

'From Pickleball to Dodge Ball'

Girls constructing identity in a masculinised sporting arena

Gender, Sport, Ethnography

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Summary:

High School sport in the USA is regulated by 'Title IX', a Federal statute that was created to prohibit sex discrimination in education programs that receive Federal financial assistance. Accordingly, I expected to observe something approaching parity in the delivery of sports in the two US High Schools I visited. I wanted to see if girls, who had been born and raised in the 'Title IX Era', were achieving greater self-esteem, equality and power.

My observations concentrated on volleyball, pickleball, challenge & adventure and dodge ball. The schools I visited (Rolling Meadows High and Boulder High) were both ethnically diverse but located in affluent suburbs. I did not want to introduce race, media or underprivileged issues into an already complicated issue.

I observed some outstanding facilities and options available to both boys and girls and although there were examples of the 'confidence gap', the overwhelming response I had was of large numbers of girls fully engaged in a wide variety of sports, who exhibited high levels of self-esteem to a level and ratio commensurate to that of the boys.

Literature Review: Playgrounds and sports fields in Western cultures have a significant impact on the gender constructions of masculinity. There is a close association between sport and hegemonic masculinity; Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) suggested that "hegemonic masculinity mobilises around physical strength, adventurousness, emotional neutrality, certainty, control, assertiveness, self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness..." (p. 121). My research question is therefore: "Where Title IX has been effective in offering girl's choice has it closed the confidence gap, improved female self-esteem and consequently increased female engagement in sport?"

Feminist Ann Oakley suggested that whilst every individual was a 'sexed' individual this 'sex' was largely biological. However, the 'gender' of an individual was social and cultural. The current discourse suggests that "traditional notions of what is 'appropriate' are still influential" (Houlihan, p91). Sports such as tennis, swimming and gymnastics continue to be seen as more compatible to femininity than the participation in the 'male' sports of American Football, Baseball

and Wrestling in the USA. These are the gendered expectations introduced by parents to their children “as a result of their own sex-role socialisation” which in turn “transmits gendered values...[and] reproduces gender stereotypes” (Greendorfer, 1983). These were key concepts which were carried into this research.

The theoretical observations of gender and sport have driven ‘social justice’ policy and the American Association of University Women’s (AAUW) report (Orenstein, 2000, pxx) found, in a national survey on gender and self-esteem, that:

“For a girl, the passage into adolescence is...marked by a loss of confidence in herself, her abilities...a scathing critical attitude to her body and a blossoming sense of personal inadequacy...”

However, I was able to observe increasing evidence where traditional forms were challenged, albeit not in a football environment, but on numerous occasions in the physically dynamic sports such as volleyball.

Methodology:

This is an ethnographic study, characterised, primarily, by observation and interpretation, explained within a theoretical framework. It relates to how the complex construction of self-identity, self-esteem, masculinity, femininity and cultural relativism require a more interpretive, qualitative observation through prolonged exposure to the subject.

I attended Rolling Meadows High School on five occasions (daily from October 30th – November 3rd) to observe 13-17 year olds. The gatekeeper was Jeff Atkins, Athletics Director. I conducted three semi-structured interviews on November 1st. From November 14-17th I visited Boulder High; the gatekeeper here was Monique Guidry, Head of PE. I conducted informal group interviews on November 15th. My observations were recorded in note form and reviewed, allowing me to identify the emerging themes of gender roles, masculinity, constructing difference and the confidence gap.

Observations and findings:

‘Pickleball’ is a mini-tennis game. The ball is designed to reduce the effect of power hitting, which should ‘level the playing field’ for girls, who face significant muscular disadvantages against males at this age (16).

The girls were very competitive, with the boys nowhere near as engaged. Despite this I was invited by the male PE teacher to watch two boys play with the comment: “These guys are good”. Even so, they played at such a low tempo that it was like watching the game in slow

motion. After the class finished at 8.30am I asked Drew if he liked the sport. His response was: "Yeah, it's OK". So I probed further and asked what he didn't like about it, he replied: "It's like, not real". I felt he had much more to give and chose not to engage because he didn't regard it as a competitive sport for a male.

It was however the score board that held the most significant data. The yellow league was for those children who just wanted to have fun and the purple league was for those who not only wanted to compete but felt they were good enough to compete well. The score board showed the following gender split:

	Boys	Girls
Yellow (fun)	3	10
Purple (compete)	10	4

The Confidence Gap was clearly evident. 71% of girls wanted to play for fun or didn't have the confidence in themselves to compete with the boys, whereas only 23% of boys felt the same way. 77% of boys had the confidence in themselves to compete at the higher level. However, the players were then ranked on their performances within each colour code. In the yellow section the girls occupied the first position and four of the top five. In the purple section the girls held 1st and 3rd positions. So clearly the girls were performing at a higher level than the boys and it was possible to conclude that either they were better players or the boys were not engaging in a sport they considered to be too feminine.

Constructing difference:

Mixed volleyball in the gym, with two dominant players, a female (Bailey) and a male (Mike). Bailey was full of confidence but Mike controlled every game he played in and some of the ones he didn't. He was below average; however he was supremely confident...

The ball goes past him, hits the court and scores a point for the opposition:

Mike: *"What happening? Where's my back up."* Followed by: *"...Man"* (said in desperation with a shake of the head)

Mike makes a play, scoring a point for his team...he shouts at the player he beat:

Mike: *"Hey, what's up fool?"*

Another boy asks Mike why he didn't set the ball up.

