Research Article

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'It's just girls' hockey': Troubling progress narratives in girls' and women's sport

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Abstract

The current historical moment abounds with social ideologies suggesting that girls' and women's sport has come a long way. Narratives of achievement, success and the gains that have ostensibly been made over the last three decades hold up these ideologies. In this interview-based study, we consider girls' minor hockey in Southern Alberta, Canada to examine whether and how historically entrenched inequalities are being challenged, eradicated and/or maintained. To do this, we consider how gender systems are simultaneously resisted and reproduced in girls' minor hockey in this region thus, positioning it outside the 'triumphant feminist tale'. In so doing, we highlight the importance of critically considering progress narratives of growth and success in girls' and women's sport.

Keywords

Alberta, Canada, gender, ice hockey, progress narratives, youth sport

Over the past three decades, there have, arguably, been extraordinary changes and growth in girls' and women's sport in Canada. The initiatives of women's sport leaders have led to greater recognition within the local, provincial and national governance structures and increased participation numbers. In women's ice hockey, for example, the 1980s saw an expansion of programmes across the country to include opportunities for girls and women and in 1982 a national championship was established. The 1990s and 2000s brought success in international and Olympic competition and an increasing emphasis on elite-level development with the national women's team capturing media attention and drawing spectators to the sport in record numbers. By 2010 in Canada, 85,624 girls and women were registered as ice hockey participants, an exponential increase from the 8146 participants reported two decades earlier in 1990 (Hockey Canada, 2015).

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Certainly the current historical moment abounds with social ideologies that suggest that girls and women's sport has come a long way. Narratives of achievement, success and the gains that have been made over the last three decades hold up these ideologies. As Cooky and McDonald (2005: 158) write, 'female athletes who are portrayed as "just doing it" are often romanticized as the new representatives for the girl-power movement' and they are endorsed as role models of female strength and empowerment. Corporations such as Nike capitalize on and perpetuate discourses of progress and achievement that promote an idealistic account of girls and women's sport and liberated femininity while seemingly erasing the practical realities of their participation that is too often encumbered by historical and cultural constraints (Cole and Hribar, 1995; Cooky and MacDonald, 2005; Helstein, 2003; Lucas, 2000). Cooky (2010: 211) argues, however, 'the public celebration of girls' and women's sport does not always translate into increased participation, increased opportunities, or broader shifts in the *structural* landscape of sport' (emphasis in the original). Girls' and women's sport is much more complicated and fraught with tensions and negotiations than is recognized in the too often simplistic success narratives that get taken up and perpetuated in popular culture and public discourse.

In Canada, the dramatic increase in the number of girls and women playing hockey could be read as a 'triumphant feminist tale' (Messner, 2011: 152), and in many ways it is. Yet, viewing this, or any of the gains made in girls' and women's sport, as an uncomplicated success story risks misrepresenting reality (Fink, 2015; Hargreaves, 1994). Reading the increasing numbers of participants as a simple linear progress narrative assumes a similarity of experience from region to region, access for all, and distorts the reality of many girls and women, a reality that is fraught with discriminatory practices and constant negotiation for access, especially in certain (often rural) areas of the country (Adams, 2008; Avery and Stevens, 1997; Etue and Williams, 1996; Theberge, 2000). While statistics such as those listed above suggest that girls' and women's ice hockey participation is at an all time high, there are many girls and women who do not participate or have access due to limited opportunities, organizational barriers and persisting gender ideologies (Messner, 2002; Cooky, 2009). Thus, while there is much to be celebrated in girls' and women's sport, we also need to 'cheer with reserve' (Schultz, 2014: 187).

In this study we position girls' minor hockey in the southern part of the western province of Alberta, Canada at the centre of inquiry. In Canada, girls' minor hockey refers to participants aged five to 17 years. More specifically, age categories within girls' hockey are as follows: initiation (under seven years of age); novice (ages seven and eight); atom (ages nine and 10); pee wee (ages 11 and 12); bantam (ages 13 and 14) and midget (ages 15 to 17). Over the past two decades women's hockey in Canada has been taken up from sociological and historical perspectives focusing on substantive inquiry about the nature and context of the game (Adams, 2008, 2009; Avery and Stevens, 1997; Etue and Williams, 1996; Kossuth, 2008, 2009; Stevens, 2006), the production and embodiment of gender (Adams, 2014; Theberge, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2003), community building (Stevens, 2000; Theberge, 1995) and the relationship between women's hockey and the sport-media complex (Edwards et al., 2013; Poniatowski and Hardin, 2012; Sparks and Westgate, 2002; Vincent and Crossman, 2012). Supporting Messner and Musto's (2014)

contention that there is a dearth of scholarly research on children and youth sports in sport sociology literature, a review of the scholarship on girls and women's hockey in Canada reveals that youth sport has largely been ignored. One exception is Adams and Stevens' (2007; Stevens and Adams, 2013) recent work on girls' minor hockey in Ontario. As they argue, 'effective change is not simply a matter of increasing female hockey registration numbers. Rather, it relates directly to issues of power and authority over sport, which is intricately connected to governance structures' (Adams and Stevens, 2007: 357).

