

## Reasons why girls refuse to take part in sport

*Isolde Reichel,<sup>42</sup> University of Vienna (Austria)*

Various studies (Eichler, 1983; Köppe and Warsitz, 1989; Rost, 1994; Wydra and Förster, 2000; Wehner, 2005; Wolters & Gebken, 2005; Frohn, 2007) have focused on the phenomenon of the sport refusal, seeking to identify why some people reject sport, an activity in principle open to everyone and inherently attractive to all. The factors put forward to explain the refusal to take part in sport include age, socio-economic situation, sex, immigration and, in addition, a negative (parental) attitude towards sports and a low level of education. The focus of this contribution is on the sport behaviour of people who are exposed to those factors conducive to fostering a rejection of sport. It highlights the various influences – from parents and the girls' immediate environment – which come into play in their rejection of sport, and looks in particular at their "sport identity". A number of interviews focusing on specific problems were carried out in an attempt to understand the negative attitude these girls had towards sport. The prime objective of this paper is to identify the factors inherent in the sport system prompting girls to reject sport; these include not only a lack of encouragement from family members and the way the education system can influence girls' attitudes to sport, but also the perception of the female body in sport situations. Taking these factors on board could help in developing a form of physical education which is "subject-centred", i.e. tailored to the particular needs of the target audience.

From the perspective of developmental psychology, at age 15 many pupils are going through puberty, accompanied by changes in their perception of their body. Girls in the 15 to 16 age bracket have been identified as an at-risk group (Sack, 1980) for sport refusal; it is at this age that a person can become actively pro-sport or turned off by it. The challenges of growing up call for a new definition of the "subject-environment-relationship" (Baur, 1989). Biogenetic parameters, such as sexual maturation, have a major impact on the development of (body) behaviour. Physical growth also leads to sensorimotor adjustments. Earlier expectations of the body are no longer compatible with one's new perception of the body. The body takes on a new appearance and gives rise to a feeling of "having this body" ("Körperhaben", cf. Plessner, 1975) rather than "being this body". The insecurity of this new situation leads to emotional delays and shyness (Baur, 1994). As shown by the studies on body biographies conducted by Baur (1994)

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42. Doctorate student, University of Vienna (Austria).

and the observation of sport activities by Sack (1980) the level of sport refusal among 15- to 16-year-old girls is much higher than at any other age. Theoretical studies have demonstrated that sport refusal is a result of sport experiences which have left those concerned with the feeling that nothing positive has been gained. Miethling (2004) talks of the inherent competitiveness in a PE class and describes physical education classes as harmful to and violating pupils' body concept. This determines the way they react to future social sport situations (cf. Reichel, 2007). The results of the questionnaire carried out by Wehner (2005) show the existence of negative conceptions of their bodies in situations where they were observed by a male teacher (48%) or by male classmates in a variety of sport situations such as football (93%), athletics (89%) and gymnastics/dance (81%). These results should prompt reconsideration of mixed sports classes and the development of a teaching approach designed to strengthen girls' self-confidence in sports situations.

### **Theoretical background**

The transformation and redefinition of parental relations and the new importance of the peer group give rise to new social rules and norms in the context of a new group style (Hurrelmann, 1985). Pupils of this age are seeking to cope with questions of where they are heading in life and are extremely interested in developing the "ego identity" (Erikson, 1968). On the one hand, Bourdieu (1993) states: "in the absence of any other defining criterion, the body is the sole asset young people have", but on the other, the body undergoes significant changes at a young age. Baur (1994) describes the body as an important means of constructing identity and refers to age 13 to 19 as a real time of crisis. The questions frequently asked by children and teenagers at this age are: "Who am I?" and "Who will I be?" and such questions are primarily prompted by physical changes. This phase is regarded as one which is highly sensitive to environmental influences on the formation of gender identity. Epidemiological studies in female anorexia show the development of the disorder from age 13, which is closely linked to pubescence and coming to terms with the role associated with being female in society. Simone de Beauvoir proclaimed "on ne naît pas femme: on le devient" (one is not born a woman: one becomes one) (1949), and it is therefore still highly relevant to focus attention on the role of women in sport. Women tend to position themselves in society in response to the biological and physical changes they undergo.

Austrian surveys on the sport behaviour of the Austrian people show that 31.6% of men regularly take part in sport, as opposed to only 23.3% of women (Statistik Austria). This might be accounted for by circumstances such as babysitting, the lack of training partners and the lack of any positive self-esteem in sport situations. In the demographic questionnaire carried out by

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Boos-Nünning and Karakaşoğlu (2004) for the German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, the authors point to the link between participation in sport and immigration. The results show that half of the girls (N=950) never partake in sports and only 28% participate in sport frequently or very frequently. These results are comparable with the German median of sport participation, but 45% of girls and young women would like to participate more in sport. This raises the crucial question of what keeps them away. The survey results also show that there are no significant differences linked to the national background of immigrants. The impact of gender, age, social status of the family and level of education on sport participation is more significant than national origin and religion (Boos-Nünning and Karakaşoğlu, 2004). Among the main factors identified by the authors as having a high impact on sport participation were having success-oriented parents and a high level of social support. Negative experiences linked to difficult family situations considerably reduce the level of sport participation. The finding that a positive perception of the body leads to greater sport participation is of considerable interest for the following qualitative interviews with girls who do not take part in sport. The research will examine if the body is viewed negatively and will seek to identify the reasons for this negative perception. The main questions are what environmental restrictions stop girls from taking part in sport and what factors promote sport participation.

