

1-1-2003

Alice in the Gendered Sports-Fan Wonderland: A Sociological Inquiry

Elizabeth J. Schumacher

University of Massachusetts Boston

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture>

 Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Theory, Knowledge and Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schumacher, Elizabeth J. (2003) "Alice in the Gendered Sports-Fan Wonderland: A Sociological Inquiry," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol2/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.



Alice in the Gendered Sports-Fan Wonderland: A Sociological Inquiry

Elizabeth J. Schumacher

UMass Boston

C. Wright Mills encouraged people to develop a **sociological imagination** in order to “place themselves in social context and identify how public issues affect them at the personal level, arguing that people need to know the source of their difficulties in order to make sense of their lives” (Disch 2). I believe that gender is often the context in which such difficulties arise. Disch goes on to stress the importance of empowerment through the challenging of the patriarchal system. She states that, “without seeing the complexity of human experience and the complexity of human oppression, we cannot begin to address the real needs of human beings caught in systematically oppressive social structures” (Disch 14).

Though the feminist movement has vastly improved the situation of women, many challenges and obstacles still endure. Over the past century, substantial progress has been made in the opportunities afforded to women in voting rights, education, and job possibilities, but many social issues still need to be improved. In this paper I will discuss the obstacles women continue to face in their efforts to be seen as equals in the sports world as fans.

In her paper, “Theoretical Reflections on Peer Judgments” (2003), M. Goltry speaks of how society plays a crucial role in how we view ourselves. She states, “It is through our interactions with others that we form opinions of ourselves” (Goltry 19). In my opinion, society plays a crucial role not only in how we view ourselves but also in how we behave, as well as how we seek to influence how others view us as well. Some things just aren’t fully under our control, gender being one of these. I took a class on the Sociology of Gender, and found the readings on embodiment to be the most interesting part of the class. In particular, “Beauty is the Beast: Psychological Effects of the Pursuit of the Perfect Female Body” (1995), by Elayne A. Saltzberg and Joan C. Chrisler, went into great details concerning the differences between men and women and how they are viewed by society in relation to their appearance. The reading begins by quoting Ambrose Bierce (1958), “To men a man is but a mind. Who cares what face he carries or what he wears? But woman’s body is the woman” (Saltzberg & Chrisler 167). Though there have been great steps forward for women since this time, this idea can still be felt in the present day. The authors go on to point out that men are considered “handsome,” while women are “beautiful.” The term handsome being derived from the word hand and referring to qualities of strength, action, and achievement, while beauty simply refers to decoration. “Men are instrumental; women are ornamental” (Saltzberg & Chrisler 167).

This idea, I believe, translates into how we are expected to act as sports fans: men should be cheering loud and active, while women are expected to just “sit and be pretty.” This has been especially apparent to me this year, as the Red Sox and Patriots both had such amazing seasons. It is now, however, during March Madness, that I realize it has bothered me year after year. I attended the University of Maryland for four years, including the 2001 season in which

the Terrapins went to the Final Four for the first time in school history and the 2002 season in which they won their first National Championship. In my case, being a Maryland sports fan is an important part of my **identity**.

A long-time misconception is that only men care about such sports as football, baseball, and basketball. For example, when a television show portrays the Super Bowl, it usually has something to do with men watching the game and their wives receive the **stigma** of being upset with their husbands regarding their watching the game. It seems that television still follows the **traditional gender roles** most of the time when it comes to sports. However, in the real world, women have become much more interested in “traditionally male” sports over the past few decades. The film *Twelve Angry Men* seems to be illustrative of this perspective. While the film concerned a jury rather than a sporting event, I find it interesting that back in the 1950s, just as sporting events are still considered today to be male-dominated places, men were portrayed to be as best suited for jury positions. It seems as though the movie was making a statement that some places, such as a jury room, were meant only for men—just as I believe many men feel today that sporting events are not appropriate places for women, at least not for more than ornamentation.

I also believe that a woman’s **anticipatory socialization** in sports differs greatly from the consequences that she actually encounters once she makes the “positive orientation to the values of a group other than one’s own” (Wallace and Wolf, 50). I believe that most women think that they will receive **intrinsic rewards** for their “love of the game.” They believe that they will earn the respect of men as they will be impressed with their knowledge and passion; but many times this is not the case. While the film *Affluenza* portrays Americans as striving for increase in **status** through the

purchase of symbolic material goods that they neither need nor always even want, I believe some men think that the majority of women only “pretend” to like sports in an attempt to achieve a higher status in the eyes of men.

