

# ***Gender, Physical Education and the Biographical Turn. French Perspectives on the History of Female PE Teachers***

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to examine the current dynamism of biographical approaches that explore the history of PE teachers in France through the prism of gender. To this end, the first section examines the historiographical filiations of the history of female PE teachers, where it intersects with the history of women and gender, gender in the history of sport, and the history of education, coeducation and female teachers. The second section focuses on the theoretical and methodological shifts brought about by gender within the wider biographical transformation of the history of PE teachers. Here I will discuss the shift from a male profession to a mixed-gender profession, from the study of groups to that of individuals, and from the use of official sources to that of oral sources. This contribution will conclude by considering possible next steps for the social history of female teachers and arguing for a *history from below* of women in PE.

**Keywords:** History; gender; physical education; female teachers; biographical turn.

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## **1. Introduction**

In 2014, for the first time in the history of France's PE teacher training examinations, one of the questions candidates were required to answer in order to receive their *agrégation* – the highest recruitment qualification for French secondary school teachers and one that sets France apart from other countries – centred on a major figure in the history of PE: Annick Davisse. This question related specifically to a new item on the *agrégation* programme focusing on key individuals involved in the field of PE, their career paths, their approaches, their influences and how their ideas were received. More broadly, the question reflected a trend towards a renewal of academic research on the history of physical education in schools, which had seen a biographical turn since the 1980s-1990s (Arnaud, 1988; Michon & Caritey, 1998), a development that was also perceptible in other educational spheres both

in France (e.g., Charle & Telkès, 1988; Lelièvre & Nique, 1990; Plaisance, 1991) and abroad (e.g., Altenbaugh, 1992; Erben, 1998). With this in mind, this article seeks to examine the current dynamism of biographical approaches that explore the history of PE teachers in France through the prism of gender. To this end, the first section examines the historiographical filiations of the history of female PE teachers, where it intersects with the history of women and gender, gender in the history of sport, and the history of education, coeducation and female teachers. The second section focuses on the theoretical and methodological shifts brought about by gender within the wider biographical transformation of the history of PE teachers. Here I will discuss the shift from a male profession to a mixed-gender profession, from the study of groups to that of individuals, and from the use of official sources to that of oral sources. This contribution will conclude by considering possible next steps for the social history of female teachers and arguing for a «history from below» of women in PE.

## 2. A history of female PE teachers in France at the intersection of several historiographies

### 2.1. *History of women, history of gender*

Born in France in the early 1970s, women's history emerged in a context favourable to the appearance of new lines of research in the social sciences, stimulated by the second feminist wave. In 1973, Michelle Perrot, at a seminar entitled «Do women have a history?» at the University of Paris 7, and Yvonne Knibiehler, with her continuing-education course on the «female condition» at the University of Provence, were the first to take the initiative. An intellectual adventure had begun, and «a new object/subject of study» had been introduced (Thébaud, 2007, p. 29). Researchers embarked on a mission to increase visibility, the goal being to (re)discover women's pasts and (re-)examine historical events from a female perspective, as summed up by a play on words coined at the time: «her-story not his-tory». Their research topics quickly diversified, evolving from the study of the workers' movement to the division of work according sex, before addressing education, the body and the family. While the development of a history viewed from a female perspective allowed women to become historical subjects in their own right, there remained a risk in the 1980s that they would fall into an intellectual ghetto, i.e., a subaltern female culture in which women would be reduced to being just another subsidiary topic.

Once exposed to foreign historiographies and the translation of an article by Joan W. Scott (1988), which had been published two years earlier in the United States (Scott, 1986), the history of women in France entered the «era of gender» (Thébaud, 2007, p. 117). A door had been kicked down, opening onto a «resolutely relational history that questions society as a whole and is just as much a history of men» (Duby & Perrot, 2002, p. 59). The five volumes of *Histoire des femmes en Occident* («*History of Women in the West*»), originally published in 1991-1992 and reissued in 2002, were a resounding success, both in France and abroad. Women saw their

status in the historical discipline improve and it was further enhanced by the launch, in 1995, of the journal *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés* («*Clio. History, Women and Societies*»), which was renamed *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* («*Clio. Women, Gender, History*») in 2013. Françoise Thébaud's impressive historiographical guide, *Écrire l'histoire des femmes* («*Writing Women's History*») (1998), contributed to this dynamic. And although several other works helped to maintain this impetus, including *Les femmes ou les silences de l'histoire* («*Women or the Silence of History*») by Michelle Perrot (1998), *Les femmes et leur histoire* («*Women and their History*») by Geneviève Fraisse (1998) and *L'histoire sans les femmes est-elle possible?* («*Can History Exist Without Women?*»), which challenges the categories into which history writing is structured (Sohn & Thélamon, 1998), questions remained when Françoise Thébaud's historiographical review was republished as an expanded edition. Indeed, a new section had been added to «the era of gender», punctuated by a question mark: «The Era of Gender?» (Thébaud, 2007, p. 193).

