THE CONTINUUM THEORY
Challenging traditional conceptualisations and practices of sport

Mary Jo Kane

We get interesting theory when we . . . allow our minds to roam freely and creatively . . . Theory is insightful when it surprises, when it allows us to see profoundly, imaginatively, and unconventionally into phenomena we thought we understood.

(Mintzberg, 2005, p. 361)

Background and overview
In the early-to-mid 1990s, I was publishing articles on the interconnections among sport, gender and power. I was contributing to a growing and sophisticated body of knowledge that had moved beyond descriptive studies examining women’s sports participation – and their continued second-class citizenship in spite of the progress made in the wake of Title IX – to one grounded in critical feminist theory. This particular analytic framework examines the fundamental role sport plays in (re)producing and maintaining dominant ideologies and structures related to gender. Central to this critique is the deeply embedded belief that ‘biology is destiny’ whereby individuals are assumed to fall into unambiguous and oppositional bipolar categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’. Numerous scholars contested the notion (and practice) of biological reductionism by demonstrating how there are no ‘natural’ immutable categories of female and male because conceptions of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are never removed from broader social and political realities (Bartky, 1988; Frye, 1983).

Essential to this analysis was an understanding of how sport becomes an ideal setting for establishing and articulating the ‘assumption that there are two, and only two . . . bipolar, mutually exclusive sexes’ (Birrell and Cole, 1990, p. 3). Sport also serves as an ideal site for the connection between gender and power relations because it vigilantly maintains gender difference as hierarchically ordered and, more importantly, grounded in the physical body and thus perceived as biologically, meaning inherently based. More than any other institution, sports centre around – and richly reward – measurable, physical differences between the sexes where heights, scores and distances are relentlessly recorded and compared (Bryson, 1990). These differences provide the basis for common sense, apparent empirical proof that men are naturally superior to women (Kane, 1998). As I mentioned in the original article, sport scholar Paul Willis makes precisely this point:
Sport and biological beliefs about gender difference combine into one of the few privileged areas where we seem to be dealing with unmediated ‘reality,’ where we know ‘what’s what’ without [listening] to the self-serving analyses of theorists, analysts, political groups. Running faster, jumping higher, throwing farther can be seen—not interpreted.

(1982, p. 117)

It should be emphasised that any set of beliefs and practices that can claim a biological basis is a particularly effective tool for a dominant group’s (e.g., men’s) ability to maintain a stranglehold of power. What is equally important to note, however, is how much cultural support is invested in men’s athletics. Far from being biologically based, there is great urgency surrounding sport as a masculinizing practice. As Whitson points out: ‘What such effort and concern immediately belie is any notion of biological destiny. If boys simply grew into men and that was that, the efforts described to teach boys how to be men [through sports] would be redundant’ (1990, p. 22).

How (and why) I developed the continuum theory

The discussion outlined above is a delineation of the central arguments I made in the 1995 article as a preamble to my point of departure, meaning even though I agreed with the overall critique of the interplay among sport, gender and relations of power – and how that interplay demonstrated the role of sport in ‘proving’ male superiority as biologically based – I was increasingly concerned that scholars (myself included) were unwittingly contributing to the very stereotypes about gender difference we were so forcefully arguing against. For example, one strategy advanced for changing the power dynamic between women and men was to elevate the status of those sports outside the traditional male pantheon such as running, swimming and wilderness activities. Whitson (1990) supported this approach because ‘the demonstrable achievements of women in such sports . . . have helped to weaken the popular association between sport and masculinity’ (p. 28, emphasis added). Whitson also argued that gender-neutral sports created ‘opportunities open to people who do not typically shine in confrontational team games, to smaller men, and to women’ (p. 28, emphasis added).

What troubled me about Whitson’s well-intentioned analysis is that he not only reinforced traditional notions of gender – and biological imperatives associated with size and strength – he failed to mention women’s achievements in traditionally male-identified team sports such as basketball and hockey. Women’s entrance into these kinds of sports on any serious level would surely pose a significantly greater threat to men’s dominance than would emphasising their accomplishments as runners and swimmers. In essence, Whitson confined women (and ‘smaller’ men) to sports that, by definition, had less status and power while leaving the impression that these ‘lesser’ sports were the only ones in which women could compete.