In this study we examine the structural inequalities of gender and relations of power to consider whether and how historically-entrenched inequalities are being challenged, eradicated and/or maintained in girls' minor hockey in an area of Canada with relatively low participation numbers. To do this, we focus on the perspectives and experiences of volunteer coaches and administrators who directly manage girls' minor hockey. Through this examination we discuss the progress narratives currently associated with girls' and women's sport to determine how these social ideologies of gender equality and achievement can work to distort the reality of girls and women in sport. We consider how persistent gender ideologies, organizational barriers and regional realities continue to impact girls' minor hockey in Southern Alberta positioning it outside the 'triumphant feminist tale'. Further, we place the implications of our research findings in conversation with a recent review released by Hockey Alberta on girls' hockey. We argue that, if overall participation numbers are increasing, but we are not addressing the continued privileging of boys' and men's hockey over girls' and women's hockey, then the gains made are compromised.

Resisting and reproducing systems of gender

Historically, girls' and women's sport participation has been fraught with restrictions, tensions and compromises (Cahn, 1995; Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994). Since the 1970s, the increasing participation of girls and women in sport has led scholars to examine sport as a contested terrain of gender relations wherein boundaries (both real and imagined) regulate access for certain members of society (Dworkin and Messner, 1999; Messner, 2011). Sport has long been viewed as a preserve of boys and men, 'an important cultural practice that contributes to the definition and recreation of gender inequality' (Theberge, 1995: 197. See also Boutilier and San Giovanni, 1983). The extensive body of research on gender and sport examines how formal and informal policies and practices perpetuate gender inequality/inequity and disadvantage girls and women in national and global contexts.

In 2000, sport sociologist Nancy Theberge argued that the progress made in women's hockey by the turn of the century had 'barely dented the continuing gender gap in opportunities' (Theberge, 2000: 8). This is still the case in 2016, despite girls' and women's registration numbers being much higher than they were in 2000. The opportunities for girls and women still lag far behind those available to boys and men, especially in certain areas of the country (Hockey Canada, 2015). Historically-entrenched inequalities continue to exist in the distribution of resources, access and opportunity, voices of authority, and how girls' and women's hockey (and girls' and women's sport more broadly) is

constructed in our national discourse. These inequalities suggest that girls' and women's hockey is accommodated into the game in ways that reinforce and perpetuate systems of gender (Adams and Stevens, 2007). Indeed, it has proven difficult to meaningfully challenge the historical dominance of men's (and boys') hockey in the Canadian cultural context. Ice hockey has long been linked to discourses of national identity and nationhood in Canada and it is most often men's hockey that is celebrated as part of this discourse (Adams, 2014; Allain, 2011; Robidoux, 2002; Theberge, 2000). The importance of hockey in the construction of Canadian identity can be understood in terms of the practices of history-writing/making that occur in part through the performance of sport and the discourses that are formed around them. That girls and women are playing hockey in ever increasing numbers in 2016 complicates this discourse, but in no way does their mere presence on the ice in greater numbers meaningfully reconstitute it (Adams, 2014). As Messner (1988: 206) wrote over two decades ago, 'the ideological hegemony of the dominant group shifts but is essentially maintained'.

The increasing numbers of girls and women participating in hockey 'demanding recognition and equal access to resources is a destabilizing tendency in the current gender order' (Dworkin and Messner, 1999: 346). Systems of gender are not static, they shift as boundaries are pushed and challenged (Connell, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994). Dworkin and Messner (1999) discuss how 'resistant agency' and 'reproductive agency' impact the transformative potential of women's sport (more recently Messner uses this framework to consider agency in youth sport; see Messner, 2009). Reproductive agency occurs when one's actions reproduce existing systems of gender by perpetuating the conventions of existing and historical gender relations. Resistant agency occurs when one challenges the existing gender order. In their study of the construction of gender in skydiving and snowboarding, Laurendeau and Sharara (2008: 27) argue that although liberal-feminist initiatives have led to greater sporting access for girls and women, we must continue to question 'access to what?' They stress that if girls and women are gaining opportunities to participate but entrenched assumptions and structures that continue to privilege boys and men over girls and women are not meaningfully challenged, 'then the transformative potential of their entrance is limited at best'. While Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) take up resistant and reproductive agencies as a binary we, like Messner (2009), position them as simultaneously occurring. By questioning assumed cultural discourses and persistent historical ideological understandings of girls' and women's sport we consider how gender systems are simultaneously resisted and reproduced in girls minor hockey in Southern Alberta.

Research context, methods and positionality

With a population of over four million, Alberta is the fourth largest province in Canada with an area of 661,848km^2. There are two metropolitan cities in the province: Calgary (population 1,406,700 in 2014) and Edmonton (population 1,328,300 in 2014). For the purpose of this paper, Southern Alberta is geographically defined as south of the city of Calgary (see Figure 1). A largely agricultural area, Southern Alberta consists mostly of rural communities with the exception of two medium sized cities: Lethbridge (population 90,214 in 2013) and Medicine Hat (population 61,180 in 2012). Southern Alberta is

Figure 1. Map of Alberta with small insert of Canada to show placement of the province. The area of inquiry for this project is south of the city of Calgary located in the bottom portion of the Alberta map, highlighted in grey.

bordered by the province of British Columbia to the west, Saskatchewan to the east and the state of Montana, USA to the south.

