female athletes are constantly being defined in relation to these men and not as individuals (Hall, 1988; Hargreaves, 1986). There is a strong consensus among scholars that the institution of sport is homophobic, and that women must manage both their femininity and athleticism in order to gain support and recognition within the institution (Messner, 1988; Washington and Karen, 2001; Blinde and Taub, 1992; Lenskyj, 1994; Hargreaves, 1986; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009; Graydon, 1983; Krane et al. 2004; Griffin, 1992). Sport is an institution where the number of men very noticeably dominate the number of women (Anderson, 2009; Graydon, 1983). Some scholars attribute this imbalance to socialization, and the assumedly important role sports play in the lives of young boys. Anderson (2009) believes this notion to be a myth, whereby many parents in American culture are brought up believing that sport will provide their sons with character, leadership and a way to exercise their masculinity. Others, such as Boyle (1978), outline the belief that society perceives women as smaller and physically weaker than men. Therefore, women cannot participate in sports that require physicality, resulting in a larger participation of men in athletics. The physicality debate, however, is frequently contested, as physical differences between men and women are often attributed to culture than biology (Dyer, 1977). Today, female performances and participation in stereotypically 'male' sports have broken down this concept of physical inferiority.

Feminism and the passage of Title IX in 1972 have offered new opportunities for female athletes, dramatically increasing the number of women involved in sports. However, women's

participation is still extremely low in comparison to that of men (Anderson, 2009). Moreover, it has been assumed that Title IX and increased female participation in sport is reason enough to believe that women have successfully been empowered (Mean and Kassing, 2008). Scholarly evidence has shown that this is not the case. Mean and Kassing (2008) found that female athletes are extremely peripheral to the institution of sport, and that they are “either excluded or framed within traditional, sexualized discourses of femininity and heterosexuality” (Mean and Kassing, 2008: 126). Similarly, Connell (1990) asserts that the assumed positive outcome of increased female participation in sport is laden with contradictions such as homophobia and emphasized femininity.

Men govern and run all aspects of sport; it is an institution “run by and for heterosexual men” (Anderson, 2009: 4). Jennifer Hargreaves (1986) states, rather succinctly, that the world of sport “portrays heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality as deviant” (112). Hargreaves (1993) argues that gender is an organizing principle of sport, that society understands athletic attitudes and practices based on what is suitable for males and what is suitable and acceptable for females. What *is* suitable and acceptable for females in the US sporting world? Scholars have argued that ‘feminine appropriate’ sports, such as gymnastics, ice-skating, golf and tennis are acceptable in that they do not contradict traditional notions of femininity (Graydon, 1983). These sports are considered ‘feminine appropriate’ because they comply with culturally acceptable behaviors and characteristics that are expected of all females in our society. Conversely, women who participate in sports such as soccer, rugby, boxing, wrestling, basketball, softball and motor-racing are viewed as unacceptable due to their hyper-masculine characteristics (Hargreaves, 1986).

Research has shown that women who participate in hyper-masculine sports are vulnerable to stigmatization. These women are vulnerable to stigmatization by virtue of their participation in sports that display characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that do not act in accordance with what society believes is 'ideal' for women. Lenskyj (1994) states that ridicule may be expressed by homophobic innuendoes attributed to a boundary constructed by men that designate suitable activities for women and men. Women who participate in hyper-masculine sport are often characterized as "unfeminine, gay or 'butch'" (Hargreaves, 1986: 117). This is juxtaposed with female athletes in sports that emulate traditional notions of 'femininity,' who "are treated explicitly as sporting sex symbols, in celebration of the female/male distinction" (Hall, 1988: 17). Where masculine sports participation for men is considered normal and healthy, Messner (1988) argues that women who express their athleticism in the realm of hyper-masculine are in conflict with socially acceptable norms of femininity that may ultimately lead to an opposition to women's sports altogether.

This described incompatibility between hyper-masculine athleticism and femininity results in what a number of scholars refer to as the lesbian stigma (Blinde and Taub, 1992; Lenskyj, 1994; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009; Griffin, 1992). Sartore and Cunningham (2009) argue that "the stigma associated with being, or perceived as being, gay or lesbian is one of the most powerful and pervasive stigmas in society" (p. 289). All female athletes are vulnerable to the lesbian stigma. In addition to this, Krane (2001) believes that most female athletes, closeted lesbians and heterosexual women included, feel pressure to avoid the lesbian stigma. The threat of lesbianism in hyper-masculine female sports may cause women to suffer very negative outcomes. Sartore and Cunningham (2009) state that female athletes can suffer outcomes on both a psychological and physical level. The lesbian stigma in sport's heterosexist and homophobic

context compels many female athletes to manage their identities in social situations. Sartore and Cunningham (2009), as well as Blinde and Taub (1992), assert that it is a method to protect themselves from sexual prejudices, status loss, and devaluation of their athletic abilities in hyper-masculine sports. In some cases, female athletes go as far as to insult their own teammates in an attempt to protect themselves from the lesbian stigma. These techniques, as successful as they may be, do not ultimately eradicate the homophobic nature of sport. In fact, many scholars argue that the refusal to confront the lesbian stigma and the efforts put forth by women to manage their athletic identities reproduce and reinforce stigmatization, homophobia, and compulsory heterosexuality in the institution of sport (Blinde and Taub 1992; Lenskyj, 1994; Critcher, 1986; Graydon, 1983; Hargreaves, 1986).

