

## INTRODUCTION

### 1

# Studying Sport, Men, and Masculinities From Feminist Standpoints

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A decade ago, *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives* (Messner & Sabo, 1990) built on a framework developed by feminist analyses of women and sport to demonstrate the fundamental importance of gender in men's sports. Nearly two decades of feminist studies of women and sport had demonstrated the fundamental importance of gender as a category of analysis (e.g., Birrell, 1978; Duquin, 1978; Felshin, 1974; Greendorfer, 1978; Hall 1978, 1988; Hargreaves, 1994; Harris, 1972; Lenskyj, 1986; Oglesby, 1978; Theberge, 1987). Yet, with the exception of a few writings on masculinity and sport that had appeared earlier (Dunning & Sheard, 1979; Sabo & Runfola, 1980), gender was conspicuously absent from studies of men's sports.

*Sport, Men and the Gender Order* challenged this blind spot in sport studies by moving gender to the center of analyses of men's experiences in sport. The editors and contributors (both men and women) were writing from intellectual standpoints that were based in feminist theory, women's studies of sport, and the emerging area called "men's studies." They argued that one way men responded to various crises surrounding masculinity during the modern era was to construct sport—both materially and

symbolically—in ways that naturalized men's subordination of women. Fundamental to this analysis was Connell's (1987) theory of the gender order as a dynamic system of power relations, in which multiple masculinities and femininities were constantly being constructed, contested, and altered. Late 20th-century sport was portrayed as a conservative institution that tends mostly to reproduce existing unequal relations of power between women and men as well as existing unequal class, racial/ethnic, and sexual relations of power among men.

We still see sport as a predominantly conservative force in contemporary gender relations (Rowe & McKay, in press; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999). However, some of the research during the past decade suggests that this perspective is too simplistic and deterministic. In this introduction, we outline some recent developments and discuss some of the ways that the study of gender, men, and sport is being pushed in newer and more nuanced directions.

### *The Centering of Gender in the Study of Men and Sports*

If gender was largely invisible in studies of men's sports in the 1980s, it moved to the center of analysis during the 1990s. Critical analyses of masculinities were fundamental to empirical studies of gay male athletes (Pronger, 1990); the lives of male athletes (Messner, 1992b); male body-builders (Klein, 1993); the sport media (Davis, 1997); the sporting cultures of Australia (McKay, 1991, 1997), Canada (Gruneau & Whitson, 1994), and the United States (Trujillo, 1991, 1995); and misogyny and violence against women (Brackenridge, 1997; Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997; Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995; Schact, 1996; Volkwein, Frauke, Schnell, Sherwood, & Livezey, 1997). Moreover, these scholarly analyses of masculinities moved into popular discourse on sport especially with respect to high-profile public debates about male athletes and sexual violence against women (Benedict, 1997; Nelson, 1994; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Robinson, 1998). The "success" of feminist analyses of masculinities in sport also was reflected in the tendency of some high-profile feminist scholars in the 1990s to draw insights from sport scholars to advance their understandings of gender and bodies (e.g., Connell, 1995; Lorber, 1994).

This volume, then, emerges in a different era (the end of the 1990s) than did *Sport, Men and the Gender Order* (the end of the 1980s). Rather than issuing a call to begin to pay serious scholarly attention to gender in sports,

this book is published at a time when gender is already a visible and acceptable category of analysis in studies of sports. This "centering" of a gender analysis raises three new questions on which we hope to shed light: (a) How can the study of masculinities in sport be integrated with critical feminist studies? (b) How can scholars reckon with the tendency in critical sport sociology to overemphasize negative outcomes for men within dominant sport institutions? and (c) How can studies of masculinity and gender relations in sport be consolidated with analyses of race and ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation?

### *Canonization, Dialogue, or Synergy?*

As a "new men's studies" emerged in the early 1980s, feminist critics were concerned that instead of complementing and supporting feminist women's studies, this new focus would water down, oppose, or even displace women's radical scholarly interventions. Similarly, we ask how the study of masculinities in sport can be integrated into larger feminist frameworks for analyzing sport and gender.

