The (Gendered) Experiences of Female Faculty Members in Two Health and Kinesiology Departments

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The purpose of the current study was to explore how a relatively overlooked population of sport-related professionals, female faculty members in health and kinesiology departments in the United States, have interpreted and navigated the cultural fields of gender, sport, and education. Employing qualitative methodology and coupling Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity with Bourdieu’s concepts of practice, habitus, field, capital, and agency, ten female faculty members from two health and kinesiology departments discussed sport, in relation to gender, as being both empowering and limiting during their respective lifetimes. Despite these two very different effects, gender, sport and sport participation were significant in shaping these women, both personally and professionally. The implications of the findings and suggestions for future works are provided.

The conventional understanding of gender is that following one’s assignment to a dichotomous sex category (i.e., female or male), an individual possesses congruent gender roles, beliefs, identity, and displays, and sexual orientation (Lorber, 1996). It is therefore understood that men should have congruous masculine roles, beliefs, and identities, and women should possess femininity and congruent feminine roles, beliefs, and so on. This doxa (i.e., that which “goes without saying because it comes without saying”, Bourdieu, 1977, p. 167) strengthens the polarization of the sexes by conveying that what it is natural for women to be what men are not, and vice versa (Lorber, 2000). While generally viewed as normal and natural, it is naïve to believe that all of the components of one’s gender will “line up neatly on one side of the binary divide” (Lorber, 1996, p. 147). Thus, the doxa that there exist only two categories of people, male and female, lacks meaning and overlooks individuals who fall beyond these boundaries (e.g., intersexed, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and the transgendered).

The social construction of two and only two sexes has resulted in the disparate allocation of societal power to men and women and the privileging of masculinity over femininity. Consistent with Connell’s (2005) view of masculinity as a social position, gendered hegemony validates gendered status hierarchies, power differentials, and the subordination of women. This is evident across numerous societal institutions, (e.g., health care; see Kent, Patel, & Varela, 2012 and higher education; see Jacobs, 1996), within nearly every profession (i.e., wage gaps and pay disparities; see Stockdale & Nadler, 2013), and, as a result, negatively impacts women both professionally and personally (Ridgeway, 2011). Within sport, Burton, Grappendorf, and Henderson’s (2011) findings demonstrated that women within intercollegiate athletics may be limited in their professional advancement opportunities due to traditionally held gender beliefs. Specifically, as senior-level administrative positions are viewed as requiring masculine characteristics such as toughness, tenacity, and leadership ability, women are not selected as viable job candidates for such positions.

The sport context is perhaps the most visible context in which gender inequalities exist and patriarchal traditions of heterosexual masculinity and male hegemony prevail (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Within this context, women and men often behave within acceptable gender boundaries and ultimately maintain the narrowly-defined, suitable behaviors and images of both sexes. This habitus or the “internalized dispositions that govern the ideas and practices of agents without being consciously controlled” (Mennesson, 2012, p. 5) is the result of an individual’s internalization of the gendered meanings within the sport context. Indeed, from this vantage point and others, researchers have identified the influence of these meanings in relation to the individual behaviors of female athletes, coaches, physical education teachers, and sport organization employees (e.g., Dewar, 1987; Mennesson, 2012; Sykes, 2001; Thorpe, 2010).

