

## **Girly Girls and Manly Men: Children's Stigma Consciousness of Gender in Sports and Physical Activities**

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Despite efforts toward equality, social rules of gender play a prominent role in leisure especially within the sport and physical activity arena. Recreational and organized sports are common leisure pursuits among children. From an early age, children show signs of recognizing "appropriate" gendered behavior and activities. The goal of this study was to assess the degree to which children are aware of social stereotypes of gender in sport and physical activity and how their awareness affects their participation choices. Results of the study indicate that in terms of gender stereotypes girls experience greater social latitude in their sport participation than boys. The findings suggest support for further investigations into the effects of gender stigmas on boys' participation and experiences in sport and physical activity.

**KEYWORDS:** *Stigma consciousness, gender stereotypes, children's leisure.*

### **Introduction**

Sport is a common and popular leisure pursuit among children and plays an important role in how they develop their future leisure behaviors and understandings. However, children's participation in sports and activities can be bound by social constructions of gender and gender stereotypes. Individuals who grew up in the United States and attended public school or participated in after school programs are likely to have memories of playground protocol (e.g., boys play football, soccer, or baseball and girls play jump rope or four square). Research has provided supporting evidence that the childhood rules of the playground exist beyond the scope of personal memories. Children as young as two are aware of and practice gender roles (Boyle, Marshall, & Robeson, 2003). Although advances have leveled the playing field for girls and women somewhat, a subconscious yet widely held perception of boys' sports and girls' sports persists.

There are dozens of definitions of sport and sports that are used in scholarly and common vernacular. For the purposes of this study, Coakley's (2001) definition is used. According to Coakley, sports are "... institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use

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of relatively complex physical skills by participants motivated by personal enjoyment and external rewards" (p. 21). In his explanation, he outlines that sports are physical activities. Per this definition, activities that might not otherwise be considered sports such as dance, ballet, and cheerleading, fall under the umbrella of the term. Therefore, for readability and ease in this study, the term sports is used in conjunction with physical activities and meant to refer to this definition.

### Gender in Sport and Physical Activities

The relationship between gender and sport particularly from the perspective of women has been addressed by researchers (e.g., Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1999). Society has undergone a number of changes that warrant re-visiting gender and sport. For example, Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 has increased women's participation in sports (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Thirty-two years later, society is reaping the benefits of women who grew up with Title IX legislation. Women's athletics are receiving media coverage, increased participation, and overall recognition. Women's athletic ability is lauded more frequently in sports that have been traditionally considered masculine such as basketball, soccer, and ice hockey (Colley, Nash, O'Donnell, & Restorick, 1987; Koivula, 1995; Matteo, 1986). Despite these efforts and successes, stereotypes of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" sports for men and women persist (Riemer & Visio, 2003).

Although girls' and women's experiences in sport and physical activities have been investigated from a variety of perspectives (Henderson et al. 1999), the social-psychological experiences of boys and men in sport have received less attention. Much of the early sport research focused only on the experiences of boys and men, as they have historically been the primary participants. More recent research has explored girls and women's participation almost exclusively. Subsequently, boys and men have been overlooked in more recent work (Henderson & Shaw, 2003; Messner, 1998, 2002). The social nature and behavioral expectations prevalent in sport make boys' as well as girls' experiences in sport worth investigating.

#### *Children's Participation in Stereotypically Girls' and Boys' Sports*

Metheny (1965) pioneered investigations into social stereotypes of appropriate and inappropriate sport participation for women and men. She concluded that sports in which girls and boys were expected and encouraged to participate possessed qualities that were congruent with both feminine and masculine personality traits. Feminine sports were typically aesthetically pleasing, and lacked face-to-face competition or overt aggression. Masculine sports were generally aggressive and competitive, and involved a high degree of face-to-face and bodily contact (Metheny). Riemer and Visio (2003) revisited Metheny's classifications to assess the validity of the classifications in

today's society. Their findings indicated that although more sports fell into the neutral category than Metheny's original results indicated, social stereotypical perceptions of feminine and masculine sports persisted. According to Riemer and Visio, people consider gymnastics and aerobics to be feminine sports and football and wrestling to be masculine sports.

### *Gender Stigmas*

The terms gender and sex are often used interchangeably in common vernacular. For the purposes of this paper, the two terms will be used per the current definitions in psychological and sociological research. Sex is dichotomous and refers to biological differences between males and females. Gender on the other hand, is idiosyncratic and reflects degrees of femininity and masculinity. *Social norms* dictate that men are expected to possess masculine characteristics and women are expected to possess feminine characteristics. Men and women possess varying combinations of masculine and feminine traits, yet risk of stigma presents itself when men demonstrate overtly feminine traits, and women, though less so than men, demonstrate masculine traits. Goffman (1963) is noted for the first scholarly presentation of stigma which has since precipitated scores of subsequent investigations into the experiences of the stigmatized. In his original piece, Goffman distinguished that stigma is the result of an "attribute and a stereotype" (1963, p. 4). More recent definitions specify that the stereotype that follows the possession of a particular attribute is negative or undesirable (Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, & Scott, 1984). Thus, considering social definitions of gender, subsequent stigmas are prevalent within sport and physical activity.

