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The Muscular Female Athlete: Negotiating Conflicting Identities and Bodies

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The Muscular Female Athlete: Negotiating Conflicting Identities and Bodies

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Abstract

Competing assumptions, expectations, and discourses surrounding the institution of sports, femininity, and the feminine body create a conflicting paradox for female athletes. Existing research was investigated to examine the ways in which female athletes negotiate their conflicting roles in society and how they feel about their muscular bodies. Feminist theory, gender-role conflict theory, and identity work are used. Results show athletes employ apologetic behaviors, defensive othering, and create fluid identities in response to experiencing gender-role conflict. In terms of their bodies, female athletes feel differing sentiments dependent on environment, reject conflicting messages about their body, and/or reject their musculature. Due to significant social changes in how Western society views and understands gender, gender identity, and gender expression, future research should reinvestigate how female athletes experience their identities and bodies. Additionally, future studies should strive to use a multi-method approach and incorporate a more diverse and representative sample of female athletes.

Introduction

Historically, sports have been considered a highly masculine, male dominated institution, where characteristics such as individualism, aggression, competition, toughness, and a large body size are valued, encouraged, and glorified. These characteristics directly contradict characteristics traditionally defined as feminine, including attentiveness to appearance, passiveness, weakness, fragility, and a nurturing and gentle manor (Chase 2006; Davis-Delano, Pollock, and Vose 2009; Ezzell 2009; Fallen and Jome 2007; Howells and Grogan 2012; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinenw 2008; Steinfeldt et al. 2011a; Steinfeldt et al. 2011b). Female athletes thus find themselves situated within contested terrain, where their identities as females and athletes challenge constructions of femininity, often leading them to be inaccurately and negatively stigmatized (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinenw 2008).

Female athletes also challenge the existing ideal form of the feminine body—the thin ideal—with the muscle they develop as a result of their sport and training (Ezzell 2009; Steinfeldt et al. 2011a). Despite a well-documented shift in the ideal body type for women—now defined with subtle muscle and tone, yet leanness and little to no fat—female athletes struggle to balance the conflicting demands on their bodies by society and their sport. The parameters placed by society defining the amount of acceptable muscle often conflict with the amount of muscle required to excel in their sport. As a result, the bodies of female athletes are often judged by their non-athlete peers and society to be too muscular, too bulky, and thus inadequate for a female. This exacerbates the conflict they are theorized to face (Fallon and Jome 2007; George 2005; Mosewich et al. 2009; Steinfeldt et al. 2011a).

I. Theoretical Background: Gender Socialization, Identity Work, and Gender-Role Conflict Theory.

Prevalent themes emerge in existing research examining this contradiction. This body of research assumes women and men in society undergo processes of gender socialization, where they learn gender norms and expectations of femininity and masculinity, respectively (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Davis-Delano 2009; Ezzell 2009; Fallon and Jome 2007; George 2005; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shiness 2008; Steinfeldt et al. 2011a; Steinfeldt et al. 2011b). Existing research has applied gender-role conflict theory, which suggests that female athletes “who perceive contrasting expectations for the gender-role behavior will experience role conflict” (Fallon and Jome 2007:311). Because female athletes fail to completely fulfill expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity, they are judged as inadequate by society. Female athletes

who sense the different and often opposite social expectations surrounding their identities as female and an athlete will be more likely to experience conflict between their identities and presentation of self.

Chase (2006) also discusses the competing discourses that accompany an athlete that is female. Through the process of identity work—or “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others”—female athletes negotiate their conflicting identities, resulting in identities and expressions that both challenge and reinforce these gender norms and expectations (Ezzell 2009:111).

