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Joaquín Piedra¹

1) University of Sevilla, Spain

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Masculinity and Rhythmic Gymnastics. An Exploration on the Transgression of Gender Order in Sport

Joaquín Piedra
University of Sevilla

Abstract

Patriarchal dominance in our Western society has oppressed not only women but it has also isolated many men who did not comply with hegemonic masculinity patterns. The aim of this study is to know and analyse the experiences of a group of boys who practise rhythmic gymnastics, traditionally linked to the feminine reality. Within this interpretative paradigm, eight interviews have been done to gymnasts (8-19 years old), who practise rhythmic gymnastics in a competitive or amateur level. The boys express the familiar support that they have had when deciding to practise a traditionally feminine sport. However, many gymnasts have been insulted or mocked by other boys. Therefore, it is important to work with families in order to eliminate stereotypes and prejudices in this masculine discipline in the future. Similarly, rhythmic gymnastics must be promoted among boys, since a higher presence of boys in clubs would ease their reception among girls.

Keywords: masculinity, gender identity, gymnastics, youth.

Masculinidad y Gimnasia Rítmica. Una Exploración de la Transgresión del Orden de Género en el Deporte

Joaquín Piedra
Universidad de Sevilla

Resumen

El dominio patriarcal en nuestra sociedad occidental ha oprimido no solo a las mujeres, también ha marginado a muchos hombres que no cumplían con los patrones de la masculinidad hegemónica. El objetivo de este estudio es conocer y analizar las experiencias de un grupo de chicos que practican gimnasia rítmica, tradicionalmente vinculado a lo femenino. Dentro del paradigma interpretativo, se han realizado ocho entrevistas a gimnastas de entre 8 y 19 años que practican gimnasia rítmica a nivel de competición o de exhibición. Los chicos expresan el apoyo familiar que han tenido al introducirse en un deporte tradicionalmente femenino. Sin embargo, muchos de los gimnastas han experimentado alguna vez insultos o bromas por parte de otros chicos. Por ello, parece importante para el futuro trabajar con las familias buscando derribar estereotipos y prejuicios ante esta disciplina masculina. Igualmente se debe promover la gimnasia rítmica entre los niños, pues una mayor presencia de chicos en los clubes facilitaría su acomodo entre las chicas.

Palabras clave: masculinidad, identidad de género, gimnasia, juventud

All over history, some practises (fighting, hunting, leadership, sport...) have been left for the masculine group. Conversely, women were left for other less aggressive activities, more social and linked to the artistic component. Hence, the distribution of roles and tasks has been clearly separated among men and women. Within this rigid social structure, physical activity and sport has been (and is) a modulating context that helps to create and teach gender identities (masculine and feminine) as natural and complementary among them. This construction of identities has provoked the construction of body values linked to the masculine and feminine component (Barbero, 2003). In this social order, masculinity has been built in opposition to femininity, and femininity is built in opposition to masculinity (Connell, 1995). Thus, the physical culture of our society has historically shaped some boundaries for boys and girls (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This dual visible separation has made many boys and girls who do not feel identified with the patterns that are established for their body and behaviour model (masculine or feminine) be in a situation of inner fight between what they are and what they have to be, which has enabled the perpetuation of masculine-privilege dynamics (Steinfeldt, Miller, & David, 2016).

For men, masculinity has been traditionally built on the basis of a model of an aggressive, competitive, heterosexual and strong man. The boys who comply with the masculine stereotype gain more social capital and reach a dominating position in comparison with other boys who do not feel identified or act in a different way from those stereotypes, being separated (Silva, 2013). This position of superiority was named *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and increases the pressure among the rest of boys for imitating it. This dominance situation is accepted and reproduced by an important part of society. The other ways of developing and understanding masculinity are dominated by this hegemonic view, discriminating those men who run away from the “normal” situation. Sport, with its male-centred and heteronormative view, contributes to enhance and promote, in many cases in a subtle and hidden way, this social dominance, increasing even more the boundaries for boys.

