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The Power of "Small Stories:" Narratives and Notions of Gender Equality in Conversations About Sport

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This study examines narratives by young adults about sport and gender in relation to equality. Specifically, we explore how focus-group participants used small stories to situate male and female athletes and Title IX. The U.S. law has been credited for increasing opportunities for girls and women but is considered a source of tension for gender relations. Our findings suggest that participants' stories ultimately did not support emancipatory goals for girls and women because they positioned equality as a right women had not earned. We argue that feminists cannot underestimate the need to inject counternarratives into public discourse at every level, including stories shared with children about sport. These narratives must address misconceptions about equality and gender equity and, ultimately, challenge gender ideology.

Cette étude examine les récits de jeunes adultes à propos du sport et du genre. Plus spécifiquement, nous explorons comment les participants des petits groupes de discussion utilisent de courtes histoires pour situer les athlètes masculins et féminins ainsi que la Loi 9. Cette loi étatsunienne a été créditée de l'augmentation des occasions sportives pour les jeunes filles et les femmes mais elle est considérée comme source de tension pour les relations de genre. Nos résultats suggèrent qu'ultimement, les récits des participants n'ont pas soutenu d'objectif émancipateur pour les filles et les femmes parce qu'ils ont positionné l'égalité en tant que droit que les femmes n'avaient pas mérité. Nous suggérons que les féministes ne peuvent pas sous-estimer le besoin d'injecter des contre-récits dans les discours publics à tous les niveaux, incluant les histoires lues aux enfants à propos du sport. Ces récits doivent tenir compte des conceptions erronées au sujet de l'égalité et de l'équité et, ultimement, défier l'idéologie dominante concernant les genres.

In a 2007 *USA Today* story about cuts to men's and women's sports teams at James Madison University—a highly publicized and debated decision—athletes and school officials contended that Title IX[1] was forcing the university to make unwanted cuts, which mostly penalized men.

A prominent source in the story was Jennifer Chapman, a JMU cross-country runner who, despite the fact that her team was spared, was helping lead an

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organized effort against what she saw as the injustice of Title IX. Chapman said the law was unfair to men, and she told a small story to make her point. Her "epiphany" came when she was on a bus with members of the men's and women's cross-country teams and learned the men's team would be cut.

> The guys' teams started crying. . . . Then the girls cried, too. Girls might cry after a race if they don't do well or they're in pain. But we had never seen a boy cry. It hit us really hard. And I thought, "We have to do something. There's no reason guys should feel like this." . . . Title IX is almost reverse discrimination. (Brady, 2007, ¶ 37, 38, 44)

Our retelling of Chapman's anecdote is less to debate the truth in her belief about Title IX than to point out the centrality of this story, as she recalled and reconstructed it, in her argument. Chapman's recall of her moments on the bus with male teammates had an *agenda*, as narratives always do; narratives are strategically used to perform a variety of functions, including arguing, persuading and mobilizing (Coates, 2003; Patterson, 2002; Riessman, 2008). In general, narratives involve the consequential linking of events and development of ideas (Coates, 2003; Riessman, 2008). They are created by social actors who strategically craft them apart from the actual events. Their discursive function may be unconscious to the orator, but narratives are considered to be some of the most powerful devices in the context of persuasive discourse (Allen, 2000; Coates, 2003; Riessman, 2008).

This research examines narratives related by young adults about sport and gender in relationship to their understanding of equality. Specifically, we examine how participants use "small stories" to situate Title IX and male and female athletes (Georgakopoulou, 2007a). Title IX is a U.S. law that has been credited for making sport opportunities available to millions of girls and women since its passage in 1972 but is also considered a source of great tension for gender relations (Suggs, 2005). We explore how men and women incorporate narratives to explain Title IX and, more broadly, their conceptualization of equality as it applies to sports participation among men and women.

Literature Review

The narrative in everyday conversation is considered so powerful that Somers (1994) suggests it is an "ontological condition of social life" (p. 614). Narratives are produced as we sort through countless experiences, ideas and interactions and try to make sense of them. This "making sense" function is an integral component in the production of knowledge and power relations among individuals and groups (Patterson, 2002; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Young (2000) also argues that narratives are especially powerful in democratic communication, providing thick description that lends itself to an understanding of issues from a particular point of view. Narratives have been used in the U.S. democratic process, starting at the grassroots level, to form the language and eventually the policy to address injustices such as sexual harassment (Young). Women's narratives about unwanted sexual advances and the naming of such advances were key in addressing sexual

harassment (Wood, 1992). Social action can be mobilized and rationalized based on the construction and appropriation of stories (Somers, 1994).

Although narratives are often understood as lengthy life stories or life events (Moissinac & Bamberg, 2004), Georgakopoulou (2007a) effectively argues for scholarly attention to small stories—nonlife stories found within the context of conversations and interviews. Georgakopoulou (2007b) defines small stories as "a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell" (p. 146). It is these embedded mininarratives that prompt listeners to lean in and "listen in a different, more attentive way" (Coates, 2003, p. 5). Such stories, which are often dismissed by researchers (p. viii), are rich sources for discovery of identity formation and the relationship between storytellers and cultural ideologies (Georgakopoulou, 2007b). An example of research that marries identity and gender with small stories is that of Moissinac and Bamberg (2004), who explored how a cohort of young boys (ages 10–13) used short narratives to assert their masculinity.

Narratives and Ideology

The array of narratives readily available for use, however, is limited. Stories that are acceptable and dominant in a culture depend on the distribution of power among social groups (Somers, 1994). Social narratives are "rarely of our own making" (Somers, p. 606). They are instead drawn from a "tool kit" (Coates, 2003, p. 6) of larger cultural narratives that support abstract concepts and ideologies. Individual stories, then, make real the larger, cultural (public) narratives with mainstream plots that have been accepted as conveying Truth about the way a society works; examples include those about American social mobility or about roles of women and men at home and in the workplace (Somers, 1994). The larger, cultural narratives that govern the way individual stories are told reflect the values of dominant groups and support the status quo (Mulvey et al., 2000). Everyday events, then, are often interpreted by storytellers to fit the cultural narrative/preferred ideology (Messner, 2000). They then become further evidence of prevailing ideology and contribute to justifying values and to producing "collective social wisdom" (Young, 2000, p. 76).

