

Reflections on physical activity and gender in adolescents in Galicia

Pensamientos relacionados con la actividad física y el género en adolescentes de Galicia

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Editorial shedule: Article received: 26/04/2015 Article accepted: 22/12/2015 Article published: 01/01/2016

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17979/sportis.2016.2.1.1439>

Abstract

The study is mainly aimed at analyzing some gender-related perceptions in the context of sports. The sample consists of 616 secondary education students from Galicia. A questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection and the chi-square test was used as analysis strategy. The evidence of a certain progress was found in relation to traditional stereotypes. In addition, significant differences between girls and boys favoring the former were observed, as they have fewer prejudices regarding these conceptions.

Keywords

Students; gender stereotypes; sport practice.

Resumen

La finalidad principal de este trabajo es analizar algunos pensamientos vinculados al género en el contexto de la práctica deportiva. La muestra la componen 616 estudiantes de educación secundaria de Galicia. Se utiliza el cuestionario como instrumento de recogida de datos y la estrategia de análisis es la prueba de chi-cuadrado. Se observan diferencias significativas entre chicas y chicos en la mayoría de respuestas. Se confirma la resistencia al cambio del estereotipo que afirma que existen unos deportes más apropiados para hombres y otros más apropiados para mujeres, aunque se sugiere cierto avance en relación con los estereotipos tradicionales.

Palabras clave

Estudiantes; estereotipos de género; práctica deportiva.

Introduction

In recent years significant evidence has been collected on the stereotypical differentiation of physical practice performed by boys and girls, as well as their beliefs and interests in this context (Blández, Fernández, & Sierra, 2007; Fernández, 2007; Kleinubing, Do Carmo, & Francischi, 2013; Zaravigka, & Pantazis, 2012).

As Fernández (2007) noted, there is a certain social progress in the representation of the most traditional gender stereotypes related to physical activity and sport, although their evidence is still maintained. These stereotypes are still present both in Primary and Secondary schools (Blández *et al.*, 2007) and ideas, such as certain physical and sport activities are gender-specific, are persistent; that is, they are more appropriate either for men or women. This was the common understanding among the students from the research study conducted by Hanon, Soohoo, Reel and Ratliffe (2009), who identified *men's sports* as those involving aggression and physical contact, contrary to *women's sports*, which are more related to characteristics such as flexibility. The fact of linking boys' activities to force, risk or competition and girls' activities to rhythm, beauty or body language is a concept found in many works (Klomsten, Skaalvik, & Espnes, 2004; Koivula, 2001; Zaravigka, & Pantazis, 2012), which highlighted the important influence of the socialization process in this regard. Similarly, this is reflected in body stereotypes, so that boys seek the musculature cult and girls lean toward the search for thinness and a slim silhouette (Ravé, Pérez, & Poyatos, 2007).

The participation in sports which are considered appropriate for the opposite gender involves the risk of *stigma* (Schmalz, & Kerstetter, 2006). As explained by Blández *et al.* (2007), if the traditional barriers on the type of practice performed are removed, the person may be subjected to disparaging and sexist remarks. Boys find it more difficult than girls in this sense and the fear of being stigmatized conditions their sport choice (Schmalz, Kerstetter, & Anderson, 2008). This explains the closer establishment of women to activities considered *masculine* (Blández *et al.*, 2007), since social pressure is greater for men, in such a male-dominated field such as sports.

In connection with the above-mentioned ideas, the literature indicates that, despite the

fact that there is still a clear predominance of gender-based prejudices, the so-called *neutral* sports are on the rise (Hardin, & Greer, 2009; Schmalz, & Kerstetter, 2006). Defining sports as *neutral* may be due either to the fact they are practiced by, or considered appropriate, for both genders (Koivula, 2001; Schmalz, & Kerstetter, 2006).

Therefore, the relevance of the study is evident; stereotypes influence perceived competence and performance (Chalabaev, & Sarrazin, 2009; Chalabaev, Sarrazin, & Fontayne, 2009). In fact, some interventions that sought to break traditional stereotypes obtained very positive results in changes of attitude (Muñoz, Campos, Toro, & De los Fayos, 2012; Petracovschi, Voicu, Faur, & Sinitean, 2011; Vlastic, Oreb, & Katovic, 2012) and performance (Drouin, Varga, & Gammage, 2008), showing that a satisfying and productive experience can be obtained by performing athletic practices socially associated with the other gender.

In Spain there are hardly any specific studies addressing these topics; in addition, the social progress regarding women's sports and recent institutional efforts related to gender equality in our area lead the authors of this study to be interested in what students may think, and to discover whether there are still different ways of thinking in terms of gender.

Therefore, this study is aimed at analyzing opinions related to gender stereotypes in the context of sport practice, observing the differences between boys and girls.

Material and method

Study design

A non-experimental descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted. Sampling was intentional.

Participants

The subjects under study were 616 students enrolled in nine Secondary schools from the four Galician provinces. 49% were boys and 51% girls, and their ages were between 15 and 17 years ($M = 15.95$, $SD = 0.84$).

