The Technologies of the Self: Sport, Feminism, and Foucault

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Following Michel Foucault, feminist sport scholars have demonstrated how women’s physical activity can act as a technology of domination that anchors women into a discursive web of normalizing practices. There has been less emphasis on Foucault’s later work that focuses on the individual’s role of changing the practices of domination. Foucault argues that human beings turn themselves into subjects through what he labels “the technologies of the self.” While his work is not gender specific, some feminists have seen the technologies of the self as a possibility to reconceptualize the self, agency and resistance in feminist theory and politics. In this paper, I aim to examine what Foucault’s technologies of self can offer feminists in sport studies. I begin by reviewing applications of Foucault’s technology of the self to analyses of women’s physical activity. I will next locate the technologies of the self within Foucault’s theory of power, self and ethics to further reflect how valuable this concept can be for feminist sport studies.

Introduction

In sport sociology, examinations of the “body” have become increasingly popular. One prominent framework for these analyses has been Michel Foucault’s theory of the body as a site of disciplinary, normalizing practices. As the body is a central aspect of physical activity, sport researchers have taken Foucault seriously this past decade and thus, answered David Andrews’ (1993) call for using Foucault’s analysis as a “tool for studying the significance of sport within a social context” (p. 149). Sport feminists, in particular, have called for Foucauldian examinations...
of the female sporting body (Cole, 1993; Theberge, 1991). Their work has analyzed how physical activity acts as a technology of domination that anchors women into a discursive web of normalizing practices (Cole, 1993, 1998; Duncan, 1994; Eskes, Duncan, & Miller, 1998; Markula, 1995, 2000, 2001). These studies demonstrate how physical activity disciplines women into docile bodies who unquestioningly follow a discursive regime. Their focus, therefore, has been on physical activity as a vehicle of women’s domination. Indeed, Foucault has been known for his insightful reading of bodies inscribed within power relations, but has, consequently, been critiqued for ignoring the individual’s ability to resist practices of domination. However, there has been a renewed interest in Foucault’s later work that focuses on the individual’s role of changing dominant discourses. In sport studies, Nancy Theberge (1991) has pointed to the possibility of analyzing women’s agency and resistance based on Foucault’s theory. Because Foucault concentrates on local and intimate operations of power, it is possible to examine how everyday, bodily practices can empower women to change the institutional use of power in sport.

As a feminist scholar, I have always been interested in how physical activity can serve women’s empowerment. While feminists have approached sport as a site of resistance from several perspectives, in this paper I explore how Foucault’s perspective can inform our discussion of women’s empowerment. I aim to do this by first reviewing how sport feminists have used Foucault’s concept of “the technologies of the self” to examine women’s physical activity as a transformative practice and second, by reviewing how Foucault viewed individual resistance and freedom. Finally, I will locate the technologies of the self within feminist theory to discuss how women’s physically active bodies can become resistant bodies.

**Sport as a Women’s Technology of the Self**

When Genevieve Rail and Jean Harvey (1995) edited a special issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* on the tenets of French poststructuralism, their editors’ introduction included Foucault’s technologies of the self among the integral poststructuralist concepts for sport research. Citing Foucault, they defined the technologies of the self as practices that permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988b, p. 18)

Through these technologies an individual begins to recognize her/himself as a subject and in this sense, s/he can be understood to counter the technologies of power. Based on Rail and Harvey’s explanation, the technologies of the self can be conceptualized as practices that free the individual from the control of disciplinary practices and consequently, lead to self transformation. However, when Rail and Harvey attempted to identify sport sociological research that had used this concept, they found only a few “tentative” analyses of sport as a transformative practice in the Foucauldian sense (Boudreau, Folman, & Konzak, 1992; Heikkala, 1993) and no studies that approached the technologies of the self from a feminist perspective. After Rail and Harvey’s review, however, research on women’s sport as a technology of the self has accumulated and it has now become feasible to learn
what sport practices have been identified as transformative. In order to provide such an assessment, I took a closer look at the research. As indicated in the review provided in the next section, some researchers detected the technologies of the self in athletes’ changing body shapes, others regarded the same technologies as coping mechanisms with the requirements of the feminine body or appropriated Foucault’s concept for their feminist perspectives. While these readings varied, several researchers shared an interest in how a sport practice functioned both as a technology of power and a technology of the self. In the following section, I review some of these works to further understand the usefulness of Foucault’s technologies of the self for the feminist sport studies.

The Technologies of the Self: A Bodily Transformation?

David Johns and Jennifer Johns (2000) analyzed how a particular “discursive practice,” the dietary intake of athletes, was shaped by “the technology of power” as a means of domination (p. 219) and by “the technology of the self” as a means of personal transformation (p. 221). They argued that sport nutrition governed the athletes by exposing their bodies to constant self-surveillance and surveillance by coaches and other athletes. For example, gymnasts were subjected to the normalizing discourse of the ideal body “required” in high performance gymnastics and they were continually defined as fat and lazy if they deviated from the ideal body shape. It was evident that in gymnastics dieting served as a means of domination, but how it acted as a means of personal transformation was much less clear. Johns and Johns seemed to suggest that some successful gymnasts were able to negotiate the body image requirements and for these athletes their dietary practices, instead of acting as disciplinary practices, became practices of transformation:

A successful gymnast applies a technology of the self through inscriptions of docility, compliance and productivity reaffirmed in the gaze of the judge. In this case, the effort to transform is aimed at knowing and regulating the body in order to meet the criteria of compliance and outcome or what Foucault referred to as the essential qualities of “docility-utility.” (p. 226)

