Gender and Team Sports: the Arena Where Agency Meets Communion

Kathleen A. O'Donnell, San Francisco State University
Andrew S. Wallers, University of California, San Francisco
Daniel L. Wardlow, San Francisco State University

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15646/gender/v04/GCB-04

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Gender and Team Sports:
The Arena Where Agency Meets Communion

Kathleen A. O'Donnell, San Francisco State University
Andrew S. Walters, University of California, San Francisco
Daniel L. Wardlow, San Francisco State University

We conducted a qualitative study investigating motivations for participation in collegiate team sports among male and female athletes. Previous research has suggested clear and consistent sex differences in the areas of affiliation and personal achievement. In-depth interviews with 23 varsity athletes from male and female basketball and soccer teams were conducted. Contrary to previous studies, we found no gender differences in individual motivations for their participation. Rather, our analyses suggested considerable similarities between men and women in both the importance of team relationships (communion) and excellence in individual/team performance (agency). Our data indicate that the polarization of gender assumed to exist among athletes dismisses important dimensions of their experience.

INTRODUCTION

As our society moves into the new millennium marketers have become increasingly interested in the changing role of the female consumer. Once responsible for buying laundry detergent and cereal for her family, today's female consumer controls or influences 80% of the $3 trillion spent by U.S. consumers annually (N.W. Ayer & Partners, as reported in Cuneo 1997). While women still bear the primary responsibility for grocery shopping in spite of their increasing presence in the workforce (they control or influence 82% of grocery purchases), they also control or influence 80% of new vehicle purchases, 66% of home computer purchases, and 70% of appliance choices (N.W. Ayer & Partners, as reported in Cuneo 1997). Changes in female consumption behavior have not been limited to consumer products alone, however, but have occurred in the consumption of entertainment and leisure activities. Of particular interest to marketers today is the changing role of females in the consumption of sports (Cuneo 1997; Lefton 1997).

Public policy changes such as the passage of Title IX (which legislated equal athletic facilities for both sexes in the United States) and societal trends (such as increased emphasis on health and fitness) have contributed to increased female sports participation, a rate of consumption that has increased steadily (Huebner 1997). Once "restricted" to the more graceful, non-contact, individual sports such as archery, figure skating, and dance, today's female athletes also have the freedom to participate in contact sports such as basketball, hockey, and soccer. As larger numbers of females have begun consuming a wider array of sports they have become an increasingly attractive segment for marketers of sports apparel, sports equipment, and sporting events, as well as the marketers of other, non-sports products such as automobiles, soft drinks and beer, who are also trying to target female consumers (Lefton 1997).
Companies such as Nike, Reebok, and Adidas, whose sales of footwear products alone added up to over $5 billion, and whose media expenditures topped $330 million in the United States last year, are among those most interested in tapping into the female sports market (Sporting Goods Intelligence and Competitive Media Reporting, as reported in Brandweek 1997). Nike, for example, has set a goal for itself of “boosting its women’s business to 40% of sales by 2002” (Cuneo 1997, p. 24). As companies such as Nike turn their attention to the female athlete, some interesting issues have emerged that reflect the tendency in both academia and advertising development to perceive and interpret phenomena based on gender socialization.

Traditionally the purview of males in our society, sports were originally considered an important factor in masculinity construction (Fischer and Gainer 1994; Whitson 1990). When women began participating in sports, they were limited to sports that relied on the athlete’s ability to “project the body into or through space in aesthetically pleasing patterns” (Metheny 1972, p. 284) rather than their abilities to “physically subdue the opponent by bodily contact” (Metheny 1972, p. 284). Clearly, the nature of the sports considered appropriate for females was quite different from the nature deemed appropriate for males. The integral linking of the traditionally male-appropriate sports (e.g., team sports) with masculinity construction made this distinction necessary. As long as sports were different enough, masculinity construction theories could still be used to explain the motivation for participation in organized, team sports. However, since women have begun participating in team sports such as basketball, hockey, and soccer, it has become necessary to find a different explanation for their motivation to participate.

Gender socialization theory has traditionally suggested that males in our society are guided by agentic goals that stress mastery and self-efficacy while females are guided by communal goals that stress interpersonal affiliation and relationship maintenance (Bakan 1966; Carlson 1971, 1972; Epstein 1988; Reinisch, Rosenblum, and Sanders 1987). These differences lead to differences in perception and behavior based on whether one was socialized as a male or a female (Gilligan 1982). Using gender socialization theory to explain individuals’ motivations for participating in team sports supports the notion of different motivations for each gender. Males may use team membership as a mechanism for realizing agentic goals, hence maintaining the notion of defining masculinity through sports. Meanwhile, females may use team membership as a mechanism for realizing communal goals and, therefore, may use sports participation in the construction of their femininity. Because sports were initially confined to and therefore were defined within the realm of the masculine world, the later introduction of females into the domain required a second, non-masculine or feminine definition of and explanation for this behavior.

Similar to the path of gender socialization and sports motivation theories, the evolution of the female athlete into a viable market segment has enticed sports marketers to question their assumptions about women’s motivations for sports participation, and has resulted in some interesting and contradictory approaches.

