

## **Gender Ideologies, Youth Sports, and the Production of Soft Essentialism**

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By the mid-Twentieth Century in the U.S., a dominant ideology of natural, categorical differences between women and men was an organic part of the unequal distribution of women and men into domestic and public realms, especially in middle class families. Sport was a key site for the naturalization of this ideology, which I call "hard essentialism." Since the 1970s, an explosion of female athletic participation mirrored the movement of women into the professions, leading scholars to examine sport as a terrain of contested gender relations. This paper extends that discussion by positing a four-part periodization of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic gender ideologies, stretching from the mid-Twentieth Century to the present. Touching down empirically on contemporary professional class youth sports coaches' views of children and gender, I identify an ascendant gender ideology I call "soft essentialism." I argue that youth sports has become a key site for the construction of soft essentialist narratives that appropriate the liberal feminist language of "choice" for girls, but not for boys, thus serving to recreate and naturalize class-based gender asymmetries and inequalities. I end by outlining emergent strategies that spring from the contradictions of soft essentialism.

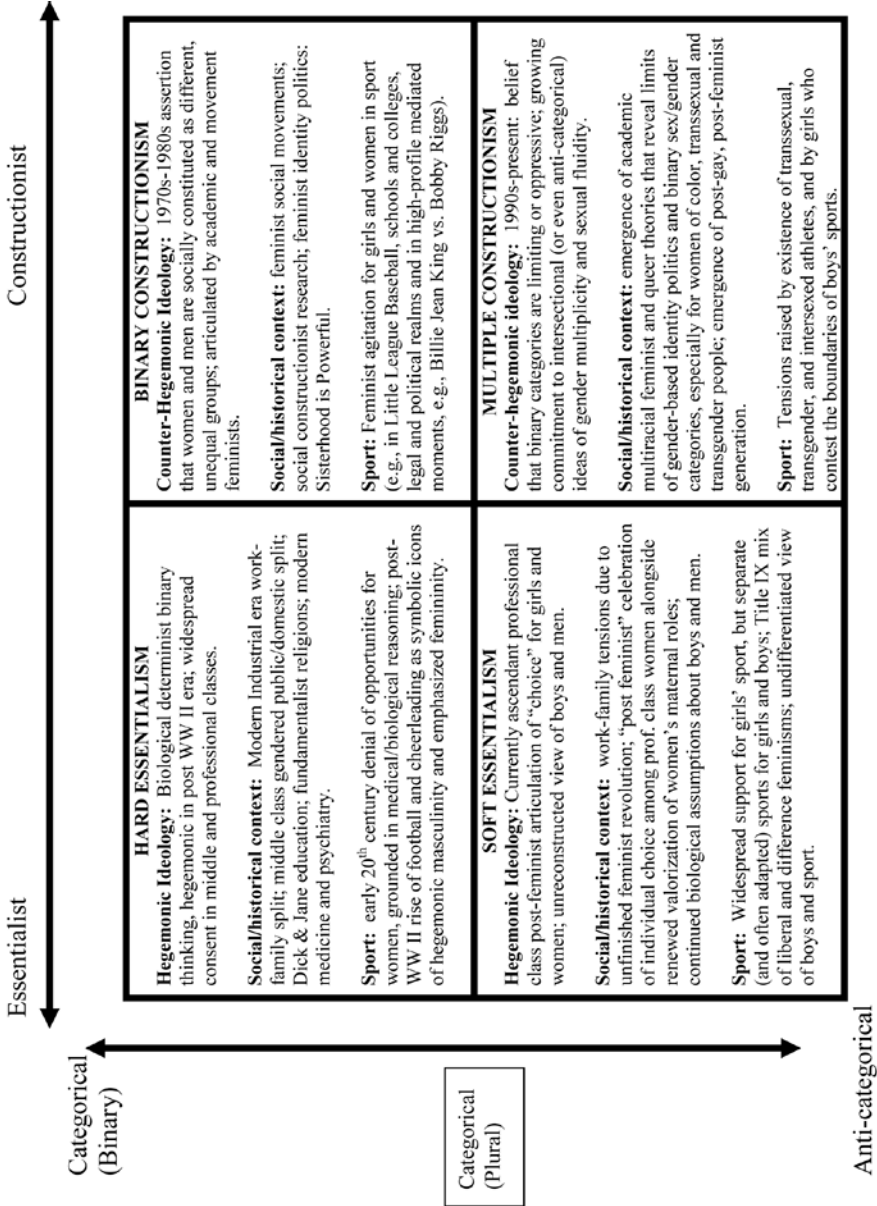
Déjà, à la moitié du 20<sup>ième</sup> siècle aux États-Unis, l'idéologie dominante concernant les différences naturelles entre les hommes et les femmes contribuait à la distribution inégale des femmes et des hommes au sein des sphères domestique et publique, particulièrement dans les familles de classe moyenne. Le sport était un site clé de la naturalisation de cette idéologie ; cette dernière pouvant être appelée « essentialisme dur ». Depuis les années 1970, l'explosion de la participation sportive des femmes a été le miroir de leurs avancées dans les professions, ce qui a mené les chercheurs à examiner le sport comme terrain des relations hommes-femmes. Cet article poursuit la discussion en présentant une périodisation en quatre parties des idéologies de genre hégémoniques et contre-hégémoniques. A partir d'un regard empirique sur ce que les entraîneurs professionnels pensent des enfants et des rapports sociaux de sexe, j'identifie une idéologie de genre ascendante que j'appelle « essentialisme mou ». Je suggère que chez les enfants, le sport est devenu un site clé de la construction de récits essentialistes mous qui empruntent le langage féministe libéral du « choix » pour les filles (pas pour les garçons), ce qui sert à recréer et naturaliser les inégalités de genre et les asymétries au plan des classes sociales. Je termine en soulignant les stratégies qui émergent des contradictions de l'essentialisme mou.