These gymnasts managed to transform their bodies to the ideal competitive shape and obviously became successful, not by transforming their sport, but rather by complying with its requirements. However, based on Johns and Johns’s interpretation it was difficult to decipher what distinguished the technologies of the self from disciplinary practices that also resulted in a changed body shape. Consequently, dieting did not free the gymnasts from the disciplinary control of sport or act as a resistant practice, but rather allowed them to “cope” with the discursive power relations. For Johns and Johns, the technologies of the self translated into a coping mechanism: dieting was a means for successful body transformation which met the requirements of the dominating discourse. But how did coping with disciplinary practices lead to self transformation? Was this what Foucault had in mind? Shouldn’t there be a more clearly definable difference between the technologies of power and the technologies of the self? Johns and Johns, indeed, admitted that they found it difficult to analyze which technology directed the athletes’ actions, and their conceptualization of the technologies of the self remained too vague to provide support for further clarification. Was it possible to find a more comprehensive reading into differences between Foucault’s two technologies?
In her study of weight management in women’s light weight rowing, Gwen Chapman (1997) offered further insight into Foucault’s technologies of the self. She defined the technologies of the self as resulting in a process of subjectification in contrast to the technologies of power that resulted in a process of objectivization. In this way, Chapman continued, the technologies of the self are “practices of freedom” that allow people to “make conscious choices about how to understand and relate to themselves” (p. 208). For example, through the technologies of the self the rowers could relate to, understand, create, and transform their selves and oppose relations of power. Chapman also suggested that the technologies of the self involved “practices of taking care of the self” (p. 208) that in some way fold together an “outside line of power” with “the inside” (p. 208). She did not, however, provide any further discussion of the relationship between the inside and the outside. Nevertheless, framed by these concepts, her study analyzed how dieting acted as a technology of power that objectivized the rowers to discursive control, but simultaneously turned into a technology of the self that allowed for a certain degree of subjectivity. Therefore she suggested, “weight management practices should not be viewed solely as an oppressive power external to the athletes’ selves, but as a technology that athletes may take up and use in different ways in the development of their subjectivity” (p. 208). Chapman was also careful to point out that the technologies of the self were always “based on the models made available by one’s culture” (p. 218) and were, therefore, not new practices per se, but practices that enabled the rowers to practice certain freedom within the limits of their sporting context.

While Chapman provided a rather detailed definition of the technologies of the self, she focused largely on how rowers’ experiences of weight management practices were shaped by power relations within such discourses as biomedical training, health and femininity. Although her discussion of dieting as a disciplinary practice dominates the study, Chapman identified that the rowers practiced a certain degree of freedom when deciding upon their individual dieting plans. For example, each rower could choose the specific foods and degree of restrictions in her food intake. In addition, some refused regular team weigh-ins to develop their own methods of control. Finally, a rower could choose to drop the sport if she didn’t agree with the weight management required for the high performance level. Chapman interpreted these choices as the technology of the self, because they revealed that dieting is not “a totally dominating discipline that controlled rowers’ every action” (p. 216). However, the rowers still practiced their freedom within the strict limits of the objectifying technologies of biomedical discourse and the discourse of femininity. For example, the rowers believed that weight management was a necessary part of their sport and thus, unquestioningly applied biomedical training principles to their training. Similarly, they felt attractive in their thin and firm competition bodies but were quite concerned with off-season weight gain. It was obvious that they accepted the thin and toned feminine body ideal. Ironically, when the rowers created themselves as athletic bodies, they also became ideal feminine bodies. This, according to Chapman, resulted in a contradiction between the dominating discourse of femininity and the empowerment deriving from a powerful athletic body: “the intersection of gender and sports discourse
appeared to reinforce the importance of creating an idealized physical body and thus the rowers continued to struggle with the role of their physical bodies in their relationships with themselves” (p. 221). Women’s sport, then, was simultaneously a site of domination and an opportunity to practice certain freedom to create a feminine self. In this field, the athletes’ experiences of themselves and their bodies were a contradiction of compliance and freedom.

While Chapman (1997), more clearly than Johns and Johns (2000), distinguishes between the technologies of power and the technologies of the self, in her study, the rowers had learned to cope with the dominating discourses that after all, strictly dictated their choices. The rowers never questioned the legitimacy of the discursive practices and therefore, seemed more like docile bodies than transformed bodies. As it was not evident how these women used dieting to become subjects, it was also unclear how they engaged in a process of subjectification. Weight management emerged as a practice of self-care that did not challenge the relations of power, but rather, parallel to Johns and Johns study, acted as a coping mechanism against the pressures of discursive dominance. After reviewing these two studies two possible readings of the technologies of the self emerge. First, that this concept may help identify how individuals cope with discursive practices, but does not provide a conceptual framework for practices that free women under dominance and allow them to create their own subjectivities. Alternatively, this concept is more sophisticated than interpreted by the authors of these two studies. At this point, it is worth examining the second option, because the authors’ conceptualizations of the technologies of the self were rather brief and as a result, they devoted most of their attention to dieting as a disciplinary practice leaving important concepts such as subjectification underdeveloped. Furthermore, while dieting practices tended to act as disciplinary practices, other practices of self care might provide better examples of transformative practices of freedom. Weight management in gymnastics and light weight rowing was an integral part of the training regime and resulted in thin and toned sporting bodies matching closely with the ideal feminine body in our culture. But a different type of sporting body shape might transcend the dominance of discursive femininity and thus, provide an example of practices of freedom.

The Technologies of the Self: Reinforcing, Challenging, and Creating a New Female Body?

Jennifer Wesely (2001) examined how the heavily built female bodybuilder’s body can create a site for the technologies of the self. Her discussion of the technologies of the self itself was rather brief and she modified Foucault’s definition for her purpose, claiming that “the technologies of the self are mechanisms through which individuals create, transform, and understand themselves” (p. 166). For Wesely, this self understanding took place as a result of a constant negotiation between the dominant technologies of femininity and the technologies of the self. Bodybuilding, she suggested, “is a technology of the self through which participants can negotiate gender identity” (p. 167). Through bodybuilding “individuals can and do reify dominant constructions of gender identity, but at the same time negotiate meanings of gender through the body” (p. 168) and therefore, it was an activity that neither reinforced or challenged gender identity but provided a body continuum on which the participants continually negotiated their identity. As a
result, women bodybuilders’ experiences in Wesely’s study were “complex and confusing” and were, in many ways, framed by the dominant technologies of femininity. For example, while being proud of their ability to change their body shapes, the women bodybuilders were also critical of the resulting body. Consequently, some stopped bodybuilding and trained, instead, for “fitness competitions” that emphasized a more “naturally” toned female body form than the bodybuilder’s extremely muscular body. On the other hand, these women actively created their identities through the appearance of their bodies and thus, bodybuilding acted as a technology of the self. Bodybuilding, Wesely concluded, had the potential to be both technologies of femininity and technologies of the self, reinforcing, challenging, and creating a new sense of identity all at once. These participants are active agents in their body choices but hardly separate from the social milieu in which these choices occur. (p. 176)