During the time I was immersed in this research I came across a related body of knowledge that was also being critiqued through the lens of critical feminist theory – the muscle gap literature. This ideological construct refers to the degree of difference that exists when comparing women’s and men’s performance in the same sport or physical activity. Scholars such as Ann Hall (1990) and Lois Bryson (1990) were arguing that culturally embedded assumptions about the muscle gap disadvantaged females because superior athleticism was routinely defined in ways that privileged physical skills and social attributes traditionally identified with males. These comparisons provided the framework for gender (i.e., muscle gap) differences whereby females are systematically shown to be inherently inferior athletes (Nelson, 1994). As with the
biology-is-destiny literature previously cited, I agreed with the overall analysis, but was increasingly aware that this line of discussion, which effectively demonstrated the oppressive impact of the so-called muscle gap, was also unintentionally reinforcing that very same dualistic ideology. I say this because feminist critiques of the muscle gap frequently explained and defended performance differences as predictable outcomes of patriarchal ideologies, practices and structures surrounding sports. Such an approach locked any analysis into a dualistic framework where one could logically say, ‘Of course men outperform women. Look at all the advantages they have both physically and in terms of social support and access to resources.’ While this is certainly the case, it nevertheless reconfirms gender as separate and distinct categories. Doing so obscures any acknowledgement of sport as a continuum where there is a range of performance differences among individual females and males. As a result, even when scholars quite rightly defended performance differences they did so within a framework that included only one gender comparison, only one muscle gap.

So how did all of my reading of the literature – and the theoretical constructs embedded within – allow my rather perplexed and confused mind to, as Mintzberg’s quote at the beginning of this paper suggests, ‘roam free’ and ‘see profoundly, imaginatively and unconventionally into phenomena’ I thought I understood. Or as the editors of this text posed to the authors: ‘Describe the process for developing [your] theory . . . [D]iscuss the events or activities that spurred your interest in the topic.’ Reflecting on this interesting question, I realised that I began to formulate the sport-as-continuum theory because of two experiences in my life outside the academy. The first involved the Twin Cities marathon. I had never lived in areas like Boston or New York where marathons took on legendary status. But in Minneapolis, where I moved in 1989 to become a faculty member at the University of Minnesota, the Twin Cities marathon (considered in the top ten of marathons nationwide) was an annual event of great civic pride. The marathon literally ran in front of my house and my neighbours would hold annual gatherings to cheer on the runners. It was my first experience seeing elite runners up close and I was reminded that the marathon was one of the few sporting activities where women and men competed on the same course at the same time.

While cheering on the runners I noticed how much of the conversation was dominated by well-meaning muscle gap comparisons and how great everyone thought it was that women were closing the performance gap with each new generation. But what I also noticed was that the best female runners were outperforming many – indeed most – of the male runners and not just the stragglers at the end. During the same time period when I was analysing a body of knowledge that failed to recognise the possibility of many muscle gaps, in my personal life I was witnessing the reality that there actually were. In short, I became acutely aware that the results of the marathon were framed using a single overall comparison, meaning the first male to cross the finish line versus the first female. This one – and only one – comparison is a critical point I will return to later in the manuscript.

The second experience had to do with professional football. I grew up in central Illinois and, along with all of my family members, passionately followed college and pro football. I was intimately familiar with the Black and Blue division of the NFL – the Bears, Vikings, Packers and Lions. I knew the records of the teams as well as the individual performances of the players. Shortly after I arrived in Minnesota I met a recently retired NFL player and then record holder for one of the Black and Blue division teams. I was rather startled because this player was much smaller in height (approximately 5’8”) and build than I had anticipated. My assumption was that although there are obvious size differences between, for example, quarterbacks and defensive linemen, I also assumed that every athlete would have a physical presence that was overpowering. They were, after all, members of the NFL.