I begin with a Twenty-first Century feminist fable:

*Once upon a time, girls were believed to be naturally unsuited for sports, and were not allowed to participate. Sports were set up exclusively by and for boys and men. But in the early 1970s, Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes; girls sued Little League for the right to play baseball; and Title IX was passed, a national law that gave girls the legal right to equity in school sports. This opened the floodgates to girls' athletic participation. In the subsequent decades, tens of millions of U.S. girls and women have played community-based youth sports, school sports, and college sports. Today, though equity is not yet achieved, sport is no longer just for boys and men. Thanks to feminism and to Title IX, girls are free to choose to play sports, thus gaining access to the social and health benefits of athletic participation.*

Most everybody knows this triumphant feminist tale. Like any story that has legs, this one is based on some core truths. There is no doubt that girls' sport participation has skyrocketed in recent decades, and there is ample research to document the claim that girls who play sports gain access to social and health benefits (Miller et al., 1999, 2005; Sabo & Veliz, 2008). My concern here is with how shifting gender relations in sport articulate with the larger gender order, and in particular, how the commonsense stories we tell ourselves about girls and sport give us a window not into some final triumph of feminism, but rather, into a contemporary reorganization of gender relations and a concomitant emergence of a newly hegemonic professional class-based gender ideology. Rather than reflecting some straightforward view of "reality," the conventional story of girls' athletic progress outlined above distorts reality in three ways. First, it is a simplistic rendering of history, premised on a linear before-and-after view of progress. Second, the story narrates an undifferentiated view of "girls and women," failing especially to account for the ways that class and race have differently constrained and enabled girls' and women's sports participation, in the past and in the present. And third, while positioning girls as postfeminist choosers, the story passively endorses an almost entirely unreconstructed naturalistic view of boys' relationship to sport. In focusing on these points, I hope to illuminate sport's contemporary role in a shifting terrain of gender relations.

More than two decades ago, in an article published in the *SSJ* (Messner, 1988), I argued that the exploding athletic participation rates of girls and women highlighted sport as a terrain of contradictory and contested gender meanings and relations. This article follows logically from questions raised by that earlier work, analyzing the recent history of U.S. sport and gender relations. At the conceptual heart of this article, I sketch a four-part periodization of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic gender ideologies in sport (summarized in Figure 1) that shows the utility of differentiating two concepts that scholars too often conflate: essentialism and categoricalism. I will offer a brief empirical example from my research on contemporary youth sports—with a focus on professional class volunteer coaches' views of children and gender—to illustrate an ascendant gender ideology I call "soft essentialism," a belief system that arises out of current tensions between liberal feminist ideals of equal opportunity and stubbornly persistent commitments to the idea of natural sex difference. Rather than being a locus of gender revolution, I will conclude, youth sports has become an ideal site for the construction of adult



**Figure 1** — Terrain of Gender Ideologies

narratives that appropriate the liberal feminist language of “choice” for girls, but not for boys, in ways that help to recreate and naturalize the continuing gender inequalities in professional class work and family life.

## Gender Ideologies and Historical Gender Formation

It has become common academic practice to dismiss ideas or theorists by labeling them “essentialist.” Used as a verb, the accusation that one is “essentializing” a group of people has become a shorthand (and often ill-informed) means of dismissing an idea, or even an entire line of thought. I suggest that it will contribute to more precise thinking if we differentiate between two commonly conflated concepts: *essentialism* and *categoricalism*. Essentialism, as I use it, is a viewpoint that assumes natural (usually biological) differences between groups of people (e.g., the assumption that genes, hormones, or brain structure make women more emotional and men more rational). Categoricalism is a belief that all members of a group are one way, while all members of another group are the opposite (e.g., all men are aggressive, while all women are maternal).

Essentialism and categoricalism often go hand-in-hand. But sometimes they exist separately. It is possible to hold an essentialist, but noncategorical belief: women naturally tend to be shorter than men, though we can see that some men are shorter than some women, revealing a “continuum of difference” (Kane, 1995). It is also possible to hold categorical, but not essentialist views: feminist psychoanalytic theorists argued that women and men developed categorically different orientations to intimacy and morality, differences grounded not in biology, but in the social organization of mothering (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982).

In Figure 1, I locate beliefs in essentialism at one end of a horizontal continuum, countered on the other pole by beliefs in social constructionism. On a vertical continuum, I locate categorical beliefs at the top, counter-posed to anticategorical views of gender plurality and fluidity at the bottom. In what follows, using the two-by-two table created by these two continua, and influenced by Connell’s (2002) periodization of gender thought, I will sketch out a schema of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic gender ideologies in U.S. society and in sport. Starting with the upper-left cell, I will move clockwise to discuss, in turn:

1. **Hard essentialism:** a categorical and essentialist view of women and men that was the foundation of the hegemonic gender ideology of the post-World War II era white, middle class, heterosexual family, constructed and naturalized in part within sport.
2. **Binary Constructionism:** emerging in the 1970s out of feminism, a view that challenged naturalized beliefs of gender difference and hierarchy, and mobilized counter-hegemonic discourse and actions by strategically organizing around the category *women*.
3. **Multiple Constructionism:** with its roots in late 1970s socialist feminism and 1980s feminist women of color’s critique of the white, middle class basis of feminist binary constructionism, this view develops in the 1990s to the present as a radical anticategorical, antiessentialist impulse in queer and transgender action, and academic de-gendering theory.

4. **Soft Essentialism:** as a currently ascendant hegemonic ideology of the professional class, this view valorizes the liberal feminist ideal of individual choice for girls and women, while retaining a largely naturalized view of boys and men, a view that is especially evident, I will argue, in youth sports.

I will outline the first three of these gender ideologies briefly, with very broad brushstrokes, spending more space in articulating the dynamics of soft essentialism. Overall, my aim is to illustrate the shifting hegemony of historical gender formation in the U.S. over the past half-century. Hegemony, as it is widely understood, is a consolidation of power based in part on force, but most effectively on the development of widespread consent (Hargreaves, 1983; Willis, 1983). Any hegemonic moment of gender formation also creates tensions and contradictions. While consent based on shared ideology helps to contain or manage these contradictions, fissures necessarily occur, often (but not always) resulting in organized opposition, reform, or occasional radical ruptures. Thus, in the model presented below, I will attempt to illustrate both the sources of consent and continuity, while showing how tensions and contradictions give rise to counter-hegemonic ideas and actions. Soft essentialism, I will argue, is a largely conservative, class-based reorganization of gender that resolves some of the contradictions of professional class work and family life in this historical moment, while giving rise to new and different tensions.

