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Gendered performances in sport: an embodied approach

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ABSTRACT Despite significant advances in recent years, gender inequalities remain apparent within the context of sport participation and engagement. One of the problems, however, when addressing gender issues in sport is the continued assumption by many sport practitioners that the experiences of women and men will always be different because of perceived physiological characteristics. Adopting a focus based solely on perceived gendered differences often overlooks the importance of recognizing individual experience and the prevailing social influences that impact on participation such as age, class, race and ability. An embodied approach, as well as seeking to move beyond mind/body dualisms, incorporates the physiological with the social and psychological. Therefore, it is suggested that, although considerations of gender remain important, they need to be interpreted alongside other interconnecting and influential (at varying times and occasions) social and physical factors. It is argued that taking the body as a starting point opens up more possibilities to manoeuvre through the mine field that is gender and sport participation. The appeal of an embodied approach to the study of gender and sport is in its accommodation of a wider multi-disciplinary lens. Particularly, by acknowledging the subjective, corporeal, lived experiences of sport engagement, an embodied approach offers a more flexible starting point to negotiate the theoretical and methodological challenges created by restrictive discourses of difference.

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Introduction

Debates relating to the role of gender in sport participation continue to be contested. Although, more recently, there have been significant advances in the ways that women are able to take part in sports, it is still difficult to provide convincing arguments that women do have equal opportunities. One of the problems, however, when addressing gender issues in sport is the continued assumption by many sport practitioners that the experiences of women and men will always be different because of perceived physiological characteristics. Adopting a focus based on perceived differences often overlooks the importance of recognizing individual experience and the prevailing social influences that impact on participation.

In the majority of studies of gender within the context of sport, the focus tends to be on the experiences of women. Historically, the disparity between men and women in terms of the opportunities to participate in sport is unquestioned and has been documented in detail (Hargreaves, 1994). However, the inequitable treatment that women have experienced needs to be understood alongside the influence of other social discourses such as ability, age, class and race. These (and others) can be seen as significant factors contributing to present patterns of participation and inclusion. Further fuelling this complexity are more recent discourses developed within contemporary, populist thinking about gender informed by neo-liberal claims that women are “empowered” and free to choose their own identities (Phipps, 2014). Although these discourses can be seen to be seductive in that they encourage individual assessments of being “in control”, they tend to operate in a performative way (Butler, 1993) where simplistic binary divisions between men and women remain uncontested. Bearing this in mind, the discussion in this article focusses on exploring ways to think beyond “just” gender when thinking about sport participation, at the same time keeping the central argument of inclusion at the heart of the debate.

In 2004, I was involved in a review of research exploring girls’ participation in sport and physical activities for the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Bailey *et al.*, 2004). The report explored current research within the field and highlighted evidence to suggest that, although there was enthusiasm among girls to take part in sports, many were still facing barriers because of a range of complex and competing external social factors. In particular, areas such as family life, friendship patterns and school sport were significant influences on how the girls could participate.

Although the focus in the WHO research was on girls’ participation in sport and physical activity, an important part of the analysis was the recognition of girls as children and young people and, as such, part of a broader discourse of childhood (Jenks, 2005; Christensen and James, 2008; Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2011). Consequently, girls’ experiences of sport and physical activity could not be understood wholly in terms of gender, but as part of wider social thinking that included understandings of children’s physical, psychological and social development as well as discourses of health and well-being shaped through centuries of political, religious and scientific thinking. Nevertheless, current social constructions of what a “normal” or “healthy” girl/boy/child should look like continue to be formulated in contested ways. Therefore, it is suggested within this article that a way to unravel the complexities of gender within the context of sport and physical activity is to recognize the centrality of the body, so that the multiple social factors that influence and impact on how an individual is freely able (or not) to participate can be recognized and acted upon. In doing so, it is suggested that, although considerations of gender remain important, they need to be considered alongside other inter-connecting and influential (at varying times and occasions) social factors such as age, class, race, religion and (dis)ability.

