

Exploring the Capacity of Sport for Empowering Women: A Conceptual Framework

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In spite of many advances, women across the globe are still subject to unfair perceptions and treatment. For example, in a number of countries women are prohibited in certain public spaces including sport fields (Brady, 2005; Cesari, 2012). While women continue to increase access toward equal opportunities in many western countries, the ways they are disadvantaged in social practices has become more subtle and hidden (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). The gendered social practices can be still sustained because many social structures are built by men and for men. Although changing the gendered culture of social structures is necessary (Ely & Meyerson, 2000), it is also important for women to gain control over their lives in order to make a change in gendered social practices and to keep from being disadvantaged. Then they can take action, not only of their personal choices but also over the politics and structure of the society in which they live. Sport could be a powerful means of gaining such control (Blinde, Taub, & Han, 2000; Brady, 2005).

Several studies have demonstrated that sport has the capacity to be a tool to generate personal change for girls or women. Studies on women's sport participation (Blinde et al., 2000; Theberge, 1987; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998) have suggested that females who actively participate in sport have gained a sense of competence, confidence, independence, and control over their bodies and lives. Other studies have implied that participating in sport can empower various women (female student athletes, amateur athletes, low income women, and girls in developing countries) by developing life skills (Blinde et al., 2000) and providing an access to public spaces and a safe place to be themselves (Brandy, 2005; Green, 2001; Reid, Frisby, & Ponc, 2002), especially if their activity is contrary to existing gender norms and expectations. Conversely, sport is not always empowering, safe, or confidence-building. Sport experiences can also reinforce the traditional gender roles and expectations and make women feel powerless. In some contexts, female participants who became aware of gender roles and expectations conformed to the social expectations by either quitting the sport (Brace-Govan, 2004), or feminizing themselves (Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998), instead of resisting, attempting to change other people's perception, or persuading them not to stereotype all women.

The inconsistent effects of women's sport experience highlight that sport experiences are not all same, nor do they "naturally" result in positive outcomes (Chalip, 2006; Green, 2008). However, we know little about how the empowerment happens during sport experiences, what contextual elements of the sport and the women's lives affect the empowerment, and how sport can be such a catalyst for change. Therefore, in order to explore the ways to empower women through sport, this study presents a framework that integrates psychological empowerment theory into the design and implementation of sport programs for girls and women.

Zimmerman's psychological empowerment (PE) framework (1995) provides useful insights of the processes through which individuals are empowered, the variations of experience that empower individuals, and outcomes of empowering experiences. PE, empowerment at the individual level, is defined as a process by which individuals perceive and gain control over personal issues (Rappaport, 1978), understand their environment critically, and take actions to influence the issues in their lives or communities (Zimmerman, 1990). Zimmerman's framework (1995), the PE model, contains three components: intrapersonal (domain-specific perceived control, motivation to control, and perceived competence), interactional (a critical awareness of sociopolitical environment, understanding of causal agents and options, and developing needed skills), and behavioral (participatory or coping behaviors). Based on the three components of PE, an empowered person may believe that she has the capability to influence a given context, understand how the system works in that context, and engage in behaviors to exert control in the context (Zimmerman, 1995). According to studies in various fields (e.g., Anderson & Funnell, 2011; Kar, 1999; Schutt & Rogers, 2009; Zimmerman, 1997, 2011; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988), an empowering process can occur when a program provide participants with a safe space and an experience that can increase perceived control and competence, gain knowledge and skills, and engage in collective activities. For women, feminists have argued the

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process of critical awareness is important because through consciousness-raising women can connect their disadvantaged experiences with those of other women, and thus see the sociopolitical dimensions of their personal problems (Carr, 2003).

Sport has been shown to have the capacity to generate or decrease each component of PE, though the evidence is scattered in literature of various sport fields. Evidence of how variations of sport participation can enhance each component, particularly for female participants, are found in diverse sport experiences ranging from male-dominated sports such as weightlifting and ice hockey (Brace-Govan, 2004; Theberge, 2000) to post-modern (gender neutral) sports such as windsurfing (Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998). For example, through using their bodies in sport, especially contact sport, female athletes have demonstrated increased control and competence over their bodies and lives (Blinde et al., 2000; Theberge, 1987). Furthermore, women have shown empowerment and the capacity to take actions to overcome barriers and resist the traditional gender norms through making changes in their choice of physical activity for their own sake and involving in discourses of gendered behaviors, opportunity inequalities, and activity provision (Dixon, 2009; Shaw, 2001). Conversely, when women experience negative interactions as a result of resisting power relationships in sport, they often simply conform to traditional notions, especially if they lack other male support for change (Brace-Govan, 2004).

This model presents a useful conceptual framework for personal empowerment through sport. A research agenda based on this framework could be used to design, implement, and evaluate sport programs for women with regard to their capacity for personal empowerment. It is also necessary for future research to investigate how the empowering components and variables can be differentiated among women by social status, age, race, or culture.

This research can contribute to sport academia by providing a framework from a holistic approach of the sport experience that can be tested in various populations underserved in sport. By focusing on women, this research can inform how to organize sport to help women gain control over their bodies and lives and ultimately liberate them from damaging gender norms and expectations. Identifying empowering components and outcomes of a sport participation experience can contribute to sport practitioners and participants by enabling the organizers to acknowledge and implement elements that lead positive change and benefits to its participants. Furthermore, it may provide other intervention or prevention program (e.g., leadership programs, intervention programs for victims of domestic violence) organizers with an opportunity to consider utilizing sport to enhance other empowering services in the programs.