Fortunately, the interest towards the situation of masculinities in sport has an extensive academic history. From its beginning, three decades ago,

research has focused on understanding better the development of the masculine identity within sport speech and practise (Messner, 1992; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). Nowadays, the studies on masculinity in sport remark the clear function of competitive sport as an oppression tool for many boys (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011), isolating other types of non-hegemonic masculinities (Atencio & Koca, 2011; Parker & Curtner-Smith, 2012; Silva, Botelho-Gomes, & Goellner, 2012). Within the different forms of oppression and aggression used, homophobia is a recurring one. Nonetheless, as Morrow and Gill (2003) or Silva et al. (2012) state, the relationship between masculinity and sexual orientation cannot be denied, being homosexuality, in many cases, the boundary of accepted masculinity.

This hegemonic masculinity variable made Anderson (2009) pose the concept of homophobia (the fear of being homosexualised) and build, around it, the theory of inclusive masculinity. According to this theory, cultures can be classified depending on the existing homophobia levels. A society with a high level of homophobia makes boys avoid any association with homosexuality, which relegates them to the origin of masculinity hierarchy. Heterosexuality is never challenged in a homophobic atmosphere. Anderson notes that, among men, homophobia is typically manifested by fleeing from feminized behavior, including physical contact with other men or showing signs of affection and emotion, while also maintaining homophobic discourse. Homophobia helps to explain how gendered patterns of behavior – both within and outside of sport settings – play out in relation to shifting levels of social homophobia, particularly highlighting how homophobia can affect the behavior of individuals who may not necessarily be homophobic themselves.

The scarce studies in Spain in the sport context (Piedra, 2015) prove the different possibilities, from a clear and overwhelming rejection to an acceptance of gays and lesbians. However, in general Spanish culture show evidence of pseudo-inclusivity, and it can be identified as a “politically correct” departure from the rejection of sexual diversity (and thus the negative implication of “being homophobic”) alongside a concurrent refusal of acceptance of sexual minorities, shaped perhaps by the heteronormativity of Spain’s traditionally conservative political and religious history (Piedra, García-Pérez, & Channon, 2017). This points out that our society is behind

if we compare it to others in which there is an atmosphere of increased tolerance. In American and British societies tolerance and inclusivity appear to be deeply rooted, but heteronormativity and heterosexism still persist (Anderson & McCormack, 2016).

In this situation, in Spain those male athletes who do not comply with the valid characteristics have several options. They can adapt themselves to this masculinity orthodoxy, denying themselves, or they can give up sport, looking for other less hostile activities with their true masculine identity. Fortunately, there is a third group of boys who decide to cross boundaries from the established patriarchal system, showing publicly their heterodox masculinity or looking for sport practises that do not match their gender (Barker-Ruchti, Grahn, & Lindgren, 2016). This is the case of boys who decide to practise rhythmic gymnastics since this is one of the few sports that tradition has kept for women in an exclusive way, Burstyn (1999) regards them as hyperfeminine. Accordingly, it fosters the features that society considers feminine: flexibility, coordination, balance, thinness and emotions (Hargreaves, 1994; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). The boys who decide to practise this sport withstand the “norm” in a double way: they show an identity far from hegemonic masculinity and they do it in a traditionally feminine sport. As Chimot and Louveau (2010) remark, a boy who practises rhythmic gymnastics needs to dare a disputing conflict: he needs to reach a good level of feminine technical expression that is traditionally identified with rhythmic gymnastics, and he also needs to keep his identity as a “true man”.

As we have seen, rhythmic gymnastics (formerly known as modern gymnastics) was born as an attempt to highlight traditionally feminine skills. In spite of that, some boys have become part of this scope. Some federations of countries as France or Japan recognise the masculine competition. In Spain, masculine participation was regulated from 2005 in the open category, and the masculine category was recognised as such in 2009, only in its individual category. All in all, masculine participation in Spain, as in other countries, is still a minority, being 1% of male federated gymnasts. Stereotypes, prejudices and tradition are still the main barriers for the development of this discipline among boys.