I consider the world of sports and sports fans to be a good example of the **patriarchalism** in our society, which also relates to Dorothy Smith’s **Feminist Standpoint Theory**. The sports world demonstrates women’s experience with a “**line of fault** between what they know and experience in their everyday/everynight lives and what is official knowledge as expressed in the symbols, images, vocabularies, and concepts of the patriarchal culture” (Wallace and Wolf, 286). As a result, female fans must accept a **bifurcated** consciousness. They must show their interest in the game, but do so in such a manner as to not upset the traditional female gender roles they are expected to follow.

I also consider the belief that women should not be vocal or aggressive fans relates to Max Weber’s concept of **traditional authority**—authority enjoyed because it has been handed down from the past; “patriarchalism is by far the most important type of domination the legitimacy of which rests upon tradition. Patriarchalism means the authority of the father, the husband, the senior of the house” (Wallace and Wolf, 73). I think the idea that women should simply sit and be silent is an utter and deplorable form of domination and deprecation.

I believe that traditional authority and patriarchalism also relate to the concept of **symbolic interaction**, as it is our appearance, many times, that defines how others will treat us and how they believe we should behave. I have dealt with this issue many times during Maryland basketball games. The men in the room yell loud, jump around, and high-five each other after every good play, but if I, or another female, acted in any of these ways, the men would look at us like we had two heads. I believe

that they just didn't expect us, as women, to be physically into the game.

I also consider this to be an example of the **objectification** of women. Most men expect women to be quiet and dainty, not loud and rambunctious fans like themselves. They enjoy watching the female cheerleaders with the short skirts and bare midriffs, but comment whenever a woman is dressed, cheering, and acting like a "man." I also believe that this objectification can lead to the **internalization** by women of this "objectivated social reality," thus legitimizing it. George Herbert Mead's concept of the **generalized other**, in which "individuals internalize the norms and values generated by the dominant institutions," also explains this phenomenon (Wallace and Wolf, 202). Samara Cohen describes this idea by stating, "Our personalities are shaped by interactions we have with people as individuals, and as groups in society (2003:9)." These concepts have to do with the **social construction of reality** that is displayed throughout the film *The Matrix*. A person comes to accept as true what society tells them is true. Though a woman may want to cheer and behave in the same manner as her male fan counterparts, she will accept as true the idea that she should not behave in this manner since women must remain "feminine" at all times, and this behavior is simply unacceptable.

Rational choice theory states that the values that women hold help explain the rationality of their behavior. I believe this to be very true. While I am a true Maryland fan and hold great passion for my team, I also value my womanhood greatly. I have come to prefer watching games on television by myself, or with other female Maryland fans, as an attempt to keep up my appearance as a "lady" to as many people as possible. While, "the [Rational Choice] theory does not ... explain how women come to hold these values in the first place (Wallace and Wolf, 420)," I believe that this

particular value is something that is internalized in us from the time we are born.

Charles Cooley's concept of the **looking-glass self** can be observed at work in the behavior of female fans such as myself. I believe that it is very true that we judge ourselves based on our perceptions of others' opinions of us. I also believe that we let this affect our behavior in certain situations. With regards to this idea, I also believe that women cannot see past their femaleness when they consider themselves as fans. Personally, I find it easier to understand W.E.B. DuBois's race-related concept of **double-consciousness** when I apply it to issues of gender in sports. I do not see myself simply as a fan, but first as a female and then as a fan. Personally, I am aware of my behavior during a basketball game, and, at times, make an effort to keep my behavior in check, mindful of how I believe others think I should be acting. I do not think that this affected me as much when I was in Maryland, but it has recently been an issue. My boyfriend made a comment to me, and then later to others, about how I am so loud when I watch Maryland basketball games. Since then, I have noticed this, and made attempts to change this behavior during any sports game that I watch. I believe this change in behavior may be due, in part, to **latent function**, a consequence neither recognized nor intended, of my boyfriend and others' comments to me regarding how I should behave as a woman while expressing my excitement during Maryland games.

