

Yes, I Do Throw Like a Girl.

An Analysis of the Social Reinforcement of Hegemonic Masculinity in Sport.

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Abstract

This paper was written for the 2022 Sociology Paper of Excellence Prize. Female athletes have not only been historically excluded from sport but are fighting for equal competition opportunity in sports today. Traits associated with hegemonic masculinity are embraced in the sporting-community, which asserts the notion of male dominance over women. Hegemonic masculinity is learned by athletes through various socialization processes. This paper begins with a personal statement from the author, then analyzes various factors which contribute to a culture of hegemonic masculinity acceptance within the sporting community. This includes stereotypes in sport, language in sport, segregation, social reinforcement, the dramatization of evil, and stigmatization. It concludes by investigating Canadian female participation in sport today, the measures being taken to improve female retention and participation in Canada.

Personal Statement: Introduction

I ask the reader to take a moment think to themselves and describe the perfect athlete.

Consider the following questions:

What do they look like?

What is their body type?

How tall are they?

The expected answer would include muscular, larger than the average person. *Male*.

Throughout my life I witnessed the jaw-dropping shock that stuck people when they learned of my athletic career. Eight-time Canadian National Championship medalist, Pan-American medalist, world-ranked, and Canadian National Judo Team is not often synonymous with a woman standing five-foot-two. My enjoyment of traditionally feminine activities, clothing, and the colour pink often added to the bewilderment. After the shock faded, I usually found myself having to defend my athletic ability. *'You might have been good for a girl, but I could easily beat you in a fight'* is a statement I have heard many times over.

Judo directly translated from Japanese to English means 'The Gentle Way', and Judo is often symbolized by an eight-petal cherry blossom flower called the Kodokan flower. I was taught by my Sensei to embrace the core principles of Judo: Jita Koyei and Seiryoku Zenyo (Mutual Welfare and Benefit, and Maximum Efficiency with Minimum Effort).

These core principles were often challenged in competitive Judo, where the sport became anything but gentle. As an athlete, I was encouraged to fight aggressively, show strength instead of emotion, and most importantly:

Don't throw like a girl.

Introduction

Female athletes have been excluded from sport historically and are still fighting for equal representation and opportunities today. Female athletes are subjected to stereotypes in sport which perpetuate the idea of male superiority over women. Hegemonic masculinity, a statistically rare phenomena in greater society, is prominently celebrated within sport as the ideal male athlete (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Athletes learn to embrace hegemonic masculinity through various socialization processes. They undergo social reinforcement, the dramatization of evil, and stigmatization in order to normalize a phenomenon which is considered deviant outside of the sporting community. This paper will analyze various factors which contribute to a culture of hegemonic masculinity acceptance within the sporting community. It will conclude by investigating Canadian female participation in sport today and investigate the actions being taken by the National Coaching Certification Program to increase female participation and retention in sport.

Stereotypes in Sport

The stereotype that females are less athletic than men is evident in areas such as the media, sports broadcasts, and funding allocations (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). This notion is still pervasive in contemporary society (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). Men, on average, have higher perceptions of their athletic ability and motivation to participate in sports when compared to women (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). Athleticism has been equated to masculinity, illustrated through common expressions such as “You throw like a girl” (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). The expression “You throw like a girl” is constructed as an insult which reproduces the idea of male superiority over women in sport (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). Negative stereotypes, such as

the statement above, can potentially prevent female athletes from attaining their full potential within sport and can be linked to the phenomena 'stereotype threat' (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014).

Stereotype threat is a phenomenon that has been examined by researchers in which people underperform in tasks when they are made aware of negative performance expectations of their group (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). For example, if a female athlete was made aware that there was an expectation of her to not perform well due to her gender, she may incur additional stress and anxiety due to the psychological belief that if she does not perform well her performance would verify the negative stereotype. The athlete is put in a situation where they are no longer competing and representing solely themselves, rather, they are now in a position where they believe they are the representation of their gender. This situation could potentially motivate the athlete to perform well in order to disprove the negative belief, but concern about performance has been correlated to an impairment of outcomes (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014).