In comparison to gymnastics and rowing, the bodybuilding body offered more “fluidity” or choice for women to create different body shapes, and women bodybuilders in Wesely’s (2001) study seemed to take advantage of this possibility. However, when their built bodies deviated too far from the singular feminine ideal, they became uncomfortable. In this sense, bodybuilding did not offer a new sense of gender identity, but demonstrated how difficult it was to challenge the technologies of femininity. Building a muscular body did not act as a practice of freedom, but like dieting, enabled women to achieve a body shape required in their sport.

Gymnasts, rowers and bodybuilders all desired to conform with the narrowly defined feminine ideal, and dieting and bodybuilding became disciplinary practices to obtain this ideal. Chapman (1997) and Wesely (2001) point out, however, that at the same time the athletes’ strong, competent and skillful athletic bodies challenged the traditional definition of femininity as physically weak and thus, the women used the existing sport practices to challenge women’s oppression. Sports women, then, struggled to cope with a contradictory position of simultaneous compliance and resistance to the technologies of femininity.

These adaptations are puzzling, because the technologies of the self provided Foucault with a possibility to determine how individuals can, through resistant practices, reconstruct the dominant discourses that structure society. This reading is based on Foucault’s recognition of the instability of the dominant discourses and the possibility for change arising from the cracks created by this wavering. Therefore, some type of resistance must be embedded in his theory. Why, then, didn’t readings of sport as the technology of the self demonstrate a clear challenge to the dominance? Are women doomed forever to cope with the discursive construction of femininity rather than transforming it? Or is it Foucault’s concept of the technologies of the self that requires readjustment to detect the resistant potential of women’s sport? Two studies used a modified Foucauldian approach to examine how physical activity can act as a source of empowerment and resistance for women with disability.

**Feminist Modifications of the Technologies of the Self**

Sharon Guthrie and Shirley Castelnuovo (2001) adopted Foucault’s perspective to understand the meanings women with disabilities attach to physical activity.
Their starting point was Foucault’s “relational understanding of power: where power exists, there will also be resistance” (p. 7) and thus, they clearly aimed to detect how women can resist powerful discourses on disability. According to Guthrie and Castelnuovo, Foucault advocated two types of resistance: “reverse resistance” which involves practices that support powerful discourses, and “resistance as freedom” which involve practices of self development that transcend the discourses (p. 7). This division appeared to parallel the Foucauldian notion of technologies of power and the technologies of the self discussed earlier. Guthrie and Castelnuovo, however, found Foucault’s reading of resistance limited because of his focus on intellectual, individual practices. As such it was unsuitable for studying how experiences of physical activity empowered people with disabilities as a group in society and they adopted Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical framework to allow for embodied and collective resistance. Similarly, Candace Ashton-Shaeffer, Heather Gibson, Cari Autry, and Carolyn Hanson (2001) observed that while Foucault’s theory of power was a useful starting point for their study of physical activity and disability, his concept of resistance was too localized and “tends to ignore the macro structures of oppression” (p. 97). To reverse the oppression of people with disability, they argued, it was necessary to expand Foucault’s theory “to explain the feelings of empowerment that arise from challenging the system at the individual level and from the development of a collective identity” (p. 97). Moreover, they pointed out that Foucault’s work was gender blind and did not, as such, provide a sufficient framework for examining the experiences of women with disabilities. To overcome these limitations, these researchers adopted a “poststructuralist feminist” framework which, while based on Foucault’s theorizing, took his thinking on “identity constitution further to incorporate the ideas of group-based definitions and affirmation that result in empowerment and transformation” (p. 98). Guthrie and Castelnuovo and Ashton-Schaeffer et al. concluded that physical activity could provide individual empowerment through an increased sense of self-confidence and connection with other people with disabilities. Furthermore, participation in competitive sport rather than individual exercise programs acted as the most effective collective resistance against the dominant discourse of disability.

These studies advocated that resistance, through involvement in certain types of physical activity, was possible. However, Foucault’s framework was insufficient for their analyses because of its individualism and gender blindness and needed to be completed with other theoretical frameworks. After adjustments to Foucault’s theory, both Ashton-Shaeffer et al. (2001) and Guthrie and Castenwuovo (2001) established that physically active women with disabilities actively resisted ideological dominance. For example, Ashton-Shaeffer et al. (2001) advocated a poststructuralist approach which fully recognized women’s ability to “successfully resist and transform . . . dominant ideologies” (p. 100). Their choice of terminology was rather peculiar because Foucault, while often categorized as a poststructuralist, is not usually quoted juxtaposing terms like dominant ideology or agency with his theory of power. Is it, then, impossible to talk about women’s resistance within the parameters of Foucault’s theory? Are the technologies of the self to be replaced with agency in analyses of women’s empowerment through physical activity? Or does the use of terminology make a difference at all? To acquire more details on how Foucault conceptualized individual’s ability to change dominance, it is necessary to return to his theory of power.
On Foucault, Power, and the Resistant Self

What has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years? It has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, not to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. (Foucault, 1983a, p. 208)

While Foucault is much criticized for favoring the analysis of power in society, he maintains that fundamental to his project is understanding the role of the individual within changing power relations:

Perhaps I’ve insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself in the technology of self. (Foucault, 1988b, p. 19)

In his later years, consequently, Foucault concentrated on the relationship of the self to power and truth: how the human being turns him- or herself into a subject through the technologies of the self. To understand this relationship, however, it is necessary to revisit the role of the individual in Foucault’s theory of power.