Currently, a provincial governing body, Hockey Alberta, under the organizational umbrella of Hockey Canada, the sole national governing body for minor hockey in Canada, oversees hockey across the province of Alberta. Hockey Alberta administers minor (ages five to 17) programming while also assisting in governing the game at the elite levels. The Female Council, a subcommittee of Hockey Alberta, is comprised of a Chairperson, Senior Provincial Representative (North), Senior Representative (South), Minor Representative (North) and a Minor Representative (South) (Hofferd, 2013). This council meets annually at the Hockey Alberta Annual General Meeting to which individual association directors are invited, though their attendance is not mandatory. The council mandate is to oversee operations, rule enforcement, officiating, coaching certification, provincial championships and the development of programming at both the elite and grassroots levels. Stevens and Slack (1998) suggest that when the Female Council

was established within the provincial governing body in the 1990s, substantial changes to programming occurred which led to greater opportunity, resources and substantial growth in the women's game.

In Canada, at the municipal level, girls' and women's hockey often operates as part of what Stevens and Adams (2013: 659) call an 'integrated or partially-integrated governance model' that combines the organizational structures and responsibilities for girls' and boys' hockey. However, in the past two decades increasing numbers of separate governance structures have emerged in larger centres, with the largest number in Ontario under the umbrella of the Ontario Women's Hockey Association (Adams and Stevens, 2007; Theberge, 2000). In Alberta, an integrated governance model exists in all rural areas and most urban centres whereby the local minor hockey association guides the development and direction of both girls' and boys' hockey.[1] An executive, or board of governors, that is made up of a President, Vice President, a financial position and directors for each age division typically oversees the local minor hockey association. While resources (or lack thereof) demand this type of governance model in smaller cities and towns across the province, there is often the implicit assumption within this model that if it works for the boys it will work for the girls.

As part of a larger research project, this study is based on research conducted over a three-year period in Southern Alberta, Canada. Our analysis centres on tenopen-ended semi-structured interviews with coaches and administrators of girls' minor hockey. In Canada, volunteer coaches, board members and administrators typically manage girls' minor hockey, like most boys' minor hockey associations. While we are aware that we risk imposing adult-oriented concerns and meanings on girls' minor hockey, our intent in this paper is not to directly examine girls' experiences as participants; rather, we focus on the social inequalities imbedded in the organizational structures. We feel that this is best accomplished by talking to those who organize girls' minor hockey as these individuals oversee the strategic direction, development and operational aspects of the girls' game. The participants interviewed in this study, therefore, were community members with expert knowledge who were well informed of both the governance processes and the day-to-day aspects of girls' hockey in their communities.

This research was undertaken from a qualitative constructivist perspective (Guba and Lincoln, 2004; Misener and Doherty, 2009; Patton, 2002; Stevens and Adams, 2013). As researchers we enter the 'moment' to study what is important from the perspectives of the individuals who are experiencing it (Charmaz, 2004; Sparkes and Smith, 2014). To understand the social realities of those involved in organizing and administering girls' minor hockey we need to know what it means to them, what frustrates them, excites them, challenges them and how they respond and act as they make sense of the experience. As researchers we were most interested in the meanings attributed by the interviewees, the issues they raised as most significant throughout the interview process and the insight they provided into the gender relations and cultural discourses of girls' and women's sport in this context. These interviews contributed rich insight into girls' hockey in Southern Alberta from a local grassroots perspective.

The scope of involvement in girls' minor hockey among the interviewees ranged from five to over 15 years. There were five female and five male participants. All of the participants were past or present coaches and/or administrators in their local girls' hockey

organizations. As well, most participants were parents of at least one athlete playing girls' hockey. When understood in the context of the small number of girls' minor hockey participants in Southern Alberta (recent Hockey Alberta numbers suggest there were 311 participants south of Calgary registered for the 2014/2015 season; personal communication, Hockey Alberta, November 12, 2014), the 10 participants in this study reflect the small number of individuals involved in organizing and coaching girls' hockey in Southern Alberta. Despite this small number of interviewees, much can be learned about social realities through in-depth analysis of relatively small sets of textual data (Chawansky and Francombe, 2011; Johnson et al., 2004; Laurendeau and Moroz, 2013). Interviewees were identified and contacted through local hockey association documents and webpages. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length. During the interviews, participants were asked questions related to three broad themes: (a) their role within girls' hockey; (b) changes and challenges in girls' hockey in their community; (c) their perspectives on the effectiveness of the current local and provincial organizational structures.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analysed to investigate our central research question: How are historically-entrenched inequalities in girls and women's sport being contested and/or upheld in the case of girls' minor hockey in Southern Alberta? The lead researcher coded the data, then the second author reviewed all codes and coded data. A coding scheme was developed based on the most dominant issues discussed by the participants. This resulted in five themes that are presented in the following section and discussed within the context of relevant literature. In an effort to ensure the anonymity of the participants all of the names in this paper are pseudonyms. To this end and due to the small girls' hockey community in Southern Alberta we have also endeavoured not to identify the specific roles held by participants nor specific communities related to particular comments, instead identifying the participants more broadly as coach, administrator, as the parent of a player and/or as a past player.