Because of the prevalence of gender dynamics in sport, individuals who choose to disregard social rules attributed to the sexes are vulnerable to gender stigmas. Stigmas are commonly assigned to anyone who behaves or appears in a way contrary to what people commonly expect. As with many leisure pursuits, social assumptions are made about participants through symbolic communication (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994; Haggard & Williams, 1995; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Simply by participating in an activity considered socially appropriate for the opposite sex, participants symbolically communicate characteristics about themselves to others. Stereotypes and stigmas assigned to participants are common in leisure activities of many kinds. Social class, race, religion, physical disabilities, gender, or any combination of these are common stereotypes in leisure activities. Individuals who possess or associate themselves with characteristics opposite to those considered appropriate for their sex are at risk of being stigmatized (Bem, 1981; Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998; Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Pinel, 1999, 2002; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Gender stereotypes in sport and physical activity are often manifested in stigmas of sexual orientation. Specifically, participation in sports deemed

appropriate for the other sex puts an individual at risk of being labeled gay or lesbian (Messner, 2002). Theorists suggest that individuals only become concerned with stigmas when the characteristic that is subject to social stigma is central to their identity (Schlenker & Weigold, 1989). For example, stigmas associated with gender in sport would be more salient to a person who participates in and identifies closely with sports than for an individual who does not participate or identify with sports. For a person identifying closely with a characteristic vulnerable to stigma, two paths of behavior have been investigated: (a) the individual continues to participate and develops coping mechanisms for the stigma, or (b) the individual chooses not to participate and therefore avoids association and stigma (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). The phenomenon of avoidance has been referred to as disidentification (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) or disengagement (Major & Crocker, 1993; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998).

Little research has been conducted based on theories of stigma in an investigation of sport participation. Moreover, because the focus in recent years has been on women's experiences in sport, men's experiences and stigma have received little attention (Messner, 1998; 2002; Henderson & Shaw, 2003). The research completed is dated, but indicates that men are under more pressure to conform to social ideals of gender than women (Colley et al. 1987; Deaux, 1985; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Fagot, 1981; Harris & Jennings, 1977; MacCoby & Jacklin, 1974). This expectation is particularly true in sports and physical activities where boys and men are socialized to participate and demonstrate their masculinity (Koivula, 1995). Recent studies have supported the notion that girls participating in masculine sports and activities are more acceptable than boys participating in feminine sports and activities (Boyle et al., 2003; Riemer & Visio, 2003; Wiley, Shaw, Havitz, 2000).

Boys and men may also be more sensitive to stigmas associated with their participation choices than girls and women, because sport is so widely accepted as being masculine. Though not completely unexplored, few researchers have investigated the experiences of boys or men regarding gender stigmas in sport. An investigation of the manifestation of stigmas in sport, given the current climate and movement toward greater equality in sport, is warranted.

### *Stigma Consciousness*

Using Goffman (1963) and subsequent investigations as a springboard, Pinel (1999, 2002) posited that individuals differ in the extent that they are conscious of stigmas. People's behavior in certain circumstances is reflective of their levels of stigma consciousness. Pinel addressed this idea with many populations in different circumstances including gays, lesbians, women, and Blacks. Sport and children are two domains Pinel did not investigate. According to Liben and Bigler (2002), children are aware of and conform to cultural norms prevalent in society including those norms regarding gender.

As early as age two, children group clothing, colors, toys, occupations, and activities into categories of gender (Levy, Sadovsky, & Troseth, 2000; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001).

Participation in sport and physical activities provides children with positive avenues for development and identity exploration (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991; Larson, 2000). However, stigmas and consciousness regarding stigmas in some sports may limit children in the activities they perceive to be available to them. Boys may limit their participation in stereotypical girls' sports, and girls may limit themselves from stereotypical boys' sports for fear of being stigmatized. Cultural stereotyping of gender and behaviors that are considered more appropriate for one sex or another also limits people in their expression of attitudes and interests (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991; Liben & Bigler, 2002). How children understand and perceive the limitations of gender stigmatization and to what degree they conform to and internalize gender stigmas in behavior and activities become important to investigate. Furthermore, it is important to establish a better understanding of how children perceive and internalize stereotypes so that effective programs educating them to have a variety of play opportunities can be implemented (Liben & Bigler).

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between stigma consciousness and sport participation in gender-typed sports among boys and girls ranging in age from 8 through 10 years. It is important to know how social influences such as stigmas might play a part in children's perceptions and decision making in order to better understand their participation choices. This age group was chosen for investigation because they have not yet fully developed their gender or leisure identities. Yet, they are susceptible to influences surrounding them, and are apt to vary their behavior according to messages they receive from their environment. Stigma consciousness is a complex yet intriguing dimension that applies to many dimensions of leisure behavior. Examining how gender stigmas in sport affect children's participation is an important first step toward greater understanding of perceived constraints and leisure behavior. The following research questions guided the study:

- Q<sub>1</sub>: Do boys and girls participate in gender-typed sports more frequently than cross gender-typed sports?
- Q<sub>2</sub>: What is the relationship between stigma consciousness and sport participation of children in grades 3 through 5?

