



Category: women and sport
psychological aspects



WOMEN AND SPORTS: PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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In terms of participation and equality, women have made tremendous strides in the past few decades. Today it is commonplace to see females participating in all levels of the workforce, the political arena, and athletics. However, while it is generally accepted in many cultures that women can partake in facets of life that were once considered male oriented, there are still many stigmas that surround females that chose to do so. This is especially obvious in the area of sports.

Gender roles are social mores that influence the perceptions and behavior of individuals on a daily basis. They tell people how they are supposed to act, look, and even what one's interests should be. These roles are culturally dependent and are reinforced from birth. For Example, traditional American culture stresses that men are supposed to support the household financially and are not supposed to convey emotions. Women, on the other hand, are supposed to be emotional and fulfill the role of caretaker and mother. In modern society these traditional roles have become blurred but as recently as 1990 two in three people in a United States-based survey supported these roles as the "idea family situation".

Societal and economic considerations have increasingly moved women into areas that were historically dominated by men and vice versa. It has become more acceptable for men to be second to women in the workforce, or even to be responsible for child care and act as a stay at home dad. Due to these changes traditional gender roles have become more androgynous over the years; however, they are still very prevalent in many aspects of today's society. Accordingly, athletes are often exposed to and evaluated based on traditional gender roles. Although it has become more acceptable for females to participate in masculine sports or males to participate in feminine sports there is still potentially a negative connotation attached to those athletes who participate in "opposite sex" sports.

Role Conflict in Athletics

When people violate the stereotypes and mores associated with preconceived roles, they are considered to be atypical or "other than normal". Student-athletes by definition must deal with the role conflict inherent in acting as both students and athletes. In addition, female athletes must balance gender roles. Lance (2004) found that because of this added conflict, female athletes show a higher amount of role conflict than male athletes. Conflict was also found to be more prevalent for female athletes participating in traditionally masculine sports such as baseball, football, soccer, hockey, and basketball.

Female athletes have a tendency to use more emotion-focused coping strategies which can create more stress. For example, women as a group tend to internalize their anxieties and continually replay or analyze a bad call or error more than their male counterparts. As more and more women and girls across the country are competing in sports and athletic events, the prevalence of those competing in traditionally masculine sports is increasing. Sports such as football, wrestling, and ice hockey are no longer the exclusive province of male athletes.

Participation in sports that require what are considered typically "male characteristics," such as speed and strength can present an "image problem" for many female athletes. While some research suggests enhanced self-perceptions of female athletes participating in cross-gender sports the perceptions of others

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may not be as positive. Female athletes are often seen as being more like the typical male in terms of characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors. Female athletes may also discard typical feminine behaviors after they adopt the masculine behaviors that accompany their sport. While these changes in themselves do not necessarily represent a negative outcome the negative reaction of others can result in adverse consequences in terms of the treatment of female athletes.

Krane, Choi, Baird, Aima, and Kauer (2004) suggested that the paradoxical relationship between masculine and feminine behaviors is also prevalent in everyday life. When in social settings, female athletes often strive to conform to the ideal female image which is often defined by society and culture as being “small, thin, and model-like” (Krane et al., p. 326). Female athletes may have a hard time conforming to this feminine ideal due to the amount of strength, muscle, and “masculine” features that they possess. Conversely, in an athletic setting, female athletes express little desire to conform to the feminine ideal and are often proud of their muscles, strength, and “masculine” features. Female athletes reported that they are constantly reminded by their friends that they are different from the norm, even when performing stereotypically female actions such as shopping for clothing or dining. Female athletes reported having trouble finding clothing that fits their muscular bodies and often eat a larger amount than their non-athlete female friends.

Questions are often raised regarding female athletes’ femininity, sexual orientation, and appropriateness as role models. Because of “gender role violations” female athletes often suffer a great deal of role conflict in other aspects of their lives, including at school, work, and social gatherings which may lead to the experience of high levels of stress. Role conflict is further exacerbated by the attempt of many female athletes to overcompensate for their masculine behavior on the field by acting in feminine ways off the field. Norms for the “female sports world” and the rest of society differ dramatically.

