2. THEORIES OF GENDER AND SPORT

INTRODUCTION

What is gender? Is it a thing people have or a process people go through (Messner & Sabo, 1990)? In this chapter, we define gender as well as a variety of theories used to examine gender including feminism and feminist theory, queer theory, and gender studies. The central categories of analysis used to explore gender such as gender identity and gendered representation are also fleshed out. Gender has been taken up and applied by researchers in multiple sport domains such as feminist sport studies, queer sport studies and men and masculinity in sport studies. A major organizing framework that we also find useful is Crenshaw and colleagues’ metaphor of intersectionality (Crenshaw, Yuval-Davis, & Fine, 2009). We end with the global potential of feminist sport studies.

DEFINITIONS

What Is Gender?

Unfortunately, the terms sex and gender are often used interchangeably. However, this is not accurate. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) (2011), sex “refers to a person’s biological status” and can be identified by “sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia” while gender refers to “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex” (APA, 2011).

Sport sociologist Jay Coakley (2009) suggests that gender is what is thought to be “masculine” or “feminine” in a society. In this gender binary system, everyone is classified into only two sex categories: male or female, with the assumption that if a baby is born male, he will be “masculine” and if a baby is born female, she will be “feminine.” Sex and gender, then, are inextricably intertwined and conflated in a gender binary system. Not only are these categories set up to be “opposites,” but they are interpreted as “natural” categories where “male” and “masculine” are better than “female” and “feminine.” This is particularly true for cultures like the United States where males control “a disproportionate share of power and resources” (p. 258). As Coakley (2009) wrote:

All people in the male category are believed to be naturally different from all people in the female category, and they are held to different normative
expectations when it comes to feelings, thoughts, and actions…The two-category gender classification model is so central to the way people see the world that they resist thinking about gender critically and are likely to feel uncomfortable when people don’t fit neatly into one sex category or the other. (p. 258)

Butler (1990) extended critical thinking about gender as she defined gender as a “performance.” Butler stated that gender is actually only brought into being when a person “performs” his/her gender identity. This involves how s/he dresses, speaks, plays, talks, etc. “Performing” gender is not voluntary in most cultures, including the United States; gender norms prescribe what gender performances are probable and in what ways they are to be performed. Butler (1990) believed that people who identify with a particular version of gender that is outside of cultural norms are rejected by most members of that society.

Like Butler, Layton (2004) speculated that hegemonic masculinity and femininity (e.g., the dominant and “taken-for-granted” notions about “normal” masculinity and femininity) are likely to be the most powerful gender internalizations. Each is associated with its own modes of action and response in relationship. For example, the “traditional” modes of action for males in North American society are assertion, agency, and aggression; the “traditional” modes of action for females are restraint, constraint, and passivity. The “traditional” mode of response in relationship for males is non-responsiveness while the “traditional” mode of response for females is responsiveness.

Layton (2004) furthered that these “traditional,” “dominant and hegemonic modes of action and relationship are not the only ones that people experience. Both males and females maintain not just one but multiple gender identities, each associated with its own unique modes of action and response in relationship. For example, the same girl could grow up to be “athletic in relation to an active mother or father, passive and small in relation to a caretaking mother or father, flirty in relation to a seductive or distracted mother or father” (p. 54), depending upon her social environment. Further, an upper-class Caucasian girl, for example, will receive very different messages about how she can act and what she can do in the world as compared to a lower-class Caucasian girl, a girl of color, a middle-class Hispanic boy, etc. Lastly, Layton (2004) asserted that gendered experience is not fixed in stone at a particular age or stage of development; rather, gendered experience evolves with our evolving sets of developing relationships. In other words, gender is developed in relationship.

What Is Feminism and Feminist Theory?

bell hooks (2000), professor, author, and social activist, defined feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. 1). The basic goals of feminism are to promote women’s rights, transform society, privilege women’s ways of knowing, and include their voices in research (e.g., Andermahr, Lovell,