

Women in sport and exercise psychology: a north american perspective

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Women's contributions have had little place in the written histories of the field of sport and exercise psychology (Gill, 1995). Much of our written history of the field focuses on founders that were male, Caucasian, from the United States, and had a behavioral or experimental psychology background, with little attention to the role women, people of color, and those outside the United States played in the field's history and development (Krane & Whaley, 2010). Within this paper, we provide an overview of the literature devoted to North American women's career experiences in the field of sport and exercise psychology, followed by a discussion of the history of feminist sport psychology and its influence on studying and acknowledging women in the field, as well as women's experiences in sport and exercise. We then address the relative absence of documentation devoted to women's contributions to the field outside of North America. Lastly, we discuss the importance of female role models and mentoring women in sport and exercise psychology.

KEY WORDS:

Much of our written history of the field of sport and exercise psychology focuses on founders that were male, Caucasian, from the United States, and had a behavioral or experimental psychology background, with little attention to the role women, people of color, and those outside the United States played in the field's history and development (Krane & Whaley, 2010). As Weinberg and Gould (2018) acknowledged, this is not uncommon in the history of many sciences, pointing to multiple factors that account for the absence. Weinberg and Gould stated, "historically, women were not given the same equal opportunities as their male counterparts, and women who were involved often had to overcome prejudices and other major obstacles to professional advancement. Also, women's contributions have often been underreported in scientific history" (p. 12).

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The majority of the research devoted to women's experiences and place in the history and development of sport and exercise psychology has employed a feminist (Gill, 1995; 2001; Oglesby, 2001b) or feminist cultural studies perspective (Krane & Whaley, 2010; Roper, 2008; Roper et al., 2005; Whaley & Krane, 2012), and is often written by women. Within the past two decades, researchers have challenged the written history of sport and exercise psychology and begun to acknowledge the voices and contributions of those who have not been previously recognized. In 2005, Fisher, Butryn, and Roper urged professionals in the field to consider how the origins of sport and exercise psychology and its founders have been historicized and what our understanding of this (his)story means. A number of feminist researchers in sport and exercise psychology have contributed to the void by examining the influential roles women have played in academia (Gill, 1995; Krane & Whaley, 2010; Oglesby, 2001b; Roper et al., 2005) and applied sport and exercise psychology (Gill, 1995; Roper, 2008) and how they overcame or coped with challenges or barriers (Roper, 2008; Roper et al., 2005; Whaley & Krane, 2012).

Within this paper, we provide an overview of the literature devoted to women's career experiences in the field of sport and exercise psychology, followed by a discussion of the history of feminist sport psychology and its influence on studying and acknowledging women in the field, as well as women's experiences in sport and exercise. We then address the relative absence of documentation devoted to women's contributions to the field outside of North America. Lastly, we discuss the importance of female role models and mentoring women in sport and exercise psychology.

Career experiences of women in sport psychology

Career opportunities is an important area of discussion within any profession. It is of particular relevance to this paper as the sport setting has a poor record of hiring, promoting and retaining women in many sport careers – coaching, administration, athletic training, and media relations. Women in each of the aforementioned professions have been found to confront various forms of discrimination, marginalization, and harassment (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Depatie, 1997; Gillette, 2000; Theberge, 1993).

Over the years, researchers have examined the career experiences of several prominent professionals in sport and exercise psychology (Gould et al., 1989; Krane & Whaley, 2010; Roper, 2008; Roper et al., 2005; Simmons & Andersen, 1995; Straub & Hinman, 1992; Whaley & Krane, 2012); it is from

these articles that we glean more understanding of how successful professionals in the field do their work. Unfortunately, the majority of the early research in this area focused on male professionals, with little-to-no attention devoted to the experiences and perceptions of female professionals. It is important to note that within these articles, there is often a distinction between those working in *academic* (university setting - teaching, research, service) and *applied* (practitioner – clinical and educational) sport and exercise psychology.