Methods

In researching the varying information management techniques employed by female athletes participating in hyper-masculine sports, I will be doing a secondary source analysis. These secondary sources include theoretically based articles and past experiments of relevance to my topic. Some sections of my paper, where appropriate, will include personal narratives regarding female athletes' experiences taken from the analysis of secondary sources. In order to contextualize my paper, I will first explore how the institution of sport is male-dominated, and why this is relevant to my paper topic. Following this, I will use the work of Simone de Beauvoir, and her concept of 'The Other', in order to help support the notion that the world of sport is male-dominated. I will then define the concepts of femininity and hyper-masculinity. There are certain attributes that are commonly associated with femininity, attributes that women are expected to embody in all realms of life, including sport. I will describe these attributes. Women who do not personify these qualities are considered outcasts and are viewed as different,

often ridiculed and extremely vulnerable to stigmatization. This is especially true with hyper-masculine sports. The way in which we understand femininity is in strict opposition to a woman's athleticism. Female athletes in hyper-masculine sports are competitive, aggressive, driven, and determined. These are all characteristics *not* associated with femininity, thus making these sports problematic. Defining and elaborating upon terms (used throughout my paper), such as femininity and hyper-masculinity, will help me transition into Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and impression management, and the application of this theory to female athletes who participate in hyper-masculine sport. Goffman's theory will help explain why and how female athletes manage and control their athletic identities.

Sport & Male-Domination

Males dominate the institution of sport through their participation in athletics, administrative roles, or even in sports media. Statistically, Acosta and Carpenter (2006) found that of all collegiate teams in the country, less than 2% are coached by women. Washington and Karen (2001), after surveying more than 300 United States daily newspapers, found that men occupied more than 95% of sport editors in newspaper sport departments, 87% of assistant sport editors, 93% of columnists, 93% of reporters, and 87% of copy editors and designers. Even when women do occupy sport management positions, "they are likely to be placed in marginalized positions" (Anderson, 2009: 5).

In addition to men over-representing occupational positions found in the world of sport, these men adopt attitudes that are, according to Anderson (2009), highly masculinized. Anderson (2009) states, "an ethos of hyper-masculinity is embedded in sport, its managers, coaches, players, reporters and even its referees" (5). In addition to this, men who run the institution,

“regardless of their race, age, or socio-economic status...conform to the requisites of hegemonic masculinity through attitudinal positions of homophobia” (Anderson, 2009: 5). These homophobic, heterosexual men who dominate central roles within the institution have the ability to influence social outcomes in the sporting world. These men could hire more female coaches, or homosexual female and male coaches. However, it is clear that these men hire others like them who share similar attitudes, and thus reproduce the overtly masculine, homophobic sporting enterprise (Messner, 1998). Their power enables them to decide social outcomes. Anderson (2009) has previously called sport ‘a cult of masculinity,’ while Burstyn (1999) has dubbed the culture of sport ‘a great, masculinist, secular, religion’. But all this information begs the question: if sport is inherently masculine, does that not imply that females participating in hyper-masculine sport should not be stigmatized, as they are conforming to the masculine ideals of the institution? Not necessarily. Unlike other institutions, sport is a space where gender segregation is considered natural. Men and women occupy separate worlds, and in a woman’s sporting world, female athletes must adhere to standards of femininity that are imposed upon them (Anderson, 2009). Some scholars, such as Hargreaves (1993), suggest that men exercise their dominance over women in sport as a result of feeling threatened by the athletic gains of females throughout the course of history.

Men dominate sport both numerically and ideologically, driven by a philosophy rooted in masculinity and patriarchy. Knoppers and Anthonissen (2005) have asserted that “despite at least thirty years of research and policy making directed primarily at women...and regardless of changes in the way managers do their work, senior management [in sport] is primarily a male preserve, numerically and culturally” (123). This institutional dogma has restricted female athletes from gaining distinction and merit in the sporting world, and especially those women

involved in hyper-masculine sports, as they are perceived as more masculine, deviant and threatening than others.

In her book, The Second Sex, Simone De Beauvoir claims that women are placed in the category of “the Other” in human culture and history by men (Gatens, 2003). Beauvoir believes the category of the Other to be a primordial one, whereby during a girl’s earliest years, “her vocation is imperiously forced upon her” (Bauer, 2001:174). To be an Other, or Otherness, “is a fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as One without at once posing the Other opposite itself” (Bauer, 2001:179). Thus, girls at a young age are forced to represent and be judged by the standards of femininity, and it is this forcing and compliance that predisposes the woman as the symbol of the Other. The concept of the Other is characterized by the notion that men and women regard women as less important than men. Beauvoir argues that women have always been dependent upon men, and that the two genders have never experienced equality (Gatens, 2003). The woman, categorized as the Other, is a definition of woman in relation to men. Beauvoir states, “she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” (Beauvoir, 1989: 33). To be a ‘woman’ is not to be an autonomous being, as ‘woman’ is not defined as human unto herself, but rather as relative to man. The standards of humanity in the world of the Other are ultimately the standards of men. Thus, the exercising of freedom for women is extremely difficult, given her oppression. What’s more, the complexities of a woman’s situation as the Other are proven more constricting when Beauvoir states that women are in fact satisfied with their role as the Other and feel a necessary bond that ties her to the sovereignty of man (Gatens, 2003). Thus, “men demand recognition; women fail to demand it in return; and women as a result are oppressed as absolute Other” (Bauer, 2001: 181).