II. Theoretical Background: Feminist Theory

Additionally, researchers have grounded investigations of the individual experiences of female athletes and their negotiations of femininity and masculinity in order to highlight the experiences of this marginalized population and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. Feminist cultural theorists “examine common practices that shape all aspects of social life,” and how these practices are “socially constructed, how they create cultural meanings, and their role in establishing differential power and privilege in society” (Krane et al. 2004:315). Of special interest is the “interaction of gender and culture” (Krane et al. 2004:315). This perspective highlights and prioritizes the experiences of women, whose voices have historically been removed and silenced (Kolmar and Frances 2013; Mosewich et al. 2009).

III. Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the existing literature regarding how female athletes experience and negotiate their identities as females and athletes, as well as the ways in which they conceptualize and experience the muscle they develop as a

result of their athletic activities. As someone who identifies as a female, is quite defined, and occupies athletic spaces that are male dominated, this research is particularly interesting as it bridges my personal experience with the larger social structure. The questions leading this research include: How do female athletes view gender roles, sports, and the interaction between these two institutions? How do female athletes position themselves in terms of femininity and masculinity? Do athletes sense or experience conflict between their gender and athletic identities? If so, how do female athletes negotiate and navigate this conflict? What are the methods or strategies used? Finally, how do female athletes view and experience the muscle they develop as a result of their sport participation? And in what way do female athletes experience the body ideal in relation to their athletic bodies? Feminist theory—intended to describe, explain, analyze, and produce change concerning the realities of women’s lives, allowing individual women’s voices to be heard—has been the leading theory used. Likewise, it will be applied in this paper to explore the for mentioned leading questions, providing a space for this marginalized and stigmatized population’s experience (Boyle 2005; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Kolmar and Bartkowski 2013; Krane et al. 2004; Ross and Shinew 2008). Additionally, role-conflict theory, explained above, will be applied and explored.

Methodology

Studies selected for consideration in this meta-analysis were accessed from online databases provided through a medium-sized midwestern university’s library services. ProQuest and Sociological Abstracts—two databases suggested on an online page created by library personal for sociology majors- were selected for investigation. Parameters of

the course for which this was composed for included that articles be academic, peer reviewed, and published after 2005. Additionally, with the help of library personal, Google Scholar was used to locate academic, peer reviewed articles published after 2005. Important historical and theoretical academic articles were also included to inform this study.

Articles were located through the use of key words including but not limited to “female,” “women,” “collegiate athlete(s),” “muscularity,” “apologetic behavior,” “defensive othering,” and “body image.” Abstracts for each article of interest were examined to determine applicability. Those pertaining to adult female athletes’ negotiation of their identities as feminine women and athletes, as well as their meanings and experiences with muscularity were selected for inclusion. Additionally, each applicable article’s references were examined for other potential studies not retrieved using the key search words. The findings compiled from various studies investigating how female athletes negotiate their identities as females and athletes, as well as the muscle they develop as a result of their sport are explained below.

Review of the Literature

I. Methods of Negotiation

a. Evidence of Gender-Role Conflict

A breadth of research exists examining the ways in which female athletes negotiate their identities as female and an athlete, as well as their muscular bodies; the methods they use in these negotiations; and the responses and implications that result. While research has shown positive benefits for females who participate in athletics—such as increased self-esteem, a positive body image, and mental health benefits—many

studies have found that female athletes perceive and experience discrepancies and conflicting expectations surrounding their identities as female and athletes (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ezzell 2009; Fallon and Jome 2007; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinenew 2008). For example, in their study examining how female athletes participating in the sport of rugby perceive and negotiate gender-role expectations, Fallon and Jome (2007) find that some but not all female rugby players perceive and/or experience conflict between their identities. Through semi-structured interviews investigating the experiences of 11 noncollegiate club ruggers (i.e. rugby players) with roles models, social support for sport in childhood and adulthood, level of athletic ability and degree of association to feminine and athlete identity, and body image, as well as experiences with gender-role conflict following an informational handout, nine out of eleven ruggers articulated experiencing one type of gender-role conflict and one individual experienced two types. Additionally, unlike past studies, these findings also show that female rugby players actively work to discredit and educate those who stigmatize them for their failure to completely fulfill gender expectations, roles, and behaviors (Fallon and Jome 2007). This suggests that female athletes may become “politically active agents of resistance and change” if they choose (Ross and Shinenew 2008:53).