In 2005, using a feminist standpoint approach, Roper, Fisher, and Wrisberg qualitatively examined the career experiences of female professionals from North America in *academic* sport psychology. Eight professional women (co-participants) in sport psychology were interviewed regarding their experiences as women (one component of their multiple identities) in the field. Feminist standpoint explores the world from the perspective of those who are oppressed and marginalized and “begins with the assumption that knowledge is socially situated and that there are multiple ‘truths’ emanating from the different sociopolitical situations faced by different social groups” (Krane, 2001, p. 402). Feminist standpoint theorists suggest that in order to understand women’s experiences, we must hear from the women themselves. The co-participants in this study provided in-depth descriptions of their career development and experiences. Consistent with Gill (1995) and Oglesby (2001b), all the co-participants noted the preponderance of male professionals and the subsequent absence of female professionals in the written history of sport psychology. Regardless of the lack of representation, all of the co-participants suggested that there was a sizeable number of female professionals in the field. The particular obstacles the co-participants described confronting were specific to working in academia and not the field of sport psychology (e.g., unfair hiring practices/job searches, glass ceiling, salary discrepancies, challenges associated with having a family, homophobic academic culture). All of the co-participants identified as feminists, stressing the importance of equality for women (both in sport and academia). The co-participants shared examples of the ways in which their work was feminist, including (a) mentoring women and promoting women’s opportunities (as athletes, students, faculty members), (b) establishing the classroom as a feminist space (e.g., diversity of content/readings, collaborative approach rather than hierarchical teaching style, respect for all) and (c) being active in women’s organizations on campus. The importance of social networks for women was another important theme. Very often, female academicians understand the isolating nature of academia for women and are therefore willing to provide support and guidance for other women.

Researchers have also questioned and made claims that women in applied sport psychology face unique forms of discrimination (Petrie et al., 1996; Roper, 2002; Roper, 2008; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). In 1996, Petrie et al. examined the potential of a gender bias in the evaluation of sport psychology consultants. The results suggested that the participants evaluated the two genders the same, but that female consultants were rated higher on trustworthiness, attractiveness, and gender “good” counselor skills. In 2002, Roper raised the question as to whether there existed a gender bias in applied sport psychology. Roper suggested that while women do exist in great numbers within the field of sport psychology, they are often “marginalized, not recognized for their work, and/or tend to work in less visible arenas” (p. 55). Roper addressed the ways in which gender inequality in sport, homophobia within sport, the lack of prestige women receive within academic circles, and the lack of female role models each impact women’s opportunities, status, and experiences working within the applied realm. In 2003, Williams and Scherzer surveyed the training and careers of sport psychology graduates and found no support for a pro-male bias within applied sport psychology; however, Williams and Scherzer found that more females (than males) reported “gender bias” as a frustration in making progress within applied sport psychology. As a follow-up to Roper et al. (2005), Roper (2008) examined the ways in which women’s career experiences in *applied* sport psychology were influenced by their gender. Eight professional women in applied sport psychology were interviewed. These women included Kimberley Amirault, Gloria Balague, Jennifer Carter, Karen Cogan, Kate Hays, Sarah Naylor, Margaret Ottley, and Kirsten Peterson. Six of the participants identified as Caucasian, one as Hispanic, and one as Black. The participants all held a doctorate in clinical/counseling psychology (6) or sport science (2). At the time the data was collected, the participants worked in a variety of applied settings including college sport, the United States Olympic Committee, Canadian Sport Centre, private practice, and professional men’s sport. Consistent with Roper et al. (2005), the participants’ personal involvement and interest in sport played a significant role in their decision to pursue a career in sport psychology. Like academic sport psychology, all of the participants acknowledged that the majority of “recognized,” high-profile practitioners were male. Due to the overemphasis on male practitioners in the field, several participants suggested that students may be less aware of the work being done by female practitioners. As a result, several of the participants acknowledged the importance of highlighting the work of women consultants at annual conferences. While several of the participants indicated that their access to many of their applied opportunities developed

