

Gender in Physical Culture: Crossing Boundaries-Reconstituting Cultures, edited by Natalie Barker-Ruchti, Karin Grahn and Eva-Carin Lindgren. Abingdon, Routledge, 2018, 124 pp., £110.00 (hbk) ISBN 13: 978-1-138-74034-1, £36.99 (pbk) ISBN 13: 978-0-367-14260-5

Abstract:

Scholars in sport, physical activity, and physical education have recently articulated the need for appreciative inquiries into the deconstruction and denaturalisation of gender because such work is integral for gender-inclusive spaces in physical culture. Thus, ‘Gender in Physical Culture: Crossing Boundaries-Reconstituting Cultures’ fills an noteworthy gap in research by detailing widely accepted social and cultural norms before problematising discourses where boundaries can be crossed. The authors are honest, reflexive, critical, engaging activists in gender-inclusive work and through this book successfully share insights into boundary-crossing in the space of physical culture. Altogether, this book proves to be a highly insightful and thought-provoking read.

Keywords: gender, physical culture, boundary-crossing, femininity

The academic study of gender is a relatively new discipline. However, gender studies has had a history of including feminist perspectives, beginning roughly at the time of the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s (Whelehan & Pilcher, 2004). As with all movements for equality, gender studies are inherently bound with discourses of oppression and power, where individuals are positioned differently along varying social stratifications and given different resources in society – with hegemonic groups positioned over others (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Consequently, as part of a social justice agenda, gender studies

are a worthy research endeavour. One of the most influential scholars within gender studies is Judith Butler, and her definition of gender is helpful in positioning this book review: “gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (Butler, 2004, p. 42). The deconstruction and denaturalisation of gender are central aspirations of the book, which formed a special issue entitled ‘Gender and Physical Culture Crossing Boundaries-Reconstituting Cultures’ in *Sport in Society*. The book is comprised of an introductory chapter, seven empirical case study chapters, and a conclusion, with each detailing widely accepted social and cultural norms related to gender, before problematising discourses where boundaries can be crossed.

The opening chapter by the editors overviews the theory of ‘boundary-crossing’ (Lamont & Molner, 2002). The theoretical thread promotes the notion that gender boundaries are not fixed constructs and that we can transgress through malleable social and symbolic boundary points from feminine to masculine and vice versa. By doing so, one can highlight the ways that traditional approaches to gender can be reformed. With this in mind, the chapter summarises the importance of transforming gender boundaries in physical culture.

The main part of the book comprises seven empirical chapters. The first of the chapters is by Sandra Günter, who provides a robust overview of sex classification in elite level sports, most helpful for sociocultural sport management, physical education, or sports science classes. Günter, drawing on a discourse analysis of media perceptions, states that power, knowledge, and colonial thinking dictate normative bodies. Through her activist work she ‘calls out’ the media but also the systems in place that seemingly reproduce a toxic ideology, prescribing what is aesthetic and what boundaries can be crossed with respect to high profile athlete Caster Semenya.

The discussion on a gender-neutral PE-culture from Suzanne Lundvall in the second chapter caught my attention. It detailed an explorative literature review of both the history of women in Sweden but also gymnastics as a subject of study in physical education. As a physical educationalist, what was most noteworthy was the rather blunt fact that ‘PE [physical education] is the only subject in Swedish schools where boys have higher grades than girls’ (p. 33). As noted in my own work (Lynch and Curtner-Smith, 2019), physical education has focused on the psychomotor domain and assessment has followed suit with students having to perform skills to demonstrate their ability and subsequently be given a grade. This practice is highly inequitable, and students should also be able to demonstrate learning in affective and socio-emotional domains. Consequently, for a more inclusive curricula that focuses on the holistic student, we are in dire need of transforming our views surrounding the purposes of our programmes. Allied to this, assessment should not be based solely on physical ability, but rather should be a social process of ongoing dialogue, where students can evidence learning in an array of domains.