b. Apologetic Behaviors

One of the ways in which the female ruggers respond to gender-role conflict is by accommodating to gender expectations. This behavior involves “bolstering” their femininity on the pitch (i.e. rugby field) by purposefully wearing make-up, jewelry, or feminine clothing when possible to align with social expectations surrounding femininity

(Fallon and Jome 2007:316). These strategic behaviors—as well as behaviors like emphasizing the superiority of male athletes, downplaying athleticism, concealing muscular development and display, moving in feminine ways, concealing lesbianism/bisexuality, and others (see Davis-Delano, Pollock, and Vose 2009)- have been identified by various scholars as apologetic behaviors—behaviors employed as “an apology” or “compensatory act” for gender transgression (Crosset 1995). Additionally, apologetic behaviors often involve “the emphasizing [of] other conventional aspects of gender presentation and performance” (Ezzell 2009:112).

Aiming to accurately explore if, how, and why female athletes utilize apologetic behaviors, Davis-Delano et al. (2009) developed a three-part questionnaire that isolates apologetic behaviors as strategic responses to stereotypes of female athletes. Unlike other examined tools, the questionnaire created by Davis-Delano et al. (2009) acknowledges the fluidity and flexibility of a feminine identity across time, space, and social context. The questionnaire was administered to 40 female athletes from varying sports and school sizes, including 13 Division II softball players, 11 athletes from a Division III basketball team, and 16 Division III soccer players from the same team (Davis-Delano et al. 2009).

Results show that female athletes are aware of the prominence of negative stereotypes surrounding their identities as athletes and women, and that female athletes do indeed employ traditionally-defined feminine performances to apologize for their conflicting behaviors—especially their displays of aggression- to reestablish their femininity and heterosexuality (Davis-Delano et al. 2009). Female athletes also articulate familiarity with stereotypes surrounding their identity in qualitative studies by Ezzell

(2009); Fallon and Jome (2007); George (2005); Krane et al. (2004); and Ross and Shinew (2008). In Davis-Delano et al.'s (2009) research, respondents articulate three common negative stereotypes: female athletes are masculine, female athletes are lesbians, and female athletes are inferior to male athletes. While fewer consensus exists in terms of positive stereotypes of female athletes, being "in good shape," "physically strong," "hard workers," and "smarter than male athletes" were determined to be most common (Davis-Delano et al. 2009:140).

In response to these negative stereotypes, research finds that female athletes practice five common apologetic behaviors at least occasionally. These include hanging out with males outside of sports settings (48 percent), making an effort to look more feminine (45 percent), apologizing for aggressive acts (38 percent), avoiding physical contact with females in public (38 percent), and interacting with boyfriends (30 percent) (Davis-Delano et al. 2009).

Krane et al. (2004) also find the use of apologetic behaviors in their study of 21 NCAA Division I female athletes of varying sports. Exploring the athlete's concepts of body image, muscularity, and femininity through semi-structured focus group interviews, the athletes' discourses show that they feel "othered" in comparison to their "normal," nonathlete peers. The athletes feel their identities as females and athletes are discrepant, and often express negotiating between their identities depending on social context. Some athletes describe employing apologetic behaviors such as wearing ribbons, putting on make-up, and braiding their hair during games, matches, and practices to balance their identities (Krane et al. 2004)

Finally, though all but three respondents in Davis-Delano et al.'s (2009) research fail to respond to why they enact apologetic behaviors, the survey revealed a common response for why athletes do not: because female athletes simply ignore other's perceptions of them. Davis-Delano et al. (2009) acknowledge that this lack of data is likely due to the double-barreled structure of question 1, part 3.