Of particular interest to this research are the "presiding fictions" (ideologically grounded narratives that govern social relations) about gender identities and roles (Somers, 1994, p. 606). Some feminists argue that narratives construct and reinforce difference between men and women in ways that marginalize women (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Somers, 1994). Power is conceptualized as relational rather than centralized; in other words, power is not exerted from a specific site by a specific group of people, but reproduced through discursive frameworks: "Male power, or class power, or white power, or ablebodied power is then constituted in dominant discourses of natural superiority that have real effects on social relations and practices by specifying and authorizing what counts as truly superior/inferior" (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 96).

The dominant cultural narrative of male supremacy and dominance allows the proliferation of emblematic stories that reinforce the centrality of men and invisibility of women in social institutions such as sport (Coates, 2003; Somers, 1994). Narratives involving the body and athletic performance, for instance, are underpinned by what Dowling (2000) calls "the frailty myth"—the ideology of male bodies as the standard and female bodies as inferior. This ideology justifies a view of society as divided into spheres ("public" and "private") in which women naturally do or do not belong by virtue of their inability to meet the standard (Hogshead-Makar, 2007; Messner, 2000).

Messner (2000) illustrates how individual interpretations and, consequently, stories about events are influenced by cultural narratives in a way that turns believing into seeing. He relates a story about adults watching their children at a soccer event. As a boys' team and a girls' team played around a large Barbie doll, the girls sang and celebrated while the boys attempted to disrupt the girls. "They're so different!" a father exclaimed as other parents and a coach expressed their agreement. Messner observed that in other contexts, such as during games, parents of his children's teammates did not draw attention to the ways in which the boys and girls behaved similarly. The small stories created by the parents reflected the cultural narrative of difference that guided their interpretation of the events.

"Emancipatory" Narratives

Messer's (2000) small story about the scene at the children's soccer event relates to ideology, but in a way that demonstrates how narratives can either support ("They're so different!") or resist (noting the similarities in behavior) ideology about gender difference and male superiority. It is not only in events themselves where resistance can take place, but also in the recasting of the events by the narrator. For instance, in the case of the soccer event, the parents focused on the children in ways that fit dominant gender ideology; Messner focused on the parents to tell a story that made a different point.

Feminists such as Lara (1998) and Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) have called for more resistant or emancipatory stories, which can ultimately create new forms of knowledge and allow institutional transformation. The centrality of such narratives to feminist work cannot be overstated; they have been key in the development of feminist thought and are seen as vital to changing oppressive power relations between men and women (Mulvey et al., 2000; Somers, 1994). Allen (2000) argues that emancipatory narratives arose from feminists following the 1999 women's World Cup championship, in which the U.S. beat China in a shootout.

Ideology, Gender, and "Equality"

The 1999 Women's World Cup is an example of the way interpretations of an event can produce competing narratives. Messner, Duncan, and Cooky (2003), for instance, have illustrated ways narratives focusing on how presentations of the US World Cup win tended to minimize athleticism of team members and instead emphasized their (hetero)sexuality and attractiveness; one way this was accomplished was through disproportionate attention on Brandi Chastain's exuberant

display—tearing off her jersey when the U.S. won. The story of the women's World Cup championship has been used by women's sports advocates, however, to challenge "the frailty myth" and to position women as equals with men on the playing field (Allen, 2000; Equal footing, 1999; Mosley, 2008). Advocates noted the 90,000+ crowd at the championship game along with the millions who watched on television as evidence of how far women's sports had moved toward equal status with men's (Daniels, 2008).

The notion of equality has been central in arguments by feminists, most notably *liberal feminists,* in their quest to gain opportunities and resources for girls and women in sport (Hall, 1996). Although Hargreaves (1994) argues that the work of sports feminists does not fit easily into any general, recognized category of feminism, she and others (such as Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1994; Hall, 1996) regard Title IX and other initiatives that emphasize "equality of opportunity" (Hargreaves, p. 26) as having a liberal–feminist orientation. *Equality* is an appealing liberal–humanist rationale, and the concept is the bedrock of idealized cultural/national narratives about the history and contemporary social conditions in the U.S. and other democratic societies. In the U.S., "equality has been the moral equivalent of the Holy Grail: it is the object of our sacred quest, and this quest has defined and ennobled us" (Jones, 1994, p. 2313; Somers, 1994). Jones suggests that equality is a macronarrative used by Americans to see themselves as democratic and "morally whole" (p. 2313). Equality was a successful rallying cry for the development of initiatives such as Title IX in the United States. In the context of sport, equality has come to mean *equal opportunity*, and Title IX, in its final regulations regarding its application to sports, mandates that equal opportunity be demonstrated in several tangible ways, including in the allocation of resources for male and female athletes (Suggs, 2005). Hoeber (2007, 2008) has pointed out, however, that among sports administrators, notions of equality and their relationship to the allocation of resources vary; furthermore, administrators deny or rationalize the unfair allocation of resources by arguing that, ultimately, male and female athletes are not *equal*.