Foucault understands power, not as isolated within a certain social sphere (economical or political), but as diffused through society through a multitude of institutions and individuals (Foucault, 1983a). In addition, he argues that power both “subjucates and makes subject to” (Foucault, 1983a, p. 212) as it applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches himself to his identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (Foucault, 1983a, p. 212)

Each individual is, therefore, caught in a network of historical power relations through which s/he constitutes her/himself as a subject acting on others. Each individual is, by virtue of being involved in human relationships, part of “relationships of power” (Foucault, 1988a, p. 11) in which s/he is subjected to control but also has some freedom to use power to control others. Because he assumes a subject which power has constituted but which at the same time is its vehicle, Foucault’s theoretical premise is clearly anti-essentialist and anti-humanist—one of the few labels given to his work that he never rejected.

To further establish the relationship between truth, power and the self, Foucault (1983b, 1988a) seeks to describe how the effects of truth are historically produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true or false. Power, truth, and knowledge become products that individual subjects, in relationships of power, create collectively through forms of discourse. These discourses are not liberating or repressive per se, but represent a different deployment of knowledge and power and therefore, “relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one’s self” (1988a, p. 18). What matters, then, is how particular techniques or forms of power are used. However, this does not mean that all human relations are equal, but techniques of power that Foucault (1988a)
labels as “the techniques of government” (p. 19) can create states of domination in power relations. Foucault (1988a) summarizes:

in human relations . . . power is always present . . . these are the relationships that one can find at different levels, under different forms; these relationships of power are changeable relations, i.e., they can modify themselves . . . in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility for resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance . . . there would be no relations of power. (p. 11-12)

What does all of this mean in terms of women’s ability to resist power relations in general and through sport in particular? It is notable that Foucault does not explicitly analyze the domination of women in society. Consequently, some feminists argue that Foucault’s theory is unsuitable for detecting possibilities for women’s empowerment. Others, like Guthrie and Castelnuovo (2001) and Ashton-Schaeffer et al. (2001) as stated earlier, claim that only if subjected to certain modifications can Foucault’s theory provide a useful framework for feminist examinations. To further assess these claims, it is necessary to detail some further feminist critiques of his theory.

Feminist Critique:
Foucault’s Power and Women’s Empowerment?

Several feminists argue that individual practices of freedom, as advocated by Foucault, will never result in coherent political programs that will liberate women from domination (e.g., de Laurentis, 1984; Deveaux, 1996; Fraser, 1996; Hartsock, 1990, 1996; Hekman, 1990, 1996). For example, Nancy Hartsock (1990) argues that “Michel Foucault fail[s] to provide a theory of power for women” (p. 158) because of his focus on individual resistance rather than large scale transformations of power relations in society. Therefore, despite his obvious sympathy with those over whom power is exercised, Foucault focuses on destabilizing, not transforming power relations. According to Hartsock, Foucault writes from “a perspective of the dominator, ‘the self-proclaimed majority’” and therefore, works “with” rather than “against” power (p. 165). This allows Foucault to emphasize individual resistance while leaving the actual domination intact and adopt a position that “reinforces the relations of domination in our society by insisting that those of us who have been marginalized remain at the margins” (p. 168). For Hartsock, Foucault’s understanding of power as ubiquitous and contextual contributes to this ambivalent position, because it is no longer possible to identify one group or class dominating others. When binary opposition between rulers and the ruled disappears, power also disappears. Hartsock argues that power that can be resisted at local and individual levels, results in a falsely homogeneous world: “Power is everywhere, and so ultimately nowhere” (p. 170). The Foucauldian concept of resistance, consequently, does not service feminism’s ultimate task of transforming the uneven power relations between the dominant and the oppressed: “the point is to change the world, not simply to redescribe ourselves or to reinterpret the world yet again” (p. 172). Hartsock’s powerful argument is embedded also in Guthrie and Castelnuovo’s (2001) and Ashton-Shaeffer et al.’s (2001) Foucauldian analyses of disability.
Guthrie and Casteluovo (2001) and Ashton-Shaeffer et al. (2001) find Foucault opening a space for women’s resistance in sport, but echoing Hartsock, they argue that his theory does not allow for collective resistance. For example, Guthrie and Castenuovo state that “Foucault claimed that resistance as freedom must remain an individual act because if the potentially liberating practice becomes part of a group dynamic, the possibility of a new, yet equally confining, discourse is created” (p. 7). They do not, however, explain in more detail how group practices turn into oppressive discourses yet can become effective “revolutionary acts” combating “oppressive structures and ideologies” (p. 18). Ashton-Shaeffer et al similarly attest that Foucault’s theory is useful at the level of individual “identity contestation” but this alone will not result in empowerment and transformation of disabled people’s social situation. Citing feminist literature on Foucault they argue that “it is the docile bodies thesis . . . that incorporates . . . the notion that power is localized and tends to ignore the macro structures of oppression” (p. 97). They do not elaborate further how “the docile body thesis” limits Foucault to the level of individual resistance. Although Ashton-Shaeffer et al. aim to establish themselves as poststructuralist feminists, they simultaneously insist on modernist principle of group based, coherent, feminist political activity. This point requires some further clarification.

Hartsock (1990) challenges Foucault’s theory of power largely from a modernist perspective of emancipation and agentic subjectivity while it has become evident throughout this paper that Foucault strongly rejects the premise of modern episteme. A critique of modern conceptions of truth, power and subjectivity is at the heart of his work and therefore, his idea of resistance can only be established against this critique. Because of his denunciation of modernism, Foucault’s work has offered other feminists an opening to question the modernist foundation of feminism’s own categories of power, political action, resistance, and agency. I will first discuss the Foucauldian challenge to “a coherent program for feminist political action” and second, I will return to the Foucauldian anti-essentialist self to re-examine the possibilities for feminist resistance.

