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“I’m not brilliant, but I’m pretty smart”: Compromises and apologies in female college athletes’ constructions of ‘self’

ABSTRACT

With its long history as an exclusively male domain, competitive sports stands as a key site for exploration of the gender constructs and hegemonic structures that persist within athletics, reflecting the conditions and arrangements of society in general. Women have gradually integrated this space, simultaneously upsetting and renegotiating the traditional social arrangements found within it. This integration is an ongoing process, impeded or smoothed by the cultural ideologies of specific historical moments.

In this ongoing study, the author explores how women position themselves within the gendered space of sport. As they construct and establish identities as women, as students, as athletes, and as female athletes, do they encounter competing and contradictory expectations of woman and athlete? To what extent are conflicting identities present, if at all? What discursive practices do these women employ to situate themselves and the identities they construct within the athletic space and the larger social space which they occupy?

In a series of interviews with college aged female athletes conducted at an elite, single-sex, liberal arts college in the northeast United States, the author explores the various identities these women negotiate in varied settings such as on the field, in the classroom, and in the dorm. Using a poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis, interviews were analyzed with a focus on the self-positions the women adopt. The study shows the conflicting discourses they utilize, and the multiple subjectivities they take up in order to make sense of themselves and their lives.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments, on July 23, 1972, marked a radical destabilization of an institution, education, under assault for decades from outsiders—women, people of color, members outside of the upper class (Carpenter and Acosta, 2005). The passage of Title IX came as a result of a call for equity of access and resources. While this legislation referred to all programs offered by educational bodies receiving federal funding, the most profound impact was on America’s high school, college and university sports programs.

Women have gradually integrated a space, the institution of sport, that had previously been an exclusively male domain. Aided by the passage of formal legislation, this integration simultaneously upsets and renegotiates the traditional social arrangements found within sport (Lipsyte, 1979; Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005). [This movement is an ongoing process, impeded or smoothed by the cultural ideologies of specific historical moments. Rather than being simply an athlete, the modifier of ‘female’ often carries with it expectations of behavior, appearance, and values that may *be in* conflict with those same expectations of ‘athlete.’ Thus, while social norms and attitudes as well as legal mandates may now

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clearly permit and facilitate female athletes' entrance into that historically male space, one can still question the process through which female athlete identities are reconciled with other available subject positions available to these women.

Thus, the starting place for this study is the observation that despite coming of age in an era where formal legislation designates their position as 'athlete' to be unproblematic, college aged female athletes must still negotiate various identity positions to resolve the conflicting discourses in their lives. The purpose of this inquiry was to explore those processes of identity negotiation.

On the gendered nature of competitive sport (for full literature review see Appendix 1)

Before the passage of Title IX in 1972, competitive sport was primarily a male domain (Carpenter and Acosta, 2005). Therefore competitive sport presents gender scholars with an opportunity to examine the ways in which the structures of this institution maintain and reify the gender order (Messner, 2000; Dworkin and Messner, 2002; Whitson, 1990). Competitive sports reinforce conventional concepts of masculinity, valuing displays of physical strength, domination of weaker bodies, aggressive and violent performance (Dworkin and Messner, 2002). Women's entrance into the masculine sphere of sports can be seen as a contentious act (Festle, 1996; Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005). Traditional notions of femininity are in conflict with the prevailing values in sport. How does a docile, fragile, weak, small body execute violent, aggressive, competitive acts? By placing the female body within an institution that is grounded on the value of physical strength, the resultant athletic female body becomes a site of conflict (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005; Dworkin and Messner, 2002; Lipsyte, 1979).

Traditional constructions of gender are played out in certain sports and deconstructed in others. By understanding the female athlete to possess contradictory stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, the female athletic body is seen as the embodiment of a more fluid construction of gender. Masculine and feminine traits are not mutually exclusive—bodies can exist that exhibit any number of characteristics and not be considered deviant. Therefore, as this scholarship suggests, the athletic female body may become less of a cultural disruption as notions of both femininity and masculinity change. The specific sporting events themselves can also be released from categories of masculine and feminine. Until then, however, female athletes will continue to struggle with negotiating both gender and athletic identities.

THE STUDY

Thus, the starting place for this study was the observation that despite coming of age in an era where formal legislation designates their position as 'athlete' to be unproblematic, college aged female athletes must still negotiate various identity positions to resolve the conflicting discourses in their lives. The purpose of this inquiry was to explore those processes of identity negotiation.

Theoretical framing: conceptualizing identity and the construction of self

Many intellectual traditions attempt to explain the process by which a self is constituted. This study uses the poststructuralist framework to conceptualize identity and the construction of self.

Within a poststructuralist framework there is no universal, shared interpretation of a fixed reality. Individuals use speech acts, discursive practices, to make sense of and express their lived experience. In doing so, the individual constructs a sense of 'self.'

The language that constitutes a discourse is itself a series of temporary meanings. Language is a chain of words (signs) whose meaning (signifier) is assigned and reconstituted depending on the subject position of the narrator (Weedon, 1997; Calás and Smircich, 1996). Language therefore becomes a site of conflict and power, as different subject positions offer competing discourses of knowledge and reality. Discursive practices not only reflect the subjectivity of the speaker, but produce, reproduce or maintain existing power relations (Henriques, et. al.,1998). A narrative, therefore, serves as a site of conflict against or a reinforcement of social arrangements. In the narrative, the speaker's discursive practices are the tools for constructing an identity and a reality within a social space (Weedon, 1997). Analysis of those practices reveals how the narrator negotiates conflicting or complicit identities. Because a variety of discourses exist within any language; an individual attempts to make sense of, or construct, his/her experience, he/she may only use the discursive resources available to him/her (Weedon, 1997). The discourse available to any individual is reflective of his/her social position, power, and relative access within a particular socio-historical context (Weedon, 1997).

Therefore, poststructuralist scholars assert that the an individual's subject position reflects the disunity, conflict and turmoil of a unique subject's lived experience as reflected through their discursive acts(Weedon, 1997; Davis and Harre, 1990). In the analysis of social texts the focus is not on judging the 'accuracy' of the identity text, but rather is to examine the social implications of how self is constituted using discursive practices, whether through speech or action, to produce social reality.

