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THE LANGUAGE OF SPORT AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF
GENDER

M.A.L.S. FINAL PROJECT

Katherine L. Mc Dowell
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THE LANGUAGE OF SPORT AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

INTRODUCTION

Feminist scholars have argued that through the exclusion of women and the association of men with physical competence, power and even violence, the institution of sport has traditionally provided men with a homosocial sphere of life that bolsters the ideology of male superiority (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 121). Feminists have also argued that as the experiential and moral expression of our culture, common English vocabulary - and the language of sport in particular - powerfully reinforces, protects, and perpetuates patriarchal and sexist social order (Miller 55-56). In essence, feminists hold that if everyday language is a critical constituent of social reality and of the social scaffolding upon which the patriarchal and sexist social order is erected, then the everyday language of sport, which embodies the "...virulent, anti-woman and anti-

feminine ideology that pervades the structure and dynamics of sport..." (Boutilier & San Giovanni 18) is no less a critical constituent of this repressive order.

To effectively evaluate the role that the language of sport plays in constructing and perpetuating the patriarchal and sexist social order, it is necessary first to consider exactly how common English vocabulary constructs the sociopolitical process and therein the gender order and, second, to review the research regarding the role that **the language of sport - language about sport, language within sport, and conversational sports metaphors** - plays in routinely devaluing, trivializing, and degrading women in our society.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Within the sociopolitical process language may be regarded as both an agent and an expression of social action and political organization. This view of language derives from an ethnographic encounter with the use of speech in everyday situations and is based on the

perspective that language itself is at once a sensitive index of social relations and an important sort of action with important sorts of material consequences. As a result, the everyday use of language raises important political and economic questions about what ordinary words actually accomplish.

Until recently, the socially constructive aspect of language was either unrecognized or ignored and language was regarded as essentially a descriptive instrument, or one that Myers and Brenneis refer to as "an unfortunately clumsy way of making propositional statements about facts in the world" (5). That is, by focusing on language as referential rather than as socially generative, social scientists failed to conceptualize language as a pragmatic, multifunctional instrument that inherently resides within the very vortex of social life and that is a **constitutive social activity** in its own right.

Reinforced by the development of linguistics as a study of texts, the conception of language as a passive reflection of reality and a mere instrument of communication is now being challenged. In short, social scientists now appreciate the possibility that common talk - even idle chatter - might in itself represent a significant way of influencing and effecting cultural reality. Within this perspective all linguistic forms - even the most quiescent and seemingly innocuous - are

regarded as strategic actions created as responses to cultural and institutional contexts, and thus worthy of evaluation as means that systematically link and perpetuate sociocultural patterns.

Accepting the fact that everyday linguistic skirmishes both in normal language and within formal institutions operate as political actions and are generative of the social order, language assumes enormous sociocultural power. In other words, far from merely reflecting an already given social reality as previously thought, language now becomes contested terrain, an ideological battleground or primary site if you will, for competing discourses where real and possible forms of social and political life are determined and contested.

For example, in Words and Women Miller explains the powerful dialectical relationship among language, patriarchy, sexism, and gender by pointing out how the confusion of the term "gender," which is a socially-induced or socially-acquired attribute, with the term "sex," which is a biologically-given characteristic, inherently validates linguistic and cultural sex discrimination:

Throughout its history, as English made the gradual change from grammatical to natural gender, words denoting occupations or professions could be and from time to time were used for females and males without distinction. But because males are consciously or unconsciously considered the norm, new feminine designations were introduced and

accepted whenever the need was felt to assert male prerogatives. As the language itself documents, once certain occupations ceased to be women's work and became trades or vocations in which men predominated, the old feminine-gender words were annexed by men and became appropriate male designations. Then new endings were assigned to women, quite possibly, in Fowler's phrase, to keep a woman from "asserting her right" to a male's name (or his job). (49,51)

To elucidate the concept of the socially-induced term "gender" and its relationship to patriarchy, sexism, and the semantic and cultural devaluation of women, Miller next describes the important concept of "natural gender," which refers to the classification of nouns solely on the basis of biological sex, as in the terms "male" and "female." In her analysis of natural gender and its English usage, Miller explains that if a person is male, masculine pronouns are used to refer to him and he is called by "masculine gender" words, such as husband, father, uncle. Because of this particular linguistic usage, Miller asserts that even though a male's primary and secondary sex characteristics are male, "...the capabilities of his mind are not sex-linked..." (53). Miller states that this is generally not true in a woman's case. In other words, Miller explains that although an extensive range of positive characteristics in English used to define males could be used equally to define females, one perceives males through our language mostly in terms of "human qualities," while females are

perceived often in terms of negative qualities "assigned to them as females" (59).

As illustration of this phenomenon, Miller analyzes the entry for "woman" in Webster's Third, which provides the following list of "qualities considered distinctive of womanhood": "Gentleness, affection, and domesticity or ...fickleness, superficiality, and folly." In contrast, Miller then cites Webster's Third "qualities distinctive of manhood," in which no negative attributes detract from the "courage, strength, and vigor" that the definers associate with males (59). Miller next cites the words "masculine, manly, manlike, and other male-associated words" that are often used complimentarily when applied to women, such as the descriptive phrase "manly determination" (60). In contrast, Miller states that the word "effeminate" meaning "softness, weakness, unmanly, not dynamic or vigorous," when applied to a male, intends a "cutting insult" (60).