In recent years the social sciences has experienced a “somatic turn” where the body has been bought back into the field of sociology (Frank, 1991; Shilling, 1993). Subsequent embodied approaches could be considered as a response to calls to incorporate not just a “sociology of the body” that analyses and writes about “the” body but an embodied sociology that emerges through living, breathing, corporeal emotional beings (Inckle, 2010). Within the context of sport, while the discursive structures operating on the body revealed by Foucault (1979) and many subsequent post-structuralist accounts (Butler, 1993; Markula and Pringle, 2006) have been extensively debated, there does seem room for more discussion about embodied experience, in particular, the ways in which individuals create corporeal understandings of their own bodies and in turn develop understandings of their own physical identities as well as others. However, rather than being a distinct discipline in its own right, an embodied approach might be more usefully viewed as a “frame of mind” or a specific orientation to the research process. In this way, it draws upon reflexivity in that consciousness of the embodied or, as Woodward (2015) describes, “enfleshed” aspects are considered significant in any attempts to understand human experience. The very fact that to engage in embodied research one needs to accommodate the physiological, the psychological, the sociological, and the temporal and spatial elements means that the researcher can accommodate a range of disciplinary perspectives. Akinleye (2015) suggests that embodiment moves meaning making beyond linear constructs, which ultimately helps us move from distinctions and separations of mind and body or time and space and allows us to fuse what have previously been considered separate realms and also move back and forth between ideas, experiences and thoughts.

Awareness of these broader discourses (of, for example, the able body, gender and sexuality) allows the researcher (and practitioner) to consider the implications that their embodied self has on their proposed activities as well as revealing the invariably limited ways in which the body can be expressed. This is where Pronger’s (2002) discussion about the limits that are placed on individuals through dominating discourses can help us negotiate fears of overstepping the mark. In terms of an embodied approach, there is more potential to look beyond the limits. In doing so, embodied approaches might provide the starting to point to reveal such limits and develop ways to counter uncritical neo-liberal arguments about sport and sport capital that are often offered as positive and unproblematic especially in relation to the benefits of sport. Taking an embodied or enfleshed (Woodward, 2015) way of thinking helps us to accommodate the more nitty-gritty aspects of our everyday existence. Often this everyday existence is about negotiating and managing at an individual level as well as a social level the different experiences that are both positive and not so positive. As such things like pain, shame, pleasure, aggression, social status, poverty and so on have to be factored in to any of these considerations. The central foundation for neo-liberal arguments is generally based on the relationship between the benefits of sport and the economy. This focus often overlooks (or consciously ignores) the embodied experience of the individual in its attempt to explore broader economic and political agendas. An embodied approach allows for consideration of the influence of these (and other) forms of knowledge structure but more in line with the effect they have on the individual experience or, in other words, the broader everyday reality of embodied existence.

Body performances in sport

In contemporary sports the “type” of body that one has plays a central role in determining who the appropriate participants

should be. It is worthwhile to note at this stage that when I speak about sport, it is within a “Western” formulation, as described by Hargreaves (1986), one that has a historical trajectory that has constructed a particular understanding of sport as a male arena (Hargreaves, 1986; Messner, 1992; Wellard, 2009). This formulation of sport and the subsequent relationship to an understanding of contemporary “Western” masculinity need to be considered within the context of what Connell (2007: 44), in Southern Theory, describes the “northernness” of general theory and, in particular, what she terms a “metropolitan geo-political location”. She critiques the lack of recognition of the northern geo-political location and along with it the failure to recognize many alternate ways of thinking or being, which derive from non-Western cultures. In particular, it is empirical knowledge deriving from the “Metropole” that constitutes the erasure of the experience of a majority of human kind from having an influence in the construction of social thought. As much as I support Connell’s viewpoint, I cannot escape from the fact that the material generated in the research that I have been involved in is located within the Metropole that Connell describes. However, recognition of this position, combined with the knowledge that there are other ways of being, provides an opportunity to analyse the material with a broader viewpoint, much in the same way that feminist research has taught us to constantly take into consideration the gendered dynamics of social interactions and identity formation (Woodward, 1997). Therefore, I have attempted to remain aware of the limits of the Metropole, especially as the version of sport that prevails does have its roots firmly entrenched in Western thinking. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the ideas developed are not relevant, as they seek to explore issues that have yet to be fully understood. Exposing the constant conflicting interpretations of what sport should be (and to whom) provides a way of incorporating broader ideas, particularly so in the case of school sport and physical education, where participation is mandatory for young people, although the benefits or outcomes are not necessarily the same (Wellard, 2006). However, the point I am making in this article is that sport participation is not solely based on the actual physical ability to perform movements related to the specific sporting event. Bodily performance provides a means of demonstrating other normative social requirements that relate to the prevalent codes of gender and sexual identity, both inside and outside the sporting arena. There is, however, within the context of sport a form of what I have termed “expected sporting masculinity” (Wellard, 2009) that is expressed through bodily displays or performances. These bodily displays signal to the opponent or spectator a particular version of masculinity based on aggressiveness, competitiveness, power and assertiveness, derived from sociocultural processes that have constructed what a sporting body should “look like” and “act like”. In this case, body practices present maleness as a performance that is understood in terms of being diametrically opposite to femininity (Butler, 1990; Segal, 1997). Within the context of sport, the body takes on a greater significance where embodied “deeds” are prioritized and established on principles such as competition, winning and overcoming opponents. The combination of a socially formulated construction of normative masculinity as superior to femininity and the practice of sport as a male social space creates the (false) need for more obvious outward performances by those who wish to participate. Consequently, displays of the body act as a primary means through which an expected sporting (masculine) identity can be established and maintained.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of studies into masculinity and masculinities (Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Connell, 1995; Whitehead, 2002), and Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity has become an established starting point