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I left this encounter thinking that I knew a number of females who were taller and in all likelihood physically stronger than this former player. Yet conventional notions about gender difference based on physical size and strength precluded any possibility that females would be big and strong enough to play sports like professional football. Yet I had just experienced a situation where that was obviously not the case. Just like the marathon, I began to connect my scholarly readings of biological determinism – and critiques that such dualistic thinking was perfectly suited for a sport setting – with real life experiences that were quite to the contrary. Perhaps some females could compete with and against some males, particularly in those sports not grounded in the most extreme possibilities of male size and physical strength (Messner, 1988). Maybe this notion of ‘women’s’ and ‘men’s’ sports, where we assume that all men will outperform all women – especially at elite levels of competition – was obscuring a far greater reality: rather than organising sports into two mutually exclusive categories based on what we assume are inherent (i.e., biological) gender differences, we could think about sports as a continuum of physical activity where women and men fall along a range of performance differences. It was within this intersection of my professional and personal lives that the continuum theory was born.

Central tenets and ramifications of the sport continuum theory

The title of my 1995 manuscript is, ‘Resistance/Transformation of the oppositional binary: Exposing sport as a continuum’. I was beginning to understand that analysing sport as a continuum would allow scholars to critique sports as a gendered binary without falling into the same unintentional traps I outlined above. But why the use of the verb ‘exposing’ and how was that connected to resisting – and even transforming – sports? Here was my point of departure from previous research: I argued that confining our analysis to categories of ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’ sports suppressed knowledge of sport as a continuum. I further argued that as long as we constructed sports in this manner, females would be forever seen as engaging in ‘lesser’ sports and thus, by definition, be considered inferior athletes when measured against their male counterparts. This is precisely why exposing sport as a continuum would be profoundly threatening to established conventions of power because it would provide evidence that some women can (and do) outperform some men, even in ‘men’s’ sports (e.g., basketball), and that they also possess physical attributes such as strength and speed in greater capacities than do many men. In sum, ‘the acknowledgement of such a continuum provides a direct assault on traditional beliefs about sport, and gender itself, as an inherent, oppositional binary that is grounded in biological difference’ (Kane, 1995, p. 193).

Based on your own lived experience participating in and watching sports, you may be wondering – even resisting – how I could possibly make the claim that ‘women outperform men’ in a variety of sports and physical activities. To address this issue I return to the muscle-gap literature. Recall that earlier in the paper I cited Paul Willis who brilliantly made the point that, ‘[Men] running faster, jumping higher, throwing farther can be seen—not interpreted’ (1982, p. 117). But what Willis did not say – and here is the key to the continuum – is that it is only men who are seen jumping higher, running faster and throwing farther. If, however, we conceptualised sport as a continuum of performance difference we would witness many women running faster, jumping higher and throwing farther than many men. This is precisely why we rarely (if ever) see women performing in such a manner.

None of my arguments refute the fact that there are biological – and performance – differences between women and men, though it must be emphasised that cultural factors clearly exaggerate those differences. For example, traditional definitions of what it means to ‘be a man’
are synonymous with what it means to be an athlete; while females, until recently, were stigmatised for participating in sports, particularly team sports at elite levels (Cooky, Wachs, Messner and Dworkin, 2010; LaVoi and Kane, in press). Given this background, it stands to reason that we have routinely emphasised muscle-gap comparisons such as the average female versus the average male. But if we reframed our analysis to conceptualise sport as a continuum, we would see a very different reality – a range of performance differences among women and men that would reveal not just one, but many muscle gaps. As I pointed out in the original paper:

[Although] males, as a class, tend to have an advantage in strength and size over women, as a class, it is equally true that the ‘range of difference among individuals in both sexes is greater than the average difference between the sexes.’