In short, Miller concludes that male-associated words when applied to females are generally character enhancing, while female-associated words when applied to males are not. Hence, female-associated words when applied to a male, must be "hedged" to avoid insult (61). Noting that lexicographers do not make up definitions "out of thin air," but simply fulfill a task to record how words are actually used rather than how they **should**

be used, Miller further concludes that the examples English lexicographers choose to illustrate word meanings are, in essence, accurate revelations of existing cultural expectations (60). Accordingly, Smith explains how males have historically conversed with males, thereby encoding false principles and expectations in language, thought and reality:

This is how tradition is formed. A way of thinking develops in...discourse through the medium of the printed word as well as in speech. It has questions, solutions, themes, styles, standards, ways of looking at the world. These are formed as the circle of those present builds on the work of the past. From these circles women have been excluded...throughout this period in which ideologies become of increasing importance first as a mode of thinking, legitimating and sanctioning a social order, and then as integral in the organization of society, women have been deprived of the means to participate in creating forms of thought relevant or adequate to express their own experience or to define and raise social consciousness about their situation and concerns...(Spender, Man Made Language 143)

In "Sexism as Shown through the English Vocabulary," Nilsen further examines the critical role that language plays in the social construction of gender and of the patriarchal and sexist social order. In her analysis, Nilsen asserts that in linguistic areas not specifically connected to sex differences, the standard separation of male and female terms, like host, hostess, conductor and conductress, is used as much to indicate the idea of male seriousness vs. female triviality as it is to identify

the sex of the referent. Nilsen concludes that this system of separate male and female terms clearly "shortchanges women, who end up with the less prestigious titles" (38,39).

In "Gender-Marking in American English: Usage and Reference," Stanley effectively expands the preceding theoretical perspectives on language and gender by arguing that "natural gender" as a grammatical classification does **not** exist in English, but rather that the semantic space of English is structured strictly in accordance with the sex-role stereotypes of our society in which male is the prevalent and dictating social standard (Nilsen, 50).

As illustration, Stanley cites the use of the words *man* and *mankind* and asserts that since women have been "cognitively excluded" in the actual intended use of these terms, these words are often used as "pseudo-generics" to mean *male* human being (53). As evidence of this cognitive exclusion of women, Stanley cites and analyzes the following passage:

Mankind has, ever since he began to think, worshipped that which he cannot understand...Yet man is now in the position of facing the ultimate unknowable, which can never be penetrated as long as he remains in his present physical form...The constantly augmenting knowledge of the world has only been achieved by centuries of dedicated work by men of science...When he has grown safely to adulthood he can wake up in the morning in his heated or air-conditioned house...and spend the day in a glass and plastic office...And to cap it all he may, if

he really so desires, stay at home and change into a she!
(54)

In her analysis of the above passage, Stanley explains what she considers to be the writer's intent in cognitively excluding women from the semantic space of the words "man" and "mankind": to signal to his readers his negative attitude toward women and toward any male "...stupid enough to voluntarily accept a subordinate role..." (54).

From the sexist semantic and cognitive content of the above article and from a wide array of other similar examples, Stanley concludes that at the very least the use of the masculine gender encourages English writers and speakers to perceive the male sex as the social standard (62). In contrast to male semantic space, Stanley also concludes that the center of female semantic space is composed of words that connote either distinctly supportive and subordinate roles or words that denote women as objects of male conquest and possession. As illustration, Stanley cites female referent nouns like car, boat, nature, land, and ship and refers to the clarity and comprehensiveness of a legal textbook definition: "land, like woman, is for possessing" (66).

Finally, in "Gender-Marking in American English: Usage and Reference" Stanley points out that when women move into activities outside of their traditional roles as

women and mothers, they move into "negative semantic space" and, as a result, a woman's anomalous position in this "space" must be marked by the addition of a special, female-specific marker like *woman/female/lady*, or by a special "feminine" suffix like -ess, -ette or -ix. According to Stanley, these linguistic connotations of rigidly-structured, culturally-defined, negative semantic space represent "...the price for moving out of one's socially defined semantic space, as though there were something *not quite right* with such an individual" (67).

In sum, as one reflects on the broad-based citations and telling analyses in Stanley's article, the powerful dialectical bond between patriarchy, sexism and "gender marking" in English becomes increasingly apparent. Thus Stanley concludes:

Our language is sexist because our society is sexist, and until there is a significant reversal of the prevalent attitudes toward women, we cannot hope to accomplish much...Removing sexist words, phrases, comparison, jokes and the like is NOT *changing* the English language...*humanity, people, persons, and human being* are not new additions to the English vocabulary...Those who oppose the removal of sexist relics in English hope to obscure the real issues, which have to do with political power...*they* has been in use as a replacement for indefinite pronouns at least since Chaucer. Only the influence of the traditional male grammarians has kept it out of so-called Formal English. Male omnipresence in our vocabulary is only one of the ways in which women have been kept invisible in our society when they moved beyond their traditional roles. If sexist terms are really so innocuous and trivial, why is everyone so anxious to protect them? (74)

Accepting that cultural resistance to removal of "sexist relics" in English is essentially a symbolic expression of patriarchal power, one should now consider the nature of this power and its trenchant ability to semantically and culturally devalue, trivialize, and degrade women.