Susan Hekman (1990) deconstructs the need for resistant political action in feminist thought. A coherent program for political action is grounded in a need to liberate women under the oppressive patriarchal system of power. This program first exposes the relations of dominance and then suggests resistant action to replace the oppressive regime with a feminist political regime. For this program to succeed, we have to, first, clearly identify the powerful groups, second assume that they use their power to oppress women and third, that women, when in power, will use it differently. Therefore, a feminist power arrangement is obviously superior to existing structures as feminists themselves can become active agents of change. From a Foucauldian perspective these assumptions become problematic. Foucault’s concept of ubiquitous power blurs the supposed clear boundary between the powerful and the powerless. Consequently, all political action becomes a product of some regime of power and as a result, we cannot escape power—be liberated from it—through any type of program for political resistance. The point of Foucault’s political prerogative is not to seek freedom from power, but to reconsider how it is used. Because Foucault asserts that power is contextual and historical, his “political program” rejects a universal agenda designed to challenge relations of dominance everywhere, any time and for anyone. For example, it would
be inappropriate to suggest that women’s sport participation universally challenges male dominance and thus, always creates a change in the cultural condition. Hekman (1990) summarizes that Foucault’s “program of ‘local resistance’ centers around the argument that, as contextual, historical beings, launching local resistant efforts against specific regimes is more appropriate and more effective than trying to formulate universal theories to justify acts of resistance” (p. 183). Therefore, Foucault does not limit resistance to the individual level, but alerts us to new, broader possibilities for challenging and modifying power. By deconstructing “coherent” feminist political action, Foucault’s theory enables feminists to go beyond the idea of emancipation as the recovery of an authentic, universal, female self (Lloyd, 1996) to examine the possibilities of anti-essentialism for feminist politics.

Angela McRobbie (1997) advocates that a reconceptualization of self can promote the recognition of the fluidity of feminism’s own categories such as agency, resistance or identity by “creating the possibility for re-drafting or of re-designing the self, not in an unproblematic voluntarist capacity, but as a process which recognizes gender as more unstable and potential than currently acknowledged” (p. 177). In this schema, “the woman is a subject rather than an agent” (p. 174). Similarly, for Elspeth Probyn (1993) Foucault’s theory has answered her “call for a feminist project that recognizes the conjunctural exigencies of the self even as it refuses to celebrate the self as ‘resistant’ (against humanist, free-willed individual)” (p. 109). With Foucault, feminists can again talk about the self, but also acknowledge it simultaneously as an expression of power relations and a tool to analyse these power relations.

In sum, while Foucault directs our attention to localized, individual practices, he does not advocate individualism. Quite the contrary, his anti-essentialism allows a simultaneous focus on the effects of power relations and the possibilities of their transformation. Foucault’s anti-essentialism allows feminism to recognize that “the self is constituted intertextually across a range of discursive practices, and that the subject is active in the negotiation of those discursive practices” (Lloyd, 1996, pp. 253-254).

It is evident, therefore, that Foucault’s theory of power is quite incompatible with the idea of women’s resistance to ideological domination through participation in physical activity. To treat sporting women’s resistance as individual or group agency that transforms ideological power relations relies on a modernist notion of power and the self. In Foucaudian terms, instead of seeking to abolish oppressive ideological power that is a privilege of a selected few, we need to reconceptualize power as ubiquitous: it is present in every relationship and the task, rather than getting rid of power, is to consider how it is used through sport and physical activity. Furthermore, instead of assigning women as autonomous agents of emancipation we need to reconceptualize the self as historically constructed within power relations that simultaneously constitute the subject and are constituted by her. But surely, and according to Foucault himself, sporting women are still subjected to oppressive dominant discourses that require change. If the technologies of the self do not connote a resistant agency and a transformation of ideological power in sport, what is their meaning? What does subjectivation through the technologies of the self signify? Are these resistant practices, and what do we liberate if not our selves? In short: When does the anti-essential self become transgressive? A further analysis of Foucault’s technologies of the self might answer these questions.
The Technologies of the Self

To make sense of the technologies of the self, it is helpful, first, to imagine that Foucault’s individual operates simultaneously in two terrains: “the inside” and “the outside.” Foucault’s earlier work focuses on dimensions of truth (how individuals are subjected to knowledge) and power (how individual subjects act upon each other); dimensions located “outside” of the subject (Deleuze, 1988). Foucault’s later work centers on the individual’s relationship with his or her self, an “inside” dimension and particularly, how the inside (the relation to oneself or subjectivity) can derive from power and knowledge without being dependent on them (Deleuze, 1988). Foucault conceptualizes this relationship as “the double.” The double is a type of interiorization of the outside: the doubling of one’s own relationship with others; a relationship that is never “a projection of the interior; on the contrary, it is an interiorization of the outside” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 98). This doubling requires a “folding” of the outside force that relates it back to the self. This is subjectivation: “a dimension of subjectivity derived from power and knowledge without being dependent on them” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 101). Recuperated by power-relations and relations of knowledge, the relation to oneself is continually reborn (Deleuze, 1988). Foucault, then, seeks to interpret how individuals have folded the outside forces to launch a process of subjectivation. This is done by engaging in the technologies of the self: practices that permit an individual to transform her/himself by folding the outside force.

How exactly this takes place is a complicated matter because, to be true to his anti-humanist, non-universal, and contextual understanding of the self, Foucault continually avoids assigning certain practices as the technology of the self. As he says: “All my analyses are against the ideal of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made” (Foucault, 1988a, p. 11). Therefore, changes can and will happen, but they actualize against a particular cultural and historical context. After a careful look, however, certain features can be found to characterize the technologies of the self. For example, Foucault seems to advocate that subjectivation involves ethical self-care, aesthetic self-stylization and critical self-awareness. I will detail these concepts more closely and then discuss their application to women’s sport.

Ethical Self-Care as the Technology of the Self

Unfortunately, we have forgotten the care for self. . . . It is the key for everything. (Foucault, 1988a, p. 14)

Foucault believes that in today’s society we favor a morality reinforced by social, economical and political systems. In addition, our selves have become dominated by the system of scientific truth games that practice control over the individual. Women’s sport seems a prime example of this modern episteme: while the athletes possess certain freedom to choose practices to create themselves, their bodies are defined strictly within the limits of the dominant discourse of femininity (Chapman, 1997; Johns & Johns, 2000; Wesely, 2001) and their practices controlled by the scientific truth games of high performance sport (Chapman, 1997). Foucault suggests that it is possible to break out of such a dominance by assuming a different understanding of morality: an ethical practice based on self care instead...
of a moral practice based on societal laws.