as a result of “being in the right place at the right time” (p. 416), it was found that male professionals played a significant role in assisting six of the participants to gain access to their initial applied opportunities. Undoubtedly male professionals should work to promote women within the field; however, it is important to consider the privilege male professionals possess that grants them the ability to assist women in gaining access. Moreover, in maintaining such positions of power, “men remain the gatekeepers to entry into advanced sport psychology positions” (Roper, 2008, p. 421). Consistent with Roper et al. (2005), it was also important to several of the participants to nurture and support other women in the field – both students and professionals. Several of the participants discussed their role as mentors to other females in the field. Seven of the eight participants described experiencing gender discrimination working in the sport context which included experiencing sexist language from some male coaches, instances of sexual harassment by male athletes, feeling a need to downplay their appearance, having greater expectations placed upon women, and feeling excluded and isolated as a result of not being “one of the boys” (p. 415).

More recently, Krane and Whaley (2010) employed a feminist cultural studies perspective to examine the roles women have played in sport and exercise psychology. They examined eight “trailblazing” women who significantly influenced the development of the field in the United States in an effort to “*re-place*” them into the written formal history of the field. These included Joan Duda, Deb Feltz, Dianne Gill, Penny McCullagh, Carole Oglesby, Tara Scanlan, Maureen Weiss, and Jean Williams. They note, that “Many of their most significant contributions were done behind the scenes, within the scope of various executive board positions” (p. 365). Krane and Whaley argue that these “lesser-known” contributions have shaped the course of the field. They also note that this trailblazing work was often done in less than supportive environments. In their follow-up article, Whaley and Krane (2012) examined the challenges these eight trailblazing women faced (i.e., general campus climates, department politics, etc.) and the coping methods they used (i.e., picking allies, saying no, carving their own path, asking for help, exercising, etc.) to survive. This article also discussed the emotional cost of trailblazing, namely the absence of any personal life. Despite the lack of support these women received at their home institutions they were successful, which “further underscores their extraordinary achievements and contributions” (p. 76).

In 2020, Prewitt-White shared her experiences of delivering a sport psychology workshop to a college baseball team for the first time. From her standpoint, she nailed the workshop presentation; she also knew that the ath-

letes, team owner, marketing vice president and his business associate, head coach, and owner's lawyer (all of whom were in attendance, and all of whom were men) were carefully assessing her presentation. Immediately following the presentation, she was also aware their assessment of her abilities would continue as they proceeded to a lunch she was not invited to attend. The day following her presentation to the team, she received a call from the head coach inviting her to provide more workshops to his team. He also divulged that the "gents' later lunch was to evaluate [her] ability to work with college male athletes" (p. 42). Prewitt-White thanked the coach for the invitation and upon hanging up, called the owner of the team to decline the invitation. She proceeds in her article to indicate that in her first year of starting her consulting business, she would only be hired to work with male teams and athletes. This realization, along with the finding from Lubker, Visek, Watson, and Singpurwalla (2012) that athletes often prefer female consultants, was empowering to her. As she stated, "I recognized for the first time, I was a valuable consultant and felt empowered to own it" (p. 42). Lubker and colleagues acknowledge that this finding may be due to athletes' perceptions of females possessing stereotypical feminine characteristics such as "listening, empathy, and caring" (p. 476). We must, however, use caution in assuming that women (or men) possess innate abilities (e.g., nurturing), as we perpetuate the distinction between a male sex role and female sex role, ignoring the extent to which gender is a dynamic, relational process. Discussion of this point goes back to an article published in 1991 by Yambor and Connelly in which the authors addressed common stereotypes that female consultants confront when attempting to work with male athletes. Specifically, the authors suggested that due to gender-based stereotypical assumptions, women's abilities to maintain confidence may be called into questions. Also, it was argued that women are oftentimes assumed to be less knowledgeable of sport and that they may be less able to maintain professional boundaries due to male athletes' perceptions of women.

