

**THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND**

THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY IN ELITE SPORT: A MIXED  
METHODS EXPLORATION

A Dissertation submitted by Andrea Lamont-Mills BA (Hons)

For the award of Doctor of Philosophy

2001

**CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION**

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own efforts, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Five years ago I began this quest. Through this time I have thought, despaired, argued, accepted, and lamented over this dissertation. Throughout this a number of people have stood quietly by, always ready to assist with words of encouragement, questions for consideration, and shoulders to lean on. First and foremost, I give my most deepest thanks to my supervisor Grace Pretty. Grace took me on as a student knowing that I didn't have a background in the psychology of gender, knowing that I had no experience in qualitative analysis, but also knowing that I had a passion for learning. Grace for your tireless energy, commitment, belief in me, friendship, patience, encouragement, humour, and guidance I am most sincerely thankful. It has been a privilege to have worked with you.

To my Associate Supervisor Eric Marx, thank-you for stepping in at the last moment and giving me your thoughts and comments on my work. I hope that this is the first of many collaborative efforts.

Steven Christensen, my husband and colleague, thank you for instilling in me that good is good but better is best. Even if in these last few days I wish I had never heard you say that! You have been unfailing in your support, encouragement, love, patience, enthusiasm, and belief in what I set out to achieve. Your critical questioning and intellectual challenges may not have always been welcome, but know that I appreciated having that bar set high. You are a true inspiration as a colleague and friend. You have always been there when I have needed you. Thank-you.

To my son, Jens Christensen. For most of your life I have been doing my PhD. You have grown accustomed to Mummy going to work on Sundays and working late into the evening. Yet you have always greeted me with love and joy. Your excitement in me finishing this dissertation has kept me going during these last few days. Sweetheart we can now go on our holiday!!

To my fellow postgraduates, the support that you have provided has been invaluable, as has been the wine that you have bought, and that we have shared. To my academic colleagues, administrative, and technical staff I extend my appreciation.

I also thank those State Institutes of Sport, athletes, and coaches who gave so freely of their time and energy. Without your support I would never have been able to achieve what I have in this dissertation. I thank the sport psychologists at those institutes who were invaluable in gaining me entry into these organisations. The drinks are on me in Adelaide! To those professionals who have spent time with me at National and International Conferences. Your comments and thoughts have inspired me to look at my work in a multitude of different ways.

The financial support given to me by the University of Southern Queensland has been invaluable and has made possible the completion of this dissertation. The three and a half years that were conducted under the University of Southern Queensland Postgraduate Scholarship, along with the marking, tutorial, lecturing, and travel funding assistance that I have gained from the USQ Department of Psychology, have allowed me concentrate my efforts on this dissertation without too many unnecessary distractions. My deepest gratitude to you.

Finally to my parents, to whom I dedicate this dissertation. Whose love, support, and understanding has been the main driving force behind my academic pursuits. Your faith and trust in my abilities and your indulgence of my wishes have allowed me to be where I am today. To my father, I thank-you for encouraging me to challenge male-female binaries, to not only think but act in ways that challenge this. I thank you also for encouraging me to be whatever I wanted to be. To my mother, whose own academic aspirations were never realised, this is for you. I thank-you for instilling in me the passion to go out and be whoever I wanted to be. Thank-you both so very much.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explored how gender identity is constructed in elite sport. I argued that sport is a unique socio-cultural context where gender category membership, may be enacted both the same and differently than in other contexts. Historically, most gender stereotyping, gender trait, and gender identity research in sport (e.g., Andre & Holland, 1995; Csizma, Wittig, & Schurr, 1988; Harris & Griffin, 1997) has employed researcher-generated constructions of masculinity and femininity, or non-sporting constructions of masculinity and femininity. By failing to define and construct gender from the participants' perspective, researchers have imposed their own preconceived cultural standards of gender upon participants (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). To generalise these preconceptions to other groups is to do so without consideration of cultural diversity and possible difference (Doyle & Paludi). Therefore, previous sport gender studies that have used these methodologies are tenuous as contemporary and future models upon which to base gender work.

Further, gender identity research that has utilised a discursive psychological theoretical and methodological framework has produced findings that question the empirical validity of current models of gender in sport and exercise psychology (see Wetherell & Edley, 1999). These discursive results suggest that gender is a multifaceted, multidimensional, multifactorial, negotiated, dynamic, and variable concept (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Therefore, two research questions were addressed by this dissertation: 1) How do participants perceive themselves in terms of gender-related characteristics?; and 2) How do elite sportswomen and sportsmen enact and negotiate membership of idiosyncratic, gender, and gender identity in sport categories?