Nike, for example, follows the traditional genderized view of female motivations for participating in sports on its website (www.nike.com) area titled “Play Like A Girl” (there is no “Play Like A Boy” area). The “You’re Up” subsection on “Sports and Friendship” encourages female athletes to write about their sports involvement in terms of communal goals. But in the “Join the Team” subsection, 100% of the responses pertained (as of December 6, 1997) to achievement-related highs and lows, making it clear that these girls consider achievement important. Gender dichotomy of their website aside, Nike seems to
be heading in a different direction with their most recent print and broadcast advertising campaign for their women's products line. Appearing in women's lifestyle and sports publications, new advertising for the Air Mezmerite shoe pokes fun at the idea of female athletes as "nurturers" and "providers" first and athletes second, and emphasizes the product's performance features.

The Reebok site (www.reebok.com) makes no special distinction between male and female athletes and contains profiles of both male and female athletes under sport-specific sections focusing on basketball and soccer. However, in their print advertising, Reebok promotes the American Basketball League with the headline "the women have arrived," implying that the distinction between genders in professional sports is somehow noteworthy.

If these Internet sites and current ad campaigns are any reflection of sports marketers' approaches to gender segmentation, they suggest an ambiguity about male and female roles similar that of the greater cultural context. As an ad for Lady Foot Locker suggests, its stores are "the place where strength is discovered." Not a friendship in the bunch, though nothing about kicking the butts of your opponents either.

A core tenet of marketing is to differentiate products according to the needs of consumers, and for some time a gender dichotomy was an effective strategy. However, athletics -- historically masculine -- exist within a changing socio-cultural context. Research indicates that in the recent past, the roles of men and women, and in fact, the social definitions of masculinity and femininity have been revised to become less clear-cut. Research gleaned from several disciplines in the behavioral and social sciences documents these changes and provides evidence that gender is poorly conceptualized as polar opposites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychosocial Impact of Athletics

Participation in school athletics is generally assumed to be a positive outlet for children and adolescents (Danish, Petitpas, and Hale 1990). Although the developmental literature in this area is small, reviews suggest that school personnel, parents, and youth themselves view sports positively (see Simon 1979) and that participation in school athletics can become an essential vehicle for developing personal competence (Danish et al. 1990). Results from the largest survey of student attitudes toward athletic participation indicate the primary reason for participation is fun, not competition (Hartley 1990). Lack of enjoyment in sports was the most frequently cited reason why students left athletics. Students also saw sports as an avenue for the development of skills and obtaining the social approval of other peers and adults. In fact, research suggests that students participating in athletic team sports are more popular and more involved in other extracurricular activities than nonathletes, benefits that hold true for students of all races (Black, Hispanic, and White) and for females and males (Women's Sports Foundation 1989). At least for males, the greater size and strength associated with the adolescent growth spurt often makes them more athletically proficient which, in turn, brings social recognition (e.g., popularity) from peers and adults (Simmons and Blyth 1987).

Several studies have investigated personality variables that characterize adolescent and college student athletes. In two studies, Ryckman and Hamel (1992; 1995) found that high school females who participated in team sports reported greater need for personal development and less need for attention than females with lower levels of sports
involvement. In addition, personal development competitiveness (i.e., using the competitive structure of athletics to facilitate individual development) but not hypercompetitiveness was correlated to achievement. Among males, hypercompetitiveness (i.e., an excessive need to win competitions and associated with aggression toward and denigration of opposing players) was the only predictor of involvement in high school sports. Taken at face value, these studies appear to suggest a gender difference in why high school athletes may participate in sports. However, the outcome variable used in these studies (i.e., the number of different sports athletes participated in) may have contributed to these results. For example, hypercompetitiveness may well predict male participation in many sports but it does not address experiences males obtain from their participation.

In a study designed to measure the purposes of sports and psychological motives for participating in sports (i.e., task and ego), Duda (1989) sampled 321 (193 female, 128 male) varsity athletes from six high schools in the Midwest. All students were White, from middle-class families, and equivalent in age (M for females = 17.1, M for males = 17.8). Several significant gender differences were found. Males reported a significantly higher ego orientation than females (e.g., “I score the most points,”) while females reported a significantly higher task orientation (e.g., “I learn a new skill and it makes me want to practice more”). In addition, male and female athletes differed in their responses to several positive purposes of athletics. Male athletes saw more value in competitiveness, social status, and career opportunities (clearly ego-oriented needs) while female athletes reported mastery and cooperation to be a more important purpose of sport than did males. Duda’s discussion maximizes gender differences in high school sport but without mention of the fact students from various sports (e.g., track, basketball, tennis) were combined to create her sample. It is entirely possible that the reported gender differences in this study were driven by the responses of from a subset of athletes participating in the most competitive sporting events.