This paper uses the context of the Spanish competitive rhythmic gymnastics, which exists in both male and female formats as an entry point

into these issues. Specifically, it explores what experiences male participants have and how currently masculinities ‘do’ in what is seen as a ‘feminized’ arena, and the implications this throws up for practice, policy and future research.

Method

With the aim of understanding the experience of the boys who practise rhythmic gymnastics and the way that they develop and explain their masculine identity, we use, within the interpretative paradigm, an approach of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism helps to illuminate how human beings define their experiences and give meaning to their identities, behaviors, realities, and social interactions (Hewitt & Shulman, 2011). Because of that, eight semi-structured interviews have been done between March 2016 and May 2016 with a length that range from 25 up to 40 minutes.

The sample is made by eight boys whose age range from 8 to 19 years old, from few months to 7 years of experience in rhythmic gymnastics. The reduced size of this sample is due to the limited presence of boys who practise this discipline, there were only 49 masculine licences in our country in 2015. Furthermore, the sample is varied since there are competitive gymnasts and amateurs (belonging to clubs). All gymnasts study and train at the same time. Similarly, the sample has a wide range of experiences, the most veteran individual competes in senior category in the Spanish National Championship and the youngest ones are in the initial competitive levels.

The sampling technique was convenience (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) through the different clubs who have male gymnasts. After contacting the clubs, the project was presented to families, asking for their agreement with the interview. After the authorization and signature of the parents’ informed consent, a date was fixed for the interview. The place of the interview was chosen by the parents, in the club facilities or in their own houses. For its development, the research project has been passed by the Ethical Research Committee of “Junta de Andalucía”. The gymnasts are given pseudonyms in the analysis and interview questions are italicized in order to ease its reading.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed literally for its later analysis with the support of the computer program Atlas.ti. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is an analytic method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes across a data-set. Themes were selected if they captured something important about the research question. An inductive and deductive approach, where themes are identified producing descriptions and explanations of particular phenomena (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

‘Well, Open your Legs’: Boys’ Experiences with Rhythmic Gymnastics

Pleasure, interests and motivations are developed at a great extent in childhood and adolescence. In this evolution, familiar environment as well as acquaintances both play a crucial part to promote or hinder some interests. In the case of sport, success is clearly related to athletes’ familiar support (Chimot & Louveau, 2010; Coté, 1999). This has been reflected by most of the interviewed boys, who allude to their parents’ support when they began to practise rhythmical gymnastics.

Quite well, I was fully supported because they thought it was a good idea and it was a boy sport, it would be less habitual and it could be exciting then. (Pablo, 11 years old)

Well, they said: “it is ok, if you like it you can try and if you don't like it after some time you can always quit”. (Julián, 13 years old)

I was supported from the very first moment and I have had no problem at all. (Mario, 19 years old)

This familiar support (mainly mothers) has led boys not only to begin practising this discipline, but in most of the cases it implies some trips to competitions or exhibitions and families are the ones who bear these costs. Expenses are sometimes high since the athletic wear is especially expensive. Nonetheless, parents’ support has not always been parallel to that of brothers or other relatives, especially male elder ones (Chimot & Louveau, 2010). Even though these initial doubts are acknowledged, these are later transformed into support.

My brother was a bit surprised but he then understood me. (Pablo, 11 years old)

At the beginning, they were surprised and laughed, ‘where are you going?’ because it was a girl sport and you are a boy in rhythmic gymnastics ... but, after some years, they have seen that I am successful and they take it seriously... (Mario, 19 years old)

The same happens with friends. The close circle, initially surprised, has shown their support.