## Hard Essentialism

The post-World War II era in the United States ushered in a harsh imposition of strict gender divisions of labor in work and family life. The 1950s is still viewed nostalgically by many as the golden era of “the American family,” but scholars have shown that the near hysteria (stretching across popular culture, psychiatry, medicine, politics, education, industrial unions, and sport) that pushed millions of women out of public life and into the home in the postwar years was actually an historical aberration, rather than a manifestation of some longstanding “traditional family” (Coonz, 2000). In the postwar era, hegemonic ideals of motherhood for women and breadwinning for men were grounded in both essentialist and categorical beliefs about women and men.

The consent that consolidated around postwar hard essentialism was never absolute. It was middle- and professional-class women and men who most closely conformed to this hegemonic ideal. Millions of poor and working class women (disproportionately women of color) remained in the labor force, often out of necessity. Squeezed between the middle class hegemonic ideal of the housewife/mother, and the postwar expansion of women’s low-paid industrial and service-sector jobs, these women were judged as deviant, perhaps not fully “women.”

A look at post World War II sport—perhaps the apogee of sex segregation in U.S. sport—illuminates this moment of class-based gender formation. By the mid-Twentieth Century, a dramatic burst of women’s early-century athleticism had been largely suppressed or contained into nearly invisible social spaces (Twin, 1989; Cahn, 1994). By the postwar years, youth sports programs as well as school and university sports programs had become almost entirely the province of boys, and though it survived for a few years after the war, women’s professional baseball was soon extinguished (Ring, 2009). The ascendance of football, a game that valorizes

violent collisions of armored male bodies and heroic metaphors of war and conquest—symbolically linked with the emergence of the cheerleader as symbolic icon of American white femininity—became sport’s most celebrated display of hard essentialism (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Messner 1988; Montez de Oca, 2005).

Just as the gendered public-domestic split in postwar society was structurally manifested more in middle class (and disproportionately white) families, the flushing out of girls and women from midcentury sport was also closer to absolute among class- and race-privileged girls and women. Cahn (1994) observes, for instance, that African American women’s participation in industrial basketball leagues and national amateur track and field competition continued unabated through the middle decades of the Twentieth Century. My own analysis of one hundred years of a California high school’s annual yearbooks suggests similar patterns, with girls’ interscholastic sports disappearing after the 1920s, and midcentury participation in the (mostly intramural) sports ghetto of the Girls’ Athletic Association (GAA) disproportionately made up of Japanese-American, Filipina, and Latina girls. White middle class girls achieved social status not as athletes, but as cheerleaders. As public exemplars of what Connell (1987) calls “emphasized femininity,” cheerleaders helped to construct male football players as midcentury exemplars of hegemonic masculinity.

However, even within the professional class, consent with the postwar hierarchical gendered public domestic split was not absolute. The restrictions on educated women’s lives were reflected in widespread individual discontent—partly contained by a barrage of psychiatric and other medical “expertise” on the natural virtues of the wife/mother role, dispersed through an expanding popular culture. Betty Friedan’s (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* was grounded in the experiences of college educated, professional class women who had been largely barred from participation in public life. Given the critiques that emerged in subsequent decades of Friedan’s conservatism with respect to sexual orientation, class, and race, it is too easy to forget the sharpness of Friedan’s critique of how hegemonic postwar gender ideology supported an institutional scaffolding (included in which were the sturdy girders of Parsonian sociology and Freudian psychology) within which women were confined to maternal domesticity. Friedan provided a first voice in what would blossom a decade later into a full chorus of opposition, consolidating by the early 1970s into a powerful counter-hegemonic ideology.

## Binary Constructionism

The title of the most widely circulated feminist collection of the 1970s, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (Morgan, 1970), captures the crux of binary constructionism. As feminist movements exploded in the 1970s, women increasingly found collective empowerment in discovering shared experiences of oppression, and articulating shared strategies to change society. It is beyond the focus of this article to reiterate the debates and differences among different strains of 1970s feminisms. Here, I simply want to note that the two most public forms of U.S. feminism at that time shared a similar commitment to antiessentialism, while asserting a binary, categorical view of women and men. Whether in its more radical articulations of women as a historically-oppressed sex class (Firestone, 1971) or in liberal feminists’ language of sex roles as socially-scripted and learned behaviors, the heart of these

1970s feminism was the idea that women's subordination was a manifestation not of nature, but rather, of social forces. By extension it was believed that when women organized around their shared identity and interests—whether through radical revolution or liberal reform—a state of equality between women and men could be achieved.

By the late-1970s, radical feminism had been marginalized by a cultural and political backlash, and also by the increasing social acceptance of liberal feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women and leaders like Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Though they continued to be influenced by radical and socialist impulses in the larger feminist movement, liberal feminists pushed a narrowed agenda of equal rights for individual women in education, politics, workplaces, and other male dominated public institutions. Equality increasingly came to be defined not in terms of collective efforts to radically transform institutions, but as attempts to open existing institutions to individuals from the disenfranchised category, women.

This liberal feminist activism was reflected in U.S. sports. On numerous fronts—from high schools and colleges to Billie Jean King's push for equal pay for women on the pro tennis tour—women struggled to pry open the institution of sport, a stubborn bastion of men's privilege. This effort was dramatic in youth sports. Little League Baseball was started in 1938 and spread rapidly in the postwar years as the flagship youth sports organization for U.S. boys. In the early 1970s, girls successfully sued for the right to play Little League, and were subsequently in the 1980s included in the burgeoning youth soccer movement, and in an expanding field of national youth sports organizations. Today, millions of girls play youth sports, a testament to the successes of feminist organizing from the 1970s to the present, and to the widespread social absorption of the liberal feminist ideal of equal opportunity for girls.