Poststructuralism, therefore demands a critical analysis of language and the role it plays not only in constructing every individual's concept of self, but in the establishment and maintenance of the social order. In this study the poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis was used in the analysis of interview data. There was a specific focus on the presence or absence of conflicting discourses as participants took up various subject positions in describing the circumstances of their lives.

Methodology (for full Methodology see Appendix 2)

Qualitative research methods offer multiple analytic frameworks grounded in varying epistemologies for the interpretation of narrative accounts. Rather than viewing the "subject" of the interview as an informer who will provide revelatory information on social processes (that are static and decontextualized), the interviewer and interviewee are mutually participating in a construction process (Mason, 2002). Under this framework, the interviewer presents a situation in which the conversation creates conditions where the interviewee draws upon the resources and discursive practices available to her in discussion of a social phenomenon (King, 2004; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Therefore, examination of these women's discursive practices yield insight into how their social world is constantly being constructed, negotiated, and reconstituted (Jorgenson, 2002; Thomas and Linstead, 2002

In this study, interviews between the researcher and participants were used to generate social texts. The individual's athletic and life experiences were not analyzed to gain objective knowledge. Rather, the narratives offered unique interpretations and understandings of lived experiences, illuminating the identity negotiations and competing discourses individuals utilized in making sense of their realities.

Analysis

The interviews revealed multiple identity positions, conflicting discourses, and gendered subjectivities that the participants negotiated in the context of their daily lives (see Appendix 3, Appendix 4, Appendix 5). Below are three exemplary vignettes that highlight each of these negotiations.

Exemplary Vignettes

Positioning Self. In the following vignette, Mary, a 20-year old third year student took up the identity position of “self as diligent athlete.” As Mary took up this identity position, she described her role on the team and athletic ability as the result of her effort and hard-work. As Mary demonstrated, this identity position was taken up in other contexts, including the classroom:

When I asked Mary about different kinds of athletes and the type of athlete she is, she described playing against competitors at other schools: *“I played girls in high school from (other town) who just could play soccer. And it was just like watching ballerinas. Just like effortless. People were just naturally strong, they could just beat somebody.”* Mary contrasted her own construction of herself as an athlete, emphasizing her work ethic and the translation of that work ethic to her academic identity, *“Because...yeah, I wouldn't even say that my soccer skill necessarily came naturally to me. That was something also that I had a work ethic to get better. Always trying to sharpen my skills and be better. And I think that in that way it sort of parallels school for me. I would have to keep working through those things for me that might have been limiting me or that seemed like, you know, they were huge hurdles to get over.”* Mary reinforced the natural ability of others and her identity position as the “diligent athlete” as she situated herself in a supporting role on the team, *“Playing with people who were really naturally great soccer players and being sort of the, mentally aware person on the team, the person who wanted to assist, the person who wanted to distribute. That was something that made soccer so fun for me—making those moments happen for other people.”*

As Mary took up the identity position of “self as diligent athlete” she demonstrated her investment in maintaining sharp distinctions between those she deemed to be natural athletes and herself, an athlete whose competency came from hard work and mental acuity. With this identity position, she extended the ‘natural ability’ framework to other areas of her life, such as academics. Peers’ perceived competence in the classroom as an essential ability rather than achieved state, while her performance was the result of diligence and hard work. By taking up this position, Mary was able to dismiss any failure to ‘measure up’ to the performances of peers as a lack of natural ability rather than inadequate preparation or effort.

Managing conflicting discourses. When participants engaged in identity work, they took up various subject positions dependent on specific contexts. The numerous contexts and subject positions lent themselves to contradictory norms, behaviors, and expectations that were expressed through the conflicting discourses voiced by the subjects. In the vignette below, Michelle, a 21 year-old third year student expressed the conflict she experienced between being an ‘athlete’ and being a ‘woman.’ She articulated the peer as well as self-censure she engaged in in order to rationalize athletic prowess with traditional notions of femininity.

Michelle described her experiences in middle school as the tallest person in her class, coupled with her affinity for sports: *“Like in middle school I was the tomboy. My nickname was the Jolly Green Giant because I was taller than...at least four inches taller than the tallest guy in middle school. And I would always get picked like first for the teams in gym and the boys would be like (mimicking) ‘Oh, you’re such a man cuz they picked you first.’ And I would be like, ‘You are just jealous cuz they picked me over you.’ But then I felt self-conscious.”* While Michelle defended herself from the taunts of her male peers, internally she was conflicted over the failure to ‘do gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) appropriately. She recounted how she engaged in half-hearted compensatory strategies in an attempt to reaffirm her membership in the female sex category, *“But then at that point I thought maybe I should do girly things. All my friends did girly things. I tried to wear my hair down occasionally. But it just...Like all my friends were into dance. Like the girls who were into soccer like they were my friends because they played a sport but it was like soccer where they wore makeup to like practice and did their hair and I was just like, ‘Whatever. I don’t care.’”*

Michelle voiced conflicting discourses of ‘athlete’ and ‘woman.’ Michelle found that her peers were critical of her actions and behaviors. As a result she engaged in strategies to align herself more closely with female peers whom she identified as doing gender appropriately. She pointed to other female athletes, soccer players, whose accomplishment of gender is detrimental to ‘doing’ athlete. Her final comment betrayed her ambivalence towards maintaining traditional notions of both female and athlete. Rather, she seemed to have reconciled the conflicts and managed them in a manner that was appropriate for her.