Some people find weird me doing that but, in the end, there has been no problem at all. (Julián, 13 years old)

I usually get on well with everybody, so I have had no problem at all. (Carlos, 18 years old)

They did not say anything, the only thing was “do you practise rhythmic gymnastics?” My answer is yes and they say “well, open your legs” (Antonio, 11 years old)

However, it is also true that many gymnasts have been insulted or mocked by other boys. Miguel (11 years old) and Esteban (8 years old) admit that some boys of their age, at school or in their area, made remarks because of practising rhythmic gymnastics.

These stigmatization situations are frequent for boys who participate in other 'feminine' activities as Bemiller (2005) points out in her study with male cheers. This sport structure, as limited for boys who decide to practise traditionally feminine sport activities, show the still existing power of patriarchy in our society, which in many cases challenges these boys' sexuality because of running away from the standard. In most of the cases, boys confirm these experiences in their lives and, in the case of Julián (13 years old), pressure was so high that he decided to quit for some time.

My friends, my school friends, they were a bit surprised and it was weird for them so they didn't accept it [...] so I, with my girlfriend, did some gymnastics in the courtyard, they started to talk about me when I was not with them. (Pablo, 11 years old)

Had you thought of give up?

Sometimes I did, but then I thought, "Well, what do I care what these guys say?" As a ... [Laughs] ... I do not care. (Julián, 13 years old)

However, these experiences that have affected them, more or less, are not as frequent when we refer to their beginnings in the club. Joining an already created club is a difficult experience, especially when you are the only boy among so many girls. Experiences told by boys are, in all cases, positive and new circles of girlfriends and teammates were created for them. In the few cases in which the initial reception was more sceptical, it would have been easier if the club had had previous experience with other boys, as in the case of some of the visited clubs.

Have you ever felt alone?

Sometimes I have. When we were asked to create groups or pairs, there was nobody who wanted to be with me and I was alone. But, after some time, some girls became my friends and at the end we were together. (Julián, 13 years old)

Hence, the social, economic or institutional difficulties do not mean a reduction of their motivation. The case of Julián (13 years old) can be meaningful since he gave up this practise for a year because of the other boys' remarks and insults. Because of his family support, he began to practise it again and had to fight against the regional federation to enter competitions, collecting signatures and putting pressure so that he was finally accepted.

...when they [regional federation] let us compete they did it because people protested. Not because they said, "Well, here's a guy who wants to do it, so we are going to leave him". No, but because my mother, my friends and all protested so that I could do it, and if not, probably I still could not... (Julián, 13 years old)

In spite of their youth, all these experiences indicate a strong personality and character in all the boys who have been interviewed, together with an unconditional support on behalf of their parents.

‘That’s Typical from Girls’: Masculine Identity among Gymnasts

When we go deeper into the subject of identity, nearly all of the interviewed boys admit that rhythmic gymnastics is a girl's sport and they assume it as well as society does. In fact, many boys emphasize the reduced adaptation of the Scoring Code regarding expressivity, choreography and dance to masculine features. In that sense, Bozanic and Miletic's study (2011) on the technical differences among boys and girls highlights the lack of expressivity among boys. This is so noticeable that even boys themselves admit that they do not want to do those movements because they are 'typical from girls', assuming that by doing them they could be identified as girls.

Are those movements always the same for boys and always the same for girls? Are they common, the same for both or do you do different things?

Different things

Would you like to do the same than girls do? Or don't you like those movements?

[Refuses]

Don't you like them? And could you do them?

No, I wouldn't

Wouldn't you like to do them?

No

But could you do it with your body, right?

But I wouldn't

Why not?

Because it's typical from a girl (Vicente, 10 years old)

This problem is not exclusive from rhythmic gymnastics or boys. Krane's study (2001) with women athletes points out that patriarchal and heterosexist society privileges traditional forms of femininity over those which challenge the standards. For that reason, it seems logical that boys assume as improper for them some activities that are socially classified as for girls and boys want to move away from that femininity (Anderson, 2005a). As Priyadarshini and Pressland (2016) point out, tradition, sport structure, social pressure and gender status of some sports are in many cases an obstacle for the change of mind. Doing the opposite could mean discredit, mockery or rejection from an important part of society.

