"Jumping like a Girl:"
Women's Ski-jumping, Risk Discourses and Discursive Silence

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This paper considers the recent International Olympic Committee (IOC) decision to deny women the opportunity to compete in ski-jumping at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada. The paper suggests that the Olympics is a discourse that constructs excellence and fairness as “within the true,” with the IOC protesting that this recent decision is not about gender, but about the upholding of Olympic ideals. The paper then interrogates what is conspicuously absent in this discourse. Contextualizing this decision within the risk discourses upon which the IOC has historically drawn on denying women’s participation in particular Olympic events, the paper argues that the discursive silence around the issue of risk points to “old wine in new bottles” as the IOC dresses up the same paternalistic practices in new garb.

Introduction

In a January 2008 agreement brokered by the Canadian Human Rights Commission, the Canadian government pledged to pressure the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to reconsider a November 2006 decision denying women the right to compete in ski-jumping at the 2010 Olympic Games. Shortly after this announcement, representatives of the IOC affirmed their decision to exclude women, suggesting that the decision was not “about gender.” Rather, they argued that women’s ski-jumping failed to meet the criteria for Olympic inclusion. Even more recently, several ski-jumpers filed a lawsuit in the British Columbia Supreme Court against the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. This paper considers the case of women’s ski-jumping, contextualizing these events within the history of gender politics that has characterized the modern Games.

Sport scholars have criticized the IOC for its exclusionary practices, suggesting that despite rhetoric of inclusion and emancipation, it continues to entrench notions of gender difference and plays an important role in constructing men’s sport as the “real” version against which women’s sports should be measured. In the history of the modern Olympic movement, female athletes and their advocates have long had to struggle for inclusion in the Games, even going so far as to institute the “Women’s Olympic Games,” first held in Paris in 1922. In response to these challenges, the IOC has (sometimes grudgingly) instituted changes that resulted in more equitable (less inequitable?) gender representation in the Games. These changes have not come about easily, and, just as importantly, have often had the effect of locating women, and their participation, under the control of male-dominated governing bodies.

In this paper, I problematicize the Olympic discourse upon which the IOC has drawn in constructing the recent ski-jumping decision. I suggest that this discourse focuses on the ‘technical merits’ of the sport and ‘objective’ criteria for Olympic inclusion. I then interrogate the silences in this discourse,
including the history of women’s participation in the sport, recent achievements of women in ski-jumping, and the exceptions that the IOC has made to inclusion criteria on numerous occasions. Most importantly, I highlight the silence around the risk discourses that have played a central role in excluding women from participation in particular events.

Olympic Discourse

Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse serves as a jumping off point for this discussion. Building on (and departing from) earlier approaches to representation that focuses the meaning conveyed by visual representations, Foucault approaches representation in a way that permits a more nuanced theorization of the operation of power. Moving beyond a consideration of language, Foucault uses the notion of discourse to capture the production of “meaningful statements” about a given topic in a particular historical moment. As Hall points out, Foucault uses this concept in an attempt to overcome the traditional distinction between what one says (language) and what one does (practice). Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others.

What makes the notion of discourse compelling for theorizing power is that it never rests in one moment, text, practice, or even set of practices. Instead, a given discourse appears with regularity across a range of texts (broadly defined) and practices to regulate what may be said “within the true” about a given subject in a particular socio-historical moment. It is critical to remember that for Foucault, the focus was always on the implications of these processes for power:

…in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.

Not only, then, does a discourse constrain what can (meaningfully) be said about a particular topic at a particular time, but it also authorizes particular voices and silences others. The Olympics operate as a discourse that constructs what can meaningfully be said about amateur athletics, Olympism, and the Olympic movement. In texts such as the Olympic Charter and IOC press statements, excellence, inclusivity and fairness are constructed as “within the true.” The Olympic Charter, for instance, outlines that the mission of the IOC is “to promote Olympism throughout the world and to lead the Olympic movement.” Furthermore, the role of the IOC is to promote “ethics” and “the spirit of fairness,” and to “act against any form of discrimination affecting the Olympic movement.” Specifically, its role is also to “encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures with a view to implementing the principle of equality between men and women.” This commitment to equality and fairness is also evident in IOC statements defending the decision to exclude women’s ski-jumping from the Vancouver Games. As IOC president Jacques Rogge stated, “The decision of the International Olympic Committee not to include women's ski jumping was taken on technical grounds not on gender issues.”