Accordingly, in Body Politics, Power, Sex, and Nonverbal Communication Henley describes the political nature of patriarchy by explaining that behaviors that arise from

... the power differential in our society... are not sex differences, they are power differences. There is no "woman problem," there is a an oppression problem. There is no "battle of the sexes," there is class and caste war.. "*The personal is political*"...there is nothing we do... that does not reflect our participation in a power system...our politics are the way we live, as well as what we profess. (81, 192, 198)

In terms of the ability to coerce or influence an individual through the "control and defense" of existing resources, Henley then analyzes the social and psychological nature of patriarchal power and its more blatant expression, dominance. Using language as a primary "resource" example, Henley shows how by "defining, dismissing and deprecating" women English has itself become "ammunition" for the patriarchal power structure that in effect puts women in a position similar

to a "dueler who faces an opponent with a gun which points backwards" (80). As illustration, Henley refers to the differing historical and contemporary meanings for male and female descriptive nouns that define and derogate woman routinely on the basis of their sex. Henley specifically cites male words like "lord," "king" and "prince," which have maintained their historically "stately" meanings, and in contrast cites similar female words like "queen," "madame" and "mistress," which have commonly evolved to acquire sexually "debased" meanings (81).

Finally, although Henley realizes that the ultimate result of the semantic "derogation" and "dismissal" of women is difficult to assess, she concludes that "...no amount of laboratory studies can measure the day-to-day effects of millions of females being daily surrounded and bombarded by a language that suggests they are trivial, secondary, sex objects, or just not there" (81).

Concurring with Henley, Miller effectively sums up the far-ranging, humanly debilitating effects of women's "day-to-day" semantic and cultural devaluation:

The role expectations compressed into our male-positive-important and female-negative-trivial words are extremely damaging, as we are beginning to find out. The female stereotypes they convey are obvious, but the harm doesn't stop there. The inflexible demands made on males, which allow neither for variation nor for human frailty, are dehumanizing. They put a premium on a kind of perfection that can be achieved only through strength,

courage, industry, and fortitude. These are admirable qualities, but if they are associated only with males, and their opposites are associated only with females, they become sex-related demands that few individuals can fulfill. (61)

As illustrated in the previously cited research on language and the social construction of gender, it may be concluded that by routinely devaluing, trivializing, and degrading women, language - both everyday and otherwise - powerfully reinforces, protects, and perpetuates the patriarchal and sexist social order . Accordingly, if language in general is a critical constituent of social reality and of the social scaffolding upon which the patriarchal and sexist social order is erected, then the language of sport, which embodies the "...virulent, anti-woman and anti-feminine ideology that pervades the structure and dynamics of sport..." (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 18) is no less a critical constituent of this repressive order .

To understand how the language of sport powerfully reinforces, protects, and perpetuates the patriarchal and sexist social order, the research regarding the role that **language about sport, language within sport, and conversational sports metaphors** play in routinely devaluing, trivializing, and deprecating women will be reviewed.

THE INSTITUTION OF SPORT AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

By contributing to historical patterns of male empowerment and female disadvantage, organized sport has played a profound and critical role in producing and maintaining male hegemony in our society. Thus Eitzen and Zinn assert that "...sport reproduces patriarchal relations through four minimalizing processes: definition, direct control, ignoring, and trivialization..." (362). Concurring with this perspective, Sage posits that sport "...presents symbols and values that preserve patriarchy and women's subordinate position in society..."(44), and serves in both historical and contemporary terms as an important resource to reconstitute an otherwise challenged masculine hegemony (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen 121). In essence, by routinely defining and treating women as incapable of equaling men in sports ability and performance, male physical superiority over women has

been translated into a model of hegemonic male social superiority that is entrenched in male-centered ideology, powered by a male-centered world vision, and structured by a male-generated vocabulary. As a result, the institution of sport may be considered an essential ideological tool for producing and reproducing the dominion of men over women, therein preserving and rationalizing an asymmetrical division of labor upon which the status quo of the social order supposedly depends. Boutilier and San Giovanni explain this dynamic as follows:

...(sport is) clearly a patriarchal institution, celebrating masculine power, values and behaviors. It is on an equal footing with political, military, and economic institutions in training, encouraging and rewarding the primary emphasis on competition, discipline, rationality, control, product and victory that reflect the major androcentric values of society and the profile of what is considered quintessentially masculine. (17)

THE LANGUAGE OF SPORT AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Even though few accounts of the role of sport in the social construction of gender have paid attention to the subject of linguistics, the language of sport clearly reflects the dehumanizing dynamics associated with the

semantic devaluation of women. In other words, the language of sport - **language about sport, language within sport, and conversational sports metaphors** - is rife with sexist expressions, traditions, and customs that serve to structure and socially validate the repressive patriarchal gender ideologies and practices of our society. To comprehensively evaluate the specific role that the language of sport plays in reinforcing, protecting, and perpetuating this patriarchal and sexist social order, research regarding this issue will now be reviewed.

Language About Sport

In Messner's, Duncan's, and Jensen's "Separating the Men From the Girls: The Gendered Language of Televised Sports Reporting" and in Duncan's and Hasbrook's "Denial of Power in Televised Women's Sports," the issue of how televised sports commentary in our society routinely devalues, trivializes, and degrades women is closely examined.