In a study involving male and female college students who participated in either team (e.g., basketball) or individual (e.g., swimming) athletics, Wrisberg, Draper, and Everett (1988) found that sex role orientations did not differ between male and female athletes participating in team sports. Two-thirds of team sport participants scored as psychologically masculine or androgy nous on the Bem Sex Role Inventory. Alternatively, differences in sex role orientation were found among males and females who participated in individual sports. This study suggests that personality differences may contribute to what kind of sport (team versus individual) individuals pursue. It could be that the gender differences reported in other studies were attributable to systematic differences in the consumption of specific sporting events (e.g., male basketball players compared to female swimmers). That is, if individual difference variables (such as personality) affect choice of sport, these variables -- by themselves or as they interact with gender -- could explain various sex differences ascribed to sports participation.

Two limitations characterize much of the research that attempt to isolate personality traits (such as those used to explain gender and differences in competitiveness among male and female athletes) to a specific period of development. First, the causal sequence between personality and behavior must be questioned. It is easy to attribute gender differences to personality given the larger number of males who rate themselves high on instrumental-agentic qualities and the larger number of females who rate themselves higher on communal-expressive qualities. The endemic nature of these differences creates a logic that gender differences in personality cause gender differences in behavior. Although this
may be the case in some areas, research also suggests that the particular roles individuals play can cause the development of different personality traits (e.g., see Deaux and Major 1987; Eagly 1987; Epstein 1988). Thus, the causal sequencing of gender differences is, at minimum, less than fully understood. Second, studies reporting gender differences often are written in such a way as to suggest personality differences are firmly established in and remain stable from childhood. When personality is studied from the perspective of ego development (i.e., the ability to make increasingly complex thoughts about self and others), gender differences increase from childhood to early adolescence, remain moderately large during the adolescent years, decline among college students, and are virtually non-existent among post-college-aged adults (Cohn 1991; Loevinger 1976). Studying gender as a component of personality must be understood within these parameters.

Competitiveness

Competitiveness is assumed to be highly genderized with males more competitive than females. This assumption pervades much of the sports literature. Indeed, research studies do find that males score higher than females on various measures of competitiveness. These differences are most pronounced in situations involving winning or defeating an opponent (Basow 1992). Psychological research indicates that competitiveness shows a developmental pattern and is influenced both by socialization and situational factors. For example, differences in competitiveness between boys and girls is not consistently reported (see Maccoby and Jacklin 1974). As children get older -- and largely attributable to the differential reinforcements they receive for play activities -- boys become more competitive. Moreover, their desire to compete is not contingent on sex of opponent, whereas girls appear to be more selective in the situations where they display competitiveness. In addition, females (including college women) more than males have been found to be more affected by the perceived social desirability or peer approval of competitiveness (Alagna 1982).

Gill (1988) found gender differences in the achievement orientations of male and female athletes. Adolescent males consistently scored higher on two achievement dimensions (competitiveness and win orientation), though no differences were found in general achievement orientation (Gill 1988, Ryckman and Hamel 1995). In terms of affiliation as a motive for sports participation, adolescent males have reported weaker needs for emotional support and friendship than females (Ryckman and Hamel 1995), in spite of the evidence that sports provide one of the few socially acceptable environments in which males may develop intimate relationships with other males (Messner 1992).

These findings appear to be consistent with many theories of gender socialization although often constructs had to be deconstructed or “genderized” in order for those differences to appear. Although gender differences were not found in general sports achievement motivation (Gill 1988, Ryckman and Hamel 1995), differences were found when the construct was broken down into two subdimensions: hypercompetitiveness and personal development competitiveness. While male subjects were higher in hypercompetitiveness than their female counterparts, this difference was found only after removing the less agentic component of personal development competitiveness from the construct (Ryckman and Hamel 1995). Likewise, only after dividing affiliation into agentic (attention and social comparison) and communal (friendship and emotional support) components were gender differences found in affiliation motives. Female subjects revealed stronger needs for emotional support and friendship than their male counterparts (Ryckman and Hamel 1995).
Athletics as a Gendered Activity

Although school- and university-sponsored athletic programs include, by legal mandate in the U.S., access to sports for both females and males, current programs are historical legacies that were developed and implemented for the main purpose of developing masculinity among young men. Athletic programs gained momentum in the same historical period of time when men's self- and socially-constructed definitions of manhood (and, at a larger level, society's definition of masculinity) were becoming increasingly nebulous. The development of a powerful and skillful body -- one that could overpower opponents -- was perceived as a mechanism for eliminating effeminacy (Kidd 1990) and weakness (Whitson 1990), feared by-products of the industrial revolution by 19th century educators and social philosophers.

As sport programs became more cemented into school curricula, male identity became more affiliated with participation in (and preferably, success at) structured athletics. These programs reinforced highly gendered social environments -- both explicitly (e.g., "You play like a girl") and implicitly (e.g., the cultural emphasis on sports that simultaneously dismissed females in the U.S. prior to Title IX and the continued inequitable focus of male and female sport programs since its passage). Not surprisingly, the research focusing on sports has also contained a male bias. Although a body of research indicates that males obtain a number of benefits from participation in sports, such as the relationships they form with teammates (e.g., see Fischer and Gainer 1994; Messner 1990; 1992) and an entree into the hierarchical structure of work, several negative consequences have also been associated with the value internalization of athletics. For example, males who are not interested in or good at sports may be unable to construct an identity based on the values of their peers. In addition, athletes who embody the values attributed to jocks are known to be more violent, and athletes who are excessively competitive may become limited in their ability to form close relationships with others (Basow, 1992; Miedzian, 1991).