Other scholars have pointed to thorny problems attached to general notions of equality. A problem that has particular ramifications in sport is the conflation of equality with sameness in light of ideology that insists on gender difference. Young (1990) explains that as long as ideology and institutional practices define women as inferior because of assumed natural *differences* with men, emancipatory movements must insist on *sameness* in respect to rights to equal citizenship. Young posits that demands for equal opportunity force (liberal) feminists to grapple with the "dilemma of difference": On one hand, they must deny differences between men and women to demand equal rights; on the other, they must affirm that there are enough differences in access and opportunity that current standards put women at a disadvantage. As Hall (1996) and Hargreaves (1994) acknowledge, feminists seeking equal opportunity accept masculine values (hierarchy and aggression, for instance) as encompassing the ideals, experiences and worldviews of men and women. What tends to remain largely uninterrogated is the fact that the standard for power, resources and opportunity is *not* neutral but reflects hegemonic masculinity (Hargreaves; Hoeber, 2008; Young, 1990). For instance, in sport, raw displays of strength, aggression and domination are prized as (objective) standards to which legitimate athletes aspire. Young points out that

in situations where equal opportunity is sought without interrogation of the dominant group's standards, those standards work against the disadvantaged group. They justify exclusions, avoidances, and paternalism because group members are, in fact, *not the same*.

Edley and Wetherell (2001) have illustrated how notions of equality are paradoxical. In interviews with 60 British men about feminists and feminism, the researchers found that these men focused their comments on their notions of equality, which they positioned as a rational goal for women. Conversations indicated that the men equated equality with sameness, and consequently encouraged direct comparison of women's abilities, character and aptitude with the "objective" standard—men. Thus, participants often suggested that women be treated as equal only when they did the same things as men. Men, then, were framed as deserving their exalted status and women who pushed too hard for equality were framed as obsessed and deviant. Because they could never meet the standard, the consensus was that women should be willing to accept "just a small measure of inequity" (p. 449).

Title IX: Stories of (In)Equality

Scholars have also addressed problems embedded in dominant definitions of equality in the sport world. Hoeber (2008) found that the concept was often interpreted as *conditional* among the Canadian athletes, administrators and coaches she interviewed; it was accepted as long as the status quo (gender inequality) was maintained. The men and women expressed a belief that inequality was natural. They rationalized it through evidence such as the popularity and revenue-generating capacity of some men's teams and the history of men's sports. Participants blamed women for any disadvantage they faced because they did not meet the (male) standard.

Equality has also been examined in relationship to Title IX, a law that was clearly designed around that concept. As it relates to sport, Title IX does not challenge existing value systems; the unspoken understanding is that the standards by which sport are valued are universal. Thus, the implementation of Title IX legitimated existing practices and ideologies behind sport, including the emphasis on revenue production as a primary value even in the educational setting (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1994; Suggs, 2005).

The emphasis on equality presupposes sameness as the ultimate goal, but the law's enforcement has reinforced the ideology of difference. The crafting and subsequent application of Title IX allowed for forced segregation in sport participation—through separate-but-equal opportunities—emphasizing an assumption of (hierarchical) difference between the sexes. McDonagh and Pappano (2008) rightly argue that this allowance "has reinforced, rather than challenged, assumptions of male superiority and female weakness" in sport (p. 29).

Continuing Gender Discrimination

Title IX has been called "the most visible gender controversy" in recent decades (Suggs, 2005, p. 2). On one hand, the law has been credited with phenomenal increases in female sport participation since the 1970s (Hogshead-Makar, 2007;

Priest, 2003; Suggs, 2005). On the other, it has also been blamed for cuts to men's nonrevenue collegiate sports according to a recent study of Title IX-related complaints conducted by the National Women's Law Center (Public Supports Title IX, 2007). Growth in the number of men's sports programs, teams, and athletes has provided overwhelming evidence, however, that Title IX has not diminished opportunities for boys and men; they still practice and play in better facilities and receive more funding at the high school and college levels (Dworkin & Messner, 1999; Suggs, 2005).

An analysis of Title IX-related complaints filed with the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights between 2002 and 2006 showed that girls and women still face discrimination, and the OCR has not vigorously reviewed school compliance records (Public Supports, 2007). Some lapses have been egregious; one school district in Alabama provided boys' basketball teams with separate locker rooms, matching home and away uniforms, warm-ups, and gym bags while making girls' teams share locker rooms with physical education classes and wear mismatched uniforms. The girls' teams also sometimes missed away games because a bus driver was not available (Public Supports, 2007).

Narratives and Title IX

Stories about discrimination against female athletes have been used by women's rights advocates to argue for protection of the law against recent legal attacks (Blumenthal, 2005; Hogshead-Makar, 2007; Public Supports, 2007). Stories have also focused on the success of individual women such as Anita DeFrantz, an International Olympic Committee vice president who credits Title IX as a catalyst in her life and career (Hogshead-Makar, 2007). Opponents of Title IX, however, have also used narratives to argue that the law is unfair and provides undeserved opportunity to women ("A sporting chance," 2002; Gavora, 2007; "Law has IX lives," 2003). These narratives are so prevalent in public debates about the law that they often escape scrutiny in media accounts and are a source of great frustration for women's sports advocates (Hardin, Simpson, Whiteside, & Garris, 2007; Messner & Solomon, 2007; Public Supports, 2007). A narrative by Gavora (2007) is illustrative of the standard storyline: male athlete attends college in hopes to live out his dream of playing sports but is, because of Title IX, forced to give up his dream and to instead see women who are neither as talented nor as passionate take the field.

Of particular interest to this research is Messner and Solomon's (2007) analysis of anti-Title IX narratives used during federal commission hearings about the law in 2003. The researchers identified two common themes often reflected in the narratives: a) unfair treatment of men; and b) women as less interested and able to compete. One such narrative focused on the "walk-on" (nonscholarship) athlete, which evoked images of an untarnished amateur playing for the love of the game (in the spirit of "Rudy," a popular American sports film about a walk-on at Notre Dame). One coach who testified told stories about successful walk-on athletes on his track team and added that such inspirational figures would disappear because of Title IX. Such arguments frame young men as being victimized unfairly by the state. The image of the "broken-hearted male wrestler or gymnast whose program has been eliminated is a powerful one" (p. 173).