The other important dimension of the Olympic discourse is athletic excellence and elitism. The Olympics, though committed to inclusion and fairness, is (perhaps somewhat paradoxically) also about recognizing and rewarding only the most elite performances. Rogge’s frequently cited comment about women’s ski-jumping illustrates this point well: “If you have three medals, with 80 athletes competing on a regular basis internationally, the percentage of medal winners is extremely high…In any
other sport you are speaking about hundreds of thousands, if not tens of millions of athletes, at a very high level, competing for one single medal. We do not want the medals to be diluted and watered down. That is the bottom line."22

Olympic discourse, then, constructs the IOC and the Olympic movement as committed to athletic excellence as well as fairness. Furthermore, the discourse authorizes the IOC as a legitimate voice (the Charter, after all, identifies the IOC’s role as the promoter of Olympism and leader of the Olympic movement). My interest in this paper, though, is less on what is present with regularity in this discursive formation. Instead, I wish to focus on what is generally absent.

Discursive Silence

It is not only what is said that is important in understanding a discourse. Equally important is what remains unsaid:

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies...There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.23

In the same way that discourse marks certain statements, actions, and institutional arrangements as "within the true,” it (un)marks others as “without:” “it ‘rules out,’ limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it.”24 It is important, then, that we interrogate the silences in a particular discursive formation as we seek to illuminate the operation of power. We must pose “questions about how power and knowledge can shape social practices and set new social practices into play through language, when that very language is absent.”25

These “negative spaces”26 are important not simply because they mark what is beyond the true, but because, in so doing, they shore up the true in a particular discursive formation. The silences about those that are and have been marginalized in a particular set of relations naturalize and legitimize the privileged position of those who have benefited from the same relations.27 In the silences about exclusionary practices in the history of the modern Olympic movement, for instance, athletes and nations are cast as the beneficiaries of the Olympic ideal of inclusiveness, allowing for a continued ignorance about a history of symbolic violence perpetrated against women, visible minorities, and others.28

In terms of the discourse around women’s exclusion from ski-jumping, the first silence is the history and success of women in the sport of ski-jumping. The IOC “has repeatedly said its rejection of women’s ski jumping is based on technical criteria, and that the sport is not yet ready for Olympic competition.”29 Evidence suggests that Ingrid Olavsdottir Vestby competed at what is generally acknowledged to be the first ski-jumping competition in 1862 that took place in Trysil, Norway.30 In 1922, Canadian Isabel Coursier was named “Women’s Amateur Champion Ski Jumper of the World.”31 Despite this long history of involvement in the sport, only recently has the FIS instituted women’s ski-jumping as a regular and ongoing competition. In addition, numerous stories and websites lack any contextualization of the history of women’s ski-jumping, or present its ‘official’ (i.e., sanctioned by the FSI) history. This too is an important discursive silence. In order for Rogge’s claim that women have not achieved the standards necessary for Olympic inclusion to be “within the true,” the silence around women’s long history of competition is important, even necessary. Also important is the silence around recent achievements by women in the sport. As just one indicator of women’s competitiveness in the sport, the current record on the 95m jump at the Whistler Olympic Park, site of
the 2010 events, is shared by three competitors, two men and one woman.\textsuperscript{32} Even this (too) brief overview of women’s successes in this sport is enough to highlight the conspicuousness of their absences from the discourse around the current controversy.

The second silence is the fact that the IOC has made numerous exceptions over the years to the very guidelines to which they are holding so firmly in this case. Thus, the exclusion is framed as one based on a technical set of considerations. Historically, however, exceptions to these criteria have been made. The IOC has overlooked certain criteria at times, particularly when there seemed to be some political mileage to be gained by the inclusion of particular events. Even at the same time as they announced the exclusion of women from ski-jumping (in 2007 there were 83 women from 14 countries competing on the FIS circuit), the IOC affirmed the inclusion of ski-cross (30 skiers from 11 countries).\textsuperscript{33} Asked to explain this seeming contradiction, “Mr. Rogge said that ski cross is ‘immensely popular, maybe not in your country, but in Europe. And the technical and participation level is okay for the Olympic Games.’”\textsuperscript{34} What is generally absent in the discourse around the ski-jumping controversy is the idea—illustrated by the contradiction outlined above—that the IOC can and does exercise considerable discretion in determining which events to sponsor. This, again, is an important silence in that it becomes part of the construction of the IOC as a body committed to fairness (and, implicitly, objectivity).