To date much -- but not all -- of the research reifies dichotomous gender differences for engaging in structured athletics. For example, males are generally thought to become interested in sports because they are introduced to a world created by and comprised of other males, can excel in developing their bodies to compete aggressively with other males, and can obtain gratification from relationships they construct with other males that are both psychologically intimate and ambiguous. The more recent research focusing on female participation in sports has also contained a gender bias. That is, girls -- and later, women -- are thought to engage in sports for the social interaction they develop with others (e.g., teammates). Nike reinforces this communal/affiliative motive for females. The message to their website "Play Like A Girl" is clear: Share with other female athletes about the relationships you have made through sports. The absence of a category for females to share their achievements reinforces a presumed motive for why females participate in athletics.

Our review of the sports literature suggested that gender differences are less than clear cut. While it is true that several studies have reported sex differences in some areas, other studies have not. In addition, the samples and methodologies of some studies appear to have been constructed for the specific purpose of finding gender differences. As reviewed, psychological research suggests that (in areas where differences are believed to exist) gender differences are often developmental in nature, situational, and frequently non-existent or quite small (also see Hyde 1990; Hyde, Fennema, and Lamon 1990; Hyde and Linn 1988).
We became interested in exploring the motives both women and men cite for participating in structured team athletics. We assumed, consistent with previous research, that men would cite a variety of reasons for participating in team sports and that both issues of achievement (i.e., personal, team, ego strength) and relationships with teammates would be described by men as important. Also consistent with previous research, we assumed that women athletes would report their relationships with teammates were valuable and that they derived high satisfaction from these relationships. However, we also assumed there was no reason to expect that women athletes would not cite achievement and athletic skill — areas presumed to exist for males — as important contributors to their participation in sports. That is, we expected to find that both issues of achievement (e.g., playing as best one can, the importance of contributing to a successful team, winning) and communal relationships with teammates would be important to both women and men.

Summary of Goals and Research Questions

In the current study, we adopted the position that both instrumental/agentic and communal/affiliative factors would be cited as important and recurrent dimensions to male and female team athletes. Specifically, we were interested in exploring the life stories of team athletes (i.e., their history of participation) and how important athletics are to their perceived individual identities. Within this context, several issues were addressed. First, we asked athletes about their participation in team sports (e.g., to describe their role/position on the team, how confident they were in their role) and how long and by what set of circumstances they had been involved in sports. We expected to find that both females and males would indicate they were very confident in their team position and that they derived a great deal of pleasure from their participation. Second, we expected that a key thread across all athletes' stories would be associated with their skill/proficiency as a both an individual performer and a member of an interdependent team. That is, we suspected athletes would address the fact their own specific skills were a source of pride to them and was related to their self-esteem. Finally, we suspected that both male and female athletes would report very positive and meaningful relationships with teammates or other athletes.

The female athlete is a very valuable and viable target for marketers today. To appeal to her, however, marketers require a full understanding of what motivates her to play. This study was designed to explore athletes' opportunities for pursuing both gender-stereotypic (communal for females, agentic for males) and inclusive (both agentic and communal for both genders) goals through participation in team sports. Results have implications for both theory and practice.

METHOD

Subjects

Personal interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 23 undergraduate team athletes from a Division II university in the Western United States. Division II athletes receive no financial aid for their sports participation and are unlikely to advance to professional team sports. Their motivations can be reasonably described as playing for "love of the game," an altruism which will not be rewarded by an athletic career. Male (n=11) and female (n=12) athletes from the University's soccer and basketball teams were recruited by researchers to participate in the study. These two sports were selected due to the availability of both men's and women's teams in each sport. Athletes ranged in age...
from 18-30 years and were mostly between the ages of 19 and 24. The campus these students attend is well-known for its cultural diversity and our sample reflected these racial and ethnic pluralities. Although most participants were White (N = 16), also included were 4 Black and 2 Latino/a students and 1 racially blended student. All students were in good academic standing with the university and reported a variety of majors (e.g., nursing, film, marketing). Athletes were given the option of being interviewed either individually or with up to two teammates, within sports and gender groups. In all, 16 interviews were conducted (individual n=10, duos n=5, trios n=1). Interviews were conducted over a two week period and were videotaped in various locations in and around the physical education building. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Athletes who participated in the study were asked to speak about their experiences as students and athletes. In particular, they were asked about the duration of their participation in sports, their reasons for choosing their particular sport, their preferences for team versus individual sports, the importance of individual performance, their relationships with teammates, their best and worst sports memories, and whether they would encourage younger siblings/children to participate in sports and why.

Analyses

Qualitative research probes for different types of data including subjectively described sensory information and descriptive demographic information. A key strength of a qualitative approach is the ability to explore several aspects of human behavior or experience, such as an individual’s or a groups’ opinions, beliefs, feelings, or knowledge. Interpretive qualitative research has the potential to offer rich insights about the experiences of athletes.