Stereotype threat puts female athletes at a disadvantage during competition when they believe there is an implicit bias against them. Historically there has been an exclusion of women in sport (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021) and women today still fight for their place and equal opportunities in competitive spheres that are exclusively male, including: 50km race-walking, Nordic combined, Greco-Roman wrestling, decathlon, one-person dinghy (heavyweight) Finn and 4-man bobsled where they are excluded from competing at the Olympic level. Female athletes competing in different events of the sport (for example, 20k, race-walking or mono-bob) may be aware of the implicit bias against them in their sport through their genders exclusion in other events and have hindered performance results as an effect of stereotype threat.

Segregation.

The exclusion of women from organized sports has a long-standing history, and today there remains gender segregation unlike any other social institution (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). Sport is one of the only social institutions in which gendered segregation is explicitly visible (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). While it can shield female participants from violence and aggression that is common in male sporting cultures, gender segregation only hinders gender equality, reinforces gender differences, and upholds a gender binary which in turn excludes transgender athletes (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). The classification of women's sport presumes women's inferiority to men and legitimizes gender inequalities in broader society (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021).

Gender modifiers are commonly used to differentiate male and female sport. Sport is often organized through a gender-binary, for example: The National Basketball Association and the *Women's* National Basketball Association, the *Men's* National Hockey Team or the *Women's* National Hockey Team. There is a societal understanding that sport associations without a gendered label, such as the National Basketball Association, are inherently male. The usage of the terms 'men' and 'women' organizes athletes into groups based on binary-sex and results in the gendered segregation of sport (Hextrum, 2020). This usage of gendered language extends past the categorization of people and spills over into the terms used within the context of sport itself.

Language in Sport.

Language is a tool that allows for humans to communicate through direct and implicit ways. A study which investigated language in sport interviewed a male athlete in which he revealed the normalization of derogatory gendered language within sports, stating "Coach didn't want me. He thought I was a pussy – literally, he thought I was a pussy. So he dropped me"

(Hextrum, 2020). The usage of the term pussy acts as an affirmation between athleticism and masculinity (Hextrum, 2020). The dichotomy between the terms ‘pussy’ and ‘balls’ further illustrates this concept, as the statement “He thought I was a pussy” and “He thought I had balls” holds two very different meanings.

In a study that investigated male athletes who competed against female athletes, the male athletes admitted that the experience positively changed their perspective of female athletes (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). Yet, the male athletes still used negative stereotyping phrases to describe their female counterparts, including “these women don’t play like girls, like how you think a girl would play” (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). This language used to describe the female athletes implies that they are ‘the deviant mutant’, as the female athlete had performed beyond the realm of possible feminine athletic ability (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021). The female athletes the male athletes had played ‘did not play like girls’, implying that if a female athlete can compete with male athletes she would instead ‘play like a man’ which reinforces the idea of male superiority in athletics.

Hegemonic Masculinity

There are many different constructions of masculinity that exist in various local, regional, and global settings which differ through their existences in various contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is a pattern of practice that assumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities while asserting male dominance over women, and is often associated with traits such as strength, competitiveness, confidence, and assertiveness (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It contrasts emphasized femininity which illustrates the asymmetrical position of the notion of masculinity and femininity in patriarchal gender order (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity assumes a historical relation of

gender hierarchies, and therefore, it has been argued that hegemonic masculinity has come to exist due to specific social circumstances and can be subject to historical change (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is not predominant in society and is considered statistically rare (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), but connections can be seen between the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and traditional athletic ideals.

Hegemonic masculinity is seen in society as cases of exemplar masculinity, such as in the case of sports stars (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Male athletic stars become idols and symbols of masculinity that the majority of men will not be able to achieve themselves (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Athletes will often be taught to value traits such as competitiveness, strength, and confidence, traits which have been equated to hegemonic masculinity. The engagement in competitive sport has been shown to construct masculine models, such as in a study which found that Australian students who embodied and practiced rugby football formed a clear structure of masculinity which centered on domination, aggression, and ruthless competitiveness (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Social Reinforcement.

Hegemonic masculinity is statistically rare in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) yet many athletes are taught that they should strive to attain traits commonly associated with it, such as strength and competitiveness. Athletes undergo socialization processes which can increase their chances of developing hegemonic masculine tendencies. Forms of social reinforcement, such as social approval and status contingent upon a behaviour, can reinforce behaviours that may be seen as deviant in greater society (Burgess & Akers, 1966). If an individual has witnessed another person being rewarded for a specific act, or has been rewarded for a specific act themselves, then they will be more likely to continue to engage in the act

(Burgess & Akers, 1966). Outside of athletics, aggression is not rewarded in society and is often viewed as deviant. In sports, however, aggression can be rewarded and deemed an acceptable act.

