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GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE

Using a post-structural approach to theorize diversity in sports media organizations

Erin Whiteside

In its 2009 pre-Super Bowl coverage, the Washington Post published a somewhat provocative story about the advancements – or lack thereof – among women in sports broadcasting. The story acknowledged that more women than ever were involved in covering sports – including high-profile events like the Super Bowl – but had bumped into what the author termed a “glass – or ‘grass’ ceiling” when it comes to moving into the broadcasting booth (Farhi, 2009, para. 3). On record, several prominent female broadcasters praised the changes in attitude by media companies and male bosses and noted the advancements that women had made in sports media. Indeed, many broadcasts of major men’s sports feature women as part of the reporting team – often working as sideline reporters where they stand near the action, providing color and background via short stories throughout the event. Furthermore, some women, including the likes of Erin Andrews and Andrea Kremer, are routinely part of the biggest sporting events of the year and have built successful and visible careers. But off the record, women spoke more candidly about the challenges they face in earning respect and opportunities on the job. One comment in particular proved telling. “This is the most misogynist part of society,” [said] one, wary of offending her bosses. “It’s the last bastion of acceptable sexism” (Farhi, 2009, para 9).

Indeed, few women have moved beyond the sideline role in major men’s sports broadcasting. Furthermore, the play-by-play booth – where announcers explain the action and in many ways embody an authoritative figure in relation to the audience – remains a nearly exclusive male domain. More generally, women as a group constitute a small fraction of sports media professionals and an even smaller part of those working in leadership and management positions (see, for example, Lapchick, Moss, Russell, and Scearce, 2011; Whiteside and Hardin, 2010). The lack of gender diversity in this industry has been an ongoing concern for scholars, feminists, and industry groups alike. To address these issues, various groups have emerged to provide networking and help to women in the business; other industry organizations such as the Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) have implemented ongoing internship, mentorship and scholarship programs aimed at cultivating a more diverse workforce and creating important opportunities for those who have traditionally been left on the outside of inner circles.

Scholars have similarly focused on these issues. Much work addressing gender in the sports media workplace has been underpinned by feminism, a perspective that fundamentally views
society as structured around gender in ways that are inherently problematic for women. In light of the growing research and attention directed toward women’s opportunities and experiences in sports media, this chapter reviews how gender diversity has been theorized and conceptualized. In doing so, it addresses the value various feminist orientations have provided in helping to understand the persistent lack of diversity – even while industry leaders work to rectify the problem. The chapter concludes by arguing that scholars draw from the arc of research in sports sociology, which has turned to a post-structuralist approach in considering similar issues in sports organizations and practices.

Shedding light on a problem

As women began to move into sport communication professions, an early body of work emerged that described their experiences and documented their minority status. For example, Neupauer’s (1998) study of women in sports information used long interviews to highlight some of the challenges that female sports information directors faced at that time. His study touched on experiences of bias and women’s generally pessimistic outlook toward balancing work and family. Several follow-up studies provided additional insight into where women stood within sports information. Stoldt, Miller, and Comfort (2000) used a survey to note that male sports information directors were often older than their female counterparts, generally earned higher salaries, dominated in manager positions, and were also more likely to report aspiring to such roles. An ongoing longitudinal analysis of women in sports has shown that the lack of women in leadership roles in sports information has declined over time; the most recent edition showed that 9.8 percent of all sports information directors were women, down from 13.1 percent in 1994. That gender disparity is amplified at more prestigious athletic departments; only 3.1 percent of head sports information directors at the Division I level are women, compared with 10.7 percent at the Division II level and 14.3 percent at Division III institutions (Acosta and Carpenter, 2010). Scholars have produced similar descriptive studies about the state of women in sports journalism. In a survey of sports departments, Hardin and Whiteside (2006) found that women made up just 12 percent of all sports reporters. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport has begun producing an ongoing tally of female sports journalists and editors among APSE-member newspapers (Lapchick, et al., 2011), as well.

