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WHO DECIDES HOW SPORTSWOMEN SHOULD LOOK AND BEHAVE? TOWARDS A GENDER-SENSITIVE CRITICAL APPROACH

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SUMMARY

What if we told you that the texts collected in this project (Women and Sport) might serve to maintain stereotypical views about women in sport? What if we told you that scientific knowledge often cannot meet or fulfil the expectations placed on it of being able to support and promote women's participation and performance in elite competitive sports? What if we told you that sports science is, in fact, not equipped to deal with sports practice on a practical and individual level? Our aim in saying this is not to disavow the impact of sports science on the development of women's sport, but rather to warn against an overly simplistic approach to research. Both of us are researchers; that makes us confident in confronting the most obvious problems arising from the use of scientific knowledge in the promotion of women's sport during the past decades. In this chapter, we highlight the significance of the 'practical knowledge' of coaches and its sometimes ambiguous relation with scientific knowledge about sex and gender differences.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES:

- Pay attention to what guides the questions posed in research, what answers are being sought, and the language in which those questions and answers are couched.
- Knowledge based on different ideas of what constitutes 'true' knowledge will vary markedly; for example, the difference between scientific (epistemic) knowledge based on logic and reason and the knowledge born of practical experience.
- To be critically gender sensitive is to be sensitive to the individuality and personality of the athlete (regardless of gender).
- Coaches should aim to develop know-how specific to individual athletes, and not base training programs on gender stereotypes.
- As a coach, challenge prejudices and develop an awareness of how to handle contextual situations to resist and transform male hegemonic practices that disempower female athletes.



INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, scientific knowledge about similarities and differences between male and female athletes has increased greatly and has been published widely. In the early 1900s, the focus of scientific interest was primarily on examining and defining *differences* between men and women (in particular how women differed from men). Since then, the focus has turned to examining *similarities* between the sexes, and the influence of socio-cultural factors and contexts on gender stereotypes. Feminist research has indeed raised concerns about gender issues within research that need to be taken into account when applying scientific knowledge in social life. As is shown in other chapters in this book, women have faced great obstacles when attempting to participate and develop excellence in competitive sport. Among these obstacles are stereotypes about femininity and sexuality that have underpinned the often implicit, but sometimes also explicit, resistance to female participation in competitive sport. These stereotypes have conventionally been framed in terms of 'natural' femininity, or womanliness, and a heterosexual norm.

Strong beliefs have developed that girls and women are biologically less competitive and are more socially and cooperatively inclined compared to boys and men. Looking at this from the point of view of the individual, such views might be problematic because any trait can be expressed in a wide variety of forms, and it is dangerous to generalise what might be considered 'normal' for men and women. As women started to participate in competitive sport, they often faced resistance that had both sexist and homophobic undertones – and still has, to some extent. This is particularly true in sports considered to be specifically 'masculine', or if women perform outstandingly in a particular sport.

Hargreaves (1994) stated that participation in competitive sport is based on what is acceptable for men and women respectively, and that the foundation for this organising principle is gender, expressed as conformity to assigned or assumed or mandated gender roles, and the social structure of heterosexuality. For a woman to engage in competitive sport has been (and is still often) considered to be in conflict with feminine ideals (even 'natural femininity'), that is, how women are supposed to be. Several researchers also claim that conformity to assumed gender roles and the heterosexual norm has been an organising principle in traditional research and the search for knowledge when considering female athletes.

In practice, a number of strategies have been developed to overcome this organising principle and the obstacles it creates. Some of these strategies might, at first glance, seem to promote women's participation in sport, but in the long run many of them fail to live up to expectations, not least because they embrace the same prejudices and stereotypes concerning gender that constitute the injustices. Sports culture is heavily influenced by an ideal of the 'legitimate athlete' who is heterosexual and who displays gender-appropriate behaviours. Disapproval of, or overt hostility towards, female athletes who don't look and act as 'normal, traditional' girls or woman do, has led to female athletes in several sports developing strategies to avoid provoking prejudices and discrimination. Further, the expectation of adherence to the heterosexual norm has resulted in pressure on women to present to the public an image that often emphasises traditional characteristics to gain social acceptance.

For example, Krane (2001) and Kolnes (1995) give examples of how female athletes' careers have been made dependent upon how marketable their appearance has been to spectators, media and sponsors. Feminine appearance and a 'heterosexy' image have been given privilege and acceptance over female athletes with 'masculine-looking' bodies.