Despite the highly gendered structure of sport and sport organizations, women continue to take part in sport and enter into sport-related professions. For example, Acosta and Carpenter’s (2012) report indicates that women continue to occupy an increasing number of positions within intercollegiate athletic departments. While women continue to be underrepresented in senior-level leadership positions (i.e., Athletics Directors and head coaches; see Acosta & Carpenter), it appears as though some degree of progress is being made and that, to some extent, sport’s gendered structures are being challenged. Thus, notwithstanding their socialization into sport’s gendered context, women are perhaps internalizing sport’s gendered meanings such that they are using the capital they possess to challenge its gendered order. While this supposition has received attention in some sport-related contexts (e.g., Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1993; Krane, 2001; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007), a dearth of literature exists with regard to women in the field of kinesiology; an academic field that encompasses nearly every aspect of sport and the related contexts of physical education, and physical activity.
According to the American Kinesiology Association, kinesiology is an academic discipline that promotes the importance of sport and physical activity. Newell (1990) noted that kinesiology, as a discipline, promotes the “broad-based disciplinary, professional, and performance approach to the study of physical activity” (p. 273). Kinesiology includes the areas of exercise science, sports medicine, biomechanics, physical education, sport management, sociocultural aspects of sport, physical therapy, and so on. Kinesiology professionals, as explained by Gill (2007) “serve the public and promote health and well-being in individuals and society.” (p. 282). Thus, in line with the Gill’s assertion, those working in any of kinesiology’s subdisciplines have an enormous responsibility to their respective areas. Within these areas, however, professionals must contend with the ideological meanings that surround their disciplines, occupations, actions and experiences. Most notably, because kinesiology involves sport, science, physical activity, and physical education the webs of ideas surrounding the concept of gender have long been salient and used to organize sport and physical activity related curricula at nearly every level (e.g., Madigan, 2009; Mangan & Vertinsky, 2013). Recognizing this, the purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which gender has been salient in the experiences, past and present, of a relatively overlooked population, women working in the kinesiology setting. While a small number of works exist regarding the experiences of faculty members in health and kinesiology departments who belong to any social minority group (e.g., Burden, Harrison, & Hodge, 2005), there are no works that focus on women. We seek to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of female faculty members, as they relate to gender within health and kinesiology departments.

**Conceptual Framework**

Gender is many things—an individual property or characteristic, a social institution, a process, and an individual practice (Connell, 1987). The construction of gender must therefore be studied in relation to the context or cultural field in which it takes place. This is where the coupling of theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu and R. W. Connell are particularly fruitful (Coles, 2009). As Mennesson (2012) pointed out, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus itself makes no inclusion of gender as a concept responsible for structuring social relations and contexts. Rather, the focus of habitus is on the construction of gender within an individual (c.f., Krais, 2006). Hegemonic masculinity, on the other hand, represents the structures and practices that legitimate male dominance over women and subordinated masculinities (Connell, 2005). Thus, the pairing of the two frameworks is useful in examining the interplay of individual experiences within contexts fraught with profoundly traditional gendered meanings. A more detailed discussion of both concepts will elucidate this point further.

**Habitus and Hegemonic Masculinity**

The epistemological framework of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is based on his belief that human beings are active agents who operate within contexts fraught with tacit, explicit, and reflexive forms of knowledge. Bourdieu also believed that one’s consciousness cannot transcend “its history, social trajectories, and circumstances” (Schartaro & Webb, 2002, p. 255), and that no form of knowledge or human action can be separated from agents’ histories, their incorporation of this history into themselves, and their context. Bourdieu (1977) used the concepts of practice, field, habitus, and capital to explain this relationship between an individual and his or her surroundings. Despite the interdependent relationship that exists between these concepts, habitus has received the most theoretical and philosophical attention, as it represents the link between an individual and the social world in which he or she lives.

Habitus is the extent to which an individual unconsciously internalizes his or her surroundings and represents one’s state of being and approach to the world (Bourdieu, 2000). This is not to suggest that habitus consists entirely of the information gleaned from a field’s objective structures, however. Rather, habitus is subjective in that it is informed by field’s objective structures, not dictated, hence introducing the concept of agency or choice (Bourdieu, 1977). Within certain fields, agency may be limited as a result of hierarchical structures that render individuals to certain social positions (Thomson, 2010). These social positions are a function of power relations dictated by the levels and types of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) possessed by persons within a given field.

While some works have linked Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to the gender binaries that grant privilege to men in the context of sport and physical activity (e.g., Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2003; Hunter, 2004), Bourdieu himself did not to locate gender in relation to these power relations. As such, it is here that Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity can be particularly helpful. Connell (2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as, “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). Simply put, it is the process by which the most dominant form of masculinity exerts power and control over other masculinities and femininity. Multiple masculinities exist in relation to these dominant forms, but as Connell notes, hegemonic masculinity is culturally valued over all forms, thus according it the ability to hierarchically structure the concept of gender across numerous social contexts.

