A re-examination of gendered sports: The relationship between sex, implicit sexism, and feminine/masculine and appropriate/inappropriate ratings of sports

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Traditionally, scholars have evaluated sport as a male domain (e.g., Birrell, 1983; Lenskyj, 1990; Messner, 1988; 1990) which serves to reinforce the hegemonic notions of masculinity (Messner & Sabo, 1998). Further, “sports become stereotyped as gender neutral, feminine, or masculine based on conceptions regarding gender, gender differences, and beliefs about the appropriateness of participation due to gender” (Koivula, 2001, p. 378). Indeed, the notion of gender appropriate and gender inappropriate sports has, and continues to be, a widely used concept in sport related research (e.g., Colley, Nash, O’Donnel, & Restorick, 1987; Kane, 1987; Peterson & Whisenant, 2003; Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000). However, because stereotypical notions and assumptions about gender are socially construed relative to specific cultural and historical contexts, perceptions of the “appropriateness” of certain sports for each gender may change over time (Acker, 1999; Seguino, 2007). The purpose of this study was to provide current perceptions relative to the masculinity/femininity and gender appropriateness/inappropriateness of certain sports. Additionally, we sought to determine how evaluator’s sex and level of implicit sexism impact these perceptions.

Metheny (1965) was the first sport sociologist to analyze the gender stereotypes of different sports. At that time, she found the majority of sports were considered “masculine”, yet some sports were viewed to be more appropriate for women than men. These sports were deemed more stereotypically feminine as they were aesthetically pleasing and prohibited bodily contact. Masculine sports, on the other hand, were characterized by the use of physical force, contact in face to face situations, and an attempt to use physical force to overpower the opponent. Koivula (1995) was the latest researcher to examine perceptions of the gender appropriateness of sports. In her study, she asked students at a Swedish University to rate different sports as appropriate or inappropriate for men and women’s participation. Using the mean scores derived from that data, she labeled sports as masculine, feminine, or gender neutral. This resulted in 34 gender neutral sports, 18 masculine sports, and 7 feminine sports.

However, in pre-test data collected as part of a larger study last year, we obtained ratings of the appropriateness of several sports for females. Our results differed from Koivula’s (1995) as several sports rated as “inappropriate” and therefore labeled as “masculine” by her subjects were rated well above the appropriateness midpoint of the scale (i.e. 1-7, inappropriate to appropriate) by our subjects (N = 128). Soccer (M = 6.2), rugby (M = 5.4), and rowing (M = 5.6) are just a few examples. This provides some evidence that sports considered to be masculine may also be considered appropriate for women and it may be an indication of the changing nature of notions of appropriateness relative to women’s participation in sport. Therefore, we would like to replicate and extend Koivula’s study to determine if, and how, these notions may change over time.

Still, previous research has shown attitudes to differ based on participant sex and level of sexism. For instance, Koivula (1995) found men, particularly men who scored high in masculinity, were more likely than women to stereotype sports as masculine or feminine. However, women who scored androgynous on the Bern’s Sex Role Inventory were more likely to rate sports as equally appropriate for men and women. Research has also indicated measures of sexism are closely related to individual attitudes regarding a variety of topics (Herzoz & Oreg, 2008; Leaper & Van, 2008). Implicit or unconscious sexism measures capture feelings or beliefs which reside just below consciousness such that individuals may not be fully aware of their existence (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Thus, implicit sexism may provide a more accurate indication of individual attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Mass, Castelli, Arcuri, 2000) and impact participants’ view of sport as feminine/masculine and appropriate/inappropriate.

We plan to collect data from six universities in different areas of the United States (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, Northwest) with approximately 100 subjects from each area. The participants will be part of the “general education” courses at the universities. Data will be collected relative to the sports in Koivula’s (1995) study which will enable us to determine if any changes have occurred across time. Data will be collected in three stages. First, participants will complete the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGee, & Swartz, 1998) which has proven to be a successful tool in measuring unconscious attitudes and beliefs including gender stereotypes (Rudman & Kilanski, 2000). Two weeks later, participants will be asked to rate each sport as masculine, feminine, or gender neutral on a 1-7 summed rating scale. After an additional two weeks, participants will be asked to rate how appropriate each sport is for each gender on a 1-7 Likert type scale.
Mean scores for appropriateness will be compared to Kiovula’s study for an initial analysis of change over time. Further, cluster analysis will be employed to examine relationships between participant scores on the sport appropriateness measure and the sport masculinity/femininity measures as well as relationships between participant sex and implicit sexism and participants’ masculine/feminine and appropriate/inappropriate ratings of sports. Results will be discussed relative to appropriate theoretical underpinnings such as hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, and social norming. Further, practical implications relative to marketing, programming, and related areas will be forwarded. Suggestions for future research will also be discussed.