c. Defensive Othering

Female athletes also employ what Ezzell (2009) coins as "defensive othering." Defensive othering, the second way in which female athletes negotiate their conflicting identities, involves "reinforcing the power of stigmatizing labels by arguing that the label is true for other members of their social category, but not for themselves" (Ezzell 2009:114). Defensive othering differs from apologetic behaviors in that performances of femininity are normalized through identity claims, explained below. Specifically, the 33 to 50 female ruggers in Ezzell's (2009) ethnographic study identify with the dominants (male ruggers), participate in normative identification compared to other female rugby players, and prop up dominants during practices, games, socials (parties), and fundraisers.

When identifying with the dominants, female ruggers reinforce feminine stereotypes by asserting that they (but not women as a class) are tough and aggressive due to their participation in rugby. This makes them superior to not only other athletes, but nonathletes, especially sorority women, despite their acknowledgment of many shared behaviors and presentations of the self (Ezzell 2009).

Through normative identification, the female ruggers reinforce the definition of the ideal female, and "other" women and homosexuality within the institution of sports. The female ruggers deflect labels such as "butch," "lesbians," and "she-males" through

presentations of femininity and maintenance of “size-zero,” fit bodies. Through identity claims, the ruggers normalize these presentations, asserting that feminine performances are not a performance, but an important part of who they are as an individual.

Additionally, by policing gender and sexuality within their own team and others, the ruggers protect their heterosexual appearance (Ezzell 2009).

Finally, the athletes prop up dominants. The athletes do this by asserting their inferiority to male athletes and their “naturally” superior athletic abilities. Combined with maintaining stereotypical gendered behavior, positioning themselves as superior to other females and female athletes due to their toughness and aggression, and distancing themselves from other female rugby players who do not emphasize their femininity, the female ruggers reproduce the inequality between men and women (Ezzell 2009).

d. Selective Femininity and Fluid Identities

While the female athletes in Fallon and Jome (2007), Davis-Delano et al. (2009), and Ezzell’s (2009) studies engage in efforts to mediate perceived and real role-conflict and the competing cultural discourses surrounding their identities, the seven female softball players and seven female gymnasts in a qualitative study by Ross and Shinew (2008) demonstrate a third way of negotiating role conflict: “selective femininity.” While fully able to articulate the requirements of a feminine appearance—described by the respondents as “girly” appearances, “wearing make-up,” “[having] longer hair,” “with nails and lipstick,” acting “prissy” or “really happy... all the time” and looking “soft” in appearance; “the opposite of masculine” (2008:47)—the respondents are found to not purposefully enact these characteristics in defense of their femininity. Rather, their presentation of self is selected based on their environment. That is, the athletes chose

“specific times... to create an image consistent with preferred femininity” (2008:51).

Respondents describe situations like practice, attending class, and accomplishing general daily activities as occasions for which embodying a feminine appearance is unnecessary. Activities like going out or attending formal events are described as situations where the respondents put effort into doing their hair, putting on make-up, and dressing in other clothing besides the sweats pants and t-shirts they describe as typical. Thus, for these athletes, looking feminine on a daily basis is largely unimportant in college, as their identity as an athlete takes precedence, and their use of apologetic behaviors remains highly transitory (Ross and Shiner 2008).

Describing the identities of athlete and feminine woman as situational is also a pattern found by Krane et al. (2004). In their research, respondents describe creating two identities: The social identity of woman, and the athletic identity that violates and often ignores concepts of femininity. Depending on the social location, female athletes describe either experiencing feelings of inadequacy and marginalization or empowerment and pride (Krane et al. 2004).

e. Required Femininity

For certain athletes, a feminine appearance is a requirement of competition. Both female gymnasts (Ross and Shiner 2008) and bodybuilders (Boyle 2005) describe that looking feminine is an important aspect of their sport and a quality they are judged on. The seven gymnasts in Ross and Shiner’s (2008) study describe perceiving that their appearance would influence how judges score them, despite appearance not being a judging category for gymnastics (Ross and Shiner 2008). However, in female bodybuilding, looking feminine during competition has historically been a very important

category and is again becoming more emphasized. It remains a category of evaluation during competition (Boyle 2005).

