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Iliana Smiser

Why the Binary?: Cisnormativity in Athletics

WGSS-350 Queer Theories

Dr. Kiki Kosnick

Fall 2020

Short Analytical Essay

Cisnormativity is a problematic idea that is commonly seen throughout society. It is especially prominent in athletics due to the binary created by men's labeled and women's labeled sports. Accordingly, transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes often feel as though they do not fit into or are excluded from athletic spaces. However, the gender binary has been shown to be misleading as people assigned male and female at birth have many overlapping characteristics. Moreover, increasing awareness of intersex individuals is further complicating the enforcement of a problematic binary. In this paper, I will discuss several reasons why the gender binary no longer has anything to stand on, and why cisnormativity should be abandoned in athletic spaces. Finally, using evidence from various areas of study, I will challenge the NCAA's current rules on transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes. Gender itself is fabricated, but the sexes are not binary either. Therefore, cisnormativity in athletics creates an exclusionary environment for many athletes, and it should be abandoned to allow for the inclusion of athletes of all sexes and gender identities.

Sex is defined as the "anatomical, hormonal, genetic, and physiological components of one's body" (Compton et al., 2019, p.1). Therefore, sex is made up of testosterone and estrogen levels, secondary sex characteristics, genitalia, etc. Meanwhile, gender is defined as the "socially constructed system that categorizes individuals as masculine or feminine" (Compton et al., 2019, p.1). According to van Anders et al. (2017), roles, norms, social structures, and laws all play a part in making up one's gender. The two terms, sex and gender, often get confused, or they are used interchangeably. However, acknowledging the differences between sex and gender is crucial when discussing gender identities and cisnormativity.

In "The Future of Sex and Gender in Psychology: Five Challenges to the Gender Binary", Hyde et al. (2019) discuss several points of evidence that show how the gender binary is not

binary. First, it is discussed that if there is a binary between the male sex and female sex, then every aspect of the human body would be binary, too. The human brain, though, shows “mosaicism,” as in a combination of female form, male form, and an intermediate form (Hyde et al., 2019, p. 174). Hyde et al. (2019) then go on to talk about the gender similarities hypothesis. This hypothesis says that men and women are psychologically similar, and show very few differences. A meta-analysis showed that when looking for psychological differences between men and women, there are very few differences, and even those differences show an overlap (Hyde et al., 2019). These psychological similarities and small margins of difference further disprove the gender binary. Transgender and nonbinary individuals curb the gender binary, as well. Their mere existence demonstrates that “birth-assigned categories are imperfect at predicting how a person self-categorizes” (Hyde et al., 2019, p. 181). If the gender binary were true, then the sex a person is assigned at birth would be how they express themselves and identify, but that is not always the case. In brief, the gender binary has been challenged from quite a few areas of study, all of which contest and/or subvert it.

Moreover, one of society’s biggest beliefs is that testosterone is solely a male hormone, and progesterone and estrogen (estradiol) are solely female hormones. However, all sexes and gender identities naturally create these hormones. They are not simply divided between male and female, as many believe. It has been shown that progesterone and estradiol levels are similar between males and females (Hyde et al., 2019). Additionally, testosterone levels overlap between the male sex and female sex, and “masculine-normed behaviors actually increases testosterone levels in women and men” (van Anders et al., 2017, pp. 195-197). Sport in general has historically been a masculine-normed activity, but when we consider the things athletes do in training such as weight lifting, that idea of masculine-normed activities becomes more obvious.

These pieces of evidence show that hormone levels are not binary, and thus cannot be used to rule in athletics on who can compete in what category. Many athletic organizations, including the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), most often attempt to use hormone levels as a way to determine how a person is allowed to compete in their athletic events. The common belief that higher testosterone levels in female athletes creates an unfair advantage is the basis for these rules. On the contrary, these rules are largely problematic and, in reality, do not catch female athletes attempting to cheat by increasing their testosterone levels (van Anders et al., 2017).

Testosterone is a banned substance in the NCAA (NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes, 2011), meaning that any athlete competing in the NCAA is not allowed to use testosterone without medical exemption. Testosterone levels that are altered due to outside factors have been shown to increase muscle mass, which could create an athletic advantage. But, it has been proven that natural levels of testosterone, in athletes of any sex, do not positively impact athletic performance (van Anders et al., 2017). Therefore, monitoring testosterone levels in athletes competing under women's labeled events is discriminatory.

As in the case of transgender women, this belief creates an exclusionary, biased, and non-affirming space in athletics. First, the NCAA requires medical exemption for testosterone (NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes, 2011), which entirely diminishes a transgender person's privacy. The NCAA also states that transgender women must complete one year of testosterone suppression treatment before being able to compete on a women's team. Otherwise, they can continue to compete on a men's team, or if they wish to compete on a women's team, the team must then be labeled a mixed team. Yet, transgender men can immediately compete on men's teams because there is no alleged advantage (NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes, 2011). Under these rules, transgender women are excluded, but

transgender men are not excluded. Because of this, some transgender athletes may delay transitioning in order to continue competing in their athletic events. Nevertheless, it creates an environment that is exclusionary and biased against transgender athletes.