Critics at the commission hearings also presented Title IX enforcement as ignoring biological *difference* between men and women. They often argued that boys and men are naturally more interested in and better suited for sport (Messner & Solomon, 2007). This reasoning presented young men as suffering the consequences of a law whose enforcement undermines reality. Messner and Solomon's observation illustrates a larger point made by Young (1990) and applied to Title IX: that assumptions regarding (masculine) definitions and values of sport embedded in the law may actually reinforce perceptions of girls and women as undeserving of the law's benefits, as they fail to aspire to or to meet these standards. Messner and Solomon argue that the adoption by young adults of narratives emphasizing difference and presenting boys and men as victims of Title IX could erode support for women's sports opportunities. Such an argument must be seriously considered in light of our understanding of narratives as a precursor and rationale for social action in democratic societies.

This Research

Using Messner and Solomon's (2007) assertions about the power of narratives with young men in relationship to Title IX as a starting point for this research, we explored how young men and women strategically use small stories to relate to sport and gender. Narratives are natural in the interviewing context, as answers often spontaneously form into narratives (Czarniawska, 2004). Our analysis followed Riessman's (2008) model and focused on how and why stories developed and what was accomplished in their use.

We used focus-group discussions, a method that can "produce concentrated amounts of data on precisely the topic of interest" (Morgan, 1997, p. 13). Focus groups are ideally suited for examining the development of knowledge and ideas in a cultural context and, because of their group participation, allow for the sharing of experiences and the construction of a "collective sense" by members (Kitzinger, 1999; Wilkinson, 2004). One challenge in feminist research is deconstructing the power relationship between researcher and subject (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002); we used focus groups because they are an ideal method for breaking down some of those barriers that can inhibit communication (Finch & Lewis, 2003; Presser, 2005). Although there will always be a division between the academic researcher and the group being studied, we expected that conversation would flow freely on topics of sport and gender difference because participants would readily assume a sense of authority about these topics based on their experiences and observations (Willis, 1994).

Participants

We sought to talk to young adults who identified themselves as at least moderately interested in sport because we were interested in the narratives that might flow from their own sport experiences and because we believed they were more likely to be familiar with Title IX than individuals who had no interest in sport. We recruited participants by inviting students in sport-related classes at a small university and students who were attending a high school sports journalism camp to

participate. We used a small monetary incentive with the college students, but not with the high school students.

Nearly everyone in the focus groups said they followed sports closely, and many said they consumed sports media on a regular basis. The participants ranged in age from 15 to 26. We conducted 11 groups of four or five members, each of which lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Six of the groups were made up of high school students and five were composed of undergraduate students. Of the focus groups, three consisted of all women, five consisted of all men and three comprised both men and women. Almost all participants were white, and all participants in most groups were white.

Ways of Talking: The Use of Integrated Groups

One initial concern was the mixed-sex groups. We acknowledge that the dynamic in a mixed-sex group can differ from a single-sex group, especially when the topic at hand relates to differences in perceptions about men and women (Finch & Lewis, 2003; Morgan, 1997). However, we do not believe the gender diversity in those groups dramatically affected the discussion, especially with the benefit of the single-sex groups as a point of comparison. Our choice to include differently textured groups in our analysis was also informed by the work of Coates (2003), who found similar support for gender ideologies in segregated conversations among women and men and among mixed-sex conversations. Coates' analysis of informal conversations found that such conversations reinforced masculine hegemony, albeit in differing ways, no matter the gender composition of groups. For instance, Coates noted that women were generally not mentioned in narratives shared in all-male groups, functioning to position men as central and women as invisible. Men displayed their heterosexuality and engaged in dialogue that Coates characterized as misogynistic and homophobic. All-female groups made men prominent in their narratives, presenting them as influential in the lives of women, and in mixed-sex groups, women cooperated in the maintenance of men as prominent (Coates).

We recognized the potential for muting of differing perspectives (especially those among women in mixed-sex groups) and made "special efforts to include participants who feel they do not belong" (Finch & Lewis, 1003, p. 191). For instance, we invited individual participants, especially girls in groups that were majority boys, to comment and used nonverbal cues (a nodding head, for instance) to affirm their participation. It should also be noted that all groups, even those composed only of men, were facilitated by women—the researchers. We acknowledge that this factor, too, affected the type of data we obtained (Presser, 2005).

Procedures

We began the discussion by asking participants to describe their interest in sport and how they follow their favorite teams or participate in sporting activities. These questions served as icebreakers and allowed the participants to introduce themselves (Morgan, 1997). We then moved on to a series of nondirective questions related to women's athletics and Title IX. For instance, to move the discussion toward women's sports, we asked the groups, "Are there any sports that get too

much or too little coverage?" Many times this opened the door to ask about women's sports, which then gave us the opportunity to ask questions such as, "Are you familiar with Title IX?" We used the same list of basic questions for each group but asked unique follow-up questions depending on responses (Potter, 1999).

The focus groups were led by one researcher at a time with the other taking notes during the conversations. After the focus groups were finished, we went over our notes and impressions together in what Potter calls an initial step of data analysis (Potter, 1999, p. 121). Because of the fluid process of qualitative research, it is difficult to define the discrete steps in the data analysis. However, we define our analysis of the transcripts as a theoretical thematic analysis that "is driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytical interest in the area" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). We do not characterize our analysis as narrative analysis in the traditional sense of the term, but instead as an analysis with special attention to narrative in interaction (Georgakopoulou, 2007a).

We looked for what Morgan (1997) calls group-to-group validation in determining our findings, which "means that whenever a topic comes up, it generates a consistent level of energy among a consistent proportion of the participants across nearly all the groups" (Morgan, 1997, p. 63). Initially, we each independently analyzed the transcripts before meeting to discuss our interpretations of the themes, review any differences and finalize the analysis.