Mennesson (2012) recently suggested that the gender dimensions of individual’s behaviors within the sport context are best understood in relation to the way gender has been structured or gender regimes. According to Connell (1987), gender regimes refer to gender relations within societal institutions (e.g., education, family, sport). While well established that gender is structured such that men and masculinity are privileged within the sport context, persons within sport do not necessarily embrace dominant gender meanings uniformly nor do they have the same experiences in relation to these meanings (Coles, 2009). As noted by Adkins (2005), and stated in Bourdieuan terms, “agents are not simply the benign carriers of the rules and norms of particular fields” (p. 194). Embracing this sentiment, we sought to explore how a relatively overlooked population within the realm of sport and physical activity, female kinesiology professors, have experienced and responded to contextual hierarchical gender structures.

**Literature Review**

The institutions of sport, physical activity, and education have been structured such that there are several similarities. Historically, women’s access to schooling and sport participation was limited due to beliefs of inadequacy and inferiority (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Jacobs, 1996; Madigan, 2009; Solomon, 1985). While women have been granted access over time and continue to make strides, these contexts create an atmosphere where women experience a ‘double bind’ in that they are to “assume male patterns
of behavior and to preserve their distinctively feminine characteristics” (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001, p. 257). This conflict between societal expectations and contextual demands is particularly prominent when women occupy decision-making positions. As such, gendered beliefs contribute to the continued overrepresentation of men occupying leadership and decision-making positions in education and sport-related contexts (e.g., Berkelaar, Pope, Spypher, & Cox, 2011; Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Webb & Macdonald, 2007; Whisenant, 2008).

As Williams (1995) noted, gendered beliefs and assumptions are endemic within academia such that men have disproportionately occupied positions at all levels. While some departments may have more women than men as faculty, in general, most departments are male-dominated. As a result, women have reported feeling excluded, devalued, and marginalized within their departments due to their sex-segregated higher education work environments (Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Sander, 1986). This perceived exclusion creates and reinforces the hierarchical stratification of male and female faculty and may serve to limit the level of success female faculty can attain (Maranto & Griffin, 2011; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Williams, 1995). Likewise, women working within these gendered confinements may experience more negative work outcomes and suffer more negative psychological consequences than their male counterparts (Miner-Rubio & Cortina, 2004; Settles, Cortina, Stewart, & Malley, 2007).

A great deal of research has substantiated the presence of gender barriers within certain academic disciplines within higher education (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields; Riffe et al, 2013; Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006). To date, however, other male-dominated disciplines within higher education have received less attention. In the professional setting, however, researchers have identified the presence of gendered expectations and constraints within the field of physical education. As explained by Webb and Macdonald (2007), these expectations and constraints are reflective of society-at-large, educational institutions, and organizations, and, in turn, have profound implications for individuals working in the sport context. Thus, extrapolating from this, it is reasonable to surmise that gender may also have profound implications within sport and physical activity-related curricula at higher levels, namely, within kinesiology departments of institutions of higher education. This supposition is reinforced by the highly gendered nature of sport organizations, the likes of which represent career destinations for many graduates of kinesiology programs.

In sum, gendered meanings and gender norms are highly influential in the structuring of contexts of sport, physical activity, and higher education (see Cunningham, 2008; Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Webb & Macdonald, 2007). Interestingly, however, and despite the role that sport-related areas of study play in shaping future sport professionals, there is limited understanding of how gender plays into the lives of kinesiology faculty, particularly those who have been historically marginalized (i.e., women). In light of this, we sought to understand the extent to which gender has been salient in the life experiences of women working as professionals within sport-related curricula (i.e., kinesiology departments). Specifically, we use the work of Bourdieu (i.e., practice, habitus, field, and capital) to interpret individual experiences and action relative to gender order and Connell’s work on gender and power (i.e., hegemonic masculinity) to understanding the construction of gender order itself (Coles, 2009; Mennesson, 2012). Our method is presented below.

### Method

#### The Setting

The setting for this study was two college and university health and kinesiology departments. The prime impetus for choosing higher education was the current dearth of literature examining the experiences of women within the setting of sport-related academic settings. Akin to the position of women’s physical education “at the nexus of masculinist sport, gendered education, and pedagogies of the body” (Sykes, 2001, p. 13), female health and kinesiology faculty members also exist within a field or context that views heterosexuality as the norm and gender as a binary construct (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). As such, the realm of sport-related academics was the site for this inquiry.