Hyper-masculinity is an intense exaggeration of masculine characteristics, whereby masculinity is performed to such an extent that it is deemed 'hyper'. Hyper-masculinity can be expressed psychologically or physically (Brown, 2006). It is argued that "there is embedded in it a view of radical opposition to all things feminine" (Klein, 1993: 221). Hyper-masculinity, in a physical sense, may be highlighted by a large amount of musculature. Similar to femininity, characteristics defined as 'masculine' are culturally specific. In American culture, "masculinity is the dominant, prestigious form of gender identity" (Hargreaves, 1986). Today, it can be argued that 'masculinity' is problematic in that there are different variations of the term. However, in the world of sport, masculinity is implicated very narrowly. Traditional, overriding characteristics of masculinity are applied, which include competitiveness, aggression and instrumentality (Graydon, 1983). Hargreaves (1986) contends that,

Sporting masculinity is taken for granted – the sportsman is the symbolic focus of male power and when women are involved, either as participants, spectators, coaches or helpers, their experience tend to be submerged with those of men (p. 116).

Burstyn (1999) defines hyper-masculinity as "the belief that ideal manhood lies in the exercise of force to dominate others" (192). Burstyn (1992) further highlights that the concept of hyper-masculinity, historically, is commonly related to warrior culture. In the context of sports, Lenskyj (1994) defines hyper-masculinity as "the preoccupation with victory and dominance" (359). Displays of negative emotion, anger or disappointment are also characteristics of hyper-masculinity (Lenskyj, 1994).

Anderson (2009) declares that hyper-masculinity is entrenched in the world of sport. He claims that the world of sport "has created a social space in which boys are taught to value and perform a violent, stoic and risky form of masculinity based in anti-femininity, patriarchy and homophobia" (Anderson, 2009: 6). Sports that emulate characteristics of hyper-masculinity may include football, weightlifting, rugby, basketball, baseball, hockey, boxing and race-car driving.

These sports, once deemed only appropriate for men, have begun to see an increase in female participation. Some women in hyper-masculine sports no longer view an adherence to hegemonic femininity as a required standard in athletics. As one hockey player states, in a study by Krane et al. (2004),

We're not trying to look like women out there because that's not the whole point of why we're playing the sport. We're out there 'cause we enjoy it, we want competition and we're out there to beat the crap out of somebody. I mean it's just not a focus at all. (p. 86)

Women participating in hyper-masculine sports have inevitably closed what Messner (1988) defines as the 'muscle gap,' where "the degree of difference between male and female athletic performance...has closed considerably in recent years" (197). Anderson (2009) argues that this is threatening. As a result, women involved in hyper-masculine sports are especially vulnerable to homophobic innuendoes that invoke questions of female sexuality. This is articulated by accusations of lesbianism, commonly referred to as the lesbian stigma.

The male-dominated world of sport categorizes women who are a part of the institution as 'The Other.' Sport is run mostly by men and for men. As a result, men are given the power to dictate the status of women. According to Anderson (2009), sport as a social practice "permits men to continue to code all femininity as inferior to all masculinity and therefore all women as inferior to men" (5). Women in sport are the 'Other' as their achievements and successes in the sporting world are recognized only in relation to that of men. Notions of masculinity are institutionally ingrained in sport. Women, and particularly female athletes, are defined in accordance with this masculinity; they are appropriate if they are not masculine, and inappropriate if they are. Thus, 'he' is the absolute, ultimate subject in sport, the vital crux guiding the institution. The characterization of the 'Other,' that men and women regard women as less important than men, is highly apparent in sport. A woman's athleticism is never regarded as highly as men. Even when a woman is recognized for her athletic prowess, her success is

achieved in an environment emphasizing male values. Therefore, she is and always will be the object, controlled and vilified by the male dominated sport institution. What's more, female athletes who choose to manage their identities exemplify Beauvoir's notion that some women are content with their oppressed role of the Other. Beauvoir believes the categorization of women as the Other to be the fundamental reason behind their oppression. Similarly, the categorization of women as the Other in the institution of sport is one of the fundamental reasons behind the oppression of all women who choose the sporting world as a career choice.

Sports are male-dominated. Because of this, in part, a lesbian stigma attaches to women who excel in sport

There are different understandings of femininity. Femininity is shaped by culture and history, and can differ from place to place. Krane et al. (2004) define femininity as "a socially constructed standard for woman's appearance, demeanor and values" (82). This is further exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of femininity, whereby she states, "femininity, that is, those ways of behaving, those typical traits and values, that conventionally mark women off from men" (Gatens, 1991: 277). These typical traits and values in American culture are characterized by what is termed 'hegemonic femininity.' Hegemonic femininity is exemplified by traditional, dominating characteristics that are revered, idealized and expected of all women in society. Therefore, the concept of femininity is seen as means of social control. Hall (1988) suggests that 'femininity' is in fact a code word for heterosexuality. Moreover, these hegemonic characteristics of femininity are constructed around what Lenskyj (1994) defines as a "white, middle-class stereotype of female heterosexual attractiveness" (362). For Beauvoir, these traits include "dependence, passivity, weakness, docility, inferiority, timidity, coquetry, and impotence" (Gatens, 1991: 277). Krane (2001) included being "emotional, maternal,

compassionate and gentle” as other examples (117). Hall (1988), who associates femininity with a care for others rather than the self, highlights the constraining nature of femininity by comparing the concept to American values. American values, she states, stress “achievement, individuality, and self-promotion” (Hall, 1988:332). However, given femininity’s emphasis on self-sacrifice, women are unable to strive for such values as they are forced to confine to the feminine ideal which takes precedence (Hall, 1988).