Findings

Nearly all of the participants in this study considered themselves to be sports fans and regular sports consumers; most women and many of the men had participated in competitive sports. Nearly all provided examples of how they follow sports and access sports information daily. Despite their knowledge and experience, however, very few participants could provide more than a cursory description of Title IX; most were either unfamiliar with the law or could offer only basic, and often erroneous, information about it.

Generally, participants expressed support for what they understood to be the defining principle of Title IX: equality. The word "equal" was used in almost every definition of the law suggested by participants, such as this (erroneous) one offered by a male high school student: "It's like women's rights in sport. Like women should get equal coverage as men's sports." Those who did not use the word implied the concept, as another male high school student's assertion that the law meant "you have to spend as much money on men's sports as you do in women's sports."

When provided with a brief description of the law,[2] nearly all participants initially said they supported it, again, couching their rationale in notions of equality. Girls and women, participants reasoned, had a right to assimilate into sport; as one female high school student said, "I'm very into women's equality in sports." A male college student explained:

> They [female athletes] have just as much right. They might not draw as many crowds and everything, but I mean, girls are athletes. They deserve enough chance as guys to make it to the next level and do what they love to do.

None of the participants denied girls and women the right to play. Participants said equality "is definitely a good thing," that the law "sounds fair" and that women deserve as much of a chance as men to play. One female college student summed up that idea when she said, "They've worked hard enough to get there in college, then why not let them play? They shouldn't be penalized because they are a woman."

Stories About (In)Equality

None of the participants used narratives to support the law. Many, however, did introduce small stories as they began to challenge Title IX and to explore the idea of equality as it applies to girls and women. The narratives were used to question equal allocation of resources to girls and women who, in the eyes of participants, did not deserve them because of a perceived lack of interest, ability or both. Nowhere in the narratives did participants discuss the possibility that opportunity precedes interest; because boys and men have always had opportunities, the idea of cultivating interest was invisible.

Stories sometimes emerged early in the conversation as a way for one participant to educate the others about Title IX. The narratives, such as this one among high school boys, were often adopted quickly as a lens through which to view the law:

> *Interviewer:* Any opinions on Title IX?
>
> *Participant 1*: I think it's good.
>
> *Participant 2:* I think it's a good idea, but I have heard of—I can't think of specific examples, but boy's teams that have been penalized because there is not enough girl interest. That's not fair at all. That's reverse discrimination. I'm all for girls being able to play any sport they want. But if they don't want to play then why should the boys not be able to play? That's totally not fair to them. It should be based on interest and not what some organization says is correct.
>
> *Participant 1:* I didn't realize they penalized the boys. If the girls don't want to play, then I don't think they should be penalized.
>
> *Participant 2:* Yeah, the concept is great, but it's not being handled right.

Participants told stories based on rumors ("I have heard . . ."), blending in hypothetical situations to make their points. For instance, a female college student explained her understanding of Title IX to others by referring to a speech she had heard. She said she could not remember the details, but forged ahead:

> I know one of the things I've heard is like funding—it'll take away funding from men's teams, and if a girl—So, say you're at a school, and, like, they have a football team or whatever, and the football team is awesome, and they're, like, really good. But then Title IX comes along so they're going to have, like, a girls' soccer team, but the girls' soccer team sucks. But because of Title IX, they're supposed to have it, and, like, it's taking away funding

from the football team. . . . I don't know any specific examples, but that's just kind of like throwing that out there as a specific example.

They also spoke based on experiences with friends or relatives. In one group, four male college students offered narratives about how the law had hurt male athletes they knew. Two men compared notes:

Participant 1: The only experience I have with it is—my brother graduated from VMI, the Virginia Military Institute, and they're a very small Division I school, and I just think it's funny because he told me stories many times about how no, no—not a lot of women want to go there, so they were giving out soccer scholarships to girls out of high school that didn't even play soccer in high school. They were giving them full rides to VMI—which, $25,000 a year just to play soccer—just so they could have enough people just for Title IX so . . . for that regard, . . . I think a lot of places it's good. Women given equal opportunities. But places like that, where they're taking away men's sports to give scholarships to women that haven't even played the sport before—stuff like that just makes me upset. Makes me mad.

Participant 2: They do that here with women's rowing.

Participant 1: Oh, really?

Participant 2: They were giving scholarships. All you do is apply.

Participant 1: I think stuff like that is outrageous.

The topic of money—in the form of discussions about scholarships and revenue generation—was prominent among men and women. It was clear that participants saw the value of sport, even in the educational setting, in its ability to make profits, not to teach life lessons or to offer an outlet for fitness and teamwork. The female participant who said she was "very into women's equality in sports," for instance, added that "you still have to live in today and reality," which meant that equality was not as important as money making for an educational institution. This idea was especially salient among high school students. One student told a story to make the point that his school had gone "Title IX ballistic" and lost money, through ticket sales, by placing some girls' instead of boys' games on Friday night. Another boy lamented that Title IX was unfair because at any given university "guys' football is bringing in so much more to the school, but yet their girls' volleyball team probably doesn't. So it makes it a little unfair to get equal resources to guys' football and girls' volleyball when they bring in different revenues."

College students also talked about sport in financial terms. "Money is everything so if you hurt the business or something, it just sends a bad ripple effect," one participant told her group. Another female college student, who said she thought Title IX was "a positive thing," also sympathized with the plight of men:

Look at the big money generators. They're the men's football program, basketball. And so when you look at that and you're saying women should get

> the same amount of scholarships as the men, when they're bringing in one-tenth the money, how do you justify that?

Only one student, a man who had been a track and field athlete, used a personal story related to Title IX. He said he had been "bitter" about Title IX because of his own athletic career, which had not been as accomplished as he had hoped. He said that he had not been able to compete in indoor and outdoor meets although the women at his university had. He said that although he was "for it," the law could

> have the adverse affect on what the sphere of Title IX was for. . . . It's for including for everybody, and all of them [women] receive equal opportunity. I think when you take away women's sports—like West Virginia, they lost their rifle team—their men's rifle team. They lost their men's indoor–outdoor track and field team, just because of Title IX because they had to increase women's scholarships and everything. That kind of loses the whole sphere of Title IX, which is to include everybody and offer many opportunities.