Two large universities located in the southern United States were chosen for this study. These two specific universities were selected with the intent of capturing diverse perspectives. One university is well known for its strong traditions and conservative atmosphere while the community surrounding the other university is viewed as more liberal, enlightened, and progressive in its ideals. Politically, the former university is located within a county that voted Republican in the 2012 presidential election, while the county that houses the latter university voted Democrat. As Levendusky (2009) argues, Republican ideals have become synonymous with conservatism and Democratic ideals synonymous with liberalism. Indeed, conservatives and liberals have been found to possess opposing views on a host of issues, including traditional cultural values (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Of these values, conservatives are more likely to hold traditional beliefs about gender roles within a family unit. This is particularly the case among conservatives who identify strongly with their political affiliation (Poteat & Mereish, 2012). Liberals, conversely, challenge socially constructed institutions such as gender and both implicitly and explicitly favor feminism over traditional gender ideology (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2009). While acknowledging that persons can possess both conservative and liberal notions and that many persons do not identify as either, we used these two settings as a way to capture as much heterogeneity among our participants as possible.

#### Participants

As mentioned above, we employed maximum variation sampling methods whereby we attempted to make our participants as heterogeneous as possible (Patton, 1990). Nonprobability sampling and aspects of convenience and purposive sampling were used. Upon receiving IRB approval, e-mail solicitations were sent to health and kinesiology department faculty members at two universities. The e-mail contained a detailed description of the purpose of the study as well as an assurance that, should they choose to participate, all information would remain confidential. Those willing to take part responded to the e-mail, after which face-to-face interview appointments were scheduled at the participants’ convenience. In sum, ten female health and kinesiology department faculty members responded to the original e-mail indicating that they were interested in taking part in the interview process. All ten women were interviewed. Participant demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

#### Question Development

Seidman (2012) noted that the purpose of interviewing lies within the researchers desire to understand, “the lived experience of...
other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Thus, questions embodied aspects of participant’s past, present, and foreseeable future experiences, behaviors, opinions/values, feelings, and knowledge consistent with the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002). Specifically, questions were formulated to address the topics of gender, sport, education, physical activity, and the field of kinesiology. A group of prominent researchers within the sport management and sociology fields assessed the questions for clarity, appropriateness, content, and congruency with the purpose of the study. In line with Howe’s (2007) assertion that an individual’s habitus “is the embodied sentiment of every encounter they have had in the social world” (p. 137), questions were structured so that experiences were addressed chronologically. Thus, we first asked questions about gender and early life sport and physical activity experiences, followed by gender and sport-related experiences in adolescence, young adulthood, and lastly, gender and sport in the professional setting. The chronological sequencing was also chosen because of the influential role of sport in the development of gender identities and ideologies among even the youngest participants (Messner, 1992).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Question development was based on previous literature on gender, sport, and education, and the frameworks of Connell’s (1987, 2005) hegemonic masculinity and Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of habitus (Moustakas, 1994). These questions were used to guide each woman in her discussion of gender, sport and physical activity, education, and professional experiences. Interviews were structured such that demographic and background information were collected first. Next, each woman described her sport and physical activity experiences through her childhood, adolescence, and in adulthood. Following this, each woman was asked to discuss her professional experiences. Structuring the interviews this way allowed for participant experiences to be chronologically connected and ordered (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004).

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim and inductively analyzed by the first author alone through a multistage process. Consistent with the premise of inductive analyses, the individual experiences of each faculty member were uniquely explored and analyzed before subsequently integrating them for a broader, yet contextualized, understanding (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011; Patton, 2002; Thomas, 2006). In the first step of the analysis a pseudonym was assigned to each participant to maintain confidentiality. In the next step, interviews were read numerous times from beginning to end. Next, every paragraph, sentence, and word of each interview was combed through to identify emergent themes. Lastly, once the unique experiences within each individual interview transcript were explored, all of the faculty members’ experiences were integrated. Data segments from transcripts were constantly compared and contrasted as a means to produce broader categories (Schwandt, 2007). By adhering to a “grounded, a posteriori, inductive, context-sensitive” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 26) coding scheme whereby working with the raw data transcripts allows for inferences and code (i.e., category) generation, we were able to refine category formations (Guest et al, 2011; Thomas, 2006).