Gendered subjectivities. As participants negotiated various subject positions and managed conflicting discourses, their subjectivities were gendered in interesting ways. The subject position of ‘female athlete’ was one that participants were resistant to take up. However, participants were eager to elucidate the ways in which sport was gendered, and female and male athletes were different. They were hesitant to acknowledge differences between male and female athletes that suggested men were more physically suited to athletics, as normative constructions of gender would suggest, while they simultaneously emphasized the finesse and mental aspects of the women’s approach to sport. The following vignette was constructed from

the comments of several participants who simultaneously deconstructed and bolstered the gendered nature of sport:

When asked how she defined a ‘female athlete,’ Anne, a 21-year old third year student articulated the definition of a female athlete in relation to the perceived differences between male and female athletes: *“I don’t know...I definitely notice the differences between female and male athletes. More on the biological level—they can run faster. From what I’ve been told and read, men are naturally built for that because...stupid crap...It’s really funny cuz I tried out for the baseball team; it was a farm league. I was the only girl on the team and they were all complaining about it until we ran bases and I could run faster than them and they shut up.”* Anne acknowledged physical difference but provided an anecdotal account that discounted that difference. Other participants spoke to the physical nature of men’s sports and contrasted it to the women’s game, which they felt relied more on finesse than power, *“I think you know, to be a female athlete, I think a lot more in terms of the mental aspects of the game.”* And: *“Men’s soccer I think is too much of a physical game for me. It’s not as much skill or finesse. It’s more of a power struggle. You know, who can kick it the farthest. Whereas women are more technical in their game. And kind of ironically, I enjoy watching men’s lacrosse and ice hockey because it is more physical. Checking is allowed in hockey and you can’t hit somebody with your stick in women’s lacrosse. For me that’s the more entertaining game to watch.”*

While the participants could point to instances where they had physically outperformed men, *“I could run faster than them”* their resistance to the gendered subjectivity of sport was not consistent. Participants affirmed traditional gender construction through their assertion of men’s reliance on strength and power for successful performance and women’s emphasis on mental focus and finesse. Many pointed to structural constraints in the women’s game, rules against checking for instance, that oriented the game towards development of skillful ball handling and frequent passing, rather than shows of force to overcome opponents. The women’s comments betrayed frustration with the perception that their play was any less physical than that of their male counterparts, lest their game be seen as a lesser version of the men’s game, but they reinforced gendered constructions of sport through their emphasis on their more skillful, mentally focused approach to play.

DISCUSSION

The preceding vignettes highlight some of the identity positions, conflicting discourses, and gendered subjectivities that college aged female athletes grapple with as they negotiate the varied spaces of their lives. It is important to consider the conflicts and compromises female athletes navigate as they formulate self in the context of a post Title IX world. Simply enacting legislation and urging compliance does not necessarily result in an ideological shift in sport. Quantitative data suggests great strides have been made towards achieving parity in sport. But that is simply an incomplete picture. Society’s response to a new

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generation of female athletes must be scrutinized beyond participation rates. As these vignettes suggest, the narratives of these women speak to the deeply ingrained gender constructs and hegemonic structures they encounter during what still remains a subversive act--participation. The narratives reveal the processes by which women are and are not complicit in maintaining the status quo, despite opportunities to disrupt historical structures. Revealing this complicity illuminates the potential for change. The identity negotiations and discursive tools utilized by these women present opportunities for rethinking gender in sport, and self in general. Further, the experiences of these athletes are not confined solely to the field. As these women enter different organizational settings, the classroom or the corporate board room, how they have constituted 'self' will inevitably impact the social and cultural spaces they occupy.

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Appendix 1

On the gendered nature of competitive sport

Sport sociologists have long examined the institution of sport and its place in United States culture (Whitson, 1990; Lipsyte, 1979; Frey and Eitzen, 1991). Prior to the passage of Title IX, sports were viewed as an essential developmental experience for males, imbuing them with skill sets and personal qualities that would be necessary as they entered the public sphere (Whitson, 1990). This is a primary assumption of the function of sport: the transfer a set of values and attributes—leadership, strength, self-discipline, competitiveness, teamwork, endurance, responsibility—that are associated with masculinity (Whitson, 1990; Frey and Eitzen, 1991) on to participants (historically male). In what Lipsyte (1979) refers to as the ‘varsity syndrome,’ competitive sports serves as a process of selection where participation is systematically denied to all but a select few who are deemed to be physically, mentally, and emotionally suitable. Those unable to ‘make the cut’ are seen as lacking in some essential maleness. During this selection process that starts at youth, these ‘talented’ and ‘gifted’ athletes are socialized into the sport culture that has defined itself on a constrained and limited set of behavioral expectations(Whitson, 1990; Frey and Eitzen, 1991; Kidd, 1990).

Before the passage of Title IX in 1972, competitive sport was primarily a male domain (Carpenter and Acosta, 2005). Therefore competitive sport presents gender scholars with an opportunity to examine the ways in which the structures of this institution maintain and reify the gender order (Messner, 2000; Dworkin and Messner, 2002; Whitson, 1990). Competitive sports reinforce conventional concepts of masculinity, valuing displays of physical strength, domination of weaker bodies, aggressive and violent performance (Dworkin and Messner, 2002). There is little room for deviation from those ideals (Dworkin and Messner, 2002; Whitson, 1990; Frey and Eitzen, 1991). Women’s entrance into the masculine sphere of sports can be seen as a contentious act (Festle, 1996; Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005). Traditional notions of femininity are in conflict with the prevailing values in sport. How does a docile, fragile, weak, small body execute violent, aggressive, competitive acts? By placing the female body within an institution that is grounded on the value of physical strength, the resultant athletic female body becomes a site of conflict (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005; Dworkin and Messner, 2002; Lipsyte, 1979). A muscled, sweating, strong female body that runs as fast or hits the ball as hard as any man can be seen as a threatening, disruptive body. Scholars have argued that in order to rationalize women’s participation in sports and maintain hegemonic masculinity, both men and women have actively engaged in a variety of tactics that position the female body in a less-threatening way (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005; Carty, 2005; Christian, 2004). An athletic female body, strong, muscled, at times violent, can be used in service of weakening masculine/feminine dichotomies. Carty suggests that changing cultural values in response to women’s participation in athletics have allowed for a new standard of beauty, one that enables strength to be desirable (by men), thereby putting the powerful athletic body in a less threatening space.