Before we discuss the findings from the study, we would like to acknowledge our researcher positionality and the impact of our backgrounds and assumptions on our relationships with research participants. We do this to provide a more critical representation of ourselves within this project as we are committed to 'thoughtful reflexivity' and transparency within our work (Amis and Silk, 2005: 355; see also Adams, 2012; Frisby, 2005; Kirby et al., 2006; Misener and Doherty, 2009). We are Canadian-born, white women researchers, deeply invested in girls' and women's hockey and organized sport. One of us, a scholar of women and girls' hockey for over a decade, is an outsider to the community of girls' hockey in Alberta. The second researcher has been involved as a player and coach in girls' hockey in Alberta for over 15 years and was initially interviewed as a participant of this project prior to joining the research team as a graduate student. Our 'location' as researchers was disclosed to interviewees and in many cases it provided a common ground of interests and knowledge between the interviewees and the researchers (albeit in different ways). We recognize, as Amis and Silk (2005: 364) write, that our work 'establishes a relationship with readers to convince them of the status of "findings" and to deal with issues surrounding the integration of participants, the positioning of the author[s], and how people are written in and written out'. To this end then, we discuss our researcher positionality not to forefront ourselves in this project but to be transparent about the complex agendas veiled in our writing (Richardson, 2000).

The more things change…

In Alberta during the 2014–2015 season there were 8569 girls and women playing hockey within the province (Hockey Alberta, 2015), up substantially from the 1223 participants reported two decades earlier in 1993. Boys' and men's participation has been consistently reported over the last two decades at approximately seven times the number of female participants reported in 2013 (Hockey Canada, 2015). Of those 8569 girls and women, 7174 (83.7%) were registered in the minor sport system (Hockey Alberta, 2015). Interestingly, there has been a rise in the province in registration at the lower levels (initiation, novice, atom) but a gradual decline in numbers at the midget level from 1440 in 2009–2010 to 1292 registrants in 2014–2015 (Hockey Alberta, 2015). While fluctuations in registration numbers are to be expected, they can also be indicative of the complexities faced by girls' and women's hockey in Alberta, which is geographically a largely rural province. As Jared (administrator, past coach, parent) explained, 'the growth within the female game is recognized and has allowed it to mature as it has grown…but it's not without growing pains'.

Over a decade ago, Stevens (2000: 136) offered the astute assessment that 'a formidable gap has emerged within the female hockey system separating the local game from the global forum'; there has been a shift away from a focus on locality and grassroots hockey. This has become even more pronounced over the last decade as a culture of elitism, professionalism and commerce continues to infiltrate the girls' and women's game. While this growth in elite opportunities could be read as cause for celebration in girls' hockey whereby increased opportunities exist for girls to play elite hockey, at the local level this is perceived by some as detrimental to grassroots programmes, especially in smaller centres and rural areas, given the already precarious foundations of girls' hockey in these areas. For example, over the past decade, the number of high-performance hockey academies has dramatically increased across Canada. These schools claim to offer an elite hockey experience for youth and prepare them to play in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the United States, the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) and/or on national teams. Currently, in the province of Alberta alone there are four hockey academies for teenage girls. Thus, as Stevens (2000) suggests, attention has shifted from growing the game and providing access to all individuals who want to play to focusing on those who have the skills (and are willing and able to pay) to play in high performance programmes. Several of our interviewees spoke to the reality of this 'eroded development ethos' in their communities (Stevens, 2000: 127).

> The hockey academies have made significant inroads at the elite level and are changing the dynamics tremendously…in Alberta particularly, and I think throughout the country, drawing players out of the midget league into their programs which has had the impact, in my view, and I think in most people's, that the triple A midget league has now been watered down considerably (Cheryl, administrator, parent).

> It's sad to say but the triple A midget league is starting to vanish little by little. They're starting to be washed out a little bit. There has been quite a dramatic change over the past six years… something needs to be done (Darryl, coach).

Within this context, innovative solutions have been adopted to strengthen girls' hockey and provide opportunities to participate. Within the province, there are all-girl leagues in which both elite and minor programmes play. The Rocky Mountain Female Hockey League (herein after referred to as RMFHL), the Alberta Major Bantam Female Hockey League (AMBFHL) and the Alberta Major Midget Female Hockey League (AMMFHL) all operate independently to create places for girls to play against girls. However, in smaller centres and rural areas there are still major struggles for the basics such as access to ice, quality referees and coaches, and lack of representation of girls' hockey at the administrative levels that emphasize the structural inequalities and challenges that are day-to-day realities in girls' minor hockey. Our research findings support the growing body of research on girls' and women's hockey documenting the discriminatory practices that exist in the game. The structural inequalities and perpetuated assumptions about girls as competitive athletes revealed in this study suggest that we have a long way to go in girls' minor hockey in Southern Alberta despite the progress narratives that tend to get invoked about girls' and women's sport in Canada.

Lack of voice and prevailing attitudes of girls' hockey as 'second rate'

Recently, many hockey associations in Alberta have created a new position within their governance structure – Director of Female Hockey. This person is tasked with organizing and representing the girls' teams within the minor hockey organization, promoting the game and liaising with other associations. In some areas of the province, a Director of Female Hockey is a relatively new addition to the organizational structures and in other areas, especially smaller rural areas, this position does not yet exist. While having someone in this role lends credibility to the girls' game, in most associations that govern both the girls and boys, this means there is still only one representative for all of girls' hockey, unlike on the boys' hockey side where there are representatives for each age grouping to complement the executive.