## Method

### *Participant Recruitment*

The sample population for this study consisted of a convenience sample of 444 children ranging in age from 8 through 10 years in a school district in central Pennsylvania. This age group was selected specifically because as

pre-adolescents, their gender role and sport identities have yet to fully develop (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990; Harter, 1998; Huston, 1985; Liben & Bigler, 2002). Children of this age are still exploring what being female or male means and the social identities and options available to them. The school district was selected because of its location and the willingness of the administration and the teachers to work with the researchers. Four public schools from the district participated in the study.

To recruit participants, the primary researcher visited third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms (i.e., children aged 8 through 10 years) in the four participating schools to briefly introduce the study and what it involved. Students were given a consent form and a background questionnaire to take home to their parents/guardians. The background questionnaire was used to obtain demographic information such as age, sex, and race of the participant. The consent form was two-fold in that it described the quantitative and qualitative elements of the study. It was made clear on the consent forms that by signing, parents and guardians were providing consent for their child to participate in both phases. Students were instructed to return the completed consent forms and background questionnaires within three to four days if they were interested in participating. Participating students received a \$5 movie voucher if they returned their consent form within the allotted time.

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire and one-on-one interviews. Questionnaires were administered during Physical Education (P.E.) classes. Participating students stayed behind in the classroom to complete the questionnaire while non-participating students proceeded with P.E. class as usual. Although parental consent was received before students were enrolled in the study, participants were also asked to give their assent and to indicate their interest in participating in a one-on-one interview with the primary researcher. Participants who indicated interest in doing an interview were categorized by age, sex, and school and then randomly selected. Interviewees consisted of one boy and one girl from each grade at each school, with the exception of one particularly rural school in which fourth and fifth graders were together in one classroom. One girl and one boy were selected to represent the class. A total of 22 one-on-one interviews were conducted.

### *Self-Administered Questionnaire*

Stigma consciousness was measured using an adapted version of the Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire (SCQ) (Pinel, 1999). The SCQ had not yet been assessed among children, nor had it been applied in a sport context. With the consultation of Pinel (personal communication, February 13, 2003) and Liben (personal communication, February 13, 2003), the statements were re-worded to be understandable to a young population, and the number of response categories was reduced from seven to five. The latter was intended to address the possibility that children may not understand the

nuances between responses on a seven-point scale. The SCQ consisted of 10 items and asked children to respond to a Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

A list of 30 sports was compiled including 25 sports that had been previously classified (i.e., 8 feminine, 10 masculine, and 8 gender neutral) by Metheny (1965) and four new sports as suggested by the P.E. teachers at the participating schools (i.e., skateboarding, snowboarding, hunting/fishing, and canoeing/kayaking). P.E. teachers were consulted to confirm that students in the participating schools were aware of and familiar with the sports and activities on the list provided, and that most if not all were available for participation in the community. Study participants were asked to indicate if they played each sport and, if so, whether they played with a team, and/or with friends and family.

Attitudes towards sports referred to the degree to which participants perceived sports to be boys' sports, girls' sports, or gender neutral sports. A modified version of the activity dimension of the Children's Occupation, Activity, and Trait Scale (COAT; Liben & Bigler, 2002) was used to assess attitudes towards sports. The COAT scales are a suite of scales designed to measure attitudes and perceptions of gender for self and others in occupations, activities, and traits. Liben and Bigler created two dimensions for each scale in the COAT suite: the attitude measure (AM) and the personality measure (PM). Each scale was designed specifically to overcome limitations in previous gender measures by wording the response items differently. Items that ask "who usually" does a given activity or occupation, target knowledge of stereotypes rather than personal endorsement of stereotypes. However, "who should" do a given activity or occupation gets to the point. Therefore, the AM items were directed toward assessing the degree to which a person understood gender stereotypes (e.g., "who should be this way"), while the PM items were directed toward assessing the degree to which gender stereotypes had been internalized as part of the personality (e.g., "I am like this").

For the purposes of this study, the AM version of the activity dimension of the COAT was used but slightly modified. The original scale consisted of items typically considered masculine (e.g., "play basketball," "fix the car") and items typically considered feminine (e.g., "do gymnastics," "iron the clothes"). Because this study targeted sports specifically, the format of the AM version of the COAT scale was used (e.g., "who should . . ."), but the items were changed to the same list used to assess sport and physical activity participation, thus excluding original items not relevant to the purpose of this study (e.g., "fix the car," "iron the clothes").

The questionnaire was piloted with three eight-year olds prior to the start of data collection to evaluate the comprehensibility of the directions for completion of the questionnaire as well as the COAT and SCQ scales, which had not been previously tested on children. As a result of the pilot study, changes were made to the questionnaire including descriptions to help participants understand what some of the traits were on the COAT scale and a further rewording of some of the statements in the SCQ.

### *One-on-one Interviews*

One-on-one interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and were conducted during the school day in a room away from other students and teachers. All of the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Pseudonyms were assigned all of the interview participants to afford confidentiality. Interviewees were reminded that they could ask to have the recorder turned off or could refuse to answer a question at any time. A series of questions served as a guide to establish a relaxed environment, but the interview was loosely structured to allow for natural conversation. The guide consisted of questions such as "what sports do you play?" and "what sports would you like to play?" Other, more discerning questions were also provided on the guide, such as "do people think differently about you if you play certain sports?" The interviewer kept a journal to record observations and nuances of each interview. The questions were devised to glean information about the interviewees' participation interests and to tap whether or not the interviewee perceived a limitation in what sports are available and, if so, why.