When critical feminist analyses of men in sport were introduced in academic sport studies in the early 1990s, they were quickly and widely accepted and, some might even say, canonized. What factors were operating that might explain the rapid growth of interest in masculinities in sport studies? In retrospect, several explanations come to mind. It is true that the study of masculinities and sport was introduced and developed mostly by male scholars. Could it be, as Messner (1990c) wonders, that feminist ideas simply have more legitimacy when they are introduced by men and are aimed at studying men's lives? Can scholars of masculinities in sport now simply read a male feminist canon and ignore the work of feminist women scholars who laid the conceptual and theoretical groundwork for critical studies of men's sport with a turnover line?

In contrast to what might be labeled the "canonization thesis," we observe that both male and female scholars figured prominently in the development of the study of sport and masculinities during the 1990s. For example, 9 of the 22 editors and contributors to *Sport, Men and the Gender Order* were women, and much of the subsequent scholarly work done on men and masculinities in sport sociology was done by women. Likewise, a number of male scholars conducted research on women in athletics, calling attention to longstanding feminist concerns, such as gender inequity, homophobia, gender bias in media representations, and male athlete violence against women. There were cross-gender collaborations as well. In

summary, under the banner of a “dialogue thesis,” it could be argued that a good portion of the vitality of men’s studies in sport is owed to the ongoing communication and collaboration between male and female scholars. Put another way, the study of men in sport has been informed and energized to a significant extent by dialogue between men and women scholars.

The study of men and sport was also partly fostered by synergy between feminist women’s politics and profeminist men’s politics. Many sport sociologists who studied gender, particularly those associated with the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, attempted to yoke theory and analysis to political vision. Sport was not only studied, but recommendations often were made about how to transform and humanize gender, class, and race relations in and through sport. To the extent that sport sociology became a conduit through which some feminist women and profeminist men interacted and shared ideas, sport sociology in the 1990s may have differed somewhat from the larger pattern of gender segregation that existed in many scholarly and feminist circles. Many mainline male academics “didn’t get” feminist theory and avoided or downplayed feminist scholars and women’s movements. So, too, profeminist male scholars often were unsure about how to approach and work with women feminists. There were also walls between the genders that were constructed within feminism. As Sandra Bartky (1998) wrote, “The Second Wave feminism of the late sixties and seventies emerged and grew strong and confident in an environment where men were largely excluded” (p. xi). And so we wonder whether the political synergies between female and male critical scholars of gender and sport that emerged during the 1990s added wind to the sails of men’s sports studies and extended and expanded the tradition of women’s sport studies that emerged in the 1970s.

### *Staying the Critical Feminist Course*

We suggest two ways for the critical studies of masculinities in sport to stay grounded in—rather than distracted from or antithetical to—feminist theory and women’s policy goals. First, as many of the chapters in this book demonstrate, scholarly analyses of men’s sports experiences should draw from, and dialogue with, studies of women’s sports. We leave it to our readers to discern the extent to which the contributors to this volume tap feminist theories and writings (by women as well as men) in their work.

Second, there is a need to develop critical *relational* studies of gender and sport. Relational analyses take into account the reciprocal relation-

ships between men’s and women’s lives, the fact that constructions of masculinity are interwoven with constructions of femininity. Perhaps because sport is such a gender-segregated institution, the tendency has been to conduct separate studies of “women’s sports” and “men’s sports.” Indeed, these sorts of studies are important and should continue (for excellent examples, see Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Theberge, 1997). Yet, it is increasingly apparent that even when we are studying single-gender sport contexts, the analysis needs to take into account the larger contexts of unequal relations of power that exist between and among women and men. Studies that do this include Thompson’s (1999) analysis of the ways that women’s labor facilitates the sport participation of family members, Boyle and McKay’s (1995) investigation of the exploitation of older women’s labor and leisure in sport, and Kane’s (1995) study of the ways that sport constructs categorical differences between women and men rather than reveals a continuum of bodily performances. Similarly, Messner, Duncan, and Wachs (1996) analyzed televised coverage of women’s and men’s sports, and Sabo (1997) compared inequities in intercollegiate women’s and men’s athletic programs. Miller, Sabo, Farrell, Barnes, and Melnick (1998) studied the associations among boys’ and girls’ athletic participation, sexual behavior, and risk for teen pregnancy, and Tomlinson and Yorganci (1997) analyzed male coach-female athlete relations.