Inductive, qualitative analyses are most clearly appropriate when a theory to explain a phenomena is poorly developed -- as is the case regarding effect of gender differentiation in sports consumption. Consequently, we interviewed student athletes from two university team athletic programs. The primary purpose of the interviews was to use open-ended, qualitative methods to examine if the gender differences so widely assumed to exist among athletes were present in a sample of athletes’ life stories. Our inductive approach to studying the circumstances and experiences of participation in team sports assisted us in constructing a theoretical framework that integrates variables from the individual, contextual, and sociocultural (e.g., gender stereotypes) levels to explain the nature of gender in sports participation.

Qualitative interviews were used as a basis for investigating the individual circumstances that characterized athletes’ participation in sports. In line with previous qualitative research, a focused semi-structured interview style was used. This interviewing style was based on established qualitative methods. A defined list of questions were used, but the interviewer was given flexibility to explore specific circumstances and meaningful events that were perceived as important by informants. Upon completion of the interviews, tapes were viewed and transcribed by the researchers. Qualitative research relies on researchers’ ability to study intricate dimensions of human relationships. Consistent with how qualitative methodologies have been used within social and behavioral sciences (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), we explored personal stories from our informants with the ultimate goal of describing the full range of their experience in team sports with regard to affiliation and achievement.
RESULTS

To address our research questions we categorized informants’ comments into two broad categories -- one that reflected achievement or instrumental motivations for team sports participation and one that reflected affiliative or communal motivations, for both male and female team athletes. As we suspected, the gender similarities within the categories far surpassed the gender differences suggested in previous sports participation research (Gill 1988; Ryckman and Hamel 1995). We were surprised that the narratives revealed few differences between genders on our variables of interest. Male and female athletes on both the soccer and basketball teams spoke at length about the positive impact sports participation has had on their lives, suggesting individual achievement motivation; however, this was not the only form of achievement they appeared to experience. Although individual performance was considered important for personal satisfaction, satisfaction seemed to come more from the athletes’ knowledge that when they performed well they helped the team to perform well rather than their own “good game.” Because this distinction hints at the traditional gender socialization ideas about male-appropriate and female-appropriate types of achievement (Gill 1988; Ryckman and Hamel 1995), we felt it was necessary to look at achievement at both the team and individual levels.

Individual Achievement

When speaking about the benefits they receive from participating in sports, many of our respondents spoke immediately of time management skills, ability to work in a team, and living a healthy life. On a developmental basis, however, the most important thing they appear to have gotten from their participation in sports is a sense of self confidence and self identity from their role as athletes.

Because I’m with a team, I feel like I’m somebody. I mean, I wouldn’t still play if it didn’t make me feel positive. It makes me feel positive all the time, being part of something you work so hard for. (Jack, male/basketball)

I expect a higher level of performance from in anything that I do out of myself because somebody else has always expected that from me.....I know that if I work hard enough at anything I could be good at it, or at least learn from it. (Sheila, female/basketball)

Although time constraints are a common concern of most college students, few are stretched as thin as the college athlete. In addition to their six-day-a-week practice/game schedule, these student athletes also take a minimum of 12 units per semester and work with teammates at outside jobs to earn the money needed to pay for their uniforms and shoes. Surprisingly, not one athlete complained about the sacrifices they were expected to make to compete at the college level. Instead, they spoke of the sense of pride and honor they felt at being part of the select group of individuals given the opportunity to represent the university on the field or court. This sense of accomplishment or pride was another positive individual achievement, which did not differ by gender.

It gives you something to look back and say I accomplished that. Chris and I can look back and say we played for [the] University. (John, male/basketball)

We went to the state finals in San Jose, we were one of the top four teams in southern California, and we took a trip after the end of the season to go play in the
state finals. That was a good accomplishment for me. I really enjoyed it, it was a good experience, you know, not many people get to do that and I really cherish that moment. (Steve, male/basketball)

Both male and female athletes also told us about the special feelings they experienced when they played well and the joys of winning:

There’s this feeling in your chest where you feel like you’re glowing, once you play, if you play well. When you play well, you’re glowing. It’s just a great feeling. (Deena, female/basketball)

When we played in the semifinals against England, I scored the tie goal. Last two minutes of the game, I will never forget, the captain came up to me and said “Shorty, I don’t know how you’re gonna do it, I don’t care how you’re gonna do it, but you need to score a goal.” There was like two minutes left, and we had a breakaway and I scored against guys who were like three feet taller than me. For me that was the best experience I ever lived because it taught me that no matter how big you are, if you put time and you put effort into it, you can achieve it. (Alonzo, male/soccer)

When I was in high school, I played on a field hockey team and I scored three goals in one game, and they retired my jersey and hung it up in the glass case, and it’s still there. I was pretty excited because I was really young, like a sophomore. That was pretty exciting to me. Every time I go to my hometown I see it there, like yeah! (Julie, female/soccer)

Many of the athletes with whom we spoke told us that becoming involved in sports had saved them from less desirable life circumstances, by “forcing” them to stay in shape and therefore resisting the temptations of drugs and alcohol, and by giving them the motivation to stay in school (as Division II athletes, none of our subjects received financial compensation for playing). Over and over again we heard the motto “you have to stay [in school] to play.”