This idea of women changing their behavior in order to guide and control the impressions others form of them is akin to **impression management**. Erving Goffman describes the idea of **front-stage**, or personal front, and how the standards are stricter for women than they are for men. He uses the example of clothing and appearance, but I believe the things that come into play in the case of watching a sporting event are posture, speech patterns, facial expres-

sions, and body gestures. There are certain traditional **norms** for women regarding these issues, and when a woman does not follow these norms, she is criticized. Personally, I know that when I watch a Maryland basketball game, I am not exercising good posture—I may swear, I may make strange faces, and I may make body gestures such as jumping up and down that are not typical, or acceptable, for women.

I believe that men cannot see beyond a woman's **ascribed status** when it comes to sports. Even if a woman has proven, through her past performance in March Madness bracket pools for example, most men still have a hard time accepting their **achieved status**. My college roommate and I have proven time and again that we know what we are talking about with respect to college basketball, but our male friends still refuse to take us seriously. When they put together Fantasy Football Leagues, they still would not let us join, saying that women know nothing about football. According to Parsons modern societies are supposed to adjudicate others based on what they can do or have done, their achievement status, but this is obviously not the case in many situations regarding women and sports (Wallace and Wolf, 32).

Another observation I have made recently is that it seems to be more acceptable for men to react to sports with more **affectivity**, while women are expected to react with more **affective neutrality**. When the Red Sox were competing for the ALCS in October, my boyfriend spent hundreds of dollars to go to two of the home games, though he had gone to only one game all season, on a ticket I gave him for his birthday, and watched none on television. On the other hand, I went to quite a number of games and watched many on television throughout the season. Still, my boyfriend truly believed that he cared more about the Red Sox and that he deserved to be out celebrating their wins simply because he was a man while I should not be as exultant.

However, if the roles were reversed, I, or any other woman, would never be taken seriously and would be seen as a "fair weather fan" or "jumping on the bandwagon." Men, however, use the excuse that they are just too busy with work and other obligations in order to maintain their status as dedicated fans throughout the entire season—and it is accepted.

According to the **Functionalist** perspective, "boys who are aggressive and girls who are nurturing have learned the 'appropriate' gender role behavior: the socialization process worked" (Wallace and Wolf, 420). While I believe that many men consider most female fans to be "fake," I also believe that there are men who themselves are fans simply due to **socialization**. The process of socialization involves societal values being internalized by members of society, making society's values their own. It is a common societal perception that men are sports fans. Therefore, I believe that there are men in the U.S. who, while they don't really care much either way, act as if they are avid fans of the local teams simply to "fit in" with their friends. Also, if one were to follow this view on the other side, they would consider women who were aggressive fans themselves to be guilty of engendering **role conflict**, since they would be clearly deviating from the traditional female norm.

The film *Billy Elliot* depicts this idea of role conflict in the opposite circumstance. While behaviors and actions taken by a female fan are often seen as a threat to her femininity, Billy's desire to dance was viewed as a threat to his masculinity. Throughout the film, Billy's father was reluctant to accept his son's yearning for and love of ballet, and attempted to coerce him into a "masculine" sport. I see this as being equivalent to the male's attempt to exclude women from the "masculine" sports of basketball and football except in the circumstance of decoration, as cheerleaders. I believe men view the role of the fan as a

masculine sport in itself, and are only comfortable when females in the vicinity are objectified or disregarded.

Conflict theory is based on the view that people and groups in society are in a constant struggle for power. Conflict theorists emphasize power as the core of social relationships. They view power as scarce, unequally divided, and essentially coercive. They also believe that people develop values and ideas that suit their own interests. I see this idea displayed in the fight for maintaining men as the only “true” sports fans. I believe men view the situation as if women’s being fans somehow takes something away from men, as if being a fan is imbued with power, and if women are fans too, men lose some of their power.

I believe that womanhood is one example of a **status group**, as described by Max Weber. According to his definition, status groups are those “whose distinctiveness lies not in their shared economic position but either in their shared mode of life (often founded on a common education) or in the prestige attached to their birth and family” (Wallace and Wolf, 74). In the case of sports, I believe that being labeled as part of the female status group causes the person to lose the right to be taken seriously as a fan.

The film *Erin Brockovich* also depicts the challenges women face. I compare the reactions Erin receives from the other women because of how she is dressed to the reactions of both men and women to a woman who is an “aggressive” fan. People act like there is something wrong with being who you are and behaving (or dressing) the way you choose to behave. They act as if that one choice completely defines who you are and do not recognize it as simply one expression of your personality and preferences.