Despite this reservation, which was specific to French thinking and reflected a struggle for intellectual and political legitimacy, Françoise Thébaud identified five uses of gender in historical research. These produced a number of shifts in the way history was reported. The first use prompted a shift *from women to gender*, «from the history of women as a social group to a comparative history of men and women» (Thébaud, 2007, p. 199). The second use caused a shift *from neutral to gender*, to offer a gendered re-examination of historical events and processes. The third use questioned «*the gender of...*», with analyses focusing on the issue of the differences between the sexes, while also examining the mechanisms behind their hierarchical division. More recently, the fourth use, *from neutral to male*, paved the way for research on the history of men, as exemplified by the second volume of *Sport et Genre* («*Sport and Gender*») on the subject of masculinity in sport (Terret & Liotard, 2005). Moreover, this use invites us to «investigate the meaning that individuals project onto their practices and onto their experiences, in line with the current trend for historiography to place a greater emphasis on the protagonists» (Thébaud, 2007, p. 202). The fifth use demonstrates the value of shifting the focus *from the group to its components*, particularly when adopting an intersectional perspective (Gallot & Zancarini-Fournel, 2020). Here, the aim is to gauge the heterogeneity of a group of women – or men – in order to identify the power relationships that develop according to gender, social class, sexual orientation or race. However, Françoise Thébaud does not define a «right» way of writing women's history and makes it clear that the history of women and gender remains a work in progress. Recent work on the concept of «gender regimes» bears witness to this, as do biographical studies of international female figures (Thébaud, 2018).

## 2.2. Gender in the history of sport

«Gender in the history of sport», which is also the title of a historiographical report published by Thierry Terret (2006), is a recent preoccupation. Indeed, it was only at the beginning of the 21st century that the history of sport in France began to take on board the concept of gender, despite it having emerged at the same time as

the history of women. The 1980s were marked by the rise of Anglo-Saxon feminist perspectives in the wake of Nancy Struna's article in the *Journal of Sport History* (1984), which followed in the footsteps of the pioneering writings of Roberta Park in the 1970s (Vertinsky, 2003). At the time, French sports historians, all of whom were men, with the exception of Marianne Amar, were primarily seeking to structure their efforts in order to promote their field. While the role of school and physical education in cementing models of femininity was being analysed in the United Kingdom and Germany, and while sports in North America were being studied with respect to processes of male domination and female exclusion, but also as a catalyst for the emancipation of women (Terret, 2006), major French sports historians, such as Georges Vigarello, André Rauch and Pierre Arnaud, remained oblivious – for the time being – to women in sport. The turning point was actually precipitated by a psychoanalyst, Françoise Labridy, who presented France's first conference on the history of women's sport (1978), before going on to conduct research into the construction of social roles and bodily norms (1987a, 1987b). In sociology, Catherine Louveau established herself as the leading specialist in women's sport. Taking a gendered approach to sporting practices, she explored the involvement of women in men's sports, while highlighting the wide variety of integration models in place across the different sports federations: some federations were open to women from their inception – e.g., air sports and potholing – while others, particularly those governing team, strength or combat sports, were originally closed to them – e.g., football, rugby, boxing and weightlifting (Louveau, 1986). The book she co-authored with Annick DAVISSE (1991), *Sports, école, société: la part des femmes* («*Sports, School, Society: the Place of Women*»), represents a breakthrough in the historiography of sport and physical education in France.

Over the course of the 1990s, under the influence of an increasingly gendered international historiography, the history of sport in France embarked on the path of renewal. The study days held in Lyon in 1994 on the history of female sport revolved around two main themes: the gender bias of sporting disciplines and physical education in the school setting (Arnaud & Terret, 1996). These lines of inquiry set in motion «a history of women's struggle for emancipation and acceptance in a male-dominated sporting world» (Terret, 2006, p. 218). Annick DAVISSE and Catherine Louveau underscore this point in the updated and expanded edition of the book they co-authored, which was renamed *Sports, école, société: la différence des sexes* («*Sports, School, Society: the Differences Between the Sexes*»), when they state unequivocally that: «The origin of sport has a gender and it is male» (DAVISSE & Louveau, 1998, p. 97). At the dawn of the 2000s, sport was therefore no longer considered neutral by French historians and sociologists. Instead, sport was now seen as a social sphere that contributes, explicitly or tacitly, both in the past and in the present, to reinforcing a dichotomous vision of society, encouraging individuals to conform to masculine or feminine traits, these being the only acceptable and accepted representations of the biological sex they have been assigned.