In her book, The Second Sex, Beauvoir argues that it is the social construction of femininity, and not ‘woman’ herself, that is ‘mutilating,’ because it strips women of their ability to exercise choice (Gatens, 1991: 277). Thus, femininity is not only a standard for woman’s appearance, but a symbol of woman’s oppression within society. It remains extremely problematic as it is so profoundly ingrained in culture.

Society’s understanding of hegemonic femininity is used to assess the success and qualities of female athletes (Lenskyj, 1986). Female athletes who choose to conform to the characteristics of hegemonic femininity will not participate in physically demanding sports (Graydon, 1983). If women *do* choose to participate in athletics, it is expected “that their interest in sport does not detract from their commitment to heterosexual relationships, marriage, and family life” (Crichter 1986: 339). Sports such as gymnastics, swimming, tennis, ice-skating and golf are considered more appropriate athletic endeavors for women as they emulate facets of femininity. It is not surprising that these sports, and others like them, “tend to be individual, involve the use of a light object, and very little or no bodily contact” (Desertain and Weiss, 1988). Ice-skating, for example, portrays grace in movement and aesthetically pleasing uniforms. As the dominating gender in the institution of sport, men “reward- and continue to reward – female athletes who [satisfy] stereotyped heterosexual standards of femininity in their

appearance and in the performance of their sport” (Lenskyj, 1986: 56). These athletes are considered ‘normal,’ and are consequently privileged over those who do not adhere to hegemonic feminine ideals.

American society often views hegemonic femininity as *incompatible* with athleticism (Miller and Levy, 1996). This is especially true of women participating in hyper-masculine sports, who allegedly cross or extend the boundaries of hegemonic femininity. While so-called ‘feminine’ sports are more acceptable in American culture than others, scholars have contended that sport is principally a masculine sphere (Krane, 2001; Lenskyj, 1994; Blinde and Taub, 1992). What’s more, Hargreaves (1986) argues that female athletes who *do* exemplify the feminine ideal type are treated as sporting sex symbols. It is not uncommon to see very popular, bikini donned professional female athletes featured in male sporting magazines. In the 2007 Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition, Anna Kournikova, a professional tennis player, was featured in bikinis and provocative poses. From this, it can be assumed that a female’s athletic career is synonymous with her sexual career (Crichter, 1986). Ultimately, there exists a double edged-sword for women in sport. Women cannot behave “as too feminine for fear of being sexualized or trivialized, nor must they act too masculine for fear of being demonized (Sartore and Cunningham, 2009: 294).

Sport is defined by masculine standards, but these standards conflict with the standards of hegemonic femininity. Thus, women who choose to engage in active and physically demanding sports are considered masculine. Even successful women who are respected for their athletic ability are oftentimes described as ‘playing like a man.’ Graydon (1983) emphasizes how such discourse serves to highlight the way in which female athletes are defined through a male dominated lens; because a woman is so skilled in her athletic capabilities, she is thus likened to

that of a man. Interestingly enough, Krane (2001) states, “this helps explain why adulterated versions of some “men’s” sports evolved for women” (p.117). She uses the example of softball as an alternative for girls who want to play baseball, and ringette, a Canadian girls version of hockey (Krane, 2001).

Allowing female athletes to be defined by male standards perpetuate the strict divisions between femininity and masculinity that pave the way for stigmatization if divisions are crossed. Attributing masculine qualities to women in hyper-masculine sports result in the questioning of female athlete’s sexualities, which subsequently foster homophobic allegations. There is an unspoken belief within American culture that female athletes will “encourage and cultivate homosexuality and/or deter females from their stereotypical feminine roles” (Sartore and Cunningham 2009:294). This is especially evident in the lesbian stigma, an accusation Blinde and Taub (1992) believe represents “a violation of gender norms...based on the idea that woman who challenge traditional gender-role behavior cannot be “real” women” (522). Lesbianism is constantly viewed as a threat to the patriarchal and heterosexual structure of sport. The lesbian stigma is used as a means of social control (Blinde and Taub, 1992). It succeeds in preventing the advancement of women in sports, because ‘success for a lesbian’ is deemed inappropriate. The heterosexuality of athletics and the accused lesbianism in hyper-masculine female sports ensures that women know that they are “norm violators, deviants, and subjects of oppression” (Blinde and Taub, 1992:522).

The common myth in American culture is expressed by Brownworth (1991) as such: “sports are masculine: therefore, women in sport are masculine; therefore, women in sport are lesbians” (37). American culture believes that it is a female athlete’s duty to present herself as explicitly heterosexual. Failure to do so will result in devaluation and stigmatization, ultimately

discrediting a woman's success and abilities in sport. While this is extremely prevalent in hyper-masculine sports, Lenskyj (1994) argues that it is not uncommon in allegedly 'feminine' sports as well. Lenskyj (1994) uses the example of Margaret Court, a retired Australian female tennis player, who believed Martina Navratilova, a self-proclaimed lesbian professional tennis player, to be an unsuitable role model. Lenskyj (1994) comments on how Court's remark was "voicing the unspoken views of many homophobic women and men," and that "according to this line of thinking, the ideal role model needs to be a woman who has successfully combined femininity and athleticism, preferably a credentialed heterosexual woman" (364). This example serves to highlight the pervasiveness of this stigma among all female sports, and especially within hyper-masculine sports.