Female bodybuilders—besides being judged on their build, definition, and muscular symmetry—are expected to look “natural.” This is described by Boyle’s (2005) racially diverse sample of five amateur female bodybuilders and one elite female bodybuilder between the ages of 30 and 48 years. In the study, the respondents use words and pictures to define a “natural” and pleasing female appearances as having “long hair,” “less-defined muscles,” “more graceful posing movements,” and colorful bikinis (which they compete in) as opposed to “cropped hair,” “lack of makeup,” and “‘masculine’ attire [like] jean-shorts and a black t-shirt” (Boyle 2005:140). Striving for a natural look (as opposed to an unnatural look that suggests steroid use) “produces a female body that does not disrupt normative gender identity” and appeals to the typically, white, middle-class, and heterosexual male judges (Boyle 2005:141). Like the respondents in Davis-Delano et al.’s (2009) study, the female bodybuilders fear their participation in the sport and their highly muscular appearance will stigmatize them as “mannish” and homosexual (Boyle 2005:144). Female bodybuilders who fail to appeal to normative femininity while performing also risk being “banned from competition and blacklisted by judge”—something that will destroy a bodybuilder’s career (Boyle 2005:144).

II. Negotiating the Muscular Female Body

a. Competing pressures

The muscularity female athletes develop as a result of their sports participation provides another layer for negotiation and conflicting discourses. In many examined

studies (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinew 2008) female athletes describe awareness and experience of competing pressures and expectations surrounding their bodies and identities as females and athletes. Largely, these overt and covert messages and pressures come from key reference groups including male coaches, other males, parents, teammates, the media, and society as a whole (George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Mosewich et al. 2009). Despite recent shifts in the definition of the ideal female body—toward one that not only demands leanness and thinness, but visible muscle definition and tone, as well—female athletes still must and do develop significant amounts of muscle definition that violates the image of the ideal female body, crossing into the realm of unacceptable and masculine (George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Mosewich et al. 2009; Krane et al. 2004).

Indeed, Krane et al. (2004) finds in their study of athletes concepts of body image, muscularity, and femininity that female athletes can be highly influenced by and compare themselves to hegemonic femininity—“the cultural ideal of femininity” described as “white, heterosexual, thin, and small” (2004:319). The athletes express their inability to achieve the ideal as an athlete, leading them to conceptualize athleticism and muscularity as masculine traits incongruent with their identity as females. This sentiment was shared by other athletes in other studies including rugby players (Chase 2006; Ezzell 2009) soccer players (George 2005), bodybuilders (Boyle 2005), softball players (Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ross and Shinew 2008), gymnasts (Ross and Shinew 2008), track and cross country runners (Mosewich et al. 2009), soccer and basketball players (Davis-Delano et al. 2009), and by sample of athletes of various sports (Steinfeldt et al. 2011b). This

creates an interesting paradox within which female athletes live, leading them to experience their bodies and muscularity very differently in different situations, again prompting the creation of two very different identities: One for the sports or performance environment and one for the social environment (George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004).

b. Situationally Specific Sentiments

Depending on the context of the environment, female athletes can feel differently toward their bodies. In Krane et al.'s (2004) study, the mixed group of female athletes describe that, while in sporting environments, they feel confident and comfortable in their bodies. They temporarily displace the demands and requirements of “doing girl” and focus on their identity as an athlete (Krane et al. 2004). Likewise, the adolescent swimmers in the study by Howells and Grogan (2012) describe the swimming environment as “non-threatening” and express feeling very comfortable in their bathing suits (Howells and Grogan 2012:107). Only one of the respondents describes engaging in comparisons between her body and those of other swimmers. For the swimmers, in the context of a meet or practice, their bodies are normal, desired, and their muscle necessary and valued.