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Not all sports and female athletes are viewed under the same lens. Traditional constructions of gender are played out in certain sports and deconstructed in others. Sports like tennis and figure skating, with their lack of physical contact between players, revealing uniforms, absence of team play, and de-emphasis on violence, serve as an expression of athletic performance that can reinforce traditional notions of femininity. Some believe that other sports like basketball, rugby, and soccer call for a different, more 'masculine' athletic performance (Carty, 2005). Many female athletes are discouraged from participation in an activity that exposes them to possibly critical or hostile scrutiny of their gender identity and/or sexuality. Studies of high-school girls have shown greater declines in participation rates in sports that are deemed as masculine (i.e., basketball) than in sports seen as more socially appropriate (i.e., tennis) over the course of a high school athletic career (four years). Further, girl's participation in those more masculine sports has caused participants to experience more negative reactions from both peers and adults, than peers who participate in typically 'feminine' sports (Videon, 2002).

Sports sociologists have noted that female athletes are faced, at all levels of participation and from youth to adulthood, with maintaining the appearance of heterosexuality (Carty, 2005; Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005; Pelak, 2002). Primary to maintaining heterosexuality, is confirming femininity. Because the athletic body is the site of destabilization, it is important to utilize markers on the body itself in service of displaying appropriate feminine attributes. Femininity is conveyed through markers such as ribbons in the ponytail, makeup and jewelry worn during competition, and tighter and shorter uniforms (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005). Sport selection is also important. Avoidance of sports gendered as 'male,' such as soccer and basketball, serves to affirm femininity as well. Confirming femininity reassures both men and other women of the participant's heterosexuality. Long burdened with the lesbian stereotype (Christian, 2004, Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005; Pelak, 2002; Kidd, 1990), female athletes find themselves faced with the assumption that athletic talent equates to homosexuality. This burden is often revealed in the off-court tactics employed by athletes. Studies of high school and college aged girls have revealed that these athletes place a high value on maintaining a heterosexual relationship, achieving signifiers of heterosexual femininity like homecoming and prom queen, and participating in beauty pageants (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005; Christian, 2004).

Sports sociologists have pointed to the use of the lesbian stigma is invoked to discourage women's participation the male domain of sports. This label rationalizes women's invasion of sports, implying that a 'real' woman would not play sports; therefore women who do are not 'real' women (Carty, 2005; Festle, 1996). Consequently, this tactic assures men that they are not being challenged at their own game by 'real women,' neutralizing the danger of a woman being an equal or superior athlete to any man. Maintenance of athletic masculinity in this way requires that women be sub-par athletes. Any deviation from this standard can be reconciled by questioning the participants' sexuality. Sexuality, in this case, is a proxy for masculinity and femininity, and is used as a determinant of athletic performance and ability. Use of sexuality in this manner has consequences for male athletes: a man that competes against a woman and then loses risks having his sexuality called into question (Whitson, 1990; Kidd, 1990).

Another identity negotiation facing female athletes is the questioning of their membership in the assumed sex category. For example, an extremely talented female athlete may not even be a woman at all—a female athlete is not a *real* woman (Christian, 2004; Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin, 2005). For example, in newspaper accounts of the exploits of 1930s athlete Babe Didrikson, reporters often referred to her masculine traits, going so far as to question how she should be addressed—as ‘Miss’, ‘Mrs.’, ‘Mr.’, or ‘It’ (Festle, 1996). The implication of such commentary is that essential qualities attributed to women have been sacrificed to serve her transition from female to female athlete. In response, many female athletes expend tremendous energy promoting their off-court lives, which include having a husband and child-rearing. This response, especially prevalent among professional athletes who are subjected to the media spotlight, refutes the stereotype that sports participation hinders a woman’s ability to achieve society’s expectation of her—to rear children. The presence of a husband confirms her heterosexuality and assures other men that despite a commanding presence on the field, she conforms to the ideal of mother and wife, subservient to the male head of the household (Carty, 2005).

As Carty suggests, rather than viewing the athletic body as merely a sexualized entity, subject to male subordination, it can be seen as a renegotiation of formerly dichotomous gender categories (2005). By understanding the female athlete to possess contradictory stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, the female athletic body is seen as the embodiment of a more fluid construction of gender. Masculine and feminine traits are not mutually exclusive—bodies can exist that exhibit any number of characteristics and not be considered deviant. Therefore, as this scholarship suggests, the athletic female body may become less of a cultural disruption as notions of both femininity and masculinity change. The specific sporting events themselves can also be released from categories of masculine and feminine. Until then, however, female athletes will continue to struggle with negotiating both gender and athletic identities.

Becoming a woman and an athlete

In the post Title IX era, access to sport enables women to begin their athletic careers at four and five years old and continue organized participation through high school and college. But just as there is an assumption of skill transfer from participation (Hanson and Kraus, 1988; Frey and Eitzen, 1991; Miracle and Rees, 1994; Shulman and Bowen, 2001)—leadership, responsibility, teamwork, competitiveness—the previous studies illustrate the gendered expectations that female athletes face starting from their initial sport experience. How do the expectations and frameworks girls encounter in sport impact their negotiation of the gender order as they transition to adulthood?

Researchers of adolescent development have shown that during adolescence, a time when the transition to adulthood is in the process of negotiation, the gender regimes (Williams, 2002)—the gender relations specific to particular places and times—and expectations that girls encounter in the social world have profound effects on their construction of self (Williams, 2002; Shakib and Dunbar, 2002).

Adolescence marks a time when girls are negotiating various identities, experimenting with and practicing

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different ways of being (Williams, 2002). In L. Susan Williams's study, the researcher analyzes the social texts generated by twenty-six adolescent girls in two northeastern communities to explore the ways in which they navigate the gendering process. Williams posits that during adolescence girls do not 'do gender' as West and Zimmerman (1987) describe in their well-known article, but rather 'try on gender.' Trying on gender is a process whereby a person, in the process of constructing an identity, anticipates, experiments, retreats from, and resists normative gender expectations in service of ultimately adapting a gendered identity later on (Williams, 2002). Using this framework, adolescent gendering can be viewed as a contextual, on-going process that is actively shaped by social interaction and experiences. The researchers identified three distinct ways in which the girls tried on gender. First, many girls' trying on gender is tenuous. In this process adult gender roles are seen with ambivalence, and many characteristics associated with 'ideal' femininity, such as dieting, are postponed. Independence is valued but causes conflict with expectation that women be passive (Williams, 2002). Many of the girls tried on gender and resisted gender-traditional norms. This behavior manifests itself in exploration and assertion into 'male' territory, such as career choices and subverting social expectations when they ask boys on dates. Trying on gender also included gender as emphasized femininity. This conceptualization of gender marked the girls' entrance into high school, where social interactions with female and male peers had a significant impact on behavior. The role of appearance tended to constrain the girls' desire to deviate from traditional constructions of femininity and beauty. Further, value was placed on romantic attachments to male peers, and girls expressed decreased interest in activities associated with masculine behaviors, particularly sports.