Sportswomen, by virtue of participating in the world of athletics, are already seen as nonconforming. Athleticism represents the first rejected characteristic. This, coupled with the lesbian stigma, "magnifies the devaluation and stigmatization associated with female athletes" (Blinde and Taub, 1992:522). As a result of being stigmatized, many female athletes internalize and develop techniques to manage their identities (Blinde and Taub, 1992). Griffin (1992) argues that female athletes live in fear, that whatever accomplishments they may receive in sport "are always one lesbian scandal away from being wiped out" (219). Thus, female athletes feel the need to adopt practices that prevent or conceal the lesbian stigma. Some scholars have described identity management as the defining survival strategy for women in the world of sport (Griffin, 1992; Blinde and Taub, 1992). Just as there are numerous survival strategies found in particular situations, female athletes utilize numerous forms of identity management practices to present themselves in socially acceptable ways.

Female athletes have found ways to manage the lesbian stigma

According to Erving Goffman, stigmas are discrediting attributes that illustrate a difference between an individual's public and private identities (Wallace and Wolf, 2005: 241). Such attributes fall outside of what is considered 'ordinary' or 'natural' in society, consequently tainting the individual's identity. Goffman states that individuals with stigmas can be categorized into two groups, 'discreditable' people and 'discredited' people. Discreditable people are defined as individuals "who have a stigma that they hide, but may be discovered at any time," whereas discredited people are individuals "who have a stigma that others can see automatically" (Wallace and Wolf, 2005: 241). Ultimately, the existence of stigma in discreditable and discredited individuals result in what Goffman terms impression management, defined as "the ways in which the individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her" (Wallace and Wolf, 2005: 238).

Individuals attempt to manage their identity for fear of being defined solely by their stigma (Goffman, 1986). Persons attempt to suppress 'stigma symbols' in hopes of social acceptance and proof of normalcy. The word 'symbol' in this context is not what is normally understood by the term. Goffman states that information suggested by "any particular symbol may merely confirm what other signs tell us about the individual, filling out our image of him in a redundant and unproblematic way" (Goffman, 1986: 43) Goffman offers the example of lapel buttons and wedding rings as symbols that can convey an individual's prestige, class position or sexuality (Goffman, 1986: 43). Stigma symbols, however, are signs which are "especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy," and are consequently problematic (Goffman, 1986: 43).

In attempts to eradicate the problematic nature of stigma, that being its non-acceptance in society, people adopt techniques to cope with the latent effects of their stigmatization. These techniques, however, differ between discreditable and discredited people. Discredited people, as a result of their visible and public stigma, must “manage the tensions that arise when ‘normals’ interact with the stigmatized individuals” (Wallace and Wolf, 2005: 241). These tensions may result in awkward or hostile interactions. Discreditable people, by virtue of their unforeseen stigma, make efforts to control or hide information regarding themselves from others. Goffman states that discreditable people do this through concealment, whereby an individual masks information or signs that have ultimately become stigma symbols. Concealment as a technique can take on several forms. These forms include self-segregation, passing, and the use of disidentifiers (Goffman, 1986). Self-segregation is the act of isolating oneself by only interacting with others that share the same stigma. It is implemented in an effort to feel safer in a particular environment. Passing involves the individual managing information he or she reveals about themselves in an attempt to hide a stigma completely. In this sense, individuals ‘pass’ when concealing facts about their identities that may reference a stigma (Elliott et al., 1990). Goffman uses patients re-entering society after having spent some time in a mental hospital as an example of the former. Ex-patients hired into the workforce actively kept his or her co-workers in ignorance regarding the ‘stigma’ of having been mentally ill (Goffman, 1986: 43). The use of disidentifiers highlights an individual’s attempt to separate themselves from stereotypes regarding their stigma. In his work, Goffman equates the concept of disidentifiers “with what espionage literature calls a ‘cover’” (Goffman, 1986: 43). One such example may involve an illiterate individual wearing a pair of glasses, as it can be argued that glasses are perceived as a symbol of intellectuality.

Successful discreditable individuals insert themselves into society as ‘ordinary’ members. While seemingly better off than discredited individuals, Goffman highlights the psychological costs of employing impression management in discreditable individuals, that being anxiety, isolation and the vulnerability of exposing one’s stigma at any moment (Goffman, 1986: 43). This is juxtaposed with the invasive nature of discredited individuals, whereby their visible and obvious stigma is constantly interfering with their everyday lives. Ultimately, however, both strive for the same thing: a desire for greater acceptance and equality with ‘accepted’ and ‘normal’ people in society.

Female athletes in hyper-masculine sports can be both discredited and discreditable individuals. How? Playing a sport ‘discredits’ a woman because the hyper-masculine sport is the stigma. On the field, track, rink, court, pool or diamond, spectators witness these females expressing their athleticism, which in this case, is their stigma. In attempt to diffuse some of their stigma, female athletes, while playing their sport, may use methods to establish themselves as more feminine, such as wearing ribbons in their hair (Krane et al., 2004). When it comes to social situations that do not involve these women being seen playing their respective sports, they become discreditable female athletes. Discreditable female athletes typically perform all three forms of Goffman’s ‘concealment’ in social situations. In applying Goffman to the lesbian stigma in sport, I will draw heavily from Blinde and Taub’s (1992) study of 24 intercollegiate athletes from three Division I universities, the names of which remain unidentified.

