

Bettina Kratzmüller, Matthias Marschik, Rudolf Müllner,
Hubert D. Szemethy, Elisabeth Trinkl (eds.)

Sport and the Construction of Identities

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Proceedings of the XIth International CESH-Congress
Vienna, September 17th-20th 2006

VERLAG TURIA + KANT

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Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische
Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic Information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the
internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-85132-494-5

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© für diese Ausgabe: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2007

Diese Publikation wurde gefördert durch:

Vize-Rektorat für Lehre und Internationales, Universität Wien
Historisch-Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät der Universität Wien
Zentrum für Sportwissenschaft und Universitäts-sport der Universität Wien
Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, Wissenschafts- und Forschungsförderung

This publication was supported by:

Vice-Rectorate for Educational and International Affairs, University of Vienna
Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies of the University Vienna
Centre for Sport Sciences and University Sport of the University Vienna
City of Vienna, Cultural Department – Science and Research Promotion

VERLAG TURIA + KANT

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THE SOCIAL GENDER AND SPORTIDENTITY: A BIO-SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

IRENE KAMBERIDOU

IDENTITY: A BIO-SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Until the 1970s social scientists studied only class and race as primary factors of social status and identity. Today, in regard to the foundations of identity, gender has been incorporated into race and class. Gender is the axis around which identity is constructed, namely it is the axis around which social life is organized and through which we understand our experiences. However, we continue to act as if gender is related only to women. One must point out that men also have a gender and, as women are subject to social inequalities and exclusions.¹

Discussions on the gender subject, gender identity and corporeality² are no longer based exclusively on the biological sex, but on the social gender which formulates, defines and redefines identity according to historical, bio-socio-cultural interpretations. In the new theoretical framework, gender identity, corporeality, the 'body and gender' are being 're-discovered' and are under 'reconstruction', in other words viewed as 'linguistic conceptions', socio-historical manifestations, transformable meanings and evolving elements of change. Specifically, gender is activated, deactivated or 'neutralized', according to 'time and space', socio-political developments, predominant social conditions and circumstances that transform the meaning of 'biological difference' in society. The biological body, corporeality through which gender identity is defined, represented and reflected, – is a social reality attached to a network of specific symbols, interpretations and ideologies.

In today's postmodernist reality, the biological 'facts' that institutionalized and structured gendered hierarchies – such as in the Olympic sports reality – are being transformed, questioned, debated and redefined. Gender is being transformed from a static biological perception into a dynamic social category, thereby affecting and changing identity, gender relations and the expectations of the social environment. In this theoretical framework the biological gender is losing its primacy as an analytical category in most social spaces.³ For instance, there is no regulated gender classification, imposed by rules and regulations, in Information Society, in Science and Technology, in the Economy, in the political arena, etc., namely gender is 'deactivated' or 'neutralized' in these social spaces.

On the other hand, the biological sex/gender in Olympic sports remains actively present as an analytical category, whether visible or 'invisible,' since it is supported and enforced by rules and regulations. It is activated or de-activated according to the

evolutionary development levels of competitive sports. It is also dynamically present in its pyramidal hierarchies: decision-making sport bodies, organizations, federations, etc. The under-representation of women in Olympic sports is no longer an issue or a problem of 'supply' or lack of supply – namely the reserve of female athletes in competitive sports and that of women in the sport-governing bodies. It is the problem of the 'leaky pipeline' and the 'glass ceiling', specifically how we can change attitudes and social stereotypes and keep women in this social space once they are in, thereby eliminating the 'leaky pipeline', and secondly how to break the 'glass ceiling' and promote women's inclusion, advancement and agency in the sport hierarchies. In other words, how their socialization process once in the fields can be promoted, retained and reproduced.

INSTITUTIONALIZED SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In this transitional stage of the postmodernist period, institutionalized social discrimination or gender exclusion – supported and enforced by rules and regulations – is anachronistic, socially problematic, contradictory, deficient and theoretically inconsistent.⁴ Nevertheless, gender dichotomy in competitive sports, as opposed to other social spaces, continues to be an 'unavoidable', conventional, standard and typical practice, enforced in the name of gender equity and gender equality. It is a contradiction to promulgated Olympic values:

"The IOC strongly encourages, by appropriate means, the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures, particularly in the executive bodies of national and international sports organizations with a view to the strict application of the principle of equality of men and women".⁵

