Chapter 13

Some reflections on women’s sports in Ireland

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Introduction

This chapter continues the discussion of themes already addressed in chapter 5 by Ryan, and focuses particularly on the role of sport in identity-formation, especially as it relates to the self-conceptions and social ranking of men and women. The various contributions to this volume highlight other important aspects of the sport–society relationship, such as the role that sport plays in the production and reproduction of a national identity in times of social conflict, as well as the historical emergence of Gaelic sports on this island. Besides that, all contributors share a common focus on a particular form of sports: the use of a physically active body capable of competing against another, often in close physical proximity and sometimes with the requirement that a competitor make direct physical contact with an opponent (as in combat sports such as ice-hockey, rugby football, association football or soccer, Gaelic football). I shall suggest, taking account of wider sociological arguments concerning sport and the body (e.g. Bourdieu, 1988; 1990), that sport is particularly important in the maintenance of visible differences between male and female bodies. This has significant implications for the development and organisation of sports generally, and women’s sports specifically. Public and private financial investment in, and sponsorship of, sports depend on a high media profile, sporting success, public interest and support. Thus, what one might call ‘the sporting body’ can be said to stand at the centre of an inter-related nexus of commercial, cultural, state, regional, local and individual interests. Moreover, images and expressions of the body vary across time, space, culture and location and the ‘ideal’ Irish sporting body is contested by sports participants and supporters alike.

In the first section, Irish sports are presented as a fully functioning, self-regulating and dynamic social arena with their own set of rules or structuring principles – or, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, as a social ‘field’ (1990: 156). The
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discussion then moves on to examine the relationship between the field of Irish sports and the predominant systems of bodily preferences in that country, and their impact on the practices of male and female sportspeople. Using this framework, I examine empirical findings on sport and physical activity in the Republic of Ireland, particularly gendered differences in rates and perceptions of, and motivations for, participation in sports. I conclude with a reappraisal of the role of sport in identity-testing, particularly in relation to the physical expression of a gendered identity.

The field of Irish sport

We can characterise the field of sports in the Republic of Ireland (Figure 13.1) in terms of prevailing discourses and ideologies that are consistently produced and reproduced within sporting institutions and specific social practices. The field of Irish sport is generally dominated by discourses that emphasise the heroic and competitive elements of sporting achievements as well as the necessary physical strength, speed, instrumental aggression (which is an acceptable and expected feature of most sports) and sacrifices that are required in order to be successful. Examples of these discourses can be seen in media coverage of dominant amateur and professional sports such as Gaelic football, soccer and rugby. Over the past ten years, alternative – though not necessarily contradictory – discourses have emerged from interactions between participants in the field of sport and elsewhere (Bourdieu, 1990); a leisure sphere has grown, the increased productivity of the Irish economy has led to increasing commercial (and often private) interest and investment in sport, and some Irish sports such as rugby, soccer and athletics have undergone ‘de-amateurisation’. Thus alternative discourses have emerged in the field focusing on health and the body, commercialisation and marketing interests, and the emergence of professional sporting practices that challenge the ‘fair play’ ethos traditionally associated with amateurism. A notable feature of prevailing ideologies is the absence of critical discourses concerning sport. There might be for example – but there is not – critical discussion of the physically and psychologically harmful effects of participation in sports, particularly at elite level and within contact sports; or a challenge to the ‘sport is good for you’ dictum that often prevails in political debate; or an acknowledgement that sport can help to perpetuate social divisions and conflict as well as play a part in softening them. The general absence of critical discourses is perhaps not surprising considering: the low status of sociology in Ireland generally (and the lack of sports researchers within Irish sociology, with the exception of some of the contributors to this volume); the fact that sport plays such a central role in the Irish Republic; and that the importance of sport as a
mechanism of identity-formation and identity-testing, from the national to the local and individual levels, is simply taken for granted. Dominant discourses are produced in the field of sport through the practices of specialist agents and powerful institutions, some directly engaged in the administration and organisation of sports, others engaged only indirectly. Dominant sporting bodies include the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Irish Rugby Football Union, the Football Association of Ireland and the Irish Sports Council, which is the formal umbrella body with responsibility for the organisation of Irish sports. Other important parts are played by the state, which plays an important role in the provision of sports facilities and policies as well as financial investment in the development of sports; by the Catholic Church, not only through its patronage of, and association with the GAA, but also its position within Irish society generally; and by the increasingly powerful mass media (print, radio and television) as a dominant interest group (Inglis, 2000). Debates and discussions about sport take place both in the public and the private spheres. The importance and value of these discussions generally depend on the position of institutions and specialists with investments in the field of sport, and they are both affect and are affected by transformations, such as de-amateurisation and commercialisation, in sporting values and practices. But in general, there is relatively little public debate and critical discussion in the field of Irish sport, except for specific incidents such as Michelle Smith’s positive drug testing after the 1996 Olympics, and what has recently been labelled the ‘Roy Keane saga’, which generate an emotive national focus. While it is common to see and hear daily, weekly and weekend sports reports that focus on particular individual athletes and teams, most of these discussions converge on implicit assumption that sport is ‘good’, that sporting achievement is to be applauded, and that the sporting Irish are alive and well. Critical discussion of the development, organisation and future of Irish sports is generally confined to regular meetings of marginalised groups such as female sportspersons and those involved in minority-interest sports. The protagonists of minority sports are often forced to finance and publish their own publications to generate a public profile. Thus the interests of traditionally powerful sports bodies, commercial sponsors and private groups are generally reflected in the everyday sports conversations in the private sphere – in public houses, homes and sports centres throughout the country. These discussions provide a focus for expressing and developing attitudes, individual beliefs and practices that are conveyed within the home, in local community activities, in the local and national media and in the physical education curriculum, which in turn reshape discourses on sport.
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Figure 13.1: The field of Irish sport and physical activity (adapted from Inglis, 1998: 121)