When asked by the interviewer how he would like to see Title IX work, he said, "I think it would be based on—trying to think how to word this: Ability, pretty much." His comment was congruent with the general sentiment on Title IX: that equality implied sameness, and, because women were not the same, a law that conferred unearned benefits of equality was unfair. As one college woman said, inequitable opportunities might seem unfair for women, but in light of their inability to play sports like men, the inequity "shouldn't be such a shock." Participants also expressed concern that the law was "forcing" or "pushing" an unnatural relationship among women, men, and sport. One high school boy summarized the overwhelming sentiment of participants, praising the law as "great," but then adding in the same breath: "but it's like—communism's a great idea, and look how that turned out. It didn't work."

Underlying Gender Ideologies and the Frailty Myth

Narrative exchanges about Title IX were driven by shared cultural ideologies about women and gender roles. Those ideologies are reflected in the stories already provided, which demonstrate the acceptance of male values (such as revenue generation) as objective, acceptance of lower female participation rates in sport as evidence of their natural lack of interest, and assumptions that female athletes are inferior. Participants explicitly fleshed out these ideas—all supportive of the frailty myth and gender ideology of difference, in exchanges about women, men and sport. In all groups, sport was characterized in plain terms as a masculine endeavor.

Many of the participants used images of women in sport to make these points. One conversational thread that reinforced all of these ideas focused on the Women's National Basketball Association, a professional women's basketball league in the United States. The WNBA often emerged as participants discussed their preference to watch men's sports on television. Group members used the WNBA, "an inferior product to the NBA," as one participant characterized it, as the epitome of the failure of women's sports. Participants pointed to the league's failure to draw

large audiences (and, consequently, to generate profits). They also criticized the style of play by WNBA players, which several participants labeled as "fundamental," implying a basic, almost elementary way of playing. Nearly all comments were negative, as in this exchange:

> *Interviewer:* What do you all think of the WNBA?
>
> *Participant 1*: Personally, I can't stand it. But I mean—
>
> *Interviewer:* Okay. Tell me about that.
>
> *Participant 1:* It's—I guess I'm going along with America and the fact that it's not as entertaining as watching guys do a 360 or put the ball through his legs or cross someone over. It's—it takes a lot to actually be able to pay attention and to watch women go about a game. Just bouncing the ball, shooting, doing a lay-up.

The failure for women, according to some of the group members, began with their bodies. As one high school boy explained, "Nobody wants to watch women's sports. . . . They don't have the physical abilities that men do." A female college student informed her group that "it's a fact that their muscles are 30 percent weaker than guys." A high school girl reiterated the idea that the male body is the standard when it comes to sport: "Men are more physically inclined to play sports than women are, so let them have that. That's what defines them, almost."

Participants also used the 1999 U.S. Women's World Cup championship to marginalize female athletes and to focus on their sexuality. In response to a question about whether he watched girls' and women's sports, a high school boy responded, "I don't watch women's sports at all. The last one I watched might have been USA beat China. Brandi Chastain took off her shirt."

The primary way in which participants related to sport was through the media, and most group members suggested that men were better suited and qualified to offer commentary to viewers and listeners. Male participants strongly expressed a preference for a male voice in television and radio, arguing that it was natural and authoritative. A male college student said, "It comes down to a credibility issue. Whether justified or not, sport is masculine. . . . It's only natural, for some reason. I hear a man's voice and I pay attention." Many of the participants expressed either dissatisfaction at hearing a women's voice or outright condemnation of the performances by female television reporters. One high school boy summed up this sentiment when he said that listening to a female play-by-play announcer "ruined my ESPN coverage of college football for that day."

Participants trivialized the work of sideline reporters, the most visible position of women who work in sports media. In one all-female group, members collectively reinforced, through small stories peppered with commentary, the idea that women do not understand sports:

> *Participant 1:* The sideline reporters, they pretty much tell you something you already know. . . . I didn't get the chance to watch the Steelers game this past weekend, but I'm sure when Ben Roethlisberger was out on the field, they went to like, Bonnie Bernstein or something, who said, "Ben Roethlisberger got hit. He's laying on the field. Back to you."

Participant 2: They state the obvious a lot. Maybe because they just want people to look at a different face on the field. I'm not saying that they don't deserve to be on the field, but they don't tell us anything new. They could have told us, "They're checking him for a concussion test," or "This is how he got hit. This is what might be the problem." They tell you the obvious.

Participant 3: Here's a—I was watching the Penn State—Minnesota game about a month ago. It was on ESPNPlus, and a woman was doing the play-by-play at the game. She was forgetting names. . . . I wanted to watch the game, and then I have someone here that doesn't really know what she's talking about.

Regardless of whether they were talking about female athletes, journalists or women's sports, the narratives were told to make the point that women were ill-suited for sport. The stories reflected an ideology that women were outsiders in sport in every conceivable way.

Small Stories of Resistance

A narrative that challenged dominant ideology in limited ways surfaced twice. Both took place in the same all-female group of college athletes and are worth noting. One (Participant 3, below) immediately followed two other small stories designed to provide evidence of women's athletic inferiority after a participant questioned whether women and girls are athletically inclined:

Participant 1: There's one—I remember. I think it was somewhere in Colorado a couple of years ago, when there was one girl [who] was on the boys' team. She was a kicker, and I remember the coach said she sucked as a kicker, and he said football is not for girls.

Participant 2: Yeah, there was a girl in my high school that tried to walk on our football team, and they just laughed at her. The coach was just like, "No." . . .