(Rathe, as cited in Kane, 1995, p. 201)

**Containing/suppressing knowledge of the continuum: the role of gender segregation**

If males, as the dominant group, are to maintain their position of power and privilege, sports must be perpetuated as a taken-for-granted binary. One way this is accomplished is to ensure there is rarely (if ever) any overlap, that we never witness females outperforming males, particularly in sports traditionally associated with men. In the original paper I highlighted how much cultural effort goes into maintaining the sport binary while simultaneously suppressing evidence of the continuum. Central to my thesis was that a key to obscuring any notion (or reality) of performance overlap was to prevent women and men from competing with and against each other. This is done first and foremost by organising sports as ‘women’s’ and ‘men’s’ sports. What’s important to note, however, is that most women participate in the same sports that men do, but because they rarely compete head-to-head, we never imagine the existence of a continuum, meaning the possibility that many sports can be constructed as a gender-neutral activity where numerous individuals – some of whom are male and some of whom are female – have varying degrees of ability and performance outcomes that frequently include overlap.

To clarify my argument, let me use tennis as a case in point. I am in no way suggesting that, for example, Serena Williams could beat the top-rated male professional tennis players. That is an uncontested fact. But here is an equally uncontested fact: Serena Williams could beat the vast majority of all males who play tennis. What is important to note about these two sets of facts, and how they relate to the continuum, is not that we shouldn’t emphasise – or even prioritise – the first set over the other, it’s *that we never even consider the latter*. Under current conceptualisations of sports – where we glorify one gendered outcome and totally erase the other – we end up with the following punchline: ‘No matter how good a woman is, she can never beat a man.’ But imagine how we would think about sports and its ‘gendered nature’ if we included an additional punchline: ‘Some women can beat almost all men, even in the same sport.’ Such a conclusion allows us to see why segregating women and men is so essential to suppressing sport as a continuum.

**Mechanisms that contain the continuum**

I argued in the original piece that there are a number of what I referred to as mechanisms of containment that limit any evidence of a sport continuum. Due to space limitations, I will highlight just two of them: selective gender comparisons and re-gendering. Central to understanding how these containment mechanisms play out is to analyse the totally arbitrary – and
artificial – imposition of structural variables and rules that strictly enforce the oppositional binary. As mentioned above, obscuring evidence of a continuum is relatively easy because females and males rarely compete against each other. But there is one popular sport where they not only compete in the same event, but are on the same course at the same time – the marathon. This sport offers a particularly graphic and powerful example of how evidence of a continuum is artificially suppressed. We literally witness a range of performance difference stretched out for miles where men and women are running simultaneously, interspersed along the same course.

Even though one race is taking place, it is artificially constructed as two separate races based on sexual difference. As a result, performance differences between women and men become a primary focus of the event. Racing statistics and media coverage reinforce this oppositional categorisation: the cameras focus on the first runners to cross the finish line and talk about the winner of the men’s race. It is usually at this point where the emphasis shifts to the front-running female(s) and the ensuing discussion of who will win the women’s race. I am not suggesting that the marathon shouldn’t be covered in this fashion. What I am suggesting is to consider why this gender comparison becomes the only one that is ever made. And who benefits when this happens? As I pointed out in the original piece, we select – and then emphasise – one gender comparison while ignoring all others:

[O]nce the first female crosses the finish line, gender comparisons regarding the rest of the race vanish from the television landscape—she is compared only to the men who have finished ahead of her. We are not told that this same woman has just outperformed all of the other men who have yet to cross the finish line.

(1995, p. 209)

The arbitrary decision to focus exclusively on who finished ahead of the female who won the women’s race instead of (or in addition to) who finished behind her, automatically ensures that we will never see women beating men even though we literally just witnessed it. Such artificially imposed conventions teach us to read these performance differences only (and always) in ways that privilege men. There is an additional point to be made regarding how selective gender comparisons in general, and the marathon in particular, suppress any evidence of women outperforming men. In the 2013 Twin Cities Marathon, 4,924 men and 3,931 women finished the race. The women’s winner finished 45th overall. Even though forty-four men finished ahead of her, 4,879 men finished behind her. Given this rather remarkable result, it’s not surprising why some gender comparisons are emphasised over others.