For example, Messner, Duncan, and Jensen assert that televised sports reporting consistently infantilizes and devalues women athletes by inequitably "marking" women's

sports and women athletes as "other" and by equivocally "framing" women athletes' accomplishments (121-137).

As illustration of such practices, Messner, Duncan, and Jensen cite the popular televised sports coverage of tennis and basketball and the stark contrast between the way that commentators commonly refer to men and women athletes within these sports. That is, while women are commonly referred to as "girls," "young ladies," and "women," male athletes are **never** referred to as "boys" but, rather, as "men," "young men," or "young fellas" (127). Moreover, when athletes are named, commentators use the first name only of women athletes far more frequently than they do for male athletes (304 times vs. 44 times!). Significantly, the authors note that the athletes' age differences fail to explain the commentators' tendencies to refer to women athletes as "girls" and/or "young ladies," and by first name only (128). In addition to both male and female commentators' tendencies to linguistically infantilize and stereotypically define women athletes while granting male athletes adult status, Messner, Duncan, and Jensen also found that the quality of the commentators' verbal attributions of success, failure, strength and weakness for women's and men's sports events tend to differ (127,128).

For example, in contrast to men's basketball reporting, verbal attributions of strength to women in women's basketball are often stated in ambivalent language like "she's tiny, she's small, but so effective under the boards," expressions that undermine or neutralize words that convey power and strength. The authors further note that the commentators also routinely gender mark female basketball coaches by referring to them in terms like "screaming off the bench," expressions that often imply "powerlessness and a lack of control"(130). The authors point out that similar expressions are not used to describe male basketball coaches.

As a result of their research on the gendered language of televised sports, Messner, Duncan, and Jensen conclude that gender - at least within the realm of televised sports commentary - is the "dominant defining feature of women athletes'shared subordinate status." In addition, the authors further conclude that sports media reinforce "...the overall tendency of sport to be an *institution* that simultaneously (1) constructs and legitimizes men's overall power and privilege over women and (2) constructs and legitimizes hetero-sexual, white, middle-class men's power and privilege over subordinated and marginalized groups of men..." (132). The authors also state that since, unlike "live" sport, televised sport is an event

that is mediated by the commentators' framing of the contest, a television viewer is thus likely to be profoundly affected by any meanings - androcentric or otherwise - that he or she constructs from a particular sports contest (132). In light of this observation, Messner, Duncan, and Jensen then assert that since language both reflects and constructs social reality (134), the media - and sports media in particular - tend to reflect the social conventions of gender-biased language and hence reinforce our language's biased meanings, which contribute to the re-construction of social inequalities (133).

To further elucidate Messner's, Duncan's, and Jensen's conclusions regarding the extraordinary power of gender-based, linguistic definition to construct social inequalities, sociologists Eitzen and Zinn argue that

{gendered} language places women and men within a system of differentiation and stratification. Language suggests how women and men are to be evaluated. Language embodies negative and positive value stances and valuations related to how certain groups within society are appraised. Language in general is filled with biases about women and men. Specific linguistic conventions are sexist when they isolate or stereotype some aspect of an individual's nature or the nature of a group of individuals based on their sex... (363-4)

In "Denial of Power in Televised Women's Sports"
Duncan and Hasbrook continue Messner's, Duncan's, and

Jensen's discourse on the language of sport in televised sports commentary, by arguing that because ambivalent sports reporting routinely and inequitably "defines" and "ignores" woman athletes and their accomplishments, televised sports coverage may thus be considered an influential purveyor of exclusionary and denigrating sexist tactics that symbolically deny power to women (239).

For example, in their evaluation of the live 1986 national television broadcast of men's and women's NCAA Division I basketball championship games, Duncan and Hasbrook found that in contrast to the men's televised coverage an analysis of the game and play of the team was largely absent from the women's coverage. That is, during the broadcast the physical skills of the female basketball players were virtually ignored and instead were replaced by gender-based, stereotypical descriptions of aesthetic movement such as "very pretty" and "beautiful." In contrast, the physical prowess of the male players were often depicted in terms of skilled accomplishment like "great," "powerful" and "pure" athletic skill (234). Duncan and Hasbrook also found that in marked contrast to the absence of such descriptions in women's play coverage, commentary about the game play of individual male team members frequently suggested "mental power" and "knowledge" and as

illustration cite descriptions like "smart foul," "smart play," and "brilliant shot" (233-234). Duncan and Hasbrook then point out that in the women's championship coverage the degree of commentary on strategy and technical analysis within the women's game was all but ignored. Rather, the women's commentary focused on which female had possession of the ball, which one was shooting or which one had committed a violation. In contrast, the commentary in the men's coverage was a technical play-by-play analysis composed of much technical jargon and strategic reference, such as "2-2-1 full-court press," "1-4 offense," and "great weakside defense" (234). Unlike the women's coverage, the broadcast reporters seldom took time during the men's game to communicate personal information about an individual male player (234). From the above information, Duncan and Hasbrook thus posit:

...while the commentary within the men's championship game recognized and therefore affirmed the game elements of physical skill, knowledge, and strategy, the commentary associated with the women's game overlooked and thus symbolically denied these elements. In this sense, the televised commentary of the women's game constituted a denial of game, while the televised commentary of the men's game constituted a confirmation of game. (234)

In "Denial of Power in Televised Women's Sports," Duncan and Hasbrook further explain how televised sports coverage of the 1986 NCAA Division I basketball

championship games constituted a "denial of team" to the female participants. In short, Duncan and Hasbrook state that since basketball is a team sport and since each team consists of a group of individuals who are viewed as a central unit that competes against another central unit rather than against another individual, to overlook or ignore the fact of this central focus is in essence the devaluative act of "denial of team" (233, 234).