Similar experiences are expressed by the four adult and four adolescent track and distant runners in Mosewich et al.'s (2009) research on the meanings of muscularity. Like the comments made by the adolescent swimmers and other athletes, the sample of runners express that being muscular is a sign of health, strength, and dedication (Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009). Additionally, the

respondents note that their visible strength serves as an intimidation factor in sporting environments (George 2005; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009).

When discussing their bodies in the context of sports, many female athletes from numerous studies express a desire for more muscle, more definition, and/or to get bigger to improve their athletic performance (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Steinfeldt et al. 2011b). Despite criticizing “unnaturally” muscular women (i.e. women who use performance enhancing drugs), Boyle’s (2005) female bodybuilding respondents unanimously share a desire to get as big as possible. Likewise, the ruggers in both Chase’s (2006) research and the runners in Mosewich et al.’s (2009) study are working to increase their size, and muscle tone and definition, respectively. Some ruggers even state that they are working to gain weight, as in Chase’s (2006) findings; a statement that clearly rejects and contradicts cultural messages surrounding the feminine body.

c. Resisting Discrepant Messages

Indeed, for some women, participation in sport mediates cultural pressures to embody the thin idea and serves as a site of resistance (Chase 2006). For example, in Chase’s (2006) study of four Midwest rugby teams and how players make sense of competing cultural discourses surrounding their identities, respondents are keenly aware and celebrate their rejection of gender norms. They express how the demands of rugby have replaced the desire to obtain a “supermodel body” (2004:240). Women who once set goals to lose weight and be thin now reject such goals and have replaced them with goals to increase both their weight and body size. Only a few of the 30 women still want to lose weight, but they note that this desire is nonexistent when playing the sport of

rugby, which typically values and accepts all body types equally (Chase 2006).

Likewise, the adult swimmers in Howells and Grogan's (2012) study experience feelings of confidence and empowerment due to their musculature, and their body-confidence has increased since they began swimming. These sentiments did not change according to setting as they did for the adolescent swimmers (Howells and Grogan 2012).

d. Rejecting Musculature

However, for some athletes, their musculature remains a source of embarrassment and shame, no matter the environment. Though each soccer player was described as reacting to their body and musculature differently, George (2005) spends significant time highlighting the voices of women who are ashamed of the bodies that have resulted from their participation in Division I soccer. These women express dreading lifting sessions, and often work less hard than their fellow teammates who welcome a more muscular body, do more cardiovascular exercise to keep their body size small, hide their muscular legs and arms, and avoid off-season workouts when possible (George 2005).

Despite these exceptions, most female athletes recognize the importance of and value being bigger, stronger, and more muscular; are thankful for the functionality of their bodies; and are proud of their athletic abilities. Their physical strength and accomplishment leads to feelings of empowerment and independence. Though they, at times, are self-conscious and apprehensive about their stereotypically masculine structure, when asked, many express that they would choose an athletic body over one that reflects the cultural definition of the ideal feminine body (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinenew 2008; Steinfeldt 2011b).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how female athletes negotiate their gendered roles and expectations, as well as the way in which they make sense of the muscle they develop as a result of their athletic activities. Overwhelmingly, the examined literature finds that female athletes are aware of, made aware of by others, and perceive the incongruence and conflict between their identities, bodies, and activities, and the cultural norms and expectations surrounding femininity. Athletes articulate that their behaviors as athletes align more with masculine characteristics, contradicting characteristics that define femininity in society (Chase 2006; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Fallon and Jome 2007; Howells and Grogan 2012; Ross and Shinew 2008; Steinfeldt et al. 2011a; Steinfeldt et al. 2011b). Likewise, female athletes, though proud of their powerful and successful bodies, are very aware of how their bodies violate the acceptable amount of muscle for women as defined by society (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Fallon and Jome 2007; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinew 2008; Steinfeldt et al. 2011b). Through teasing, negative stereotypes, clothing, comparisons, and body policing by key reference groups, including themselves, the female athletes understand themselves as “others” and not “normal girls” (Chase 2006; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ezzell 2009; Fallon and Jome 2007; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinew 2008)