The findings from each of these studies provide insight into some of the unique experiences and challenges women may encounter when pursuing a career within the field of sport psychology. While the findings are not generalizable to all women in the field, it is possible that other women may share similar experiences. It is important to note that while not exclusively, most of the women highlighted were predominately from North America, although most had international work experience. The emergence of social support networks was an important theme that characterized the experiences of the participants in several studies (Krane & Whaley, 2010; Roper et al., 2005; Roper, 2008; Whaley & Krane, 2012). Further investigation is needed to

explore the mentoring process and the needs of female students and professionals, as they may be somewhat different than those of males. Continued attention must be directed toward career opportunities and patterns in the field of sport and exercise psychology.

Feminist Sport Psychology

When examining women's place in the history and development of sport and exercise psychology, it is imperative to incorporate a discussion of feminist sport psychology (FSP). As Diane Gill (2001) stated, "feminist practice incorporates gender scholarship, emphasizes neglected women's experiences (e.g., sexual harassment), and takes a more non-hierarchical, empowering, process-oriented approach that shifts emphasis from personal change to social change" (p. 369). Feminist work in sport and exercise psychology, whether it be research, teaching, or consulting, is often taken up by women in the field.

Carole Oglesby's 1978 book, *Women and sport: From myth to reality*, is considered one of the first feminist approaches to women and sport. Her feminist voice in sport psychology has continued to the present day (Carter et al., 2020; Oglesby, 1993; Oglesby, 2001a; 2001b; Oglesby & Hill, 1993). While the field of sport psychology "lacks guiding frameworks and provides few opportunities to engage in [feminist] dialogue" (Gill, 2001, p. 363), those in sport psychology who have taken a feminist perspective have pulled from other disciplines including women's studies, cultural studies, and sport studies. With the exception of Bredemeier et al.'s (1991) work on the epistemological perspectives of women who participate in physical activity, there was a "long silence" (Krane, 1994, p. 405) in feminist work in sport psychology between 1978 and 1994. Given the dearth in the literature, many FSP scholars and practitioners turn to women's studies, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies to cultivate their scholarship and skills. Within the last 20 years, however, feminist work in sport psychology has witnessed "sporadic advances" (Roper et al., 2005, p. 34).

In 1994, Krane and Gill each published papers addressing feminist approaches to sport psychology research and practice, respectively. When Martens (1987) and Dewar and Horn (1992) both called for new epistemological perspectives and methodological approaches to sport psychology research, Krane (1994) proposed feminism as an alternative approach to researchers in sport psychology. Feminist research, as Krane suggested, "acknowledges the sexist bias in the knowledge base and reexamines knowl-

edge through the experiences of women....plac[ing] women at the center of analysis, not on the periphery" (p. 397). The participants in feminist research, often referred to as co-participants to reflect the dialectic and reciprocal relationship between the researcher and women, are viewed as the experts of their own experiences. Beyond simply describing 'the problem,' feminist research aims to "challenge the hegemonic practices and asks, what is it about gender relations in sport and exercise that leads to various inequities?" (Krane, 1994, p. 398). For example, research in sport psychology indicates (and is published in many major sport psychology textbooks) that female athletes report lower levels of confidence than male athletes (Corbin et al., 1983; Feltz & Petlichkoff, 1983). Such findings have the potential to perpetuate the perception that males are "naturally" better athletes. A feminist analysis would attempt to articulate *why* females underestimate their sport abilities. An understanding of the social context for women is pertinent to the analysis of these research findings. Also, it is important that those in sport psychology examine the measurements used to measure such constructs as confidence. As Krane (1994) noted, "perhaps current measurement instruments do not adequately tap into females' conceptions of constructs such as competitiveness and confidence" (p. 403).