Women are still under-represented in comparison to men, and this, not only because of the socio-cultural causes associated with the chronological delay in eliminating barriers to inclusion, but also due to the particularly high levels of commercialization which originally had obstructed women's inclusion and integration into Olympic sports. For example, in the 1996 Olympic Games of Atlanta, in which a total of 10,305 male and female athletes from 197 member-countries of the Olympic movement participated, only 3,496 were women. In Sidney in the year 2000, the percentage of female athletes was 38,2%. In the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, from a total of 11,099 athletes from 202 countries, 40,7% were women, the largest participation record yet!⁶

Additionally, the biological gender, the glass ceiling effect remains actively visible, in the institutional realities of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), where the proportional representation of women is in the proximity of absenteeism or 'invisibility'. For example, the IOC's institutional hierarchy, until 1981, was exclusively male. From a total of 93 members in 1993, only 7 were women (7,5%). Today,

women in the IOC comprise a 'restricted minority'. From a total of the 116 members only 12 are women (10.3%), a 'violation', an 'infringement', or rather contempt of the Olympic Charter.

SEX AND GENDER

Feminist theories based on 'difference' fell under question in the late 1980s and early 1990s, creating an open space for discussions on gender. By the mid 1990s debates and discourse concerning the terms gender vs. sex, identity, corporeality, femininities, masculinities, 'female masculinity' and male femininity' incisively questioned the concept of 'difference'.⁷ A change of the 'Example' or the 'Model', was observed during this period.⁸ A new theory, a new concept on gender and gender identity was established. For example, the term gender equality replaced 'equality of the sexes', and the term *sex* is now associated primarily with the biological gender as an analytical category. It defines the biological differences between men and women: chromosomes, chemistry and anatomy. Conversely, the term *gender* is associated with the *social gender* which formulates and constructs identity, namely gender identity, ethnic identity, sport identity, etc.

Specifically, the meaning of gender today refers to the social subject, without taking into account the biological sex as an element of social categorization, classification or codification. Both men and women have genders and are defined as gender subjects – a meaning and a concept that attempts to neutralize or deactivate 'difference' in favour of diversity and respect for diversity, equal opportunities, etc. As a result it attempts to deactivate and eventually eliminate social discrimination and exclusions based on 'difference'. Consequently, the gender subject, whether male or female, in this analytical framework, is defined as a conveyor of *identities*, namely a conveyor of social functions, positions, professions or disciplines. This does not however mean that the biological gender (sex) has been eliminated or will no longer exist as a social category. This does not mean that the gender subject has become genderless or has been 'castrated'. It signifies, however, that the biological factor is less and less interrelated to traditional views, perceptions, attitudes and stereotypes concerning identity, masculinity and femininity. It offers a form of 'gender-neutrality' or gender-inclusive perspectives and attitudes in all social spheres. Gender is not disappearing in modern social reality, but it is being transformed from a static biological perception into a dynamic social category, the meaning of which is evolving and as a result affecting and changing gender identities and the expectations and attitudes of the social environment.

Undeniably, gender refers to the meanings, the importance, the ideologies, the socio-political ideas that are attached to 'difference' in a specific culture, society or civilization, according to which – depending on which society or culture – biological difference is either activated, actively present, or it is deactivated or neutralized in

accordance to the prevailing social processes and developments.⁹ Gender identity, for example, differs according to 'space and time' – namely what it means to be a man or a woman, in a specific society or a particular culture, or during a specific historical period. Gender identity, masculinities and femininities, are bio-socio-cultural interpretations, conceptions and meaning that are transformable, manufactured, constructed, structured, restructured and redefined in relation to 'time' and 'topos' (socio-cultural environment). Unquestionably, 'difference' between men and women cannot be examined in general, in other words on a grand or global scale. The women of the world do not comprise one collective unity or one entity and neither do the men. There are many differences amongst women who live in the same society and culture, as there are amongst men – differences related to socio-economic class, race, color, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, physical handicap, etc.

Biological determinism and differential socialization, the two schools or theories that dominate, share two fundamental hypotheses. They distinguish men and women as different. They emphasize or highlight gender differences, thereby ignoring commonalities, sameness as well as multiple identities. In concentrating on difference and social differentiation, in assuming that the differences between men and women are greater and more decisive factors that are worth studying and analyzing, commonalities and sameness have been ignored.¹⁰ Women and men alike have multiple identities. They are conveyors of multiple roles. They have multiple masculinities and multiple femininities. We belong to many categories and have many roles-identities beyond our biological sex: parents, spouses, professionals, employees, workers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, athletes, etc.