As illustration of this dismissive, linguistic ignoring of the integrity of the women's team and in stark opposition to the "confirmation of team" of the men's game commentary Duncan and Hasbrook cite the following play-by-play commentaries in which the emphasis on the individual female players' personal backgrounds - "their injuries, their families, and their personality characteristics" - underscores the dearth of commentary - either by school name or by mascot - about the women's performance as a unified team:

Beverly Williams starts Texas out and ties it up at 2; Here's Fran Harris moving inside. The 6-foot senior has given Texas a 4-point lead; And here comes Kamie Ethridge; ...Cynthia Cooper brings it down; Cooper cuts it to 4; The foul sends Cooper to the line... the play-by-play commentary in the men's game emphasized the team rather than the individual...Duke goes into a man-to-man; Louisville 2-2-1 full-court pressure; They have shown great interior motion; Here come the Blue Devils; over to Louisville, last touched by Duke...(234)

At the end of their analysis of the televised sports coverage of the 1986 men's and women's NCAA Division I basketball championship games, Duncan and Hasbrook conclude that by "ignoring" and "trivializing" the female participants' mental, physical, individual, and team skills, not only did the broadcast narration of this event constitute a symbolic denial of power to the female participants but also a symbolic "denial of sport." Duncan and Hasbrook further assert that through this symbolic denial of "power" and of "sport" to the female athletes, the networks clearly communicated the view that although the women's competition is an important intercollegiate championship, unlike the men's competition it is "neither a real team sport nor a real team game," but merely a "pale imitation of real (men's) basketball" (233,234,239).

The issue of how media sports coverage devalues female athletic performance by trivializing female athletes' mental, physical and individual skills and accomplishments - a dynamic that in effect produces and reproduces the dominion of men over women - is further addressed in Halbert's and Latimer's " 'Battling' Gendered Language: An Analysis of the Language Used by Sports Commentators in a Televised Coed Tennis Competition" and in Birrell's and Cole's "Double Fault:

Renee Richards and the Construction and Naturalization of Difference."

By specifically comparing the language used by sports commentators to describe Martina Navratilova and Jimmy Connors 1992 televised "Battle of the Champions" coed tennis competition, Halbert and Latimer explain how sports commentators devalue women's athletic participation, abilities, and achievements (299). In short, Halbert and Latimer relate how these commentators construct/reconstruct traditional gender boundaries by routinely overemphasizing the "femaleness" of female athletes, a practice that results both in gender marking of the game itself and ultimately serves to deny a "genderless sports realm" (307).

For example, after stating that sports commentators routinely gender mark sports competition by consistently referencing the emotional/vulnerable side of the female competitor and not the male competitor (304), Halbert and Latimer describe how they found that in the "Battle of Champions" Martina Navratilova's feelings and emotional vulnerabilities were remarked upon 17 times ("..Martina wears every emotion right there on the sleeve, you know what she's thinking - it's in her face. You can just tell by her body language...") while Jimmy Connor's feelings and emotions were hardly referenced at all (304). From their research Halbert and Latimer conclude that since

emotions and vulnerabilities are devalued in sports and stoicism and independence are valued, the effect of this trivializing media practice is to diminish Navratilova's abilities as a "real" athlete (304). Halbert and Latimer also conclude that this phenomenon not only reflects present attitudes about women's participation in sport, but also the fact that viewers are falsely educated on what is "reality" (307).

Concurring with Halbert's and Latimer's findings regarding how media sports coverage reflects the social conventions of gender-biased language that contribute to the re-construction of social inequalities between men and women, in "Double Fault: Renee Richards and the Construction and Naturalization of Difference" Birrell and Cole explain how even though Renee Richards' transsexualism appears to challenge fundamental cultural assumptions regarding notions of gender, sex and differences therein, closer analysis reveals that "...various media frames invoked to explain the meaning of Renee Richards reproduce rather than challenge dominant gender arrangements and ideologies...specifically the assumption that there are two and only two, obviously universal, natural, bipolar, mutually exclusive sexes that necessarily correspond to stable gender identity and gendered behavior..."(1,3) . As illustration, Birrell and Cole describe how in the

case of the "sexual anomaly" of Richards - and in contrast to male athletes - the media followed their convention of detailing the physical appearance of a female athlete (9), rather than her performance skills and/or accomplishments:

Dr. Richards displays traits associated with both sexes. The soft husky voice is mostly male but the high cheekbones, shapely legs, graceful gold pierced earrings and peach nail polish...are distinctly female...(*The New York Times*, August 21, 1976)

Like Halbert and Latimer, Birrell and Cole conclude that sport is not only a

...gender producing, gender affirming system but... a difference and power producing system...a central site for the naturalization of sex and gender differences...a narrative structured around physical superiority in which sex differences are understood as, and thus reproduced as, real and meaningful...(18)