In the same issue of *The Sport Psychologist*, Gill (1994) addressed the ways in which sport psychology practitioners may employ a feminist approach to their applied work with athletes, teams, and coaches. Gill urged practitioners to begin by questioning how gender influences their responses; stressing the notion that gender matters. As Gill suggested, "gender influences reactions, expectations, and options a consultant might consider...trying to 'treat everyone the same' does a disservice to the athletes" (p. 413). Recognizing the significance of gender is, as Gill (1994) suggested, the first step in feminist practice. Moving beyond this step involves: (a) valuing women's experiences, (b) understanding the social context rather than focusing entirely on the individual, and (c) emphasizing egalitarian relationships (Gill, 1994; Worrell & Remer, 1992). Emphasizing egalitarian relationships is particularly challenging within the sport context, a hierarchical setting often dominated by rigid power structures (e.g., coach-athlete, athletic director-coach, coach-sport psychology practitioner). A feminist approach to practice would allow practitioners to work toward a more inclusive, safe and empowering environment for all sport participants.

In 2001, a special issue of *The Sport Psychologist*, edited by Diane Gill, was devoted to FSP (In search of feminist sport psychology: Then, now, and always). As Ryba (2005) stated, "it is a testimony to the importance and growing influence of feminist work in the field that apart from individual

essays, an entire issue of *The Sport Psychologist* was recently devoted to the topic of feminist sport psychology” (www.athleticinsight.com). In this special issue, professionals and students in the field shared their personal feminist journeys and the feminist frameworks that guided their work in sport and exercise psychology. As Gill (2001) noted in the introductory article of the issue, “each author contributes her own insights and interpretations...the variations and differing perspectives are the strength of feminist sport psychology” (p. 364).

Oglesby (2001b) begins the issue with a discussion of women’s absence in the documented, mainstream histories of sport psychology and highlights the many contributions of feminist women in sport sciences during the formative years of sport psychology (1950-1975). Ruth Hall (2001) addresses the absence of feminist attention to women of color within the sport psychology literature, calling for critical attention to the following three “fundamental issues:” (a) white women are not the norm and should not be used to represent all women, (b) race must move beyond mere description; an understanding of the cultures of women of color are what is important, and (c) increased sport opportunities must be made available for women of color. Vikki Krane (2001) outlines three feminist perspectives – feminist standpoint, queer theory, and feminist cultural studies – that have guided her extensive research on lesbians in sport and women’s bodily experiences (Krane, 1994; 1997; 2001; Krane & Barber, 2003; 2005; Krane et al., 2002; Krane et al., 2004, see earlier in this chapter for a discussion of her work in these areas). Brenda Bredemeier (2001) outlines the importance of feminist praxis to sport psychology researchers, using her work on moral development as an example of feminist research to practice. Diane Whaley (2001) reviews the complexities of feminist methods and methodologies, highlighting the issues of particular relevance for those in sport and exercise psychology. The feminist perspectives and influences of five students in sport psychology (now all feminist professionals) are also incorporated into the special issue (Greenleaf & Collins, 2001; Roper, 2001; Semerjian & Waldron, 2001). Consistent with the professionals’ papers, each student raises important and unique perspectives and questions.

In 2006, Vealey provided a comprehensive history of the evolution of sport and exercise psychology. In her paper, Vealey assigns a “box” to represent the dominant paradigm that serves as the model for research and application in sport and exercise psychology. She identified seven historical eras related to the history of sport and exercise psychology. Throughout the paper, Vealey highlights previously ignored contributions of women in sport and exercise psychology including Dorothy Hazeltine Yates and Dorothy

Harris. Vealey labeled the 1993-2005 era as “diversifying, taking stock, building docks” (p. 145), acknowledging the increasing emphasis on diversity as an encouraging sign of pursuing knowledge and practice using different types of “boxes,” or paradigmatic models. Feminist epistemology is specifically cited as an example of an important new paradigmatic approach in sport and exercise psychology (Whaley, 2001).