In conclusion, gender is about how and when 'difference' promotes social exclusion, in other words, when social differentiation becomes disadvantageous or an obstacle to equal opportunities and participation in social life for the individual, for non-privileged social groups, for non-mainstream groups and social spaces. Consequently, gender 'difference' is a product of social inequalities and exclusions and not the reverse.¹¹ In other words, concentrating only on difference promotes inequalities and social exclusions, whereas diversity advocates not only tolerance but respect, acknowledgment, appreciation or 'celebration' of the 'other' (diversity).

SPORT IDENTITY, THE GENDERED BODY AND GENETIC PERSONIFICATION IN OLYMPIC SPORTS

Sport Identity has been associated with various socio-cultural meanings since the appearance of Olympic sports in the 19th century when women – and not only women – were excluded from most sectors of public life, and obviously from the Olympic games as well. In the beginning Olympic sports were non-inclusive even to certain 'categories' of men. For instance, in regard to 'difference' and consequently

disrespect for ethnic diversity, Olympic sports, had excluded men from the Third world countries from its institutional positions.¹²

Moreover, the biological body in Olympic sports, through which gender identity is defined, is a social reality attached to a network of specific symbols, interpretations and ideologies.¹³ Undeniably, there are arguments according to which the human body is not a product of linguistic interpretations and discussions. Certainly this may apply to certain biological parameters, genetic characteristics related to performance-records in specific Olympic sports. Nevertheless, the historical context of the Olympic phenomenon has shown us, through many examples and models, that anachronistic biologicistic knowledge or biological 'facts' have been accordingly integrated and incorporated into cultural influences, social structures and structural thinking, thereby formulating social views, attitudes and stereotypes concerning capabilities, capacities or performance in relation to biological gender.

Today, even though women do participate in Olympic activity, Olympic sports are still not perceived nor institutionally structured as 'gender-neutral' or gender-inclusive. Gender classification/dichotomy, a 'socio-symbolic class system', is clearly institutionalized as a structural category in Olympic sports, in contrast to other social spaces. In other words, identity continues to be genetically personified in the Olympic culture. To reiterate, it is supported and enforced by rules and regulations, and as result specialized social expectations and sport identities are constructed and highlighted according to 'difference'. Namely in relation to the specific 'value system' and 'meanings' associated with 'difference' in the Olympic sports phenomenon, due to the various socio-cultural 'scales' and not only the 'evaluation scales' of men's and women's actual sport performances. Corporeality, the human body is examined and perceived, as a simple, one-sided and static biological-anatomical unit, instead of a totality of cultural representations and documentations. The gendered 'structural' distinctions, conceive the body as an anatomic-biological entity, as a means, an instrument or a tool for high performance. The structural emphasis given to the biological difference between men and women, as a central category of the institutional composition in Olympic sports, leads to bipolarity in the competitive-sport expression. This bipolarity has implied, since the beginning, that *Olympic sports emphasize genetic characteristics* and are genetically personified – namely not interested if the participating gender subject "has a female or a male body", but that "it is a female or male body".¹⁴ As a result, the human body has been 'instrumentalized', transformed into a 'tool', and rationalized in a different way in accordance to biological stereotyping.

In other words, the human body, regardless of gender, whether a male athlete or a female athlete, is 'measured' only and exclusively in its 'biological dimension', and continues to appear as a 'physio-organic entity' as a 'material entity', as a means to an end, as a 'tool-instrument', for attaining high or maximal performance records at all costs. Systematically neglected and inadequately examined, even today, are the interrelations and interconnections between high performance, the body, the social

subject, and the socio-cultural environment (topos), including the changes and transformations of the body due to the sports training processes, such as the changes incited by intensive training, doping, genetic doping, etc. Additionally neglected have been the consequences, influences and impact of these changes on established views concerning gender identity, such as the multifaceted and multi-variable transformation process of sport identities.

CONCLUSION

The human body, corporeality and sport identity, in the framework of postmodern Olympic social reality, is in the stage of development, in the developmental-evolutionary process of 'being schematized and post-schematized', namely in the process of being shaped, molded, formed, re-formed, reconstructed and redefined – in accordance to controversial views related to socio-cultural and scientific developments.