A categorical aggregation technique was used to categorize and interpret the data. Categorical aggregation is a process in which the researcher examines multiple examples and instances within the data looking for relevant topics and meanings (Creswell, 1998). The evaluations of the data were done manually without use of a computer software program. Relevant topics to this study included gender schema, stigma consciousness, and sport participation. Using this technique, the data were reviewed and re-assessed by the first author and debriefed with colleagues and collaborators to confirm that the emerging ideas were logical, consistent, and objective.

## Results

Demographic characteristics including race, household income, and parent education were assessed as potential confounding variables. Preliminary analyses indicated that none of the potentially confounding demographic characteristics were linked with the dependent or independent variables, and were therefore not included in analyses as covariates.

### *Sample Profile*

All socio-demographic information was collected from a background questionnaire completed by parents or guardians of the study participants. The majority of background questionnaires were completed by mothers (84%) of participants. The majority of the sample was female (57%). The mean age of the sample was 9 years and 98% of the sample were White/Caucasian. One third (36%) had a household income of \$20,000-\$39,999. The highest level of education completed by the largest percentage of participants' mothers (37%) and fathers (45%) was some or all of high school.



*Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire*

The Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire (SCQ) (Pinel, 1999) consisted of 10 items, with five reverse coded. When assessing internal consistency, it became apparent that the study participants did not understand or respond well to the reverse coded items. Data were collected during P.E. classes and the questionnaires were administered in groups. The participants might have been distracted in the group, or may have experienced other breaks in concentration. Unfortunately, the small group that made up the pilot test did not shed light on this potential difficulty. All five reverse coded items were eliminated from the final scale, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of .65, which is an acceptable alpha for scales of 6 items or fewer (Cortina, 1983). Wording of items, means, and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
*Means and Standard Deviations for the Modified Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire (n = 281)*

SCQ Items	Response by Percentages					<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>
	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)		
People have strong beliefs about boys (girls) who play girls (boys) sports, even if they don't say so.	15.3	15.7	28.5	21.0	19.6	3.14	1.32
People think I should act like a boy (girl) and do things boys (girls) do, just because I am a boy (girl).	36.3	17.8	11.7	13.2	21.0	2.65	1.58
If I play a girls (boys) sport, people treat me differently.	30.2	22.8	18.1	13.2	15.7	2.61	1.43
When I play sports with girls (boys), I feel like they think I am too much like a boy (girl).	35.6	20.6	14.6	15.3	13.9	2.51	1.45
I worry that if I play a sport girls (boys) play, people will think I am like a girl (boy).	34.9	23.5	13.2	16.4	12.1	2.47	1.42
Scale						<b>2.68</b>	<b>2.08</b>

\*Means are calculated on a scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree."

*Sport Participation and Attitudes Towards Sports*

Study participants were asked to indicate if they participate in the sports currently or had participated within the last year and in what capacity they participated (e.g., on a team or with friends or family). Participation of boys and girls in masculine and feminine sports fit stereotypical expectation. Specifically, more girls than boys participated in feminine sports, and more boys than girls participated in masculine sports. However, more girls participated in masculine sports than girls participated in feminine sports. A total of 109 (37%) study participants indicated that they participated in feminine sports, 99 (91%) of these were girls. A total of 123 (42%) study participants indicated that they participated in masculine sports, 80 (65%) of these were boys.

Participants were provided with a list of 30 sports and asked to indicate whether or not they participated in each activity recently or in the past year. On another page, using the same list, participants were asked to indicate whether they perceived each sport to be for boys' only, for girls' only, for both boys and girls, or if they did not know or were not familiar with the sport. Sports were categorized as feminine or masculine if 60% or more of the respondents perceived them to be for girls' or boys' only. Sports in the feminine category included cheerleading (67%), ballet (65%), and dance (62%). Sports in the masculine sport category included football (70%) and wrestling (63%). Sports for which there was no majority gender assignment were categorized as gender neutral (Table 2). Lacrosse was an exception because over half of the sample (65%) did not know what it was. Under the circumstances, putting it into the gender neutral category would be unreasonable and assumptive so it was eliminated from further analysis.

Further analyses were conducted using the feminine, masculine, and neutral participation categories. The three categories into which the sports were grouped were based on the strategy employed by previous studies that investigated gender-typing of sports (Colley et al. 1987; Koivula, 1995; Matteo, 1986; Metheny, 1965). Additionally, the grouping of the sports into gender-typed categories helped in reducing the risk of Type I error in the course of analysis.

Chi-square was used to test the significance of the differences in participation between boys and girls in gender-typed (i.e., feminine and masculine) sports. The neutral sport category was not included in these particular analyses because the primary goal of the study was to assess the stigma consciousness of participants in gender-typed sports. In this case, chi-square was used to assess whether the participation rates of boys and girls in the sample paralleled the social stereotypes. The results were used to determine whether further analyses investigating the differences between boys' and girls' participation were justified. Results of the chi-square indicated that in the case of feminine and masculine sports, boys and girls tend to participate in the sports deemed socially appropriate for their sex (i.e., gender-typed) rather than participating in cross gender-typed sports (Table 3).