Variables

The study variables corresponded to a series of items that were presented to students to respond whether or not they agreed to what was stated therein. Example: regarding the item *girls can practice any kind of sport*, the respondent could mark off either *I agree* or *I disagree*. They are therefore nominal and dichotomous variables. These variables are set out in italics in the results section; that is why they are not repeated in this section.

Instruments

As a data collection instrument, the *questionnaire on sport lifestyle with a gender perspective* was used (Alvariñas, Fernández-Villarino, & López-Villar, 2009), which focused on various issues relating to lifestyle and beliefs regarding physical activity and sport (extra-curricular sports, motivations and influences to practice sport, violence in physical, sport practice and gender-based contexts, etc.). The questionnaire construction followed the phases proposed by Cohen and Manion (2000). Only the data related to *gender and sport practice* are shown in this document.

For data collection, students were contacted through the administration of the physical education departments of the participating centers. The questionnaires were conducted during the mentoring classes.

Statistic analysis

Contingency tables and chi-square tests were used to determine the relationship between different variables. The statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0.

Bioethical considerations

Parents (or guardians) and students received accurate information on the objectives and contents of the study, signing the corresponding informed consent. The research study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Sport, University of Vigo, Pontevedra.

Results

The analysis of results, as detailed below, shows the existence of an association between gender and many of the studied variables (Table 1).

Girls can practice any kind of sport

The results suggest that most students believe that girls can practice any sport, the rate being slightly higher among girls (98.1%). There are significant differences according to gender, boys being those who most reject this statement (4.8%).

Menstruation is an impediment to physical and sport activities

No significant differences were observed in this item. It should be noted that over 25% of the female students and over 30% of the male students believe that menstruation hinders the practice of sports.

It is better to be part of a male-dominated club because you are treated better

90.5% of the girls and 83.9% of the boys disagree with this statement and again the rate of female students in disagreement is higher ($p = .016$).

A girl having too much physical activity is less feminine

Again, the girls disagree more with this stereotype ($p < .001$). 20% of students think that this statement is true.

Both boys and girls can be part of a team when performing a physical activity

There are significant differences by gender in this variable as well, with a probability level lower than .01; almost all the girls agree with the statement, whereas the rate of disagreement is higher among male students. In any case, it should be noted that the rate of students who agree is very high in both genders.

A boy who practices dance is less masculine

75.2% of the boys and 90.2% of the girls do not agree with this statement, but it should be noted that a quarter of the students surveyed believe that someone who practices dance is less masculine ($p < .001$).

The type of physical practice performed does not depend on whether you are male or female

The differences ($p = .034$) show that those who confirm this statement most decisively are the female students.

There are sports which are more appropriate for girls and there are others which are more appropriate for boys

A significant proportion of boys (62.3%) and girls (57%) consider that there are sports more or less appropriate according to gender. In this case, although no significant differences were detected, it is worth noting that the girls are those who disagree in a higher percentage to this stereotype.

Boys do not want to perform physical activity with the girls because they are afraid of hurting them

Significant differences by gender, with a probability level lower than .01, are observed in this case. A high percentage of the boys, more specifically 44.6%, identified with the idea that they did not want to practice sports with the girls because they were afraid of hurting them. This percentage is much reduced in the case of the girls (23.3%), who globally tend to disagree with the idea.

Girls do not want to practice sports with the boys because they are too aggressive

In this case, more than fifty percent of the sample of boys (57%) and girls (52.3%) think that girls do not want to practice with the boys because the latter *are too aggressive*. This time there are no significant differences and it is observed that the responses of agreement and disagreement are more balanced than in the rest of variables.

A girl can be as good as a boy playing any sport

Most students think that a girl can be as good as a boy playing any sport; only 18.2% of the boys and 3.9% of the girls think otherwise ($p < .001$).

	♂ (%)		♀ (%)		χ^2	p-value	
	I agree	I disagree	I agree	I disagree			
I1	95.2	4.8	98.1	1.9	3.853	.050*	♀
I2	31.2	68.8	27.1	72.9	1.147	.284	
I3	16.1	83.9	9.5	90.5	5.760	.016*	♀
I4	19.9	80.1	4.8	95.2	31.753	.000***	♀
I5	90.9	9.1	97.1	2.9	10.439	.001**	♀
I6	24.8	75.2	9.8	90.2	23.743	.000***	♀
I7	77.9	22.1	84.7	15.3	4.502	.034*	♀
I8	62.3	37.7	57	43	1.758	.185	
I9	44.6	55.4	23.3	76.7	30.273	.000***	♀
I10	57	43	52.3	47.7	1.333	.248	
I11	81.8	18.2	96.1	3.9	31.784	.000***	♀