for debate, particularly within the context of sport. Like many other forms of “dominant” theory, the concept has been subjected to many forms of criticism. However, Connell’s willingness to address criticisms of her earlier descriptions of hegemony as a response to developments in critical thinking, along with her original accommodation of a broader embodied approach has allowed her general theoretical arguments about hegemonic masculinity to weather the storm (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Indeed, within the context of gender and sport, Connell’s description of hegemonic masculinity is relevant, precisely because of the recognition of body-reflexive practices that contribute to the internalization by the individual of broader social discourses that ultimately affect participation.

My own interpretation of hegemonic masculinity is informed by Connell’s theory in terms of her recognition of the body but is also influenced by Butler’s (1993) descriptions of the “performative” aspects of the gendered body and Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of “Capital” (in particular, “sporting” and “cultural” capital) generated through performances of the body. Although I am aware of the conflicting tensions that emerge through the theoretical trajectories of these concepts (Pringle, 2005), prioritizing the body allows for consideration of how these knowledge systems and relationships of power impact on the individual body. Subsequent investigations (Wellard, 2002, 2006, 2009) convinced me that Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, within the context of gender and sport, remained relevant particularly by reading these ideas *through* the body and body performances. Consequently, it is the lack of recognition of the embodied aspects of sport participation (and embodied experience) that is a telling gap within much of the sport literature and especially many subsequent critiques of hegemonic masculinity.

Recent claims made by Anderson (2009) about “inclusive masculinity” as a “new” theoretical insight to replace hegemonic masculinity fall short when they are subjected to the same type of scrutiny that Connell’s theories have been. For example, a failure by many critics to recognize the performative, embodied elements is neatly summarized by de Boise (2014) when he highlights the strengths of Connell’s original ideas.

Here is the crux of Connell’s (1995: 77) argument; while gender is performative, hegemonic practices, in order to be legitimated, *must* correspond to institutional privilege and power, which have no basis in nature and are subject to change. Therefore, what is considered gender “identity” is not psychologically “fixed” or acquired, but dependent on arrangements of social power. In contrast, Anderson’s account wrongly seems to suggest that gender emanates from an internalized, psychological predisposition, rather than the performance as constituting gender. (de Boise, 2014: 7)

Although Anderson’s claims that there has been an increase in more inclusive forms of masculinity may have some substance within the context of broader, contemporary social discourses, it is less convincing when applied to sport. In my research into gendered bodily performances in sport, I initially employed the term “exclusive masculinity” (Wellard, 2002) to describe a particular form of hegemonic masculinity that I found to be prevalent within sport. Subsequent further analysis (Wellard, 2009) led me to suspect that this was slightly misleading in that performances of certain versions of masculinity do not necessarily “exclude” but rather compel specific performances within the sport setting, particularly during play. “Expected” sporting masculinity can therefore be seen as a form of embodied masculine performance that is considered appropriate or necessary within the specific location of taking part or playing sport and can be read alongside other “accepted” forms of

sporting masculinity that occur off the playing field, but within the social space of sport. In this way, awareness of what is “expected” when entering the sports arena is necessary for an individual and consequent reflections by the individual about their ability to display what is expected can be assessed in terms of a range of broader social factors that affect them—such as gender, sexuality, age class and so on.