Girls' and women's experiences in U.S. sport illuminate the limits of binary constructionism as a counter-hegemonic feminist strategy. I point briefly to two points of tension in this expanding field of play for girls. First, and reflecting the widely documented white middle class basis of liberal feminism (Baca Zinn et al., 1986), the expansion of youth and school-based sports disproportionately benefited white, suburban, professional class girls (Coakley, 2006; Sabo & Veliz, 2008; Stevenson, 2007). Second, the centrality of the body in organized sports exposed the ideological limits of binary constructionism and the feminist strategy of individual equal opportunity. In sport, the presumption of bodily difference between boys and girls—in effect, a creeping back in of essentialist beliefs—precluded a strategy of desegregation of youth sport, serving instead as a foundation for the creation of a kind of “separate-but-equal” ideal of sport for males and females.

The contradictions inherent in a strategy that pushes for both individual equal opportunity and categorical separation of the sexes in sport can be seen at the national level. Title IX reflects a strategic joining of liberal feminist strategies of equal opportunity along with a sort of throwback to what in the 19th Century was called “social feminism,” a valorization of presumed natural differences between the sexes (Brake, 2010). The Women's Sports Foundation—the largest and most important advocacy organization for girls and women in U.S. sports—has taken this same tack, using an equity-with-difference strategy, advocating for girls' and women's sport organizations that mirror, but do not seek to integrate, boys' and

men's sports (Messner, 2002). In youth sports, this joining of different feminist traditions can be seen in the shifting gender regime of Little League Baseball. In 1974, a National Organization for Women-sponsored civil rights claim was decided by the New Jersey Superior Court, which ordered LLB to allow 8–12 year old girls to play baseball. Once forced by law to incorporate girls, LLB responded rapidly to create separate gendered tracks: baseball for boys, softball for girls (Ring 2009). The organization is now called “LLB/S” and the “slash” in this moniker is a visible indicator of the current state of play of the organization's gender regime (Messner 2009). Essentially LLB/S accommodated girls not by integrating baseball, but by channeling girls into a separate and different sport, thus maintaining baseball as the province of boys and men.

The feminist counter-hegemonic articulation of binary constructionism in sport resolved one of the central contradictions of hard essentialism: the blatantly unfair exclusion of girls and women in a society that values individual equal opportunities. However, as a strategy within sport, binary constructionism privileged the interests of middle, upper-class, and white girls (Cooky, 2009). Moreover, organizational responses to binary constructionism ushered in to youth sports and into national law a revived strand of essentialism. The resultant institutionalized sex segregation created new contradictions, strains, and tensions in gender relations. As we will see, the mainstream response to the limits of binary constructionism, especially among professional class people, is the emergence of an ascendant hegemonic ideology of soft essentialism. Before I discuss that, however, I will outline the emergence of a radically resistant discourse of multiple constructionism.

## Multiple Constructionism

The power of categorical identity politics lies in its simplicity, its ability to provide a discourse of shared experience and interests around which people can rally for change. But that very simplicity tends also to exclude, and to wash out differences and inequalities of race/ethnicity, social class, and sexualities that exist within a category like “women.” In the latter half of the 1970s, socialist-feminists developed a sophisticated theory and political practice that sought to grapple with the intersection of social class with gender inequalities. To be sure, socialist feminism was still very much a categorical theory, but it was a first attempt to move beyond an oversimplified *binary* view of gender. Instead of dealing with two undifferentiated categories—women and men—socialist feminists now grappled with differences and contradictions between working class and professional class women, working class and professional class men (Eisenstein, 1979; Tolson, 1977).

Socialist feminism was a precursor to multiracial feminism, a perspective that blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s as an attempt to theorize multiple categories (most often race, class, and gender), utilizing metaphors of “intersectionality,” and “matrixes of domination,” that emphasize cross-cutting systems of inequality and plural identity categories (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984). Like socialist feminists, multiracial feminists retained a commitment to categorical thinking, due in part to their concern with the strategic usefulness of categories in pressing politically for distributive justice (Grillo, 1995). In Figure 1, I locate plural categoricism at the midpoint of the vertical continuum, between binary categoricism and anticategoricism. Advocates of multiracial feminism like Baca



Zinn and Dill (1996) and of “multiple masculinities and femininities” like Connell (1987) reject the class and race bias and distortions built in to feminist binary constructionism. But they do not embrace a radical anticategorical de-gendering viewpoint. Instead, they are committed to an intersectional structural analysis that highlights how groups (categories) are shaped and constrained by social and historical dynamics. Social justice, to these scholars, is possible not through eliminating categories such as gender and race, but by building coalitions that strategically assert group-based interests. Adapting Spivak’s (1995) often-noted concept of “strategic essentialism,” I suggest that multiracial feminists oppose biological essentialism, while simultaneously asserting the utility of what is better termed “strategic categorialism.” Strategic categorialism (by subordinated racial/ethnic groups, sexual minorities, or women) resists, takes up, and recasts categories that have been imposed upon them by superordinate groups, with the goal of contesting the privilege of superordinates.

Though they would not necessarily see themselves as such, multiracial feminists are often viewed as transitional precursors to relativized views of gender fluidity and multiplicity that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, most radically in the anticategorical works of “post-gay” sexual minorities (Sedgwick, 1990). The growing visibility of intersexed children, transsexual and transgender people, and masculine women illuminate the shortcomings of the tidy binaries of 1970s feminism (Bornstein, 1993; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Halberstam, 1998), while also illustrating the limits of a radical strategy of anticategorical degendering. These visible sexual and gendered “others,” joined with a growing generational antipathy to categorical identity politics has fueled debates (mostly within academia) about a “de-gendering” strategy of social change that seeks to do away with sex and gender categories (Deutsch, 2007).

Anticategorical degendering strategies have had little influence within sport, an institution defined by rigid categorical boundaries. However, fluid and multiple ways of thinking about gender raise disruptive questions about sex segregation in sport. Despite the cultural work done by mass media and many promoters of women’s sports to contain the public image of the female athlete as feminine and heterosexual, the existence of powerful, aggressive, masculine and/or lesbian women athletes has troubled simple categorical assumptions about women (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Kane, 1995; Messner, 1988). In addition, others who do not fit within binary sex/gender categories have increasingly placed strains on the conventional gender regime of organized sport. The recent controversy surrounding South African athlete Caster Semenya’s inclusion in women’s track is a potent example. As Dworkin and her colleagues (under submission) argue, the fact that Semenya—apparently an intersexed person—was forced to undergo “gender verification” tests reveals the oppressive (and in this case, white colonial) imposition of binary sex categorization in sport. It also reveals the asymmetries in cultural assumptions underlying the gender-divided social organization of sport: that “gender verification” tests are required of intersexed, transgender, or transsexual individuals *in women’s sports, but not in men’s*, lays bare assumptions about the natural superiority of men’s bodies.

