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Women Physical Educators and the Science of Sex Differences in America, 1950s-1990s

Throughout the twentieth century, the concept of sex differences has been a central principle in American physical education. The question of whether men and women are similar or distinct — in their physical, psychological, and social attributes — has been especially important for white female teachers and administrators. For decades, women physical educators have relied on “sex differences” as a discursive framework for addressing many questions. For example, what are women’s physical abilities and limits? How do anatomy and physiology affect female motor skills and biomechanics? Can females learn to perform like males, or are they destined to “throw like girls” and to “run with a precipitate waddle”? Which sports suit the female body and temperament? Are co-recreation and mixed competition worthwhile or ill-advised? Such issues are far from routine; they encompass the theoretical, instructional, and administrative structure of women’s physical education.

From 1900 to the Second World War, white female physical educators in America drew complex conclusions about men’s and women’s “natures”. They regarded sex differences as both large and small, both significant and trivial, both fixed and elastic.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the subject of sex differences and physical education changed substantially. Many developments in the profession — and American society at large — transformed the ways in which teachers thought about female “nature”: the implementation of Title IX in the 1970s; the subsequent growth of female athletics and co-recreation; the merger of men’s and women’s physical education departments; the women’s movement and its fervent debates about gender; and sophisticated new research about sex differences by natural and social scientists. From the 1970s on, terms such as “equality” and “equity” gradually absorbed the profession’s attention. In such an environment, was the concept of “difference” a viable theme or a professional dead-end? Was it still useful, female physical educators wondered, to debate the extent, origins, and implications of sex differences? The answer proved to be, yes.

This paper examines how white female physical educators in America conceptualized sex differences between the 1950s and 1990s. It concludes that teachers and administrators gradually redefined the notion of “difference” to fit a world of “equity”. They highlighted difference — and located it in biology — when such a strategy promoted equity. For example, many asserted that males and females should not compete with or against each other. In mixed sports, the argument ran, girls’ and women’s innate lack of strength and speed disadvantaged them, making fair competition impossible. At the same time, female physical educators have maintained that many sex differences in athletic performance and interests are the result of inequitable opportunities; once girls receive fair training and encouragement, they say, sex-related disparities should decrease. Since

mid-century, then, female teachers and coaches have accentuated and minimized sex differences, and have attributed women's "character" to both biology and culture, both nature and nurture.

Why have female teachers and coaches adopted such a complex, even ambiguous perspective about sex differences? This paper examines the multiple factors—intellectual, professional, and social — that have influenced how female teachers think about women's physicality and "character." Borrowing selectively from modern research about sex differences, female teachers have advanced new ideas about "womanhood" and broader opportunities for girls and women — while also protecting certain cultural assumptions about gender and the old logic of female governance of women's sports.

The paper draws on a diverse body of primary literature by white female teachers in the United States between 1950 and 1990, including physical education textbooks, popular and professional articles, research papers, policy documents, and official sports manuals. In addition, this study draws on some archival materials, such as the records of individuals and professional organizations.

The paper contributes to a scholarly analysis of the intellectual foundations of physical education. In particular, it examines the ideas of physical educators within the context of scientific, professional, and cultural developments. More broadly, the paper uses the history of physical education to consider a central puzzle in women's history and feminist theory: What is the meaning of "difference" — as a concept and practice — in a society that espouses "equity"?