Mike: *"I don't set others up. I'm the man"*.

Mike's team get beaten repeatedly.

Mike: *"You guys suck. You don't deserve me"*

Mike's aggression intimidated both the girls and the boys but it was almost entirely aimed at the other boys. Curry (in "Higher Goals", 2000, p110) argues that males construct their community based on "division and the preservation of distance". Meanwhile, Kelly played no part whatsoever in the entire 40 minutes she was on court. I'd observed her after the lesson fooling around confidently with her friends. I asked one of them to describe Kelly, her response was "Oh, Kelly's wild..." I interviewed Kelly afterwards:

Me: "Hi Kelly. Do you like sport?"

Kelly: "Not really. Well not here anyway."

Me: "What school activity would you prefer to do?"

Kelly: "Dance. But we could only do it last semester. I'm not really, you know, school spirity".

Me: "So you wouldn't want to be a cheerleader even though you like dancing?"

Kelly: "They're cool and all and the football guys are cool too but I don't like team sports"

Me: "Your friends describe you as 'crazy' and you seem very confident but playing volleyball you were very introvert. Why do you think that was?"

Kelly: "Err. I don't like it mixed with the boys. They are better than the girls".

Me: "Bailey was the best player there..."

Kelly: "Oh, she's like them!"

This was a little disappointing because Kelly was an athletic confident girl who was struggling to express herself in the PE arena. Worse was to follow when I observed 'Dodgeball' at Boulder High.

The Power of Masculinity:

Dodgeball is a game which involves throwing balls at the opposition as hard as possible. The game was initiated by 'popular demand' when the PE teacher asked the class what they wanted to do, numerous boys demanded the game. The result was that 12 pupils declined to play (8 girls and 4 boys). 16 males on one side, opposed by 10 boys and 7 girls on the other. The all boys team, which was made up entirely of 'Jocks' (sports players), many of whom had lethal aims, confronted the other team and bombarded them for 45 minutes. There could be no worse example of hypermasculine practises. This one lesson could be the subject of an entire paper so I will not expand on this here, it would not reflect the tremendous athletic options and programs that Boulder High offered overall.

The 'Jocks':



The 'Skittles':



Playing like a Girl:

The next volleyball game I observed was in Boulder. with an entirely different outcome. Because of Title IX, volleyball was a varsity sport for girls. I observed a mixed class of 8 teams and the level of competition was intense.

'Team Awesome' was made up of 4 'Jocks', who hand picked Eli (favoured female) and actually announced that their team would be called 'Team Awesome'. They were athletically built and they told everybody that: "you're going down". I could have named them 'Team Testosterone'. 'TeamWork' had 3 boys and 2 girls all of whom were fully engaged. Team Awesome opened up against TeamWork and raced to an early 3-1 lead amongst lots of bravado. Their female player wasn't able to contribute as the boys controlled the space however then the tables turned as TeamWork began to improve. 3-1 became 3-6 to TeamWork and Team Awesome began to become undone...

'Team Awesome':

"Come on man, step up. Make the play!"

"You've touched the ball once – shut up"

"It's 5-3 not 6-3." (it was 6-3)

"That was in. That was in..."

"In your face bro"

"We're coming back baby!"

'TeamWork':

"Come on guys"

"Our serve"

"OK, 5-3"

Team Awesome lost 8-6. Katie's team, behind a bombardment of excellent serving and 'encouragement' from her, beat 'Team Grunge' 14-1. Katie instructed her team on technique and they went on to defeat the Hispanic Boys 11-3. Kelly, another girl, was now as active as Katie. The boy's response was initially to compete hard, then, when defeat looked likely, their behaviour degenerated into fooling around. Every time I witnessed this, it clearly frustrated and irritated the female(s). Katie and Kelly did however ram home the advantage and reacted with loud support of each other: "Way to go girl!"

This has been a barrier for girls. Duncan (1997, p12) points out that: “stereotypes associated with traditional notions of femininity and masculinity exalted boys’ strength and athletic feats while equating girls’ athletic talents with “tomboyism.” In this game of volleyball, at this school, Girls were a match for Boys, they were also confident, with high levels of self-esteem; they worked as a team and craved similar attention to the boys. The playing field for them was level.

Outcomes:

The USA places a much higher degree of importance on athletics and physical education than we do in the UK. Boulder High and Rolling Meadows High schools both had mandatory PE lessons for pupils 5 days a week, in superb facilities, with huge resources and a school curriculum that was organised to accommodate sport. Coupled with the level-playing field afforded by Title IX, it would have been a disappointment if it had not broken down the barriers of masculinity in sport.

However, facilities, resources and legislation do not in themselves alter accepted gender norms. There has to be an agenda for a more ‘female-friendly’ curriculum. An improvement in the range of activities offered, in the correct environment with meaningful exit routes and emphasis on female achievement are what’s needed to allow females to develop and gain confidence in themselves.

This level of choice shows the commitment to sport and it is one in which girls could and did flourish in. In conclusion, the Confidence Gap still existed, the power of masculinity still existed, boys still constructed difference but females were showing signs of closing the gap.

Dissemination plan:

I will create a website displaying my work, with a discussion forum, and I will present my report informally by powerpoint to the department and produce a seminar presentation targeted at the Sociology module: ‘Field Studies in Social Research’. This can be rolled out to other relevant modules (however, I must caution that I have work-related time constraints that would negate me making numerous presentations). I will also use this research in my dissertation.