A second mechanism of containment refers to what I called re-gendering, which is a particularly insidious form of binary reinforcement. Re-gendering occurs when females display superior athleticism in a skill or a sport traditionally associated with males. The female in question is re-gendered because when she exhibits such athletic prowess, her own gender becomes temporarily erased while she is being simultaneously recast as male. The sporting world is replete with examples of re-gendering. In Little League we may witness a young girl crushing a baseball and, when we do, a familiar retort is ‘she hits just like a man’. This seemingly reasonable response reinforces two important components of the oppositional binary: it confirms that superior athleticism belongs exclusively to males – especially in those sports that ‘matter’ most – while subverting any notion that females can (and do) possess such physical skills in such capacities. Re-gendering is insidious because, on the surface, it gives the impression that female athleticism is not only accepted but enthusiastically supported – such retorts are, after all, usually meant as a supreme compliment. But we need to remember that the young girl or woman who exhibits such athletic competence is not being supported as a female: ‘What re-gendering reveals is that
in order to receive this kind of praise she must be (temporarily at least) considered anything but female’ (Kane, 1995, p. 208).

**Application and impact of the sport continuum**

With respect to its application, the continuum theory is not designed to be empirically tested using classic scientific methods as when a scholar develops formal axioms, postulates and theorems (Punch, 2013). It is more in the tradition of theorizing advanced by Mintzberg, who argues that as scholars and educators, our obligation is to develop a set of ideas that stimulates ‘pondering, wondering, thinking . . . not knowing [the truth]’ (2005, p. 356). There are, however, tangible, real-world ways where the sport continuum has been applied both in measurable and anecdotal terms. These range from scholarly lines of enquiry resulting in publications to classroom settings where (I am told) my article is included in course syllabi and serves as a basis for lively discussions with students. Over the years, my colleagues have mentioned how much the sport continuum has informed their work. And I am always deeply honoured, even a bit surprised and humbled, when a newly minted PhD tells me that my work in general, and the continuum paper in particular, formed the basis of their research studies.

The same can be said for my own work twenty years removed from my original conceptualisations. How ideologies and practices perpetuate gendered relations of power within a sport context remain at the centre of my empirical investigations ranging from media coverage of women’s sports (Fink, Kane and LaVoi, 2014; Kane, LaVoi and Fink, in press) to occupational employment patterns related to women’s leadership positions in intercollegiate athletics (Kane, 2001). Using more scientific ‘measures of impact’, a search on Google Scholar indicated that the article has been cited 143 times. One final measure of the theory’s influence relates to an experience I had this past summer. I direct an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Minnesota. As I was preparing to write this manuscript, I asked one of our interns to compile a list of more recent publications. She had just completed her undergraduate work and would soon pursue her graduate studies. She told me she had already read the continuum paper as it was assigned in one of her undergraduate classes. This anecdote alone speaks volumes to perhaps the theory’s greatest impact: seeing one’s work passed on to a new generation is a legacy that would make any scholar proud.

**Extension and future directions**

As with measuring impact, the continuum theory cannot be extended in a formal, scientific way. Yet Mintzberg’s approach to theorizing led me to this particular train of thought: in the two decades since I first introduced the sport continuum, women have made unprecedented participation and achievement gains across a wide variety of sports including ice hockey, lacrosse and extreme sports (Kane, 2012). These developments appear to provide significantly more opportunities to reveal sport as a continuum, but the record is pretty clear that traditional gender arrangements about how sports are conceptualised and practiced remain firmly entrenched as an oppositional binary.