In response, the literature reflects three methods female athletes utilize to negotiate the role conflict they experience. First, female athletes consciously and unconsciously exercise apologetic behavior- behaviors enacted to defend their femininity

and avoid discrepant messages, or gain acceptance and rewards (Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ezzell 2009; Fallon and Jome 2007; Krane et al. 2004; Ross and Shinew 2008). Second, female athletes demonstrate defensive othering—where members of the subordinate group both reinforce and resist their stigmatized status by identifying with dominants, engaging in normative identification, and propping up dominants. In this way, the female athletes maintain a hierarchical structure, situating themselves as superior, but also inferior to the most powerful proximate group—male athletes (Ezzell 2009). Finally, female athletes also may separate their identities into two separate and specific identities: one for social occasions and the other for sporting occasions. This allows female athletes to conform to the norms of the environment, thereby decreasing the conflict and contradictions they may feel, while still honoring their identities (Krane et al. 2004; Ross and Shinew 2008). Finally, female athletes may disagree, discredit, and/or attempt to educate the initiator of discrepant messages (Fallon and Jome 2007), occasionally acting as a force of resistance (Chase 2006).

In terms of the muscle developed from their sports, the literature reflects a spectrum of the ways in which female athletes react to their bodies. Similarly to their reactions to role conflict, some female athletes describe transitory feelings about their body, dependent on the environment. In the context of sports, athletes typically celebrate and are proud of their strength, size, and build. Their muscular bodies allow them to excel at their sport and serve as an intimidation factor for the competition. However, in social environments, the bodies of the female athletes violate cultural ideals of the feminine body, leading them to dislike their bodies and wish they fit the norm (George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004).

Athletes may also lie on either end of the spectrum. Some athletes express never liking their muscular bodies. Even during sporting events they describe wishing for a leaner, thinner, and more compact form. As response, some athletes describe resisting strength training programs, engaging in extra cardiovascular exercise, and/or dieting (George 2005).

On the other end, the athletes, specifically, in Chase's (2006) study describe actively resisting and discrediting cultural pressures to be thin with only slight muscle. They insist that they always value the size of their bodies, sometimes desiring to gain more muscle and/or weight, regardless of setting. Despite these differences, the female athletes who act as respondents in the examined studies by and large are proud of and value their bodies, and express that if they had to choose, they would choose the muscular, athletic bodies they have (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shiner 2008; Steinfeldt 2011b).

The findings of these studies mirror my personal experiences negotiating my identities and muscularity. As some female athletes express, as a weight lifter and distance runner who identifies as an athletic person, I often feel more masculine than feminine. Yet, as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, I fear inaccurate labels like butch, lesbian, and hard and tough; labels that would stigmatize me as less—or un-desirable to the more powerful gender: males. As such, I often unconsciously and consciously engage in apologetic behaviors. I tend to wear tight clothing to the gym to display my feminine shape; for races I wear a bow in my hair and strategically pick out an outfit that is trendy; my nails are always painted so others in the weight room can read my femininity; and,

though I would sometimes like to, I never workout without make-up on in fear of being judged unattractive and unfeminine. Additionally, especially considering lifting, I engage in defensive othering. Both mentally and verbally, I discredit women who only do cardiovascular activity, who aren't serious about lifting, and women who do not work out at all. Yet, I prop up male lifters—their knowledge, ability, and potential, sometimes to the degree of relinquishing the machine I am using for their *more important* workout (emphasis my own). Finally, I too find how I feel about my body to be highly transitory. While lifting, running, or in a gym/sporting environment, I feel proud of my body and what it can accomplish. Once outside of this setting, I feel the immense pressure of the cultural ideal of the feminine body, and the body I was so proud of is now insufficient, bulky, manly, and unacceptable. It is on a daily basis that I debate between decisions to lift more weight and increase my body size or restrict my diet to obtain a smaller, lighter, and thinner frame.