Since publication of the seminal issue of *The Sport Psychologist* devoted exclusively to FSP, FSP researchers have called for a multicultural and intersectional approach to feminism (Carter et al., 2020). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality, which focuses on how race, class, gender, and other cultural identities “intersect” with one another and overlap. Leeja Carter’s (2020) recent text, *Feminist Applied Sport Psychology: From Theory to Practice*, is an example of such work. The edited book introduces the reader to feminist, black feminist, and womanist sport psychology, offering an alternative and powerful approach to working with athletes.

The history of women in international sport psychology

The majority of research devoted to the history and development of sport and exercise psychology focuses exclusively on men’s contributions, but when women’s contributions are incorporated, the emphasis is on North American women. Weinberg and Gould (2018) note that the contributions of women to sport psychology are not limited to North America, “Women from around the world, such as Russian Natalia Stambulova, German-born Dorothea Alfermann, and Spaniard Gloria Balague, have made important contributions to the field for multiple decades” (p. 12). The most notable contributor is Ema Geron. In her obituary, it was noted that she was “a pioneer in the sport psychology domain which was just formally established, and her books on performance psychology published in 1957, 1961, and 1965 were among the first to introduce the newly born discipline to the world” (Tenenbaum et al., 2011, p. 99). Gill (1995) highlighted how Geron’s contributions to international sport psychology were formally recognized at the 1993 International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) Congress, where she received the ISSP’s highest honor, the ISSP Distinguished International Sport Psychologist Award.

As Gill (1995) notes, many women have contributed to sport psychology through their research, teaching, and service roles, but women have not attained formal leadership positions in proportion to their numbers. For

example, the ISSP has only had male presidents since their formation in 1965. However, it is important to acknowledge that eight women have served in the vice president role since 2001. Similarly, while the *European Federation of Sport Psychology* (FEPSAC) had a female president (Ema Geron) from 1969-1975, it took until 2015 for another female to be elected as president. The *Canadian Society for Psychomotor learning and Sport Psychology* (SCAPPS), which was also created in 1969 did not elect its first female president until 1980. Since then, there have been eight other female presidents.

Gill (1995) noted that at the 1993 ISSP World Congress, she personally spoke with women scholars from Argentina, South Africa, Nigeria, Japan, as well as Europe and North America. She stressed “we have much to gain from a more active international network” (p. 430). Similarly, in 2001, Oglesby suggested that “our praxis is incomplete without full knowledge, appreciation, and awareness of the contributions of female and male pioneers in this discipline/profession” (p. 375).

Implications and Future Research

As noted earlier in this paper, it is imperative that the history of sport and exercise psychology incorporates the work and voices of women who contributed to its development and growth, and continue to do so. Doing so presents a more accurate and complete representation of our field throughout its development. Our textbooks, which typically include a chapter devoted to our field’s history, play a vital role in the education of our students. Female students interested in, or those entering the field of sport and exercise psychology, must see themselves in this history, as well as in the literature they read, and faculty who teach them. The importance of female mentorship was a salient theme in several of the studies examining women’s career experiences (Krane & Whaley, 2010; Roper, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2005; Roper, 2008; Whaley & Krane, 2012). As Roper, Fisher, and Wrisberg (2005) indicated, “Having a woman in the department that I respected and was able to look up to and talk with meant the world to me. I was able to see someone, like me, that was doing what I wanted to do. As simple as that sounds, it was so important to my professional development” (p. 35). While there are studies devoted to the mentoring process in sport and exercise psychology (Watson, Clement, Blom, & Grindley, 2009), little research has examined the meaning and value of a female mentoring relationship.

While both authors of this paper are situated in the United States, we recognize that the history we learned through our textbooks and in the class-

room, are predominately ethnocentric. As a field, we must seek out voices from the scholarly community from many countries, with diverse identities and various perspectives so as to enrich our discussions and understanding. Examples already exist within our field (Schinke, McGannon, & Smith, 2016), as researchers progress toward a more inclusive, global perspective, which must include women's contributions.

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