

## Review Paper

# ON THE PHYSICAL-ACTIVITY SOCIALIZATION OF BOYS. QUALITATIVE STUDIES

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## Introduction

In sports education and early childhood education, children's physical activities are posited as natural basic needs, assessed as children's individual forms of action and expression, and discussed in terms of the developmental and educational potential of such activities (Fischer, 2010; Scheid, 1989; Zimmer, 2003, 2006). The opportunities for experience and development associated with children's physical activity are interpreted as being *valuable* and are elevated to be the norm and declared the objective of sports education in practice (Zimmer, 2020).

Only recently has empirical research begun to give attention to the fact that the ways in which children act and express themselves in physical activity are tied to social interactions and reference groups, possibilities and conditions, contexts and framings and the educational and developmental impact of these experiences of physical activity are not an inevitable outcome of these activities but first and foremost a socially mediated one (see, for instance, Röhner, 2012; Schmidt, 2015; Hunger, 2014, 2016; Stahl-von-Zabern et al., 2016; Mutz & Albrecht, 2017; Krug et al., 2018).<sup>1</sup> This is the point of departure of this contribution. It draws on qualitative studies conducted over several years<sup>2</sup> that employed different foci, all of which aimed to analyze physical activity in early

## Abstract

The present contribution draws on a broad set of qualitative studies on children's physical-activity socialization to focus on the individual perspectives and practices of parents and of boys aged four to ten in Germany. Applying a theoretical lens informed by the sociology of knowledge, it shows how more or less 'traditional' images of what it means to be a boy are embedded in parents' patterns of thought and action, across milieus, and how these images are activated in view of assumed 'social necessities' or by recourse to 'naturalizations.' The analysis further shows how boys situate and see themselves in relation to physical activity, sports, and the body in the context of perceived gender relations. The overall conclusion is that physical activity, sports, and the body prove to be an anchor across all milieus for solidifying gender-related inequalities in childhood, even though particularly educationally inclined parents emphasize gender equality.

*Keywords:* Gendered physical-activity socialization, empirical childhood research, parents, boys, gender knowledge

<sup>1</sup> See also Bründel & Hurrelmann, 2017; Schmidt & Smidt, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The studies referred to here were conducted on the basis of third-party funding awarded to the author of this contribution by the Lower-Saxony Ministry of Science and Culture. These studies were 2008–2011 *Geschlechtsspezifische Körper- und Bewegungssozialisation in der frühen Kindheit (Gender-Specific Bodily and Physical-Activity Socialization in Early Childhood)* (funding period 1); 2011–2013 *Geschlechtsspezifische Körper- und Bewegungssozialisation in der frühen Kindheit* (funding period 2); and 2014–2016 *Geschlechter – Wissen – Macht – Körper. Eine interdisziplinäre Verbundforschung zur geschlechtsbezogenen Körper- und Bewegungssozialisation in der Kindheit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung sozialer und ethnischer Kategorien (Gender—Knowledge—Power—Body. Joint Interdisciplinary Research on Gender-Related Body and Physical-*

childhood in the context of the specific social constellations in which the child grew up in these early years. All of these studies also paid particular attention to the children's social (and ethnic-cultural) background and the specifics of their familial milieu and systematically considered issues related to individual characteristics such as the children's age and gender (and special needs, where applicable).

The present text adopts a *selective* perspective and moves parents<sup>3</sup> and boys<sup>4</sup> to the center of attention. It gives a summary of what kind of offerings boys between age four and ten encounter, largely *across all milieus*, in terms of physical activities, sports, and the body and how the boys are addressed in this respect. In so doing, the text zeroes in on relevant patterns of interpretation

and action on the part of parents as well as on how boys situate and see themselves in terms of physical activity, sports, and the body<sup>5</sup> in the context of perceived gender relations. But before we turn to the findings, I would like to outline the theoretical premises of the studies and their design.

### The Basic Theoretical Premises of the Studies

The findings presented here are based on studies that rest on constructivist foundations. Even though I am not able to elaborate these foundations in detail here, a rough outline should enable the reader to identify the theoretical direction of the basic assumptions underpinning them and elucidate the methodological framework of the studies. As far as the children are concerned, the studies employed a concept of 'the child as a social actor' (e.g., Hurrelmann, Mürrmann & Wissinger, 1986; Kelle & Breidenstein, 1996; Leu & Krappmann, 1999; Lippitz, 1999). Drawing on a sociology-of-knowledge perspective, they view the children as individuals living in the here and now, who continuously interpret, play a part in shaping, and actively come to terms with their lifeworld. A consequence of this processing with social reality is a 'stock of knowledge and experience,'<sup>6</sup> which is vital for mastering everyday life as it provides a secure foundation of interpretation and orientation for action.

Of course, the basic premise that human beings, as they navigate their daily lifeworld, accumulate a socially formed store of knowledge and experience that affords security for interpretation and

orientation and plays a part in guiding action applies to adults as well, just as it goes without saying

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*Activity Socialization in Early Childhood under Particular Consideration of Social and Ethnic Categories*). In 2017, we launched another joint research project on physical-activity socialization, education, and promotion in families, with a focus on diversity.