However, it is important to make it clear that expected sporting masculinity is not only based on the appearance of the body such as the possession of a muscular build or, indeed, the biological sex category of male. Within the context of sport, expected masculinity is expressed through bodily performances that adhere to traditional formulations of hegemonic masculinity, but embrace the values and ideals of sporting performance. Thus, outward displays of competitiveness, aggression, strength and athleticism are prioritized. Bodily capital is clearly understood in terms of how sport “should” be played and what it should look like as part of a social and historical process that Hargreaves (1986) describes. Consequently, the Muscular Christianity that Hargreaves describes as a significant element of contemporary sporting practice draws upon a particular version of an assertive, physical and heteronormative masculine body.

Within the context of sport, it is the performance of the body that is expected, not necessarily the social category such as gender or age. Although these play an important role, it is the bodily performance that provides the central focus. Being successful in sport requires specific knowledge about the body that, in turn, requires specific body performances. These replicate the performative aspects of gender within wider society, as described by Connell (2005) and Butler (1990), but here the bodily performances are emphasized. For example, in an elite sport such as professional tennis, players in the men’s and women’s events whether physically large or small tend to display exaggerated versions of what could be described as aggressive masculinity through their on-court manner. They will talk about “being” aggressive in their play and their general on-court performances, and these are seen as essential elements for success. These bodily performances are replicated in other sporting contexts where certain behaviours become “expected”.

In the case of women players, they are performing “expected” sporting behaviours that are heavily influenced by historical, social formulations of traditional masculinities that are considered appropriate within the context of competitive sports, rather than in the way Halberstam (1998) talks about (broader, social discourses of) female masculinities. In the “on-court” sporting context, men and women adopt similar embodied strategies such as strutting about the court, pumping their clenched fists and acting aggressively towards their opponents. In this way, the body is prioritized over other social categories, and women, in order to “play”, need to accommodate the expected bodily performances. However, these expectations are at the same time regulated by broader social constructions of gender and essentialist understanding of difference through mechanisms such as separate spaces to play (for example, in tennis there is the ATP for men and the WTA for women).

In this way, it could be argued that a disabled person in a wheelchair could still perform expected sporting masculinity within the context of, for example, wheelchair basketball and, in doing so, reinforces the discriminatory gendered practices found within able-bodied sports. Indeed, here the notion of ability is equally important as it highlights the need for it to be read alongside gender to provide a fuller understanding of the way in which established codes of an able body *and* normative gender reinforce discourses of normalcy (Peers, 2012). However, while the presence of those not necessarily considered as most “able” to perform expected sporting masculinity might suggest that

traditional forms of masculinity are threatened or subverted when it is performed by women, gay men, lesbians or the disabled, the broader social discourses of gendered, sexual and disabled identities still operate. For instance, the tennis player Serena Williams may present outward signs of aggression and expected sporting behaviour on court, although, at the same time she presents accepted social signs of traditional femininity by wearing dresses and make-up. However, it is not sufficient to understand Serena’s on-court performances through gender alone; her body performances need to be read alongside a social context that has been informed by cultural and historical discourses that of race and women’s bodies (McDonald, 2006). Consequently, whereas the context of professional, competitive sport may allow women to perform in ways that are expected within the context of sport, the broader social structures still operate to dictate how men’s and women’s bodies are constructed as different. This is particularly the case outside of professional sport, where displays of expected sporting masculinity become even more problematic for women (Caudwell, 2006; Drury, 2011) as well as other disadvantaged groups.

“Real” masculinity and femininity

The notion, provided in the example above that Serena Williams can successfully perform in a hitherto male-dominated arena while still maintaining her “femininity”, highlights the contradictions of contemporary sport. Throughout the research that I have conducted with sportsmen (Wellard, 2009), I have continually found that there is an assumption of a “real” or authentic version of masculinity. However, it has also been apparent that a definitive explanation could not be offered by the men, and in many cases there appeared to be a slippage in the use of the term. Indeed, the themes that recurred in their descriptions highlighted interplay between formulations of working-class sensibilities, heterosexuality and evidence of hard work and effort. The use of the body was central in the presentation of this version of masculinity. “Real” masculinity was constantly equated with presentations of the body that were considered “ordinary, ‘everyday’ or ‘run of the mill’” (Wellard, 2009). Particularly within the context of sport, the men found it difficult to accept alternative versions of masculinity or “types” of body. For instance, among a group of male trainee PE teachers, the understanding of “normal” masculine behaviour extended to ways in which the body could (or should) move (Wellard, 2007). In this particular case, these men found it difficult to accept the role of dance within their training. For them, the “ordinary” movements found in sport had been formulated through a combination of perceptions of class, expected masculine performances in sport and a narrow depiction of the sporting body. These were in opposition to the movements found in dance and their understanding of it. Dance was equated with non-sporting movements that were simultaneously associated with the feminine, considered non-working class and required a different approach to the body, both physically and emotionally.