Furthermore, intersex and nonbinary athletes face even more exclusion and bias. For intersex athletes, they may face bias in athletics for not appearing to be the gender they are competing under. This could lead them to feel unsafe or unaccepted in athletics. They may also face exclusion if their testosterone levels are deemed too high. In this case, many athletes are asked to take drugs that suppress their testosterone levels. Despite the belief that less testosterone would cause a decline in performance, “exogenous reductions in testosterone are not always accompanied by reductions in performance; sometimes, there are actually increases” (van Anders et al., 2017, p. 197), meaning that, in some cases, testosterone suppression drugs may cause increases in athletic performance. This, again, proves the point that testosterone levels do not create an advantage in athletics, and may further create issues for athletes undergoing such treatments. In the case of nonbinary athletes, labeling sports as “women’s” and “men’s” forces them to choose a gender to compete under and not have their gender identity affirmed. In an inclusion forum, the NCAA laid out recommendations for athletes who identify as nonbinary, (Carroll et al., 2018). The NCAA stated that nonbinary athletes who are not undergoing hormone treatments of any kind are able to compete under the sex they were assigned at birth. If a nonbinary athlete is undergoing any sort of hormone treatment, then they must follow the same rules as the ones laid out for transgender athletes. While some nonbinary athletes may be comfortable with competing under these rules, the NCAA is creating an athletic environment that is non-affirming despite their inclusion efforts. These rules can also create an environment where

a nonbinary person may not feel like they fit in with the rest of their team due to differences in gender identity.

Alternatively, the NCAA could potentially alleviate the issues their rules create with the use of mixed teams. A mixed team is one in which both male labeled athletes and female labeled athletes can compete together (NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes, 2011). A mixed team could support and affirm athletes of all gender identities. For transgender athletes, mixed teams could allow them to compete while transitioning which would otherwise not be allowed. For intersex and nonbinary athletes, mixed teams can allow for them to compete as they are whether they are undergoing hormone treatments or not. This then allows for their identity to be affirmed without a gendered label being applied to them. Cisgender athletes competing on a mixed team would still have their identity affirmed as well. Mixed teams also compete under men's labeled events (NCAA Inclusion of Transgender Student-Athletes, 2011). By doing so, mixed teams are able to avoid the argument of testosterone creating an advantage for them. All in all, mixed teams have the potential to create an affirming and inclusive space in athletics for all sexes and gender identities.

Compton et al. (2019) define cisnormativity as “the assumption that everyone identifies within the gender binary of male/female” (p. 1). This is often meaning the sex a person was assigned at birth. Cisnormativity becomes problematic when discussing other gender identities who do not identify with what they were assigned at birth. It ignores the existence of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex individuals. Cisnormativity only acknowledges cisgender individuals. In athletics, men's labeled and women's labeled sports enforce the idea of cisnormativity because there is no recognition of any person outside of the gender binary. By labeling sports binarily, it automatically sets up the exclusion of individuals in sports who are not

cisgender. Transgender and intersex athletes face many rules in cisnormative athletics, largely based on their hormone levels. They are expected to fit into specific categories with specific expectations. If transgender and intersex athletes do not fit into these categories they face exclusion from the athletic events they wish to participate in. Nonbinary athletes face the same rules, as well as having to fit back into the binary if they wish to compete. This immediately diminishes their gender identity because, when put into the gender binary of sports, it will often be assumed that they identify with the gender they are competing under. As discussed, the gender binary is yet to be backed by verifiable evidence. In fact, the majority of evidence actively disproves the gender binary. This then implies that cisnormativity is unjustifiable, and has zero basis to be used in athletic environments. There is no reason to binarily label sports, and the constant presence of cisnormativity in athletics only produces an exclusive environment. Ultimately, cisnormativity in athletics is extremely problematic because it creates an exclusionary and non-affirming space for transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes.

It is important to note that the NCAA's most current rules for inclusion of transgender athletes are from 2011, which means they are severely outdated. In these rules, the NCAA does not discuss anything in relation to nonbinary or intersex athletes. However, in 2018, the NCAA held a forum about the inclusion of athletes who are "gender fluid, genderqueer, non-binary, agender, or another gender outside the gender binary" (Carroll et al., 2018, p. 19). These rules were largely the same as those laid out for transgender athletes, and they still force a gender binary into athletics. The NCAA tried to be inclusive of all genders with this forum. Yet, the gender binary is still present in their athletic events, so it is still a biased and non-affirming space for any athlete who is not cisgender. With that being said, the NCAA recently had a summit about gender identity in their athletics. The summit included many transgender and nonbinary

student-athletes who spoke about their personal experiences in athletics. Many other participants were in attendance such as, “university presidents, athletics directors, conference representatives, athletic trainers, team physicians, mental health professionals, faculty athletics representatives, cisgender student-athletes, and cisgender and nonbinary coaches... external industry and subject matter experts on collegiate athletics, the broader higher education community, medicine, science, and diversity, equity, and inclusion” (McGuire, 2020). The summit concluded with those in attendance saying it is important to listen to the lived experiences of transgender and nonbinary athletes. Although, there was also a call for more research so that new rules and policies could be written for the NCAA (McGuire, 2020). While this is a step in the right direction for the NCAA, there is already research out there that could be used to write new rules. Hyde et al. (2019) and van Anders et al. (2017) could make major contributions to future NCAA policies on transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes. For now though, the NCAA is lacking in their efforts to create a more inclusive and affirming environment in their athletic programs.

Cisnormativity is the main factor in upholding men’s labeled and women’s labeled sports, but there is no evidence to support the gender binary that cisnormativity holds roots in. Transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes show a range of hormone levels and identity expressions that result in their exclusion from NCAA events, or they are otherwise forced to participate in athletic events under a label that does not always affirm their identity. This creates a space that is discriminatory and non-affirming. Thus, transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes often do not feel as though they can participate in athletics safely. If the cisnormativity ideal was abandoned, athletics would be far more inclusive and affirming for athletes of all sexes and gender identities. Nevertheless, there is a lot to change before cisnormativity is out of athletics. The NCAA must write new rules and regulations for the inclusion of non-cisgender

athletes as their policies are extremely outdated. They should also follow the research that is currently available to abandon cisnormativity in their athletic programs. Surely, if the NCAA were to deny the gender binary and cisnormativity, athletics would become a far more inclusive, identity-affirming space for transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes.

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