In order to address these research questions two self-report measures were utilised, the 24-item Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and a semi-structured interview concerning identity prescription. Thirty-eight elite level coaches (19 women, 19 men) and 37 elite level athletes (19 women, 18 men) voluntarily participated in this study. The interview data were analysed using two divergent theoretical and analytical frameworks, an a-priori content analysis (imposition of the PAQ items on interview responses) and a discursive psychological framework.

The results of the PAQ analysis suggest that sportswomen and sportsmen perceive themselves differently in relation to gender-related characteristics. Differences which did not reach statistical significance, were found between male and female responses on the PAQ Masculine (M), Feminine (F), and Masculine-Feminine (M-F) sub-scales. Statistically significant differences were found with reference to PAQ classification, with women more likely to be classified as Androgynous and men as Masculine. There were no statistically significant occupational differences on either PAQ sub-scale responding or PAQ classification. The above results call into question the underlying assumptions and theoretical foundations of the PAQ.

The a-priori content analysis also revealed a number of contradictory findings with reference to the assumptions and foundations of the PAQ scale. For example, women were more likely to utilise the PAQ M item Self-confident to describe themselves as gendered individuals than men. Whereas men were more likely to use the PAQ F item Gentle than women in the same identity category. Further, Feminine classified people were more likely to use the PAQ M-F item Very Dominant when describing themselves as women/men in elite sport. Therefore, the PAQ and a priori results cast doubt on the empirical utility of two factor models of gender to understand gender as a complex and dynamic construct. The results suggest that elite sport might be a context where gender is distinctively enacted and constituted.

In order to determine how gender identity is enacted and negotiated in competitive sport, the interview data were analysed using a discursive psychological approach. Discursive psychology focuses upon how representations are constructed within, and constitutive of, the social practices that are found in language. In this respect, gender is conceptualised as being negotiated within the local interactive context where culture, history, and social contexts are reflected within discursive practices. In Research Question Two, interest centred on the interpretative repertoires and reflexive positions that participants used to prescribe themselves as idiosyncratic, gendered, and gendered individuals in sport.

Interpretative repertoires are recurrent, culturally familiar global discursive patterns that individuals use to make sense of themselves in conversations (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Reflexive positions are offered as an alternative

discursive notion to the social psychological concept of role (Davies & Harré, 1990). A person is not considered as an individual free agent, but rather as the subject of the interaction, where the individual takes up or is placed in various subject positions depending upon the discourse and the particular social context in which the individual interacts. Thus we make sense of ourselves, or position ourselves, within social interactions through the cultural and personal resources (interpretative repertoires) that are made available to us in our discourse.

Overall, the results of the discursive analysis suggest that participants enacted something gender scholars would call Masculinity, Femininity, and Androgyny when prescribing themselves across the three identity categories. That is, participants used gendered, culturally familiar discursive patterns (interpretative repertoires) to make sense of themselves across identity categories. However, participants were also able to draw upon non gender-related discourses during this process. Thus, identity work was characterised by variability, inconsistency, and contradiction. Different interpretative repertoires and reflexive positions were used by participants both within and across identity categories.

Therefore, the use of gender-related interpretative repertoires differed according to the identity that was being scripted up. Thus participants were able to be Masculine, Androgynous, and Feminine, and position themselves differently depending upon the identity that was being prescribed and the local interaction context. That is, participants used interpretative repertoires to talk one way, but walk another (e.g., Androgynous interpretative repertoire, Hegemonic Masculine reflexive position) that was specific to the social, historical, and cultural context, and the local interactional context. The above results call into question Spence and Helmreich's (1978) postulation that there is one Masculine and one Feminine identity. Indeed the results are suggestive of many Masculinities and many Femininities.

Participants also deployed specific discursive strategies that incorporated the action and epistemological orientation of their talk when constituting their identities. That is, they worked to increase the facticity of their talk and worked to align themselves with certain positions (e.g., Hegemonic Masculine man) and not others (Feminine man) through their discourse. Thus gendered talk carried with it gendered

ideological practices that participants used to reproduce, reinforce, and challenge the current gender order.

The above results, combined with the disparity between the PAQ results and the a-priori content analysis, suggest that earlier and current models of gender that conceptualise gender as a multifaceted, multidimensional, bi-directional but static concept are probably not representative of how people do gender in everyday talk. The results support extant theory that gender identities might exist rather than a single gender identity. Overall, the results of this dissertation -suggest that elite sportswomen and sportsmen enact and negotiate membership of identity categories that is specific to the local interactional context, as well as the cultural, social (i.e., sport), and historical context. I infer, therefore, that current static gender models in sport and exercise psychology may not fully capture the complexity of gender in everyday talk and that alternative ways of understanding gender in sport are needed.