However, even though there was a general sense of an authentic version of masculinity among nearly all the men I interviewed, their interpretations did not hold up to theoretical unpacking or scrutiny. The very fact that the men were positioning their identities within a “central” territory that was considered normal suggested that they felt little need to unduly question masculinity in general. The notion of “ordinariness” was not solely confined to heterosexual men. Many of the gay men I interviewed who played sport also considered themselves as “real” men who happened to be gay and their descriptions of “real” masculinity echoed those of the heterosexual men (Wellard, 2009). Often, criticisms of “real” masculinity were

considered to be voiced from those “outside” of what was considered to be a legitimate world view. As such, alternative arguments were considered less valid.

Belief that there is a real version of masculinity continues to reinforce gender binaries, and is particularly the case in sport where there is the expectation that only “real” men know or appreciate sport (Connell, 2008). Those without “evidence” of such knowledge are considered “less than” real men. These simplistic formulations not only consolidate the belief that there is an authentic version of masculinity that creates unnecessary distinctions between groups of men but also continues to position women as occupying a separate gender binary.

It is because of the continued presence of a general perception of real masculinity as a basis for identity formation, that hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) as a theoretical concept remains relevant. It still has value in that it can be read as a way of explaining how particular sections of society remain subordinate and in that the claims made for authenticity do not destabilize the broader distributions of power, but rather offer useful justifications or appeals to less material forms of self-worth.

The centrality of the body: thinking about body-reflexive practices and pleasures

As I mentioned above, the findings from our report to the WHO indicated that the majority of girls enjoy taking part in sport and physical activity (or would like to, given the right circumstances). In order to understand when, how and why they found it enjoyable requires a greater understanding of individual experience so that any contributing factors that may have made it less enjoyable or not worth engaging in can be understood. Consequently, focussing initially on the body and embodied experiences provides an opportunity to consider more effectively the complex processes through which engagement and continued participation occur.

Although the discursive structures operating on the body revealed by Foucauldian and many post-structuralist accounts (for example, Butler, 1993; Markula and Pringle, 2006) have been extensively debated, there does seem room for more discussion about embodied experience (Harre, 1998; Woodward, 2009; Wellard, 2013). In particular, the ways in which individuals create corporeal understandings of their own bodies and in turn develop understandings of their own physical identities as well as others. At the same time, it is acknowledged that there has been a growing interest in the meaning and experience of movement within the context of physical education, which could be described as a phenomenology of movement (Smith, 2007). However, much of the focus here is to address the perceived lack of understanding about the qualities and characteristics of movement among physical education practitioners (Brown and Payne, 2009).

Nevertheless, the concept of a “phenomenology of movement” is undoubtedly a significant influence in the way that experiences of fun and enjoyment can be understood in relation to sport participation. However, it is equally important to incorporate other theoretical positions that acknowledge the role of the body in shaping external social practices. As such, I have found the concept of body-reflexive practices (Connell 2005) to be useful within this context as it enables the application of a social constructionist approach that incorporates the physical body within these social processes. Obviously, there are discourses that seek to explain social understandings of areas such as bodily health and sickness, but all too often they do not take into account the individual, corporeal experience of the body. Often there is a fear that this will involve a movement towards biological essentialism, but this need not be the case. I have described

elsewhere (Wellard, 2013) how my own enjoyment of sporting and physical activities has often been compromised by the requirements to manage and negotiate my body (particularly in relation to performances of hegemonic masculinity) in socially expected ways. I am not alone in this, as the potential bodily pleasures experienced through sporting activity have to be managed within social understandings of a range of discourses such as gender, sexuality, age and ability, which may ultimately prevent or diminish my ability or willingness to take part. It is here that Connell’s arguments have resonance as they form the basis of an understanding of the importance of the social and physical body and bodily practices. Connell attempts to incorporate the role of the biological (in this case, in the social construction of gender) and also applies a sociological reading of the social world where social actors are exposed to the restrictions created by social structures. She explains that,

With bodies both objects and agents of practice, and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined, we face a pattern beyond the formulae of current social theory. This pattern might be termed body-reflexive practice. (Connell, 2005: 61)

Body-reflexive practices are, she argues, formed through a circuit of bodily experiences that link to bodily interaction and bodily experience via socially constructed bodily understandings that lead to new bodily interactions. As a result, Connell argues that social theory needs to account for the corporeality of the body. It is “through body-reflexive practices, bodies are addressed by social process and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies they do not turn into symbols, signs or positions in discourse” (Connell, 2005: 64).