An early transsexual challenge in sport was the celebrated and controversial case of professional tennis player Renee Richards who transitioned from male to female in 1976 and then sought to play on the women’s pro circuit (Birrell & Cole,

1994). The International Olympic Committee in 2003 attempted to resolve the question of where transsexuals “fit” by allowing transsexual athletes to compete within their postoperative sex category. But does this resolution really address fully the issues raised by the existence of people who do not “fit” the binary sex categories around which sport is ordered? Feminist biologist Ann Fausto-Sterling (2000, p. 19) argues that intersexed, transgender, and transsexual people exist not on some continuum “between male and female,” but instead reveal “sex and gender as a multi-dimensional space.” Radical critics of the IOC’s inclusion of intersexed or transsexual people in women’s or in men’s sports argue that this policy erases this empirical reality of gender as a multidimensional space, instead absorbing and neutralizing trans or intersexed peoples’ otherwise radical challenge to assumptions of fixed binary sex categories. The legal inclusion of, say, a female transsexual in a women’s sport serves to reinscribe the ideology of categorical sex difference that in turn legitimizes social inequality (Sykes, 2006; Travers, 2008).

Contrarily, Namaste (2000, p. 9) warns that rather than leading to greater justice and freedom, a de-gendering strategy that seeks to dismantle binary gender categories can result instead in “queer theory’s erasure of transgender subjectivity.” Similarly, Connell (2010; forthcoming) argues that many 1970s feminists vilified transsexual women because they did not “fit” in the counter-hegemonic binary constructionist narrative, while more recently multiconstructionists have deployed transsexuals as heroic exemplars who prove the fluidity and malleability of sex and gender. Connell (forthcoming) concludes that a forced inclusion of transsexual women within the “agglutinative” LGBTI umbrella is wrongheaded: “Far from being fluid, transsexual women’s lives are a striking proof of the *intransigence* of gender,” an intransigence most notable in the fact that most transsexual women do not want to be included in a de-gendered LGBTI umbrella group of sexual others. Instead, they seek social recognition *as women*.

Connell (forthcoming) argues that “...a powerful political agenda need not have the goal of abolishing gender.” For transsexual women the more relevant goal is creating a *just* gender order, that moves beyond individual rights to include guarantees of safety from physical violence, material access to education, jobs and medical care, and respectful social recognition. In concluding that “The best guarantee of justice for transsexual women is a gender-equal society” Connell illuminates the limits of a political strategy of de-gendering. As a discursive “troubling” of gender categories in sport and elsewhere, anticategoricalism is potent. As a way to force broad social changes especially in the realm of distributive justice, anticategoricalism is limited. Much of the social world—including sport—is organized under the categorical assumption that there are women and there are men. Fighting for distributive justice usually involves not abandoning, but rather, strategically deploying these social categories. From this point of view, sisterhood—albeit a more radically inclusive and multiple conception of “sisterhood” than that deployed in 1970s feminism—may still be a powerful transformative force for social justice. On the other hand, it is also the case that successfully pressing for gender justice for “women”—especially if this category is firmly delineated through biological essentialist assumptions—will not necessarily lead to greater inclusion of transgender, transsexual, or intersexed people. All categorical projects—even those premised on progressive strategic categoricalism—create boundaries that exclude “others” who do not fit within the categorical definition.

## Soft Essentialism

As we have seen, liberal feminism leveraged institutions toward equal opportunities for individual women with a strategic use of the category *women*. However, in sport, whether through development of adapted sports for girls, like Little League Softball, or through legal statutes like Title IX, a strain of essentialism akin to 19th Century social feminism crept back in to the strategy, thus complicating what is meant by “equality.” Can separate really ever be equal? Codified and endorsed, the separation of boys and girls in sport fed in to the development of an ascendant gender ideology: Soft essentialism is a belief system that assumes natural differences between boys and girls. But in recognizing girls’ and women’s right to choose participation in public life, soft essentialism does not endorse categorical social containment of women in domestic life. Meanwhile, boys and men are a largely unmarked (and implicitly undifferentiated) category in the discourse of soft essentialism.

I will next illustrate some of the key dynamics of soft essentialism by drawing from my recent study of gender relations among adult volunteers in one community’s youth sports programs.<sup>1</sup> I draw from this research to offer illustrative examples of soft essentialist discourse. Youth sport is an ideal site for seeing the workings of soft essentialism. As an institution that makes visible people’s bodily abilities and limitations, sport has historically created and conveyed cultural assumptions and values about essential differences between women and men, more so than most other institutions (the military is perhaps equivalent). Though clearly contested by girls’ and women’s movement into sport, this is still a place where essentialism is constructed through sex segregated bodily practices. As I will show, many adults are not only “comfortable” with thinking of boys and girls as naturally different—they in fact revel in the pleasure of shared talk about the ways that girls and boys differ (Messner, 2000).

### Adults’ Narratives About Boys and Girls in Youth Sports

In my interviews, I asked youth soccer, baseball, and softball coaches to talk about boys, girls, and gender. All of the coaches embraced a narrative of equal opportunity for boys and girls to play sports. However, most struggled with how to square this belief in equality with the continued sex segregation in sports, and with the fact that the vast majority of coaches are men, while most women volunteers take on the helping roles of “team moms.”

Adults I interviewed were very articulate and confident in drawing from well-known cultural narratives about sport as a site of health enhancement and empowerment for girls. By contrast, they fumbled and struggled to find a coherent thread with which to weave a narrative about boys, often falling back on trite clichés about boys being “hyper-active,” “rowdy,” with “high energy,” and driven by “all that testosterone.” Girls are narrated by adults as flexible choosers in the world, and boys as narrow, linear, and predestined for public lives in sport and careers.