Foucault derived his concept of ethical self care from his genealogy of ancient Greek practices through which individuals managed to fold the outside force without becoming normalized by the power/knowledge nexus. While Foucault does not advocate Antiquity or any other time as the “golden era” for ethical practice, he asserts that we can benefit from the Greeks’ understanding of a code of moralities that was quite different from our own. In Greek society, an understanding of morality derived from individual examination of the meaning of ethics. Rather than complying to a system of legal norms and rules, the individual was relatively free to interpret the norms of behavior in his own style (Foucault, 1985). In other words, an ethical, “good” person chose to behave in a caring manner towards others and thus, took personal responsibility of his actions. In addition, a highly ethical and idealized individual in Greek society assumed an active role in his life, but practiced restraint and moderation to achieve a total self-mastery. To obtain self-mastery, an individual engaged in techne—actual practices—to elaborate himself as an ethical being. These practices included letter writing, active self-examination, interpretation of dreams and askesis that were exercises through which an individual achieved “a progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 35). Foucault locates the techniques of the self in this ethical practice where an individual constituted himself as a moral subject of his own actions. The question is then, how do modern individuals break out of the dominance of morality to become ethical, responsible individuals? Foucault appears to suggest the following praxis: an engagement in self care to facilitate an ethical use of one’s power through everyday practices in everyday relationships.

It is important to recognize that according to Foucault, any practice can serve as ethical self-care: no practice in itself is good or bad, but its ethical value depends on how it is used. For example, women’s weight management itself is not good or bad, but because it has been effectively used to mould women’s bodies into a certain shape, it has become a disciplinary practice. Can weight management ever serve as an ethical practice through which one cares about others? Theoretically speaking, it can but with certain conditions. Foucault asserts first that the ethical self-care does not necessitate new, invented practices, but folding of the existing, every day practices to create a self. Second, ethical self-care enables the individual to create a self in an active fashion. Today, the technologies of the self should manifest in “an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being” (Foucault, 1988a, p. 2). Weight management is an every day practice that can definitely be used as a way of transforming one’s body shape, but does it have anything to do with actively “attaining a certain mode of being”? In Ancient Greece such every day practices as writing, active self-examination, and exercise served as practices of self-care and their main purpose was to analyze and develop one’s self, not necessarily to transform one’s body shape. The same practices can be used today to increase ethical self awareness, but not just any writing, self-examination or exercise program serves as ethical self-care—on the contrary, a constant self-surveillance and obsessive exercise can turn into a disciplinary technique similar to weight management. It is important, therefore, to assess whether a practice of self care in sport is used merely to comply with the dominant discourses (such as a high performance body) or to actively increase the understanding of one’s self as an ethical being. Sport tends to allow little flexibility for individual interpretation of its ethical values and it is,
therefore, difficult to envision how weight management, self-examination or writing a training diary in sport can become the technologies of the self. This turns into a question of power distribution in sport: if an ethical use of one’s power is a defining characteristic for the technologies of the self, one obviously has to possess some of it before being able to engage in active self-care. What kind of power do athletes have to practice the ethics of care?

None of the studies that analyzed women’s sport as the technologies of the self discussed how individual athletes used their power. As a matter of fact, none of their participants possessed a “traditional” power position. Quite the contrary, they were elite athletes who were at the low end of the power hierarchy of their sporting institutions. Or they were people with disabilities who participated in physical activity and were thus a rather marginalized group of people rather than powerful, influential citizens. It seems contradictory that somehow these individuals should learn to control their use of power over others by engaging in practices of self care. Many feminist scholars have criticized Foucault for ignoring such obvious imbalance of power relations in favor of individualized ethics of self-care (e.g., Braidotti, 1991; McNay, 1994).

Foucault is entirely aware that the care of the self in ancient Greece was a practice of the privileged. Contrary to our present inclination to condemn elite practices as practices of domination, Foucault (1983b) regards them as a possibility for questioning the normalizing practices of our society:

I don’t think one can find any normalization in, for instance, the Stoic ethics. The reason is, I think, that the principal aim, the principal target of this kind of ethics was an aesthetic one. First, this kind of ethics was only a problem of personal choice. Second, it was reserved for a few people in the population; it was not a question of giving a pattern of behaviour for everybody. It was a personal choice for a small elite. The reason for making this choice was the will to live a beautiful life, and to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence. I don’t think that we can say that this kind of ethics was an attempt to normalize the population. (p. 230)

This is a rather surprising conclusion and turns our usual approach to women’s resistance upside down. Have researchers, after all, been searching for feminist transformation in the wrong place? If the aim is to examine how change happens in women’s sport, it might be as important to study the management of power as it is to analyze individual athletes’ reactions to it. Consequently, if Foucault theorizes that power is not necessarily an evil, the researchers should not automatically assume that powerful individuals in sport manage their power unethically. Finally, if, according to Foucault, power is present in every relationship, but not all relationships are symmetrical, how does the feminist sport researcher who occupies a position of relative power in comparison to her research participants, manage her power to create change? We might need to become more aware of the possibilities for our technologies of the self: how can a feminist researcher actively change the condition of women through sport rather than eagerly waiting for “Others” to create transformation for us to analyze. It is essential, thus, to examine how women in power, including feminist researchers, become ethical users of power. But can individual athletes, speaking from a relatively “powerless” position, ever initiate change in women’s sport? Or to put it in Foucauldian terms, how do ordinary
women athletes bend the dominating “outside” into themselves so that they can actually see differently and be seen differently?

