

MASCULINE RESEARCH - FEMINIST METHODOLOGY: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO STUDYING MEN

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The early and mid 1970s heralded a new era for academic research in the fields of social sciences and humanities. It was during this period that feminism made important inroads into many areas of scholarship and assisted in defining the terrain of discourse in others. From this period onwards feminist scholarship has prospered, investigating and analyzing relations between the sexes in all spheres of life. Gender relations within sport has not been immune from this feminist analysis.

Feminist analysis of sport has a very short history. One struggles to find any consideration of sport in mainstream feminist classics written before the 1980's (Messner & Sabo, 1990). This lack of recognition of gender issues in sport enabled insightful pioneers of gender studies to develop a feminist critique of sport. Theberge argued this initial critique was based on the notion of sport being "a fundamentally sexist institution that is male dominated and masculine in orientation" (1981, p. 342). Feminist research on sport uncovered and illuminated the social realities faced by women in the world of athleticism. Sport was demonstrated as being a dominant social institution which naturalized men's power and privilege over women. The marginalization and trivialization of female athletes thus helped to reproduce the structural and ideological domination of women by men (Messner, & Sabo, 1990).

In the decade that has followed, feminist research in the field of sport and sports studies has proliferated and had a major impact in defining the scholarly discourse that exists in sports studies today. However, as feminist research on sport gathered momentum it appeared that men's relationship with sport was not being examined. Messner argued that the corrective approach of feminist research tended to leave men's relationship with sport unexamined, as the unquestioned norm, while women and sport became "the gender issue" (1992). Despite the feminist inspired literature on masculinity that began to emerge, sport was still ignored as a focus of inquiry. It was not until the early 1980s that attempts were made to research the masculinity/sport relationship. An example of this approach is Sabo and Runfolo's, (1980) groundbreaking anthology, "Jock: Sports and male identity". These early attempts to construct a feminist analysis of masculinity and sport were thwarted by the lack of any sophisticated theoretical conceptualization of masculinity. However, there has been a growing genre of feminist studies on men, sport and masculinity that

has produced much discussion and theorization at the conceptual level.

Not only is there more theoretical literature being produced, but there is also more research being carried out on the social construction of masculinity as it relates to sport. Connell's (1990) research on the life history of a surf lifesaving iron man as well as Klein's (1990) research into the bodybuilding subculture of southern California are two examples of contemporary research on masculinity and sport. Messner's (1992) study on the lives of 30 former athletes has led the way in masculine research in recent times. It has produced new theoretical concepts in masculinity as a social construct in relation to sport.

It is important to study masculinity in sport just as it is important to study masculinity as a concept in society, because sport, like society, is an institution wherein domination and power are both contested terrains. In many instances the underpinning theoretical concepts are transferable from one site to the other. Power is a key term in the discussion of masculine development, because it is this element that enables the notion of masculinity and the hegemonic ideal to become a dynamic process in gender relations and intrarelations. Hence the notion of bodily empowerment becomes an important component within such an investigation.

One could argue that the dimension of contemporary masculinity has reached a crisis point. Research-based literature is required for a more appropriate definition and "workable" form of the construct of masculinity. It is not possible to acknowledge gender-role socialisation as the primary initiator of the masculine-feminine dichotomy. Sex-role theory is static and does not allow for the dynamic processes to take place in the same way that social constructionist and hegemonic masculinist theory can provide. The advent of the feminist movement has produced significant change. Men no longer have the same oppressive influence over women. Although, it is arguable that in sport the hegemonic ideal remains strong between sexes as well as stigmatized and marginalized masculinities. Messner (1992) claimed that in sport there still exists a gap in gender relations, more so than the gap that divides racial and class relations.

Sport must be viewed as an institution whereby power is continually challenged and domination over subordinate groups is not only established, but also contested. Messner argued that "people have the ability to recognize injustice and to use sport as a means to resist (at least symbolically) the domination imposed upon them" (1992, p.13).

Purpose of the Study:

It is envisaged that this doctoral research will contribute to the

growing field of literature by exploring the lives of 12 elite level sportsmen through interview and observation techniques.