This early (and ongoing) work has provided a critically important assessment measure against the industry’s efforts to improve diversity and create hiring opportunities for women. The data also provide a guard against letting calls for change exist without a quantitative check. Although descriptive data are necessary and important, they are limited in that such data do not explain why these disparities exist. As attention to women’s status in sports media careers began to amplify, scholars have turned to critical theory, including that which draws from feminism, in moving beyond describing women’s status and toward providing an explanation for their continued marginalization and subordination. The next part of this chapter reviews feminist theory and its application to women’s status within the sport communication workforce.

Feminisms

Although feminist thought is often referred to as a singular type of inquiry, it may be more useful to think of it in the plural form as feminisms (Birrell, 2000; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002). Feminist thought has evolved throughout history. It has branched out and become influenced
by other theoretical areas; it is thus difficult to partition feminists into neat categories. Despite feminist thought’s inherent theoretical diversity, all feminisms are generally grounded in the belief that women are systematically oppressed and that oppression should be challenged (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Hall (2002, p. 12) calls feminism a “fundamentally political concept” and, thus, feminists are ultimately concerned with activism and societal change. The concept of oppression implies the existence of power and indeed, as noted by Ramazanoglu and Holland (p. 5), “feminism, therefore, entails some theory of power relations.” Feminists have drawn from varying perspectives in their work of conceptualizing power; these assumptions are critically important as they provide a subsequent roadmap for how sports media’s lack of gender diversity can be understood, and, importantly, addressed.

**Liberal feminism**

In their article on the lack of women in sports journalism, Hardin and Whiteside (2006, p. 48) urge newspaper sports departments to “intensify their efforts to recruit, hire and promote women.” This assertion is underpinned by a liberal feminist perspective toward change in that there is a focus on advocating for equal opportunity; in this way, the goal is to level the playing field, so to speak, in terms of access and opportunity. Indeed, many liberal feminists advocate for equality and essentially same-ness with men (Tong, 1998). Many gender equity laws, such as equal pay laws or anti-discrimination legislation reflect a liberal feminist perspective in which, according to Tong, the goal is to enable “women to compete equally with men” (p. 33).

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of liberal feminism in sports is Title IX; the law, which celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2012, mandates that government-funded institutions provide equitable funding and opportunity to their male and female athletes. This piece of legislation has been credited with the surge in sports participation rates among girls and women and is considered one of the most important pieces of legislation challenging women’s subordination in recent history (Suggs, 2005). For all the benefits Title IX has provided, however, it does not challenge the ideology related to sport and gender that naturalizes women’s inclusion as illogical. Other types of feminist theories have helped expose how such ideology functions to guard against women’s intrusion into (male) sporting spaces, despite the existence of anti-discrimination laws or industry programs aimed at providing opportunities to women. Most notably, radical feminism has provided a lens through which to understand these ongoing issues.

**Radical feminism**

Radical feminism advanced the women’s movement by directing attention to how ideology functions as a justification for women’s oppression; in opposition to liberal feminists – where the goal is gender equality – radical feminists argue that such “sameness” is based on male-defined norms and that true liberation will only come through a challenge to the supremacy of all things male and masculine (Tong, 1998, p. 47). In doing so, many radical feminists advocate for the celebration of the feminine and a re-articulation of what should be valued in a society. Going further, many radical feminists argue that femininity and “women” in general can bring a tangible improvement to society through an essentially feminine perspective. For instance, girls’ and women’s sports receive little media coverage and it has been speculated that if more women served as media gatekeepers, more and better coverage of girls and women’s
sports would see daylight (see, for example, Cramer, 1994). Limited research has suggested that women may bring a different perspective to covering women’s sports. For instance, a content analysis by Kian and Hardin (2009) found that female reporters tend to use fewer stereotypical frames of female athletes in coverage compared with that produced by men. Other research has shown how the inclusion of women may lead to liberating content. A content analysis of Title IX coverage found that women use fewer war metaphor references, which may fundamentally change how the public views the law (Hardin, et al., 2007). As numerous scholars have argued, Title IX has often been characterized as a “battle of the sexes” which works rhetorically to position the law as anti-male. Indeed, radical feminists have long indicted media content for promoting an ideology that upholds male superiority in sporting spaces and suggests a kind of ambivalence toward women’s sports in a period where girls and women are routinely encouraged to participate and be all they can be (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003).