Since the enactment of Title IX, there has been growing interest in the experiences of female athletes. Often the athletes' narratives themselves suggest that legislative gender equity may have been achieved, but women's entrance into sport has far-reaching consequences that do not suggest the dismantling of traditional social structures and gender regimes. The female athletic experience is rife with contradictory expectations and pressures that assault these athletes from their very first athletic experience and follow them over the course of their careers. In Michael Messner's yearlong observation of a recreational boys' soccer team, the salience of gender and normative gender expectations emerge, despite the young age, four and five, and this is their first organized athletic experience. In what Messner refers to as a 'magnified moment,' the researcher observed an interaction between a boys' team, the Sea Monsters, and a girls' team (also four to five years old), the Barbie Girls, that illuminated the ways in which gender boundaries are activated and enforced in sport (Messner, 2000). While both teams were waiting to engage in a league-wide parade, the boys' team became agitated and was prompted to take aggressive action at the sight of the girls team engaged in singing and dancing Barbie-related songs. Rather than allowing the girls team to celebrate their mascot amongst themselves, the boys took up the chant of "No Barbie! No Barbie!" When the girls' team failed to react to the chant, the boys mobilized and began running into the girls' space, forcing them into a defensive position (Messner, 2000). Parents observed the scene, smiling, and making comments about the innate differences between boys and girls, and their tacit approval signaled commitment to maintaining those differences. At no point during the season did parents remark upon the

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similarities between the boys and girls—that they were learning to play the same game, were experiencing turbulent emotions associated with winning and losing, were making friends and gaining skills such as teamwork and leadership. Further, when the Sea Monsters were being inattentive or not playing as expected, their (male) coach would invoke image of the Barbie Girls, threatening to ‘get them’ after the boys, presumably motivating the boys to perform at a higher level (Messner, 2000).

Even at the ages of four and five, female athletes are positioned differently than male athletes (Messner, 2000). Messner’s account illustrates the notion that it is perfectly ‘natural’ for boys to disrupt and destroy the girls’ celebration of team unity, eliciting approval from parents of both the boys and girls. Parental approval and the strength of group behavior was a powerful inhibitor of dissenting behavior (2000). Male children who may have been inclined to join the girls in their celebration of Barbie were prevented from doing so, and female children who may not have identified so strongly with Barbie were also silenced. Moreover, their mere existence as female athletes can be used as a motivational tool, implying that boys not performing optimally would make the boys appropriate competitors for female athletes. The organization of the youth soccer establishment, and presumably other youth sport bodies, does very little to present alternatives to traditional gendered divisions of labor and power arrangements. Messner observed the vast majority of all head coaches, across all age groups for both boys and girls, were men; and virtually all team managers, commonly referred to as ‘Team Moms’ were women (2000). Board members were almost entirely male. Female athletes start their athletic careers learning that men are coaches, women prepare snacks and organize team parties, and at any moment a boys’ team can disrupt, mock and physically challenge their right to organize as a team. Further, their athletic experiences are not deemed comparable to their male peers. Threats of head to head competition, with the implicit message that a defeat would be humiliating, are used to motivate boys to improve their quality of play (Messner, 2000).

If the initial sporting experience is imbued with coded meanings and structures that enforce normative gender expectations, then the perpetuation of these arrangements in sports goes uncontested (Shakib and Dunbar, 2002). Research on male and female athletes later in their careers suggests that both sexes are complicit in maintaining the gender order (Shakib and Dunbar, 2002). In a study of 44 racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse United States high school basketball players, Shakib and Dunbar explore how study participants experience a traditionally masculine sport, using gender as a framework for analysis. Both male and female players actively positioned women’s basketball as a modified, and therefore less socially valuable, version of the men’s game. The primary distinction between the men’s and women’s game, is the greater physicality of men’s game. The participants equated physicality to athletic performance—in their assessment male players play a more physically intense game; therefore they are superior athletes. This implication reinforces the values of hegemonic masculinity (Shakib and Dunbar, 2002). In order to be an athlete, one must embody the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity; this framework negates the possibility of a female who is a ‘real’ athlete. Instances where females and males engaged in direct competition on the basketball court held the potential for

reconstituting social arrangements, but for both parties served to reinforce the status quo gender order. If a male wins the competition, it is a matter of course; he is supposed to. A male player who is defeated by a female is shunned by his peers, humiliated, and most powerfully, has his masculinity called into question. Often, the male athlete rationalizes his loss by stating he did not play his hardest or he let the girl win. No acknowledgement of the female's athletic ability is given. The commentary of female athletes does little to destabilize normative gender expectations. Many describe taking intense pleasure in defeating male peers, enjoying the seeming praise of other males of 'she plays like a guy' or 'she made him look sorry' (Shakib and Dunbar, 2002). These comments do not praise the athletic ability of the female player. Rather they equate her talent to masculine athletic skill and imply her opponent was weak, neither athletic nor masculine enough to be a worthy competitor. Female athletes reported having their gender identity frequently assaulted, being called 'tomboy' or 'dyke,' as their athletic behavior was seen as a transgression of normative gender boundaries. Often these athletes engaged in behaviors meant to overemphasize their femininity, effectively apologizing for non-normative behavior, through careful selection of attire and compulsory heterosexuality. Shakib and Dunbar illustrate how male and female athletes participate in policing gender expectations in male terrain, monitoring behaviors and responding with peer sanctions to transgressions of the traditional construction of gender (2002).

THE PROPOSED STUDY

Thus, the starting place for this study is the observation that despite coming of age in an era where formal legislation designates their position as 'athlete' to be unproblematic, college aged female athletes must still negotiate various identity positions to resolve the conflicting discourses in their lives. The purpose of this inquiry is to explore those processes of identity negotiation.