**Risk Discourses and Discursive Silence**

The third silence, and the one that serves as the focal point for this paper, is the history of risk discourses surrounding the ‘protection’ of women’s bodies. What constitutes a risk or hazard at any particular socio-historical moment is itself a social construction.\textsuperscript{35} The focus of this paper is not on the objective risks associated with any particular activity, but upon how risk discourses operate to authorize and legitimate particular exclusionary practices. Discourses surrounding particular risks set the stage for the policing of individuals who occupy subject positions or engage in behaviours that mark them as “at risk.” This policing may be the work of state agents (e.g., racial profiling), average citizens (e.g., those who tell people they should not smoke), or subjects themselves (e.g., when individuals take up diet and/or exercise regimes to maintain good health). Often, these discourses have particularly targeted individuals or groups who pose a threat to the status quo. During the “witch craze,” for example, women, the mentally ill, and opponents of dominant religious organizations were particularly targeted as those who posed a risk, and were often ‘tried’ and put to death.\textsuperscript{36}

Historically, there have been a number of discourses that have marked women as subjects of risk discourses. These discourses serve to constrain women’s actions, and construct them as subjects in need of policing (by themselves and others). Lupton for example, discusses the ways in which lay and medical discourses construct “the pregnancy experience” as fraught with risk. Pregnant women, she points out, become subject to this discourse, and many voluntarily assume it as they take measures (e.g., folic acid supplements) to mitigate these risks: “Producing a ‘perfect’ infant is seen to be at least partly a result of the women’s ability to exert control over her body, to seek and subscribe to expert advice and engage in self-sacrifice for the sake of her foetus.”\textsuperscript{37} These discourses, Lupton points out, are rooted in expert knowledges (associated with the medical profession, for example) and testing procedures (e.g., ultrasound tests) “to which the woman has no access except through expert intervention and interpretation.”\textsuperscript{38} These discourses construct what is “within the true” with respect to pregnancy, and not only constrain pregnant women’s actions, but also give others some degree of licence to police women’s actions. Pregnant women become embedded in a web of surveillance in which there is no such thing as a no-risk pregnancy.\textsuperscript{39} As Lupton argues elsewhere, the discourse outlined above
also operates as a mechanism of social control in the case of women who are not pregnant, but are simply potentially pregnant, or even potentially pregnant at some unspecified future time.40

There is a length history of women’s exclusion from participation in various forms of physical activity, an exclusion often intimately connected to the circulation and operation of the pregnancy discourse outlined above. In the early 20th Century, medical discourses rooted in Victorian ideas of women’s moral virtue, and physical and intellectual inferiority, positioned women as both too weak for vigorous physical activity and morally obligated to “preserve their vital physical energy for childbearing and to cultivate personality traits suited to the wife-and-mother role.”41 Discourse around menstruation was a particularly poignant example of this phenomenon, with “malestream gynecology” constructing “any menstrual variation as a condition demanding heroic medical intervention.”42 Exercise during menstruation was discursively constructed as self-centred and frivolous, and women who ‘failed’ to monitor themselves and their reproductive capacities closely were seen to be breaching a sacred duty.43

Medical discourse focused especially on the frailty of women’s internal organs—especially their reproductive organs. The uterus, in particular, was a subject of considerable medical scrutiny. Even in an era where some light physical activity during menstruation was thought to have numerous benefits for women, there were strong objections to women’s involvement in vigorous exercise for fear of uterine displacement.44 Out of this discourse arose different rules and guidelines45 for certain activities, especially those involving jumping, thought to be a particular threat to the uterus. Basketball, for example, was embraced by proponents who believed it to produce qualities important to ‘womanhood,’ but was seen as in need of modification to reduce the strain on women’s bodies.46 During this same period, the IOC justified the exclusion of women from particular Olympic events on the grounds that women’s bodies—and in particular their reproductive functions—would be irreparably harmed by such vigorous activity.47 These exclusions came despite evidence that women’s bodies were strong enough for “vigorous” physical activity.48

