Shooting Hoops: Why Men’s Presence Negatively Affects Women’s Athletic Performance


Despite the significant progress women have made toward gender equality, men continue to dominate in many areas. This dominance, whether real or imagined, effectively narrows the career choices for both men and women by suggesting that one gender may be superior in certain skills and dominant in specific behaviors. Unfortunately, some studies have found that this gender categorization starts at an early age. A study by Smulce and Kembre (2006) found that by as early as third grade, young boys and girls differentiate between what are considered masculine sports, such as football, and feminine sports, such as cheerleading. This awareness of gender differences and gender categorization is very likely a result of gender socialization (Chen & Rao, 2011), since there is not a marked gender difference in gross motor development at that age (Larson et al., 2007).

In relation to gender characterization and gender differences, Viallon and Martinez (2009) studied gender-based group dynamics and found that the context of the performance group with minority status affected both men and women. Studies have theorized that learning deficits were due to a stereotype threat, the widespread performance in a specific task due to anxiety caused by internalized negative stereotypes (Heilbrun & Ben-Ze've, 2004). According to Lord and Sauser (1985), being a token minority disrupts an individual’s cognitive functioning on group tasks. Thus, a woman’s token minority status could result in cognitive impairment in domains especially attributed to men.

However, the question remains whether stereotype threat impacts nonintellectual abilities such as athletic performance, thus dampening real equality in the athletic domain (Belicki, Jellison, Bredell, McConnell, & Carr, 2006; Chalubas, Sarrazin, Stone, & Cary, 2008). A study by Harbin and Greco (2009) found that participants rated sports, such as basketball and soccer, as more masculine even though both genders play these sports at the collegiate and professional levels. In addition, McCabe (2007) noted that women who played basketball tended to believe that their abilities were inferior to those of men.

This is the case, the stereotype threat would be expected to appear in basketball shooting skills. The present study sought to observe whether being the gender minority would affect women’s performance in the stereotyped male-dominated sport of basketball. It was hypothesized that female participants in an all-female condition would shoot more basketballs successfully than female participants in a female minority condition, was examined using an Independent Samples T-Test. There was a significant difference between the groups, with participants in the all-female condition, (M = 5.73, SD = 1.57) shooting more baskets more successfully than the participants in the female minority condition (M = 4.32, SD = 1.67), t(37) = −2.78, p = .008 (See Figures 1 and 2).

The results of the study support the hypothesis that female participants would shoot more successful baskets in the all-female condition compared to female participants in the female-minority condition. In addition, the data supports the study’s premise that men’s presence can have a negative effect on women’s performance in the area of basketball, a predominantly stereotyped masculine sport. Furthermore, the results clearly support the implication that women feel a sense of inferiority, due to stereotype threat, when performing stereotypically male-dominated activities such as basketball in the presence of men.

This awareness of gender differences may be a result of early gender socialization at home and in the classroom (Chen & Rao, 2011). With this in mind, perhaps one of the ways to decrease the negative effects of stereotype threat is through early educational intervention. Recent studies have found that educational programs that alter intergroup gender boundaries (Rosenbach & Crisp, 2006) and introduce positive female role models (Marx & Roman, 2002) effectively decrease the negative effects of stereotype threat in stereotypically male activities.

Future studies should consciously introduce the gender stereotype, to see whether or not the emphasized awareness of the threat would affect performance less negatively. Moreover, a more realistic setting might introduce more pressure and subsequently affect performance. For instance, a study might use an actual basketball court, regulation size baskets, and require participants to shoot from the free throw line. In addition, future studies should also examine the development of stereotype threat in young girls to determine whether all-female schools might increase success in academic areas like math and science when there are no boys to reinforce the stereotype threat.

It is clear that the stereotype threat continues to negatively impact women’s performance across both cognitive and athletic domains. Future studies that address this issue are warranted and should focus society’s attention on the stereotype threat. In this way, real steps toward progressive change can be realized.