Through their examination of ideology, radical feminists turned a critical eye toward the institutions of gender and sexuality. Although there are differences among radical feminists, they generally see heterosexuality as problematic in marginalizing the experiences and opportunities for gay and transgender individuals and contributing to a culture that allows men’s dominance over women to continue (Tong, 1998). Furthermore, radical feminists have urged individuals to reflect critically on how social structures – including the workplace – are organized around ideology that normalizes men’s superior status; they thus work toward challenging such ideology and questioning taken-for-granted norms about gender. In sports, radical feminists have indicted the institutional practices and media content and organizational norms as fundamentally oppressive to women. For instance, despite exponential growth in participation, girls’ and women’s sports are still only marginally covered by the media (for example, Duncan, 2006). When female athletes do receive coverage, they are often featured off the field, where their femininity can be enhanced at the expense of their athleticism. Indeed, what is often termed the feminization of female athletes is a common trope among researchers (for example, Buysse and Embser-Herbert, 2004).

Sports media scholars have applied these ideas in thinking about improving opportunities for women in sports media professions. In particular, Hardin and Shain (2006) and Hardin, Shain, and Poniatowski (2008) have used a radical feminist orientation to illustrate the limitations of liberal feminist initiatives in changing workplace cultures. As Hardin and Shain note, more women than ever are hired in sports media careers – fulfilling the goal of liberal feminists, who advocate for equality of opportunity. But once they enter that space, “women are socialized into a newsroom that emphasizes their inferiority in relation to sports” (Hardin and Shain, 2006, p. 335). Everbach (2008) indicts workplace norms in her study, which found no differences in the amount of women’s sports content produced by sports departments headed by women compared with those headed by men. As she writes, “instead of bringing a distinctly female standpoint to the sports sections they edited, the female editors at these newspapers appeared to reflect the prevailing norms and values established by male sports journalists” (Everbach, 2008, p. 64). Whiteside and Hardin (2011) similarly turned their attention to commonsense norms when they critiqued the norms of capitalism as problematic for women in sports information. As they note, ideologies that dictate that the ideal worker be available at all times and give their utmost allegiance to their careers are problematic for women, given that they are generally responsible for childcare responsibilities within the family.

Other research has criticized the institution of sports media for fostering a culture in which women’s exclusion is justified. Whisenant and Mullane (2007) conducted an audit study of
hiring practices at athletic institutions and found that athletic directors tended to hire sports information directors who match their own physical characteristics (white and male); this practice of homologous reproduction guards against challenges to men’s control. Ideology also functions as a justification for decisions that systematically disenfranchise women. For example, when women do secure jobs in sports information, they are more likely to work with women’s sports compared with their male counterparts; in a space in which women’s sports are considered low value, these types of sporting assignments may lead women off the path of career growth and promotion (Whiteside and Hardin, 2010). In sports journalism, women have similarly reported feeling contained by norms that dictate they are better suited to cover women’s sports (Smucker, Whisenant, and Pedersen, 2003). As Everbach (2008) notes, survival in sports media may depend on the adoption of dominant norms by women – even when they work to women’s own detriment. Indeed, survey research shows that female sports information directors generally hold women’s sports in low regard and do not believe that more women working in the profession would impact how women’s sports are promoted at their institutions (Whiteside and Hardin, 2012). In reflecting on these attitudinal statements, the authors note that acceptance of norms that place a low value on women’s sports ultimately “undermines the power of women in the profession” (Whiteside and Hardin, 2012, p. 64).