The study will focus on the relationship between the sociocultural construction of masculinity and three traditionally male-dominated sports. The sports under investigation are the endurance sport of triathlon, which can be regarded as a doing sport, and bodybuilding, which can be regarded as a being sport. The third sport under investigation will be that of surf lifesaving. This sport is perceived to be somewhere near the midpoint on a continuum of masculinities, between the two sports of triathlon and bodybuilding. Surf lifesaving is a respected masculinized sporting activity within Australian culture not only due to the pervading image of the "bronzed Aussie" that is bestowed upon its male participants, but also as a consequence of the doing and being components of the sport. Many of the elite level participants in the sport of surf lifesaving are envied and admired by males and females because of their desirable body shape and the ability to use their body in a functional manner, a manner in which the majority of people in society cannot. At a community level all three sports offer similar opportunities for men and women to participate. However, preliminary observation suggests that they are predominantly a masculine domain. Entry into this domain can be daunting for women because of the power associated with male participation rates. It will be argued that intimidation, as a consequence of masculine hegemony, also prevails for men who do not display stereotypical masculine traits. Therefore, in regard to masculinities and one's perception of

the masculine body image, the study will question why some men are socialised into various types of doing and being sports. It will also question why men feel the need to enter sport at all. Ultimately the study will contrast these reasons and provide an insight into the way doing sports and being sports affect the social construction of masculinity and assist in the perpetuation of the hegemonic masculine ideal.

METHODOLOGY

Design:

This research utilizes case study design. Case studies are useful where one needs to understand some special group, particular problem, or unique situation in depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information (Patton, 1990). In this instance the case is the uniqueness of sport as a site for the social construction of masculinity. Within this single case study twelve male athletes (four bodybuilders, four surf lifesavers, and four triathletes) provide the individual case studies that supply the raw data for cross-case pattern analysis to take place. This involves grouping together answers from participants to common questions or analyzing various perspectives on

central themes. Cross-case pattern analysis of the individual case studies comprise a major part of the data for the overall study.

Case studies can be made up of various layers of analysis. This study involves three layers. These include analysis at the individual level, analysis at the individual sports level (ie. bodybuilding, surf lifesaving and triathlon) and finally at the overall concept level. Case data comprise all the interview data, the retrospective accounts provided by the athletes and the data from the group interviews. Therefore all of the information that has been collected from each individual case is synthesized to form the data for the overall case study.

Case study design was chosen over life history accounts primarily because of the phenomenological underpinnings of the research and the resultant line of inquiry. By using a guided interview technique based on phenomenology, specific issues relating to masculinities could be probed and elaborated upon in order to gather 'rich' qualitative data that assist in describing the essence and experience of the phenomenon.

It should be noted that elements of life history are present in the data through the process of phenomenological interviewing.

Since the study takes a phenomenological approach to interviewing I attempted to evoke from these men the essence of experience of being a man and their reasons for participating in their sport. My aim is to develop an understanding of the relationship between the development of masculine identities and the structure of sport as a social institution. Further, I want to examine the lives of male athletes with the aim of exploring and interpreting the meanings that males themselves attribute to their participation in sporting careers (Messner, 1992).

Twelve elite level athletes, four each from the sports of bodybuilding, surf lifesaving and triathlon. The ages of the men ranged from 19 to 42, with the median, 27. The rationale for delineating between elite level, competition level and recreation level athletes was based upon dedication and commitment to their sport. Tentative theory suggests, that in choosing elite participants, there is a greater possibility that their perception and construction of masculinity is more related to their sport than any other single factor (Messner, 1992). However,

a competitive or recreational athlete may be successful in other areas of life, such as business, and therefore not place as much emphasis on the development of masculinity through sport.

The athletes were selected in accordance with the standard achieved in their sport, availability, willingness to participate and the locality in which they live. The definition of elite in the context of this study refers to competing in or at state or national championship level

events. The study is based on Australian and Western cultural masculine ideology and therefore the participants were required to be at least second generation Australian citizens. The research is confined to participants living in the Perth area for logistic reasons.

Since it is a phenomenological approach to individual case studies, a total of twelve participants should produce a rich source of data.