Theoretical framing: conceptualizing identity and the construction of self

Many intellectual traditions attempt to explain the process by which a self is constituted. I will provide a brief overview of several of these theoretical models to provide a background for the perspective that I will be using in this project.

The humanist tradition. A humanist approach suggests the self is derived over time in relation to those who are defined as 'like' and 'other' (Henriques, et. al., 1998). Categories that include 'self' and categories that exclude self but include others provide the framework for devising an identity (Davies and Harre, 1990; Henriques, et. al., 1998). This process gives rise to an understanding of the self as continuous, rational, and unitary. The unitary self is derived from an individual entity that thinks, acts, and perceives autonomously, functioning in an absolute reality. The individual's conscious experience is therefore the primary force in forming sense of self. For humanists, experience is identity (Gergen, 1997). In the

humanist tradition, an individual's inner reality is also their external reality. Society and all social relations are the result of the interactions between these individuals (Sampson, 1989).

In humanism, the concept of individual subjectivity is paired with an assumption of human agency. The attribution of agency to all individuals results in the presumption that actions, and consequently, outcomes, result from an individual's deliberate choices (Gergen, 1997). In making choices freely, individuals are imbued with both liberty and moral responsibility. Society and the conditions found within it are therefore directly attributable to conscious choices of individuals.

Unlike identity theory (discussed below), which acknowledges pre-existing possibilities of category membership, the humanist tradition does not account for hierarchies and social structures that both limit and dictate the 'selves' that may be constructed by the individual. Additionally, while individuals may have the appearance of human agency, humanism cannot account for situations whereby an individual's conscious choices have resulted in the denial of other's liberty (Gergen, 1997). Further, an individual's choices that are made under conditions where liberty is constrained are not made freely. Other theories of identity attempt to address this conflict.

Identity Theory. In social psychology, identity formation theory uses a framework for identity construction whereby social categories precede the individual (Stets and Burke, 2000). Like humanism, the individual derives their sense of self largely through membership in groups and categories to which they do or do not belong. While the humanist tradition emphasizes the conscious experience of the individual and human agency as critical to identity formation, identity possibilities are constrained by preexisting conditions in society (Gergen, 1997). Identity theory denies some degree of human agency found in humanism.

In identity formation theory, the basis for identity is through a role, or 'what one does' (Stets and Burke, 2000). Under this framework of identity formation, self is constructed through a process referred to as 'identification.' During identification, an identity is constructed reflexively. It can be thought of as an object that is categorized, classified or named in relation to pre-existing social categories (Stets and Burke, 2000). Self-categorization is aided by the cultural symbols that assign positions. These positions are essentially stable and are points of recognition for self-assignment to structured social categories. An identity is activated by the recognition of these cultural symbols, identification with those symbols, and enactment of the role expectations attributed to the symbols. Under identity theory, the various identities an individual takes up originate from membership in the groups and the resultant roles one must occupy (Stets and Burke, 2000).

In comparison to social identity theory, where group membership is predicated on alignment and uniformity of perceptions and actions among in-group members, identity theory locates the self in differences between the actions of a role that is taken up as it compares to role identities that are not taken up (Stets and Burke, 2000). More specifically, social psychologists are concerned with the meanings of different role occupations and how the roles are enacted in relation to others. They emphasize the adoption

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of self-meanings that people attribute to the different roles they take up and how various expectations of those roles influence interaction with those who occupy other roles within a group (Stets and Burke, 2000). Therefore, the core of one's identity in identity formation theory is the manner in which one internalizes the expectations for behavior, attitudes, and values that are associated with a specific role performance (Stets and Burke, 2000).

Social Identity Theory. A theory closely tied to identity theory, social identity theory emphasizes the categories or groups that people belong to, rather than the roles they take up (as in identity theory) (Stets and Burke, 2000). Like identity theory, the self in social identity theory is constructed reflexively and relationally depending on the social categories and classifications that the individual perceives to be available to him/her. During the process of self-categorization, a person identifies a social category or group and aligns himself/herself with that group on the basis of similarities in ideology, values, appearance or any number of qualities by which a person may perceive likeness (Stets and Burke, 2000). Those who are deemed similar are members of the 'in-group,' and those who differ from the self are regarded as 'out-group' (Stets and Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). All social interactions are then compared and contrasted to the actions of the individual, the members of the in-group, and the out-group (Tajfel, 1981). Under this framework, the individual's concept of self is derived and understood from knowledge of group membership and the attendant values and expectations of that group membership. Further, the individual will seek out new groups and group membership if he/she perceives that these groups will have a positive impact on his/her own concept of self (Tajfel, 1981).

A critical component of social identity theory is the assumption of a structured society. Categories precede individuals, where available categories are arranged in a binary hierarchy. Each category has relative status, power and prestige that dictate the ways in which the individual constructs a sense of self relative to others in society (Stets and Burke, 2000). Under social identity formation theory, the unchanging and static natures of binary categories and the individual's own notion of self tend to constrict the available constructions of self. A self other than that which fits into dualistic categories predicated on the concept of 'like' and 'not like' is not typically available (Stets and Burke, 2000). Such a deterministic view of people and social processes inhibits fluidity of identity and the possibility for alteration of social arrangements.

Performativity. The theory of performativity arose as an alternative framework of linguistic analysis that contests the logical positivist notion of authentication and verification of statements. For example, the declaration, "The sky is blue" is descriptively true. However in the statement, "I promise I will return your car unharmed tomorrow" the speaker has made a promise, an illocutionary act, which makes this statement a performative utterance. In the performative category, statements are utterances with no inherent truth value because their purpose is not to describe the world. Rather the intention of utterances is act upon the world (Hall, 2000). The success of performative utterances is judged on a set of felicity conditions

(felicitous or infelicitous), rather than the positivist standard of true and false. As Hall points out, declarations are 'performative' rather than 'constative' because it is the action of making the utterance that results in an act being performed. In this way, words used in the performative do conform to one's notion of the world. However, availability and selection of words also alters the world to "fit" the word choice (Hall, 2000). Therefore, cultural norms are constituted through the repetition of performative utterances, rituals, and speech acts which are judged felicitous.