<sup>3</sup> The term *parents* equally refers to single parents or couples, to biological and non-biological, heterosexual and homosexual mothers, fathers, legal guardians and custodians, and similar.

<sup>4</sup> For (sports) education's reflections on the subject of 'boys,' see also Richartz, 2000; Strobel-Eisele & Noack, 2006; Blomberg, 2009; Blomberg & Neuber, 2015; Kaufmann & Neuber, 2018; Neuber, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> In the present context, the subjects of 'physical activity, sports, and the body' are generally conceptually bundled and treated as a single subject matter. The choice not to separate the phenomena that they refer to analytically is rooted in the observation that the relevant symbolizations, parental offerings, expectations, and the like that we identified make reference to physical activity, sports, or the body in a more or less fluid manner, across the various phenomena.

<sup>6</sup> The term *knowledge* by no means intends to imply that this is 'valid' knowledge or stocks of knowledge that are organized according to specific criteria. What the term *knowledge* refers to here is rather everyday knowledge, that is, the conglomerate of sedimented experience, adopted systems of values, elements of historical-cultural knowledge, and so forth (see, e.g., Matthes & Schütze, 1973).

that there are differences in the differentiation, awareness, hierarchical organization, and stability of such stocks of knowledge and experience related to age, education, and individual development.

### **The Formation of Gender-Related Knowledge and Action**

According to the basic premises outlined above, individuals develop, over the course of their socialization, more or less pre-reflexive gender knowledge that influences action (Wetterer, 2004). This view builds on the basic assumption that human beings unconsciously filter information out of their lifeworld—day in and day out, starting at birth—about masculinity and femininity, information which is inherent in the practices in which they engage (in the sense of Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Piaget, 1997). Thus, the child registers *in passing* which modes of behavior and roles males and females adopt in its immediate vicinity or in public, which tasks they assume, and so on. It unconsciously takes note of the bodily characteristics and accessories that are typical of each gender and observes which physical activities male and female individuals in its lifeworld are expected to engage in, which bodily behaviors and characteristics they are assumed to display, which gender-related identity offerings are intended for whom, and much more.

This more or less unconscious, manifold filtering of information leads to the successive formation of superordinate gender-related attributions. Human beings develop schemes (involving different layers of sedimented meaning, levels of differentiation, and degrees of awareness) of what is typical and atypical of the other gender and of what is viewed as normal or deviant (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 19 ff.).

People are certainly not always and not fully aware of the elements of gender-related knowledge that they apply in their everyday lives or express through action (Anderson, 1996, p. 230).<sup>7</sup> These are schemes that frequently go unnoticed and are spontaneously applied in people's everyday doings (Matthes & Schütze, 1973, p. 17)—be it in the form of assimilated patterns of action, routinized patterns of attribution or interpretation, or similar. Yet there can also be a high degree of awareness of the intersubjective validity of this knowledge as a frame of reference, and, as such, it can deliberately serve to guide action (Wagner, 1994, p. 99 ff.).

### **The Role of Parents in the Context of Children's (Gendered) World of Physical Activity**

Clearly, the basic premises outlined above also apply to attribution processes that typify gender-related elements of behavior and abilities in the domain of physical activities, sports, and the body. Time and again a child experiences in real-world situations (through symbolizations, feedback, identity offerings, solicitation, and so forth) which gender-typical expectations are directed toward both others' and its own physical behavior and is offered pertinent opportunities to engage in gender-specific behavior in the context of sports and other physical activities (Gieß-Stüber, 2006; Gieß-Stüber et al., 2008; Voss & Gramespacher, 2019).

Parents play a key role in this process in that they, as primary agents of child-rearing, socialization, and education, comment on or regiment a child's everyday physical activities, voice expectations regarding those activities, provide opportunities for bodily identification, offer perspectives of meaning by engaging in joint physical interaction, and select and enable participation in organized

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<sup>7</sup> Although the individual is not always and not fully aware of these stocks of knowledge and experience, they can (at least partially) be intentionally actualized and verbalized and, in consequence, find expression in the form of implicit or explicit definitions, expectations, hypotheses, commonsensical theories and so on (see, e.g., Honig et al., 1999).

sports programs. These physical-activity- and body-related interactions, offerings, interventions, acts of addressing the child, and so on all reflect the respective everyday social and cultural knowledge of the parents and the children's selected reference groups (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Kubandt, 2016a, 2016b). Participation in these (pre-structured) social practices provides the children with a framework for interpreting gender-related expectations, adopting the respective typologies, and enacting the self in terms of gender.