Several of the chapters in this book develop a relational framework for understanding masculinities in sport. Cynthia A. Hasbrook and Othello Harris study interactions between first- and second-grade girls and boys, and Stephan R. Walk examines the experiences of women student trainers in men’s college sports. Don Sabo, Philip M. Gray, and Linda A. Moore report on interviews with women who have experienced violence inflicted by male partners during and after televised sports programs. Readers also can find a relational context behind Todd Crosset’s chapter on athletic affiliation and violence against women, Timothy Jon Curry’s examination of relations of violence in sports bars, and Alan Bairner’s look at the ties between soccer hooliganism and terrorist violence in Northern Ireland. Faye Linda Wachs and Shari Lee Dworkin deploy a relational approach to understanding the construction of gender in sport in their study of race, sexual orientation, and gender in media coverage of famous athletes who have announced that they were HIV-positive.

In one sense, relational approaches like these make it impossible to ignore women’s experience while studying men and masculinities. A relational emphasis also makes it difficult to keep issues of power and inequality far from the center of analysis, thus carrying on the critical impulse in

feminist analysis of sport. At the same time, relational approaches press feminist theories and political agendas to include analyses of men and masculinities, pointing the way toward the development of what Messner (1990c) called "inclusive feminisms." The emergence of more inclusive feminisms may mean that, just as profeminist male scholars seeking to understand the links between sport and masculinity need to take feminist theory and politics into account, so, too, do women feminists need to address somehow the "man question" in sport and the larger gender order. Although we recognize that such a vision of theoretical and political synergy is a formidable undertaking, we also think that the authors in this book are moving in this direction. Conceptually, we are addressing the larger issue of how to integrate the systematic study of men and masculinity into the theoretical and political purview of gender studies (Brod, 1987; Sabo, 1999). Conversely, our work also reflects and extends the profeminist political struggle to strengthen links with women and women's movements.

### *Overemphasis on Negative Outcomes*

Most of the critical feminist writings on men's experiences in sport during the 1980s and 1990s focused on negative outcomes such as pain and injury, misogyny, homophobia, and violence against women by men. In some ways, sport was portrayed as a hostile cultural space for boys to grow up in and to develop relationships with one another and with women. When male athletes bonded with one another, for example, the resulting ties were viewed skeptically as forms of male solidarity that, in turn, reflected and reinforced men's collective domination over women. "Men's sports" were categorically compared with "women's sports," the former being characterized as hypercompetitive, aggressive, hierarchically organized, and detrimental to play and physical health. Drawing on historical themes that prevailed in the development of women's physical education and sport, the domination model of men's sports was readily contrasted with the more playful, less competitive, more health-inducing and body-affirmative culture of women's sports.

Ironically, during the same decades that the critical work on the male sports experience was gathering scholarly mass and momentum, girls and women were entering sport in ever-increasing numbers. The number of girls participating in high school sports in the United States, for example, increased from 1 in 27 girls in 1971 to more than 1 in 3 by 1994. Whereas

31,000 women participated in college athletics in 1972, more than 120,000 do so today. A team of 277 U.S. women competed in the 1996 Olympic Games, the largest number in history. In this context, scholars who critiqued men's sports were sometimes chided with the question, Why were so many girls and women flocking to enter an institutional setting that's so harmful to boys and men? This question is overly simplistic, but a more serious question deserves some attention.

Have sport studies scholars overstated the extent to which sport is a conservative institution that largely reproduces existing inequalities, while ignoring or downplaying the range and diversity of existing sport activities? What are the possibilities for disruption and resistance within dominant sport structures?