At the provincial level, Hockey Alberta holds an Annual General Meeting; this is an opportunity for representatives from the various provincial areas to meet and discuss the governance of the game. The Female Directors from the various associations are invited to attend along with all of the other minor association board members; however, Nicole (administrator, parent) expressed her frustrations with this annual meeting structure:

> There was actually no real component of that meeting that I should have been there for. Whatever they think works for the boys divisions it is like well this'll work the same for the girls; they'll be fine.

Nicole went on to say that Hockey Alberta's focus is not meaningfully on girls' minor hockey:

> [It's] not that they don't care about the female players within the leagues. It's just that there is never topics of discussion [related to the girls]…it's all 'how do we build the elite system for boys,' 'how do we promote this for the boys' and I would always have to go 'and the girls too!'

This lack of voice often results in the girls' game becoming an afterthought and speaks to tokenism in the governance structure and it reproduces systems of gender that privilege boys' sport. Nicole also indicated that a female director within an association is able to have a vision for the direction of girls' hockey. However, that vision is subject to approval by the association's board. If the resources are not prioritized and choices are made that construct girls' hockey as secondary, then potential opportunities to grow the game, such as the development of an all-female tournament, are compromised. Nicole suggested there was often no willingness to allocate resources needed to implement new initiatives in girls' hockey.

Reflecting on how girls' hockey continues to be constructed, Jennifer explained girls' hockey 'is right at the bottom of the totem pole…. Girls are an afterthought and yet they pay the same fees'. Jared expressed frustration that there is little promotion of girls' hockey in his community suggesting that girls' hockey is perceived as second rate, a mentality that 'Girls should go play with dolls, ok? Girls shouldn't play hockey'. Nicole related that there is still a prevailing attitude that 'it's just girls' hockey'. Nicole also suggested that in her experience boys' hockey had precedence over girls' hockey, stating:

> …[I]f they need to switch around anything in the schedule for provincial games or provincial play-downs or anything, they always take the female practices first and see where they can move them or cancel them.

Nicole went on to explain that in her association everything funnels through the board members. Like all matters, issues related to the organization of girls' hockey go to the board for discussion and if there is only one voice for girls' hockey it does not get adequate attention. Reflecting on the role of her association Nicole explained, 'they [the board members for the association] pretty much have the final say whether, you know do we want to go here, do we want to go there'. If advocates for girls' hockey are not being heard then this creates the potential for scenarios where individuals who have the skills to get involved as leaders are choosing not to or are leaving in frustration (Messner, 2009). Perhaps this lack of voice of those advocating for girls hockey is not surprising given that the economy in the province of Alberta is dominated by the masculinized oil and gas industry and Alberta has the largest gender income gap in the country (Lahey, 2016). This landscape makes it all the more difficult for gender equity to be 'heard' around a board table.

Despite these frustrations, all participants in our study felt that girls' hockey in smaller associations such as those in Southern Alberta were dependent on their minor hockey associations and that the current integrated governance model was the only model that would work in this area of the province. For example, Mark (past coach, administrator, parent) stated:

> For smaller organizations it is better for them to be together because then you're not going to the city for a bit here and a bit there. You can work more cooperatively if you're in the same group. When you're dealing with the referees you can work together. In a city of this size it makes sense to work together.

Cheryl also endorsed the current integrated model explaining:

> This is more of a rural area; there is not a huge amount, not a lot of girls playing, so to have a separate organization that ran it probably wouldn't be the most efficient. I know with the bigger centres they have their own organizations that deal with the women's teams but they are a lot larger centres. When you only have a couple of teams it is a waste of resources. You do what you have to in a smaller centre.

At the end of the interview Cheryl concluded by expressing her frustration and reluctant acceptance of the status quo, stating: 'The same problems seem to always come up. Having to travel far to go and play or not having enough girls show up or the girls are struggling to get their ice times.' The experiences of our interviewees reinforce how persistent structural inequalities can work to reproduce the status quo and make it difficult for organizers to imagine transformations (Messner, 2009). Despite individual efforts to resist gender systems at play, prevailing ideologies of girls' hockey as 'second rate' perpetuate historical relations of power within governance structures that work to discriminate against girls.

Discriminatory ice allocation

While some of the interviewees in our study suggested that accessing ice time was a challenge in both boys' and girls' minor hockey in some communities, others suggested ice allocation was discriminatory in their associations as 'the girls seem to be the last ones on the list to get the divvied up ice time' (Jennifer, past administrator, parent). Many of the participants explained that due to insufficient facilities shared ice for practices was often a reality. When asked how many practices a week each girls' team in her association was allocated, Jennifer explained:

> One practice a week and they share the ice. This is not unusual. They do 30/30/30. So the first 30 minutes our girls are out by themselves and then they share the ice for 30 minutes [with another team] and then the other team gets the ice to themselves for 30 minutes.

This necessity of shared ice makes practices difficult even at the younger ages when players are just learning basic skills and even more difficult at older ages when coaches are trying to teach specialized skills (breakouts, penalty kills, power plays, defence zone systems), something that is quite difficult to do without the full ice. Some participants shared that their teams had to drive to different towns to secure ice time and in one case, the interviewee indicated that their home ice was in a town over an hour from their city. With the reality of insufficient ice in some communities, participants explained how associations and coaches have to make do. For example Lisa **(**administrator, parent**)** stated:

> Now it's coming down to crunch time with the ice, but what we say is, we will work with it, will do whatever we can, will do dry land, will split the ice, will see what we can do.

