

Explorations of Gender Qualities of Females in Competitive Sports

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Abstract: We conducted in-depth interviews with 6 respondents from Beijing Foreign Studies University, all of whom play either on the women's basketball team or on the women's football team. From the perspective of the theory of structuration, we started from individual practical experience and explored the relationship between gender quality and attributes of competitive sports, which reveals the compromise and confrontation between individuals and social structures. Our research found that the diversification of competitive sports attributes is opposed to the duality of gender quality and that the reshaping of qualities in women's sports practice is simultaneously affected by the individual's agency and the structural influence of the social environment on different levels.

1. Introduction

In January of 2021, in response to the submitted proposal of preventing the feminization of male adolescents, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China pointed out that the teaching method of physical education needs appropriate improvements to foster masculinity, which brought up heated online discussion about masculinity and qualities of male and female teenagers. Two months later, another proposal about attaching importance to gender-differentiation education in comprehensive education from a representative of National People's Congress pushed the discussion to an intenser level.

The two proposals both indicated a tendency of segmentation in gender qualities from a national level. Taking the aspect of physical education as an example, in the proposal submitted in March there is advice of leading boys to take a more active part in antagonistic sports like basketball, soccer, fencing and etc., while girls are advised to be guided to participate more in sports like rhythmic gymnastics and yoga that improve flexibility. Under such a context, antagonistic sports are defaulted to exclude female adolescents' active participation, which serves to the strengthening differences of gender qualities between the male and the female.

However, in the current field of the soccer and the basketball, both of which are strongly competitive sports with many body confrontations, we can see women's energetic participation. In terms of professional competitions, the performance of the Chinese women's basketball team is not inferior to that of the Chinese men's basketball team, and reviewing the past sports events, the performance of the Chinese women's soccer team is far more outstanding than that of the Chinese men's soccer team, which shows a distinctive charm of competitiveness in female players.

Therefore, we doubt this segmentation of gender qualities from the perspective of sports. We took female students from the women's football team and women's basketball team of Beijing Foreign Studies University as our research respondents. We started from the antagonism and aggressiveness of physical confrontation in competitive sports, and discussed whether there is a segmentation of gender quality in the field of competitive sports, in response to whether it is necessary to strengthen gender differences in physical education, and thus trying to reflect on the shaping of gender qualities.

2. A General Review of Previous Research on Relationship Between genders and sports

Previous researches, from Buss and Perry, Eagly and Steffen, Geneviève, and Oliver and Hyde, conclude that men tend to show higher levels of antagonism and aggressiveness than women, and the

two characteristics are generally viewed to be possessed by masculine traits.[1] However, these researches were conducted under the premise of the existence of opposition of gender qualities, and they all focused on distinguishing differences between males and females. Similar to these researches, Nixon suggested that women's seeking to become more competitive was an imitation of male physical aggression, which also revealed that aggression belonged to masculinity and excluded women's possibility to possess such qualities.[5] Therefore, this conclusion is also repudiated by our research goal due to its premise.

From a macro-perspective, recent domestic researches on feminist sports study basically follow two lines. One line is the theory of gender performance derived from queer theory, which reveals the essential feature of sports participation through cross-dressing and transgender methods—performance and constructive attributes of gender [6]. Although this is a study on the sports participation of transgendered people, it helps us to observe the shaping of women's qualities in female sports based on the fluidity and performance of gender in queer theory. The other line, also a prevalent trend, is the body studies. It reveals the social construction of women's sporting bodies, explores the embodiment and liberation of the body, and criticizes body politics established with the gender as its core in the field of sports. The ordered body theory represented by Foucault emphasizes the discipline of women's body by the gender power, but ignores the subjectivity and agency in the practice of the female body from the individual level.[7] While Giddens' structural theory has taken the social background of the body into consideration[8], believing that social structure and social practice are mutually constructed [9], and it emphasizes the significance of the interaction between "social structure" and "mental structure" on people's social actions.[10] From this theoretical perspective, we examine the mutual influence of the women's physical practice and social environmental factors in the participation of competitive sports, as well as how individuals challenge the gendered body order and gender structure, so as to try to deconstruct the gender attributes of sports itself.