Extending Birrell's and Cole's above evaluation that sports media coverage is a central site for naturalizing sex and gender differences between men and women, in Women & Language in Transition Henley explains how this semantic double standard operates to deprecate women:

The deprecation of women in the English language is seen in the connotations and meanings of words applied to female and male things. Different adjectives are often applied to the actions or productions of the different sexes....A woman's sex is commonly treated as if it is

the most salient characteristic of her being, but this is not the case for males. This situation is the basis of much of the defining of women, and it underlies much of the deprecation...(4)

The reality of Henley's observation that "...a woman's sex is commonly treated as if it is the most salient characteristic of her being..." is clearly illustrated in Lumpkin's and William's "An Analysis of *Sports Illustrated* Feature Articles, 1954-1987." In this article, Lumpkin and Williams posit that

...The selected descriptors of females in feature articles reveals that sexist language, such as body dimensions and references to attractiveness, is indeed evident in the stories written by males. A comparison of the descriptors by gender dramatically illustrates that looking pretty or dressing or behaving in traditionally feminine ways seems to be as important as athletic prowess to *Sports Illustrated's* authors and editors. Bodily references to males seldom refer to anything other than good looks or well-developed physiques...(253)

As example of the deprecating sexist descriptors that *Sports Illustrated* routinely applies to women athletes and not to men, Lumpkin and Williams cite "blatantly sexist" phrases like "12-car pileup gorgeous...so ruby-lipped...114 pounds worth of peacekeeping missile, " "about the sexiest thing I'd ever seen," and "the tour's resident sex goddess" (248). In contrast, Lumpkin and Williams note that male athletes were most often described in much less sexually characteristic terms such

as "All-American features," "a magnificent physique," and "a well-proportioned body" (248).

From a multitude of linguistically derogatory illustrations such as those cited and from the fact that *Sports Illustrated* has continually (1954-1987) featured white male athletes more frequently and in longer articles than female athletes (who were for the most part confined to "sex appropriate" sports), Lumpkin and Williams conclude that *Sports Illustrated* feature article writing both reflects and reinforces traditional cultural biases and attitudes against women (254).

Language Within Sport

Like **language about sport**, by routinely devaluing, trivializing, and degrading women **language within sport** forcefully structures and validates the repressive patriarchal and sexist order of our society. This dynamic is clearly illustrated by Eitzen's and Zinn's "The De-athleticization of Women: The Naming and Gender Marking

of Collegiate Sport Teams," Fuller's and Manning's "Violence and Sexism in College Mascots and Symbols: A Typology," and Curry's "Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk About Competition and Women."

Accordingly, in "The De-athleticization of Women: The Naming and Gender Marking of Collegiate Sport Teams," Eitzen and Zinn examine how gender marking within the language of sport devalues, trivializes, and degrades women in our society. Specifically, Eitzen and Zinn analyze how female athletes are denied team, game, and sport through sexist naming practices of athletic teams, which contribute not only "...to the maintenance of male dominance within college athletics by defining women athletes and women's athletic programs as second class and trivial," (362) but also to linguistic marking systems that promote "male supremacy and female subordination" (364).

As example of this semantic, sexist gender marking within the language of sport, Eitzen and Zinn cite the popular practice of combining a male name with a female modifier such as in the names "Lady Friars," "Lady Rams" and "Lady Gamecocks" (366). Since this semantic, sexist gender marking inherently assigns "inferior quality" and "lower status" to women's sports teams, Eitzen and Zinn conclude that this popular naming practice effectively

enhances "...the lack of acceptance of women's sport.. " (365,366). They further conclude that since gender marking women's collegiate sports teams' names by adding "lady" to the name of the men's team implicitly emphasizes women's "fragility, elegance, and propriety" rather than women's athletic skills and abilities, this popular practice serves to "de-athleticize" women (367). Eitzen and Zinn then summarize the wide-ranging importance of their research:

Since language has a large impact on people's values and their conceptions of women's and men's rightful place in the social order, the pervasive acceptance of gender marking in the names of collegiate athletic teams is not a trivial matter. Athletes, whether women or men, need names that convey their self-confidence, their strength, their worth, and their power. (370)

In "Violence and Sexism in College Mascots and Symbols: A Typology," Fuller and Manning continue Eitzen's and Zinn's discourse by examining how sexist sports naming practices devalue, trivialize, and degrade women. Specifically, Fuller and Manning explain that the "feminization" of traditional collegiate mascots and symbols has contributed to the "trivialization of women's sports" and thereby reflects the "second class status of women as it is perceived by American society" (63). Fuller and Manning also assert that a contributing factor to women's secondary status in the realm of sports is

attributable to our culture's grounding in the phenomenon of patriarchy:

Since sport is considered a masculine preserve there is an incongruity in admitting that women's teams have the same status as those of men. In many instances the feminization of the names used for women's teams emphasizes their gender so that one is aware first that they are women and only second that they are athletes. (63)

As example of the "feminization" of traditional collegiate mascots and symbols and resultant "trivialization" of women's sports teams, Fuller and Manning cite the linguistic transformation of power-implying characteristics normally associated with mascot names for male athletic teams into "merely cute" mascot names for female teams, a semantic gender marking practice that in effect disempowers female athletes by emphasizing femininity over athletic skill (63). As illustration, Fuller and Manning cite contrasting examples of women's and men's collegiate sports mascots: "Blue Chicks" versus "Blue Hawks," "Cotton Blossoms" versus "Boll weevils," and "Wild Kittens" versus "Wildcats" (62).

