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Macho Macho (Wo)man: Masculinity, Femininity and Physical Education

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Background

Complex conceptions of masculinity and femininity are portrayed in the media and are played out via the social and cultural norms encountered in society resulting in gender confusion. Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin (2005) suggest that women “can indeed revel in their athleticism and publicly display it as long as they continue to exude traditional notions of femininity, particularly their heterosexuality” (p. 21). From this there emerges a disconnect in what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a masculine woman. Are women purposively or subtly subverting femininity in daily interactions? Does masculinity always trump femininity and if so ought it do so? Observes Bourdieu (2001 p. 21) “When we try to understand masculine domination we are therefore likely to resort to modes of thought that are the product of domination”. In our efforts to demarginalize girls and women might we be reproducing masculine domination whilst obscuring femininity and regarding it as a lesser trait? Similar disconnects are encountered by men across the spectrum of hyper-masculinity, masculinity, and effeminacy. From this perspective masculine is not exclusively male and feminine is not solely female.

Research Questions

This study asks the question, “what roles do physical education and sport play in the development of masculinities and femininities?” and further probes possible ways physical education might be reconceived in order to incite tolerance of gendered diversities and acceptance of masculine and feminine ways of moving and being. It further explores the binary tensions that exist in being both feminine and masculine as males and females and the complexities of encountering derogatory labels. The demise of femininity in sport and physical education is interrogated through a lens of nongenderist pedagogy (Kentel 2009), which recognises that all humans have masculine and feminine traits, disrupts all forms of ascendancy and marginalisation, and provokes learners to critically appraise the ways representations of gender dominance figure into and do not figure into their own identities.

Methods

In order to deepen understanding I examine the lived worlds of boys who do not like what might be considered more masculine sports and activities and the girls who do and consider whether they are on the margins of physical education and sport pedagogy. Specifically I ask, “what about girls who want to play full on contact sport and are not adverse to sweat, mud, muscle and power? And what about the boys who are not interested in breaking a leg?”

Data were collected through audio-taped conversations, focus-groups, informal observations, written reflections, and media image analyses whereby photographs of females doing what could be considered masculine and males doing what could be considered feminine were used to initiate conversation. This multi-faceted approach of gathering allowed the participants to share their views through various means and examine representation of masculinities and femininities through visual images as well as their own lived experiences. Mixed methods of interpretive inquiry were used in data analysis, that is, a convergence of critical ethnography, narrative, and hermeneutic inquiry.

Frame

Nongenderist pedagogy (Kentel 2009; Light and Kentel in press), which is built upon the principles of feminist theory, formulates the theoretical framework for this study. Media as well as social and

cultural norms contribute to the hegemonic masculinities encountered in society. Masculine is not male and feminine is not female. Rather there exists a plurality of masculinities and femininities within each person (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, masculine domination permeates human interactions in a wide spectrum of settings. Much of hegemonic masculinity takes the form of male over female but even in a women's world, particularly in the field of physical education and sport, is masculinity given the same privilege? Observes Bourdieu (2001, p. 56) "early upbringing encourages boys and girls very unequally" to enter into social games, which favour the development of manliness.

Research findings

There exists a plethora of complexities within the development of masculinities and femininities within sport and physical education. The sporty girls indicated they require a space to get dirty, rough, and aggressive; to "do" masculinity. This is in contrast to the majority of their counterparts. The boys in this study were not entirely comfortable doing femininity recognizing the stigma of being teased or bullied even though ideally it is "okay" to do. So the boys and the girls succumb, in part, to the socially coded roles perceived to be proper. Femininity is the subverted binary especially in the male's world and when men "do" femininity they tend to be regarded as camp or gay, as if that is somehow wrong or perhaps even humorous.

The data suggest that there may exist social pressure for boys to masculine. Does the same weight hold for girls to be feminine? And if physical education and sport develop primarily masculinities in what ways can equilibrium be accomplished? Whilst these participants have indicated that sport and physical education are milieus where masculinities and femininities are played out the links to equity and social justice remain blurred. After all if we were truly non-racist, non-sexist, and non-abled would we need to use descriptors such as black, white, brown, transgendered, and disability? I surmise if we, as physical educators, can look beyond the gym and the playing field, if we can look beyond the fat or unfit body, if we can wiggle ourselves out of our comfort zones and the cellophane wrapped curricula that directs our pedagogy then perhaps, just maybe, we can together with our students contribute to a better world.

References

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