Grégory Quin follows with a thorough history of Swiss women’s gymnastics around competition and feminisation (1950–1990). The case study details the historical, politically conservative visions and ideals for women in Swiss society and the competitive nature of gymnastics as a discipline. In contrast, the next chapter by Joanne Hill, Rachel Sandford and Eimear Enright highlights a liberal approach to aesthetic movement in an adult ballet school for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, whereby a dance community was built. This chapter demonstrated the need for gender-inclusive, judgement-free spaces for social relations, embodied identity, body positivity and a sense of belonging to occur. I particularly liked how the term ‘belonging’ was framed with transformative experiences within this chapter. Through belonging to the community group, the participants’ negative views towards their body could be transformed into body positive views. With social

media entwined within our daily lives and cyberbullying related to individuals' appearances all too commonplace, opportunities for belonging and body positive messages are a welcome approach for *all* people to feel that they *do* belong, they *do* matter, and that they *are* valued members of our communities.

The subsequent two chapters by Karin Grahn in Sweden and Astrid Schubring and Ansgar Thiel in Germany focused on youth sport. Interestingly, both focused on and highlighted the significant impact that coaches can have on young people. Coaches have a responsibility to avoid promoting orthodox health practices and to encourage athlete well-being rather than reinforcing masculine/feminine norms that are potentially dangerous to young people's health. These chapters highlight that young people experiencing pain in sport should *not* be regarded as an accepted submissive practice and an undisguised norm. Those working with young people should seek to be informed of such practices as part of an ethic of care and humane teaching practices. Reading these chapters also emphasised the ethical work involved in the work the authors carried out with young people and the value of ethnographic research and youth voice as part of the research process.

The final empirical chapter was a thought-provoking and honest account from Dean Barker and Natalie Barker-Ruchti. Drawing on an autoethnographic approach to social rugby in New Zealand, they highlight that boundaries are dialogical, and that individuals and their cultures are observable through their practice. When Barker questioned the status quo thinking in a 'jock' rugby culture and left a toxic rugby team, his personal and cultural norms transformed. After many years, he shares a highly personal account that is helpful for those in sport, particularly at universities who are seeking to challenge gender boundaries and club cultures to become more inclusive spaces.

In the closing piece, Susan Bandy details the genealogy of gender studies and importantly emphasises that how gender is viewed inherently influences the study of physical culture. Her

work summarises the chapters as ‘a better understanding of the way in which power relations affect individuals and groups of individuals in creating, maintaining, negotiating and transforming dominant ideologies and gender discourses in various forms of human movement cultures’ (p. 118-119). This final sentiment, I perceived as a call to scholars to continue to transform dominant ideologies in physical culture and promote gender boundary-crossing. Fortunately, Walton-Fisette, Sutherland and Hill (2019) recognised this need in physical education and have attempted to provide practical ways in which practitioners and teacher educators can begin to reject reproductive ideologies in the discipline.

I believe the editors of this book set out to make physical culture more gender-inclusive and to share narratives of spaces where this can occur, consequentially the papers flowed very well and worked compellingly towards this overarching aim. Importantly, each of the articles moved away from a deficit approach to emphasise an appreciation of the boundaries that can be crossed by individuals; in itself, this is a positive, transformational change from reproductive research that other traditional scholars might benefit from engaging with. While perspectives from Western countries are shared, perspectives from the Global South are missing. Thus, ethnic minority groups, along with views from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, are neglected. While this critique is a broader problem surrounding academic publishing, it speaks to the discipline of physical culture to explicitly seek to source alternate perspectives that could extend our thinking in multiple ways. Reading has the transformative power to connect us in the messiness of globalisation and diverse perspectives can bring us together in community. As Butler expressed in her 2013 speech, ‘we lose ourselves in what we read, only to return to ourselves, transformed and part of a more expansive world, in short, we become more critical and more capacious in our thinking and in our acting’ (Butler, 2013).

In conclusion, this book provides a collection of case studies that would be of interest for those working in gender and queer studies and would suit a multi-disciplinary audience. Moreover, undergraduates, postgraduates, researchers, and academics working across a range of disciplines such as physical education, youth sport, elite sport and sports media would benefit from the critical perspectives shared. Particularly enjoyable are the contemporary perspectives that each the chapters provide, which enables readers to imagine something new, a better world, and other ways of being in a fluid society.

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