Theorists conceptualize self as constructed and constituted through methodical, routine, and recurring acts. For example, as Butler points out, gender itself is a performative; as it constitutes the very act it performs (Hall, 2000; Butler, 1990). Speech acts are perpetrated under masculine and feminine ideologies. Speakers use such speech acts in accordance with social norms to produce conforming gendered selves. Therefore, all aspects of identity are performed through repetitive action. Traditional aspects of a social identity precede and therefore dictate those repetitions creating 'scripted' actions. Self is not what one 'is' but what one 'does,' making both behaviors and discursive practices integral to that concept.

Identity as discursively constructed

Poststructuralist construction of self. The poststructuralist tradition offers a further explanation of self that accounts for several limitations of previous theories. Self is constructed relationally, generating a subjectivity that is positioned through the force of discursive practices. Rather than assuming a static, unitary self, the subjectivity of poststructuralism allows for an ambiguous concept of self. Experiences can be understood as products of a fluid construction that includes the categories and concepts of subjectivity available to the narrator. The availability of multiple discourses in relation to the subjectivity of each narrator enables simultaneous realities. These realities accommodate diverse subject positions and interpretations of experience (Weedon, 1997; Calas and Smircich, 1999; Davis and Harre, 1990)

Poststructuralism demands a critical analysis of language and the role it plays not only in constructing every individual's concept of self, but in the establishment and maintenance of the social order. Shotter refers to 'social accountability,' to describe the imperative of maintaining an individual's status primarily through their use of language (Shotter, 1989). He contends that individuals use certain prescribed modes of talking to maintain their status in a desired social group. Maintaining this status becomes a moral requirement, demanding that the individual express him or herself in a manner which does not invoke sanction from those the individual considers to be peers. Using modes of expression that will be met with approval by others, the individual internalizes a certain reality (Shotter, 1989). Recounting or reflecting upon an individual's reality, or their experience in that reality, is accomplished with limited language resources that precede the experience. Therefore, in accounting for reality as well as the self in that experience of reality, the language that is imposed dictates how reality can be understood and constructed.

Self constituted in this way is subject to the dominant social order through use of such legitimated speech. Foucault cited the relationship between discourse and power, outlining specific 'epistemes,' or discursive frameworks that essentially dictated socially legitimate modes of speech, and as a consequence, thought (Parker, 1989). Foucault conceived the self as both the subject and object of a speech that is constrained by a particular time and space. However, individuals and minority groups emerge who contest this dominant social order. Positions they assume and the discursive practices they employ subvert society's conventions. While these actions are oftentimes met with disapproval and peer sanction, they can serve to destabilize social structures and alter modes of expression.

Discursive practices of poststructuralist selves

A poststructuralist framework for discourse analysis is grounded in the idea that the author of a narrative, the creator of a social text, is located within a social context that evolves in relation to others (Calás and Smircich, 1999). The discourse utilized by that narrator is simultaneously constrained and enabled through whatever language is available to the narrator during that moment, constituting the narrator's subject position (Davies and Harre, 1990). One's subject position, or subjectivity, is not a fixed state. It is a socially produced phenomenon and must therefore reflect the diversity of lived experience. Within a poststructuralist framework there is no universal, shared interpretation of a fixed reality. A variety of discourses exist within any language, therefore as an individual attempts to make sense of, or construct, their experience, they may only use the discursive resources available to them (Weedon, 1997). The discourse available to any individual is reflective of their social position, power, and relative access within a particular socio-historical context (Weedon, 1997). Therefore, poststructuralist scholars assert that the an individual's subject position reflects the disunity, conflict and turmoil of a unique subject's lived experience as reflected through their discursive acts(Weedon, 1997). In the analysis of social texts the focus is not on judging the 'accuracy' of the identity text, but rather is to examine the social implications of how self is constituted. For example, an individual may construct self in a way that serves to reproduce and legitimate social structures that oppress that individual (Kitzinger, 1989).

The method for expressing one's subject position, for making sense of personal experience, is through the use of discursive practices. Discursive practices, whether through speech or action, produce social reality. Further, discursive practices carry the speaker's history as well as the history of the signifiers the speaker employs. Therefore, language serves to establish a position for the speaker as well as reinforce the structures undergirding the existing social arrangements. The words that a speaker does not utilize in social contexts are just as important as the words the speaker does utilize (Davies and Harre, 1990; Calás and Smircich, 1999).

The language that constitutes a discourse is itself a series of temporary meanings. Language is a chain of words (signs) whose meaning (signifier) is assigned and reconstituted depending on the subject position of the narrator (Weedon, 1997; Calás and Smircich, 1996). Language therefore becomes a site of conflict and power, as different subject positions offer competing discourses of knowledge and reality.

Discursive practices not only reflect the subjectivity of the speaker, but produce, reproduce or maintain existing power relations (Henriques, et. al.,1998). A narrative, therefore, serves as a site of conflict against or a reinforcement of social arrangements. In the narrative, the speaker's discursive practices are the tools for constructing an identity and a reality within a social space. Analyzing those practices reveals how the narrator negotiates conflicting or complicit identities.

A poststructuralist analysis of gender seeks to explore the discursive practices underlying the development of subject positions that create the 'gendered conditions'(Calás and Smircich, 1999), and enable the internalization of the appropriate gender positionings for every-day situations (Davies and Harre, 1990). The experience of gender is inherent in the subject position of the speaker, where the speaker locates her/himself in a specific cultural space, and his/her particular political and moral prerogatives within that space. 'Appropriate' gender behavior is as fluid and in flux as individual subjectivity. Gender discourse is therefore an important site of conflict as it can either bolster or destabilize existing social arrangements (Weedon, 1987).

In this study the poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis will be used in the analysis of interview data. There will be a specific focus on the presence or absence of conflicting discourses as participants take up various subject positions in describing the circumstances of their lives.