**Trustworthiness and Reflexivity**

A number of procedures were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and include critical self-reflection in the data analysis process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria for establishing trustworthiness when undertaking qualitative research. These include (a) credibility, akin to internal validity, (b) transferability, akin to external validity, (c) dependability, akin to reliability, and (d) confirmability, akin to objectivity. To enhance these criteria, peer debriefing/peer review, memoing, reflective journaling, and rapport-building were employed. Through these techniques, the data were viewed from multiple vantage points and the authors’ biases addressed. As such, more refined themes were formed.

It was imperative that the researcher begins developing a relationship with interviewees upon their first encounter (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). Doing so establishes trust and allows the researcher to gain access to the interviewees’ experiences with greater ease. The primary researcher in this study established rapport by self-disclosing her own experiences and reciprocating in a conversational manner while still allowing participants to speak as much as they would like about each question. This simultaneously established trust while also contributing to the trustworthiness of the data.

Another method used to enhance trustworthiness was peer debriefing. Peer debriefing allows the researcher to share and discuss his or her process of analysis and description with a qualified colleague (Schwandt, 2007). The primary researcher in this study sought impartial feedback from colleagues not directly related to the study so that outside perspectives and original interpretations of the data could be offered. The researcher also used memoing in conjunction with constant comparison analysis as a way to compare and contrast emerging themes to the theoretical framework adopted.
had on holding her back from doing so, with the boys but identified the appropriateness that emerged with adolescence (Koivula, 2001; McGarry, 1998). She recalled feeling an atmosphere of gender-related sport identity during lunch. Not that we had recess, but, but boys did play football. They played two below down on the football field during lunch and no one, I mean, it was a weird feeling because it was kind of like an unwritten rule that it was not ok for girls to do that.

Erin spoke of her experiences in school and among her friends. Specifically, she recalled feeling an atmosphere of gender-related sport identity during lunch. Not that we had recess, but, but boys did play football. They played two below down on the football field during lunch and no one, I mean, it was a weird feeling because it was kind of like an unwritten rule that it was not ok for girls to do that. Erin went on to express a desire to continue to want to play with the boys but identified the power that the perceptions of others had on holding her back from doing so.

...it was really, it was really strongly felt in terms of Erin’s a tomboy and she plays football at recess with the boys……all of a sudden, especially by 7th grade there was this very strong feeling that it was not ok anymore to go out and play football at recess. Not that we had recess, but, but boys did play football. They played two below down on the football field during lunch and no one, I mean, it was a weird feeling because it was kind of like an unwritten rule that it was not ok for girls to do that.

It bothered me that it bothered other people…..exactly, how come I can’t play anymore and yet it would have felt very weird to play. I think I would have felt very weird from both sides ‘cuz maybe it’s kind of a gender awareness, there’s some sort of line of gender awareness where up until that point it’s ok to be more androgynous, you know, and then at some point there’s some line that says, no wait, girls do this at lunch and guys do this at lunch.

At a young age Erin was made aware of sport’s gendered structures. Internalizing these meanings, Erin stayed within their confines, despite not wanting to do so. Erin also responded to her friends’ perceptions of appropriateness and succumbed to their power.

Another faculty member, Elise, described her childhood and adolescent sport experiences in relation to gender, but did so in a slightly different manner than Erin. Specifically, she spoke of playing with the boys in her neighborhood and at school because she was able to keep up with them and prove herself “worthy.” She acknowledged an awareness of gender but did not identify it as having consciously or adversely influenced her behaviors or activity choices. Rather, Elise felt that she could play with the boys because she was as good as the boys, thereby using her performance in sport as a source of capital. In her words,

...I didn’t feel that because, I also grew up playing in the neighborhood with guys and it seemed normal to me. As long as you can contribute, I didn’t relate to them as much as, you know, girl/guy as some of the other girls did……I don’t think they related to me that same way because I could play with them. If you can’t play with them than you need to be put in another category.