**Shifting directions**

The existing body of research has developed to provide an increasingly sophisticated picture of women’s struggles to overcome oppression in sports media spaces. Fundamental to the research described above is a critique of the institution; more specifically, scholars have criticized the sports media workplace as governed by ideology that disenfranchises women and provides the logic for their marginalization. Consistent with liberal and radical feminist perspectives on power, such research assumes that women will only find liberation once discriminatory barriers and problematic ideology are eradicated. Although such research has been instrumental in casting a light toward ongoing systemic biases, post-structuralists have argued that, in general, such analyses leave various identity categories intact, which they see as fundamentally problematic. Furthermore, they question the way that power has been conceptualized, and instead offer new ways for thinking about how women might engage with power relations. This next section includes a review of post-structuralist theory and how it has been applied to sports studies.

**Post-structuralist theory**

In general, post-structuralists are concerned with categories, labels, and our overall way of knowing; they question the concept of truths and turn a critical eye toward how we come to understand things such as “good” or “bad” and “true” or “false” (Tong, 1998, p. 195). Thus, as noted by Tong, post-structuralists can also be termed as “anti-essentialists” (p. 195) in that they question the idea that everyone has a natural self, and that there exist natural truths that we can understand and articulate. At issue from this perspective is the way that subjectivities are constituted through discursive frameworks and how the self comes to be understood as a product of dominant discourses. In doing so, language is thus “reconceived as the primary means through which our consciousness is structured,” implying an inseparable relationship between knowledge and power (Birrell, 2000, p. 68). Language then becomes less about
personal expression (“As a woman, I bring a unique perspective”) and more of a means through which identity is constituted and meaning is negotiated. This process is what Foucault (1995) calls the power struggle against subjectification and that which ties an individual to him/herself and becomes known to others. For post-structuralists, these “socially and historically produced identities endanger us, make us vulnerable, and close us off from possibilities” (McWhorter, 1999, p. xix).

Sports scholars have been heavily influenced by Foucault in this regard and his early work on sexuality offers an example of the process of subjectification. The Victorian age is often considered one of sexual purity, where church leaders outlawed what they described as deviant sexual behavior. Foucault (1990) argues that the censorship of images and judicial bans on certain behavior of that period did not repress sexuality; instead, he writes that by defining deviance, sexuality was thus “put into discourse” (Foucault, 1990, p. 11), creating a new set of knowledge through which power was expressed. He points to the emergence of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” subjectivities (versus descriptions of desire) as a product of this discourse. Foucault (2003) uses the concept “technologies of power” as an explanation for the techniques or strategies for influencing, shaping, normalizing and determining the conduct of individuals, which ultimately submit subjects to forms of domination. “Truths” about women’s ideal body type, for instance, is a technique that invites women to self-surveil their own bodies and diet, or take other drastic measures, to meet a normative standard (Markula, 2003).

Borrowing from the work of Foucault, Cole (1993) suggests taking the technology of sport (such as knowledge, practices, discourses) as the object of study in order to demystify the ways in which bodies are similarly disciplined, reshaped and inscribed. Cooky’s (2012) work on girlhood reflects this approach. Following the passage of Title IX, an increasingly amplified type of “girl power” rhetoric has emerged that appears to suggest that the quest for equality is complete. In her analysis of this cultural discourse, Cooky argues that the seemingly empowering rhetoric obscures the emergence of a girlhood subjectivity. Furthermore, this popular expression of girlhood is necessarily limited in its range of representation, thus reflecting the experiences of some girls – but not all. As she writes, “It is here at the intersections of race, class, and gender that the complications and tensions in girls’ sport become salient” (Cooky, 2012, p. 224). Thus, her analysis allowed for a discussion of how a seemingly gender-related set of discourses (girl power) function in complex ways to constitute racial and class-based hierarchies among all girls, as well.

**Engaging with technologies of power**

Foucault suggests that power is not something that can be held by one homogenous group (that is, men in sports) and exercised over others; rather, he saw power as “omnipresent” and continually produced and expressed in everyday practices (Markula and Pringle, 2006, p. 36). He did not deny “global forms of domination” (p. 37), such as sexism or racism, but rather encouraged micro-level analyses in order to understand these social phenomena. Importantly, as noted by Markula and Pringle, Foucault saw power as “productive” (p. 41) in that the expression of power produced subjectivities, policy and social institutions, as well as social transformation. This point of view stands in stark contrast to other forms of power which are conceptualized as repressive and a sort of obstacle to be overcome (Pringle, 2005). Understanding power as omnipresent and productive allows for an optimistic view for change, in that it implies all individuals have the opportunity to engage with technologies of power in small, everyday ways. Foucault called the ability to engage with power relations and problematize one’s own ties to
identity as “care of the self” and Markula (2003, p. 104) has called for sports scholars to adopt this concept in thinking about how political resistance may occur within sporting spaces.