As an individual spends more time with a like-minded group of individuals, they are more likely to develop ideas and tendencies which assimilate them into that group (Linden, 2020). Individuals will learn what is and what is not acceptable based upon the groups verbal or non-verbal reactions to specific acts (Linden, 2020). For example, if a male athlete were to say to another male athlete “You throw like a girl” and hear laughter from his other teammates, he would learn that the statement is considered acceptable. If a coach cuts a male player from his team and justifies it to his athletes by referring to the player as a ‘pussy’, the teammates will develop a connection between the word and performing poorly at athletics. As individuals are socially reinforced in like-minded groups, such as a sports-team environment, they can begin to develop tendencies that are considered statistically rare in greater society.

Dramatization of Evil.

Language and actions can be used to stigmatize individuals through labelling processes. The dramatization of evil is the first step in the labelling process explained by Frank Tanenbaum (1938) in which an individual is separated from the group and is ‘tagged’. The tagged individual is separated due to them not conforming to some part of the groups’ social norms. The individual would then be labelled in a manner that highlights their deviance from the group (Tannenbaum, 1938). In the case of sports, a male athlete may be labelled as a ‘pussy’ if he does not conform to hegemonic masculine traits such as aggression. The labelled would then become generalized to the person themselves, and the individual would experience ‘the dramatization of evil’, wherein the individual becomes the deviant act as opposed to the term being used simply as a

descriptor (Tannenbaum, 1938). If the athlete described above was removed from his sports team due to him 'being a pussy', the term would no longer be used simply as a descriptor of the player. The player would then become synonymous with the term instead of being a separate entity (Tannenbaum, 1938).

Even if the player was to return to the team, they may continue to be ostracized by their teammates. The athlete above would be considered deviant by his teammates for rejecting an aspect of hegemonic masculinity. Athletes are undergoing social reinforcement (as described in the above section) which results in a uniform group value system. If an individual does not assimilate into the group, they can experience not only tagging and the dramatization of evil, but also stigmatization.

Stigmatization.

In the process described by Lemert (1967), stigmatization involves the assignment of moral inferiority. When an individual is labelled as morally inferior, other members of society decide how the individual should be treated and perceived (Lemert, 1967). In sports, there is stigmatization of female athletic ability. Statements such as "You throw like a girl", "Man up", and "Don't be a pussy" are commonly used in sport. These statements are due to hegemonic masculine attitudes that exist in sport and perpetuate the idea of female subordination in sport (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021).

Stigmatization is a process that involves exclusion (Bereska, 2022). Any individual who deviates from the accepted norm, hegemonic masculinity in the case of sports, risks becoming excluded from their social group. Female athletes were historically excluded from sport (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021) and still to this day are excluded from various Olympic sport events. The ideal athlete is the human embodiment of hegemonic masculinity and any rejection of it, such as

the rejection of aggression, competitiveness or being female, can result in the stigmatization and exclusion of an athlete.

Canadian Female Athletes Today

A Canadian study has shown that 1 in 3 girls will leave sport during adolescence in comparison to 1 in 10 boys (Grey, 2020). This gendered difference in drop out between adolescent male and female athletes is quite alarming. The retention of female athletes past adolescence is also an issue. Of Canadian women between the ages of 16-63 years old, only 18 percent will be involved in sport (Grey, 2020). Commonly reported barriers to sport participation reported by 1 in 3 girls included: low confidence, negative body image, a perceived lack of skill, poor perceptions of belonging, not feeling welcomed, and 43 percent of adolescent girls reported that the quality of the sport experience was a barrier (Grey, 2020).

Many of the reported barriers to participation to sport that were reported by surveyed girls are a result of common hegemonic masculine attitudes found in sport. Canadian girls are stopping sport due to a perceived lack of skills, low confidence, not feeling welcomed, and a poor quality of sport experience. Hegemonic masculine attitudes in sport assume male dominance over females. This assumption could directly influence female athletes' perception of their own skillset, their level of confidence, and their sporting experience. To increase female sport participation and retention there must be changes made to the current sport systems in Canada. This includes (but is not limited to) attitudes associated with hegemonic masculinity, equal representation in sports-media, and biases against women.