Participant 3: My sister is a sophomore in high school, and her—one of her friends was on the football team last year. A girl—and she was on it, and, I mean, she's like a bear-girl. She was, like, bigger than some of the boys. That's an awkward phase for boys, still kind of tiny. So, she was good, and she was just as good as the boys, and she went out there and she practiced just as hard as the boys did, and she didn't do it this year because she didn't want to deal with all the crap surrounding it, she told me. Which sucks because she was actually good.

Although Participant 3 reinforced gender ideology in some key ways (such as suggesting that an athletic girl is unnatural—akin to an animal), the narrative she presented acknowledged that female athletes are often blocked in cruel ways from athletic participation that is rightfully theirs to pursue. Unlike Participant 2, who presented the ridicule of a female athlete as acceptable, Participant 3, in her story, introduces the idea that such ridicule is objectionable.

Later, the same young woman also challenged the idea that Title IX is the culprit in lost opportunities for some male athletes and suggested that overemphasis on football and basketball could be to blame. She told a story about a member of the men's swim team who had received only a partial scholarship although he was top swimmer. She added:

> I feel like Title IX—I don't even think it has to do with, necessarily, women's sports versus men's sports. . . . He's really good, but they don't give funding to that. They'll give funding to basketball and to football. I mean, no offense to anyone, but if you look at maybe, like, the deservingness of—like, if you base it purely on talent, he might deserve it more.

Her comment prompted another participant to chime in with a story about a male swimmer she knew who had competed in the Olympics in relative obscurity. From there, the conversation drifted to speculation about why swimming at the university was generally not popular as a spectator sport. Although the woman's point of resistance about Title IX had not been embraced by the other participants, and her choice of a male athlete for her story could be interpreted as reinforcing men as exemplar (although in context of the argument she was making, that men suffer at the hands of men, it seemed appropriate), it did, however, serve another purpose: that of moving the conversation away from ridicule of female athletes and Title IX and toward more general scrutiny of sports.

Discussion

We view the incorporation of narratives by young adults we interviewed in light of Young's (2000) assessment of their role in the democratic process. The narratives were powerful in creating collective sense about social and political issues; such collective understanding justifies social action (Somers, 1994). Our findings suggest that the stories we heard, although championing "equality," ultimately do not support emancipatory goals for girls and women and may jeopardize initiatives such as Title IX because of their persuasive, "commonsense" appeal to hierarchical gender norms. Perhaps illustrative of their appeal and power is the female athlete mentioned at the beginning of this article; JMU student Jennifer Chapman joined an organized effort to dismantle it based on her "epiphany" on the bus (Brady, 2007, ¶ 37). A spokesperson for the effort said of Chapman and other young adults: "They deserve to be taken seriously for their views on public policy:" (Brady, ¶ 43).

From Policy Debates to Everyday Conversation

As we listened to our participants, many of whom were beneficiaries of Title IX, we were struck by the similarities in Messner and Solomon's (2007) analysis of public debates about the law and our analysis of short stories among young adults. They are remarkably similar, suggesting that storylines incorporating the frailty myth and gender difference resonated as truthful even among men and women who have grown up and played competitive sports under the law. A particularly powerful parallel was in the discussion among participants about the WNBA and the

inability of women to meet the (male) standard in performance. The comment by a high school girl that "men are more physically inclined to play sports" echoed the biological-difference argument used by critics of the law (Messner & Solomon).

The women and men we interviewed have either participated in sports or have seen girls and women participate under the protections of Title IX. Yet none drew on those positive experiences or observations. (Only one participant reported a negative experience). Rumors and mediated experiences, such as reading or hearing a story about a college cutting men's sports and blaming Title IX, were actually more powerful. The commonsense appeal behind them was so strong that when real stories were not immediately accessible, participants drew upon hypotheticals with ease. Their beliefs shaped their stories—both real and imagined.

The Confounding Role of Equality

This study also echoes the findings of Edley and Wetherell (2001) and Hoeber (2008), who found troubling use of the notion of equality. Both found that equality was a strong rationale and an effective macronarrative in which participants situated gender equity. Problems arose, however, as participants reconciled the quest for equality with gender ideology that positions women as not equal because of their failure to be the same. Thus, women have not earned the right to an equitable allocation of resources.

The young adults we interviewed were also careful to preserve the Holy-Grail status of equality while using it as a rationale for denying gender equity. We found that participants, even in the midst of a narrative that would suggest otherwise, overtly stated their allegiance to the notion of equality. For instance, the male college student who used his brother at VMI to argue against the law interrupted his narrative to remind listeners that "women given equal opportunities" was a good idea. Even the track-and-field athlete who said he was bitter because of lost opportunities told the group he was in favor of equal rights for women. We suggest, though, that in the context of conversation, it is what is said in the concrete—the narrative—that really matters in making collective sense. Unfortunately, their reasoning is informed by the very argument behind Title IX and other liberal feminist initiatives where sameness and equality are conflated to meet a legislative goal; problems arise when the "truth" of everyday experience does not match the law's rationale (Young, 1990).

The small stories presented here are powerful rhetorical devices that produce and reflect broad cultural narratives, including the notion that women do not deserve the equality Title IX gives them. Telling individual stories like those recounted here are part of the relational exercising of power that privileges men in sport and conceals the misguided logic that makes such assumptions seem natural.

Individually, these stories likely will not directly affect policy decisions or change the institution of sport. If, however, we view these stories as part of a complex discursive process that reifies broader cultural norms and commonsense assumptions as Somers (1994) suggests, then these small stories collectively undermine Title IX, providing a common understanding of issues from a particular point of view and lending evidence to the frailty myth (Young, 2000). The frailty myth as an interpretive lens for everyday events has repercussions beyond Title IX—to the ways gender relations in the "public" and "private" spheres are

constituted in discourse as natural; such discourse has "real effects on social relations and practices" (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 96).

