
Fall 2008

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Jeffrey M. Hawkins
Oklahoma State University

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Hawkins, Jeffrey M. (2008) "Sport stereotypes in the 21st century “brought to you by” Media Corporations," *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.9741/2161-2978.1012

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/jpme/vol3/iss1/4>

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Sport Stereotypes in the 21st Century “brought to you by” Media Corporations

Jeffrey M. Hawkins

Since its formative years sport has had a commercial component to its operation, however, in no previous time period have we seen the type of growth in the current commercialization of sport that we have seen in the last two decades. Today, sport is big business and as argued in this paper, big businesses heavily involved in sport are mostly concerned with the preservation of established privileges (gender) and priorities (promotion) such as maintaining hierarchical control and generating profit uncritically and unwillingly inclined to take action upon the world in order to transform.

From the article, “Helping Students Understand Stereotyping,” in *Education Digest* it is suggested a difference exists between group generalizations and stereotypes (Cortes, 2001). It is argued, group generalizations are flexible and permeable to new, countervailing knowledge that can challenge or undermine current belief, while stereotypes are rigid and resistant to change even in the face of compelling evidence (Cortes, 2001). Therefore, unlike generalizations, with a stereotype, discrimination prevails against genders, ethnic groups, religions, people with alternative lifestyles or sexual identities, and any other conceivable minority. Ideally, historically, and on a global scale, it can be argued, sports have been a true egalitarian path and a particularly powerful instrument in countering stereotypes that typically lead to discrimination and disempowerment which continues to limit individual opportunity for full potential even in the 21st century.

Globally, as communal, societal, and educational institutions have individually and collectively tried to make aware, uproot, and eliminate long-standing, common, and obscure stereotypes like: boys are worthy; girls are caregivers; boys are physically active; girls are talkative; whites are smart; Asians are good in math; the indigenous are environmental; married couples can raise a family; and the poor are lazy. Thankfully, these stereotypical notions have been somewhat diminished, however, others about sport; boys are good at sports; girls are better in individual sports; men are coaches; women are cheerleaders; blacks cannot swim; whites cannot jump; Latinos are good in

Jeffrey M. Hawkins is an associate professor of social studies at Oklahoma State University, where he coordinates the secondary social studies program and teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in social studies methods and multicultural education.

soccer; homosexuals do not like sports; and the rich are golfers still remain among the least challenged from these same communal, societal, and educational entities around the world.

Questions for Educators

With this, a set of questions arise for educators to tackle in our classrooms, such as: “Why do we still hear these same sport stereotypes from our students and sometimes colleagues each and every year or sometimes daily?” or “What influences and reinforces the students or colleagues the continued use of these same sport stereotypes each and every year or sometimes daily?” The answers to these questions, it is argued in this paper, has much to do with a new sport-media-tourism paradigm that is tied globally to societal and economic power matrices in today’s world that “sponsor” the continued use of 21st century sport stereotypes.

The few examples of sport stereotypes listed earlier are rehashed everyday and annually from supporting evidence representation of daily and annual achievements in sport themselves. In addition, supported by research, suggesting self-schemas in early adolescent individuals conform to sport stereotypes associated with their identity group lead to the continuance of sport stereotypes (Rasmussen, 2005). For example, socialization “push and pull” agents like societal media and consumer socio-economics coordinate and dictate the many basketball courts, but lack of tennis courts in inner-cities; the abundance of New York Yankee baseball and Dallas Cowboy football fans and memorabilia globally, but lack of Manchester United football/soccer fans and memorabilia in the United States; it is most likely that a Kenyan will win a major marathon this year; a Swiss will win a major downhill skiing event this year; however, this supposed superiority is systematically blind to “others” successes in baseball, football/soccer, marathons, or slalom events this year. Why?

Globalization of Sport

Since World War II and the advent of the television age there have been significant transformations in sport and sporting cultures. Sportive nationalism intensified in the late 20th century as countries’ sought ways to position themselves in the global hierarchy of nations (Nauright, 2004). Specifically, during the 1980s and 1990s this process intensified as governments increasingly diverted large sums of money into national sporting programs aimed at succeeding on the international stage (Nauright, 2004). The number of nations that can spend the necessary resources on elite sporting programs across the

board, however, is limited to a small minority of the over 200 participants in the Olympic Games and nations must often choose whether to divert limited public resources into supporting international sporting success or the attraction of international sporting events (Nauright, 2004). Thus, with this narrow economic focus by smaller countries, inter-national success in individual sports like (Rugby) in Oceania, (Baseball) in the Caribbean, and (Running) in West Africa ironically reinforce stereotypes for the global community.

Starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, media corporations invested at unprecedented levels in sporting coverage and team/league ownership, particularly as pay television companies became global entities and media corporations sought cheap and ready-made programming (Nauright, 2004). For example, Disney was a \$2.9 billion amusement park and cartoon company, but it has grown nearly 10 times as large and now owns the ABC TV and radio networks, part or all of over 10 cable stations (including ESPN, A&E, and Lifetime), and three major film studios. It has major holdings in book publishing, the travel and resort business, music recording, and 660 retail outlets. It also owns two professional sports teams, plus TV production and Internet companies. Numerous other assets today make Disney a \$25 billion company (Karp, 1999).

Accordingly, around the globe, old stadiums were rebuilt or renamed with a corporate identity label or brand name sold to highest bidder with the most avid fan base. Because of this, sports and sporting events have become integral components of a global political economy, which has seen production shift from developed to less developed societies and an expanding focus in the developed world on the branding and consumption of image and lifestyle (Nauright, 2004). Therefore, fans, team jerseys, and merchandise are now cultivated, produced, and assembled in all corners of the globe for immediate export. In addition, the awarding of large-scale events to individual countries have become key factors in local and national development strategies throughout the globe (Nauright, 2004). With this game, unfortunately, traditional sports fans, local communities, and democratic practices are often the losers, while growth is promoted and business and governments align in support of events-driven economies to win (Nauright, 2004).

Recently, major sporting competitions and tournaments are regarded as “mega-events” to be marketed and managed, where size really does matter (Van Bottenburg, 2001). The lure of large and spectacular events is thought to be an expedient way to attract media interest in a host city, which, it is hoped, will translate into an influx of capital through tourism and new investment (Van Bottenburg, 2001). At the very same time sporting events have begun incorporating cultural elements, in an effort to present themselves as broader events (Van Bottenburg, 2001). These events are commonly used in tourist promotions to present cities and nations as exciting destinations with interesting

cultures for tourists to consume (Van Bottenburg, 2001). Therefore, it is appropriate, in the 21st century to speak of a sport-media-tourism complex that is at the center of many local, regional, and national development strategies (Van Bottenburg, 2001). Like the military-industrial complex before it, this new paradigm has been highly uneven and confined principally to Europe, North America, Australia, Japan, and in 2008 for China. However, the developing economies of Mexico (Summer Olympics 1968), Brazil, South Korea (World Cup 2002 and Summer Olympics 1988), Malaysia, India, and South Africa (World Cup 2010) have increasingly sought and held major events by which to promote their countries on a global stage (Van Bottenburg, 2001).

Global Event Stereotypes

As stated above, during the last three decades sport has assumed an ever greater role within the globalization process and in the regeneration of national, regional, and local identities in the post-colonial and global age (Nauright, 2004). With much of this century's global culture displayed by the media, events, particularly significant sporting ones such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup, have become highly sought after commodities as developed countries, and increasingly some leading developing countries, move towards event-driven economies (Nauright, 2004). In this game, however, many countries are left behind without the necessary infrastructure or visibility to compete successfully.

In some countries, the military has traditionally supported Olympic programs. In Pakistan, where the armed forces play a prominent role in society, the national champion in rifle marksmanship serves in Pakistan's army (Padden, 2008). In others, like China, Kenya, and Australia, Olympic programs are government funded while for the past ten years the United Kingdom and Italy have used a "sport lottery" to help support sport funding (Sappenfield & Ford, 2008). At the height of the cold war, athletes from the Soviet Union were totally dependent on government money, but today Russia is a bit more market-oriented and public funding is supplemented with corporate sponsorship (Sappenfield & Ford, 2008). Finally, the United States is one of only three countries where Olympic athletes receive no government funding. Instead the U.S. Olympic Committee relies exclusively on income from the sale of television broadcast rights and from corporate sponsors (Padden, 2008).

