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Sociocultural Barriers to Women's Participation in Sport: The Role of Self-Objectification and Stereotype Threat

Project Summary

Women and girls in sport have endured years of cynicism regarding their physical abilities, much of which is perpetuated via media portrayals that emphasize their appearance, femininity, and (hetero) sexuality rather than athletic competence. Although female athletes have made gains in international recognition, funding and opportunity, the negative representations and resultant stereotypes about women's suitability for sport remain. Although there is speculation that such attitudes could pose truly serious barriers to women's participation and performance in sport, remarkably little research has provided tangible evidence of this effect as yet. However, a parallel body of evidence shows performance decrements on cognitive tasks when female participants are primed with stereotypes about women (stereotype threat), and other studies have shown similar effects when attention is focused on a participant's appearance (self-objectification). There is reason to believe that the domain of physical performance could be similarly affected via these mechanisms.

The connection to participation in sport is as follows. If stereotypes about women and sport are internalized, performance may be compromised. After repeated attempts where one's success is short of optimal, motivation wanes for further participation. Choices are then made to engage in other activities where performance does not have the same meaning for one's sense of self-worth. If women do not feel competent or confident in participation in sport and exercise, then they will be less likely to do so. This is the question we wish to examine.

Our specific objective was to consider whether priming stereotypes and self-objectification can lead to performance decrements on physical performance tasks, including sports activities. We further hypothesized that these effects might be at least partially mediated through changes in self-perception, effort or motivation. Our preliminary findings provide some of the first evidence that sport performance can be compromised by priming stereotypes about women. Further, these stereotypes lead women to have a diminished view of their own physical competence, and are less likely to see themselves as athletic. Similar results are seen when attention is focused on the appearance of women's bodies rather than on their physical capabilities. We believe that stereotypes can constrain women from participating in sport because of the negative attitudes they engender.

Research Methods

We used true experimental designs in the laboratory as is common in psychological research to test our hypotheses.

In one study, we asked female participants play a golf game using a Nintendo Wii with either a male or a female avatar (game character). Half of the participants were told that there are no gender differences in performance on that task, and the remaining participants were told that men typically outperform women on

the task. In addition to the performance task, participants completed self-report measures of athletic identification and physical self-perceptions.

In another study we primed a state of self-objectification (a type of self-attention on appearance) and had female participants perform an athletic task. Specifically, we randomly assigned participants to wear tight and revealing, or loose and concealing athletic wear. Then, to exacerbate the effects of self-objectification, participants in one group were asked to attend to and estimate the size of their own body by looking in a mirror and indicating widths of their shoulders, waist and hips on a nearby screen. Participants in a control group were similarly asked to estimate the size of a control object at three designated places. Finally, all participants were asked to complete two performance tasks: an actual test of golf putting performance (mini-putt) and virtual putting using the Nintendo Wii.

Research Results

The key findings are consistent with initial hypotheses. For the stereotype threat study, results indicated that women showed marginally better performance when they played with a male avatar as opposed to a female avatar, regardless of explicit information about gender performance. The results were even clearer for athletic self-perceptions. Women who had played with the male avatar were more likely to report seeing themselves as “athletic” and as being physically competent than those playing with a female avatar.

For the self-objectification study, results were less clear but there was a trend towards support for our hypotheses. That is, there was a tendency to see slightly worse performance from women when they were asked to wear tight-fitting and revealing clothing during the golf task. One only needs to consider the now infamous comments by Sepp Blatter (FIFA president) that women’s soccer would attract more fans if they wore tighter clothing to understand where such attitudes originate and where they might lead for women’s sport.

While these results are promising, there are limitations. Both studies would benefit from additional data collection and as such it will continue so that we can increase statistical power in the analyses. There are also additional controls that we would like to implement, and also replicate a parallel design with male participants to further explore gender differences.

Policy Implications

It has been established over decades of research that the media, particularly sport media, contain the types of messages theorized to contribute to self-objectification and to the formation of stereotypes about the appropriateness of sport for women. What has yet to be clearly established is evidence of the harm that these attitudes can have to women’s performance in and enjoyment of sport. If women do not see themselves as possessing the physical competence of a successful athlete, they are going to be less likely to take up sport activities and more likely to drop out once they have started. Existing policies to ensure equal access to sport for both genders, including equal access to funding, training and facilities must be continued and arguably enhanced. Researchers in this area in the US frequently refer to Title IX as a watershed moment for women’s sport in that country. Canadians must continue to ensure equal access with or without such a policy.

Next Steps

One clear future direction of this research for media psychologists would be in devising and testing media interventions so that women can resist the cultural messages regarding their ability to participate and perform successfully in sport.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sports <http://www.caaws.ca/e/index.cfm> may find these results of interest.