Discourses on sport (drawing on prevailing ideologies)

heroism; achievement; competition; health; beauty; physicality; commercialisation; commodification; sex/erotic; fair play ethos

are produced within

state; media; church; dominant sporting bodies (GAA; IRFU; FAI etc.);

debated and discussed in

public sphere (very little); traditionally powerful interest and commercial groups; marginalised groups; e.g. women’s sports

giving rise to

attitudes; beliefs; practices

that are conveyed within

education (first to third level); home; books; media; church; local, national and international community activities

and filtered through

parents; teachers; role models; friends; peers; sports; organisers; coaches

creating

a sporting habitus

giving rise to

attitudes, beliefs, practices

which in turn reshape

discourses on sport

A Bourdieuan analysis of sport

If we apply Bourdieu’s (1988, 1990) work on the body to the field of Irish sports, we can see that sports are partly organised on the basis of the type of ‘body’ that particular sports require or favour – whether a sport ‘implies direct contact, hand-to-hand, such as wrestling or rugby, or whether on the contrary it excludes all contact, like golf, or authorises it only by the interposing of the ball, like tennis, or the intermediary of instruments, like fencing’ (Bourdieu,
Sports can be understood within a system of bodily preferences that is associated with a particular ‘experience of the physical and social world’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 157) and social position. The relationship between sporting practices and social position can be characterised as a homology (or correspondence) and it is in the relation between these two spaces that the pertinent properties of every sporting practice are defined. And the very changes in practices can be understood only on the basis of this logic, in so far as one of the factors which determine them is the desire to maintain in practice the gaps which exist between different positions (Bourdieu, 1990: 158).

The field of sport is not only characterised by specialised activities, it is also constituted by people who have a stake in them and who share a passion for the central focus of the field – a love of and investment in sport. Relationships are established between people with differing resources, motives and sporting abilities within this field, and with people in other fields. These relationships generally constitute a hierarchy and, through the assertion of its own criteria, the field of sport can seem to operate according to its own social dynamics. However, this is not to suggest that hierarchical relationships external to the field such as those related to money and power do not affect internal processes within sport. While ‘the two do not recognise the same merits and values and use a different hierarchy to speak of the various agents competing in the same field’ (Defrance, 1995: 127), Bourdieu (1990: 156) suggests that ‘one has to imagine the space of sporting practices as a system from which every other element derives its distinctive value’. In this way, the field of sport is a social activity with distinctive structuring principles and dynamics, and ‘to understand a sport, whichever one it may be, one has to recognise the position it occupies in the space of sports’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 156).

Figure 13.1 provides an illustration (though not an exhaustive one) of how the field of Irish sport is structured in terms of various discourses, practices and struggles between specialists in this field. Sport is a field in which individuals and representatives of sports institutions struggle to attain dominance over one another through the production and reproduction of relations of power and the acquisition of different forms of capital – social, economic and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). Individual and team sports can be understood within a system of bodily preferences that reflects a deep understanding of the physical and social world, and from which every other element in the sports field derives its value. Thus power struggles between male and female sports-persons are also (though not exclusively) part of struggles for access to, and dominance of, the meanings attached to particular sports and forms of physical expression. Furthermore, as Bourdieu suggests, various sports (e.g. women’s rugby) can be understood from their position within the field of sports and their relationship to power struggles. The idea that some women can play rugby as successfully as their male counterparts implicitly challenges the idea
that rugby is a male sport and what it means to be a sporting male in Irish society (Liston, 1999).