### **The Key Methodological Ideas**

This theoretical outline of the field of study so far suggests that qualitative research provides an appropriate approach to the phenomena of interest here. Qualitative research approaches its object from an understanding that “conceives of the social world as a world that is constituted through interaction and, from the perspective of both the individual and collectives, is structured on the basis of meaning” (Krüger, 1997, p. 204; my translation). In accordance with its constructivist foundations and epistemological implications, qualitative research seeks to interpret the phenomena under study as nexuses of meaning. The goal of such research is thus not to make statements about the prevalence or distribution of the observed phenomena and formulate universal hypotheses about law-like relationships of cause and effect that preferably extend beyond the cases investigated. The objective is rather to reconstruct and analyze in detail and for the respective cases the subjective patterns of thought and action, the latent meaning of action, the structures in social fields, and so on in light of the wider context in which they are embedded (Kelle, 1994, p. 11f.). The research methodology must thus start from the acting individuals' subjective patterns of description, explanation, attribution, and their systems of values. This requires techniques of data collection that offer the respondents as much opportunity as possible to articulate freely their interpretations and perspectives along with methods of analysis that are appropriate to this data and enable the researcher to (also) unearth the deeper layers of meaning inherent in their utterances. This brief description delineates the basic methodological framework underlying this research.

### **Research Questions and Methodological Design of the Studies**

For approximately eight years, the Chair of Sports Education and Didactics at the University of Göttingen has, in various steps, been pursuing a research program on physical-activity socialization in childhood. This research approaches our topic by applying two different foci. First, we inquire into the physical activities of children, as described and pre-structured by their parents, with an eye to the gender images inherent in these practices, the familial (milieu-specific) logics that they point to, the extent to which these practices offer children different opportunities of learning and experiencing according to gender, and how the genders are positioned in relation to one another in the process. It further analyzes the parental discourses (related to physical activities, sports, and the body) and the spectrum of (gender-related) norms that guide them in raising their children. We also look at the commercial products that the children are equipped with and ask whether and to what extent they bear elements of gendering. Second, our research proceeds from the children themselves, who are four- to ten-year-old children from different family backgrounds. We have sought to gain insight into their processes of self-attribution and the attributions that they make to their physical and sports activities, the role of gender in this context, how they (hierarchically) relate the genders, what kind of normative typifications they have internalized with regard to the category of ‘gender’ and ‘physical activity,

sports, and the body.’

In terms of methodology, our research is informed by grounded theory (Breuer, 2010). For data collection, we employed ethnographic observation and interviewing (Kelle & Breidenstein, 1996; Bollig & Kelle, 2012; Fritzsche & Tervooren, 2012). We used guided interviews to ask the parents (over a period of several years) about the everyday physical activities of their children, our focus being on organized sports, joint physical activities between children and parents, informal everyday physical behavior, interaction styles that emphasize physicality, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the interviews also sought to tease out the spectrum of norms to which the parents subscribe (general and gender-related ideas that guide action as well as that which is considered self-evident and thus goes without saying). In the course of the studies, these data were analyzed for deeper layers of meaning, for instance, in regard to implicit gender knowledge or familial, milieu-specific logics (Hitzler & Honer, 1997; Breuer, 2010).

This was complemented by ethnographic observations of selected families conducted in settings that are informative with regard to the aforementioned foci and to which the families allowed access. The designated settings for such observations were those where joint physical activities take place, such as public swimming pools, parks, soccer grounds, and similar, but also interactions at home (encouragement, boundary-drawing, acts of addressing the child in the context of physical activities) that provide insight into potentially gendered symbolic practices (e.g., the furnishings of the child’s room, clothing, toys, accessories) and pre-structured gendered patterns of interaction. Such data collection involved accompanying the children during their individual sports and physical activities and employing interview prompts to elicit the children to describe, contextualize, and interpret their physical activities (Hunger et al., 2019). The goal here was to understand the significance of the respective activity also from the children’s perspectives and to interpret the respective setting with respect to how it pre-structures their possible experiences.

The observations, interviews, and conversations in the field were subsequently condensed in the form of narrative-descriptive field notes and organized—preliminarily—according to thematic sequences. The data were analyzed in line with the concept of grounded theory by coding them and applying (sequential-analytical) hermeneutical procedures. Specifically, this involves examining the utterances and observations for underlying patterns of action, knowledge, and interpretation, the actors’ systems of relevance, and so on to unearth the deeper layers and latent structures of meaning. This was initially done case by case. As the analyses progressed, the objective was to draw out homologous structures and cross-case patterns (Soeffner, 1989; Soeffner & Hitzler, 1994; Soeffner, 2003). The different sets of data provided more extensive opportunities to contextualize and reflect on the data.

## Selected Findings

Although the parental discourse on ‘child-rearing and gender’ often emphasizes values such as gender equality and individuality, the domain of physical activity, sports, and the body proves to be an area that serves as an overarching anchor (across milieus) for solidifying gender inequality during childhood—both at the level of a tacit gendered system of orientation and at the level of the

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<sup>8</sup> We did not ask our respondents directly about the duality of gender in the immediate interview situation. If they did not bring up the subject on their own, however, we did float the category (as a possible dimension of interpretation) during the interview to augment the interviewees’ self-reflection and encourage them to position themselves accordingly in regard to the context in question.

situationally actuated spectrum of norms governing the gender typology.