It is important to consider the implications of this in the context of the girls' game and the low registration numbers in Southern Alberta. Jared's comment that the lack of ice availability limited the growth potential of minor hockey is telling:

> Yeah, we can go out and get another hundred kids. But, to get another hundred kids equals x amount of ice they don't have. So they have to be careful about not overselling the product.

If those 100 kids are girls then a more equitable ice allocation strategy would be needed to accommodate growth in girls' hockey. Yet, none of our interviewees even hinted at a more equitable ice allocation strategy being considered by administrators in their communities. This has direct implications for girls' hockey. As Hockey Canada (2015) registration numbers indicate, over the past two decades this *is* where the growth in Canadian hockey has occurred, yet there appears to be no strategy in place to accommodate this growth. With an allocation model that accommodates more boys' teams than girls' teams it is difficult for organizers to conceive and advocate for additional girls' teams in the current system given the realities of limited ice access.

Inconsistent officiating

Past research suggests that referees often do not understand how to interpret and apply the rules of girls' and women's hockey. This leads to player and coach frustration (Stevens and Adams, 2013; Theberge, 1997, 2000). Our study supports these findings. Matt (coach, parent) suggested that inconsistent refereeing was, for him, one of the greatest challenges in girls' hockey in Southern Alberta:

> A lot of the time officials have a hard time calling the girls' game because they don't know how to call it. And I don't really blame them to be honest, it's kind of a tough call. You just get big discrepancies in what is viewed as body contact. One ref will allow it, rubbing out on the boards. And then another ref thinks 'this is girls' hockey, they shouldn't touch each other.' And they don't necessarily understand the rules.

Cheryl explained:

> It depends on the ref. Sometimes you get those refs who don't really like to let the girls play. You know, they think you can't touch anybody at all which isn't the case with girls' hockey. That kind of makes it difficult for the girls to be able to play the game and they have to adjust. They [some referees] seem to take the no checking rule a little too far.

In a practical sense, how girls and women's hockey is practised depends not only on the written rules but the interpretation of those rules by those in a position to enforce them (Theberge, 1997). The rules of boys' and girls' hockey are essentially the same, with the exception that body checking is introduced in boys' hockey at the bantam level, while the rules of girls' hockey prohibit intentional body checking at all levels.[2] The most cited reasons for not allowing body checking relate to injury prevention, the possibility of escalating violence and keeping girls' bodies safe from 'risk' (Theberge, 2000; Weaving and Roberts, 2012). The prohibition of body checking, however, is about much more than injuries, violence and harm. Theberge (2000: 135) argues that the 'rules and practices surrounding [the use of physicality] are central to the construction of hockey and the broader struggle over the gendering of the sport'. Certainly, the political economy of risk produces boys' and men's bodies differently from those of girls and women (see

Brown and Penney, 2014; Gilenstam et al., 2008; Laurendeau, 2008; Laurendeau and Konecny, 2015). Risk, in the form of physicality, aggression and violence, is discursively constructed as a central element of (boys'/men's) hockey in our Canadian cultural context (Adams, 2014; Allain, 2008). Discourses of risk, injury and harm operate to authorize and legitimate particular exclusionary practices in girls' and women's hockey. Activities deemed risky, such as hockey, are characterized as dangerous, hazardous and threatening to girls and women (Laurendeau and Adams, 2010; Lupton, 1999). Thus, girls' and women's bodies continue to be subjected to paternalistic 'protection' and troubling notions of biological essentialism that linger in girls' and women's sport.

The ongoing process of gender socialization through organizational practices sends subtle, yet meaningful, messages to the players (as well as parents and spectators) about girls' and women's hockey. It tells them that their practice of hockey is 'inferior' and 'different'. Some organizations such as the Ontario Women's Hockey Association (OWHA) have intentionally embraced and advocated for a 'separate and different' philosophical stance (see Adams and Stevens, 2007). However, others suggest that constructing girls' and women's hockey as 'different' can result in girls' and women's sport being 'viewed to be an inferior alternative to the "real" version' (Theberge, 2000: 35). The following quote from Sandy (past coach, past player) illuminates how girls' hockey is often viewed as inferior and the practical consequences that result from this:

> In the higher leagues, like midget they send out peers, boys that are the same age as the girls. Whereas in midget boys' hockey you would never see that. It's always older people out there refereeing the [boys'] games.

When boys who are peers and the same age as players are employed as referees it reinforces a lack of respect and devaluing of girls' hockey. Actions such as this are made to seem normal and they send a clear message to the players, thus reproducing systems of gender that positions girls' practice of hockey as less important and less serious than the boys' game (Messner, 2009).

Lack of female coaches

Minor hockey in Southern Alberta is organized and administered solely by dedicated volunteers. This volunteerism in youth sport often results in a division of labour that reinforces traditional gender roles with women in support roles and men in leadership positions (Messner, 2009). In support of past research (see, for example, LaVoi and Dutove, 2012; Norman, 2010; Robertson, 2010; Theberge, 1993), some of our interviewees identified a lack of female coaches in their communities and attributed this to a naturalized difference between men and women and lack of coaching mentorship. Cheryl explained it is difficult to find experienced coaches in her association:

> It is hard to find coaches. Usually just someone's Dad would volunteer. It was kind of tough to find people who are knowledgeable or qualified and willing to put in all that time. I understand that it is tough to find people especially in a rural area when you don't have a large pool of people to choose from for coaches. That impacts the players. If you don't have the coaching it is kind of tough. Head coach wise there were definitely more males that were coaching.