If, as Bourdieu suggests, the field of sport operates within a socially constituted order (as seen in discourses such as the practice of sport for sport’s sake or a modern ‘fair play’ ethos), then the dominance of attitudes, values and beliefs is generally reproduced at an habitual level precisely because these attitudes are taken for granted. The homology between the field of Irish sports and an individual person’s habitus, or embodied dispositions and stock of long-lasting knowledge about how sports ‘work’, can be explained as:

the activity of an agent, an action that can be adjusted to the social world without the agent being aware of what is going on around him or her, without the agent understanding all or having an omniscient and perfectly just vision of the situation (Defrance, 1995: 128).

The ‘logic’ (or illusion of logic) of sports practice can be seen in ‘the way things are’, and it is such a logic that can be seen behind assertions that weightlifting is not appropriate for women, that some female bodies are too muscular or that the emergence of a power game in women’s tennis is unwelcome. The remainder of this chapter looks at the relationship between sport, gender and the body by exploring the role of sport in the construction and reproduction of cultural conceptions of gender, and also how our ideological notions about the body (and gender) structure sport. Evidence can be seen in rates of participation in sport, the relative popularity of sporting activities, and perceptions of sporting and physical activities as gender-appropriate. I shall also explore the hidden assumptions (what Bourdieu terms ‘illusio’) about ‘natural’ differences between male and female bodies which underpin the position of various sports and athletes within the field of Irish sports generally.

As a social activity, sport both reflects and plays an active role in divisions, processes and changes in Irish society. The practice of sport thus has productive and reproductive effects throughout Irish society as well as the ability to generate processes of change, for example in the growth in popularity of women’s Gaelic football (Liston, 2002).

Sport and gender in contemporary Irish society

Research presented elsewhere (Department of Education, 1996, cited in Liston, 2001) found that 77 per cent of a sample of Irish men and 71 per cent of a sample of Irish women had participated in sport and physical activity on a regular basis in the preceding year. Not surprisingly, the overall activity rate decreased as the age of participants increased. While only a slight gender
difference was evident in overall rates of participation, gender differences became more apparent in motivation for participation and the popularity of activities. The health-related benefits of sports participation were the most commonly cited motivations for sports participation: ‘maintenance of good health’ and ‘getting outdoors’. While the overall findings on motivation are consistent with other Irish and international studies, the gender differences were striking. Men cited ‘making life more enjoyable’, ‘maintaining good health’ and ‘getting outdoors’ as their three main motivations. Women ranked health benefits as their main motivation followed by ‘getting outdoors’ and ‘relaxation’. Where men tended to cite ‘competition’ and ‘occupying spare time’ as important motivation, women were more apt to mention ‘weight’, with very few citing ‘competition’. Gender differences in relation to spare time (what it constitutes and how it is used), appearance and competitive nature were also evident.

Differences in motivation are also reflected in findings on the relative popularity of activities (Liston, 2001). Women listed walking as their most popular activity, followed by swimming and aerobics. In contrast, men cited soccer, followed by walking and golf. While walking and swimming were equally popular with men and women, clear gender differences were apparent in the popularity of dancing, soccer, golf, aerobics, snooker and Gaelic football.

Three years later, in the 1999 National Health and Lifestyles Survey, 42 per cent of the sample of adults engaged in some form of physical activity on average three times per week; 24 per cent reported doing mild forms of physical activity up to four times a week; 31 per cent did moderate forms of activity up to three times per week. Only nine per cent reported doing strenuous exercise three times weekly. As in the previous national survey (Department of Education and Health Promotion Unit, 1996), an age effect was apparent with activity levels decreasing with age. The 1999 study also examined children’s activity levels and found that 53 per cent of children exercised four or more times each week, while six per cent exercised less than weekly. Apart from giving rise to concern about low levels of activity relative to European and international standards, the survey revealed a significant gender difference among children. Sixty-two per cent of boys exercised four or more times weekly while only 45 per cent of girls participated in similar levels of exercise. Only 26 per cent of 15–17 year-old girls exercised four or more times each week. In addition, 13 per cent of this age group did not participate in any form of physical activity.