Accordingly, parents across all milieus equip their children of kindergarten and elementary-school age with gendered symbols—visible to all—that dichotomize the genders at the level of the body *and* character, as it were (4.1); more or less subtly enable girls to have different experiences from boys among this age group and to engage in different forms of enactment from boys by pre-structuring their children's physical activities or choosing specific sports (4.2–4.4); they further assume that boys' and girls' physical behavior is driven by different causes and needs (4.5) and

apply a hierarchical system of social recognition in the context of physical activities that is aligned by gender (4.6). In the following, I will address these selected aspects and focus the discussion on the findings for boys. The findings for girls will be presented only occasionally for the purpose of contrast.

### Offerings of Male Identity through Body-Focused Symbolism

Gender symbolism plays a significant role for children of kindergarten and elementary-school age. This is particularly so when it comes to gendered appliqués attached to children's everyday utensils, which unfold a tremendous and, with age, increasingly important potential for distinction. From backpacks and school bags to lunchboxes, drinking bottles, pencil cases, gym bags, T-shirts, underwear, and the like, nearly every article of daily use that is owned by a child bears symbols that inform us about the gender of its user and, what is more, about characteristic behaviors attributed to that gender.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the motifs offered girls are, by comparison, mostly peaceful and less dynamic, such as butterflies, hearts, unicorns, or princesses and similar, all of which embody as their key qualities harmony and aesthetics, the symbols that address boys draw on classic, socially relevant themes, such as (men's) soccer, police, firefighters, and so forth or hero figures—typically protected by copyright—such as (currently) Spider Man (super hero), *Star Wars* (heroic epic), *Cars* (racecar story), or Lego Ninjago (fighters of evil). On the whole, all of these images (with the exception of 'cute animal designs') express behavioral elements associated with boys such as strength, competitiveness, aggressiveness, an affinity for action, technology, and spatial exploration and suggest a high level of physical presence and activity.<sup>10</sup> In our studies, this symbolism with which children are equipped is relevant insofar as it consistently evokes or suggests dichotomizing expectations of *physical* behavior. Accordingly, once boys reach an age at which they become conscious of the gender to which they belong, they make recurrent reference to it in the physical games that they play, either narratively or explicitly physically by engaging in symbolic sword fights, action-laden and risk-prone physical activities, adopting dominant poses, and so forth.

As they grow older (from about age five on), boys become increasingly aware that the symbolic world pre-structured for them by businesses and the media (and provided by their parents) and the

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<sup>9</sup> In recent years, we have observed an increasing differentiation by gender of commercial products for children.

Gendered symbols printed on toiletries (shower gels, shampoos), sweets (cake decorations), or textiles (clothes, bed linen), to name but a few examples, address boys and girls in a dichotomizing manner. And the identity offerings that they make, both physically and in terms of character, are always the same.

<sup>10</sup> Our studies of children of kindergarten and elementary-school age show that the gender symbolism represented on the children's accessories and aligned along the criteria mentioned above are typical throughout and statistically significant as well.

activities and meanings that this world intends for them are fundamentally different from the symbolic world of girls. Once they realize this, mixing gender symbolism—at least in public—is usually out of the question, as an awareness of the gender dichotomy comes with the need to assure oneself of where one belongs and the desire to display this for others to see.<sup>11</sup>

Parents, too, regularly report their sons' attempts to set themselves apart from girls, attempts that they mostly observe in public situations.

*“When he was little ... and didn't get it yet what it means to be a boy, he put on anything ... even red nail polish on his fingers ... a hairclip and so on. None of that was a problem. All of a sudden that was over, namely, once*

*he noticed, ‘Hey, I'm a boy! Boys don't do things like that!’ ... And of course there were the others laughing at him.”*

Although the parents themselves are occasionally surprised at the rigidity of this boundary-drawing, they nevertheless systematically fuel the boys' body-focused symbolism and the symbolic boundary-drawing toward the other gender that this involves by purchasing the corresponding objects. In this context, especially educationally inclined parents attempt to verbally relativize the significance of this symbolism and the traditional gender typology embedded therein (“That's just a phase”; “... because all boys just have that”).

### **Pre-Structuring of Physical Activities along Gender Lines**

Similar to how parents more or less unconsciously reinforce pertinent images of what it means to be a boy by providing body-related symbolism that emphasizes gender dichotomy, parental governance of their children's physical activities does not conform to the postulated norm of gender equality either. Both at the level of children's informal everyday physical activities and organized sports, the data show that the parents practice a partially subtle, partially obvious form of gender separation, even though they are not necessarily aware of the implications and consequences of their gender-related actions and decisions.

For boys of kindergarten age, especially fathers or significant male others create or provide access to gendered spaces in which they experience *everyday physical activities*. In rather inconspicuous situations of engaging in physical activities in the family context (e.g., physical play outside, body-related interactions at home, visits to public swimming pools), boys, in contrast to girls, are recurrently, more or less subtly encouraged to demonstrate strength, be competitive, take risks, test their limits, and so on (“We engage in little fights in the evenings”; “... my husband always challenges him ... and that turns into a real competition then”; “so that he becomes more self-confident to do things”; “feeling muscles and the like”).<sup>12</sup>

Even though fathers are not typically the kindergartners' regular caregivers during the day, the

<sup>11</sup> In our interviews, the boys recurrently emphasize the special nature of their everyday symbolism, which they describe by referring to pertinent behavioral characteristics (e.g., “courage”). In so doing, their explanations are largely declarative and self-referential (“Boys have Star Wars just because they are boys. Because they like to fight ... and are interested in things like that”). They draw a clear line between their symbolism and the iconography for girls, to whom they attribute characteristics from the realm of ‘aesthetics’ and attest a lack of physical strength and readiness for action (“Girls are mostly into beautiful princesses”).