3. Research Methods

We selected 6 players as participants from the women's basketball team and the women's football team of Beijing Foreign Studies University. As a liberal arts university, BFSU has a certain imbalance in the gender composition of students; the ration of girls to boys is close to 7:3. With the wide spread of gender awareness among students and frequent activities oriented by female, this kind of special campus environment has affected some shared characteristics of the participants to a certain extent. Our samples basically covered all positions of these two sports, including the guard, forward, and center in basketball and the goalkeeper, back and forward in football, in order to examine the influence of different positions on player's qualities and features. The competitive intensity of basketball and football varies with the degree of participation. Although the players who joined our research are not professional athletes, their level of participation is much higher than amateurs. The number of this type of players is far more than professional athletes nationwide, and they are also deeply involved in the two sports, which offers greater research significance.

Inspired by the structural theory of sexism, we conducted in-depth interviews with 6 participants in terms of physical confrontation and aggressiveness in sports, personal characters' shaping, and environmental impacts. The interviews totaled about 36 hours, with more than 45,000 words in the transcribed text. With type-coding and qualitative content analysis of these data, we explored the practice of shaping gender temperament on the courts.

4. More Than Physical confrontation: the attributes on the courts (Results and Analyses, 4.1 more than, 4.2, 4.3)

As Nixon stated, "although physically aggressive behavior is generally associated with sports, the traditional exclusion of females from sports has resulted in little attention to the aggressiveness of female athletes." [11]

Yet, in fact, physical confrontation is also of great significance in female competitive sports. In other words, we should regard offensiveness and antagonism as attributes directly related to the football and the basketball.

During the interview, the respondents all expressed that they did not resist physical confrontation and regarded it as an unavoidable or necessary part of football and basketball. Respondent 1 said, "Since the rule of football involves physical confrontation, you must do it." Physical confrontation is a means of competition permitted and encouraged by the rules of basketball and football. Although not all respondents are good at physical confrontation, they all said that as the intensity of the competition increases, the lack of physical confrontation will lead to failure. Therefore, this kind of physical confrontation can be regarded as the attribute of basketball and football itself—as long as you participate in this sport and long for winning, you have to accept the discipline of this characteristic, which is how the sport itself shapes the respondents' qualities. This required quality is a stereotyped masculinity, but the direct association of physical confrontation with gender is obviously culturally constructed, not the gender attribute of the sport itself. In addition, the acceptance of physical confrontation and the attitude towards collisions and injuries would also be affected by sports experience. Respondent 2 said, "I think boys have participated in more competitive activities since they were young, and then they will be more accustomed to this kind of confrontation and more accustomed to injuries, so they don't pay much attention to it, but many girls have never done any other competitive activities before. Therefore, they will be very sensitive to the injury, and not sure about the degree of the injury, and they will consider others' falling on the ground as severe injuries. But for a boy, he might know that the person who falls on the ground has cramps at a glance, and it will be healed in just a while. This is more a matter of experience." This rejected gender essentialism in the field of sports powerfully and negated the gender attributes of competitive sports.

Whether a player loves and frequently engages in physical confrontation is also connected with the player's physical talents. Respondent 1 is a tall and strong girl. She found that she can take advantage of this physical talent to gain an advantage in the confrontation, thus receiving victory in the game. Respondent 4 is a short and thin guard. She said that the main reason for her unwillingness to actively engage in physical confrontation is that her body does not allow her to behave dominant, but she can use other strategies, such as her speed and agility to gain her advantage. Similarly, other respondents also said that the basketball and football require very diverse qualities, although they are both competitive sports. The starting point of our research is the antagonism and physical confrontation in competitive sports, which are regarded as the main characteristics of competitive sports. However, after collecting the data, we found that this is only part of the characteristics of these two sports. Some players can be calm and intelligent commanders, some are dexterous sneakers, and some are attackers who charge for head-on battles. Although physical antagonism is necessary, other qualities, including but not limited to calmness, flexibility, and wisdom, will also play their respective roles on the court. The nature of teaming of basketball and football requires the necessity of the division of labor and cooperation, which brings the possibility of diversifying the qualities of the entire team.