Foucault maintains that in every relationship all parties have a certain amount of freedom to engage in an active care of the self. Therefore, there is always a possibility for transformation in an ethical use of power. However, he acknowledges that certain power relations are more asymmetrical than others and consequently, the margin for change is smaller. Contrary to what many feminists believe, Foucault relates his principle directly to women’s situation:

In the traditional conjugal relation in the society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we cannot say that there was only male power; the woman herself could do a lot of things: be unfaithful to him, extract money from him, refuse him sexually. She was, however, subject to a state of domination, in the measure where all that was finally no more than a certain number of tricks which never brought about a reversal of the situation. (Foucault, 1988a, p. 12)

This statement further complicates the concept of the technologies of the self, but it points to an important difference between merely coping with the dominant discourses and actually transforming them. This difference was not clearly demonstrated in the studies of women’s sport as the technologies of the self. Chapman (1997) and Wesely (2001), for example, emphasized women’s active role in producing their feminine identities. This did not, however, result in a transformation of the discourse of femininity in sport, yet it helped the athletes cope with its requirements. Their situation is strikingly similar to Foucault’s example: rather than bringing reversal to their situation, the athletes remained subjects to a state of domination. If weight management in gymnastics and rowing or bodybuilding are tricks to cope with the dominant discourses in sport, then what exactly are the practices of the self that act as practices of freedom? Foucault’s concepts of aesthetic self-stylization and critical self-awareness might further help identify the types of practices that individual women can use as practices of freedom.

Aesthetic Self-Stylization and Critical Self-Awareness as the Technologies of the Self

In his work as a philosopher, Foucault was primarily interested in how people learn to problematize their identities by becoming more self-reflexive. Only critical self reflection can result in a change of one’s condition. Foucault (1985) believes that “[t]here are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (p. 8). To be able to think differently creates an opportunity to question the limitations of one’s freedom instead of merely coping with one’s situation:

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem. (Foucault, 1984b, p. 388)
This critical thought is the core of the ethical self-care that Foucault further conceptualized as “an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (Foucault, 1985, p. 8) and practice “on the basis of which . . . problematizations are formed” (Foucault, 1985, p. 11). An individual who learns to problematize him/herself gains an ability “to fold, double the outside with a coextensive inside” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 118). The critically self-aware individual constantly questions what is seemingly “natural” and inevitable in one’s identity and as a result, creates an identity of one’s own. Through this interrogation of the limits of one’s subjectivity, the possibility of transgression emerges and thus, the potential for creating new types of subjective experiences. From a feminist perspective, it is still difficult to envision how such a potentially private practice as critical self-reflection transgresses women’s oppression? Moya Lloyd (1996) contemplates the possibilities of Foucault’s critical self-care for feminist politics.

Lloyd (1996) recognizes that while not all active negotiations with discursive practices are transgressive, at the same time they can be. The core feature of the critical, ethical care of the self, she reminds, “is that it offers up the chance of being other” (p. 254) and for feminism “this implies that alternative modes of engendering are possible” (p. 254). Therefore, Lloyd reads Foucault’s conceptualization of emancipation as an individual’s “freedom to invent a self” (p. 252): through self-awareness individuals create new types of experiences that can lead to transgressive practices. These practices further establish a chance for public impact by provoking confusion about the present discourse of femininity, out of which grows “a problematization—a questioning, critical thought” (p. 258). Consequently, Lloyd argues that feminists should find such a chance to bend, disrupt, or undermine gender norms very seductive. This critical awareness, however, has to be translated into a practical critique, into an aesthetics of existence.

According to Foucault (1984a), the practical form of transgression involves every day practices through which the individual constantly re-invents him/herself, but in addition, it requires a necessary aesthetic element: an individual recreates him/herself as a work of art. This takes place through a complex and difficult process of stylization and therefore, the individual’s relationship to one’s self is more like a creative activity, a constant process of invention. Foucault’s idea here is that art has a capacity to give birth to new life-forms directly; if we think of our lives as works of art, we regain the ability to think creatively and challenge the limitations of the “natural” identities formed through the games of truth. Aesthetic stylization of the self denotes a self that is open to change and the constant recreation of changing conditions in society. Therefore, instead of the humanist quest to “liberate man in his own being” (Foucault, 1984a, p. 42) an individual is facing the task of actively producing him/herself in art. However, there are a multitude of self-aestheticization practices—wearing the latest fashion, make-up, hair style, or building a new body in yoga classes—that individual women use to produce a self in contemporary society. Accordingly, Lloyd (1996) promotes the dimension of critical awareness—an individual’s ability to question the limits of one’s “natural” identity—to distinguish practices of freedom from the ones that perpetuate the dominant discursive construction of gender.

Lloyd (1996) argues that the technologies of the self can turn into feminist alternative politics under two conditions: they have to involve an active critical attitude and an act of self-stylization. She reiterates:
In the case of the production of gender, therefore, individuals are subject to a range of practices, some of which are capable of inversion, subversion, perversion, while others operate more or less rigidly. My argument is that it is the activity of critique that makes possible the differentiation between them. This, I contend, is what offers a radical edge to the style of existence. It is not the activity of self-fashioning in itself that is crucial. It is the ways in which that self-fashioning, when allied to critique, can produce sites of contestation over the meanings and contours of identity, and over the ways in which certain practices are mobilized. (p. 250)

This means that it is not feasible to picture in advance which feminine practices “reflect the internalization of hegemonic norms of femininity” and which “are stages of self-aestheticization” (p. 251). For example, practices that seem to cooperate with dominant discourse of femininity such as dieting, fashion, shopping, exercise or cosmetic surgery are not in themselves oppressive. Similarly, practices that seem to openly challenge this discourse, such as rigorous weight training, are not necessarily empowering. Rather “particular practices of femininity have the potential to operate transgressively” (p. 250) when embedded in the double act of critical self-stylization. Therefore, wearing the latest fashion does not serve as a technology of the self, but if an individual woman’s conscious, critical efforts to make a political statement through dress can provoke “a critical, querying reaction” (p. 258), she has potentially problematized women’s present cultural condition and can have an impact on power relations. In sum, Lloyd argues that the technologies of the self when invested in a doubled trajectory of critique and self-aestheticization, can motivate political activity and transgress women’s condition. It is now possible to distinguish between “tricks” that serve as coping mechanisms against the discursive definitions of femininity and resistant practices that serve as the technologies of the self.