<sup>12</sup> Only in individual cases did we observe boys in our studies being encouraged to engage in aesthetic-expressive activities or forms of dancing. In these cases, the parents themselves were involved in the arts or in dance (either privately or professionally).

interviews show that these physical interactions with fathers make a sustained impression on the boys and that they perceive themselves as participating in an exclusive context (“us men, so to speak. That is, Dad and me ...”).

### Men as Allies in Activities that Emphasize Physicality

At elementary-school age, physical activities take place increasingly less with parents and more with peers. Even so, father–son interactions in the context of sports activities continue to provide special perspectives of meaning inasmuch as fathers recurrently adopt the role of a ‘challenger’ who elicits physical comparisons, tests motor ability, and lends himself to being a partner in the pursuit of body-related interests.

Our analysis of the data on both fathers and mothers shows that fathers and sons are essentially perceived as equals in terms of their bodies and needs. A mother or a woman cannot ‘properly’ address, prompt, and satisfy boys’ (supposed) physical needs.<sup>13</sup> Ideally, it should be the father or another man who elicits and attends to typical boy behavior (“They just need a man who can do that with them”; “a woman can’t do that”).<sup>14</sup>

Single mothers, too, frequently explicitly attribute this role to their ex-partners or see the need to

organize a male counterpart for sports- and body-related events (“it’s important ... that a man does that with him”). What becomes apparent here is that, despite an emancipatory normative desire for a *new* image of boys, the parents in essence continuously reactivate images of masculinity that emphasize assertiveness, courage, and self-confidence. Put pointedly, the type of male-connoted interaction that is called for is not that the boys simply do *something* with a significant male other (e.g., bake cookies, do puzzles, or talk). At issue is rather the forging of a *body-related alliance between men* that enables the boy to activate and act out his (supposed) natural needs for physical activity in ways that are in line with his ‘nature,’ if you will (on this see chapter 3, sections 4–6.). In this vein, the two play soccer or laser tag, go swimming, climbing, or canoeing and—in sharing these physical activities—activate selected perspectives of meaning such as risk, competitiveness, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

### Gendered Choice of Sports

Whereas parents see the sporting and other physical activities of children of kindergarten age more along the lines of ‘letting off steam’ or ‘trying things out,’ this perspective increasingly shifts during elementary-school age toward viewing them as involving the acquisition of motor skills, the development and shaping of a hobby, and so on. From the parents’ perspective, organized sports are activities of major significance for boys and girls of this age. Parents interpret them as

<sup>13</sup> An exception to this pattern are cases in which the mother (as opposed to the father) is very active and ambitious in sports.

<sup>14</sup> We found similar patterns of reasoning in some of our substudies that pursued this issue in Göttingen kindergartens. Female early childhood teachers, for instance, regularly pointed out that, because of being women, they were ill-equipped to attend to boys’ physical-activity needs or assigned the role of engaging in intense physical activities with the boys to male interns (or colleagues). On this, see also Faulstich-Wieland (2008) and Kuger et al. (2014).

<sup>15</sup> As mentioned above, the few cases that deviate from this pattern are ones in which the mother is attributed pronounced expertise in sports.

being necessary for their children's health and physical development and beneficial in terms of being a purposeful way for children to spend their leisure time. Although the parents usually justify the respective choice of sport in gender-neutral terms, the type of sport chosen as well as the deeper structure of meaning underpinning their reasoning reveals that the parents do indeed associate gender-specific expectations with the respective sports activities.

### **Soccer as the archetype of masculine sports socialization**

Overall, in accordance with the design of our qualitative approach, we encountered a broad range of organized sports choices among the boys in our studies.<sup>16</sup> This notwithstanding, soccer is of *major* significance in the lifeworld of these boys across all milieus and particularly so from elementary-school age on (in terms of club membership, being an activity during school breaks and leisure time, the boys' media interest, and collector cards). Whereas educationally deprived parents succinctly acknowledge this interest and hobby as being more or less 'normal for boys' ("Boys just like to play soccer"), educationally inclined parents often offer elaborate explanations referring to their son's *individual desire* to play soccer, sometimes to his *special talent*, the *inevitable influence of peers*, and so forth, thus verbally distancing themselves from this being a quasi-unconscious, routine choice of a classic boys' sport.<sup>17</sup>

For the boys themselves, playing soccer is an important ingredient in establishing their gender identity. Here they experience themselves as participating in a setting that is clearly perceived to be masculine, one that is oriented toward the 'professionals' and of high social status. They see their coach's often stern tone and frequent physical disciplinary action in the event of misbehavior ("ten pushups if we keep yakking") as evidence of the importance of their setting, which (in their view) resembles what the soccer professionals do, only on a smaller scale. Moreover, good soccer skills ensure acceptance from peers that is of great significance especially when it comes to the formation of hierarchies in school (e.g., when playing during school breaks) and offers a wide range of opportunities to connect with the adult, typically masculine, lifeworld. All in all, soccer serves the function of maintaining group gender identity inasmuch as the boys' shared interest in what in this age group is perceived to be a male-connotated activity, shared values, and so forth allows them to view themselves as being alike, also in contrast to those outside the group.