Emancipatory Narratives

The understanding that believing is seeing is critical in understanding how narratives attach themselves more to ideologies than to events. In our focus groups, none of the participants told stories presenting Title IX as just or liberating. We acknowledge that such narratives are counterintuitive, but that does not mean that they do not exist. For instance, several stories presented scholarships for women as wasteful; such stories could have presented scholarships for women as serving the educational goals of Title IX and allowing women to experience the advantages of a competitive sport experience. Stories that focused on losses to men's sports "because of Title IX" could have been turned into stories that focused instead on continuing growth of men's sports. Stories about women's supposed failings covering sports on the sidelines could have been turned into narratives that focused on the ability of these women to hold their ground on men's turf.

Interestingly, the two small stories of resistance came in a conversation among college women, most of whom were competitive athletes. Generally, our analysis concurs with Coates' (2003) understanding of single-sex and mixed-sex conversations as both reinforcing the ideology of gender difference, as two of our all-female groups contained no emancipatory narratives. However, we argue that all-female groups certainly hold greater potential for such stories. We also wonder how much the athletic status of the women in this group influenced their willingness to entertain resistance. There is the possibility that sporting women may express female apologia in relationship to the benefits they receive as a result of equal-opportunity initiatives (Gavora, 2007); however, we also believe that the complex understanding of sports and sports institutions combined with awareness of their diminished athletic status might make sporting women more capable of telling small stories, life stories and life events that challenge prevailing ideology. It is true that in the focus group where we heard resistant stories, we did not subsequently hear a radical change in the way Title IX and women's sports were characterized. The narratives, however, did achieve subtle turns. We suggest that a series of small turns can result in new directions.

Conclusions

By sifting through evidence offered by our focus groups and situating it in our understanding, we have crafted our own narrative. If in no other way, simply because we act as researchers, we assume a position of authority (Presser, 2005; Somers, 1994). Our narrative, as all stories great and small offered in any context, makes a point.

The point of the small stories we have assembled, and of our larger narrative, however, is consistent with previous literature and is, we believe, a critical one for feminists to note. Georgakopoulou (2007a) argues that small stories illustrate the relationship between storyteller and cultural ideologies, and we present these small stories as evidence of the power cultural narratives have in shaping the way events are retold by individuals. Because it is these larger narratives that guide the

"seeing" and then the crafting of narratives by individuals, we believe the stories about Title IX from participants without an interest in sport likely would have been similar to the ones we heard, as the metanarratives involving gender and gender roles would likely have guided their discourse in similar ways.

The stories would have been different, however, if we interviewed participants who were engaged in a conscious effort to recast their stories in ways that challenge the existing gender ideology and contribute to the type of grassroots social action that has led to changes in social policy (Somers, 1994; Wood, 1992). Change must begin at the individual level of discourse where new liberating definitions and meanings can be created. If power is exercised through discourse, then women's sports advocates must turn their attention to such discourse to change ideology about gender roles at the cultural level. Simply put, any sustainable efforts to increase sporting opportunities for girls and women must carefully attend to the power of individual narratives, in everyday conversations, and how these relate to larger cultural narratives. We suggest that women's sports advocates cannot underestimate the need for emancipatory narratives—large and small—to be injected into public discourse at every level, including through the stories shared with children about sport. These narratives must address conceptualizations of "equality," challenge gender ideology, and, in the U.S., result in a better understanding of Title IX.

We acknowledge the difficulty of such an endeavor as such stories do not yet have a place in the tool kit of larger cultural narratives (Coates, 2003). However, as much as stories can be used to provide evidence of prevailing ideology, they can also be used to provide counterevidence and ultimately to justify social action benefiting girls and women in sport.

Notes

1. The law reads, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." The law was enacted June 23, 1972 (United States Department of Labor, 2007). Carpenter and Acosta (2005) write, "These 37 words are the sum of the law known as Title IX. Although the words *athletics, physical education*, and *recreation* are not among the 37, the solitary sentence of Title IX has changed the face of American sport forever" (p. 3).

2. The law was presented in terms such as, "Title IX requires government educational institutions to provide equal opportunities for sports participation to males and females.

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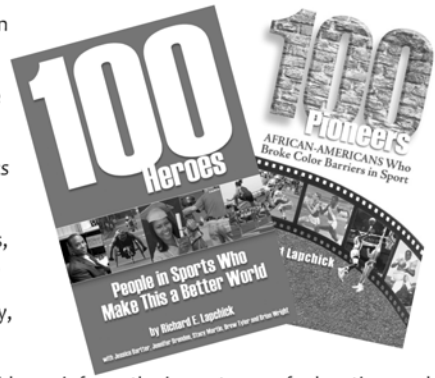
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Two New Books from Richard Lapchick on Sport and Social Change



True students of the impact of sport on society as well as true sports fans will gain so much from reading Richard Lapchick's two latest books in a three part series of historical reference, athletic inspiration and personal triumph. In *100 Heroes: People in Sports Who Make This a Better World*, the reader will find inspiring tales of student-athletes, professional athletes, athletics administrators, civic leaders, coaches, parents and more who have had a great impact on sport and society, many in the face of adversity and discouragement. The life stories of these 100 heroes challenge racial divides, reinforce the importance of education, and shed light into the social responsibility of athletic figures. They are individually and collectively, an outstanding representation of talent, commitment and spirit sure to inspire sports fans of all ages. *100 Pioneers: African-Americans Who Broke Color Barriers in Sport* combines historical research and personal interviews. 100 Pioneers offers compelling portraits of the dedicated athletes who broke color barriers on college campuses and in professional sports all around the country. These engaging accounts detail the adversities they faced and the victories they achieved. Look for the third book in the series later in 2009. It is titled *100 Trailblazers: Great Women Athletes who Opened Doors for Future Generations*. *100 Heroes* is available at www.ncasports.org and *100 Pioneers* is available at www.fitinfotech.com.