Why do I do this? I love the sport of basketball. It’s something I love doing, it’s like a hobby, it keeps you in shape, keeps you motivated, keeps you going. For me, basketball keeps me in school. If you don’t have grades, you don’t play basketball. No basketball, no school. No school, no basketball. (Steve, male/basketball)

Most of my friends that didn’t play sports got into trouble and I think sports totally gets your mind off being there on the streets, I mean I’m not saying that just because you play sports you’re not going to get in trouble, but ahh, you do, but I’m just saying it gets you mind off stuff. I mean, most of my friends who didn’t play sports, pregnant by 15, 16. I’m just glad I got started. (Heather, female/soccer)

The women athletes that we interviewed did not disclose their biographies in terms of bi-polar theories of gender socialization. In fact, many spoke of the opportunities for physical contact that sports provide them.
I like the comradery between players, I like to be able to push people around, the physical part of it, the contact. It’s just a challenge. I’m shorter, so I like the challenge. (Deena, female/basketball)

It was something you could excel in as an individual but also as a team, and I loved playing on a team, and you could get your aggressions out. I mean, it’s a contact sport. (Karen, female/soccer)

The physical aspects of sports were not all positive however, and the most frequently mentioned “worst” thing about playing sports was being injured/playing with pain. Rather than the physical pain though, it was the mental and emotional pain of not being able to play to capacity, and therefore, letting down the team, that hurt these athletes more than anything else.

I’ve gone through a lot of family problems and financial problems, and every kind of problem you can think of, and one of the hardest problems I’ve ever had is being injured while playing a sport because you have no control over it. You can fix other things, you cannot fix an injury. And to sit and watch every-body play and know that you cannot go it’s like heartbreaking. You can’t describe the pain unless you’ve been there. The mental pain is like a thousand times harder than the physical pain. (Julie, female/soccer)

My worst memory would be realizing that I wouldn’t ever play basketball without pain in my knees. A couple years ago I had two surgeries on my knee, and now I have tendinitis. The frustrating thing is not ever being able to go 100%. (Sheila, female/basketball)

Team Achievement

Developing an understanding the distinction between individual and team achievement and the relative importance of each was an important rite of passage for every athlete we interviewed, and most of them indicated that given the choice, they would always choose team over individual sports. As with individual achievement, we found no gender differences in the benefits from being part of a team.

One of the apparent benefits of participating in team versus individual sports is the diversification/amplification effects made possible by playing as a team. The positive feelings resulting from the team’s goal accomplishment (winning) are multiplied by sharing them with others on the team. Likewise, teammates provide a support system and also take the pressure off individual performances, when individual or team goals are not accomplished.

I like individual sports because when I lose it’s my fault, it’s no one else’s fault. Here, when we lose on the field it’s not because of me, it’s all eleven of us. In individual sports, if you’re down, it’s hard to pick yourself up, but in team sports, there’s someone to lift you up and help you. (Raquel, female/soccer)

I’ve always been a team player. I don’t like to be alone in my emotions of winning or losing, you know, losing to have people to console or feel the way you do, winning to have people to celebrate with you. (Ken, male/soccer)
And while individual performances were often recounted among the best and worst sports memories, the most popularly expressed idea about achievement was that individual goals though meaningful and important, are less important than the team goal of winning the game.

You always like to play well and you always like to achieve your personal goals, but they're really irrelevant in team sports. Winning is the only goal. The team success is the only relevant goal. (Dave, male/basketball)

To win, to win, definitely, and in order to win. The most important thing to me is to play as a team, to be focused all of the time, 100%. (Sherry, female/basketball)

Besides winning, just coming together, playing well and doing well as a unit, not as an individual, because if you've got an individual, you're going to fail. You have to play as a team, on a team sport, you all have to come together as one .... I just kind of see what the team needs and go for that .... I want to do well, but I put the team above myself. (Steve, male/basketball)

I'd rather have an average game and win than have a great game and lose. I mean you're always pleased with your performance if you do well, but it's more the team accomplishment that satisfies you the most. You can't get the complete satisfaction if your team doesn't win. (John, male/basketball)

Communion

We asked participants about their relationships with others -- those involved in athletics/on their team and friends who are not involved in sports. All participants discussed their relationships freely. Three themes emerged about how relationships are constructed and defined. These relation dimensionalities are related to one another but are, in and of themselves, conceptually distinct. Participants were aware that different levels of relations exist among teammates and non-teammates. Although relation qualities were somewhat fluid, they were considered meaningful and important by all athletes.

The first “level” of relationships was represented by team relations and were described largely in terms of task maintenance. A number of athletes discussed team relations much as professionals might describe their work relationships with colleagues. That is, relationships were constructed as important for specific and task-related reasons. It was noted that although many very close friendships are formed and transformed throughout a team’s development, the cohesion and performance of a team depends largely on individuals getting along, offering help when needed, and working together for a central goal: the team’s success (i.e., winning). For example, a leading female soccer player said, “Not everyone needs to get along, but we need to get along while we’re playing, to win.” Comments such as these suggest that team relations include individual leader’s ability to manage team spirit, performer confidence, and group cohesion through relationships.