As for girls who play soccer, the meanings attributed to the sport are different both from the parents' and the girls' perspectives. In the case of girls, the choice of sport is often motivated by emancipatory considerations on part of the parents ("it's just not typically girly") and involves very tentative expectations in terms of socialization. Above all, the parents emphasize "having fun doing it" and the "possibility of quitting" any time. Parents, and fathers in particular, are less likely to encourage girls to pursue this hobby with the same earnestness than they do boys (rarely do they follow media reports on soccer or watch soccer games together or buy jerseys and similar). When fathers play soccer with their daughters, they do so less as a challenger who elicits performance but rather engage in physical interaction as one who is more indulgent and admiring.

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<sup>16</sup> Among other areas, the participants in our studies were also recruited in various sports settings (e.g., gymnastics, swimming, soccer, martial arts, tennis, handball, and dancing for boys and girls).

<sup>17</sup> In individual cases in rural areas, organized soccer was seen as the only option for lack of alternatives. But even in this case, the decision for the boy to join the local soccer club was justified by reference to peer-related necessities and the boy's wish to do so.

### Choice of sport as means of readjustment toward typical boylike behavior

Not all sports that boys engage in (e.g., swimming, gymnastics, handball, basketball) offer the opportunity to contour their profile toward the outside world and maintain masculine group identity to the same extent as soccer does. When their boys pursue other sports, the parents in our interviews are less likely to mention the typical interests of boys to explain their choice of sport but rather emphasize physical objectives and the sport being suitable to their son's talent or his 'type.' That parents are (tacitly) guided by classical gender images manifests itself at points where they become aware of their son displaying behavior in substantial conflict with the spectrum of norms that they perceive to define boys or the boy failing to engage in physical behavior that meets at least minimum standards of being 'boylike.' In such cases, they anticipate their child being socially disadvantaged or stigmatized by peers. To remedy this, parents attempt to encourage readjustments toward more boylike behavior particularly via the choice of sport, even if this (in individual cases) involves compromising their emancipatory image of how boys should be. Our data shows that parents whose sons exhibit no interest in competitive sports activities, display signs of insecurity and anxiety in their physical behavior, or give the impression of being a loner may well attempt to nudge their sons toward developing the expected behavior by having him participate in team sports or martial arts. Even if the category of gender is not directly mentioned when discussing their parenting considerations in this context, evidence from the interviews suggests that this kind of intervention most likely has gendered connotations. They hope that participation in the respective sport will lead the boy to develop assertiveness, team spirit, or toughness ("so that he learns to take a hit ..."; "so that he doesn't always immediately start crying") and abandon the perceived deficient behavior ("I signed him up for a soccer club ... The pediatrician also recommended it because he [their son] is so insecure."). When it comes to girls displaying similar behavior (e.g., anxiety when engaging in physical activities; no interest in competing in sports), we rarely observe parents intervening in the same way. When girls show anxiety and insecurity, parents (who view this with some concern as well) rather look for settings where the girls can engage in physical activities in ways that correspond with this behavior ("where there is not so much pressure to perform") and not, as in the case of boys, a setting that confronts the child with its 'weaknesses' or where it is expected to overcome them.

### Creating Plausibility for the Gender-Typical Socialization of Boys in Sports

A striking observation is that, even though parents clearly contribute to the gendered socialization of boys and girls in the context of physical activities and sports, they largely deny playing any active part in their children developing gendered patterns of behavior in these areas. Rather they present themselves as meeting their responsibility as parents to attend to the *observed needs* of their children by satisfying the latter or to comply *individually* with their children's *individual* desires. The parents (for various reasons) are not aware of, or do not experience as problematic, the fact that they are largely treading the path of traditional gender stereotypes in the context of sports and physical activity and in many ways are fueling a traditional image of boys. Especially educationally inclined parents, who claim to have overcome the 'old gender stereotypes,' show signs of becoming unsettled during the interview as they begin to realize to some degree—evoked by the situational circumstances—how close the physical-activity

socialization of their sons resemble the traditional patterns. There is little reflection on these blind spots, however. Instead, parents tend to solidify the traditional perception of boys' physical behavior by reference to their "nature" or to "society."