Elite Theory posits that “only a small number of people in any organization can hold authority and that their occupation of these positions automatically places them at odds with those subjected to it” (Wallace

and Wolf, 75). The athletic world does not seem to be exempt from its own elite dynamics. I view the situation as being a similar one in which men believe they hold all of the knowledge and authority on the subject of sports, and therefore women should simply “sit and be pretty” and not offer any opinions or encouragements.

I believe that the concept of **esteem** may play into the disjuncture between male and female fans. According to Thorstein Veblen, people eagerly desire the esteem of others. Also, esteem is essentially a competitive matter as not everyone can enjoy high status. “A large part of people’s behavior, Veblen argued, especially styles of consumption and leisure, can be explained by the struggle for high standing in the eyes of one’s neighbors” (Wallace and Wolf, 76). While I believe that there are a few women who simply pretend to enjoy sports more than they actually do in an attempt to gain esteem, I believe that many men consider this to be a more frequent occurrence than it actually is. It seems that a lot of times men do not truly believe that women actually know or care about “male” sports, but act like women are only pretending to care in an attempt to gain the esteem of men.

It is as if there is what Emile Durkheim called a **collective conscience**, “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society,” (Wallace and Wolf, 21) regarding sports and sports fans in America. The general belief, it seems, is that sports fans are male. Men act as if all other men should follow and be fans of the local football, basketball, baseball, and hockey teams, but seem to be very surprised when women join the conversation regarding any of these sports. In my experience, after this surprise subsides, it seems that men do not really listen to anything I or other women say. They seem to either argue that all of our opinions are wrong, or disregard what we have to say completely if it is obvious that we are right

and do know what we are talking about.

In his paper, *Freire Meets Gurdjieff and Rumi: Towards the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Oppressing Selves*, Tamdgidi uses Paulo Freire to define a being of praxis as, “an incessantly liberating organism in that it is capable and in need of constantly changing both the objective and subjective conditions of its existence in order to survive (Tamdgidi 4).” I believe that female sports fans are example of beings deprived of what they deserve as beings of *praxis*. I view the notion that only men are true fans as an oppressive subjective condition which female fans are continuously striving to change just as women struggled in the past to change economic and social conditions relevant to the feminist movement.

Tamdgidi also speaks of the problem of *subconsciousness*. Citing Gurdjieff, he states that “one may be critically awakened, say to an oppressive situation within or without, but continue, given the force of subconsciously conditioned habits, to mechanically act as if such critical awareness never even existed” (Tamdgidi 12) I can relate this idea to my own experience, in particular when I am reminded of how my boyfriend and his friends act towards me and other women when we talk about or cheer for the Patriots or Red Sox. Though he acknowledges that I do know what I am talking about at the time, but he continues to act as if he does not think that I do. I believe this may be due to his conditioned subconscious thinking that women do not know about sports.

Tamdgidi’s paper also describes the concept of *intra-personal oppression* and how a person “may actually oppress him or her self, through practices which *may*, theoretically speaking, have relatively little to do with interpersonal social rationalities” (23). He continues to infer that, “a ‘looking-glass self’ dynamic may be at work, for instance, where the person continues to demean him or her self simply because of a misinterpretation or misimagination of a

comment ...” (Tamdgidi 23). I believe that this idea can clearly be recognized in the case of female fans with regard to their bifurcated consciousness. Personally, I have become aware of my behavior during games, and do change my behavior when others are present as I am uncomfortable and attempt to avoid the embarrassment of being perceived as an over-eager female fan. I had never before considered this reflection and subsequent change in my behavior as an instance of intra-personal oppression, but contemplating on the foregoing I do believe that it is.

In his article, “The Myth of the Sexual Athlete” (1994), Don Sabo speaks of the connection between sports and male sexuality. To make the connection, Sabo discloses stories of his and other men’s attempts at gaining and/or maintaining the appearance of masculinity through “locker room sex talk.” Sabo continues by stating, “to be manly in sports, traditionally, means to be competitive, successful, dominating, aggressive, stoical, goal-directed, and physically strong. Many athletes accept this definition of masculinity and apply it in their relationships with women. Dating becomes a sport in itself, and ‘scoring’... is a mark of masculine achievement” (Sabo 264). I believe this idea may be related to *why* men do not view women as equals in being sports fans. Perhaps in the male mind, if a woman is as much of a fan as he is, he loses some of his sexual power, some of his masculinity—as if a woman who is a sports fan steals some of the competitiveness, domination, and aggressiveness that are supposed to be reserved for the male.