Men's and women's choices about whether and how to get involved in minor hockey, as administrators or coaches for example, are fundamentally *social* choices, and often mirror and reproduce existing gendered patterns. Important in this context is the common assumption that *fathers* will volunteer to coach, an assumption that 'creates a context that powerfully channels men and women in these directions' (Messner, 2009: 39). Mark suggests that this is a result of prevalent notions of gender:

> The traditional female role is as a nurturer and taking care of the household, and so I think it's very easy for a male member of the household to say, well I'm going to go to the rink, I'm going to coach, I'm going to do this and you know I'll be home later. Whereas from a female side it is hard for them to get away if they have a family to just leave the family to go coach and then come home and they still have all their other duties to do.

This comment reflects the socially and politically conservative landscape of southern Alberta. Muller Myrdahl (2013; see also Wesley, 2011) explains that Southern Alberta is widely understood as a conservative outlier in Canada. Constructing men as having the space to actively *choose* coaching and all of the duties, responsibilities and time commitments it entails, and women in roles of nurturer and household caretaker constructs coaching for women as outside the realm of imagined possibilities and limits their potential to actively choose these positions.

When asked about the number of female coaches in Southern Alberta, Mark replied:

> I can't honestly say that I know of any females right now that are actually involved in the game with their children involved in the game. I would think with time this will come.

A lack of women coaches on the ice reproduces long-standing gender binaries instead of meaningfully disrupting them (Messner, 2009). Sandy (past coach, past player) explained that she did not feel valued when she coached in minor hockey. She recalls a lack of communication with the association at the end of the season and no encouragement to coach the following season. She recalled that there was no follow up, 'like "are you going to come back next year" or "we'd love to have you back", no, "the position is yours if you want it."' After admitting this, she laughed and said, 'so maybe we did a really crappy job'. According to Messner (2009: 56), Sandy is a 'stopper'. She coached for one or two years and then quit. Stories like this are telling in that they speak to the devaluing of women as coaches and the importance of retention strategies to encourage and support women in these leadership positions. Indeed, women's experiences in youth sport are shaped by 'subtle interpersonal dynamics rather than through overt discrimination' (Messner, 2009: 52). Sandy's understanding of this moment reinforces that organizational practices are themselves gendered and work to limit the experiences of women in subtle yet meaningful ways.

Moving forward

In 2013, Hockey Alberta contracted an independent review of girls' hockey in the province of Alberta in response to concerns from key stakeholders (players, parents, coaches, associations) that there were issues that needed to be addressed (Nesom, 2014).[3] This

report suggests a commitment from Hockey Alberta to address perpetuated discriminatory practices. The recommendations from the review recognize that the status quo must change moving forward, that girls' and women's hockey is fundamentally different and must be considered separately from the boys' and men's hockey system with more opportunities for representation at the provincial level. More significantly, the Hockey Alberta review raises some of the issues also identified in our research related to limited ice access, lack of recruitment initiatives and promotion of girls' hockey, and lack of representation. However, the review also falls short in several ways. It fails to address informal practices of gender that amount 'to a collective and (mostly) non-reflexive sorting system' that works to construct girls' minor hockey as inferior and limits its potential for meaningful transformation and grassroots growth (Messner, 2009: 48). It positions female hockey players across the province as a homogenous group, failing to meaningfully account for the regional differences.[4] This is particularly salient in a province wherein the two urban centres, Edmonton and Calgary, are too often perceived as the only centres that matter economically and politically. If rural centres are not given a prominent voice this would in turn have a disproportionate negative impact on girls' sport.

Further, the study seems to have a heavy emphasis on the emergence and effect of sport schools in the province. The purpose of the two surveys, writes Polutnik (2013: 2), was to 'determine preferences and rationale for female hockey participation in leagues and sport schools, opportunity levels and barriers to participation, the role of sport schools in Alberta and how female hockey in Alberta might be enhanced'. This raises questions about *whose* participation is the focus and what 'enhancing' the game in the province really means. We fear that grassroots participation, increasing opportunities for girls to play hockey in all areas and at all levels, and addressing persistent organizational inequalities in the game are being overlooked in favour of enhancing elite participation. This privileges certain experiences over others and ignores persistent gendered assumptions and patterns that construct the game.

Particularly disturbing in the report was the emphasis on 'additional coach mentorship for *male* coaches in minor hockey to gain skills for working with female athletes' (Polutnik, 2014: 4; our emphasis). In this case, it is not what is said that is troubling, but what is *not* said. That the lack of women coaches and the recruitment, mentorship and retention of women in minor hockey in Alberta were not targeted as a concern, or *even mentioned*, is telling. Through this exclusion, the report works to erase the possibility of women as coaches and reinforces a gender regime in which women are too rarely recruited to occupy leadership positions (Connell, 2002).