When parents offer naturalizing explanations, they frequently speak of the typical "needs" of boys and refer to boys' "hormones" and "drives." In this context, a more or less privately held belief frequently surfaces that this "really is somehow inherent in boys." To underpin this biologicistic perspective, some also take recourse to pseudo-scientific explanations.<sup>18</sup> In essence, they invoke an image of boys being defined by specific physical characteristics ("an intense urge to be active," "strength and energy") and repeatedly refer to pertinent elements of behavior seen as typical natural dispositions of boys, such as dominance, competitiveness, readiness to fight ("boys want to compare themselves with others"; "boys have to fight"; "boys are more aggressive"). Naturalist reasoning thus immediately diffuses any potential contradiction between normative thought and practical action and serves to consciously solidify hitherto unconsciously held traditional gender images. In effect, reference to the natural general physical needs of boys severely restricts discretion in parenting and underlines the parents' responsibility to do justice to the 'natural dispositions' of boys instead.

In those cases in which parents do not invoke the biology of boys' physical behavior to deny that the parents themselves play a part in forming their child's gender identity, they often stress *another* kind of parental responsibility and point to the power of social "role conceptions" and "expectations." Here, parents stress that they are at a loss against the dominant influence of other agents of socialization (media, peers, school, symbolism) and that attempts to raise boys in ways that depart from typical gender behavior carries the risk of the boy (and his parents) being socially marginalized ("[when] a boy doesn't play along ... that doesn't go over well"; "as a mother or as parents, I think you make yourself pretty unpopular or ridiculous"; "the boys laughed at him because he doesn't really have a clue about soccer").

A mother who claims to be very aware of gender issues put it in these words:

*"Here, we're not living in Berlin, but in a small village of a few souls. Here, there is no queer dance group or anything like that; ... there is only the soccer club, where everybody goes to. ... of course he wants to go, too ... And he has to join in if he wants to have contact with others ..."*

She thus ultimately sees her parental responsibility in making sure that the boy experiences a typical boy's socialization in sports to ensure that he is in line with common practices of social

recognition in society and among his peers.

Whereas boys' specific behavior when engaging in physical activities is frequently explained by reference to "hormones," "drives," "dispositions," or pressure from society, girls' behavior in physical activities is described by highlighting their individuality (her "personality," her "individual type"). Although parents draw on an internalized typology for assessing girls' behavior in physical activities to identify deviation from the norm here as well, this typology, in contrast to that of boys, is neither perceived to be biologically determined nor socially binding. Girls can and are permitted to be wild and adventurous.<sup>19</sup> But they may also be gentle or insecure without this

<sup>18</sup> This naturalizing line of reasoning was supplemented by pointing to "society," which is seen to foster gendered expectations against which "you are powerless anyway."

<sup>19</sup> Girls being "wild and adventurous" thus even comes with positive connotations, as these patterns of behavior are (implicitly) associated with developing a positive self-image. However, parents rarely actively encourage or support such behavior on a broad scale.

immediately being associated with (developmental) deficits. As opposed to boys, the image of girls in the domain of physical activity, sports, and the body thus spans a much broader normative spectrum and is much less rigid.

Accordingly, parents typically believe themselves to have greater liberty in how they promote girls in the context of physical activities and sports, as they are required to accommodate neither biological needs nor precise societal expectations. This potential openness in the rearing and socialization of girls in the domain of physical activity is often designated as an advantage. However, the absence of binding normative constraints in this respect is also a sign that “it doesn’t really matter” as much as it does when it comes to boys (“You try to raise a boy to be a boy. With girls, it doesn’t make a difference.”). Not least parents’ different treatment of boys and girls in this respect documents their varying appreciation of boys’ and girls’ habitus when it comes to physical activity. Typical statements such as, “She would have made a good boy” or “He was raised like a girl,” clearly bear connotations of hierarchically ranked recognition along gender lines that is skewed in favor of boys.

### **Self-Attributions and Boundary-Drawing in the Boys’ Perspective**

The boys themselves attribute certain characteristics to their gender, especially in contrast to girls and in regard to boys’ patterns of behavior and interests when it comes to physical activity. Although they also see some commonalities in boys’ and girls’ interests and skills in the domain of physical activity, their gender self-image derives primarily from *setting themselves apart* from girls and doing so by reference to the norm of male physical superiority to the other gender. Boys at the end of kindergarten age often stress that they are “much stronger,” “much faster,” “more courageous,” “better fighters,” and can “jump further” than girls. Even if the boys are aware of exceptions to the perceived typical pattern (“Malte isn’t very brave ... and he doesn’t run well either”), for them these dualistic gender attributions clearly serve as a structure that creates order. Yet the superior worth that the boys attribute to themselves on account of their gender does not end there. Particularly in elementary-school age, when children increasingly interact within single-gender groups, our analyses show that boys see themselves as operating in a *more relevant* context than girls (“Because boys just do cooler stuff. All the time”; “Girls just walk around and talk”). Whereas boys see their own physical activities as defined by competitive, combative, and exploratory elements, in which courage, risk, performance, and a readiness for action play a role, they characterize the domain of girls’ physical activities as revolving around the girls’ own bodies (“They dance and feel so beautiful”; “They hang from bars and stuff like that,” “They twist and bend.”).

For the boys, acting in public within the context of masculine gender attributions invariably (also) indicates an identification with ‘the important’ or a sense of belonging to ‘the more relevant.’<sup>20</sup> For boys at this age, visibly engaging in physical activities associated with the other gender for others to see bears the risk of losing recognition of one’s ‘masculinity’ and would indicate a sense of belonging to a lower-status group (“so then they think that I can’t keep up with the boys”).