The research conducted in the 2000s confirmed this new understanding. Fresh perspectives were explored, such as the combined analysis of sport and masculinity (McKay & Laberge, 2006). A number of successful biographical works focused on exceptional women in the field of physical activity (Devron, 2005; Ferez, 2005; Castan-

Vicente, 2009). The theoretical overhaul continued, but gender still did not seem to have established itself as a standard analytical category in the history of sport, except in a few French universities. This was the case in certain institutions where sociology is open to historical perspectives, such as Paris-Orsay, with Catherine Louveau and later Anaïs Bohuon, and Toulouse, with Christine Mennesson. It was also the case in Lyon, where history is open to sociological analysis, notably through the work of Thierry Terret, Philippe Liotard and Cécile Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo. Indeed, it was in Lyon, at the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Carrefour d'Histoire du Sport* («Sports History Congress») event in 2004, that the idea of moving away from a history of women's sport and towards a history of sport and gender was ultimately adopted. The extensive body of work published in the wake of the conference, which was structured into four volumes, explores a diverse range of sporting practices, while taking care to highlight the social construction of gender differences (Terret *et al.*, 2005). It also takes into account the variability and mutability of gendered hierarchies, as evidenced by the wide variety of spatial and temporal references contained in these contributions. Similarly, the influence of social background on women's involvement in sport is highlighted: until the mid-20th century, only a minority of women, mostly from socially advantaged and well-educated backgrounds, had access to sport (Louveau, 2006). While the democratisation of sport in the 1960s reduced social inequalities without eradicating them completely, it did not fundamentally alter the gendered nature of sporting fields. Thus, even today, the sporting arena remains structured by gender and social class, despite the growing visibility of those referred to in the 1980s as «new women». With this in mind, some historical studies have revisited the relationship between the discourse on the «new woman» and those who epitomise the image of the champion sportswoman, particularly at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Tétart, 2015). Others have explored the links between feminist positions, sporting practices and their representations, and the subversion of gender identities by a number of exceptional women, be they sporting leaders or champions, during the inter-war period (Carpentier, 2019; Castan-Vicente, Bohuon & Pallesi, 2021). Thus, sport came to be viewed as «one of the most historically effective contributors to the reproduction of gender hierarchies... but also as a powerful instrument for questioning and reshaping them, depending on how they are practised» (Terret & Zancarini-Fournel, 2006, p. 12).

### 2.3. *The history of education, coeducation and female teachers*

In educational history, the call issued by Rebecca Rogers (2009) to re-examine previous analyses from a gender perspective opened up new theoretical and methodological avenues that would give the history of coeducation and female teachers their rightful place. Following on from research on the education of girls (Mayeur, 1979; Lelièvre & Lelièvre, 1991), which flourished at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s (Rogers, 2007), the history of coeducation became better known in the 2000s. While Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (2003) considered that the history of coeducation was one that had yet to be written, Rebecca Rogers was laying the foundations of «a history whose contours are only just beginning to be drawn» (2003, p. 177). There were numerous facets to explore and a great deal of fascinating

research was carried out, as exemplified by the collection of studies assembled in the book *La mixité dans l'éducation: enjeux passés et présents* («*Coeducation: past and present issues*») (Rogers, 2004). In an attempt to challenge the preconceptions of the French republican school system, the author drew from research on secondary education, university education and gender diversity in the workplace. Rogers adopted a comparative and multidisciplinary approach, with gender chosen as the category of analysis. In addition to certain national specificities, the book identifies a number of issues that are common to all countries, most notably the fear engendered by the idea of bringing the sexes closer together. In many countries, the gradual adoption of coeducation has been less a political reaction to educational ideals or feminist pressure and more a practical, circumstantial or economic solution. In France, coeducation was embraced in the 1960s and 1970s, based on a desire to rationalise the locations of classes and schools (Zancarini-Fournel, 2004; Pezeu, 2020). However, physical education teaching offered an illustration of the resistance and hesitation at play, as well as the absence of any theoretical debate (Attali, Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo & Saint-Martin, 2008), even in countries such as the Netherlands where coeducation has a long tradition (Essen, 2004). What the research ultimately shows is that although coeducation is a prerequisite for equality, it does not guarantee that the latter will be achieved.

Research on female teachers as historical protagonists has contributed to this historiographical movement (Essen & Rogers, 2003; Rogers, 2009). In France, research on female teachers has focused primarily on the pioneers of female secondary education. The book by Françoise Mayeur (1977), which draws from personal files, helps us to understand how a new category of public servants came into being, by examining the training, recruitment and careers of individuals, but also the social responsibilities placed on the shoulders of the first female teachers. In a similar vein, Jo Burr Margadant (1990) used a prosopographical approach in studying the first generation of graduates from the Sèvres *École Normale Supérieure* teacher training school, which shed light on their professionalisation and on the development of a teaching culture. Research on the most recent period is currently expanding and has been since historian Loukia Efthymiou's thesis (2002) on the inter-war period and sociologist Marlaine Cacouault-Bitaud's work (2007) on the 20th century as a whole. In both cases, the research focuses on perceptions that teaching is a women's profession, with specific attention paid to careers and private lives. To Loukia Efthymiou's analysis, which describes the difficult inception of a professional community, Marlaine Cacouault-Bitaud adds her analysis of a «golden age» for female teachers in the 1960s, which preceded the gradual decline of the profession when personal choices became increasingly constrained and the difficulties of teaching more and more acute (Condette, 2023).