**TABLE 2**  
*Summary of Attitudes Towards Sports (n = 294)*

Sport	Response by Percentages			
	Boys only	Girls only	Both	Don't know
<i>Feminine Sports*</i>				
Cheerleading	1.0	67.0	30.3	1.7
Ballet	0.3	65.3	23.5	10.9
Dance	2.4	61.9	32.3	3.4
<i>Masculine Sports*</i>				
Football	70.4	1.4	26.9	1.4
Wrestling	62.9	0.7	31.6	4.8
<i>Neutral Sports*</i>				
Swimming	1.0	0.7	96.6	1.7
Jogging/Running	1.0	0.7	95.2	3.1
Soccer	2.7	1.4	93.9	2.0
Bicycling	6.1	2.0	90.1	1.7
Tennis	1.7	7.8	88.8	1.7
Canoeing/Kayaking	10.2	1.0	87.4	3.4
Diving	2.4	6.8	87.4	3.4
Golf	9.2	2.0	85.0	3.7
Volleyball	0.7	12.2	84.4	2.7
Basketball	12.9	2.0	83.7	1.4
Snow skiing	7.1	4.4	80.3	8.2
Karate	16.3	0.7	76.2	6.8
Snowboarding	21.1	1.0	75.5	2.4
Hunting/Fishing	31.6	0.3	66.0	2.0
Skateboarding	35.7	0.3	59.9	4.1
Baseball	39.1	0.3	58.5	2.0
Field Hockey	29.9	3.7	57.5	8.8
Aerobics	1.0	21.8	50.7	26.5
Figure Skating	2.7	36.4	50.3	10.5
Softball	3.1	44.9	50.0	2.0
Gymnastics	0.7	48.3	47.6	3.4
Ice Hockey	49.0	0.7	46.9	3.4
Weightlifting	44.9	2.4	46.9	5.8
Riflery	37.1	0.0	45.2	17.7
<i>Don't Know*</i>				
Lacrosse	3.7	2.4	29.3	64.6

\* Headings were assigned by the investigator in an effort to showcase differences in attitudes towards sports.

Having determined that boys' and girls' sport participation was significantly different in the feminine and masculine categories, further tests were conducted to explore the stigma consciousness of participants. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess the relationship between participa-

**TABLE 3**  
*Chi-Square Results for Participation Rates of Boys and Girls in Gender-Typed Sports*

Sport	Boys ( <i>n</i> = 128)	Girls ( <i>n</i> = 166)	<i>X</i> <sup>2</sup>
<i>Feminine Sports</i>			
Dance	10	71	44.25*
Cheerleading	2	65	58.05*
Ballet	2	43	33.03*
<i>Masculine Sports</i>			
Football	75	39	37.51*
Wrestling	38	12	25.83*

\**p* < .001

tion in gender-typed sports (i.e., feminine, masculine, neutral) and stigma consciousness (Table 4). Participation was treated as a two-category variable: participation and no participation. Because not all participants completed the stigma consciousness questionnaire in full, the total *n* for the t-tests was 281.

**TABLE 4**  
*Results of Independent Samples t-Tests of Stigma Consciousness and Sport Participation (n = 281)*

Sport	Stigma Consciousness						<i>t</i>
	Do Participate			Don't Participate			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>SD</i>	
<i>Boys &amp; Girls</i>							
Feminine Sports	109	2.36	.84	172	2.88	.93	−4.71**
Masculine Sports	123	2.73	.91	158	2.63	.95	.87
Neutral Sports	277	2.68	.93	4	2.40	1.06	.88
<i>Girls</i>							
Feminine Sports	99	2.36	.84	62	2.65	.90	−2.04*
Masculine Sports	43	2.42	.92	118	2.49	.86	−.44
Neutral Sports	158	2.47	.88	3	2.87	.61	.40
<i>Boys</i>							
Feminine Sports	10	2.32	.90	110	3.01	.93	−2.24*
Masculine Sports	80	2.90	.87	40	3.06	1.08	−.86
Neutral Sports	119	2.96	.93	1	1.00	N/A	2.11

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .001

<sup>1</sup>Means are calculated on a scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree."

The results of the t-tests suggested that stigma consciousness is negatively related to participation in feminine sports ( $t = -4.71, p < .001$ ). There was no relationship between stigma consciousness and participation in either masculine or neutral sports. After examining the relationship between sport participation and stigma consciousness for boys and girls together, each sex was isolated and examined independent of the other. Significant relationships were found between participation in feminine sports and stigma consciousness for girls ( $t = -2.04, p = .04$ ) and for boys ( $t = -2.24, p = .03$ ). In all cases, the stigma consciousness mean was higher for those who did not participate in feminine sports. This finding suggested that stigma consciousness was higher for children who did not participate in feminine sports and physical activities than for children who did participate in feminine sports and physical activities.

### *One-on-one Interviews*

Interviews were structured with a set of questions to use as a guide to get conversation started. Once conversation was established, the interview took a natural course to tap the topic of interest in an unobtrusive manner. All of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by a professional. The primary researcher read through all of the interviews several times to assess potential themes in the data. Data were then categorized by theme and reviewed by and discussed with secondary researchers for confirmation.