Even when women were ‘permitted’ to participate in particularly strenuous events, this was often closely monitored by officials ostensibly concerned with women’s well-being, despite the fact that men routinely showed signs of the same kinds of fatigue following similar events.49 At the 1928 games in Amsterdam, for instance, the IOC granted women access to only five track and field events, and “became, at first, embarrassed, and then, infuriated at what they perceived to be a horrific catastrophe in the women’s 800 metres event.”50 While a number of women set records in the event, others collapsed on the track in exhaustion. As a result, the IOC removed the event from the Olympic programme, and some members, ignoring the fact that some of the men experienced similar symptoms at this distance, “argued for complete expulsion of women from the Olympic games.”51 This did not come to pass, though women’s athletics remained on the Olympic programme “in a limited capacity and under close scrutiny.”52

In the contemporary sporting world, we continue to see discourses of risk and gender in operation, albeit in different ways. There seems to be deep ambivalence surrounding women who engage in activities that put them “at risk.” This ambivalence is directly connected to discourses of motherhood. Palmer illustrates this as she describes the experiences of two women who were elite mountaineers. Both became the subject of tremendous public scrutiny for their decisions to “shirk” their family roles to pursue this leisure activity. Indeed, when Alison Hargreaves was killed in 1995,

we saw the morality of risk taking go into overdrive. As a mother of two, Hargreaves had effectively abandoned her children by taking such extraordinary risks. The particular cultural definitions and limitations imposed upon Hargreaves ensured she would never dramatically, if fatally distinguish herself from the crowd as a climber, but rather as an errant, unthinking mother.53
Donnelly explains that this vilification of Hargreaves was particularly pronounced in the tabloid press and women's magazines. The following year, however, when Rob Hall died on Mount Everest, leaving behind a pregnant wife, at no point did the media criticize him for “abandoning” his family responsibilities.54

In this contemporary discourse around women, risk and sport, the focus is less often on risk to women's physical childbearing possibilities, but instead their “duty of care” as mothers.55 Though the discourse has shifted (slightly) from medical to social or moral, it continues to operate as a mechanism of social control over women interested in participating in sporting activities that disrupt dominant notions of femininity and motherhood. In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that traces, at least, of the medical discourse remain. Prior to the 2004 Games in Turin, Italy, then president of the FSI, Gian-Franco Kasper was quoted as saying of women's ski-jumping: “…don’t forget, it’s like jumping down from, let’s say about two metres, on the ground about a thousand times a year, which seems not to be appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view.”56

Risk discourses (particularly those constructed around femininity and motherhood) have played and continue to play a central role in the way that society generally responds to women participating in activities thought to put them “at risk.” This is particularly important in light of a move by the IOC towards gender inclusiveness in 1991. At that time, the IOC made a commitment that new sports added to the Olympic roster would be available for both men and women.57 Because ski-jumping had been on the Olympic roster since 1924, however, it was “grandfathered” from this commitment.58 This is a crucial silence. The original decision to exclude women from the ski-jumping competition (as well as numerous other events, it should be noted), was made in a period dominated by the risk discourses outlined above, in which women (and their reproductive organs) were constructed as frail and in need of medical protection. The grandfathering of women's exclusion from ski-jumping competition, then, serves to re-entrench the sexist attitudes on which the earlier decision rested. Perhaps more importantly, the silence around these earlier discourses in the current formation is a conspicuous one, and is integral to the framing of the IOC and the Olympic movement as committed to fairness and equality.

Concluding Remarks

While the IOC has been criticized for its recent decision by women ski-jumpers and their proponents, the discourse surrounding the decision to exclude the women has remained relatively focused on issues of fairness, elitism, and the Olympic ideal. Within this framework, IOC officials, and particularly President Jacques Rogge, are authorized as the experts on Olympism and Olympic ideals. Moreover, their claims that women's ski-jumping has not met the technical requirements for inclusion in the Olympic Games are correct. However, there are a number of important and conspicuous discursive silences around this controversy. Perhaps most important (and most silent) among these is the ways particular risk discourses have operated to exclude women from participation in these events at all levels. Not only were these discourses important in the original decision to exclude women from ski-jumping, but they are also implicated in the decisions by other bodies (e.g., the FIS, national organizations) to “allow” women to compete officially.60 This only serves as a further blockade to women’s Olympic inclusion, as these other competitions become part of the foundation on which women ski-jumpers and their supporters can build a case for Olympic inclusion.61 If the IOC is genuinely committed to acting “against any form of discrimination affecting the Olympic movement,” they must end the silences that perpetuate old sexist practices and hide new ones from view.62 Otherwise, we simply have a case of “old wine in new bottles” as the IOC dresses up the same exclusionary practices in new garb.
Notes