Nonetheless, this idea contradicts the conclusions reached by Peterson and Anderson (2012) in their studies with male dancers. In this work, researchers indicate that participating in 'feminine' activities is something frequent and it is no longer a subversive activity.

In spite of the fact that everyone recognises that rhythmic gymnastics is less masculine, they all believe that there are different forms of masculinity in which they can fit. For that reason, they value their experience in this discipline as positive, they want to keep practising it and improving. In this sense, Anderson's work (2005b) in another 'feminized' activity as cheerleading indicates that there are two forms of masculinity, a more inclusive one and a more orthodox one which can include different forms of masculinity. This situation is somehow projected by participant boys when differentiating sport from masculine identities.

Yes, it [rhythmic gymnastics] is scarcely masculine but this does not make the person who practises it scarcely masculine. (Carlos, 18 years old)

How would you describe a man, a very masculine boy?

For example, someone who pretends to be cool and strong would join a football team even though he doesn't like it. He would do so just to prove that playing football means being a hard boy. This has got nothing to do because someone who practises rhythmic gymnastics can be harder and more masculine than him. Nothing to do with the sport that he likes. (Pablo, 11 years old)

There are different opinions then while they all recognise themselves as masculine. There are still some boys who have rooted some ideas related to closed roles 'boyish' or 'girlish' preventing both groups from choosing freely those actions, tasks and behaviors that are not typical from their gender.

Conclusions

Through various interviews we have explored the experiences of boys who practise rhythmic gymnastics, as well as the influences that those experiences have in the construction of their identities. Results show a firm motivation of these boys towards practising a sport that they admit being

feminine but they feel strongly attracted by. This determination adds to the parents' support to their children. This support does not only imply accepting their children's decision but also encouraging them to continue when they are criticised and supporting them when they need help from institutions.

The families configuration and their view of sport are determining in transmitting the choice of activities of their children, transmitting an intergenerational habitus within these families (McDonald, Rodger, Ziviani, Jenkins, Batch, & Jones, 2004; Quarmby, 2010). Normally, in the face of more artistic and emotional practices, boys feel closer to their mothers, than boys who do traditionally male sports who are more attached to their fathers (Mennesson, Bertrand, & Court, 2017). Accordingly, it is important to work with families to eliminate stereotypes and prejudices towards this masculine discipline in the future. This task must be focused on men (parents or brothers) since they usually show rejection, by that clearly rupture the transmission of the paternal sports capital.

Regarding the construction of masculine identity within rhythmic gymnastics, boys show a contradiction in their own statements. While they admit that rhythmic gymnastics is a feminine discipline and they consider themselves masculine, they claim that doing some things would imply (even for themselves) being feminine. There are still limitations and prejudices for boys and girls since some actions and roles are perpetuated as typical from boys or girls.

Finally, we should urge state or regional gymnastics federations to help boys in rhythmic gymnastics. The lack of competitions, the scarce number of clubs with masculine presence and the lack of publicity campaigns contribute to making the spread of this sport among boys even more difficult. We believe, and this is confirmed by Kamberidou, Tsopani, Dallas and Patsantaras's study (2009), that there is a majority of people who support boy participation in rhythmic gymnastics competitions. However, the tradition supported by a minority avoids the acceptance of the presence of boys and it still subjugates many boys from a practise free of prejudices.

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Joaquín Piedra, Department of Physical Education and Sports,
Universidad de Sevilla, Seville, Spain

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to Joaquín Piedra,
Department of Physical Education and Sports, Universidad de Sevilla,
C/ Pirotecnia, s/n, 41013 Sevilla, Spain, email: jpiedra@us.es