Accordingly, the relevance of this contribution can be seen in the following question: Do sport situations in which the body is experienced in different ways have an effect on the construction of identity and to what extent are these experiences, which may also be discriminatory, responsible for body repression? Do earlier experiences with body and sport, which can be examined as a sports biography or body biography, have an impact on building a "sport identity" by the person (of either sex) concerned?

Bette (2005) identifies the body as a carrier of information which can be used to indicate membership of a particular group. The group style of sportspeople embodies strength, body awareness, a "healthy lifestyle", specific brands of sport clothes, coolness or at least an optimistic outlook. The "hypothesis of socialisation" in contrast to the "hypothesis of selection" gives an insight into the complexity of belonging to the world of sport (Conzelmann, 2008). It is not easy to identify the factors which influence an individual to become a sportsperson and it might therefore be worthwhile looking at those factors which have the opposite influence, in other words the factors discouraging people from partaking in sport.

## Method

The research is based on a holistic conception of development and personality, where the system (environment) and personality are understood in

an integrated way from a dynamic-interactional perspective (Conzelmann, 2001). To integrate the "concept of human being" in the systemic theory of development, Magnusson (1990, p. 196) states that "an individual develops and functions in a dynamic, continuous and reciprocal process of interaction with his or her environment" (Conzelmann, 2008, p. 52).

In order to reconstruct the body and sport biography, qualitative research methods such as the "problem-centred interview" are used in connection with the "Struktur-Lege-Technik" analysis method of Groeben and Scheele (1988). The focus is placed on not only the description of experiences in sport situations and the negative effect of the environment on body perception, but also a retrospective look on the creation of a life-structuring "dogma" which precludes, in advance, participation in sport.

In support of this specific analysis method and interpretative procedures, the plurality of the sport biographies of girls in different socio-economic situations were examined in retrospect. Individual case studies allow a deeper insight into the girls' (non)-sport behaviour. The possibilities for formulating educational approaches are presented and will be discussed, following the theoretical model of Prange (2008) which focuses on the body/sport biography as a given factor that can be reconstructed and made available for didactic-methodological processes. The main objective is to examine the major influences of the environment on the reconstruction of body identity as pro- or anti-sport.

## Results

Summarising the data from the qualitative interviews of four girls who do not take part in sport, the biographies are as follows.

They all show a decrease of interest in sport at the age of 15 to 17 years. Low interest is the basis for refusal to take part in sports in later years. The determining environmental factors influencing attitude to sport are:

1. Parental variables: the following influences from parents (and teachers) on a negative body perception were cited: the mother was seen as an identification model for use of the body. In one family, the mother was rather overwhelming and anxious, the girl was discouraged by the comments made by her mother and grandmother. As she was a somewhat skinny girl, they wanted her to rest and avoid physical activity. The conditions of the second family were similar in terms of the restrictions conveyed. The mother and the school teacher drew attention to the girl's clumsiness. In the third interview the mother was very keen to encourage her daughter to do sport, but with the aim of losing weight; consequently, it was impossible to transfer a positive image of the body. In the last interview, the girl in question had previously been a keen and

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successful swimmer until she had an injury, after which she lost the motivation to swim. Her original enthusiasm had been kindled by a male lifeguard, but she had little support from her parents and her mother, in particular, would tease her because of her muscular body.

2. Lack of enthusiasm from the father: as shown in surveys by Kleiner (1989) the father is an important figure in influencing girls' sport participation. None of the girls' fathers did anything to encourage them to take part in sport.
3. Lack of identification with the sport system: they did not feel that women had a place in sport. The girls could not identify with their PE teacher and found it hard to succeed in traditional games in PE classes such as volleyball or athletics, and also in dance and yoga classes, because of their lack of skills. The school system was unable to provide extra training and sport situations were not experienced in a positive way. Rather than finding sport an activity which made them feel involved, the girls' experience of sport was that it excluded them.

## **Conclusion**

By developing an appropriate teaching approach in PE classes the phenomenon of sport refusal can be reduced. To this end, specific teaching aims need to be formulated and incorporated in the training of PE teachers. Such teachers have a decisive impact on the body perception of their pupils and it is their duty to nurture a positive body perception among girls. In a group discussion carried out by Reichel (2008) with PE teachers, the perception of female bodybuilders was discussed and evaluated as non-feminine and rather unacceptable in comparison to muscled male bodies. If this replication of stereotypes remains firmly embedded in our students' minds, bringing about a change in the attitude to sport participation will be like Don Quixote's fight against windmills. As taking part in sport is still very much a male domain, the challenge facing PE teachers is how to convey bodily experiences in such a way that girls will be attracted to sport and see that they have a role to play. The most important thing to keep in mind is that PE teachers are an identification model for girls in their attitude to sport and that the relationship within the group and with the teacher has a decisive influence. A well-formulated teaching approach can influence body awareness in a very positive way. Studying these factors is of high interest and should lead to further research in this area.

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