Female athletes participating in hyper-masculine sports manage their identities in a number of ways to suppress or prevent the lesbian stigma. Concealment, a large facet of identity management proposed by Goffman, can be achieved in three ways, through the use of self-segregation, passing and disidentifiers (Elliott et al., 1990). Attempts to manage stigmas often

lead to a change in social interaction (Elliott et al., 1990). However, self-segregation is one method of concealment in which individuals very rarely interact with those that do not share stigmatization.

Female athletes who adopt self-segregation tactics “may choose to interact only with others who share their affliction” (Elliot et al., 1990:434). Self-segregation also involves interacting with individuals who Goffman terms as ‘wise’. ‘Wise’ individuals are persons who are “intimately familiar and comfortable with the stigma,” but are not stigmatized (Blinde and Taub, 1992; Elliott et al., 1990: 434). Female athletes may choose to carry out their social interactions in this way to avoid further ridicule. By withdrawing from the non-sporting community, Elliot et al. (1990) argues that the “stigmatized can pursue their, perhaps more limited, goals without disruption” (434). From their research, Blinde and Taub (1992) deduce that a female athletes interaction with non-female athletes was restricted. However, women in sport take comfort in this. Those who accuse women of the lesbian stigma are most often than not individuals who do not participate in female athletics. Thus, it is easier for women in hyper-masculine sports to relate and socialize with other female athletes who empathize with their situation. Nevertheless, self-segregation can be socially and culturally isolating (Adler and Adler, 1987).

If female athletes choose to socially interact with those outside their sporting subculture, passing is used as a method to avoid the lesbian stigma. Passing, a form of concealment in Goffman’s impression management theory, is frequently used by female athletes. A female athlete ‘passes’ by controlling information regarding her athleticism in social situations. Female athletes have been known to ‘over-talk’ lesbianism, perceived as a method of disassociation from

the lesbian stigma (Blinde and Taub, 1992). Some women refrain from revealing any information regarding their athletic identities, completely hiding any trace of athleticism.

Passing is almost always aided by the use of disidentifiers (Elliott et al., 1990). Disidentifiers in women's sport, a form of what Goffman terms concealment, are characterized by a female athlete's fixation on separating herself from attributes commonly associated with lesbianism. Some scholars use 'apologetic' as a comparable term (Sabo, 1992; Lenskyj, 1994; Graydon, 1983). The 'apologetic approach' suggests that women in hyper-masculine sports attempt to portray traditional characteristics of femininity as a way of 'apologizing' for their participation in assumedly 'boyish' activities (Sabo, 1992; Lenskyj, 1994; Graydon, 1983). Thus, female athletes overcompensate by being 'hyper-feminine' or "being girl" (Krane et al, 2004:97). Because female athletes feel pressured by the institution to act in a feminine way, many athletes believe that a feminine appearance is included in this expectation. Feminine appearances are equated with heterosexuality, and masculine appearances with lesbianism. As one athlete declares, "I've never seen somebody that looks like a girl called a lesbian or dyke. I think it is the way you present yourself" (Blinde and Taub, 1992:160). Reactions of this kind exemplify the way in which some athletes have conformed to defining the appropriateness of women's sport based on characteristics of femininity.

'Being girl' can be expressed in a woman's fixation on jewelry, make-up and stereotypically feminine clothing. In order to appear more feminine, some women choose to wear ribbons in their hair. After interviewing female Division I college varsity athletes, Krane et al. (2004) quotes a female hockey player who states,

We don't look very feminine when we're out there playing, and you know just to grasp on to that one last thing that makes us a girl, we'll put a ribbon in our hair. We do it to remind all you people in the stands, we are still girls. (p. 92)

Some athletes prefer to let their hair grow. Many are encouraged to wear skirts and dresses. What's more, Griffin (1992) and Krane (2001) describe the manifestation of a 'heterosexy image' that extends beyond female athletes simply wearing feminine clothing in order to diffuse the lesbian stigma. A 'heterosexy image' is defined as "adopting a more explicit display of heterosex appeal" (Griffin, 1992: 221). Diaz (1989) uses the Ladies Professional Golf Association as an example, whereby promotional photographs featured in a 1989 Sports Illustrated issue displayed female golfers in provocative swim-wear. Griffin (1992) provides another example, describing the basketball team from Northwestern State University of Louisiana having donned Playboy bunny attire to use in a brochure. Used to invite spectators to watch games, the brochure read: "These girls can play, boy!" (Griffin, 1992: 221). Blinde and Taub (1992) note that female athletes also stress their heterosexuality by being seen with boyfriends. One female in their study states, "if you are a female athlete and do not have a boyfriend, you are labeled [lesbian]" (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 157). In some extreme cases, women seek to create 'promiscuous' reputations. Krane et al. (2004) state that in numerous discussions with female athletes, appearing feminine was perceived as 'normal,' illustrating the belief in a distinction between being athletic and being a normal girl.

There are female athletes who avoid being seen in public with groups of women. Additionally, many female athletes are consciously aware of the way they physically interact with other women (Blinde and Taub, 1992). In some extreme cases of disidentifiers, stigmatized persons "attempt to establish some social-psychological distance from others similarly afflicted, especially those who are more thoroughly contaminated by the stigma" (Elliott et al., 1990: 434). In the described scenario, female athletes do not simply distance themselves from other women

athletes, but will make hurtful and offensive comments about teammates who are perceived as more stigmatized or 'lesbian' (Blinde and Taub, 1992).