Results of the one-on-one interviews supported the results of the quantitative data. All 22 interviewees indicated that they perceived differences in girls' sports and boys' sports. For the most part, examples of boys' sports were wrestling and football and examples of girls' sports were cheerleading and ballet, as was supported by the quantitative data. Oftentimes, however, interviewees were unable to verbally express the characteristics that constituted boys' and girls' sports. Liben and Bigler (2002) contended that children model their own thoughts and behavior after what they see others do (e.g., "the way it is"). For example, Tyler (male, age 10) suggested that ballet is a girls' sport, and when asked why, said ". . . because . . . I don't know. It just is."

Interviewees also referred to who they saw playing the sport, either on television or in their immediate environment, as a means of identifying boys' and girls' sports.

Kate, age 10 (K)

Interviewer (I): Do you know what makes them boys' sports?

K: Well, no.

I: Any thought at all?

K: Well, for baseball, usually like on TV all I see is guys on their team. I don't really see any professional . . . I see professional softball, but I don't see professional baseball with any girl on it.

Liam, age 8 (L)

I: . . . What's a boys' sport?

L: Like football.

I: Football is a boys' sport? What makes it a boys' sport? Do you know?

L: Because mostly boys play it.

In other cases, characteristics used to distinguish boys' from girls' sports were behavior traits, or props common in different sports. Boys' sports were often identifiable because of masculine behavioral traits such as aggression and competitiveness in participation, while props were frequently used to characterize girls' sports.

Eric, age 9 (E)

I: What do you like about them (Sports)?

E: Because in football sometimes you can tackle and in wrestling you can kind of hurt them, and in baseball you get to run a lot. You throw baseballs and you get to hit them. (Aggression)

Trevor, age 10 (T)

(having established that he thinks soccer is a boys' sport)

I: Okay, did you like soccer?

T: Yes.

I: What did you like about it? Do you know?

T: I got . . . the ball came up and hit me in the face one time.

I: And that was fun?

T: No.

I: That was not fun?

T: (Laughing) The fun part is when you win. (Competition)

Johnny, age 8 (J)

I: What's an example of a boys' sport?

J: Football.

I: What's an example of a girls' sport?

J: Cheerleading.

I: Would you ever do cheerleading?

J: No.

I: Why wouldn't you ever do cheerleading?

J: Because it's for girls.

I: . . . What makes it for girls?

J: Because boys don't use pompoms and all that. (Gestured shaking pompoms in a "feminine manner" with his hands.)

Kendra, age 8 (K)

I: Are there any sports that you really don't like to play?

K: Dance.

I: You don't like dance? Any particular kind of dance, or just any old dance?

K: Any old dance.

I: What don't you like about it?

K: I think it's very girly girl and you have to wear pretty stuff.

In describing what defined sports as being for boys or girls, masculine and feminine stereotypes came into play for some children. In the following

two examples, Johnny, age 8, and Peyton, age 9, referred to social generalizations of gender (e.g., what boys and girls like or do not like) to justify their notions of why a sport is a boys' sport:

Johnny (J)

I: . . . What about football makes it a boys' sport?

J: Because I don't think girls want to be knocked down and stuff.

Peyton (P)

I: What might be an example somebody else would think is a boys' sport?

P: Maybe baseball and softball.

I: Okay, why do you think they're boys' sports? Do you know why or what makes them boys' sports?

P: Because boys like to get dirty.

In both cases, the statements are general assumptions on traits of what boys and girls like to do or are "supposed" to be like.

The results of the one-on-one interviews indicate clearly that boys and girls ages 8 through 10 are aware of the gender stereotypes prevalent in sport to the degree that the stereotypes affect their behavior and participation choices. However, they do not understand the meaning or breadth of the stereotypes. They curb their behavior and participation choices to fit the social norm of appropriate and inappropriate behavior based on gender, from lessons learned from media, community, family, and friends, yet they lack the ability to explain or understand why. The results of the interviews are an interesting commentary on society. Although efforts are being made to improve the perception of gender equality in a number of domains, conversations with children, who are supposedly innocent to gender inequality, show they are aware and conscious of social restrictions in sport and physical activities based on gender, but have difficulty expressing why or how. Be it through media, community, family, or friends, the qualitative data indicate that gender roles are prevalent in sport and physical activities, regardless of efforts to change attitude and behavior.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, gender neutral sports had the highest participation rates for boys and girls. However, participation in sports perceived as gender specific was noticeably different between the two sexes.

Metheny (1965) was the first to explore social gender stereotypes in sports and the phenomenon of gender categorization of sports. Related research within the last twenty years has confirmed that despite changes in society and developments toward equal opportunity and feminism, stereotypes of gender persist (Colley et al. 1987; Koivula, 1995; Liben et al. 2001; Matteo, 1986; Signorella, 1999). In fact, Riemer and Visio (2003) found that although Metheny's categories consist of fewer sports, sex-typing is still alive. Congruently, this study found that children perceived fewer sports to be gender specific than Metheny's work suggested. The findings presented in these recent studies are encouraging in regard to the success in potentially

improving the gendered nature of sport. Considering recent legislative and social efforts to increase gender equality in sport, the reduction in the number of gender typed sports is not surprising. A confound to this finding is that children aged 8 through 10 are exploring their identities and are less limited in their understanding of gender behavior (Galambos et al. 1990; Huston, 1985; Liben & Bigler, 2002) and may therefore not fully grasp the extent of gender stereotypes prevalent in their environment. However, as the data presented in this study indicate, *children as young as eight* are aware of and are affected by gender stereotypes in sports and physical activities.