That said, let us theorize for a moment and examine what would happen if the continuum were extended as we move further into the twenty-first century and as women’s participation continues to increase. I was (and remain) keenly aware that the logical extension of the theory would be to fully integrate the sporting enterprise where we would no longer use gender as a centrepiece to practice sports. Such an outcome is no more on the radar screen today than it was twenty years ago. But there is a reason for this and it lies at the heart of the theoretical
underpinnings of the continuum. Recall that I emphasised the essential role sex segregation plays in suppressing evidence of the continuum and thereby reinforcing male power and privilege. Because ‘women’s’ and ‘men’s’ sports are deeply entrenched within a biology-is-destiny framework, we have learned from generation to generation that segregating sports is a well-meaning and practical approach designed to encourage females to participate, but to do so in ways that protect them from being injured if they compete against men (Theberge, 2000). Examples range from Little League Baseball, where attempts to integrate the sport in the early 1970s were met with medical claims that girls’ bones were more susceptible to fractures (Goodman, 1989), to assertions that females would be hopelessly overmatched if they were allowed to compete against males and doing so would jeopardise the very integrity of sports (Kidd, 1990). However, one could argue that it is actually men who are being protected by segregating sports, because if females really are naturally inferior athletes, wouldn’t they automatically fail if given the opportunity to compete against men? Wouldn’t such head-to-head competitions give men the very evidence they would need to empirically advance their claims?

Given such circumstances, it’s important to ask why there has been a history of resistance to women’s desires to compete with and against men. Perhaps it’s because men are concerned that women can outperform them even in sports they have claimed as their own. Putting forth such an argument in no way suggests that women can outperform men at the most elite levels of competition, particularly in sports like football, basketball and hockey that are organised around the most extreme physical capacities of the male body and where a central component of the sport is to physically subdue one’s opponent. But there are some sports, even at the most elite, high-stakes levels, where we cannot only imagine such possibilities, but where women actually have outperformed their male counterparts. Two such examples involve Olympic sports – rifle shooting and ski jumping. Women were first allowed to compete in shooting – and in head-to-head competitions against men – at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and did so until the 1996 Games in Atlanta. Why the switch? According to McDonagh and Pappano (2008), segregating rifle shooting occurred because of what took place at the 1976 Montreal Olympics where Margaret Murdock tied with her male teammate in the 50-metre three-position shooting event. In a controversial decision, judges broke the tie, giving Murdoch the silver medal, though both athletes stood on the gold medal stand during the awards ceremony. Murdoch believed that her unprecedented performance spurred officials to seek separate (and different) shooting events in future Olympics because ‘[M]en didn’t like having a woman beat them’ (p. 12).

After this controversial finish, the IOC not only segregated the sport, but enforced arbitrary and artificial rules where women, by definition, could not be considered equal – let alone superior – athletes. From 1996 on, women have competed in six shooting events compared with nine for men. And in those events where they engage in the same skill (e.g., skeet), women shoot at seventy-five targets versus 125 targets for men. A similar pattern of women outperforming men – and which also resulted in sex segregation where arbitrary rules were imposed – occurred in ski jumping. For decades women were banned from competing in the Olympics because, according to IOC officials, there were not enough females around the globe who could jump at elite levels, and where as late as 2005, an IOC member stated that he opposed women’s entrance because it ‘seems not to be appropriate from a medical point of view’ (Clarke, 2014, para. 7). But after a series of lawsuits and international pressure, women were finally allowed to compete for the first time at the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, Russia, though not against men and in fewer overall events (Women’s Ski Jumping USA, n.d., para. 10).

Though these are powerful and reality-based examples of females outperforming males in the same sport at the highest levels, I am well aware that attempts to integrate sports would, at

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least for the foreseeable future, harm females in very profound ways. We would, for example, have only one basketball, hockey, tennis, golf, swimming team. In such circumstances, very few females would make the overall team. But it doesn’t automatically follow that we can’t discontinue any current practices where rules are artificially changed to guarantee that males will always outperform females. As a society, we have the ability to reintegrate rifle shooting at the Olympic Games, to remove ‘ladies tees’ from golf, or to change tennis so that women also play three out of five (versus two out of three) sets to win a match. Practising some sports as a continuum would directly challenge those assumptions – repeated in mantra-like fashion – that women can outperform only lesser-skilled males or can only excel in so-called women’s sports. If the continuum were to take hold, even in a limited fashion, we would begin to see an erosion of segregationist policies and practices where females are denied opportunities because of deeply entrenched beliefs that they possess innately inferior capacities.