There are many female athletes in hyper-masculine sports that use silence as a way to manage the lesbian stigma (Blinde and Taub, 1992). This mentality is often explained using Goffman's courtesy stigma, arising "when nondeviants are stigmatized because of their affiliation with deviants" (Elliott et al., 1990: 271). As a result, female athletes who are not stigmatized avoid discourse regarding the lesbian stigma. They remain under the impression that talking about lesbianism in sport will result in directing the stigma towards them (Griffin, 1992). Silence is perceived as the path of least resistance.

Implications of the Lesbian Stigma

The lesbian stigma in the context of athletics discredits, marginalizes and devalues women in sport, particularly women participating in hyper-masculine sports. It is a heterosexual, homophobic instrument used to "keep women in their place" (Lenskyj, 1986:527). The lesbian stigma is a warning to all potential female athletes. It illustrates that a woman's participation in hyper-masculine sports oversteps the ideal, appropriate characteristics associated with hegemonic femininity. The lesbian stigma implies that "serious sport isn't for real women, because everyone knows that lesbians aren't 'real' women" (Graydon, 1983:9). In sport, emphasis on culturally acceptable appearances and behavior sustain the status quo, "perpetuating traditional conceptions of the importance of femininity for athletic females" (Krane, 2001: 116). Female athletes in hyper-masculine sports face a binding, "nearly no-win situation" (Festle, 1996:254). Festle (1996) affirms that,

On the one hand, men (in particular) denigrated [women] for not being as big and strong and playing as well as their male counterparts. On the other hand, if men found the quality of play acceptable, they criticized the women's behavior and looks as 'masculine.' (p. 254)

Ultimately, women in hyper-masculine sports are seemingly locked in a double bind. If they are to be recognized for their athletic prowess, they must face ridicule, threats, prejudice and stigmatization. As a result, many female athletes place importance on managing, controlling and concealing their athletic identities in order to prevent or diffuse the lesbian stigma.

Scholars contend that women who adopt identity management strategies suffer negative consequences (Blinde and Taub, 1992; Krane, 2001; Lenskyj, 1994; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009). The effort to avoid the lesbian stigma to meet the standards of hegemonic femininity in sport are described to “[increase] the likelihood of depression, low self-esteem, an increased risk of suicide and substance abuse, and unhealthy sexual, exercise and eating behaviors among girls and women” (Sartore and Cunningham, 2009: 297). Attitudes of self-hate were apparent in responses found in scholarly works as well (Blinde and Taub, 1992). In addition to this, athletes have admitted to feeling “unattractive, less desirable to men, and always [worrying] about how [they] look,” highlighting the internalization of expected feminine standards (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 531). Moreover, the quotes serve as a reminder that “she is a woman and subject to the male gaze” (Krane et al., 2004: 97). The female athlete is depicted as the object, the oppressed Other in the world of sport. Ultimately, female athletes who engage in identity management practices do not eliminate the lesbian stigma (Lenskyj, 1986). Identity management may hide, suppress or avert it, but it does not eradicate the presence of the lesbian stigma and inherent homophobia in the world of sport. Blinde and Taub (1992) go as far as to say that identity management aid in reproducing the heterosexual, homophobic and hegemonic feminine ideals inherent in sport.

Women in hyper-masculine sports who feel the need to prevent the lesbian stigma exemplify the internalization of “societal definitions of lesbianism” (Blinde and Taub, 1992:

160). Women who actively manage their identities validate themselves as violators of the culturally acceptable ideals of femininity. To purposely conceal one's athletic identity is to establish a shameful attitude towards it. Scholarly works that depict hateful comments made about lesbians by female athletes further emphasize the negativism affiliated with lesbianism. One female athlete expressed her "disgust about being called "dykes" by guys driving by her practice/playing field," but "said she and her teammates were relieved to be called "whores" one day by a carload of males" (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 162). It is paradoxical that "the very group that is oppressed accepts societal stereotypes about lesbians and has incorporated these images into their managing of the situation" (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 160).

There is a difficulty in discussing the lesbian stigma among athletes, teams and the sports administrators. Refusing to address tensions created as a result of the stigma serve to reproduce the devaluation of female athletes and the homophobic attitudes associated with sport. While it is a sensitive issue, difficulty in addressing the lesbian stigma among teammates affects the development of positive team member relationships (Blinde and Taub, 1992). As a team, female athletes, were not able to talk about or even challenge the lesbian stigma. The lesbian stigma is capable of dividing teams (Lenskyj, 1994). In addition, Blinde and Taub (1992) highlight the lesbian stigma as being a facet of "clique formation" (157). Tensions between heterosexual and lesbian athletes arise from a refusal to confront the lesbian stigma. Heterosexual athletes distance themselves from lesbian athletes and athletes they perceive as having masculine characteristics. There are limited interactions between the two (Blinde and Taub, 1992). Conversations regarding the lesbian stigma exist in what Blinde and Taub (1992) define as 'safe circles,' most likely represented by heterosexual female athletes. These conversations, however, are commonly "filled with jokes and gossip about lesbianism; one athlete indicated the discussions were often

“very critical and mean to lesbians” and that the lesbian topic was “talked about in an immature fashion” (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 157). As a result of divisions within hyper-masculine sports teams, confronting the lesbian stigma as a collective whole is difficult (Lenskyj, 1994).

Solidarity and camaraderie among female athletes is also affected. Women, heterosexual and lesbians alike, do not recognize that all female athletes are implicated by the lesbian stigma. The lesbian stigma works in pitting female athletes against each other, when in reality, women in sport should be fighting cooperatively against “the patriarchal and heterosexist system in which they reside” (Blinde and Taub 1992: 157).