The second level of relations involved direct friendships with others. The majority of our sample reported that their friendships with teammates -- both current teammates and friends from teams past -- were of utmost importance in their lives. Although a couple of athletes in our sample told us that their closest friends were not current teammates, they also said that their best friends in life had been teammates. Themes that emerged from narratives reflecting the dimensions of these relationships often included the words “bonding,” “support,” “trust,” and “closeness,” and “connected.” At an implicit level, many seemed
to recognize that it was their involvement with sports that helped to construct and reconfigure these relationships. That is, it was their shared experience as athletes and their biographies as members of team sports that carved out for them a social environment to develop friendships with others. A male basketball player said it this way:

"[Y]ou develop a strong bond, strong friendships with guys, because you experience so much with them, and you're with them every day, good times and bad, and they've become my best friends in life."

These friendships were seen as qualitatively different from friendships with non-athletes. Many said their non-athlete friends simply did not understand how a high involvement in sports characterizes their identities. For example:

If they're not an athlete, there's not much to talk about, well not much to talk about. Being a college athlete, you dedicate most of your day and most of your life to the sport you play, it would be hard to have that person understand what's going on with the team, with the game. (Debra, basketball)

Friendships were actively constructed with time spent together and as the pre-season and season unfolded. In this sense, participation in athletics has a directional effect on the importance of communal relationships that persons report. That is, the narratives of our sample suggest it is not that individuals -- males or females -- join teams for communal reasons (e.g., to "feel close" to others) but that their membership in a team directly effects their capacity for communal relationships. A female basketball player said this:

It's definitely a friendship, even if you don't know the person really well, like you're a junior transfer like me and you come to a place like this and you get to meet people and you don't exactly get along, I guarantee by the end of the season you have a special friendship that you never even tried to have, that you just automatically have, just because of the experiences you have together. (Sheila)

The third level of relationships was characterized by a true sense of psychological and emotional intimacy with others. Comments from athletes in our sample showed no gender difference in the level of emotional intimacy athletes experienced with others. A number of athletes spoke of their teammates as "family" and, in fact, these descriptions were more often used by men -- contrary to what one might assume from their gender socialization. Recall that we hypothesized both men and women would describe communal dimensions with friends as important. Given this, we were not surprised when they cited their teammates as best friends or that some friends were the most valued aspects of their interpersonal lives. We were surprised, however, how some comments clearly deviated from sex-typed socialization. For example, one male basketball player told us about how much he enjoyed living with four other basketball players:

I would never trade it for anything, especially now with Jeff and the guys I live with. It's been the best time of my life. I mean, I can't compare it to anything else. Being able to play with my best friends you know, that's probably going to be the biggest thrill up to now and in my life, just being able to play with my best friends and having a good time. (Cary).
The Best of Both Worlds: Communion and Sport Combined

For us, the most interesting theme to emerge from our participants’ narratives was how communion with others and dimensions of achievement were fused. As reviewed, athletes spoke cogently about the importance of their individual development and how participation in structured athletics served a number of functional developmental purposes. As well, they addressed the importance of team success, their role in team success, and their friendships with others. These dimensions were ones we predicted would characterize athletes’ stories. But we had not anticipated that for most athletes, peak experiences are actually a combination of both excelling in one’s chosen sport in the context of close friends.

I love being in the spotlight, but I need a team there. After being with a team so long, you always need someone there beside you. You know, there’s always someone there for you to lean back on. (Dan, male/basketball)

When John does really good and maybe I didn’t, and I get excitement out of seeing John play really well, even if I’m not playing well at all, I love to see my best friends and teammates perform well and develop. And I like it when I play good as well. I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I like to see myself play the very best every single night. That’s the ultimate goal for everything athlete, to perform well every single night. Just sharing everything, sharing excitement, just smiles, hugs, everything. That’s the best part of team sports, that comradery. Not just winning and losing -- that’ll years from now I won’t remember any of that. I’ll remember John, I’ll remember Richard, I’ll remember Bart, I’ll remember my teammates because they’re my best friends. (Cary/basketball)

Again and again we heard our participants tell us that winning was most valued when it could be shared with your friends, that favorite memories were based on a team’s “pulling together” such that individuals’ performances complemented their teammates, where athletes knew playing their best meant working together to achieve a united team.

Alternatively, a number of athletes’ worst memories were not about individual failure but about the “last game we could play together” (emphasis added). Comments such as these clearly suggest that team athletes’ motivations and goals cannot be easily dichotomized into “Achievement” and “Friendship” categories.

DISCUSSION

In some respects, our sample was very similar to other populations of college athletes. Most were traditionally-aged students, reported a long history of involvement in sports (both as leisure and through school-structured programs), and attained personal satisfaction from participation. In addition, several of our findings were consistent with the results of earlier studies suggesting that relationships with others and personal achievement characterize much of the benefits associated with team athletics. The current study differed from previous research in several important ways. First, our methodology (a modified version of Stauss’ grounded theory, 1959/1994; 1969) allowed participants to share their ethnobiographies in the context of our research questions. Allowing athletes to discuss the importance of their experience provides a broader context in which to make inferences about how relationships are constructed and their dimensional meaning. Second, athletes in the current study included both men and women from the same team sports. Finally,
results from the current study are quite different from results of other studies that report gender differences among male and female athletes.