But what Marlaine Cacouault-Bitaud explores in an original way is the attention paid to the voices of female teachers, through an analysis of biographical interviews. In line with Marie-Thérèse Frank's arguments in favour of an oral history (1992), the use of personal biographies is today considered essential when tying together individual and collective history. Several publications bear witness to this theoretical and methodological evolution. For instance, historian Rebecca Rogers (2013) painstakingly reconstructs the career path of Eugénie Luce, who was behind the

creation of the first French school for Muslim girls. Similarly, Françoise Laot (2020) observes a biographical turn that places a focus on the pioneers of adult training. In the recent collective work *Les enseignantes en France (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle). Sexe, genre et identité professionnelle* («*Female teachers in France (16th-20th century). Sex, gender and professional identity*»), Stéphanie Dauphin (2023) includes several biographical or prosopographical chapters. This is also the approach taken by Amandine Charvet (2022), whose doctoral thesis examines the transformations in the French school system from the 1880s to the 1940s. In particular, it highlights the central role played by teachers – both female and male – in France’s upper primary schools (*écoles primaires supérieures*) in the transition from a school system structured by teaching category – i.e., the socially working-class primary network, whose focus was vocational vs. the socially advantaged secondary network, whose focus was university education – to a school system structured by teaching level – i.e., as it is today. In this sense, the biographical and prosopographical approach contributes greatly to updating our knowledge of the history of the democratisation of school, from the perspective of both teachers and pupils, particularly girls and women.

### **3. Gender, biography and shifts in the social history of PE teachers**

#### *3.1. From a male profession to a mixed-gender profession*

The accession of women to historically male professions, such as PE teaching, represented a significant change in a society marked by professional segregation. This was particularly true when the body was involved in the process. In PE, the tension between bodily standards is all the more interesting to examine when we consider that girls, like women, were originally invisible in this field. When the teaching of gymnastics became compulsory in 1880, only boys were allowed to participate. Yet, while it may have been simply coincidental, this was also «a crucial year in the history of women» (Efthymiou, 2002, p. 9), because this was when the first secondary schools for girls were opened. However, reflecting the belief that physical needs differed according to gender, gymnastics was not introduced into the girls’ curriculum until two years later, in 1882. This delayed introduction can be explained by the lack of trained female staff, the moral code that kept girls and women away from physical activities, the stereotypical image of women as mothers, wives and housekeepers, not to mention the idea of gender mixing in schools being inconceivable at the time (Terret, 1995).

A century later, the situation was very different. In PE, mixed-gender teacher training examinations, which men and women sit together, were held for the first time in 1989 (Szerdahelyi, 2019). This was a result of the gradual feminisation of PE teaching over many years and the battle for equal rights waged by trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless, men remain in the majority today, accounting for 57% of all PE teachers, even though 58% of secondary school teachers are women, taking into account all levels of the profession (according to figures from the French Ministry of Education). However, women have clearly gained ground. Since

the 1980s, the gender distribution of the PE teaching community has remained fairly stable, with women accounting for a minimum of 40% of the total over the period. Looking beyond the figures, the fact that PE attracts a community of individuals who share a fondness for sporting activities is undoubtedly rooted in cultural practices. With respect to the overall female population, Annick DAVISSE and Catherine LOUVEAU (1998) place female PE teachers in the quarter of French women who are true sports enthusiasts. They also note that, depending on the discipline, women sometimes struggle with the culture surrounding sport, as in the case of individuals with a dance background.

In this context, gender emerges as a useful category for exploring the social history of PE teachers. In France, the history of this professional corps developed out of foundational research in the fields of social psychology (Dorvillé, 1986) and, later, sociology (Michon, 1993; Gougeon, 1994). However, it remains male dominated, despite the heuristic nature of gendered analyses. Indeed, there are several angles from which gender contributes to examining and giving visibility to women's educational experiences in the field of physical activity. The first involves placing PE teachers' careers in a particular space in time, if I consider the second half of the 20th century. During this period, the PE teaching profession was marked by the sportification of the discipline, the diversification of teacher categories and a gender-based division of recruitment. Although the Vichy regime (1940-1944) added a sporting dimension to physical education, against a backdrop of categorisation both by sex – man or woman – and by professional status – teacher or instructor –, it was not until the end of the 1980s that the PE teacher training examination, which had become the only route into teaching, was made the same for both men and women. Driving the evolution from segregation to coeducation, these institutional milestones raise questions about the feminisation of PE teaching, the social construction of the sexes and their hierarchisation during the careers of individuals in the profession (Szerdahelyi, 2014a). The second angle relates to the specificity of the subject on which PE teaching focuses, i.e., the body as a gendered marker. Cécile OTTOGALLI-MAZZACAVALLO and Philippe LIOTARD (2012) were remarkably successful in demonstrating how the learning of gender in PE, from the end of the 19th century to the present day, is rooted in the normalisation of gendered bodies and the perpetuation of the ideal of the heterosexual couple. According to the authors, examining the history of PE teachers through the prism of gender means «adopting an approach whereby the differences between the sexes are examined in order to understand both how these differences are addressed and how the teaching of PE helps to reinforce, hierarchise or influence them» (OttoGalli-Mazzacavallo & Liotard, 2012, p. 94). The sporting component of physical education also raises questions about the place and role of teachers in the sportification of this school subject. In the aftermath of the Second World War, two of the leading figures in female physical education – Yvonne Surrel, the principal of the *École Normale Supérieure* PE teacher training school for girls, and Mireille André-Fromentel, a dance teacher at this elite training institution for the highest-ranking PE teachers – recommended «that girls be made to practice disciplines that were specifically suited to them» (Lebrun & Léziart, 2005, p. 263). Similarly, Marie-Thérèse Eyquem – a crucial player in the development of female physical education who was placed in charge