I was struck by the clear and confident ways in which today’s adults talk about girls’ lives as a *socially contextualized field of choices*. This way of talking about girls is, without a doubt, one of the major accomplishments of liberal feminism over the past forty years. By contrast, adults still don’t have very sophisticated ways of thinking about boys, beyond assuming that everything they do is driven

by “testosterone,” and by their natural predispositions to be active, aggressive, and competitive. Many of the parents I interviewed saw sports participation as a way for girls to learn more conventionally masculine traits that would benefit them in public life. These same adults seemed to see boys’ aggressive and competitive traits as simple expressions of nature, played out within (but not constructed by) sports, while girls were viewed as malleable, their softer natures reformable through sports participation. For example, Gilbert Morales, who has coached both girls and boys at various age-levels, suggested that sports participation creates aggressive traits in girls that make them more like boys:

They’re very, very different in style...The girls tend to form a team much easier than boys. Boys seem to have a much more competitive streak in them and a much more aggressive streak in them than the girls do—sometimes to the detriment of the team. They are individuals playing together, not a team working together. I think that changes a little bit as the girls get older and become more trained or conditioned into behaving in a more aggressive manner—over time, girls who would have been aggressive, to some extent, and competitive, to some extent, I think learn to be more so. And I think what happens is as they grow older, those who are willing to be like that—be more similar to boys, I think—stay in the sport. And I think that’s where the similarities—they become more similar. So, I think as that happens, as they get older, I think the differences tend to get a little bit more blurred.

Morales, like many coaches I interviewed, assumed that girls are naturally cooperative and group-oriented, but concludes that with athletic experiences, they can become aggressively competitive individuals, “more similar to the boys.” While girls are viewed as flexible, boys are viewed categorically as aggressive individualists, whose essential nature is played out in sports. Boys and girls become more similar, “the differences...a little bit more blurred,” when girls play sports and become more like boys. Coaches’ narratives rarely recognize any kind of range among boys, tending instead to assume that all boys have a natural affinity with sports. This assumption—especially when compared with the common view of girls as flexible, complex and fluid—speaks volumes about adults’ one-dimensional and still largely unreconstructed views of boys.

Adults who had coached both boys and girls said that they treated them differently because they saw girls as more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable, and boys as insensitive and less vulnerable. Mark Daly, who has coached both girls’ and boys’ soccer, said that boys respond well when he yells at them:

We had practice last night, and you know I found myself yelling at a couple of them. Whereas when I coached the high school girls I never, I won’t say never but almost never scream at them. I find that they kind of go into themselves and its kind of uh, it doesn’t work out. Whereas the guys you can yell at him, tell him that he’s going to do fifty laps and, and they don’t hate you. There’s no problem, do you know what I mean?

Similarly, soccer coach Alan Lindgren said that “girls are a lot more complex [while] the boys tend to be...there’s just not much going on...with the boys it’s—its *subtler*—they don’t really push back very much, they just kinda’ do it. They

keep their thoughts more to themselves I think.” Little League coach Ted Miller said that he has read articles on coaching that say that when coaching boys, “male coaches can, you know, come up and grab the face mask and shake ‘em and yell at ‘em, ‘rah-rah!’” But Miller has learned from these articles that girls “don’t seem to respond to that very well, the yelling and screaming.” Mitch Flores has coached both girls’ softball, and boys’ baseball, and he took a “very different approach” to coaching them:

When I coached boys’ baseball it was a total different style. The boys are a little more rough around the edges and you can talk to them a certain way and they take it and it just rolls right off ‘em, but the girls, no way. I’m boisterous, I have a deep big voice, I can yell at a kid across [the field]. I had some nine year olds on the team and I did “*Come on*” you know, and you see the little girls’ faces and you’re thinking, I hurt this little girl’s feelings, I’m sorry you know, “Are you all right?” And they’re standing there and they’re quivering and you’re going “Oh my gosh” and it, but it’s a different, it’s a different style.

As these coaches’ statements show, and as I observed in my years of field research, coaches tend to treat boys and girls differently. To the extent that they are conscious of this different treatment, they believe it to be a reasoned response to the different natures of boys and girls. Coaches’ rarely seem to consider how their behaviors might in fact *construct* these differences. Mark Daly’s and Mitch Flores’ belief that when a coach yells at boys “there’s no problem,” that “it just rolls right off ‘em,” is based on an assumption that boys are emotionally invulnerable, compared with the emotional vulnerability that seems so visible in girls. What they do not recognize, perhaps, is the many years of gender socialization that nine-year old boys have already endured—from families, peers, popular culture, and sport—that has taught them to hide or repress their emotional and physical pain, and not to show their vulnerabilities. Rather than simply responding to some natural ability that boys have to “take it,” coaches who yell at boys are simply adding another layer to what psychologist William Pollack (1999) calls “the hardening of boys.” Adults—more often men, but sometimes women as well—too often use emotional separation, shame, and fear to toughen boys in ways that prepares them for the cutthroat competition of public life, but that simultaneously stunts their ability to engage in the kinds of mutual intimacy that is the foundation of close relationships and happy family lives.

In my years of observing boys playing baseball, I’ve noticed that in the younger age groups, when a boy gets slightly injured, strikes out, or gets yelled at by a coach for a bad play, he will get visibly upset. Some of these younger boys cry—often privately, pulling their caps over their faces in the dugout—and the other boys and coaches usually don’t look at or speak to them, respectfully giving the boys private space to express feelings that are not considered fully appropriate. With the older boys—especially by age eleven or twelve—these tears and displays of vulnerability are few and far between. Instead, boys’ most common response to injuries, to making a bad play, or getting criticized by the coach, is a short burst of anger—like a thrown helmet after a strikeout—followed by a posture of sullen, determined silence in the dugout. The hardening of boys teaches them to transform any feelings of hurt, pain or sorrow into the more “appropriately masculine” expressions of contained anger or stoic silence.

Adults tolerate—even celebrate—the toughening of their sons because they assume it to be consistent both with boys' essential natures, and with their destinies to compete in future public lives with jobs and careers. It seems that adults assume that boys' primarily adult responsibility will be as family breadwinners, just like most of their fathers. I argue that coaches' different treatment of boys and girls serves as an add-on to differences that have been socially constructed through a myriad of gendering processes that shape boys and girls at deeply emotional levels. In turn, the coaches' actions and discourse about kids serves to *naturalize* these differences, thus helping to reestablish an ideology of gender essentialism.