Thorpe’s (2008) study of the discursive constructions of gender in snowboarding culture applies this idea. Through interviews, Thorpe examined how female snowboarders engaged with sexualized discourse, including their process in becoming critically aware of how they are bound to their identity. For instance, in asking one snowboarder about an athlete’s decision to pose provocatively in two men’s magazines, the woman said, “I have to say ‘good on her.’ She has a strong, fit and athletic body, so it’s probably good for guys and other women to see that she is not a stick figure with balloon boobs” (Thorpe, 2008, p. 213). Thorpe takes these comments in a Foucauldian context in which the woman demonstrates a critical self-awareness about gender and sexuality, and assesses the image in a way that offers an alternative to a normative feminine ideal. The potential counter-discourse on femininity reflects the outcome of caring for the self, in which an individual works to redirect discourses in ways that could prove liberating (McWhorter, 1999).

Conclusion
A post-structural approach diverges from existing research on women in sports media in an important way regarding identity; instead of taking “women” as an essential category, post-structuralists are concerned with thinking about how the category of “woman” is constituted through discursive frameworks. Although institutional critiques have been important in illuminating how biases and taken-for-granted ways of knowing have systematically normalized women’s marginalization, it may be useful to adopt a post-structuralist perspective in order to think about how difference is produced through everyday workplace practices and discourse.

Returning to the example from the beginning of this chapter, post-structural theory offers a new way of thinking about the lack of women in sports broadcasting. Assigning female television sports reporters to cover “human interest” stories on the sidelines of football games is one example of a discursive framework that might be addressed by sport communication scholars. Not only is she doing what might be characterized as “woman’s work” (for example, reporting on the “softer,” off-the-field stories), but she is occupying a space that is less valued in the profession compared with the television booth where the announcers authoritatively inform and explain the game to the viewer. From a post-structural perspective, these types of practices are a technology through which gendered identities are produced; in other words, it is not that female reporters are relegated to working in certain spaces, but that we come to understand the category of a female reporter through seeing her work in those spaces.

A post-structural approach to theorizing diversity would also allow for a more complex discussion of gender. Existing scholarship is nearly silent on issues of sexuality, race, and class, especially in relation to how these identities function as hierarchies among women. In the United States, white and upper-class women most benefit from anti-gender discrimination legislation that is purportedly enacted to help all women (McDonald and Thomas, 2012). Furthermore, discursive frameworks do not affect all women similarly and as Thorpe (2008) argues, women may engage with technologies of power in different ways, depending on their own level of consciousness toward identity. Explanations regarding women’s underrepresentation in sports media have largely focused on difference between men and women. Situating women as one group ignores the varying ways in which women engage with bias, a concept often described as intersectionality (McDonald and Thomas). Ultimately, the focus on
difference among women may be a powerful direction for future research on sports media workplaces. Questions about who benefits from formal workplace policies regarding gender or cultural shifts in attitudes toward women in sports will be critically important to understanding the state of women in sport as a whole.

Finally, scholars in this area may want to apply the notion of caring for the self to their research; to date, women have been characterized as oppressed, and ideology as something that must be transcended. Foucault's ideas on power offer new ways of understanding the possibilities of resistance, however. It is through discourse, knowledge, and truths that power is expressed, often in ways that are transparent to us. Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, the “attack point” for creating change is at the level of discourse (McWhorter, 1999, p. 215). Researchers should focus on how sports media professionals engage with discourses of gender, race, class, and sexuality in their everyday experiences and how they redirect that discourse in ways that could be liberating.

References