A higher number of girls participated in masculine sports than did boys in feminine sports. While this finding could potentially be linked to the types of sports and activities made available to the children in this study, it may also reflect the fact that a) it has become more acceptable for a girl or woman to participate in masculine activities than for a boy or man to participate in feminine activities, and b) girls and women are at less risk for gender stigma if they pursue masculine activities than boys and men if they pursue feminine activities. This may be due to a higher social value and status assigned to masculine activities and the efforts on the part of girls and women to gain respect by achieving in a traditionally masculine field (Czisma, Wittig, & Schurr, 1988; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001; Signorella, 1999).

For boys, any indication of femininity, or straying from masculine norms would potentially raise questions about their masculinity. In sum, participation in masculine activities by girls and women is more socially accepted than participation in feminine activities by boys and men (Henderson et al. 1999; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Liben et al. 2001; Messner, 1998, 2002; Riemer & Visio, 2003). It appears that girls and women experience greater social latitude in sports than boys and men.

The data also indicated a statistically significant relationship between participation and stigma consciousness in four sports for boys and girls: dance, ballet, gymnastics, and weightlifting. Children of both sexes who did not participate in dance, ballet, or gymnastics had higher stigma consciousness than children who did participate in dance, ballet, or gymnastics. This finding is not unexpected for boys, but is an interesting observation for girls. Ballet and dance are two of the three sports identified as feminine or girls' sports, yet girls who do not participate have higher stigma consciousness than girls who do participate. A potential explanation lies in the personality characteristics that are communicated symbolically through participation. Researchers have contended that feminine sports and activities are assigned less value and lower social status in society than masculine sports and activities (Csizma et al. 1988; Kane, 1990; Koivula, 1995; Liben et al. 2001; Messner, 2002). Furthermore, theorists have posited activities in which people participate are associated with different personality characteristics that are symbolically communicated because of participation (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994; Haggard & Williams, 1992; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Thus, individuals who are highly stigma conscious are sensitive to the identity they may sym-



bolically communicate to others through participation in feminine sports and are unwilling to assume that identity. The qualitative data indicate that children are aware that their participation, or association with a socially inappropriate sport would put them at risk of stereotype, but it appears unlikely that they fully understand why or how the stereotypes are communicated or manifested.

The most prominent stigma to which participants of cross-gender (i.e., sports deemed socially appropriate for the opposite gender) is homosexuality; referred to by the study participants as "girlie girl." Boys who participate in stereotypically girls' sports are perceived to lack aggression, be uncompetitive, gentle, and dependent, among other stereotypically feminine characteristics (Koivula, 1995; Shaw, 1999). Subsequently, boys who participate in traditionally feminine sports are stigmatized as gay. A common understanding is that girls who participate in traditionally masculine sports are stigmatized as lesbians, because they demonstrate stereotypically masculine characteristics. According to this argument, it would make sense that children who are stigma conscious would not participate in sports deemed socially appropriate for the opposite sex. This was the case for boys, but not for girls. One explanation is that girls who are stigma conscious are acutely aware of and sensitive to the lower social status assigned feminine sports and activities, and may therefore want to avoid involvement and association with such activities (i.e., disidentification: Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Swim & Hyers, 2001). The current data do not address the question of disidentification and any conclusions to that end are purely assumptive. Future projects investigating the role of disidentification in children's participation would be beneficial.

The goal of this study was to examine how stigma consciousness of gender stereotypes in sports and physical activities affects children's participation. While the quantitative data were useful in exploring potential relationships, the qualitative data provide a more intimate understanding of why children aged 8 through 10 perceive and understand sport to be socially appropriate for boys and girls respectively. The data make it apparent that boys' sports are aggressive, potentially dangerous activities in which participants risk getting dirty and hurt. Not infrequently, both boys and girls indicated that boys do not mind getting dirty, and girls do not like participating in such sports because they fear getting hurt. Girls' sports on the other hand, are defined by props, such as pompoms, or are associated with aesthetic activity like dancing, or coordinated movement. Often, boys and girls referred to the stigma of being or acting "girlie" if they participated in girls' sports. Despite efforts to reduce pronounced social gender roles in sport, these data are particularly useful in clarifying the prevalence and persistence of gender biases in the sport domain.

Many stereotypes play a prominent role in leisure activities of all kinds. Yet, individuals' perception of stereotypes and how stigma consciousness affects participation in leisure has not received much attention. Gender stereotypes in particular are pronounced in sport and physical activity, which

also compose the primary leisure pursuits among children. Stigma consciousness is a complex yet intriguing dimension that applies to many dimensions of leisure behavior. Examining how gender stigmas in sport affect children's participation is an important first step toward greater understanding of perceived constraints and leisure behavior.