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, most of the studies of masculinities in sport emphasized the extent to which men's actions in sport, as well as sport media's framing of sport, largely reproduce and ideologically naturalize existing gender, racial/ethnic, sexual, and class hierarchies. In contrast, scholars have viewed girls' and women's sports in more complex ways. Due to the history of sport being defined as a masculine (and masculinizing) practice, the very existence of athletic women challenges many assumptions underlying the gender order (Cahn, 1994a; Theberge, 1987). On the other hand, corporate interests and media framing of female athletes often serve to neutralize any challenge inherent in female athleticism and to facilitate and profit from the creation of new, but still subordinate, definitions of emphasized femininity. This feminist view of sport as a context in which the cultural meanings of female athletes are contested or "at play" suggests that scholars should study concrete contexts to determine under what conditions girls' and women's athleticism tends more toward a conservative "reproductive agency" or instead toward a more radical or disruptive "resistant agency" (Dworkin & Messner, 1999). The complexity of this perspective that refuses to see women's sport in either-or terms has been taken up in studies of female bodybuilders (Guthrie & Castelnuovo, 1992; Heywood, 1998) and women's professional golf (Crosset, 1995).

Adopting this perspective in the study of men's sports is more tricky. Clearly, sport continues to be an institutional practice through which men's collective power and privilege vis-à-vis women are reproduced and naturalized. Yet, the experiences of individual men or groups of men within sport settings are not uniform. Like racial or class differences, variations in gender identity and behavior also exist among male athletes, along with resistant inclinations and, sometimes, rebellion against forms

of hegemonic masculinity. But when scholars go looking for “resistance” within men’s sports, just what are men said to be resisting?

There are two directions that recent literature has suggested scholars might go with this question. First, the past decade’s critical studies of masculinities in sport mainly examined men’s experience in highly institutionalized team sports such as football, basketball, baseball, hockey, and rugby (e.g., Kidd, 1990; Messner, 1992b; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990; White & Vagi, 1990). Within these contexts, scholars found ritualized masculinization processes that rewarded and reproduced attitudes and practices that oppressed women and marginalized groups of men. However, research that focused on individual, less centralized sports such as swimming (Pronger, 1990) or bodybuilding (Klein, 1993) found a more paradoxical mix of practices that simultaneously reproduced and disrupted (or perhaps even overtly resisted) hegemonic masculinity. More recently, following this lead, Wheaton and Tomlinson (1998) found that the noninstitutionalized athletic context of windsurfing fosters a mix of masculine styles, identities, and practices, ranging from highly misogynistic to cooperative and egalitarian. This sort of research invites scholars to investigate the extent to which activities that are on the periphery (at least before they are commodified and incorporated by commercial interests) can create spaces for alternative relations of gender. Perhaps women and men who are already “turned off” by mainstream competitive sport are attracted to these alternative sports. It might also be that the less institutionalized, rationalized, and/or mediated contexts allow more room for the play of alternative gender display and relations.

A second direction for exploring more nuanced aspects of men’s sports experiences concerns the extent to which, even within conventional and highly institutionalized athletic contexts, there is room for gender play, disruption, or even resistance to hegemonic masculinity. In this volume, Laurence de Garis’s analysis of a certain kind of intimacy that develops in male boxers’ relationships with each other suggests a need to reexamine our assumptions about the “shallowness” that often results from male athletes’ competitiveness, violence, and homophobia among one another. Alan Klein’s chapter on Mexican baseball players similarly challenges narrow and often racist assumptions about the “macho” behaviors of Mexican men. The issue of potential disruption and resistance in men’s sports is also raised in this volume by Brian Pronger’s discussion of gay athletes, and Suzanne Laberge and Mathieu Albert examine the gender transgressions among adolescent boys. Kevin Young and Philip White discuss the ways that sports injuries can disrupt the smooth reproduction of hege-

monic masculinity. David Rowe, Jim McKay, and Toby Miller show how men’s bodies are a “contested” site fraught with contradictions, and Michelle Dunbar analyzes gender contradictions in media portrayals of U.S. basketball player Dennis Rodman. To what extent do gay male athletes, the gender transgressions of adolescent boys, and men’s various bodily experiences (including injuries) destabilize the gender order? Do the manipulations of gender images and sexual orientation of a famous athlete like Dennis Rodman really disrupt the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity in sport? Or does the highly mediated commercial context in which Rodman operates turn his “play” into just another commodity to be consumed?