Connell’s concept of body-reflexive practices helps us understand how social and cultural factors interact with individual experiences of the body. This in turn creates a need to recognize not only the social forms and practices that underpin the individual’s ability to take part in sport, or any other physical activity, but also the unique experiences or physical thrill of body-based expression.

Consequently, in order to adapt the concept so that it could be applied to a more specific embodied sporting and physical activity context, I developed the term body-reflexive pleasures (Wellard, 2013). Within this context it is equally important to recognize the range of factors that contribute to the experience of pleasure (or not). Thus, if we apply the concept to an individual’s experience of a sport, we can see that consideration needs to be made of the social, physiological and psychological processes that occur at any level and with varied influence. Fun, enjoyment and pleasure are, therefore, central elements within a circuit of interconnected factors that determine the individual experience.

Recognizing the whole (embodied) package of sport

The example of fun and pleasure, above, is made specifically to highlight that there are multiple ways in which sport and physical activity can be experienced. The point here is not the case that men and women will experience sport and physical activity in an entirely different way, but rather that social constructions of gender contribute to the “way” that sport and physical activities are experienced. For children, young people and adults (particularly in the context of recreational sport), participation in sport is often expressed in terms of the potential for fun rather than as an emotional reaction that occurs during the activity. The notion that activity is considered in terms of “it could be” or “it was” fun suggests that a broader “process” is in operation and not a one-off moment of subjective gratification. A simplistic

explanation that fun is trivial undermines the diverse ways that individuals anticipate, then experience and reflect on the fun elements within a sporting activity. Anticipation of fun may relate to many things such as potential achievement, learning something new, a social activity, an embodied experience or a thrill. In whatever way, they add to a personal memory bank, as an experience in itself and as an additional contribution to identity assessment. Understood in this way, even a hedonistic experience can be seen as significant, if considered in relation to its contribution to the memory bank of pleasurable moments and its impact on how the individual makes assessments about future participation.

However, the point about recognizing the broader dimensions of fun and enjoyment is that it is also necessary to acknowledge the wider dimensions of sport and physical activity experience, or the whole package of sport. Acknowledgment that participation in a sporting activity is influenced by a range of competing and conflicting factors allows for consideration that participation often relies on awareness of the “full contents” of the package and then navigation of the social, cultural, psychological and physiological expectations demanded for access to and continued participation. All of these contribute in varying ways that an individual is allowed entry (to a particular sporting activity) and, once in, is able to enjoy the experience.

Take, for instance, the example of tennis that I have been incorporating within this article. To get to the stage of experiencing the pleasurable aspects of actually playing the game, there is a process of learning, understanding and interpreting what tennis signifies within one’s immediate social, political and geographical situation. This process involves an understanding of the relationship of one’s embodied self to a socially constructed form of physical, adult play (sport). Consideration of one’s physical body, gender, age and race has to be applied to general perceptions of who is considered “able” to play. This is not to say that participation is excluded from the start in certain cases, but awareness of the “entry stakes” ultimately orientates the individual to make assumptions about whether they will be welcomed or not.

From a personal perspective, my introduction to tennis was through my parents, and during these early experiences I was able to “learn” more than not just the technical skills of how to play but also the social rules and etiquette expected within the game. Consequently, later attempts to join tennis clubs (in order to play a sport that I enjoyed) were uneventful in that I was able to demonstrate my knowledge of the whole package and “fit in”. Being male was obviously a significant part, but equally so were my physical and technical abilities, combined with my “knowledge” of how tennis should be played. My point is that “becoming” a fully fledged member of a sports club requires conformity of some sort, which means adapting to further “rules” and codes of play, much like a “hidden curriculum” (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993) of sport that operates in addition to taken for granted prerequisites such as an ability to play the game. Seen in this light, it not only is the young person that is restricted by having to operate within adult discourses of what school- (or club-)based sport should look like, but also is an adult regulated in the way that they only have certain outlets in which to be able to experience sport pleurably because of the way that many forms of club sport are internally “policed”, for instance, age, ability, gender, sexuality, class and race (see Ismond, 2003; Caudwell, 2006; Wellard, 2006; Tulle, 2008; Evans and Bairner, 2013).