As hypothesized, the athletes in our sample reported that sports consumption was an integral part of their lives: as participants, as a means to master areas of personal development and competency, and as an identity. All athletes reported that sports participation affected their self-concepts (e.g., personal identity, perceived confidence) and improved their life circumstances (e.g., by providing a lure against delinquency, facilitating the development of life skills). Also as predicted, athletes stressed the importance of both excelling in their sport as evidence of hard work and achievement and so that they could serve as valuable members of a team. Comments suggested that moving from a focus on self (e.g., wanting to win for purposes of self-aggrandizement) to a focus on team membership was developmental in nature and occurred as athletes learned to value interdependence on others -- a developmental milestone usually obtained in college.

To us, one of the most important themes we heard was the strong sense of affiliation athletes obtained from their teammates. The feelings expressed were intense and often deviated from sex-typed behavior. Our study extends earlier research focusing on the communal/affiliative dimensions of athletes by showing no gender differences in the psychological and emotional needs that athletes reported obtaining from these relationships. Men in this study made more references to their teammates as “family” than women did -- hardly what might be predicted among sex-role stereotyped jocks. As well, women reported that their relationships with teammates, former teammates, and coaches had a positive and meaningful impact on their lives. Women referred to their teammates as “sisters.” Clearly, among the athletes in our sample affiliative/communion needs were freely -- and proudly -- expressed.

A number of studies document -- or intimate -- that females participate in sports because sports provides an organized opportunity to make friends and that males can obtain a sense of personal satisfaction from excelling in a physical activity and by beating opponents. Using ethnobiographies (i.e., not forcing participants to select one or to rank several variables as “important” on a questionnaire), our study showed that males and females obtain a high sense of personal satisfaction from excelling in athletics and from the relationships they form with other athletes. Simply put, we were hard pressed to find the gender differences assumed so endemic among female and male athletes. If our data are a more complete representation of athletes’ motivations for sports consumption, assuming that the multiple dimensions of athletics are sex-specific appears unwarranted.

Limitations

Several limitations should be mentioned. First, our sample consisted of a self-selected group of athletes involved in team sports at the collegiate level. They may not necessarily be representative of athletes who choose individual rather than team sports, individuals whose athletic interests are limited to leisure activities (as opposed to varsity sports), or athletes whose primary motivations are career driven. Second, although qualitative research methodologies allow for a more complete representation of individual experience, direct comparisons to quantitatively-based research studies are problematic. For example, although our in-depth interviews provided a great amount of detail, we suspect that other motivations might characterize athletes who participate in teams with less esprit de corps than the teams we studied. This study was a preliminary investigation using components of qualitative methodologies. Subsequent investigation can enrich our understanding by
using additional qualitative methods including content analysis, consumer ethnography, and participant observation. Finally, it should be mentioned that most of the investigators' personal athletic experiences have been limited to individually-based sports. Although we asked each participant if there were areas of team athletics that she or he believed were important but that we had omitted from the interview, our experience precludes an intimate familiarization with team membership. Therefore, we may have missed some dimensions of achievement or communion that are meaningful and that have relevance in the context of this research.

Implications for Managers

In addition to identifying a number of potential marketing communication themes and positioning strategies for marketers, our research indicates that male and female athletes participating in team sports have a great deal more in common in their motivations than they have differences. A marketer speaking to participants in team sports could be perceived as naive and foolish by women if gender-based appeals rely predominantly on the presumed agency and communion dichotomy of men and women (respectively). Participants in team sports derive substantial benefit from excellence in their performance as well as from their improved interpersonal relationships with teammates and other athletes, regardless of their gender. A more holistic approach to positioning sports products to team sports participants requires the marketer to have a deeper understanding of the team ethos, abandoning notions that men and women receive different forms of gratification from their team involvement. This holistic perspective opens up new positioning strategies for men as well as for women, and implies that marketers may use gender-neutral appeals to team participants with substantial success.

Thus we see emergent market segments which could variously be described as "performance-oriented" (speaking to the agency component of team sports competition) or "social-oriented" (speaking to the communion component). These segments may not necessarily be differentiated by gender, but rather by specific benefits which participants seek as a result of team sports participation. The current ambivalence shown by marketers toward gender differences indicates a lack of understanding and a need for additional investigation of the motivations of athletes and benefits associated with team sports. Admittedly, there are physical differences between male and female athletes (e.g. foot sizes), but in order for gender-based segmentation to be successful, marketers should examine the full range of motivations for participation in sports and not rely on presumed gender dichotomies.

REFERENCES


174


Huebner, Barbara (1997), "Title IX has been Crew's Propeller: Women's Rowing Feeds Off College Talent," The Boston Sunday Globe, October 19, D12.


Miedzian, Myriam (1991), Boys will be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence, New York: Doubleday.