Laura also referred to gender norms, although in a slightly different manner and occurring at a later stage in life. As a member of both her college volleyball and basketball teams, Laura experienced internal and external conflict when going from the “girlie” environment of volleyball to the characteristically more masculine basketball team. She discussed both team and gender dynamics as follows,

Actually, in college I struggled a little bit because the volleyball and the basketball teams did not like each other and I was on both teams…..in volleyball, it was very, girly, girly, girly and in basketball it was probably just about the opposite.

Laura went on to describe her experiences with these two teams in terms of contextually modifying her behaviors. In her words,

I think that the basketball team was a lot more accepting no matter what you were because they had gotten a lot of discrimination and so they were accepting no matter what. But I can definitely say that I probably did change a little bit, you know, I was probably more relaxed in basketball but yet, I felt like I fit in in volleyball too.

Interestingly and despite still feeling a pressure to modify her behaviors to fit into both environments, Laura identified historical prejudices and assumptions of lesbianism made toward women playing basketball as allowing for a more relaxed and accepting environment. Perhaps a function of her educational background or her numerous friendships with lesbians and men who were gay, her experience illuminates the presence of the stereotypes and associated adversity surrounding females, sport, gender, and sexual orientation.

Gendered meanings also influenced Laura, Erin and Elise’s behaviors, interactions, and activity choices within the sport domain. This is not to say, however, that sport’s gendered boundaries completely defined Laura, Erin, and Elise. Had they done so, notions of traditional femininity would have prevented them from taking part in competitive sport activities. Rather, their choice(s) to continue to participate were influenced by their self-agency and likely contributed to their self-deﬁnitions of femininity and
masculinity. Specifically, they reflected continued competitive sport participation and prolonged exposure to and socialization within sport’s environment of male hegemony.

**Individual Gender Awareness**

The second theme that emerged across the ten women’s experiences was related to the internalization of societal gender norms (i.e., habitus). As a result of years spent immersed in not only sport’s gendered context, but to some extent, the gendered realm of education, each woman developed her individual level of gender self-awareness. Specific discussions of this awareness, as it relates to adulthood and professional experiences, are presented below.

**Adulthood and Professional Experiences**

Laura, Erin, and Elise all participated in sport during their childhood, throughout school, and chose to continue on to compete at the intercollegiate level. Erin, at one time, was also a coach at the intercollegiate level. Further, the gendered meanings aligned with the sports in which these women participated and coached may have also contributed to their current gender identities. Thus, perhaps a reflection of their many years spent in the competitive sporting environment, Laura, Erin and Elise defined their current levels of femininity and masculinity differently than did the females who lacked the same experiences. After all, “the dispositions of male and female athletes reflect the socialization process of these athletes” (Mennesson, 2012, p. 6). For example, Elise, a former collegiate athlete and the self-described “first born son in her family”, noted that “…I feel more masculine than, than I assume that other women must feel. Who knows if that’s true.” Anchoring this statement and highlighting her perceptions of gender, she went on to define femininity consistent with her own experiences growing up. In her words,

I guess I still have a lot of the feminine means wimpy, weak, you know those traditional kinds of words that are not very flattering…very emotional, my mother…

Elise identified femininity according to traditional conceptualizations; even pointing out that her mother embodied such characteristics. While she did not view femininity in the most positive of light, other faculty members did, however. Interestingly, it emerged that female faculty members, those who did not compete at the intercollegiate level or work within intercollegiate athletics, seemed to define themselves as being slightly more feminine than did their former college athlete counterparts. Holly, for instance, a former figure skater, described herself as never having had a particular fondness for competitive sport, subsequently identifying herself as very feminine. Relating femininity to her current job position, she stated,

I never thought that I would see myself in a job where you know, my makeup would come off during the day and that I couldn’t dress up every day. My mom always laughs and says, I can’t believe that you’re a P.E. teacher, I would have never….

According to Holly, her mother also viewed her as feminine and thought it comical that Holly did not dress in professional clothing for work, but rather clothes in which one can exercise. While not an identifiable source of conflict within Holly or between Holly and her mother, the connotation that a profession in which one wears exercise clothes is not feminine expressed by her mother does suggest Holly’s definition of femininity was, at least in part, shaped by her childhood influences, thus forming her habitus (Bourdieu, 2000).