Dream a little dream

You won’t be surprised to learn that when I introduce the sport continuum to my students – and challenge them to follow it to its logical conclusion of integrating sports – I am met with a great deal of resistance, at least when it comes to its practical implications. It will also come as no surprise that females resist such ideas just as much if not more so (for obvious reasons) than do males. I am very aware that attempts to integrate sports, especially team-oriented combat sports, would fall into the realm of being removed from reality. But remember that it was many generations ago when young girls who had aspirations to play sports were repeatedly told that such desires – and opportunities – were ‘just a dream’. For these generations of pre-Title IX girls, playing sports at all – let alone at such elite levels – seemed (and were) far-fetched. So let me close with a suggestion that seems equally far-fetched: that unless and until young girls of the next several generations grow up dreaming of becoming a star basketball player, not a star girls’ basketball player, they will forever be consigned to a ‘lesser than’ status. It is only when we unconditionally commit to sport as a continuum – where young girls and women have similar amounts of social support and access to resources – that sports, fully integrated and transformed, will no longer exist as an oppositional binary. Theoretically speaking.

Notes

1 This chapter is a reflection on Kane (1995) and the work related to it.

2 Critical feminist theory posits that society is structured around a series of inequitable relationships of power whereby women are systematically devalued and marginalised (Kane and Maxwell, 2011).

3 The rationale for this gender difference is that women lack the endurance capacities of men. It is particularly ironic because if there is any physical attribute that women possess (on average) in greater capacities than men it’s endurance (Kane, 1995).

References


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Applying sport continuum theory

Cheryl Cooky

My first introduction to Mary Jo Kane’s (1995) ground-breaking article was as a master’s student in sport studies at Miami University. The article was assigned for one of my classes, ‘Women and Sport’, then taught by Mary G. McDonald. As a first year graduate student developing expertise in the area of gender and sport, I liked the article but unfortunately lacked the necessary background to fully appreciate Kane’s theoretically innovative arguments. Moreover, I lacked the professional experience and insight to recognise the powerful ways in which such conceptual frameworks challenged dominant gender ideologies reproduced in sport, and the potential of such to challenge the common sense assumptions students and the general public have regarding men’s presumed physical superiority in sport. As a published researcher, experienced teacher and a scholar that engages the media, I now have a deep appreciation for this article as Kane provides an accessible yet nuanced understanding of gender and sport, one that moves beyond binary perspectives. What is even more impressive is that the article was published in 1995, yet still has a high degree of relevance in contemporary theorizing on gender and sport. Indeed, I have utilised Kane’s article in my own research and it continues to be a required reading each semester that I teach my own ‘Gender Issues in Sport’ class.

Some of my research focuses on mainstream news media frames of female athletes. My colleagues and I published several articles on the media framings of Caster Semenya, the South African track and field athlete who underwent a very public ‘gender verification’ testing in 2009 (see Cooky, Dycus and Dworkin, 2013; Dworkin, Swarr and Cooky, 2013). We also published several position papers that examine notions of fair play and the belief of sport as a level playing field, both of which inform the rationale governing bodies use to implement sex testing policies (Dworkin and Cooky, 2012; Cooky and Dworkin, 2013). Central to our analysis was that the sex/gender binary is socially constructed, but that sport maintains the notion of natural, categorical gender difference, as vividly illustrated in sex-testing discourse wherein only female athletes are required to undergo ‘gender verification’. Moreover, we asserted that female athletes who do not fit into traditional Western expectations of femininity are more likely to have their ‘biological standing as female athletes called into question’ (Kane, 1995, p. 210). We utilised Kane’s conceptual framework, which argues for the recognition of sport performance as a continuum, rather than a binary, to offer a feminist critique of the sex/gender binary in sport so as to challenge the rationale offered by governing bodies to justify the need for sex testing/gender verification in women’s athletics.

At the time of this writing, it has been nearly twenty years since Kane’s article was published. According to Google scholar, the article has been cited in 143 publications. Given the enduring usefulness of Kane’s conceptual framework for understanding issues pertaining to gender and sport, I am certain this article will retain its relevance for feminist sports studies scholars for another twenty years to come.

Note

1 Cheryl Cooky is an Associate Professor of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Purdue University.
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References