1 Ruth Gregory and Jessica Mathews, *Jumping Like a Girl* [moving picture], 2004.
8 Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 126. These Games were later renamed the Women’s World Games.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 44, original emphasis.
13 Michelle Helstein, “That’s who I want to be: The politics and production of desire within Nike advertising to women,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27 (2003), 278.
14 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 224
15 Helstein, That’s who I want to be, 278.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 15.
23 Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 27.
24 Hall, *Representation*, 44.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
“Jumping like a Girl” 389


32 See http://www.skisprungschanzen.com/e_index.htm?can/cane_whistler.htm. It should be noted that only the men’s records are sanctioned by the FIS, perhaps because the jump by Lindsey Van of the United States was completed at the Canadian Championships held in January, 2007; http://www.skijumpingcentral.com/docs/lawsuitstatement05212008.pdf. Importantly, the FIS, like the IOC, has operated within an institutional framework that has historically excluded women.

33 Jeff Lee, “Women’s ski-jump team presses IOC for change; Female jumpers want to be allowed to participate in 2010 Winter Olympics,” The Vancouver Sun, January 5, 2008, B5.


35 Linda B. Deutschmann, L.B. Deviance and Social Control, Fourth Edition (Toronto, ON: Thomson Canada, 2007). As Deutschmann notes, the concept of a fair trial, as we now understand it, was not in evidence during the witch craze. Routinely, confessions were obtained through questionable means, and evidence was fabricated or simply ridiculous. This concept is wonderfully satirized in a scene from the film Monty Python and the Holy Grail—see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrzMhU_4m-g.


37 Ibid., 62.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 See Helen Lenskyj, Out of Bounds: Women, Sport, & Sexuality (Toronto, ON: Women’s Press, 1986), 18. Class and ethnicity were also implicated in these discourses. The reproductive capacities and moral virtues of Anglo-Saxon, middle class women were constructed in medical discourse as more valuable than those of their working class immigrant counterparts.

42 Lenskyj, Out of Bounds, 25.

43 Eventually, certain women in the medical profession were able to shift the discourse somewhat, although even they were seen by many male doctors as untrustworthy when it came to matters concerning women’s exercise and reproductive health. See Lenskyj 1986; Patricia A. Vertinsky, The Eternally Wounded Woman (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1989). Even women who challenged the “malestream” view, though, tended to further entrench the importance of women cultivating their capacities to bear and raise children.

44 As Lenskyj points out, though, the medical discourse simultaneously cast doubt upon the claims of women that they had suffered uterine injuries as a result of heavy labour: “The old class double standard was creating a new problem: how to convince women that heavy work was safe, while heavy play was dangerous.” See Lenskyj, Out of Bounds, 29.

45 These rules and guidelines, of course, then become part of the discourse.

46 Ibid.

47 See Vertinsky, 1989. A report issued at an IOC Pedagogic conference in 1925, for example, concluded that “if those sports and games which are suitable for men be modified and reduced so that they cannot in any way injure the woman, and if we can create organizations which will enforce these modified regulations stringently, we will have gone a long way towards achieving our objects” (cited in Jennifer Hargreaves, Sport Females (New York: NY: Routledge, 1994), 213). As Hargreaves points out, this discourse, based on a conflation of the biological and the social, was seen as authoritative, and provided the basis upon which the IOC and other bodies could justify limiting women’s participation in track and field in the years that followed.

48 For example, Stamata Revithi is said to have run alongside the official (i.e., male) competitors in the first running of the marathon (26.2 miles) in the modern Olympic era, in 1896. See Annemarie Jutel, “Thou dost run as in flotation: Femininity, reassurance and the emergence of the Women’s marathon, International Journal of the History of Sport 20 (2003), 17-36.

49 Wamsley and Pfister, Olympic Men and Women, 113.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.


55 Palmer, Death, danger and the selling of risk, 55-69.
See http://www.wsjusa.com/abc.htm. It should be noted that elsewhere, Kasper claims that his comments were taken out of context. See http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/22/sports/othersports/22ski.html.

See http://www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/missions/women/activities/women_uk.asp.

It is perhaps ironic that such a gendered term is used to describe a profoundly gendered decision.

“Women’s ski jump proponents won’t give up the Olympic fight,” Prince George Citizen, February 25, 2008, 8.


See http://www.skijumpingcentral.com/docs/lawsuitstatement05212008.pdf

Olympic Charter, 14.