Elizabeth, who was very athletic as a young child but only sporadically engaged in organized sport as she got older, also defined herself as very feminine and embraced the traditional gender female roles of cooking and cleaning. Despite this, she viewed femininity on a continuum of sorts. As described by her,

I was trying to think, you know, what very first thing pops into my mind when I think femininity and strangely enough, like, pink and high heels and girly stuff comes into my mind and then I start thinking well, femininity you think about Rosie the Riveter and go with a whole different aspect, you know, that I totally believe in women who if they want to stay home they should stay home and if they want to work and have kids, great….that’s totally, you can certainly do both and umm, equal forces, all of that. So, I mean it has such a broad spectrum to it.

Concluding that,

“I think femininity is whatever you feel is appropriate for you as a woman, you know, whatever you want to do, whatever makes you feel good and strong.”

Indeed, all of the women interviewed referred to a femininity-masculinity continuum and subsequently placed themselves somewhere on it. Sport, competitive sport particularly, and one’s experiences within it, appeared to influence where these women were located on such a continuum. Further, and as evidenced by the current job positions of Holly and Elizabeth, their self-defined high levels of femininity, coupled with their passion for sport and physical activity, conceivably lead them to their current job positions as instructors of, as referred to by Holly, the “more feminine” physical activity classes of aerobics, Pilates, and yoga.

As mentioned above, the strict dichotomization of femininity and masculinity and associated gender order were perceived to be unrealistic to the female faculty interviewees. While all of the women referred to femininity consistent with traditional gender norms (e.g., passivity and weakness; see Anleu, 2006) and used terms such as, dainty, delicate, pink, frill, and referred to dresses, high heels, and their 50’s and 60’s-era mothers as the epitome of femininity, they did not solely describe themselves using these terms. With the exception of Elizabeth, who asserted that she possessed few, if any, masculine characteristics, all other females described themselves as possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics. Amy discussed her previous studies when referring to her own self-definition,

I have a feminine side but I also have, I guess, a very distinct masculine side. I did study psychology and anima and animus and those two energies working within the psyche and I believe that there is, you know, there are people out there that (sic) are more one than the other. I would consider myself more masculine than I am feminine.

Broadly speaking, Alice also referred to male and female energies when conceptualizing her own experiences,

I know strong women and I know feminine women and I know not feminine women…..I think for me the world occurs like this….there is female energy and male energy and I know a lot of women with male energy.

Others contextualized their possessed levels of femininity and masculinity by differentiating between their professional and personal lives. Erin, for example, described a necessity to present
herself as more masculine and authoritative in the classroom setting while taking a more feminine, nurturing role at home.

…I do feel that I probably present more masculine in the, in the workplace, especially in front of students, and more feminine, nurturing types of qualities behind the scenes.

Likewise, Yvonne noted the presence of gender dynamics when instructing her strength training classes articulating a need to assert her dominance in the traditionally-viewed masculine weight room environment,

I teach a lot of strength training, and there’s a large number of guys that take that class and I know a lot of them look at me in the first couple of weeks and go, you don’t know what you’re talking about, you’re a female, I’m a man, I played sports, I know how to do it. So I generally try to nip that in the bud. I mean, I try to do it diplomatically. But, umm, guys seem to challenge my authority in the weight room a lot.

Gender dynamics were thus present among professors and students. Further, such dynamics appeared to be upheld through the actions of departmental administrators, contributing to the gendering of specific activity classes. Regarding teaching assignments Holly purported, “I feel like my boss kind of says yeah, well, the guys will teach the sport activity classes and more of the women will get into the fitness.” This is particularly interesting, as it reinforces the notion that, much like other sport and education related institutions, health and kinesiology departments may also be structured in relation to gender norms. Further research is needed to examine this in greater depth.

As a result of her own gender habitus, Holly responded to her boss’ sentiment with relief. She was appreciative for gendered teaching assignments and, as a result, contributed in perpetuating the presence of gender norms in physical activity. During the interview, she expressed gratitude toward her boss for neither asking nor pressuring her to teach the sport activity classes. Thus, even if Holly was given the opportunity to teach an activity class, she would likely choose not to do so, as that was not a goal she had. Indeed, her professional preferences resemble her own preferences toward sport and physical activity (i.e., her habitus and practice).