Corporeality and sport identity, for both genders, must be examined, not only as a biological entity in a medical or sports science framework, but also on a philosophical, sociological, anthropological and psychological basis. In the age of cyborgs, plastic bodies, 'genetic doping', virtual reality technologies, commercialization, and increasing state interventions, we need to reconsider and re-examine how not only Olympic sports or competitive sports, but also exercise and the politics of fitness are deployed and have an impact on our lives. New agendas need to be developed, such as the rethinking and re-evaluation of the categories, relations and interrelations between sport, the body, 'nature', gender, sexuality, race, class, science, power, subjectivity, domination, opposition as well as 'difference' vs. diversity. In view of the new technologies of power new questions need to be raised, such as questions related to resistance strategies and opposition politics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to eventually eliminate social exclusion – the leaky pipeline and the glass ceiling – and make Olympic sports more gender-inclusive, we need to extensively examine, not only on an interdisciplinary level, but also on all social, economic and political levels – theoretical approaches which contribute to the understanding of gender, beyond anachronistic biological theories and outdated conceptions, especially in view of the European Commission's 7th framework, namely gender-inclusive policies, gender mainstreaming, the promotion of international research on the gender subject in the social sciences and in the humanities.¹⁵ Specifically, in order to formulate multi-dimensional and proactive strategies, required is the establishment of an international, interdisciplinary, inter-cultural network of researchers from the

sport sciences, sport studies, sport medicine, the social sciences, the humanities, gender studies, etc., in order to:

1. Addresses critical issues on gender identity and the under-representation of women and non-mainstream groups.
2. Establish on what levels, and under what pre-conditions can theories or theoretical approaches on the gender subject be used as an analytical tool for the examination and understanding of the multi-variable, multifaceted and complex transformation processes of gender identity, and consequently sport identity.
3. Promote effective education strategies that transform social stereotypes before they take root, as in the example of the Peace Games organization's holistic academic model¹⁶, to be incorporated through pilot projects into the EU public school systems.
4. Examine the interrelations between sport performance, the gender subject, the socio-cultural environment and corporeality, including the male/female body aesthetic.
5. Study the social effects and impact of intensive and prolonged specialized training, and not only: the changes and transformations of the body/corporeality due to intensive training, doping, genetic doping, etc., and consequently, the impact of these changes on established social views, attitudes and expectations concerning gender identity and consequently the construction of sport identity.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Patsantaras, Nikolaos & Kamberidou, Irene: "Gender Equity in Olympic Sports: Absence and 'Invisibility'", in: 6 *Pandektis International Sports Law Review* 3-4 (2006), 361-375, p.364.
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- 5 Rule 2, paragraph 5 of the Olympic Charter in force since 18-07-1996, in: www.athens2004.com.

⁶ www.athens2004.com.

⁷ Kimmel: *Society*, p.14.

⁸ Clarke, Gill: "Difference matters: sexuality and physical education", in: Penney: *Gender*, 41-56.

⁹ Kirk, David: "Physical Education: a gendered history", in: Penney: *Gender*, 24-37.

¹⁰ Kimmel: *Society*, p.1,2,5.

¹¹ Kimmel: *Society*, p.15.

¹² Patsantaras, Nikolaos & Kamberidou, Irene: "Gender Equity in Olympic Sports: Absence and 'Invisibility'", in: 6 *Pandektis International Sports Law Review* 3-4 (2006), 361-375, p.364.

¹³ Evans, John & Penney, Dawn: "Talking Gender", in: Penney: *Gender*, 13-24, p.16.

¹⁴ Patsantaras, Nikolaos et al.: "Sindimensionen des olympischen Wettkampfs. Eine systemtheoretische Betrachtung", in: 2 *Das Wissenschaftsmagazin der Deutschen Sporthochschule Köln* (2005), 38-46, p.40.

¹⁵ EU-Council Presidency: "Female Potential as Benefit for Research Community", in: *Das Österreichische Magazin für Forschung und Technologie – Austria Innovative*, Wien 2006, 3a: 22-23. Additionally, in regard to gender mainstreaming also see: European Commission: "Gender Scoreboard 2001. Framework Strategy in Gender Equality, Staff Working Document", in: *European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs*. Brussels, 2001, http://ec.europa.eu/comm/employment_social/gender_equality/docs/workprog/scoreboard_2001.pdf. European Commission: "12010: A European Information Society for Growth and Employment, COM (2005) 229 final, June 1, 2005", *Directorate-General for Information Society and Media*, Brussels, in: http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/ceurope/12010/index_en.htm.

¹⁶ www.peacegames.org