This idea that boys are defined by their nature, while girls are complex and malleable within shifting social contexts seems an interesting inversion of long-standing tendencies to define women as close to nature, and men as aligned with culture. In an influential 1974 article entitled "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" anthropologist Sherry Ortner wrote that

woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, 'artificially,' through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendental objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings. (p. 75)

Through much of the 19th and 20th Centuries, this association of women with "nature," and men with "culture" justified a gender dichotomized world that contained women in the domestic, private sphere of supportive and procreative activities, while viewing the public world as men's dominion. This belief was foundational to the postwar ascendance of the ideology of hard essentialism.

It is perhaps the hallmark of the contemporary emergence of soft essentialism that boys and men are now seen to be defined by their biology (McCaughey, 2008), while meanwhile, girls and women, when given a range of opportunities, are seen to be capable of exercising "choice." This view of girls—a result simultaneously of the triumph of liberal feminist discourse and the incomplete feminist transformations of social institutions—allows adults to imagine girls as adult women straddling two contexts—the world of family, home and hearth, where their true nature presumably draws them, and the public world of education, sports, and work, which they will have a right to choose to participate in, or to opt out of. By contrast, this view of boys continues to see the competitive public world of sports, work and careers as their natural destiny. Since their inflexible biology presumably predisposes boys and men to the public world, they are not viewed as able to "choose" alternative (especially stigmatized feminine) paths. Ironically, fears that their sons may fail to develop properly, lead many adults to engage in (or at least tolerate) a hardening and toughening of boys that makes it difficult for boys to develop their full emotional potential (e.g., empathy, caretaking skills) that they need to become healthy adults, good partners, and effective parents. Unchallenged, this socially constructed emotional deficit in boys will leave the responsibility on women's shoulders to, through their "choices," straddle both worlds of public and domestic labor. Clearly, essentialism is alive and well in the ways that adults think about children. But this is not our grandparents' essentialism. It is an emergent "soft" essentialism that accommodates the reality of girls' and women's presence in sports, and in public life more generally.

Soft essentialist ideology about children in youth sports meshes neatly with the strains and tensions in work and family life among professional class adults. If and when they become mothers, highly educated women on professional career tracks face inflexible workplaces (Stone, 2007) and a second shift at home due to husbands who rarely share equally with childcare or housework (Gerson, 2010, Hochschild, 1989, Stone, 2007). When their kids reach school age, they face an accelerating “third shift” of volunteer activities in their children’s schools and communities (Messner, 2009). In this context, some class-privileged women choose to opt out of their careers, or to scale back to part-time jobs. Those mothers who choose to (or must) stay in their jobs face major juggling of work, family, and volunteer work that often leaves them feeling less than adequate in all three realms. Significantly, the women in my study narrate their decisions related to work and family in the language of “choice,” not constraint. Moreover, they describe their husbands as “supportive” of their decisions. Indeed, the men I interviewed uniformly say that they support whatever decisions their wives make about these matters. It is a foundational and usually unspoken assumption of the women’s and the men’s discourse that men do not face any such choice between work and family life, reflecting what Blair-Loy (2003) calls asymmetrical “cultural devotion schemas” that assume the primacy of men’s careers over women’s careers.

New mothers also confront what Hays (1996: 97) calls “Intensive mothering on behalf of the sacred child,” a ramping-up of the cultural expectations of mothering. Employed mothers must navigate the contradictions between images of warm and nurturing mothers in the home, and images of competition and self-interest in the market. “Choice” becomes a mode through which mothers navigate this tension, but not all mothers have the material resources of high-earning families. The idea that women can “choose” to opt in and out of careers is a *class-based work-family formation*: women who are best able (and constrained into) making the choice to leave (or lessen their participation in) the labor force are women who are married to high-earning men. These professional class women then feed their considerable talents into what Annette Lareau (2003: 2) calls the “concerted cultivation” of their own kids and into a range of volunteer activities with kids in the community.

In short, both professional class women and men deploy a soft essentialist narrative in which feminism is defined in individualist terms, giving women the choice to stay in their careers, while implicitly assuming that men need make no such choices. Soft essentialism’s embracing of women’s right to choose veils the still unequal social constraints faced by mothers in the contexts of professional class work and family life. The power of essentialism lies primarily in the widely held assumptions about the tugs and pulls of mothers’ supposed maternal natures, symmetrically counterposed to men’s supposed natural draw to public life. Parents’ discourse projects on to their children the same soft essentialist assumptions about daughters as future choosers, and sons as destined for career paths. Put simply, the ideology of soft essentialism views girls as “pre-choice,” while positioning boys as “pre-career.”

## Conclusion

I began this article with a feminist fable of triumph for girls and women in sport, a story around which a tremendous amount of social consent has congealed in recent years. I argue in this article that this consent signals a new moment of historical

gender formation buttressed by a hegemonic gender ideology, soft essentialism. This newly hegemonic ideology emerges as common sense in a moment characterized by continued gender asymmetries and inequalities in professional class adults' work and family lives. Youth sports has become a key site for the construction and naturalization of soft essentialism, a shared belief in natural differences between girls and boys that exists alongside more relativized and noncategorical views of girls and women as flexible choosers in social life, and still largely categorical views of boys and men. To put it another way, contemporary essentialism is softer when applied to girls, and harder when applied to boys.<sup>2</sup>

Hegemonic consent emerges around soft essentialism within the professional class because as a belief system it veils the sources, and explains away the consequences of continued work-family tensions and gender inequalities in the lives of professionals. Perhaps too, soft essentialism appeals to many highly educated professional class women because it allows them to rationalize a kind of trade-off: acceptance of continued gender inequality within their own family appears to support future upward class mobility for their kids. But as with all hegemonic ideologies, soft essentialism has its own contradictions that serve as potential sites of counter-hegemonic thought and action. I will conclude by outlining three potential sources of strain, and I will suggest some counter-hegemonic strategies that these strains imply.