of women's physical education and sports during the Second World War, before becoming politically engaged and being named Inspector of Youth and Sports in the early 1960s – campaigned for a moderate, essentialist feminism and the controlled emancipation of women's physical activities (Saint-Martin, Cardin & Walther, 2023). However, these positions, which were in line with official PE policy, were at odds with the sporting careers of other teachers who had a lower status in the professional hierarchy, i.e., instructors. Up until now, the process through which sport is introduced into schools has tended to be explored from a political or union angle, or from the perspective of a male-dominated history focusing on major figures in the world of PE (Vivier, 2021). Yet female teachers were just as affected by the introduction of sport into physical education as their male counterparts, as highlighted by the most recent research into gender and the categories at the bottom of the professional hierarchy between the 1940s and 1960s (Gomet, 2019; Szerdahelyi, 2023). The fourth and final angle relates to the links established between social history and women's history. Today, «any history that purports to include a 'social' dimension cannot ignore gender as a category of analysis» (Delacroix, 2010, p. 434). Telling the history of PE teachers as part of a gendered social history therefore clearly raises questions regarding compatibility with or distance from a supposedly "natural" role as wife, mother and teacher.

That being so, the process of updating the social history of PE teachers through the lens of gender remains incomplete. This is evidenced by the fact that, of the nine biographies of men and women involved in PE compiled by Jean-Nicolas Renaud and Doriane Gomet (2021, 2022) in the double issue of the *STAPS* journal devoted to PE approaches, only one article is about a woman: Yvonne de Rette, wife of Jacques de Rette, a major figure who was known as the father of the «Republic of Sports» in PE (Szerdahelyi, 2021). While Jean-Nicolas Renaud and Doriane Gomet bemoan «once again, the low presence of women» (2022, p. 7) in historical works devoted to the men and women who have shaped PE, there is no denying that the consideration of gender in the social history of PE teachers has yet to reach full maturity.

### 3.2. *From groups to individuals*

Beyond the gender aspects, the social history of PE teachers is characterised today by the use of biographical approaches. In France, historiographical interest in individual life paths is part of an overall shift in social history that began in the 1960s and 1970s. This was at the height of an approach to history dominated by an almost Marxist model that excluded the individual. In his opening remarks at the social history conferences held in 1965 and 1967 at the *École Normale Supérieure* teacher training school in Saint-Cloud, Ernest Labrousse, echoing Lucien Febvre, declared: «No men, again no men, and never men; human societies, organised groups, these are the subjects of history» (Labrousse, 1965, cited by Caron, 1993, p. 14). Similarly, Fernand Braudel (1979) focused on structures when reporting on everyday life. The idea of social homogeneity was dominant at the time, as evidenced by references to the «female condition» in analyses that followed on from research on the working-class condition (Zancarini-Fournel, 2010).

A new trend began to take shape in 1976 at a conference entitled *Pour une histoire de la statistique* («For a history of statistics»), when the notion of the social construction of reality was introduced (Desrosières, 1977). At a time when quantitative history was clearly prevailing, a discussion on the magic of numbers took place, specifically around the question of the methods employed to generate them. This reassessment bolstered those who had been calling, since the start of the 1970s, for a reappraisal of the apparent homogeneity of the major categories, such as the working class (Perrot, 1974). When a new social history that rejected any supposedly established definition arrived in France from England (Thompson, 1988), having originally been published twenty years earlier (Thompson, 1963), social history in France moved away from the history of the working-class condition. There was a shift from social groups to places and spaces. Social history gradually became subjectivist, constructing a narrative based on the lived experiences of individuals. While social history, which had shifted from groups to individuals, was confronted with the introduction of singularities into global history, the development of *microstoria*, in which individuals are the preferred objects of study, is probably what enabled the viewpoint's transformation (Revel, 2010). The exceptional serves to study the norm, just as the norm is invariably involved in the exception (Ginzburg, 2003). Thus, the cultural transfer to France of Italian research on the individual facilitated the transition from a macro-history to a micro-history, by reassessing the interplay between scales of analysis (Revel, 1996).