Concurring with Eitzen's and Zinn's conclusions on the far-ranging, nefarious implications of the gender marking of collegiate sports teams, from their research on

violence and sexism in collegiate mascots and symbols
Fuller and Manning posit that

...Both the selection of the original mascots and symbols, and their feminization, reflect sexist attitudes prevalent in our culture. In few situations where the names of women's teams have been feminized has the integrity of women been respected. (64)

The reality of Fuller's and Manning's assertion that sexist attitudes in our society frequently lead to disrespect for a woman's physical and emotional integrity is forcefully illustrated in Curry's "Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk About Competition and Women." Specifically, Curry explains that his research indicates that male locker room talk contributes to and structures sexist and homophobic assumptions about "masculinity, male dominance, and fraternal bonding" while providing a conducive environment for aggression toward women (119-120).

For example, after noting how sports competition links men together in a status enhancing activity in which aggression is valued and how competitive pressures and insecurities surrounding "the male bond" influence men's talk about women (126,127), Curry explains how fear of weakening the fraternal bond greatly affects how athletes "do gender" in the locker room and how this fear

influences the comments that male athletes make about women (128).

In short, Curry points out that his research shows that it is of the utmost importance to a male athlete who wants to remain bonded to his teammates to maintain the appearance of a "conventional heterosexual male identity" and that this identity often includes perceiving and making comments about women as sexual objects and conquests rather than as actual human beings (128,129). Curry emphasizes that even though it serves a function for fraternal bonding, the male athlete's perception and discussion of women as mainly sexual objects encourage homophobic verbal expressions of disdain, hostility, aggression and even hatred toward women, while at the same time promoting harmful attitudes conducive to and supportive of sexual assault and rape (130,132).

As illustration, Curry cites the following conversational fragment in which a recruit's mother attracted the attention of a group of male athletes because she was very attractive:

Athlete 1: She's too young to be his mother!
Athlete 2: Man, I'd hurt her if I got a hold of her.
Athlete 3: I'd tear her up.
Athlete 4: I'd break her hips. (all laugh)
Athlete 3: Yeah, she was hot! (132)

As a result of his research into male talk about women and competition in the locker room, Curry concludes that sexism in the locker room is best understood as part of a larger cultural system that supports and encourages male supremacy (133). He further concludes that "...By linking ideas about masculinity with negative attitudes toward women, locker room culture creates a no-win situation for the athlete who wishes to be masculine and who wants to have successful, loving, nurturing relationships with women..." (134).

Conversational Sports Metaphors

Given the fact that **language about sport** and **language within sport** routinely devalue, trivialize, and degrade women and that linguistic metaphors operate to "...build bridges between the familiar and the unknown, empower new visions and act as relays for transferring meaning, myth, and ideology from one pocket of cultural understanding to another..." while embodying, preserving, and policing "...withered mythologies that create social order and make communication possible..." (Jansen and Sabo, 8), it is not unreasonable to regard our society's pervasive use of deprecatory and sexist **conversational sports metaphors**

as yet another critical medium through which biases, sexist attitudes, aggression, and even violence against women are created, reinforced, and perpetuated.

For example, in "The Perfect 10: 'Sportspeak' in The Language of Sexual Relations" Segrave addresses this issue by arguing that "...sport symbolism in everyday discourses on sexual relations is but one further component of a complex emotive of masculine behavior that communicates power and dominance and therefore sustains the subjugation of women..." (14). To illustrate this sexist 'sportspeak' phenomenon, Segrave cites such commonly used, sexually degrading sports metaphors like "Did you score last night, Andy?," "Put it through the uprights (football)," "Get a hole in one (golf)," and "Take her deep (baseball)" (6). As did Eitzen and Baca Zinn and Fuller and Manning in their analyses of the role of the language of sport in the social construction of gender, Segrave expressively argues for greater understanding of the broad-based, humanly and socially destructive implications of his findings regarding conversational sports metaphor and the linguistic degradation of women:

The ascendancy of the sports metaphor in the language of gender relations may well be a sign of the ever growing importance of sport as a legitimizing agency for male hegemony in American society; an hegemony that not only denies the possibility of equal partnership between men and women, but one that also denies men and boys

access to more humane and less regressive behaviors - in which case an entire culture stands to be impoverished. (17)

As further illustration of how the ascendancy of the sports metaphor in the language of gender relations may well represent the growing importance of sport as a legitimizing agency for male hegemony in American society, in "The Sport/ War Metaphor: Hegemonic Masculinity, the Persian Gulf War, and the New World Order," Jansen and Sabo explain the metaphoric construction of hegemonic masculinity in our society by analyzing how sport/war tropes, such as those used in the discourse of government, military, war journalism, sport media and the sport industry during the Persian Gulf War, act effectively to police the boundaries that secure the gender system within "...discrete binary categories that require hyperbolic and hierarchial renderings of difference..." and to vent, galvanize, and cultivate resistances to gender-based forms of social equality (9). Jansen and Sabo define hegemonic masculinity as "...an idealization that comes into being and exists in opposition to other counterhegemonic constructions of masculinity ..." (9).