First, working class mothers (or middle class women who are single or do not have high-earning husbands) face different sorts of work-family constraints, and are unlikely to have a realistic option to opt out of the workforce. However, many of them are living in communities (such as the one that I studied) dominated by the ideological hegemony of professional class soft essentialism. Just as working class women and women of color in the 1980s challenged the white middle class basis of feminist binary constructionism, so too might they object today to the hegemony of soft essentialism. How do women who lack class privilege negotiate this field? What sorts of oppositional networks and discourses might they create? I found, for instance, that many of the most assertive and powerful women coaches in the community I studied were Latina and Asian-American mothers working in full-time jobs.

Second, today's largely unreconstructed essentialist and categorical view of boys and men can't help but run up against the reality of the expanding definitions of masculinity that many boys receive in schools, families and in popular culture. Many boys are being exposed to an expanding emotional and sexual repertoire, and are also being taught to view girls and women as equals. As some boys internalize these broadened gender and sexual repertoires, they may come to experience youth sports—still largely a homosocial realm run by men—in contradictory ways. However, since youth sports do not simply reflect, but also help to construct soft essentialism, we cannot expect change simply to emerge from outside sport. As long as boys and men remain an unmarked category; as long as they are assumed to be driven uniformly by a simple linear nature, and are cordoned off from girls and women in homosocial public realms like youth sports, then girls and women will have less hope of overcoming the constraints imposed on them in this historical moment. Surely, any progressive resistance to soft essentialism must include a strategy of broadening boys' emotional repertoires and desegregating adult leadership in sports. In this sense, *a strategic de-gendering strategy* in boys' sports—especially



affirmative efforts to break down the sex segregation of boys' sports and men's occupational niches like youth sports coaching—can be a key element of resistance to the oppressive limits of soft essentialism.

Third, the soft essentialist celebration of equal opportunity and free choice for girls can't help but run up against the continued existence of social barriers to equal choice for girls (e.g., girls being routed out of baseball toward softball), and also for their mothers (who continue to face the burdens of making the tough choices between career and family, or who bump up against informal barriers to their serving as head coaches in youth sports). Some of the women coaches I interviewed in fact struggled to make sense of the continued sex segregation in youth sports. Most coaches, however, believe it's best for girls and boys to have separate leagues, fearing that putting the kids together might disadvantage the girls, perhaps driving them away from playing sports.

The question of what's best for kids—sex-segregated or integrated teams—is a complicated point of tension, even from a feminist perspective. If one is interested in giving boys experiences that will counter the kinds of sexist attitudes and assumptions that they commonly develop in male-only sports, then one would likely favor coed sports. The more boys can learn, early on, to fully respect girls and women's full range of abilities, the better off they will be in their future relationships with women as classmates, coworkers, bosses, and family members—and the more they might be nudged in the direction of thinking of men too as having to make choices to navigate between work and family life. However, if one is thinking of girls' interests, this seems a more complicated question. It was decided more than a half-century ago in the United States that in race relations, separate is inherently unequal. Some scholars have argued on a similar basis for sex desegregation in sport (McDonaugh & Peppano, 2008). Sport scholar Ann Travers takes a nuanced view, arguing that sex segregation in sport "...plays an important role in normalizing and legitimizing the ideology of the two sex system" (Travers 2008, p. 80). In Travers' view, the cordoning off of girls and women contains the ways in which strong and powerful women athletes might otherwise "trouble" stubbornly essentialist views of girls and women as physically inferior. Travers argues for a simultaneous desegregation of boys' and men's sports, while retaining for the moment separate leagues for girls and women.

Travers' both/and approach, I believe, intuitively perfectly the most promising strategy for pushing the limits of soft essentialism. As I argued above, degendering strategies in girls' and women's sports might today be counterproductive in pushing for distributive justice; after all, girls' and women's sports are still widely under-appreciated, under-funded, and under-covered in the media. A program of strategic categoricism in girls' sports, in this context, still seems necessary in fighting for seemingly mundane things, like access to good playing fields. However, it makes sense to couple this strategic categoricism of girls' sports with strategic degendering of boys' sports<sup>3</sup> that goes beyond the now-common incorporation of the occasional star girl player (who too often gets defined as a token or fictive boy), instead integrating many girls and opening space for transgender people, thus puncturing the categorical essentialism that still encapsulates boys and men.

This dual strategy—strategic categoricism in girls' sports coupled with a de-gendering of boys' sports—presses against the emergent contradictions and fissures within the logic of soft essentialism. Like any strategy in a complex field

of power, this one too has its limits, and introduces new points of tension and contest. But its future success can be assessed by the extent to which it contests the oppressive social relations of gender, race, class, and sexuality that are reflected in the hegemonic stories we tell ourselves about the place of sport in social life.

## Notes

1. The empirical research in this section of the article is drawn from my study of how gender is constructed in a single community's youth soccer and baseball/softball leagues. A several-year participant-observation study, supplemented with fifty in-depth interviews with adult volunteer coaches, this research explored the ways that adult divisions of labor are created in youth sports, and how these gender divisions of labor are connected to families, workplaces, and communities. The quotes presented here are used as illustrations of the emergent ideology of soft essentialism, but the broader ramifications of this research are elaborated in my book (Messner, 2009). All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

2. Here is a point at which the  $2 \times 2$  table in Figure 1 reveals its limitations. If we were to properly map the location of the currently hegemonic professional class view of girls and women, it would be firmly within lower-left "soft essentialism" quadrant. However, as hegemonic views of boys and men are still largely categorical and grounded in biological essentialism, these views would be located closer to the upper-left "hard essentialism" quadrant.

3. This strategy holds an obvious danger. If the most skilled and competitive girls athletes are siphoned off to play with the boys, then girls' teams and leagues will be face a dilution of talent, and probably of parental and community commitment as well. This in turn could spell doom for categorically-organized girls' sports. At least in the short run, this could result in far fewer opportunities for girls to play sports. A historical analogy—not perfectly applicable, but suggestive of these dangers—is the rapid decline and eventual death of the professional baseball Negro Leagues, in the mid-Twentieth Century years following the desegregation of Major League Baseball.

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