Little substantial change in levels of physical activity among Irish males and females is evident in the 2003 National Health and Lifestyles Survey. Just over half of all adults (51 per cent) reported some form of activity compared with 52 per cent in 1999. As before, marked differences remained in levels, types
and rates of participation in sports and physical activity by gender, with men more likely to be strenuously active than women. Numbers of those reporting no physical activity at all have increased among both males (from 21 per cent to 30 per cent) and females (from 20 per cent to 25 per cent). While these differences could simply be the outcome of gender differences in choice (between men and women, and between boys and girls), a closer look at the cultural dynamics of sports education and sports participation reveals a more complex picture.

Sport and the physical education curriculum

Men and women are socialised into the field of sport from a young age, generally through the physical education curriculum and community-organised sporting activities for young males and females. Lynch and Lodge (2002) provide an in-depth analysis of the ways in which Irish schools work in the production, management and recognition of gender differences. They argue, perhaps not surprisingly, that schools play a key role in gender identity-formation and identity-testing, since a large number are single-sex (at primary and second level), the gender-segregated nature of many Irish schools being part of the legacy of the denominational origin and control of education since the nineteenth century (Lynch and Lodge, 2002: 89). There were differences between the various types of school. For example, single-sex girls’ schools were characterised by high academic attainment, control of physical appearance and personal demeanour as well as active resistance to a gender order ‘albeit often in a covert, timid manner’ (Lynch and Lodge, 2002: 106). Single-sex boys’ schools were characterised by an emphasis on sporting achievement and physical prowess, with one exception: ‘While the culture of this school differed considerably from the others and especially from the two sports-focused schools, nevertheless the prevailing culture was still one that held students who were successful in sports in high regard’ (Lynch and Lodge, 2002: 117).

Earlier Irish research (Jones et al., 1991) also found sex stereotyping in Irish physical education. ‘Gaelic football, hurling, weight training, soccer, golf and karate were perceived as being “male” activities [while] yoga, dance, gymnastics and netball were strongly associated with females’ (Jones et al., 1991: 2). These patterns tended to be reinforced by males and females and are borne out in my interviews with elite-level Irish female athletes. During one interview Catherine (name changed) described one teacher’s attitude towards females’ interest in Gaelic football and the Combined Rules series as follows:

Me and Bernie hid at the back of the bus and went to the Combined Rules game anyway. We knew we could get into loads of trouble, and we did, but we wanted
to make a point. Why were three or four boys’ classes getting the day off to go the match and none of the girls were even given the option? It was just assumed by someone – the male teacher who coached Gaelic football – that the girls couldn’t go, either because we weren’t interested or we shouldn’t be interested anyway. I ended up getting the gloves of one of the top Australian players and detention the following day but I also had the satisfaction of seeing some teachers squirm when confronted by parents who heard we weren’t even given the option to go to such an important game.

Existing survey and interview data show that the content and practice of the physical education curriculum play a key role in the inculcation of gender identities. In particular, the 2003 National Health and Lifestyles survey shows that rates of vigorous exercise are higher among boys than girls at all ages. Moreover, as in the 1999 findings, the gender gap in physical activity doubled by the age of 15–17, with an increasing number of girls reporting no participation in physical activity. Crucially, Bourdieu argues that the predispositions or ‘habituses’ of individual people (in this case those involved in sports) are central to the practice of sports. Gendered bodily processes have deep-reaching consequences in the physical education curriculum, and practitioners’ assumptions about perceived differences in the ‘natural’ abilities of males and females play an important role in the maintenance of gendered divisions in sport practices. For example, Waddington et al. (1998) highlighted how the attitudes and actions of many PE teachers in the UK continued to reflect gender stereotyping of what have traditionally been considered male- and female-appropriate activities. There were ‘marked tendencies for male PE teachers to perceive dance as a female-appropriate activity and female PE teachers to perceive outdoor education as a male-appropriate activity’ (Waddington et al., 1998: 34). Similarly, young Irish males associated physical prowess, sporting ability and achievement with masculinity, while young females were socialised to control their physical appearance and personal demeanour (Sunday Tribune, 5 Nov. 2000; Lynch and Lodge, 2002). One of my respondents’ comments regarding female PE teachers shows that what Jones et al. found in 1991 is still relevant today: that patterns of gender-appropriate sports practice tend to be reinforced by males and females most strongly within their own sex:

We went through a phase of having a number of female PE teachers in our school, and if one more said that we were going to do dancing or trampolining I would have walked out and complained. I don’t know who to, mind you, because the school principal wasn’t exactly encouraging us to break the mould. But luckily we ended up getting a PE teacher who felt that women could equally participate in team sports, could use the school gym and weren’t afraid to get their nails dirty (Anne).
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The dominance of traditional and sex-segregated team sports in the Irish PE curriculum (e.g. Gaelic sports, rugby, soccer, hockey) reflects and reinforces existing discourses about sport and the gendered body. We can therefore understand the dynamics of the physical education process (in terms of the effects of teachers’ gendered predispositions; the gendered segregation of education generally and physical education in particular; the organisation and content of PE; and the peer values of recipients in the educational system) as generally reproducing gender stereotypes in the field of Irish sports. This is not surprising when international research shows that sport is a ‘male preserve’ (e.g. Dunning, 1986, 1994, 1999; Birrell and Cole, 1994; Hargreaves, 1986, 1994, 2000; Lenskyj, 1986, 1994; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002).

The gendered dynamics of sports participation

Although the relationship between sport and gender has been examined in international sociological research, there has been little critical analysis in Ireland. One problem with existing research is that the idea that certain sports (if not most) are ‘suitably’ masculine or feminine is treated as an a priori assumption. In other words, writers argue that sport is a male preserve without drawing on empirical research. Survey research findings presented here (Table 13.1) and elsewhere (Liston, 2001) regarding cultural perceptions of the gender-appropriateness of sports and physical activities provide empirical evidence for this assumption. They also highlight the importance of sport to the maintenance of visible differences between Irish male and female bodies, as well as to the maintenance of hierarchical power relations between the sexes (Birrell, 1983; Dunning, 1999, Liston, 2002).

Table 13.1 Gender-appropriate sports

| Female Appropriate | Yoga, Skipping, Netball, Aerobics, Dancing, Ice Skating, Synchronised Swimming, Camogie, Tennis, Jogging, Volleyball, Badminton, Equestrian, Orienteering, Hill, Walking, Gardening, Hockey, Gymnastics, Walking, Croquet |
| Neutral | Swimming |
Three hundred respondents were asked to rank a diverse list of 67 sports and physical activities into what they considered to be appropriate gender categories: hyper-feminine, feminine, neutral, masculine and hyper-masculine. While there were some minor differences between males and females in the categorisation of hyper-feminine versus feminine, and hyper-masculine versus masculine (for example, males categorised camogie as hyper-feminine while females felt it was feminine and similarly females categorised hurling as hyper-masculine while males felt it was masculine), it was striking that male and female respondents did not differ in which sports they regarded as masculine or feminine overall. In other words, all respondents agreed on the gender appropriateness of sports for males and females.

Table 13.1 is a summary of the overall categorisation of sports and physical activities as male- or female-appropriate. Swimming was the only activity to be perceived as gender-neutral. A deeper analysis of female-appropriate sports reveals an ‘exercise’ or ‘health’ orientation in sports that are commonly regarded as predominantly individual rather than team-based, involving little or no competition or physical contact and, emphasising the ‘aesthetic’ – for example, synchronised swimming, yoga, skipping, tennis, jogging, hill walking, hockey and croquet. In contrast, male-appropriate sports are predominantly associated with physical strength, aggression (reactive and instrumental), speed, a team environment and a culture of risk – for example, wrestling, hurling, surfing, rowing, aikido, cycling and Gaelic football.

Interestingly, male and female respondents generally agreed on the gender-appropriateness of sports despite an imbalance in gender membership. The categorisation of Gaelic sports such as football, hurling and camogie warrants further explanation. Camogie appears to be an anomaly in the female-appropriate category, being a physical contact sport that demands strength, competitiveness, skill and aggression. The Camogie Association (Cumann Camogiochta na nGael – CCnG) has been in formal existence since 1904 and has responsibility for the segregated organisation of the game. Thus it is not sociologically surprising that it was categorised as feminine while hurling was perceived as masculine. Camogie players still find their perceived femininity, or lack thereof, to be the subject of social commentary (Liston, 1999; 2001), precisely because of the levels of physicality required to participate in the sport. However, the categorisation of Gaelic football is slightly different (male-appropriate) and hides the growth in profile and participation levels of women’s football, particularly over the last ten years. Because women’s football is not a distinct category, it is assumed that respondents included both male and female players in the category ‘Gaelic football’ despite the formal existence of the Ladies Gaelic Athletic Association since 1974 and its recent elevated status. Indeed, a pilot scheme was established on 25 February 2003 with the aim of finding a successful framework for the integration of the LGAA and
CCnG within the GAA itself. In addition, the Dáil Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs will be publishing a report on women’s involvement and participation in sport.¹⁰

Sport and the ‘idealised’ body
As well as ranking 67 sports and activities, respondents were asked to define five prescribed gender categories – hyper-feminine, feminine, neutral, masculine and hyper-masculine. An in-depth analysis of these five categories reveals ways of thinking, including conscious and unconscious ideas, about what men and women do, and should do, with their bodies. They also help to explain the relationship between gendered perceptions of sports and motivations for participation, that is manifested in gendered rates of participation.