Current research on sport experience and gender in sport

Numerous studies have attempted to explore issues of skill transfer, identity, and gender in sports by utilizing a quantitative approach. In The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values, Shulman and Bowen's analysis of the impact of college sports on the educational environment, academic outcomes, career trajectory, personal development, and relations between the sexes, races and classes, utilized a comprehensive data set of matriculated students spanning nearly four decades. Their quantitative analysis suggested both positive and negative outcomes associated with college sports participation. Results were achieved through comparison of athletes and non-athletes across a variety of factors including academic performance, graduation rates, incoming SAT scores, major selection, earnings, professional rank, and alumni giving. Additionally, Shulman and Bowen attempted to use the data to generalize more subjective characteristics such as leadership ability, self-confidence, political ideologies, work/life balance, personal values, and character. Their findings overall offer an ambivalent view of the contribution of college athletics to the educational system and society at large. Based on their findings, they suggested that athletes were harmed more than helped by their privileged position on the college campus (through lowering of academic standards for admission, athletic scholarships, special help, and prioritizing athletic competition over studies). Elitist attitudes of a 'jock' culture created a results orientation that left these individuals lacking assorted 'soft' skills like empathy and compassion.

Another study utilizing a quantitative, positivist approach to ascribe meaning to the athletic experience for women was conducted by the MassMutual Financial Group in 2002. Meant to complement the photographic exhibit, "Game Face: What Does a Female Athlete Look Like?", the MassMutual study

suggested a correlation between adolescent participation in organized sports and professional achievement. This study consisted of a thirty-four item questionnaire administered to approximately 400 female business executives. The results found that of the four hundred and one female business executives surveyed, 82% had participated in some form of organized sports beyond grammar schools (“From the Locker Room to the Board Room: A survey of sports in the lives of women business executives). Subsequent questions and participant responses suggested strongly that increased discipline, enhanced ability to function as part of a team, development of leadership skills, and a greater capacity for coping with failure could be attributed to athletic participation. Further, 59% of female business executives who participated in organized sports beyond grammar school suggested that doing so had given them a competitive advantage professionally over female peers who had not participated in sports during their youth and adolescence.

Shulman and Bowen’s study and the MassMutual study highlight a common methodology to analyze the impact of sports participation on individuals and the social world in general. Their study assumes an objective nature of reality, where the individual exists outside reality and has no hand in shaping it. Data can be gathered about this reality in a concrete, methodical way (as in the use of a quantitative data set) to produce generalizable results around a sociological phenomenon (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, Morgan and Smircich, 1990). Further, this positivist approach is grounded in a specific epistemological foundation. Within this analytic framework, there exist, hard, concrete, facts that arise out of an objective reality. All individuals function within this same objective reality. Dichotomies of true vs. false, or right vs. wrong are possible under these conditions. Understanding reality in this way enables researchers to utilize quantitative data to assign meaning and insight to lived experiences.

The aforementioned studies were conducted by researchers who sought to explain sociological phenomena through the construction of objective knowledge. Their approach is based on ontological assumptions that the experience of sport is external to the individual, and whose effect can therefore be measured. The researchers’ positivist orientation enables them to interpret their findings as concrete facts, allowing them to identify regularities and causal connections which then can be used to predict behavior and outcomes (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). This approach to research is characteristic of the field, revealing the objectivist orientation toward understanding social reality and a determinist understanding of human nature.

Appendix 2

Methodology

In contrast to existing research on the effects of the athletic experience on a life, this study does not utilize a positivist approach. Instead of looking at reality as an objective, concrete process, this study regards reality as a subjective experience that is unique to the individual experiencing it. Epistemologies under a subjectivist framework are more fluid—they acknowledge the fluid and changing nature of both reality and truth. Instead of relying on quantitative data, a subjectivist approach enables researchers to look at the processes by which individuals create and understand their realities (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). This can be achieved through qualitative research methodologies. In this study, the data being gathered will be narrative accounts generated through personal interviews. The individual's athletic experience will not be analyzed to gain objective knowledge. Rather, the narratives will offer unique interpretations and understandings of lived experiences, illuminating the identity negotiations and competing discourses individuals utilize in making sense of their realities.

Qualitative research methods offer multiple analytic frameworks grounded in varying epistemologies for the interpretation of narrative accounts. Rather than viewing the “subject” of the interview as an informer who will provide revelatory information on social processes (that are static and decontextualized), the interviewer and interviewee are mutually participating in a construction process (Mason, 2002). Under this alternative framework, the interviewer presents a situation in which the conversation creates conditions where the interviewee draws upon the resources and discursive practices available to her in discussion of a social phenomenon (King, 2004; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The narrative texts that are generated by this methodology can be interpreted in a variety of ways. A ‘realist’ framework assumes that accounts are directly related to lived experiences and practice, and can be used to make inferences about the interviewee's life (King, 2004). In this study, where a poststructuralist theoretical framework underpins the analysis, the narratives will be analyzed using a social constructionist perspective. A social constructionist viewpoint does not consider narrative texts to be representative of the interviewee's lived experiences. The text is a product of a specific setting, an interview context. The value of the text to the interviewer is through analysis of the discursive practices—the language resources and conventions—that the interviewee draws upon through the course of the conversation (King, 2004).

Examinations of discursive practices yield insight into how the social world is constantly being constructed, negotiated, and reconstituted (Jorgenson, 2002; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). In Jorgenson's study of female engineers, the researcher analyzed the discursive practices utilized by her subjects to explore how they positioned themselves within or outside prevailing gender discourses. Using narrative accounts from face to face interviews, her aim was to illustrate the ways in which participants managed gender identities and differences in a historically male occupation (Jorgenson, 2002). Her study acknowledges the possibility of living simultaneous realities where one's identity is subject to contradicting demands and expectations. This viewpoint and subsequent methodology allows for the subject to be the

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author of her own social text, revealing the ways in which she manages conflicting discourses. Generating a social text is an active process that offers, through discourse, insight into an individual's subjectivity, and the social arrangements and institutions that they are constructing and deconstructing in their reality.

Furthermore, as language is a site of conflict, with competing discourses, the discursive practices utilized in the generation of a social text illustrate the role of the individual in a social context—how their subjectivity bolsters, is subordinated by, or contests institutions of power (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Analysis of this type is not possible through the use of quantitative data.