In collecting what amounted to phenomenological and life historical accounts of these men, my intention was to investigate the manner in which masculinity is socially constructed in individuals and within specific groups of men. I was particularly interested in understanding, comparing, and contrasting the socialization process of different individual sports. Further I was interested in determining how masculine gender identities develop and alter as boys and men interact with the socially constructed world of organised sport. During our semiguided interviews, which took from one to one and a half hours to conduct, I invited the men to discuss questions based on several broad areas of their life. These included, their childhood, their relationship with parents, their body, and their perceptions and views on men and women.

I divided the athletes into the three sporting categories so that it would provide the possibility of drawing conclusions about the relationship between masculinity and sport and, about the emotions, feelings, experiences and hardships that male athletes have in common. I also wanted to find out whether comparative differences existed among the three groups so that a generalized subcultural analysis could be developed.

There are few studies that resemble the current study in its entirety however, some researchers have investigated specific elements of masculinity in the sporting context as well as issues surrounding the social construction of masculinity as it relates to sport (Connell, 1990; Klein, 1990; Messner, 1992). Connell's interview with a surf lifesaving iron man provided an insight into the life of a traditionally masculine sportsperson in Australian culture. Klein (1990) carried out extensive research into the bodybuilding subculture of southern California. There, one can find a variety of behaviours and conventions that exaggerate, yet reflect, Western masculine ideologies. He investigated issues pertaining to the concepts of hypermasculinity, homophobia, and gender narcissism. Further, Klein argued that his research into the bodybuilding subculture in southern California was not merely a social and psychological study of a bodybuilding subculture, it was at the same time a study of masculinity. While typical men are seemingly different from bodybuilders, he described and analyzed them to be like all men.

Messner (1992) interviewed 30 former athletes to gain insights into their perception of masculinity. This literature indicated that male athletes regarded sport as being a major contributor to their

construction of masculinity. Sport was a large part of their lives and was involved in shaping their personality. Issues such as patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity and power over subordinates were all investigated and analyzed within the sporting context.

All three studies have made important inroads into the realm of masculine research. However, it is significant to note that each one utilizes various forms of traditional feminist research methods. Both Connell and Messner cite their use of life historical accounts as being an important method in attaining appropriate qualitative data. According to Connell "properly handled, the theorized life history can be a powerful tool for the study of social structures and their dynamics as they impinge on (and are reconstituted in) personal life" (1990, p. 84).

The interviewing method employed in research such as mine, Connell's, Messner's, and Klein's is very important in the quality of data provided by the men. My initial aim was to make the men feel comfortable rather than make them feel intimidated by a stranger inquiring into their personal lives. In attempting to maintain a feminist methodology, I aimed to break down the traditional relationship-subject/interviewee-object by relating to the men that I interviewed in an egalitarian and reciprocal manner (Messner, 1992). I attempted to minimize any power or status inequities so they might see me as a friend and be willing to share their thoughts and feelings in a non-threatening environment. Consequently, I invited the men to choose their location in which to be interviewed to enhance this feeling of security.

In real terms, what did these men have to gain from discussing intimate details of their life? Although, the information I received from the interviews would assist me in completing my Ph.D, it appeared that these men had very little to gain. But that is where I was wrong. At the beginning of the interview session there was an obvious barrier between myself and the athlete however, towards the end of the interview it was difficult to stop the participant from talking, and in some cases from talking about unrelated topics to the line of questioning. I found that most men relished the opportunity to discuss their lives and emotional issues with me because it appears they don't take the opportunity to do so with other men. Each one responded to the interview in a positive manner and they were all eager to continue these responses in the follow-up interviews. They were very interested in the manner in which I had diagrammatically charted their lives in the initial analysis and were excited about the final outcome of the research.

Feminist research has been a major player in the development of research on masculinity. I cannot explain my feelings more

appropriately than Messner's summing up of the situation that has arisen over the past two decades;

....if it were not for the intellectual and political terrain opened up by feminist scholars of the past fifteen years or so, I am convinced that I would not be writing a book concerned with illuminating the relationship between masculinity and sport. In fact, the subject would never have crossed my mind (1992, p, 6).

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