Being both attractive and talented has been the winning combination necessary to achieve acceptance in women's sport. A present-day example is the proposed change to rules governing clothing worn by female netball players. The International Federation of Netball Associations recommended that it be compulsory for female players to wear the traditional skirt. One of the reasons given was to make the sport more (media) attractive. Female athletes in competitive sport are required to be 'tough enough', yet remain within the boundaries of feminine looks, frame and condition. Conformity to the dictates of heterosexuality is achieved through self-presentation with a sustained emphasis on femininity (wearing makeup, long hair with bows). Lesbian athletes or female athletes in typically masculine sports may employ this kind of 'strategy' to avoid negative perceptions and possible retribution. For example, women boxers engage in a balancing act: not to become a 'foxee' (too feminine), but still be assertive and competitive, with physical strength.

To work against these types of discrimination, one also has to bear in mind that the popular sports culture is still heavily dependent on the masculine sports model and its spectators (often men). This model affects the image of what constitutes the legitimate female athlete body (and the legitimate image of the male athlete). But how can we then make sense of sport and the scientific knowledge about sport while counteracting hidden and constraining meanings and influences?

Historically, scientific knowledge has been used in two major ways in attempts to improve conditions for women in sport. It has been used to *legitimise female participation in sport*, and to *improve women's sporting performance* (see for example Larsson, 2011). In reality, these two major features are often inextricably linked. These endeavours have been fruitful to some extent, but have also been beset with at least two kinds of problems. On the one hand, a general problem relates to the application and use of scientific knowledge in the practice of sport – the kind of knowledge that science can offer practitioners and that is needed in sports practice.¹ On the other hand, a specific problem relates to gender issues in sport. In both of these cases, the issue of prejudices and stereotypes is present. The first aim of this chapter is to show how gender stereotypes permeate many of the science-based attempts to legitimise and improve women's sport, rendering the scientific endeavour a double-edged sword. The second aim is to illuminate the relationship between the kind of knowledge that is needed in sports practice (what we term 'practical knowledge', or 'know-how') and the kind of knowledge that sports science actually offers (what we call 'epistemic knowledge'). We end the chapter by discussing how attempts by sports practitioners to use scientific (epistemic) knowledge may have the effect of perpetuating gender stereotypes.

GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ATTEMPTS TO LEGITIMISE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

In this section, we argue that attempts to legitimise and improve women's participation in sport have inadvertently perpetuated gender stereotypes. An illustrative example is taken from physiology research at The Royal Central Institute of Gymnastics (later named Gymnastik- och idrottshögskolan, with the Swedish acronym: GIH), which gained an international reputation during the 1950s and 1960s. The physiology department was founded by Professor Erik

¹ The same problem can be seen in the tenuous relationship between educational research into school practice and related topics, and teachers' work in the classroom. Carlgren (2011) notes that research, in general, is insensitive to educational needs as perceived by teachers. As such, by applying standards to their research methods that are not applicable to school practice, researchers are aiming to achieve credibility within the scientific community rather than aiming for results that teachers would see as trustworthy and relevant to their teaching practice.

Hohwü Christensen in 1944. Educated in Denmark, Christensen was sceptical about the male Swedish gymnastics tradition prevalent at GIH. The female gymnastics tradition, however, was apparently wholly different in his view. In 1951, Christensen wrote:

Modern female gymnastics has had, in several respects, a richer and more modulated development than the male form. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that male gymnastics has been more bound by tradition, and has had more difficulty liberating itself from the more-or-less unjustified demands of a scientifically rational constitutive base. Women have, in this respect, been more clear-sighted than men, and have tried to create a form of gymnastics that is often more rational than that of male gymnastics, because it proceeds from a natural and enjoyable way of movement for women. (Christensen, 1951, p. 329)

Evidently, Christensen looked favourably on female gymnastics, a view that seems to have corresponded both to his personal values and to his approach as a scientist. His comments on female competitive sport were different:

From an aesthetic point of view, the masculinised type of woman, which is an inevitable effect of hard training, is less attractive to most people. That female record-holders in several international elite sports events exhibit markedly masculine, sexless traits, however, does not necessarily mean that sport is the cause of this abnormality; it is, rather, the abnormality that is primary. Due to abnormal functioning of the gonads, these individuals do not develop into genuine women, biologically speaking. They develop either markedly male traits, or into a cross between a child and a woman ... It is dangerous for female sport if setting a new record becomes the main aim, because then the markedly masculine type of woman can assert her influence. (Christensen, 1951, p. 321)