The National Coaching Certification Program.

In recent years there has been a movement to dismantle hegemonic masculine attitudes among coaching staff. All certified coaches in Canada must undergo the National Coaching

Certification Program which offers modules specifically on gender inclusivity in sport. The National Coaching Certification Program invests in women in sport leadership through grants and partnerships with every officially recognized sporting institution (Recruitment and Retention). They also established a mentorship program specifically aimed at women in sport to aid them in becoming club-level, provincial, and high-performance coaches (Recruitment and Retention).

The National Coaching Certification Program are also addressing systematic barriers that women may encounter as they try to stay in sport throughout adulthood. This includes providing childcare for coaching staff, which can aid in keeping mothers in sport, and by providing babysitting services when coaching staff are at sporting events and training camps (Recruitment and Retention). The National Coaching Certification Program also supports coaching staff bringing their babies with them to various sporting events with appropriate childcare (Recruitment and Retention). There are not only efforts being made to retain female athletes, but also recruit them into becoming coaches. The National Coaching Certification Program offers not only just financial incentives to female coaches, but a mentorship program as well (Recruitment and Retention). The development of female coaches and athletes is not only the result of a governing body, but women coming together to collaborate and help one another.

Education can positively impact female retention in sport. The National Coaching Certification Program runs female specific workshops with Master Coach Developers and Learning Facilitators (Recruitment and Retention). They make an active effort to promote the successful stories of female coaches who had children and were able to continue coaching and return to work (Recruitment and Retention). At clinics and symposiums, they provide female athletes and coaches with the chance to come together and interact with one another

(Recruitment and Retention). The National Coaching Certification Program is creating a community for female athletes and coaches. Community support can offer indirect and direct education and support to females navigating the strain of balancing sport with adolescence and adulthood.

While the results of program initiatives, such as the National Coaching Certification Program, will not dismantle hegemonic masculinity overnight, it is a step in the right direction and offers a hope of a better future for the next generation of Canadian female athletes.

Conclusion

Hegemonic masculine attitudes have deep roots in sporting communities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Women have historically had to fight for their place in sport (Ogilvie & McCormack, 2021) and still to this day are subjected to negative stereotypes through multiple mediums which uphold the patriarchal belief that men are naturally better athletes than women (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). The segregation of athletes based upon gender can act as an agent in which athletes come to internalize hegemonic masculine attitudes. Language in sport also acts as a tool which indirectly communicates the idea of male superiority over females in athletics. Athletes learn to normalize hegemonic masculinity through various socialization processes which occur in sporting environments. Athletes are socialized in small, tight-knit groups, and spend much of their time together during training sessions, competitions, and travelling. Social reinforcement, stigmatization, and the dramatization of evil can result in athletes normalizing deviant beliefs, such as hegemonic masculine attitudes in sport. These normalized attitudes have had an impact on female sport participation rates in Canada. Education services, such as the National Coaching Certification Program, are attempting to increase the retention and participation of female athletes and coaches through its' various initiatives and education

programs. It is a light of hope that education programs such as this will pave a better way forward for the future generations of Canadian female athletes.

Personal Statement: Dedication

There is a certain irony in Judo. It was created based upon principles that contradict hegemonic masculinity; *The Gentle Way*, the Kodokan flower, mutual benefit and wellbeing, maximum efficiency with minimum effort. Yet, Judo embraces hegemonic masculine attitudes to this day. Female athletes were not allowed to compete at the Olympic Games until 1992, while male athletes began competing in 1964.

As a young athlete, I was fortunate to have been surrounded by many empowered women. I was trained by the first female provincial coach in Canadian history and billeted under the first woman who competed and medalled in a male category at the Canadian National Championships- resulting in the creation of female divisions in Canada the following year. While there have been glass ceilings broken, including the first female Olympic medals at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, there is still more distance to cover in areas of equal representation and opportunity.

This paper is dedicated to female athletes of the past, present, and future. May we continue to thrive, inspire, and create a better path forward for future generations of athletes.

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