It can be argued that the bodybuilders (Wesely, 2001), gymnasts (Johns & Johns, 2000), and rowers (Chapman, 1997) all engaged in a type of aesthetic self-stylization by actively creating athletic bodies through dieting and weight training practices. But it is difficult to assign these practices as the technologies of the self, because Chapman (1997), Johns and Johns (2000) and Wesely (2001) did not consider the aspect of critical awareness directly in their discussions. This omission might derive from a reading of Foucault’s (1988b) definition of the technologies of the self that does not explicitly mention critical awareness as a condition for self transformation. While the researchers interpreted the athletes’ actions as “active production of different models of the self” (Chapman, p. 217), the athletes’ voices did not convey a consciously planned, critical resistance to sporting discourses; quite the contrary, they felt good about conforming to the requirements of the ideal body. In light of Lloyd’s (1996) discussion, weight training and dieting while creating bodily transformation will not result in the transgression of women’s condition without a critique that problematizes their position in sport. To read Foucault’s technologies of the self as a practice of freedom, therefore, we need to detect a critical voice from the individuals involved in sport. Embedded in critical awareness, the technologies of the self can stimulate political activity and, according to Lloyd (1996), create a foundation for large scale feminist action through sport.
Conclusion

Foucault argues that freedom from the governmentality of individualization can take place through an everyday aesthetic stylization of the self: a constant, reinvention of the self at the level of the micro-physics of existence. However, his techniques of the self as aesthetics of existence exclude an obsessive search for the “true” essential self waiting to be liberated. Instead, Foucault emphasizes that only through a critical awareness of the limitations of the self in one’s cultural condition, can the outside be folded into the inside. In addition, practices of freedom necessitate a responsible use of power in all every day situations: by focusing on self care, the individual begins to care about others.

Foucault’s work has also offered feminists an opening to question the modernist foundation of feminism’s own categories of power, political action, resistance, and agency. Undoubtedly, it is a formidable task to re-imagine what “practices of freedom” might mean for a critically aware, self-stylized individual for whom ethical care of the self translates into ethical care for others. Therefore, those feminists who have identified sport as a space for women’s technologies of the self have been very innovative. Despite this innovativeness, however, their interpretations are not entirely faithful to Foucault’s critical disavowal of the discursive parameters through the ethical care of the self. It is necessary, therefore, to engage with his theory at a deeper level to ascertain its usefulness for feminist analyses of sport. Having now acquired more details on the premise of Foucault’s technologies of the self, it is possible to suggest how women’s sport, instead of serving as a coping mechanism, might act as a transgressive practice.

It is obvious that the technologies of the self is a complex concept, and therefore, there is no clear formula that will detect which sporting practices serve as practices of freedom. However, a careful consideration of Foucault’s concepts of ethical self-care, aesthetic self-stylization, and critical self-awareness can guide feminists towards assessing how a female sport participant can transform discursive dominance in sport. It is important not to pre-assign any practice as “liberating” or “oppressive” without a careful consideration of the cultural context where an individual woman’s identity is formed. For example, a strong, muscular body might challenge the discourse of femininity to a certain extent, but within a sporting context it does not necessarily offer a chance of being “other” (Lloyd, 1996). On the contrary, such a body exists within the limits created by the dominant disciplinary sporting practice. Because any practice has a potential to serve as the technologies of the self within the same cultural context, the feminists need to consider the transgressive potential of various practices in women’s sport by assessing them as ethical practices built on aesthetic self-stylization and critical self-awareness.

It is relatively easy to conceptualize physical activity as an aesthetic practice that results in a re-created body, but critical self-awareness, I believe, constitutes the most important aspect of the technology of the self in a sporting context. Following Foucault, an individual woman must be aware of the limitations of her self before she is able to problematize her present condition. A physically active woman, then, must become aware of the limitations of discursive femininity and the athletic self in order to reinvent herself. To detect athletes’ critical self-awareness, feminists need to ask women to articulate it. For example, researchers must know if the athletes are aware of the problems deriving from the narrowly defined body
ideal and their critical assessment of such an ideal. Similarly, feminist researchers need to analyze the athletes’ awareness of the discursive construction of their training practices and performance standards. Chapman (1997), for example, demonstrated that women rowers unquestioningly accepted the scientific premise of their training and in a Foucauldian sense, without critical awareness these self-care practices cannot turn into transformative practices of freedom. The critical attitude must then lead to aesthetic self-stylization that reflects the individual’s criticism against dominance. Building a high performance body, then, does not alone explore the boundaries of the feminine self, but a style that is a result of an active critical attitude can be a political statement that questions the dominance embedded in women’s sport. Again, practices of freedom are conscious, critical problematizations of the boundaries of the female athletic self.

It is also important to remember that athletes are in a relation of power that assigns them relatively little room for resistance and are often reluctant to criticize practices of high performance sport. For example, some studies have demonstrated that women athletes do not want to classify themselves as feminists as that would require a critical attitude toward sport or toward the discourse of femininity (e.g., Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1994; Young, 1997) and hence, a critique of the female athletic self. How will athletes, then, engage in critical self-awareness? Obviously, women within sport need to begin to question the limits of their identities and here, I believe, lies the ethical responsibility of the sport feminists. As researchers interested in the socio-cultural construction of femininity, we should strive to embody the characteristics of a critically aware individual who questions the limitations of discursive feminine identity. Therefore, we need to be in the forefront of provoking the critical inquiring reaction to women’s sport through active dialogue with the sport world. As players in the sporting truth game, we need to reflect on the limits of our own identities to problematize the boundaries of discursive femininity. Only then can we use our knowledge and our power positions ethically to take responsibility for encouraging athletes, coaches, and others involved in sport to engage in critical self-reflection. This way we will provoke “a doubled trajectory of critique and ethics whose goals were to motivate political activity out of . . . the very problematization of subjectivity” (Lloyd, 1996, p. 258). Then it is possible to consider how a large scale transgression stems from the actions of a few critically aware sport women. The challenge for feminist sport researchers is to recognize how these women employ the technologies of the self to create a positive change in women’s sport. Finally, it is crucial to consider how researchers can use their power ethically to initiate critical self-reflection in and of women’s sport.

References


**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Jim Denison for his valuable assistance in the process of writing this work. I also want to thank Nancy Theberge for her support and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.