Table 1. Differences in beliefs about gender and sport practice

I1: Girls can practice any kind of sport. I2: Menstruation is an impediment to physical and sport activities. I3: It is better to be part of a male-dominated club because you are treated better. I4: A girl having too much physical activity is less feminine. I5: Both boys and girls can be part of a team when performing a physical activity. I6: A boy who practices dance is less masculine. I7: The type of physical practice performed does not depend on whether you are male or female. I8: There are sports which are more appropriate for girls and there are others which are more appropriate for boys. I9: Boys do not want to perform physical activity with the girls because they are afraid of hurting them. I10: Girls do not want to practice sports with the boys because they are too aggressive. I11: A girl can be as good as a boy playing any sport.

p. value = * $\leq .05$; ** $<.01$; *** $<.001$

♀ = girls expressed less stereotypical thinking

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to find out perceptions related to gender in the context of sport practice, observing the differences between boys and girls. Overall, it should be pointed out that these differences are found in most of the described items and the results are similar to those reported in recent literature.

After analyzing our findings in detail, it was noted that when asked if the girls can do any kind of sport, most of the students agree with the statement; however, when one delves deeper into the subject and they are proposed the stereotype that there are certain sports more suitable for women and others more suitable for men, it is observed that more than fifty percent of boys and girls agree. These results corroborate those found by Rodríguez, Martínez and Mateos (2005) on the fact that this is one of the stereotypes most resistant to change, as pointed out furthermore through the studies conducted by Hanonn et al. (2009), and Zaravigka and Pantazis (2012). Del Castillo (2009) also found that their students adapted the social models of masculinity and femininity to the field of Physical Education. However, it is worth noting that our data show significant percentages of rejection of this perception, especially in female students, which could be interpreted as progress on this issue. On the other hand, when asked about whether a girl can be as good as a boy to practice sport, the majority agree most fervently. In the study performed by Fernández (2007), which employed a large sample of Primary and Secondary Education students, a trend was found which accepted that sport activities can be appropriate for both genders. Exceptions to this trend were detected regarding the most stereotyped event categories such as soccer, futsal and rugby (in this case the boys consider these disciplines more appropriate for them), and rhythmic gymnastics, ballet/dance, aerobics and jump rope, which both male and female students perceive more appropriate for girls.

Regarding menstruation, another myth that for years has separated women from sport practice, yet there are still those who think it is an impediment, though clearly most boys and girls disagree with this idea. Myths about the woman's reproductive system and physical activity have been unfairly transmitted from scientific and medical conservative conceptions

which sought to perpetuate the social patriarchy and the results of our study could be an example that these influences still exist.

As for the idea that the boys who practice dance are less masculine or the girls having too much physical activity are less feminine, our results may indicate certain progress compared to previous studies, such as that carried out by Macías (1999) or the Women's Institute on *Attitudes and sport practice of women in Spain (1900-2005)* published in 2006, where the permanence of beliefs such as sport will masculinize women is explained. This work has confirmed the tendency to reject both stereotypes, but the stereotype referring to the lack of femininity in female athletes is more explicitly rejected by both female and male students. This issue is closely related to what has been said about the rise of neutral sports (Koivula, 2001; Schmalz, & Kerstetter, 2006) and to the diminished pressure on girls to practice disciplines classified as male-dominated.

The existence of some ways of thinking that could be described as less adaptive was determined; thus, a high percentage of boys identified with the idea that they did not want to practice sports with the girls because they were afraid of hurting them. In addition, there are stereotypes which still resist change as discussed previously on the acceptability of gender in the practice of sport activities (Fernández, 2007). These results suggest the need for further planning proposals, both in formal and non-formal education, aimed at breaking stereotypes and leading to gender equality in sport practice. The planning should be carried out from a gender perspective, with variations in methodology, contents, and showing countermodels and countervalues, reflecting on what advertising shows us, and analyzing the use of information. Specifically, the impressions from the Internet, cinema or television and the image provided of women and men in the area of sport practice is essential in these times, when the adolescent students are so closely linked to these means.

In addition, it should not be forgotten that the problem does not lie only within the students' mentality. The change of thought and therefore of conduct has yet to reach those in teaching positions. Despite the fact that this problem may seem already outdated by teachers because we have been discussing coeducation for decades, this research study reveals that gender stereotypes are conveyed by teachers even in today's physical education classes (Del

Castillo, Romero, González, & Campos, 2012).

There are currently proposals for change with conclusively positive results; in the specific area of physical education, the reader should refer to the study conducted by Baena and Ruiz (2009) for further information on this topic. In fact, some interventions managed to break traditional stereotypes and trigger changes in adolescents' attitudes (Muñoz *et al.*, 2012; Petracovschi *et al.*, 2011; Vlastic *et al.*, 2012).

Finally, and as a limitation of this study, the authors understand there is a need for the development of specific tools that allow us to delve into such issues and reflect on the presence of stereotyped/sexist perceptions among students.

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Sportis. Revista Técnico-Científica del Deporte Escolar, Educación Física y Psicomotricidad
Sportis. Scientific Technical Journal of School Sport, Physical Education and Psychomotricity