### *Gender and Difference*

Some might assert that in the critical studies of masculinity in sport during the last two decades, gender became too salient a category for analysis. Following the lead of women scholars in feminist research at large, scholars who study men in sport have begun to ask when an emphasis on gender analysis can obscure, rather than illuminate, a social or cultural context. More specifically, we ask whether the centering of gender analysis in men’s sports risks the development of an oversimplified and falsely universalized conception of hegemonic masculinity that ignores or submerges analyses of race/ethnic inequalities, social class, or sexual orientation differences and inequalities.

Since the early 1980s, women of color have been in the forefront of those who express a need to move “beyond” gender, and, recently, some theorists have begun to point toward concrete ways to explore how gender intersects with multiple systems of inequality (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996; Collins, 1999). The focus on “difference” among women (or among men) and on multiple systems of inequality does not mean ignoring gender. It means starting with the recognition that gender tends to vary in salience in different times and at different social locations. The variable salience of gender is operant simultaneously at the levels of individual identity, group interaction, institutional structures, and cultural symbols and discourse. Thus, a challenge facing sport and gender scholars today is how to retain one’s critical feminist edge and to avoid the tendency to superimpose falsely a simple gender analysis on a social situation one is studying. Instead, researchers need to be sensitive to the varying salience of gender

dynamics within the wider interplay of race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientations, and other systems of difference and inequality.

Some of the more creative explorations of difference and the varying salience of gender in sport studies have come from scholars working within a cultural studies framework that is informed by recent post-structuralist thought. For example, critical analysis of advertisements by multinational sporting apparel companies like Nike, especially when they rely so heavily on exploited women workers in developing countries (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Dworkin & Messner, 1999; Goldman & Papson, 1998; Lafrance, 1998; McKay, 1995), and the analysis of portrayals of African American men in the popular media (Andrews, 1996a; Boyd, 1997b; Cole & King, 1998; Sabo, 1994; Wilson, 1997), connect with a critical analysis of institutionalized racism, black masculinity, and consumer culture in North America. Similarly, Wenner (1998b) examined the "postmodern sports bar" as a paradoxical, highly commercialized masculine space. Studies of sports media have been particularly productive sites for the study of difference and intersectionality (e.g., Sabo & Jansen, 1994, 1998).

Finally, some recent studies of masculinities have been heavily influenced by feminist contentions that human bodies play a pivotal role in both constituting and symbolizing the oppressive and emancipatory dimensions of social relations. As well as the aforementioned emphasis on the "costs" of masculinity to men, this strand of research also has shown how men obtain benefits from socially constructed definitions of their bodily superiority over women, even when the former are divided by race, sexuality, social class, and age. Indeed, most chapters in this volume at least allude to either the material or symbolic ways in which sport is implicated in complex processes surrounding the sexual politics of liberating sporting bodies with a turnover line to show the bottom line of this page.

### *Conclusion*

This book is intended as a touchstone for scholars, researchers, and activists who seek to integrate feminist perspectives into their understandings of men, masculinities, gender relations, and sport. Sandra Harding (1998) asked, "Can men be not just the objects but also subjects of feminist thought? Can men create feminist insights for themselves and the rest of us too?" (p. 171). She answered affirmatively, arguing that men have much to gain from adopting feminist standpoints and, reciprocally, that feminist

theory and practice can be enriched by men's insights and profeminist actions. We hope that the writings in this volume will further the dialogue and political synergy between women and men who seek to understand and transform gender relations in sport.

One of the most welcome developments in profeminist men's studies has been the increasingly sophisticated and pluralistic nature of research at both the theoretical and empirical levels. To reflect and support this healthy commitment to theoretical and empirical diversity, we have included chapters that analyze gender relations and identities at both the micro and macro levels and deploy many theoretical perspectives; blend feminist and profeminist perspectives with the disciplines of anthropology, history, and sociology; and draw on a variety of research techniques (e.g., semiotics, in-depth interviews, surveys, ethnographies). This standpoint aligns with feminist pleas for research on gender to be methodologically and theoretically inclusive and supportive of interdisciplinary research.

The book is organized into three sections. The authors in Part One discuss everyday constructions of masculinity in sport. The writings in Part Two focus on the triad of men's violence in sports. Finally, the authors in Part Three examine ways that dominant forms of gender relations in sport are being contested and transformed.