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<sup>20</sup> We could observe a casual handling of the ‘other’ symbolism and participation in the sportive lifeworld of girls among the boys in our studies only when they either adopted a stance of ironic distancing or in the (rare) case of having been exposed to the cognitive deconstruction of gender images (typically by parents deliberately upending gender clichés).

## Discussion of Selected Findings

Whereas parents almost without exception support equal opportunity between the genders at the normative level, when it comes to action they tend to promote gender-typical socialization in the context of physical activities, sports, and the body that incorporates traditional images and behavioral characteristics of boys. In the case of girls, parents tend to perceive a more diverse realm of opportunity for development with regard to physical activities and sports. The situation is different for boys. Here, the spectrum of norms surrounding physical activity, sports, and the body that the parents have internalized and are commonly shared among the larger public is much more restrictive by comparison. The (still) prevailing image of boys across all milieus is in essence defined by body-related behavioral characteristics such as courage, strength, and assertiveness and incorporates specific conceptions of the relation between the genders.

This image of boys, which is (in many ways unconsciously) embedded in parents' thought and action, is extremely stable inasmuch as it is biologically charged and acts as a social model that is bestowed with great efficacy and power to provide orientation. Common discourses among educationally inclined parents that relativize the impact of gender additionally gloss over this practice and thus unconsciously stabilize it.

This latter finding—that is, the discrepancy between actual practice and a normative discourse that is shaped primarily by the educationally inclined milieus—is particularly noteworthy and merits discussion. Whereas educationally deprived parents often hold an uncritical view of treating the genders differently and voice this openly, educationally inclined parents, convinced that they themselves are progressive and liberal, frequently act on the premise that they do not engage in such practices that foster gender stereotypes. In the event that they (more or less accidentally) do become aware of gendered patterns of action in their own practices, these are usually justified as a matter of individual choice and thus as being appropriate. In referring to their individuality and their fundamentally progressive mindset, educationally inclined parents do not see themselves as part of a general structural problem, namely, the problem of reproducing traditional images of boys. Rather, they present themselves as representatives of a modern generation of parents who advocate gender equality, and in so doing, they rhetorically neutralize the actual unequal treatment and opportunities of girls and boys.

It cannot be emphasized enough how impactful and socially significant the consequences of this general practice of treating boys differently from girls are in the context of physical activity, sports, and the body. Our studies have shown that the boys invoke a paradigm at the age of five or six that stresses their physical superiority over girls. For themselves and their male peers, they chiefly claim aspects of physical behavior that are associated with high social status in society (e.g., readiness for action, strength, courage). They view their own physical activities as always involving clearly visible challenges, whereas they indirectly denigrate the typical activities of girls as self-referential or content with the self (see Derecik, 2011; Frohn, 2012; Balz, Bindel & Frohn, 2017). Beginning at an early age, this stabilizes a hierarchy of recognition based on the superior masculine potential for physical performance (see Balz, Bindel & Frohn, 2017, p. 54 ff.). In view of the fact that patterns of interpretation that are solidified early on have an enduring impact on later life, there is good reason to devote particular attention to the skewed reality of gendered opportunities for boys and girls.

The results of the qualitative studies reported here are not of the kind to make statistically representative statements about this field of research. What the results show instead is common

patterns across a wide range of individual cases, which thus substantiate an empirically saturated typology in accordance with the concept of grounded theory. In this vein, the focus of this contribution has been on unearthing these general structural patterns, and it does so by tracing the logic of binary gender discrimination.

It goes without saying that this focus on general structural patterns and the decision to abstain from differentiating the findings along additional categories of diversity and to develop the argument from the angle of gender differentiation involves simplifications and bears risks, for instance, the risk of reifying gender differences or of blindness toward divergent patterns in dealing with gender. The decision to proceed in this manner has its roots, however, in the findings discussed above: During a time in which the social and pedagogical environment is dominated by normative demands for individualization and diversity, thinking about structural challenges frequently comes up short. The continuous reference to diversity and opportunity often obstructs our clear view of the fact that an old basic pattern persists and resurfaces in the form of new variants and that inequalities are solidified in this way while going unnoticed.

### **Conclusion**

The findings presented here demonstrate the dominance, virulence, and reproduction of traditional attributions of masculinity in the context of ‘childhood and physical activity’ and underscore the need for discourse in sports education and early childhood education to move beyond its primary focus on children’s general developmental potentials and open up to empirical insights on the social embeddedness of children’s physical activities and, against the backdrop of a lifeworld perspective, empirically explore the respective opportunities for development through physical activity. A perspective chiefly centered on (theoretical) opportunities of development through physical activity and on individual paths of development is prone to overlook inequalities rooted in socialization and raises issues of inclusion.

Our intention to establish in the respective discourses the insights gained from these findings will be challenging indeed, as we can expect them to be met with the firm belief held in many contexts that equality has been achieved, gender-related differences have been overcome, and diversity prevails.

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