Furthermore, the process of displaying a culture in the lead-up to an event during the event itself has had to focus on ready-made markets, thus reinforcing stereotypes about a place and its people (Nauright, 2004). Past examples of imagined histories and the incorporation of cultural difference within the production of events are commonplace, for example the Aboriginal

focus in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the Mormon focus in the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Games, and Tibetan focus with the Beijing games in 2008. Thus, paradoxes and inequalities brought on by the sport-media-tourism complex drives the emphasis on global sporting event stereotypes. Arguably, the values associated with the Olympics; humanity, peace, and fair play are easily transferable between communities. In principle, unified community and the consolidated celebration of sport, culture, and the environment, but, in practice global values that are external to local communities and unable to reflect their particularities.

Gender Stereotypes

In 1984, Nawal El Moutawakel won the 400m hurdles, becoming the first woman from an Islamic nation to win an Olympic medal and the first Moroccan athlete to win a gold medal. When she took her victory lap carrying a huge Moroccan flag she became a source of pride and inspiration not only for Moroccan girls and women, but also for a whole nation. At this time, such media attention on a global sporting event, its story, and image of El Moutawakel would not have necessarily reached every corner of the world. However, for those who were able to access, experience, or view this, this "new" lens of a sport in which women excelled, once only played by men, shattered stereotypes of that time, so that today's women athletes could demonstrate from that point forward that barriers can be broken and cultural stereotypes can be overcome.

Therefore sixteen years later, as we entered the 21st century with the Internet's global 24/7 information superhighway access world we live in presently, one would have thought that Aboriginal Australian Cathy Freeman's win in the 400m, in front of her home crowd during the 2000 Olympic Sydney games, would not have been such an event that made her an idol for her own people, and seen by many on a global scale in the non-Aboriginal community as a symbol of national reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. As surprising the results of these two major events, both seem to challenge research that has supported the notion that when female sporting idols in typically male domains excel, they are an even more powerful means of promoting gender equality. Why are there still sport stereotypes?

A possible answer, on a global scale, supports earlier research by Sabo and Curry Jansen (1992), Pamela Creedon (1994), and Alina Bernstein and Neil Blain (2002), with a study of seventy countries carried out by *Erin Research* and *Global Media Monitoring Project* examining one day's worth of news, about 16,000 stories altogether (FIFA.com, 2007). The study illuminated an indisputable male domination of the news, whose subjects in 78% of the

instances were men. In sports news, moreover, 88% of the news subjects were men. In television newscasts, where sports constituted some 8% of all news stories appearing worldwide, a mere 7% of these sports stories had women as their main focus (FIFA.com, 2007). Qualitative differences occur as well when sport commentators refer to them as “girls” or “young ladies”, but male athletes are always “men.” In addition, commentators referred to female tennis players by their first names 53% of the time and to men only 8% of the time, whereas, male athletes tended to be described in terms of strengths and success, female athlete’s physical strengths were often neutralized by ambivalent language (FIFA.com, 2007).

Conclusion

Globalization has emerged as one of the foremost discourses of our times. “Globalization is not incidental to our lives...It is a shift in our very life circumstances. It is the way we now live.” (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002). Key forces in these changes are the new media technologies that enable distant events, people, and processes to have a more powerful and immediate impact on our lives (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002). Consequently, there has been considerable discussion and debate about the impact of globalization and, in particular, the influence of global forces on local cultures (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002). These trends have fed what McChesney (1999) calls the “rampant commercialization of childhood.” Thus, media firms work to develop brand recognition and product loyalty from birth. The strategy is to create a recognizable identity through advertising and then clone it through endless product tie-ins and spin-offs (Karp, 1999).

To conclude, ideally and through global interconnection, interdependence, and interrelation, like education, play is every child’s right. And like education, play and recreational activities (sports) have enormous potential for changing the lives of students. Sport can teach all students important values and social skills, such as cooperation, self-esteem, fair play and respect for others, as well as being good for their physical and mental development. Finally, and most importantly for today’s global game of life, sport, like education, can help individuals become equal players in society. However, this ideal cannot be attained with the real sport-media-tourism complex paradigm on a global scale economically and socially controlling and continuing to propagate sport stereotypes.

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