Our study of girls' hockey in Southern Alberta suggests that simply increasing participation numbers, and celebrating this progress, is not enough. Although women's hockey in Canada, more broadly, has made significant inroads since the 1970s, girls and women's hockey in some areas of the country continues to lag far behind. The central issues relate to who has authority over the game and whose voices are heard. Reading the Hockey Alberta review in conversation with our study suggests that there is a disjuncture in the perceived challenges for girls' hockey in the province. While our participants emphasized issues with quality refereeing and coaching that are rooted in perceptions of girls' hockey as 'second class', the Hockey Alberta review fails to seriously recognize

the informal practices of gender that pervade girls' minor hockey. As Messner and Musto (2014: 103) write, grassroots sport is 'an important and meaningful part of the larger landscape of childhood'. In light of this, we need to more meaningfully address the inequalities that continue to reproduce existing systems of gender in grassroots girls' hockey that work to disadvantage girls.

There are many possibilities for future research related to girls' minor hockey in Canada. An intersectional analysis of girls' hockey with a focus on social inequalities (gender, race, class) from region to region would allow greater consideration of what systemic barriers and active marginalization processes contribute to who plays (and who coaches) and who does not. Those individuals with the authority to determine policy and the day-to-day operations of youth sport play a crucial role in ensuring the accessibility of youth sport programs to all youth, regardless of socio-economic status, race, culture, ethnicity or gender (see Fraser-Thomas and Côté, 2006; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Analysing low participation numbers and nonparticipating youth can also lead to greater insights and a critical understanding of institutionalized sport and the associated governance structures. Understanding nonparticipating youth, as Messner and Musto (2014: 111) suggest, can help us 'move beyond liberal scholarly frameworks that emphasize better and more democratic access to existing institutional youth sport, toward imagining alternatives to sport that emphasize inclusiveness, lifelong physical activity and health, and building cooperative relationships and skills'. Further, many of our participants suggested that there was a lack of communication with and between smaller centres and rural communities. As researchers we were asked again and again to serve as resources, to help share ideas from other communities. This raises questions about the role and obligations of the researcher (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, 2005) but also points to gaps in the system whereby knowledge and past or best practice is not being effectively shared and communicated. Perhaps, most significantly, this study reveals the centrality of sporting geographies to understanding sport governance structures. Given that most sport scholarship focuses on urban centres, critical sport scholars need to more adequately address and conceptualize rurality in light of the political and economic influences in these regions, increasing neoliberal rationalities, and the continued divide between the governance and delivery of girls' hockey across urban and rural communities in Canada.

In her critique of feminism, Peñaloza (2000: 45) writes, '[r]emembering how far we've come is important, not so much to reify the past as to provide some tangible basis for understanding where we want to go in the future and how we might get there'. In 2016, girls and women are no longer restricted to the sidelines in sport. While this is certainly a time to marvel about girls and women's sport and the tremendous gains that have been made over the past four decades, as Jaime Schultz (2014) reminds us, we also need to be vigilant about inequalities and discriminatory practices that continue to exist. We need to move beyond celebratory discourses of gain, achievement and progress to critically consider the current state of girls' and women's sport as a complicated, nonlinear, non-universal success story. By questioning assumed cultural discourses and persistent historical ideological understandings of girls' and women's sport we argue that generalizations (in this case of 'success' or 'growth' in girls' and women's sport) based upon girls and women as a homogenous group are dangerous, as they assume similarities

in opportunity and access and work to obfuscate discriminatory practices (Hargreaves, 1994). We must challenge researchers, administrators and volunteers to continually consider the ways in which they simultaneously resist and reproduce systems of gender in their individual practices and in their involvement with the systematic processes that govern sport. Only by calling into question progress narratives and continuing to strive for greater access, voice and opportunity for those who want to play, will we be able to meaningfully consider discriminatory practices and the entrenched assumptions and structures that continue to privilege boys' and men's sport over that of girls and women.

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Notes

1. In Alberta, exceptions to the integrated governance model occur in Calgary and Edmonton, where girls' hockey is organized separately under the direction of Girls' Hockey Calgary and the Edmonton Girls' Hockey Association respectively. These associations have a full complement of directors for each age group that comprise a fully operational, separate board. Similarly, Grande Prairie has recently set up the Peace Country Female Athletic Club, which is still a subsidiary of Grande Prairie Minor Hockey, but whose mandate is to develop the elite girls' and women's game within the area.
2. Body checking is defined by Hockey Alberta as, 'a player's attempt at gaining the advantage on the opponent with the use of the body. Checking results when two opposing players collide while skating in opposite directions or when positioning and angling allow the checker to use the force of the body to gain the advantage' while body contact is the 'incidental contact of two opposing players in pursuit of the puck or position on the ice in the same direction. Body contact occurs as a result of movement by the offensive players' (Hockey Alberta Resources (2015) Referee Case Book/ Rule Combination 2014–2015. http://www.hockeyalberta.ca/uploads/source/rulebook_casebook_e.pdf (accessed 15 March 2015)).
3. The report indicates that 75 people completed the survey, 21 people were interviewed in person and 15 people by telephone and that the interviews included 'players, coaches, parents, minor hockey and league executives, key staff of Hockey Canada and Hockey Alberta' and that '[c]oaches from a sport school, a sport academy, ACAC [Alberta Colleges Athletics Conference] and CIS contributed…' (Polutnik, 2014).
4. The report does not indicate where geographically in the province the individuals surveyed and interviewed were located (although it does indicate that not all minor hockey associations were surveyed) or to what extent individuals from rural areas were included in the study.

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