Discussion

Taken together our findings suggest that gender was an influential concept in the lives of the women interviewed. In revisiting the purpose of this study and upon reflecting on these findings, several points are particularly germane. Notably, the coupling of Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of practice and Connell’s hegemonic masculinity proved advantageous in better understanding the negotiation of gender among these faculty members. Indeed, the faculty members interviewed navigated through a lifetime filled with societal, contextual, and individual meanings associated with the hegemonic structures of gender, sport, and to some extent, education. Various factors, both internal and external to each woman, were uniquely integral in shaping each woman’s journey thus linking individual habitus to the hegemonic structures present in the gendered contexts of sport and education. As examples, Nancy and Elise both experienced sport before the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and therefore had different experiences than those women who knew nothing of pre-Title IX sport—a different field thereby uniquely informing their habitus and practice. Elise was also raised by her father and referred to herself as the “first born son” in her family. Thus, Elise’s relationship with her father and its associated expectations influenced her experiences and led her to possess different goals and encounter different opportunities than the other women interviewed.

The findings in this study identify that, with habitus comes agency or choice. Agency, according to Bourdieu, is part of practice and therefore linked to cultural fields and the structures that exist within them. This is not to suggest that the individual agency evident here was only a function of destabilizing gendered structures, however. Indeed, hegemonic masculinity continues to remain quite influential in the sport context (e.g., Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Rather, and consistent with Bourdieu’s conceptualization, agency emerged as the result of relational experiences (see McKay, 2004). Therefore, the gender identities of the women interviewed were not imposed upon them, but negotiated within a particular social space where gendered practices support male dominance and privilege (i.e., sport). Sartore and Cunningham’s (2007) discussion of the underrepresentation of women occupying leadership positions of sport organizations suggests that gendered beliefs are central to the bounded constraints faced by women within the sport context. Further, they put forth that these meanings could be self-limiting among women. The words of the women interviewed in our investigation both support and refute this suggestion, as some of the women interviewed appeared to also find their gender-based constraints empowering.

We suggest that the difference between gendered meanings as self-limiting and as self-empowering among our interviewees was a function of habitus, as each woman negotiated the forces that shaped the meanings of sport and gender across her own lifetime. Specifically, despite the lower levels of power and status accorded to women in the sport context, there exists the opportunity for women to be empowered through their participatory experiences (Blinde et al, 1993; Krane, 2001; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Perhaps as a result of these participatory experiences, some of the women interviewed challenged sport’s gendered meanings, patterns, and hierarchy. As mentioned previously, however, there were differences between women based on the type and duration of their sport experiences. This is a fruitful avenue for future inquiry.

Limitations and Future Directions

As Reay (1998) noted, the concepts of race, gender, sexuality, age, and social class continuously shape who we are and who we will become. Thus, while our findings provide some insight into the experiences of women working in sport-related academia, there are several ways in which this work can be expanded. First, the women with whom we spoke were all Caucasian and grew up in middle-class family homes. While the experiences of these women varied between one another despite possessing similar types of capital (e.g., race and social class), so too can we assume that the experiences of women of other ethnicities and social classes may also be different. As Elling and Knoppers (2005) pointed out, “the paradox of challenging and strengthening gendered meanings given to sport is further complicated by ethnic plurality” (p. 257). Indeed, gendered beliefs and meanings present in the sport context have influential subtexts related to not only race, but also social class, sexuality, and age. Bourdieu himself, and many Bourdieusians to follow, have acknowledged the importance of social conditions and social hierarchies within the sport realm, as they are sources of capital. Exploring the effects of these additional sources of capital among practitioners would be a fruitful avenue for future inquiry.
We see promise for the future of the girls and women who seek entry to the sport as a profession, as there are now more opportunities than ever before (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). There is, of course, the caveat of sport’s hegemonic structures. The presence of habitus and agency among women already in the field, however, suggests that these structures can be eradicated, or at the very least shifted. From this standpoint, we suggest future works investigate the lived body trajectories of women in other positions of sport organizations, as they may be quite telling and helpful for future generations.

References