In short, individual life paths were brought into social history via statistical history and later via micro-history. As of the 1980s and 1990s, the objectivist approach that centred on stable structures was no longer considered sufficient, which prompted the «return of the protagonist» (Touraine, 1984) and a shift towards a «more individualistic approach that is more concerned with strategies, situations and processes» (Delacroix, 2010, p. 431). The biographical approach enabled geographer Françoise Cribier (1991) to tie together individual and collective history. According to her, «the longitudinal analysis of life paths, from childhood to old age, makes it possible to observe the unfolding of a person's existence, of all the professional, familial and residential strategies followed by members of society, and of their relationship with all the places that are part of a social being» (Cribier & Kych, 2009, p. 76). With this shift from the quantitative to the qualitative, the study of individual career paths gradually took hold in the social sciences. The analysis of life paths, the full value of which was revealed thanks to the concept of «agency» (Thompson, 1963), uncovers the rich array of individual possibilities and choices available, at the cost of the effort required to define them. Although the term «path» has a similar meaning to «itinerary» and «trajectory», I do not believe these terms to be synonymous. While itineraries are routes that have been determined in advance, broken down into stages and planned so as to reach a specific destination (Passeron, 1990), life paths are less overarching for the protagonists and more indeterminate in terms of goals. Similarly, a path seems to offer more latitude than a trajectory, which is defined as a series of successive positions and as a progression from one point to another. On the contrary, paths encourage us to think about the full range of possibilities allowed by the capacity of individuals to act, without any presupposed *a priori* determinism.

This dynamic and constructivist theoretical approach underlines the ability of humans to make intentional changes to their lives. It paved the way for the writing of an individual history of key female figures in the field of PE. Luc Robène's seminal study of Paulette Morisson, a «gym teacher» from 1938 to 1975, at a time when coeducation was still far from the agenda, took the biographical turn down the gender route by describing «the expression of a desire to achieve fulfilment differently as a woman» (Robène, 2005, p. 319). More recently, the issue of the *STAPS* journal coordinated by Loïc Szerdahelyi and Luc Robène (2019) shifted the focus by examining the capacity for action of women in PE from the 1960s to the present day. This issue focuses on the multiplicity of female teachers' careers, the diversity of their identity constructs and the specificity of their didactic and pedagogical approaches. It also aims to provide a better understanding of the steps involved in their rise beyond the teaching sphere to key positions in the education system. To this same end, Clémence Lebossé and Carine Énard (2019) examined the career of Lilyane Forestier and her struggle to conquer a male stronghold: the General Inspectorate for PE. The authors discuss how this important figure managed to seize career opportunities by relying on gender strategies and a differentialist feminist stance. Their study is based on a critical analysis that they have since extended to the role of female inspectors in the emergence of a neoliberal governance policy for France's youth as of the *Trente Glorieuses* period between 1945 and 1975 (Lebossé, Énard & Vivier, 2021). Meanwhile, Emmanuel Auvray (2019) analysed the biographical, intellectual and praxical path followed by Nathalie Gal-Petitfaux, who was a pioneer in the teaching of swimming in schools and a holder of the *agrégation* qualification in PE, as well as being involved in France's sporting federations before gaining recognition in the academic sphere. For their part, Yacine Tajri and Jean Saint-Martin (2019) cast a light on the role of a little-known teacher, Monique Pasqualini, in designing adapted PE tests for disabled students taking the *baccalauréat* examination. Their work describes how this teacher operated at a grassroots level to mobilise key individuals, not just in the world of PE but also in political and medical circles, in order to fulfil the requirement for all children to have equal access to physical education at school. Similarly, Cécile Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo and Loïc Szerdahelyi (2018) authored an article on the life and pedagogical innovations of Annick DAVISSE, a major player in French PE who has always championed the cause of girls and the fight against gender inequality. The article was published in an issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport* devoted to the role of women in the promotion of physical exercise and sport (Vertinsky & Hedenborg, 2018). Their work highlights the extent to which the innovative approach developed by Annick DAVISSE over the course of her career, based on the «different and together» dialectic, mobilised a growing network of trade union, political and scientific figures, culminating in its partial incorporation into PE curricula at the end of the 20th century. All of these studies focus on individual experiences to reproblematised the social history of female PE teachers, based on «a form of 'bodily transgression' that ultimately marks the emergence of individuality in physical activity» (Robène, 2005, p. 321).

However, it is important to be wary of a rose-tinted narrative that would paint female PE teachers as all-powerful figures capable of overcoming any obstacle. Indeed, while not totally determinative, structures – be they social, professional,

familial, political or geographical – and economic conditions are significant factors nonetheless. It is also our view that biographical paths must be studied from the joint perspective of individual aspirations and structural constraints, with the additional consideration of events historically situated in space and time. In short, female figures in the world of PE «are not autonomous individuals who exercise their will freely, but rather subjects whose capacity to exert influence is determined by the situations they encounter and the status they are afforded. These conditions allow them to make choices, but these choices are not without limits» (Scott, 2009, p. 115).