The preset at the beginning of the study indicating that the offensiveness and antagonism are the only attributes of these two sports, was overthrown. We cannot summarize them with a single trait, and the respondents pursue more than a single quality in the process of sports participation. Then can we all sum it up with masculinity? Our conclusion is that these diverse attributes cannot simply be directly connected with dualistic gender qualities. Therefore, in the physical practice of competitive sports, female athletes will not be dominated or disciplined by a so-called masculinity alone. We should refuse to apply the duality of gender qualities to the sports field and stipulate its gender order accordingly. In addition, the influence of the sports field on shaping the respondents' qualities is not necessarily as high as expected.

5. Relation between Original Qualities and Sports' Construction

By analyzing contents from the interviews, we found that, unlike the traditional view that athleticism and femininity are absolutely contradictory, originally-possessed qualities of the female

respondents are not reshaped by the competitive sports they take part in, and they have a different relationship that echoes the previous conclusion that female players' qualities may not be influenced by the construction of sports field at a too high level.

Respondent 2 said that she is a person with a relatively strong sense of responsibility and Respondent 1 mentioned that she is a confident person even before she took part in soccer, and the sense of responsibility and the confidence have been greatly strengthened after playing soccer. The extent of confidence strengthening is directly related to performances in the soccer according to Respondent 2.

Respondent 1: I think the whole thing is interactive. My temperament makes me fond of the sports and the temperament is also strengthened (in the sports).

Respondent 2: I think I am a person with a strong sense of responsibility, but soccer can improve your perceptions on responsibility.....I think the confidence in soccer is likely to be based on what you have performed on the soccer field.

Respondent 3 mentioned that even though she is a calm person in life, she needed to show more calmness to perform well enough on the soccer field as a fullback. Similarly, for Respondent 4, she said "I am always outgoing, but I think they (basketball competitions) have taught me how to deal with issues calmly instead of being impatient.", which shows that she was taught to be calm when playing basketball, while staying outgoing as she always does. Respondent 5 and 6 said their characteristics keep consistent no matter in life or on their sports field.

From the contents provided from respondents, we reach the conclusion that the soccer and the basketball, typical representatives of competitive sports, fail to subvert respondents' original qualities, only functioning to strengthen those qualities and offering supplements. With this conclusion, we interpret qualities of female players in such sports acquire tenacity when they were constructed, thus creating agency against deconstruction from sports. To sum up, sports' construction on females' is not a unilateral action of sports where females passively accept these changes. Instead, they have their own agency to process and digest these constructions. Staying consistent or taking in the extra supplements is a way revealed in the previous analysis.

6. Environments Analysis: Interactions between Structure and Practice

From the analyses conducted above, we have explored individual mental factors' influences on shaping the gender qualities of respondents. Now referring to the structural theory of Giddens applied in the research, the factor of social structure also plays an important part in the shaping, which is the mainly discussed point in this part of the analysis.

The analysis is based on a further interpretation of the social structure. The social structure here includes two perspectives—the macro aspect of the whole society and the micro aspect of individuals, composed of the interpersonal network and atmospheres of certain areas where respondents had lived and live now.