Looking at this text 60 years after it was written, it is easy for us to see how Christensen's value orientation had an impact on his view of 'female record-holders'. Note how 'female record-holder' is related both to opposites like 'attractive/unattractive' and 'normal/abnormal', and to so-called masculine sexless traits. 'Normal' females should be attractive (to the opposite sex), that is, be *heterosexual*. Hence, the binding relationship between femininity, normality and heterosexuality was evident not only in the dominant masculine sports model of the day, but also in scientific knowledge in sports science at that time. Some would perhaps argue that this is no longer the case – surely, present-day sports science must have abandoned such prejudice. We believe that such hopeful claims must be met with scepticism because, about 10 years ago, medical studies including a 'gender perspective' started to appear. In the social sciences, a 'gender perspective' conventionally means an attempt to question attitudes and values regarding gender that are taken for granted, and in particular those that imply a hierarchical relation between the genders. In a study by Esbjörnsson Liljedahl, however, in which a gender perspective is designated in the title of the study, gender is treated in the following way:

In all studies, anaerobic work and muscle response were investigated from a gender perspective; that is, all variables were analysed in both women and men and then compared with statistical analyses ... Compared with men, women had a smaller muscle fibre cross-sectional area, particularly in FT [fast twitch] fibres, and a lower activity of glycolytic enzymes. Furthermore, women had relatively fewer FT fibres than men. (Esbjörnsson Liljedahl, 2000, p. 32)

In reality, the gender perspective in this study simply meant that 'all variables are analysed in both women and men'. The conventional hierarchical relationship between the genders, with the category 'male' as normative and hierarchically superior to 'female', is not challenged but, rather, is uncritically accepted. The category 'women' is associated with adjectives such

as ‘smaller’, ‘lower’ and ‘fewer’, and the results for women are systematically ‘compared with men’ in this sense.² The opposite comparison, of male against female, never occurs; nor is there any attempt to challenge the given hierarchical order between the genders. Hence, present-day scientific research may also include gender stereotypes, and therefore cannot always be seen to promote women’s participation in sport.

We argue that this problem stems from, at least partly, a knowledge ideal based on value-laden words such as objectivity and universal knowledge, an ideal that dominates in the sport sciences, the ‘epistemic knowledge’. This scientific knowledge, which will be described below, differs from the concrete and practical knowledge – ‘experience’ and ‘feel for the game’ – used by sports coaches in their work with athletes and teams. We believe that it is important to challenge the questions asked in the scientific literature on sports science – to highlight the difference between the epistemic knowledge of science and the practical knowledge of coaches, and how the different forms of knowledge may be understood and applied in sports practice. Why is this important? Because, in trying to apply scientific – epistemic – knowledge to their coaching practice, coaches might, albeit unintentionally, apply the same gender biases that are evident in sports science research.

SCIENTIFIC EPISTEMIC KNOWLEDGE

Australian scholar Richard Tinning (2010) argues that the development of sports science has meant that knowledge about human movement and human performance is predominantly drawn from the medical and natural sciences. Consequently, the scientific disciplines of physiology, biomechanics and psychology are typically regarded as having something important to say to sports practitioners about sports practice. These academic disciplines also convey a certain view of what constitutes ‘true’ knowledge, that is, they have a specific knowledge ideal. Gustavsson (2000) shows that true knowledge in these disciplines, which conforms to Aristotle’s world view, is *objective*, *universal*, measured and *established through statistical analysis*. These attributes might be highly valued in scientific research, but we argue that they may lead to injustices based on gender in sports practice, particularly if applied within the dominant masculine sports model – and especially if the attributes embrace the normative and hierarchical order between the genders illustrated above.

But what do these attributes mean? Put simply, *objectivity* has to do with looking at phenomena as *objects* or things that reside beyond or outside of the one who is experiencing the objects. Objectivity designates the external point of view in relation to what is under scrutiny. Within the natural sciences – for instance, human physiology – the objects of study are usually treated as ‘things’.