Lantz and Schroeder (1999) examined the relationship between gender role orientation and self-identification with the role of an athlete. It was found that high athletic identifiers (both male and female) reported significantly higher masculine gender role orientations. Those participants who reported low athletic identification reported significantly higher levels of femininity, suggesting that even though many females participate in sports, it is still an area that is dominated by masculine perceptions.

Along with gender orientation, participants were asked to rate the athletes’ likeability, respectability, athleticism, and attractiveness. The type of sport significantly affected the likeability rating of the female athlete. Participants rated females participating in masculine sports (softball, basketball, and soccer) as being less likeable than those participating in feminine sports (figure skating, tennis, and track). It was shown that the athletic identity of the participants significantly affected that likeability ratings of the female athletes.

The type of sport also significantly influenced ratings of perceived respectability. Women playing masculine sports were rated as being less respectable than those playing feminine sports. There was an interaction between participant gender and type of sport in respect to the respectability ratings. Males rated female athletes participating in softball, basketball, and soccer as being less respectable than female athletes participating in figure skating, tennis, and track. Women rated female athletes participating in softball, basketball, and soccer as being more respectable than female athletes participating in figure skating, tennis, and track. This finding is important because it suggests that women seem to respect other women who challenge gender roles. On the other hand, men see those same women as being less respectable than their more feminine counterparts.

Limitations

Several limitations were inherent in this study that should be accounted for in future research. First, while an effort was made to utilize a generalizable sample the fact remains that participants were limited to students in two college classes and members of two sports teams. Furthermore, not all of the athletes in the scenarios were depicted equally. Some were more accomplished than others, and in a few scenarios, personal

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information (such as family information and descriptions of physical appearance) was given. Additionally, only perceptions of female athletes were examined. Adding perceptions of male athletes to future studies might improve our understanding of the relationships found. In the future, it would be reasonable to obtain a larger, more random sample, as well as to make the athletes more equal in the scenarios.

Practical Implications and Directions for Future Research

The growing prevalence of women in sports, especially those that traditionally were male dominated, makes it critical that coaches, sport psychologists, and athletes understand the impact of sport participation on female athletes. From a psychological perspective masculine and feminine characteristics are not tied directly to biological sex and both can be beneficial to individuals. However, a negative stereotype resulting from sport participating can be harmful in terms of increased stress, peer pressure, and influences on behavior. The “image problem” and “sex role violations” experienced by female athletes can lead to problems both during and outside of sport competition. Awareness of the potential negative consequences of sport participation on the perceived likeability and respectability of female athletes is therefore especially relevant. Simply being aware of potential issues is a start in addressing problems that have the potential to undermine the self esteem, motivation, perception, and performance of athletes. Coaches and those advising athletes, however, can be helped by understanding the specific issues faced.

Sport is often a significant factor in the physical and psychological development of children. The role of females in sport and society is continuing to evolve and more research is need on how this is impacting athletics. This has implications for both the well-being of current athletes and the selection and development of future athletes. Society as a whole is sometimes quick to change but slow to adapt to changes. Sports is only one of many areas where women are taking on increasingly significant and visible roles. Changes in business and education have facilitated the recognition of females as equal and valuable participants. Sports as a whole can benefit from the incorporation of the literature from these areas in understanding group perceptions and differences. Future research should expand on these issues by continuing to consider individual differences.

As a specific recommendation, researchers and practitioners should consider the perception and perspectives of both male and female athletes. The perceptions of male athletes participating in traditionally feminine sports might be quite different than female athletes participating in traditionally masculine sports. Additionally, the scenarios created for this study utilized college athletes. It is not known if the perceptions found here would hold true across age levels or for professional or Olympic-level athletes. The participation of females is growing across all levels of sport and both research and practice need to keep pace.