Hyper-feminine sports were characterised as:
all female (M)¹¹
grace and attitude (F)
the highest point at which female sports people can achieve (M)
not for boys, very female characteristics (F)
these are sporting extremes where in the feminine case there is a lack of physical activity and masculinity (M)
geared towards the female physical make-up (F)
futile sports mainly pursued by females (F)
not for boys, very female in characteristics (M).

Feminine sports were characterised as:
not intense enough for men and they’d rather do something else (M)
sports where great stamina and strength [are] not required, an art form, based on suppleness (M)
sports . . . suited to females and the lack of physical contact in the sport makes it lack masculinity (F)
mild pursuits, aesthetic (F)
enjoyed by women in most cases (F)
can be achieved best by female sportspeople (M).

Neutral sports in some ways seemed to represent the idealised notion of an androgynous sport:
designed for either sex (M)
women and men can participate in them together as a group, they have no contact or brutality (M)
participation in these sports is open to both genders – both men and women can compete and sports don’t show particular masculine or feminine traits (F)
more equally pursued by both genders (F)
sports that can be achieved at a high standard by both male and female (M).
Masculine sports were believed to be more appropriate for men because:

- most of them require high levels of endurance, strength and mental abilities (M),
- they only take the interests of the male (M),
- although some women participate in these, they are predominantly masculine in attitude (F),
- most of them require high levels of endurance, strength and mental abilities (F),
- maybe [they are] a bit too physical for some women, maybe not (M).

Hyper-masculine sports – the physicality of sport was most evident here:

- the physical demands can be achieved best by males (M),
- Hyper-masculine sports are those sports which favour men and which men participate in more than women. (F),
- they are very male orientated, for stronger tough men, all action and, heavy physical contact (F),
- levels of aggression [are] high (M),
- sports that are geared towards the masculine physical make-up (M),
- extremely physical sports including physical risk (M),
- these sports are dominated by men as in media coverage (F),
- you rarely see females playing (F).

While it is important to acknowledge there are problems with attitudinal studies as well as quantitative ranking scales, Balvanes and Caputi (2001) and Oppenheim (1992) argue that these problems can be addressed through the integration of attitudinal data within a broad and varied research framework that draws on interpretivist and positivistic paradigms. An integrated research framework can address the complexity and subtlety of attitudes by situating them within the various interactive forces that shape conscious and unconscious behaviour. Although it is difficult to generalise from a sample of 300 respondents to the field of Irish sports generally, it is possible to argue that the combination of in-depth interview data and various survey findings provide a strong indication that both males’ and females’ ideas about sports converge on bodily characteristics. We can say that Irish sports are perceived as gender appropriate and that the majority involving physical strength, physical contact and overtly competitive attributes are regarded as male appropriate. In most cases, males and females participate in the same sports but perceptions of participation (as indicated in respondents’ definitions of gender categories) do not always reflect the reality of participation. Therefore rates of participation in sports, or the perception of these, need to be situated within an in-depth study of what athletes and spectators think about sports, how they feel and what ideas form the basis for their understandings of the logic of sports practice.
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The characteristics of male-appropriate sports listed in Table 13.1 include physical contact, physical strength, aggression, speed and competition, which Dunning (1986) refers to as a ‘mock battle’ (in combat sports) and a culture of risk. Most are also team sports. In contrast, female-appropriate sports are characterised by grace, a fitness and exercise culture, little or no physical contact, a lack of aggression and physical strength, an aesthetic form and are largely (though not exclusively) individual sports. While sports psychologists (for example Moran, 2001) emphasise the importance of mental and cognitive skills, particularly in elite-level sports, only one respondent referred to mental attributes as a criterion in the gender-assessment of sports. Similarly, few respondents referred to technical skills as being a requirement for sports participation by either sex. Sports psychological research shows that although males and females may differ on inherent levels of aggression, a focus on the social conditions under which ‘appropriate’ responses to aggression are learned provides us with a clearer understanding of the expectation that aggressive behaviour would be a part of some sports and not others (Birrell, 1983).