### Limitations and Future Research

Stereotypes of all kinds exist within leisure in a number of contexts and domains. Investigating gender stereotypes in sports and physical activities, common and popular leisure pursuits among children, is but one step toward understanding children's perceptions and attitudes toward future participation. However, several issues surrounding the sport participation and attitude measures became apparent when the questionnaire was administered in this study. First, participants misunderstood some of the sports in the list provided. For example, children were confused about jogging/running as a team sport. When the primary researcher provided explanation, it became apparent that students considered any running they did for their basketball, soccer, or baseball teams as doing jogging or running for a team. Similarly, many participants did not know what field hockey was and when discussed, the children made the observation that it was ice hockey but on a field. Given the fact that the study population leaned toward ice hockey as a masculine sport, it is conceivable that a generalization like this influenced the outcome of attitudes toward field hockey.

The results of the attitudes towards sports questionnaire may also have been affected by environmental factors. Opinions of sports change regionally, and are dependent on the popularity of a sport in a particular area. In addition, the sample population for this study was primarily White. A more diverse sample may yield different results, therefore warranting a similar study investigating the opinions of populations from different regions and of different ethnicities.

Another issue is that despite efforts to curb the sharing of opinions while completing the questionnaire, the children tended to shout out answers and tease one another. For example, when a sport such as ballet was read out loud, as were all of the sports, it was not uncommon for boys to jokingly accuse one of their classmates of participating often in a jeering, snide tone. These behaviors showed that study participants were well aware of the stigmas assigned to participants of certain sports, particularly in the case of boys playing what were perceived as "girls" sports. Subsequently, a common question from participants to the researcher was how to respond to the questionnaire if they thought boys or girls could do whatever sports they wanted. While this issue had already been covered in the instructions, posing the question out loud made social constructions salient to everyone in the room. The contamination problem was confounded by the fact that the researcher was often the only adult in attendance when the questionnaire was being administered. In the future, it may be wise to either have two researchers on

hand to administer the questionnaire, or to have no more than 10 students per administration session.

To address the relationship between stigma consciousness and sport participation a pre-established stigma consciousness scale was used. Five of the original ten items had to be eliminated in order to achieve satisfactory internal consistency. The five that were eliminated were all reverse-worded (e.g., "I don't think people have strong opinions that some sports are for boys and some sports are for girls"). Children may have found the reverse-wording of the statements confusing and hard to understand. Similar problems did not arise in previous research in which the SCQ was implemented; however previous studies have dealt primarily with adult populations (Pinel, 1999, 2002). In the future, the development of a scale designed to measure stigma consciousness in children specifically, taking into account the issues faced in this study, may yield higher internal consistency and validity.

Unfortunately, many of these limitations were not caught at the pilot test. This was most likely a direct result of the small population used for piloting the instrument. The researcher was able to address questions more easily and the group was not as easily distracted or likely to disregard directions. Future users of these measures should heed the lessons learned here.

Pursuing a similar line of questioning with older children (e.g., ages 12 and up) has been a recurrent suggestion for future research. However, a particularly interesting direction would be to continue to investigate gender schema, stigma consciousness, and sport participation in the same children throughout their adolescent years. A longitudinal study of the sample population would be valuable in better understanding how gender and gender stigmas change from childhood into adolescence.

Another angle to pursue would be the other pervasive stereotypes in sport and physical activity. Sociologists who study sport contend that sport is a vehicle through which cultural ideologies and social phenomena can be observed, most of which are concealed in other facets of society (Coakley, 2001). Gender roles were the focus of this study, however race, social class, education, sexuality, age, and physical characteristics such as obesity or physical disability are also reflected in sport and physical activities, among many other leisure pursuits.

Moreover, stereotypes are often learned from the social environment. Though social influences and socialization agents such as media, community, and family were discussed briefly in interviews, their role in children's decisions and leisure behaviors were not given full attention in this study. Informal interviews conducted with teachers in the current study hinted at the powerful role parents and siblings play in the perceptions of children, yet the topic was not fully investigated and not reported in this paper. Future research should investigate the perspectives of immediate family members and friends, and how their perceptions and stereotypes may feed the children's opinions and behaviors.

Results from this study and others like it will benefit professionals and educators alike in understanding the depth and breadth of historical and

contemporary stigmas in sport and physical activity. As the results of this study indicate, children recognized the stigmas in sport and physical activities at an early age and were apt to allow their stigma consciousness to affect their interest and participation. Their participation may also be affected by availability or opportunity, which speaks to the influences of community and environment. The list of sports and physical activities used in this study was reviewed by physical education teachers at the schools where data were collected specifically for the purposes of confirming that the sports were available in the community. However, it was clear through one-on-one interviews that children's recreational sports leagues were gender segregated. Baseball was limited to boys only; softball was limited to girls only.

According to the data presented here, boys experience greater restriction in their participation than girls because of gender stigmas. Henderson and Shaw (2003) suggested that boys and men have become the neglected sex in the realm of sport and gender research. Perhaps it is time to increase attention to the social limitations and constraints boys and men experience "playing their own game."

Interventions in schools and communities may help curb the development and subscription to stereotypes among children. For example, male and female athletes from sports and activities of different sorts should be invited to school classrooms, and recreational professionals should be savvy to the effects prejudices have on children's perceptions. Sports and physical activities are the most common leisure pursuit among children, in which they develop their future leisure behaviors and understandings, yet, shortcomings in social and cultural ideologies are reflected in sport and physical activities (Coakley, 2001). In the case of sport, gender is a prevalent and persistent characteristic that shapes children's interest and behavior, and may subsequently shape future leisure pursuits.

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