### 3.3. *From official sources to oral sources*

In order to gain the best possible insight into the career paths of female PE teachers, I must consider the sources used. Official texts were for a long time the be-all and end-all of the history of PE, despite the gap that separates these political documents from the reality of day-to-day practices (Herr, 1989; Martin, 1997). Having noted that the official discourse on female physical education failed to acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of the careers of female PE teachers, a number of studies shifted the spotlight from official sources to the career records of individuals – initially those of inspectors (Érard, 2010a, 2010b) and subsequently those of teachers (Szerdahelyi, 2014a, 2014b). These personal files reveal valuable civil status, administrative and pedagogical information, thanks to the information sheets, administrative appraisals and inspection reports they contain. Year after year, these documents provide a longitudinally nuanced picture of unique career paths. But accessing career records also means accessing correspondence between teachers and their hierarchical superiors, which sometimes include details of their career wishes, as well as confidential letters from government departments regarding any requests they might have made. Aside from providing the perspective of hierarchical superiors, the correspondence these records include also presents the points of view of PE teachers. These letters, which are handwritten by the teachers, explain their reasons for requesting a transfer, declaring their availability or resigning, or set out the career aspirations that lie behind the personal decisions they have made. They are always sent to the individual's hierarchical superiors. Some are written by other family members: parents in the case of single women, spouses in the case of married women. Thus, the personal independence engendered by exercising a profession must be balanced against dependence on family. If they fail to secure a post near their family home and/or in their home region, female PE teachers do not hesitate to leave their job. In the 1940s-1950s, this was particularly the case for female teachers who were mothers and wives, but young recruits were also affected, as illustrated by this letter from an unmarried teacher, whose youthful style only adds to the emotion in her writing:

My behaviour will seem to you to be most improper, but perhaps you will excuse me. I am going to catch the 5.20 train. This is unacceptable because you received me very warmly, my colleagues were charming and the Centre was welcoming. Only one thing was missing: the affection of my parents. Perhaps

you will find this reason quite childish. I hope the fact that I am only 18 and am accustomed to family life will soften your judgement of me. I could never live apart from my family. The consequences of my decision will undoubtedly be severe, but what can I do? Knowing my character, I tried to obtain a post as close as possible to my family, but I did not succeed. Madam, please accept my sincerest apologies<sup>1</sup>.

Although this correspondence reveals certain individual career aspirations «from below», it is important to highlight the bias to which these sources may be subject: looking beyond their actual words, public servants may have sought to use a style and give reasons that they believed to be in keeping with the education department's doctrine. Indeed, at the same time, the school authorities were instituting a moralistic order. As such, the letters found in the archives no longer emanated from «ordinary» women, but from hierarchical superiors who came to discuss the cases of female teachers deemed «marginal» in terms of the behaviour expected of them, and did so cross-departmentally, internally and usually unofficially. The moral framework placed a focus on transgressions relating to gender, private lives and conjugality. The internal investigations conducted, which more often than not painted condemnatory portraits of individuals, reveal the influence of the moral standards in force in French society, at least up until 1968s and particularly during the Second World War (Szerdahelyi, 2014a). The supposed masculinity of some female PE teachers was a further source of criticism. For instance, the «very boyish and free-spirited» demeanour of one teacher, who spent some of her free time in the town's *cafés* in the company of «idle and disreputable» young people of her own age, was highlighted as evidence that she was «an amoral and abnormal young woman»<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the level of exemplarity required left no alternative but to fall into line, to conform in terms of manners and moral conduct, and to respect one's «gender» as a female teacher – in short to be an exemplary public servant, both within and outside the school walls.

In addition to career records, historians of physical education have increasingly turned to oral sources (Hugedet & Hugedet, 2018). In PE, in the wake of an initial attempt at an oral history of teachers undertaken by Bernard Michon and Benoît Caritey (1998), a second relating to professional practices (Caritey, 2006, 2008) and a third focusing on school sports (Caritey, 2014), a biographical turn is currently taking place through the prism of gender. As Michelle Perrot explains (1998, p. 403), «the biographical approach, when studying both 'exceptional' and ordinary women, whether applied to their entire life or just a segment of their existence, or even to a transient situation or a particular moment, makes it possible to fully grasp the strength of the resistance or desire that causes a woman to stand out as a subject and assert her right to choose her destiny». Indeed, biographical interviews reveal common or diverging representations of individual and collective experiences, which

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives, France, reference 19770252/172: Correspondence from the teacher, sent to the Deputy Director of a Regional General and Sports Education Centre, 22 October 1942.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives, France, reference 19770252/162: Correspondence from the Departmental Director/Inspector of General Education and Sport, sent to the Chief Inspector of General Education and Sport/Regional Director, 17 March 1943.