Typically, the medical and natural sciences explore the world based on the assumption that what is explored is governed by natural laws that are *universal*. That is, these laws are, within reasonable limits, the same everywhere, and it is the task of science to discover or uncover those laws. In human physiology, the laws governing the functioning of the human body are explored. As a species, all humans are governed by the same (universal) natural laws, and will respond identically (within reasonable limits) to a given stimulus.

These laws, what we might call the laws of human performance, are studied – *measured* – through meticulously designed laboratory experiments, in which, ideally, only one or a few

² Karin Grahn shows that the same practice applies to textbooks and other study material used in training courses in sport. (Grahn, 2008).

aspects of human physiology are under scrutiny at any one time. The significance of the results of these measurements is established through *statistical analysis*, with a specific focus on how, or to what extent, a certain kind of intervention has affected a given variable.

Before turning to the question of what happens when this kind of knowledge is uncritically applied to sports practice, some comments about gender and gender difference are required. The important question is: *What happens when gender is treated as an object, universally governed by natural laws and studied through laboratory experiments, with the aim of formulating statistically significant results concerning, for instance, physical performance?* A study of the physiology research at GIH during the 1950s indicates that gender differences present in one of two paradigms: either men and women are *qualitatively* different – men (A); women (B); or they are *quantitatively* different – men (A); women (a). Viewing the genders as qualitatively different (A \leftrightarrow B), (i.e. as ‘opposite’ and ‘complementary’) from each other might superficially seem more ‘equal’, compared to viewing them as quantitatively different. However, in practice, the A \leftrightarrow B version is applied to men (or boys) and women (or girls) as, respectively, ‘competitive’ or ‘socially oriented’. This division, regardless of gender, does not seem useful in a context in which performance and competition are paramount.

Viewing the genders as quantitatively different (A \rightarrow a; i.e. where the female is presented as a smaller version of the male) might, in practice, mean that girls and women are considered systemically subordinate to boys and men. With regard to training, it might mean that girls and women are systemically considered to be less able than boys and men.

In any case, neither of these ways of configuring gender difference is ‘natural’ or given. Rather, they are *created by scientists*, and as such, they embody the same gender stereotypes that still permeate much of society to this day.

We believe that the medical and natural sciences would benefit from taking a hard look at the implicit gender bias in their research language before they can claim to present a true (norm-critical) gender perspective. But even if such a perspective is developed, problems related to epistemic knowledge persist.

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

What, then, does ‘practical knowledge’ mean in relation to epistemic knowledge? And what are the implications of practical knowledge in relation to gender, as opposed to epistemic knowledge and its qualitative or quantitative gender differences? Even if epistemic knowledge were objective, universal, measured and established through statistical analysis, it would remain disembodied and stripped of its social context. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle sees this view of knowledge as an expression of an *intellectualist legend*, in which mind and body are separated. In reality, mind and body are one and, therefore, practical knowledge (i.e. knowledge that is useful in real life) is *subjective, specific, judged and established through experience*, for instance, through long-term cooperation between coach and athlete. What, then, might gender mean, and which sporting body matters? When coaches attempt to support athletes or teams, they cannot base these attempts on epistemic knowledge, except perhaps in a very basic way, because epistemic knowledge is abstract and general rather than concrete and specific. The kind of knowledge – the *know-how* to communicate the lessons of practical experience – that separates the novice coach from the expert coach is not necessarily at the level of epistemic knowledge, but at the level of practical knowledge that has been integrated into coaching practice. Why is this?

Epistemic knowledge offers universal knowledge, which can serve as a reference point, from which, for instance, knowledge about performance as a *general quality* can be of some use. In coaching a particular athlete or team³, coaches must use their *specific* practical knowledge about the level of performance of those athletes. They must use their know-how about specific features of the athletes' performance to enable them to assist the athletes in the most effective way. An athlete or team cannot be regarded as an ordinary human being or group of people, especially not at elite level, as is the case when humans are treated as a species. The athletes must be regarded as unique individuals or groups, with specific characteristics.

Scientific knowledge is most often gained through artificial laboratory experiments. A laboratory test procedure moves the athlete's (level of) performance from its natural setting to an artificial setting (i.e. performing in a test situation is not identical to performing in a sports situation). In contrast, coaches, in a dialogue with athletes and teams, have to rely on their subjective feelings about the way in which the athletes respond to a given workload or training regime. This subjective feel is based partly on communication and feedback from the athletes and partly on the coach having experienced similar situations before. Therefore, test results are not immediately applicable to real sport settings, but have to be interpreted through the experience of the coach and through communication between coach and athletes. A scientific test cannot provide the definitive answer to the design of training programs. Rather, training must be based on what the coach knows about the demands of the actual sporting context, the athletes, how they have responded to a given training regime in the past, and how they are likely to respond now and in the future.