Conclusion

Despite shifting definitions of gender, gender expression, and depictions of the ideal female body, by examining the experiences of female athletes it becomes very clear that they occupy a contested, conflicting, and paradoxical space in society (Boyle 2005; Chase 2006; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Ezzell 2009; Fallon and Jome 2007; George 2005; Howells and Grogan 2012; Krane et al. 2004; Mosewich et al. 2009; Ross and Shinew 2008). As a marginalized group, it becomes important to understand the experiences of these women and how they negotiate their positions within the social world. It is important that we, as a society, continue to make space for and respect the experience of these and other marginalized populations.

While the examined studies, combined, examine the behaviors and experiences of female athletes in a wide array of sports, noteworthy holes exist in this area of research. Though four examined studies by Boyle (2005), Chase (2006), Howells and Grogan (2012), and Mosewich et al.(2009) contain an age-diverse sample—including comparisons between the experiences of adult and adolescents in Howells and Grogan (2012) and Mosewich et al. (2009), and a post-college sample up until 50 years of age by Boyle (2005) and Chase (2006) —no study yet has examined the experiences of female athletes within a sport or various sports from adolescents to older adults. In other words, most of the studies to date focus on the experiences of female collegiate athletes. This is a large limitation, as college students tend to live in micro-communities that may result in very different experiences compared to the rest of the population of female athletes.

Additionally, besides the study by Boyle (2005), samples of female athletes have been overwhelmingly composed of Caucasian female athletes. This, too, presents a large limitation in the research, as the experiences of female athletes of color and/or differing ethnicities are likely to have different experiences that are important to understand.

Finally, the dates of the studies considered in this research cannot be ignored. Many of the studies used to inform these findings were published in 2004 through 2009. Since then, the American society has made large gains in terms of accepting and incorporating alternative gender expressions that deviate from traditional gender norms. However, these norms are still very prevalent and breaking them still results in negative social repercussions. Thus, it is important that studies continue to examine how female athletes understand their identities as females and athletes in society, what negotiation

tactics they use (if any), and how they understand and experience their bodies, especially in a changing environment of ideals and norms.

These limitations call for a study to investigate how female athletes understand their identities as females and athletes, including questions regarding both positive and negative stereotypes of female athletes; how they negotiate, view, and experience these identities; and how they view and experience their bodies and musculature, making sure to bring in the question of settings. Feminist theory and gender-role conflict theory should be utilized, if appropriate. Researchers should consider using both ethnographic and qualitative methods- including field research, focus group interviews, and individual interviews, as demonstrated by George (2005) —as well as incorporating images to help female athletes describe their experiences (see Mosewich et al. 2009) when dominant discourses fail to provide appropriate language (McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance 2011). This study should work to include a diverse sample of female athletes from differing sports divisions, ages, races, genders, sexual orientations, social classes, and geographic locations. If findings mirror those found by this research, additional studies should explore the meanings of female athletes responses to gender-role conflict and the discourses they use, and how such supports patriarchy and the hierarchy of gender. Such a study will prove a better picture of how female athletes, as a whole, understand, experience, and negotiate their identities and bodies, and the similarities and differences between their individual experiences.

Personal Biography

Kelsey Mischke grew up around the small town of Westbrook, located in the southwest corner of Minnesota. She is a 2015 graduate of Minnesota State University, Mankato and currently holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology. Following a year serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA in Denver, Colorado, she plans to continue onto graduate school in the fall of 2016 in pursuit of a PhD in Sociology, focusing on gender, race, and class inequality. With such, Ms. Mischke hopes to use research and action to be a voice for marginalized and silenced populations in the political arena.

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