Awareness of the hidden curriculum of many sports may also be a reason for the popularity among many adults for more individual pursuits such as running, cycling and swimming. Correspondingly, the social practices peculiar to specific sports may be an attraction for participation, in that much of the appeal

of many club-based sports is the additional pre and postmatch social activities. Rituals, hazing, initiation rites, drinking games can all add to, if not play a central part in, a sense of belonging to a group (Jonson, 2011) and, possibly, what an individual enjoys most in taking part. In many cases, it is the social activities that contribute more to continued participation than does actually playing the sport. Consequently, if we recognize that there are many other (covert and open) factors operating in any sporting activity, the suggestion is that in order to understand participation for an individual we need to be aware of the competing, influencing factors, which may or may not be solely related to gender.

Nevertheless, in most cases, within sporting contexts gender does play a significant part in how an individual ultimately experiences the activity. For example, recent research on the gendered perceptions of girls and boys who played Korfball,¹ (Gubby, 2015) found that, although there were many gendered dynamics to be observed in a sport where boys and girls played together on the same teams, there were also other significant embodied factors that contributed to how the game was played and could be experienced. For instance, one integral aspect of Korfball was for all team members to be vocal during the games.

Although many team sports rely on a degree of communication in order to perform strategies and tactics, this is often no more than players shouting to signal that they are available to receive a ball, or to communicate the way forward for tactical play. Being vocal, however, has become an integral part of the game and is embedded deeply into the way it is played. “Calling” to inform teammates what their opponent might do next so that said teammate can mark and defend to the best of their abilities, is a necessary part of the game. (Gubby, 2015: 92)

In this particular case, the relevance of the vocal aspect read within the context of a sport that was developed to provide a gender neutral space highlights the importance of recognizing other factors that influence the experience of the game. In her research, Gubby (2015) observed how it was two girls who were identified by the other players as being the most vocal. However, where Korfball could be seen to offer some glimpses of gender equity, the sport was originally developed within the context of “difference” between boys and girls. The game itself provided a space for girls and boys to play together rather than, necessarily, being treated as equal. As Gubby suggests,

Whereas the positive aspects of playing together were considered favourably, it was equally difficult for the young people to leave behind their restricted formulations of how to “do gender” that had been developed in everyday social reality. At the same time, the rules of korfball could be considered equally restrictive in that they had been (historically) shaped from an initial premise of gender difference. (Gubby, 2015)

Conclusions

In summary, although it has not been the intention in this article to undermine the importance of gender within any debate about sport and physical activity, it is clear that *positioning gender as an automatic starting point is not necessarily always the way to reveal the complexities of participation and how an activity is experienced*. Recognition of the “whole package” of a particular sport allows assessment of the various influencing factors that shape the way that an individual is able to reflect upon an experience as enjoyable and, subsequently, whether participation or continued participation is either possible or worthwhile.

Although the contexts in which children, young people and adults are able to access sport are different, particularly in terms of the prescriptive nature of school-based sport in comparison with the relatively greater opportunities available to adults, the ways in which assessments are made about participation invariably position fun and enjoyment as a major factor in continued or potential participation. Indeed, taking the body as a starting point might open up more inclusive ways of manoeuvring through the mine field that is gender and sport participation. The appeal of an embodied approach to the study of gender and sport is in its accommodation of a wider multidisciplinary lens. Particularly, by acknowledging the corporeal and “enfleshed” (Woodward, 2015), an embodied approach offers a more flexible starting point to negotiate the challenges created by restrictive discourses of difference. Providing a more flexible starting point allows greater possibilities to accommodate the theoretical and methodological issues created by these discourses of difference that, ultimately, continue to limit the possibilities for many girls and boys to experience sport in a positive way.

Note

- 1 Korfball was developed in 1902 in the Netherlands by a Dutch Primary School teacher as an alternative to single-sex team sports (International Korfball Federation, 2006). It is played by teams of four (two men and two women) and comprises elements of basketball and netball.

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Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Additional information

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