What, then, might gender mean in terms of this practical knowledge? Based on the reasoning outlined above, our argument, simply put, is that on the one hand coaches might be blind to cultural stereotypes concerning gender in sport; on the other, coaches deal with *individuals* and not with genders in the universal sense.

For example, coaches do not always pay attention to the unconscious influence of the cultural stereotypes that surround gender in sport; in practice, some coaches fail to take into account the social and cultural constraints that condition or restrict women's participation in sport. On occasions, these constraints are interpreted as stemming from innate, or natural, sex traits; for instance, the fact that, as a group, women tend not to invest as much time and effort into sport as men do. A discussion of the reasons behind such constraints is, however, not within the scope of this chapter. But what do we mean by saying that coaches 'deal with individuals'?

As stated above, the epistemic knowledge of the medical and natural sciences is typically derived from research that deals with humankind as a species. Such research is conducted in test situations in which individual differences resulting from the social and cultural conditioning of the individuals being tested are given less importance than group differences, or are regarded as irrelevant and ignored. Coaches, on the other hand, deal with specific, living individuals and teams existing in particular contexts and conditioned by situational factors – that is, the social and cultural milieus in which they live, work and play.

With regard to gender, individual (concrete and specific) differences exert great influence on performance levels, and we suggest that coaches should not equate knowledge produced by statistical analysis with knowledge about individuals. Secondly, contextual conditions

³ The following discussion refers equally to individual athletes and teams of athletes. To simplify the presentation, we will mainly use the terms *athlete* and *athletes* to include both individuals and teams.

greatly influence athletes' performance. Hence, we contend that it is important for coaches to develop know-how about how any given training regime affects the level of performance of *an individual* rather than how the regimen might work for that person's sex. We also believe that it is most important for coaches to develop awareness of how to identify and handle contextual conditions, for instance, gender stereotypes. They must use this awareness and know-how when coaching to shape and condition sports participation so that players and coaches resist and transform masculine hegemonic practices that disempower female athletes.

CONCLUSION

What conclusions can be drawn from the discussion in this chapter? First, we emphasise the importance of giving close attention to the gender stereotypes that permeate much of the research in the medical and natural sciences, even that research which purports to have a 'gender perspective'. The dominance of the masculine sports model tends to uncritically shape the way that research questions are posed, which in turn produces the sought-for answers. These answers are often phrased in terms such as 'less', 'inferior', or 'weaker' when referring to women or the feminine condition. Should gender stereotypes in research go unrecognised – and not critically analysed or corrected – gender inequalities in sports practices may be unwittingly instituted and perpetuated when the scientific knowledge derived from such research is applied in training programs.

Second, we emphasise the need to take seriously the differences between the ideal of 'true knowledge' in the sciences (that which is objective, universal, measurable and verified through statistical analysis) and the practical knowledge that coaches use in real-world coaching situations. Scientific (epistemic) knowledge from the medical and natural sciences is not easily transformed into useful know-how for application to a specific training program, particularly if the scientific knowledge is imbued with gender stereotypes that prevent coaches from making best use of that knowledge when dealing with women athletes.

Speaking more generally, we call for a critical and gender-sensitive approach both to sport science and to coaching practice. Being 'critically gender sensitive' does not mean to unilaterally seek out gender differences in order to design a purposeful training regime for women (or men), particularly if the differences are purported to be universal. To be critically gender sensitive is to be sensitive to the individuality and personality of the *sportsperson* (regardless of gender), and simultaneously to be aware of the social and cultural conditions that may affect their sports practice. And to *challenge* prejudices such as those that decree how sporting women (should) look and behave, and how they (should) relate to sport – why, where and how they (should) engage in sport. To be critically gender sensitive is also to adopt a critical approach to scientific research that is systemically grounded in epistemological starting points that set men, or the category 'male', as the norm, or, to use the language of statistics, the 'independent variable'. Importantly, scientific research in the pursuit of gender-equitable sport might be a double-edged sword, capable of doing as much harm as good, should it not consciously embrace a critical gender-sensitive perspective.

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