Furthermore, I view the lack of what Jürgen Habermas calls *communicative actions* between men and women during sports games to be another example of women being excluded as fans. During the 2004 Super Bowl, I and another female watched the game with three men and were utterly disregarded throughout the game. My boyfriend did not even hear me when I

commented on Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" because, I believe, he had just tuned me out completely for the entire game. During the final minutes of the fourth quarter, the men were all standing around in a circle, and participated in communicative actions such as high-fiving, playfully hitting each other, and jumping up on each other, while the other female and I were left out. It was as if they thought we were not as excited as they were about our home team Patriots winning the Super Bowl. Habermas argues, "Communicative actions are not only processes of interpretation in which cultural knowledge is 'tested against the world'; they are at the same time processes of social integration and socialization" (quoted in Wallace and Wolf, 175). I believe this to be true, and feel that we, as females, were prevented from being socially integrated and socialized into the sports world due to our gender.

In order to begin to change the current circumstance of the role of women in sports, the concept of *inclusion* must be applied. It should no longer be acceptable for women to be treated differently or excluded from certain aspects of being a fan simply due to their gender. "Society must recognize that groups that have been excluded are capable of contributing to the functioning of the system" (Wallace and Wolf, 166), and by this I mean more than the function of decoration provided by cheerleaders. According to Wallace and Wolf, "[Miriam] Johnson ... argues that the inclusion of educated women into the occupational world outside the home on an equal basis with men has led to *adaptive upgrading* because it released more trained capacity into the system" (167). I believe the same can be true of the sports world if women are only given a chance to be taken seriously and seen as equals.

Judith Lorber, in her article, "The Social Construction of Gender" (1994), contends that gender is "constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of so-

cial life, and is the texture and order of the social life" (Lorber 96). She also asserts that,

for the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth... A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers. Once a child's gender is evident, others treat those in one gender differently from those in the other, and the children respond to the different treatment by feeling different and behaving different. (Lorber 97)

I believe this notion is evident in the treatment of female fans and their subsequent emotional and behavioral responses. As discussed above, I have had many experiences in which I was looked at and treated differently (than a man would be) during a football, basketball, or baseball game, because of my gender. And, in further support of Lorber's assertion, I then began to feel being different and consequently began to behave differently. I believe that Judith Lorber's idea of the social construction of gender is true and evident in the case of female fans.

REFERENCES

- Bierce, A. (1958). *The Devil's Dictionary*. New York: Dover.
- Cohen, S. (2002). "I Only *Thought* I Knew It All: Society and the Individual." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 9-17.
- Disch, E. (2003). *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. p. 1-25.
- Goltry, M. (2003). "Theoretical Reflections on Peer Judgments." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*. Vol. II, No. 1, p. 19-26.
- Farganis, J. (2000). *Readings in Social Theory: The*

Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism. Third Edition. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

- Lorber, J. "The Social Construction of Gender." (1994) *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. 2003. p. 96-103.
- Margulies, E. (2002). "From Anti-Man to Anti-Patriarchy." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*. Vol. I
- Margulies, E. (2003). "Why I Smoke: Sociology of A Deadly Habit." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*. Vol. II, No. 1.
- Sabo, D. "The Myth of the Sexual Athlete." (1994). *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. 2003. p. 263-267.
- Saltzberg, E.A. and Chrisler, J.C. (1995). "Beauty is the Beast: Psychological Effects of the Pursuit of the Perfect Female Body *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. 2003. p. 167-177.
- Tamdgidi, Mohammad H. (2004). *Freire Meets Gurdjieff and Rumi: Towards the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Oppressing Selves*. Presented to Social Theory Forum, 2004, Umass Boston.
- Wallace, R.A. and Wolf, A. (1999). *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition*. Fifth Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Films

- "Affluenza." (1997). Bullfrog Films.
- "The Big One." (1998). Miramax Home Entertainment.
- "Billy Elliot." (2000). Universal Pictures.
- "Erin Brockovich." (2000). Universal Pictures.
- "The Matrix." (1999). Warner Bros.
- "Twelve Angry Men" (1957)