Sport, habitus and capital

Taking into account the many facets of the sport–gender relationship in Ireland (gendered rates of participation as well as perceptions of participation, motivations for participation as well as individuals’ ‘gendered understandings of how sports work’), we could argue that the field of sport reflects an ‘affinity with the interests, tastes and preferences of a determinate social category’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 157). Irish sports are organised within a system of bodily preferences that shape how, where and why we put male and female bodies into action. This is closely associated with a deep experience of the social and physical world, and the values espoused through wider systems of knowledge towards physical size, appearance, shape, difference and strength. The field of Irish sport is an expression and generator of social distinction, and similar to other social practices. Bourdieu argues that ‘the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the habitus, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 52). Research data presented here reflect that habitus is constituted in ‘moments of sports’ and that the field of sport is a site of power struggles for access to, and dominance of, the meanings attached to particular sports and forms of physical expression. Habitus is a logic of sporting practice that conforms with, and confirms, perceptions of the sporting world and physical activities as male- and female-appropriate, generally on the basis of physical difference. The development of women’s sports in the Olympics is a good example of how beliefs about the inappropriateness of ‘flexing female
muscles’ have changed over time. The 200 metres was the longest women’s race in the Olympics until the 1970s (following the collapse of several women at the end of the 800 metres in 1926), while the women’s marathon was first run at the 1984 Olympics (Blue, 1987).

Sports such as rugby, soccer, gymnastics and all codified physical activities are cultural products shaped by those who practise them. Knowing how to be ‘a soccer player’ on and off the field of play is a physical, psychological and social activity and it is a defining factor in acquiring forms of capital. For Bourdieu, the body has become an important expression of status and power in society and it can be used as a form of capital, ‘like the aces in a game of cards . . . powers that define the chances of profit in a given field’ (Bourdieu, 1985: 24). The cultural emphasis on sporting success in Ireland can therefore be understood as the struggle for capital or the strategies and tactics used by athletes and those with an ‘investment’ in sport, to attain power. As has been argued elsewhere, the more or less 'feminised' or 'masculinised' sporting body carries social capital (Liston, 2002). Social capital can be defined as the forms of power held by athletes such as achievement, ability, ‘sportsmanship’ and competitiveness. These characteristics are also structuring principles of the field of sports (see Figure 13.1) and indicate the homology that exists between sporting practices and the social position of sports. Social capital is socially constructed. It can lead to rewards based on other forms of capital such as economic capital (e.g. corporate sponsorship) or symbolic capital (e.g. social status and prestige), and it has different consequences for male and female sportspersons. For example, interviews with leading Irish international female rugby players indicate a wider lack of acceptance of their cultural capital as elite-level athletes with the consequence that they often engage in ‘apologetic’ behaviour (Felshin, 1974) in order to attain capital: ‘We’re like rugby players on the pitch but once we step off we’re 100% ladies’ (Backpacker, 2002: 36).

Similarly, a recent newspaper report on the ‘violent image’ of female rugby stressed that ‘skill is the main element of the game’ and ‘(women’s) rugby is not as rough and tough as people think’:

In fact, it’s all about skill, speed, agility, strength and the ability to think on your feet and women of all shapes, sizes and levels of fitness can get involved [. . .] The sense of camaraderie is palpable and they’re the furthest thing from the butch stereotype you can imagine – girly, giggly, fun and fit (The Star, 9 Apr. 2003).

Interestingly, most female rugby players stress the skill and fitness elements of women’s rugby which correspond to what are generally acceptable characteristics of female-appropriate sports. Few openly refer to the physical strength and aggression also required to participate in the sport. In contrast, men’s rugby is headlined with titles such as ‘Richards still fiercest Tiger’ and
'Wounded giants promise day of thunder' (The Sunday Times, 13 Apr. 2003). However, that is not to suggest that female athletes receive little media coverage. Anna Kournikova’s participation in an appropriately feminine sport (tennis) facilitates her attainment of cultural, symbolic and economic capital, despite the relative lack of sporting success that she achieved in competition.

Our understanding of sports in Ireland can therefore be usefully situated within the context of cultural conceptions of gendered differences, which shape our ideological notions of sport. It is important to understand how our habitualised ideas about male and female bodies affect the organisation, financing and administration of sport-participation for men and women. Birrell (1983: 49) argues that ‘the female athlete is a special case in two senses. Because of her sport interests, she is considered a special kind of female; because she is female she is considered a special kind of athlete’. In particular, Johns and Farrow (1990) argue that married women receive conditional acceptance as athletes and are judged on a different set of criteria from male athletes. Cultural factors, such as the active discouragement of female participation in sport from a young age and the subtle socialisation of preconceived ideas about how males and females should act, are embodied at a physical and psychological level. Taking a long-term view, a reconceptualisation of sport as androgynous would involve both an examination of the gendered factors in motivation and participation in sport as well the outcomes of gendered participation, e.g., the psychological and sociological consequences of sports participation as well as an analysis of the determinants of future involvement. However, many examples highlight that social criteria and notions of ‘physical suitability’ continue to determine the relative acceptability of various sports to men and women (for example Metheny, 1965, 1972; Colley et al., 1987; Csizma et al., 1988).