Targeted at the two aspects, respondents offer a variety of information. In terms of the micro aspect of structure, Respondent 1 said that she had been exposed to the basketball and the soccer ever since her primary school time, which means that the environment she used to live in was able to foster her passion for competitive sports. And BFSU offers chances to take soccer courses, where Respondent 1 first entered the soccer field in a formal way. Also, BFSU is a school with many students with gender awareness, as mentioned in the methodology part, and generally sets few obstacles in women sports events' organizations. Such university atmosphere is shared by all the respondents. As for interpersonal networks, she feels that people around, both family members and friends, all support her participation in soccer basically. For Respondent 2, she took taekwondo training in her childhood which also provided sports atmosphere to a certain extent. Her friends and parents show no dissents for her participation in soccer. Respondent 3 has a similar micro environment and interpersonal networks where she played soccer at a very young age and was supported by people around. Respondent 4, 5 and 6 were exposed to basketball when they were at the middle school and there were always friends and family supporting them and companions who had similar sports interests that

influenced them to keep participating in basketball, but Respondent 6's companion of the interest of the same sports were fewer than the other two.

But when it comes to the macro perspective, the situation difference is clearly revealed. Only Respondents 4 and 5 felt that they've had a rather friendly atmosphere for women's participation in basketball and other sports at a general view of the society, since there are always enough facilities and space for them to carry out sports activities, and the government encourages all kinds of sports events and participations. But the other respondents all mentioned society's hindering to different extents. For example, Respondent 1 described the social environment for women sports as "suffocating", Respondent 2 took her former head teacher as an example to illustrate lack of awareness of females' taking part in competitive sports, and Respondent 3 mentioned a general lack of physical education, especially girl groups of competitive sports, in her hometown, where playing soccer was tagged as violence and bullying.

All the respondents acquire a rather beneficial social structure of the micro level for their participation in competitive sports, which helps them get rid of setbacks from society at a macro level. Indeed, they are survivors of the gender inequality of the general world. The micro social structure offers stronger power for the respondents and enables them to get involved in the field of competitive sports where they can experience sports' construction in their qualities and make their adjustment through their agency. At the same time, their participation in these sports can be perceived as a challenge to the macro social structure, in which they try to deconstruct dual gender qualities and confront the traditional gender order and the stereotypical social expectations of females. And the two revealed results respond to Giddens' theory that emphasizes interactions between structure and practice.

7. Conclusion

In our research, we start from Giddens' theory of structuration to explore the relationship between gender quality and the attributes of competitive sports, and the compromise and confrontation between individuals and social structures. We found that the rules of basketball and football encourage certain behaviors and strategies to achieve victory. These behaviors may point to certain root attributes embedded in the sport itself, so all participants must obey or pursue one or more of these attributes. And physical antagonism is an important part of it. But they not only emphasize physical confrontation but also require other diversified qualities, so masculinity should not be simply associated with these two sports. Even the gender attributes which are culturally constructed in the sports field cannot cover all the important attributes of these two sports. Therefore, we criticize the existing general concept of simply applying the duality of gender qualities to the field of sports.

In addition, in the process of female athletes accepting and resisting the qualities required in sports, we discovered the subjectivity and agency under the structure. Their acceptance of physical confrontation and persistence and development of their original qualities all show that there are no fixed gender qualities in the field of competitive sports, only the development and adjustment of individual characteristics under the influence of this field structure. The analysis of the social environment of the participants explained the relationship between structure and practice which is mutually constructed. On the one hand, we can see that these female athletes have caused a loosening of the gender structure at the individual level. On the other hand, we have also discovered that under the social structure, different levels of the social environment have different degrees of influence on an individual's practice—obviously, the micro-social environment and close social networks have greater influence—and thus carry out further anatomy of the social structure in the theory of structuration.

The number of samples selected in this study is not large enough, which may lead to the one-sidedness of the findings. In future work, if the sample size can be expanded and the male subjects can be added for comparative analysis, more reliable conclusions may be drawn. In addition, during the research, the set of questions related to gender issues may have too much implied meaning, restricting the direction of the respondents' answers. In the process of interview and analysis, the researcher's

own gender led to the inability to fully understand the respondents' physical and emotional experience, and his own understanding of and participation in these two sports will bring about biases in the analysis. We hope that future research can make improvements in these aspects.

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