are reconstructed in retrospect (Descamps, 2005; Perrin-Joly, Schlagdenhauffen & Collectif B., 2020). Despite their disparate and incomplete nature, the snippets of life that are recounted reveal not only the unfolding of an existence comprising high points and low points, moments of ebullience and periods of fulfilment, but also certain desires buried in the monotony of ordinary experiences. Interviews are a useful tool for analysing the profession as it is represented and are often essential for getting to the heart of intimately held ambitions, which tend to be difficult to capture using traditional sources. Oral sources are also an effective way of shining a light on female PE teachers who are known for their work and whose silence would suggest that they are ordinary, but whose career path makes their invisibility incomprehensible. By making the viewpoint of female figures in the field of PE the central focus of their work, researchers are able to convey the complex reality of individual career paths that form part of the history of PE teachers. Providing fertile insight that cannot be accessed through official sources, «oral history is an exercise in stepping off the beaten track, one that enriches knowledge about PE's past by drawing on the memory of PE teachers themselves, a memory that is condemned to die out with them» (Michon & Caritey, 1998, p. 11).

#### **4. Conclusion: Advocating for a pluralist and deconstructionist «history from below»**

The conclusion to this historiographical, theoretical and methodological journey gives me the opportunity to argue for a pluralist and deconstructionist «history from below» of female PE teachers in France. The focus of this project is a «history from below» that places the spotlight on individual protagonists, but does not ignore the environment in which they existed. This is a history that places an emphasis on change and on the multiplicity of possibilities, but which does not harbour the illusion of offering an exhaustive view of reality. Our chosen perspective, which can be equated to the distance referred to by Carlo Ginzburg (2001), is not that of an overarching history of social categories, but that of the protagonists themselves. The primary objective is to reconstruct the paths taken by female PE teachers, whether the focus is their life in its entirety, a particular period or a specific moment, decision or circumstance. This requires an examination of how careers begin and subsequently unfold, an analysis of career mobility and the changes that occur, as well as close consideration of the individual choices made under circumstances and within structures that can be particularly oppressive. This approach enables the exploration of career paths at their intersection with the social and family lives of individuals. The social dimension addresses aspects relating to context – with a distinction drawn between individual events and the medium term – and personal background in terms of sports, education or training. The family dimension, on the other hand, can be addressed by looking at marital circumstances, parental status and the differing attitudes held regarding morality and privacy. While it is more convenient to address the social, professional and family components of individual life paths separately, it remains no less difficult to place impermeable boundaries between them, since the interactions between these areas are constant.

This project to establish a social history of female PE teachers also places a strong emphasis on the diversity of the career paths of individuals who are not considered major figures in female physical education. Despite the discourse that sometimes makes broad generalisations about the teaching community, various destinies can await those who embark upon a career in PE. The apparent uniformity of the PE teaching corps, which is institutionally organised, socially structured, hierarchically arranged within the school system and qualified according to training programmes, contrasts with the diversity that becomes apparent when the life paths of female PE teachers are analysed. It is therefore important to qualify any historical account that refers to the unity of the profession or the symbolic exemplarity of female figures in PE. Whether professional, familial or social, diversity permeates the smallest interstices in which individual choices are forged. Thus, this project underlines the extent to which the history of women who were destined to play a part in the future of professional spheres initially dominated by men comes up against and is shaped by the history of institutions, as well as that of social or family structures, generating as many individual circumstances as intra-category and/or collective developments. In essence, this project seeks to provide a «history from below» that reproblematises the history of a group based on the viewpoints of individuals. Here, diversity is put forward as a way of reconsidering how history is written, with particular attention paid to lesser-heard voices, as proposed by Simona Cerutti (1995a, 1995b, 2012, 2015). It seems that these are the conditions that must be met if we are to assemble all the elements that allow us to situate the protagonists in their different environments, grasp «the complex layers of society» (Martin, 2012, p. 101) and, thanks to biographical approaches, step through the looking glass.

With this purpose in mind, the history «from below» of the careers of female PE teachers aims to deconstruct the “woman” and “teacher” categories, through the prism of life paths and gender. By taking care not to naturalise these categories, physical education historians can guard themselves against a universalist tendency that contributes to essentialising differences, setting normative ideals of masculinity and femininity, and maintaining the assumption that all female PE teachers fit into an ideal archetype. Yet the typical woman or teacher, even when considered in their plurality, as set out by the plural actor theory (Lahire, 2001), does not exist except in representations. This theoretical stance sets the singular against the plural, the image of an idealised essence against real individuals, and the stereotypical image of the archetypal woman or the archetypal female teacher against the diverse experiences of women and female teachers. It is therefore important to look beyond what these categories designate and, even more crucially, not to accept any *a priori* definition of them, but to question the mechanisms by which they are constructed and identify their contradictions, so as to grasp the processes that position individuals as women and as female PE teachers. Let us hope that the gendered social history of PE teachers in France can continue along the path opened up by Joan W. Scott (2009, p. 80), in the sense that «it is not individuals who are exposed to experience, but subjects that are formed through it».

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