Sport and power relations between the sexes

Besides their role in the demarcation of male and female bodies, team sports (as well as some individual sports), also offer participants the opportunity to exercise their power and see the immediate effects of their actions. They also offer the opportunity to satisfy a need for power, when it exists. Power motivations are inherent in most, if not all, codified sports and an individual person’s power or ‘social position in society depends on the volume and structure of the different forms of capital they have accumulated’ (Inglis, 1998: 66). Cultural capital ‘is fundamental to being socially acceptable and respected . . . and is institutionalised in the form of accepted social awards’ (Inglis, 1998: 66), such as conferring honorary degrees on Roy Keane and Sonia O’Sullivan or the social prestige attached to prominent rugby players.
such as Keith Wood and Brian O’Driscoll. ‘Sports for males tend to enhance their chances of success in the world outside of sport and it is common practice for sportmen to endorse products and services’ (Duffy, 1994: 20).12 ‘Anyone in doubt that O’Driscoll has made an impression on the world outside of rugby need only look at the type of products our top rugby players are being asked to endorse’ (Evening Herald, 28 Mar. 2003). These examples also indicate that basic forms of capital such as cultural capital can be traded for other forms such as symbolic capital through the strategic manipulation of habitualised ideas about ‘the way the world works’ (Liston, 2001). Empirical findings presented here also support Dunning’s (1999) contention that sports, particularly combat sports, are one of the few remaining social arenas which actively encourage the expression of a particular kind of masculinity and the maintenance of a male-dominated prestige hierarchy between the sexes. This has specific consequences for female athletes in that their femininity is often compromised in the eyes of others (for instance, from ‘mild’ labelling as tomboys to relatively ‘extreme’ labels as butch and/or lesbian), as well as in their own eyes. Females also still encounter obstacles towards their participation in sport that are not generally experienced by males. While women’s increasing participation in sports is a consequence of equalising and civilising tendencies and an example of their relative empowerment, males’ and females’ capacities to use physical violence remain relatively unequal and can be characterised as a ‘civilised tolerance of difference’ (Dunning, 1999).

Conclusion

Thompson (1988: 209) argues that ‘sport symbolises an idealised version of . . . social order’. Duncan and Hasbrook (2002: 86) also suggest that:

> sport tells us, through its lopsided distribution of women into female-appropriate individual sports, men into team sports and certain manly individual sports, how this power is withheld from women and how it is accorded to men.

Discourses and practices of sport pose important questions about how we understand sport and leisure as well as how we ‘idealise’ male and female sporting bodies. Sport is deeply embedded in the social fabric of Irish society. It enshrines the value of achievement in surpassing a standard of excellence and depicts an achievement-motivated ‘national Irish character’. It carries emblems of recognition and identity whether at individual, parish, club, team, county, national or international level. The role of sport in shaping bodily processes and expectations about how we should act has many implications for levels of role conflict and stigmatisation experienced by male
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and female athletes. Prevailing and often hidden ideas about the appropriate development of the male and female body, in and through sports, play a key role in the maintenance of social divisions that already exist within the field of sports. A Bourdieuian analysis of the field of Irish sport raises a number of important questions for sports practitioners, administrators and governing bodies alike. Do elite-level female athletes have volumes and compositions of capital comparable with those of elite male athletes? Do the volume and composition of various forms of capital differ in individual and team sports as Birrell (1983) implies? Do elite female athletes embody gendered forms of capital with less social value? And why do some women and some female athletes in particular often comply with dominant practices and what Bourdieu (1988) refers to as symbolic violence? As Shilling (1992: 147) suggests, this may reflect the fact that ‘many women have far fewer opportunities than men to turn any participation they may have in physical activities into social, cultural or economic capital’. Irish females are still under-represented as participants, coaches, officials and decision makers in the field of sports. Gaelic and other codified sports provide a powerful lens through which we can clearly see the value that Irish society places on the development of male and female sporting bodies, and bodies in general, as well as the struggles ‘over which part most truly represents or embodies the field (of Irish sport) and its values’ (Webb et al., 2002: 30).