Specifically, Jansen and Sabo analyze how sport/war analogies express and contribute to male solidarity at various socio-political levels. As illustration, they

point out that sport/war analogies pattern rigid sex segregation in both war and sport, apotheosize masculine contributions to society at the expense of feminine ones (eg. framing male "instrumental" actions like throwing a touchdown pass or dropping a bomb as being far more important than giving birth to or nurturing a child), and glorify values of hegemonic masculinity (eg. aggression, competition, dominance, territoriality, and instrumental violence) as being essential to the social order while simultaneously marginalizing other types of masculinity (eg. profeminist, pacifist, vulnerable masculinities) within the culture (10). Accordingly, Jansen and Sabo conclude that resulting pressures toward conformity serve to enhance "real and perceived forms of solidarity among male elites" (10).

Jansen and Sabo then explain how football/war metaphors in particular illustrate how the strategic "inferiorization" of females and femininity that is consistently implicit in the framing and story-telling practices of mainstream sport media become explicit in sport/war discourses (11). As examples, they cite a *Sports Illustrated* article published shortly after the Persian Gulf War entitled "Big D Day: The Dallas Cowboys Went on the Attack in the NFL Draft and Took All the Right Prisoners" (5), President Bush's own sport/war metaphor vowing to "kick some ass" (8), and how the first

wave of returning pilots from Iraq publicly characterized their bombing raids on Baghdad as being "like a big football game" (3):

From their research, Jansen and Sabo conclude that the extravagant mixing of sport/war metaphors and the use of athletic/combat images of hegemonic masculinity (eg. physical strength, aggressiveness, violence, emotional stoicism, competitive zeal) during the Persian Gulf War (8) both reasserted the presence of American political power to the world and conspicuously displayed and glorified elite male power to those at home. Jansen and Sabo further conclude that this socio-political dynamic effectively illustrates how

... 'Hegemonic masculinity' is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works. (8,9)

As noted, Jansen and Sabo cite physical strength, aggressiveness, violence, hardness, emotional stoicism, and competitive zeal as ideal athletic/combat images of hegemonic masculinity (8). In "A Matter of Life and Death: Some Thoughts on The Language of Sport" Segrave continues Jansen's and Sabo's discourse by explaining how many war-referenced masculine attributes like those just

cited are routinely idolized within the language of conversational sports metaphors.

For example, Segrave points out that in sports today players do not win a game but rather, in the violent and aggressive parlance of war/sports metaphor, they "... rock, sock, roll, stomp, stagger, swamp, rout... down, drop..scalp and trounce opponents, but no one wins a game..." (6). Segrave also explains how the names of sports mascots and sports teams routinely enhance and perpetuate the metaphoric link between warlike images of masculine violence, aggression, and sport by using symbols that idealize what is "savage, powerful, predatory, and wild" (7). As illustration, Segrave cites the ten most common sports mascots : Eagles, Tigers, Cougars, Bulldogs, Warriors, Lions, Panthers, Indians, Wildcats, and Bears (7). Emphasizing how the language of violence is "...perhaps most crystallized in the language of football, a language laced with military metaphor like 'bombs,' blitzes,' and 'zones'..." (7), Segrave asserts that the everyday use of the sport/ sex metaphor, such as in sexual football metaphors like "scoring" or going "up the middle," is actually a form of violent, warlike behavior wherein "...one individual physically violates the space and sanctity of the other..." (10). From his findings, Segrave concludes that

...sports metaphors portray political issues as strategic problems rather than as human problems...examining the use of the sports metaphors in a variety of social discourse demonstrates that the metaphors used in popular culture provide good insight into our character as a nation as well as into the way in which we construct our sense of individual and collective identity...(5)

CONCLUSION

As illustrated and discussed herein, by routinely devaluing, trivializing, and degrading women the language of sport - **language about sport, language within sport,** and **conversational sports metaphors** - powerfully reinforces, protects, and perpetuates the patriarchal and sexist social order. Accepting that the language of sport embodies and perpetuates the "...virulent, anti-woman and anti-feminine ideology that pervades the structure and dynamics of sport..." (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 18), the question now arises as to what to do about sports' and sport language's powerful contribution to the semantic and cultural devaluation of women. Ironically, as Messner and Sabo argue, perhaps the most effective means to remedy this nefarious scenario resides within the patriarchal institution of sport itself. Accordingly, Messner and Sabo posit:

In the 1960's, we might argue, race relations in the United States moved to the forefront in the politics of sport. And since the 1970's, we could argue, gender is the most salient dynamic in the contemporary meaning of organized sport...Indeed Connell (1987b) argues ...that gender may be the most salient dynamic today...*There are likely to be historical moments where the possibilities of general change in consciousness and culture depend more crucially on the dynamic of gender relations than on any other social force. It can be argued that we are in such a moment now....*we agree that the current salience of gender merits special theoretical attention...the concept of gender order...is a useful theoretical framework with which to examine the meaning of sport and its shifting relation to the wider array of systems of domination that comprise the modern political economy...the concept of the gender order begins with the assumption that gender is better conceptualized as a process than as a "thing" that people "have..." (Messner & Sabo, "Sport, Men..." 12)

THE END

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