An unwillingness to discuss the lesbian stigma is also carried out by coaches and athletic directors (Blinde and Taub, 1992). Moreover, Griffin (1992) highlights a preference for male coaches in women’s sport, based on the tacit belief that hiring men will make a team appear more heterosexual. As a result of the lesbian stigma, some people deem male coaches as better than women. Quotes taken by Griffin (1992) from the NCAA survey illustrate the impact of the lesbian stigma within the sporting establishment. One such example states,

Homosexual females in this profession (coaching) definitely provide models and guidance in its worst for female athletes. I’d rather see a straight male coach females than a gay woman. Homosexual coaches are killing us. (p.225)

Thorngren (1990) attributes the lack of discussion among coaches in women’s sport partly to the fact that some female coaches might be struggling with the lesbian stigma as well. The lesbian stigma is considered a “significant source of stress for women coaches and impacted on several domains of their lives” (Blinde and Taub 1992: 158). Furthermore, given the homophobic nature of the institution of sport, openly confronting the lesbian stigma as a coach, it is feared, may cause teams to lose standing, whether it be in the number of fans or budgeting (Griffin, 1994).

Female coaches, like athletes, may experience isolation as a result of the lesbian stigma and the fear associated with talking about it (Hargreaves, 1986). The lesbian stigma is

reproduced and reinforced by the silence. Moreover, the silence adopted by administrative figures serves as a model to follow for female athletes. Silence is so ingrained within the system of sport that it is rarely questioned or contested. However, without cooperation among female athletes, a feminist consciousness is prevented, and “little progress is made in improving their plight” (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 159; Pheterson, 1986).

Not all female athletes are negatively affected by the lesbian stigma and hegemonic femininity. On some occasions, the lesbian stigma has fostered positive outcomes (Elliott et al., 1990). Athletes have suggested that the lesbian stigma has instilled independence and strength to disregard negative judgments from outsiders (Blinde and Taub, 1992). Being exposed to the lesbian stigma has helped some female athletes develop a more accepting attitude towards homosexuality (Blinde and Taub, 1992). Krane et al. (2004) describe some female athletes participating in hyper-masculine sports who have “reconciled their perceived lack of femininity by saying that it was not essential to being athletic” (p. 86). Moreover, female athletes interviewed by Krane et al. (2004) stressed their pride in being athletic. One female track athlete stated that “[she] would rather be an athlete...[she’d] rather have muscles, you know, and do the sport, and be recognized for it and know that I’m doing something good for myself” (Krane et al., 2004: 94).

Lenskyj (1994) describes the creation of lesbian sporting leagues that embody positive characteristics of sport that are viewed as unattainable for many stigmatized female athletes. These leagues, based on feminist principles, “provide one example of the potential for sport to be reclaimed in the interests of pleasure” (Birrell and Richter, 1987; Lenskyj, 1994). Positive goals that such leagues hope to accomplish include:

Projecting a feeling of safety or security for participants, avoiding situations that generate unequal relationships and may sabotage the goal of cooperation, providing women with

choices regarding participation, avoiding a success/failure approach to challenges, and promoting a shared decision making and collectivity (Lenskyj, 1994: 365).

Lesbian sporting leagues are intended to celebrate female physicality and sexuality. It offers friendship and fun, and accepts women of all skill levels. Lesbian sporting leagues thus provide one example of empowered women seeking to disassociate themselves from the lesbian stigma.

Conclusion

Sport is not always about competition, winning, or aggressiveness. Graydon (1983) describes the world of sport as a place to achieve “personal satisfaction through conquering one’s own inadequacies and striving for personal expertise” (p. 15). Sport allows women to foster solidarity, equality, strong bonds and cooperation (Lenskyj, 1994). Sport can be liberating. The lesbian stigma deprives women of this, as they are unable to test their mental and physical limits, whether it be in the weight room or on the track (Krane, 2001). Lenskyj (1986) argues that athletic achievements can be beneficial, in that they encourage women to keep challenging themselves to new heights. Challenging hegemonic femininity and the lesbian stigma would be one way to achieve greater athletic accomplishments for women in hyper-masculine sports. By doing so, woman can be empowered and “make their own choices about how to look, act and define their own version of an ideal female body,” without having to feel pressured to conform to a feminine ideal (Krane, 2001: 123). It is argued that one way to achieve this is through the increased participation of women in hyper-masculine sports (Young and White, 1995). Blinde and Taub (1992) suggest that recognizing and admitting the lesbian experience in sport can reduce the lesbian stigma. This would be especially important for female athletes who are lesbian. The homophobic nature of sport “forces lesbians to deny their very essence, thus making the lesbian athlete invisible” (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 164). If women choose to make themselves

less threatening by participating in stereotypically 'feminine' sport, the path towards empowerment will be very slow. Women should not forego participating in hyper-masculine sports for fear of the lesbian stigma. This only serves to feed the compulsory heterosexual nature of the institution, depriving women of immense potential in sport.

The abandonment of the lesbian stigma can only be achieved if women stop internalizing the ideals associated with hegemonic femininity. Most female athletes believe that "the specific group most likely to engage in lesbian labeling was male athletes" (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 163). However, Blinde and Taub (1992) suggest that female athletes are some of the main perpetrators of this stigma. It is disheartening to discover that many female athletes who participate in hyper-masculine sports are ridiculed by women who, in some cases, are their teammates. Not only does this deter many women from participating in sports with immense potential for personal growth, but the day that female athletes declare complete emancipation from the lesbian stigma retreats further into the distance.

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