

## **SPORT, GENDER DIFFERENCES AND SEXUALITY BETWEEN SOCIAL STEREOTYPES AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FOR RECOGNITION OF SUBJECTIVITIES**

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**ABSTRACT.** Sport symbolizes a powerful instrument to propagate social stereotypes that feed and exacerbate also gender differences. The discrimination messages about gender are very frequent in sport and most of the time they have not direct and clear appearances, but the signals are implicit, hidden and nonverbal, not for this less effective. The educational instance that emerges strongly is which that consists in supporting individual paths of self-research, which could mean a suffered journey that requires difficult integrations. In light of this, what can be the educability dimension which should be supported by a sport that focuses on the individual's subjectivity, thus also his sexuality? Intending sport in a broader sense, and then considering all forms of organized activity related to movement, it might be appropriate to induce several aspects that may confer to sport an intentional educational value. It is at this point that the pedagogy is called upon to reflect critically on sports situations, to direct actions towards the construction of the learning *setting* that can promote wellness and well-being of involved persons. On a pedagogical perspective, is worthwhile reflect on how sport can becomes a context able to allow subjects to test themselves freely, even developing abilities and behaviors useful to feed life skills to a harmonious growth with themselves and in their own living environments. A sport supporter of universal ideals must undoubtable accept the category of difference in order to support and promote values of subjectivities.

**Keywords:** gender differences, sexuality, education, sport pedagogy

### **1. Body, Gender and Sport between Nature and Culture**

Individual identity is also built in connection with the acknowledgement and internalization of values and models of the culture where the person lives, that culture influences the way of thinking and behave, than, also the way to live and feel. The individual is considered, than, as a real "system" integrates into an environment made both of natural disposition and, therefore biological, both of

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cultural conditioning, than educational (Bateson, 1979), where the mind-body-environment connection is attributed to an ecological and systemic prospective of processes and system involved (Fischer et al., 2007). This triple connection emphasizes, therefore, the importance of education in the processes of influence and growth of subjects, where the role of the body, his actions and languages are central (Lowen, 1958); in this sense, human body becomes a real “educational area” on which are played the line forms of historical, social and political negotiation that influence it and from which in their turn are influenced (La Cecla, 2009). The ideas that individuals build over time in connection with own and another’s body, as well as, the quality of actions that they express, are literally “shaped” by culture where they are immersed: “These perceptions are driven by external forces that shape our culture and set norms where capitalist world views are strongly developed and promoted. To argue that we all have different opinions of what we look like is essential to the cultural meaning of the body and manifested in the relationship that each of us has regarding our own body. There is no doubt, then, that the image that we wish to portray to the rest of the world about what we are, as a person, is often viewed through the eyes of others, and how we feel about the image that we portray is the most important aspect of the way in which we live in our body” (Gilbert, 1998, p. 69).

Despite acculturation and socialization processes pass through both formal education places both those non formal ones and informal, however, in literature is observed an unbalanced attention that does not attribute to the latter the importance they deserve; consider, for example , the role that peer group has in the processes of construction and consolidation of identity in adolescence (Santrock, 2008) and how in general backgrounds such as family, sports group, associations and all other places of social gathering exercise, on the ground of social learning processes, very important forms of influence. Priority pedagogical instance is that to accompany the growth processes of individuals supporting them in building their own point of view, connects to the emotional and action dimension. What happens when these contexts that should be in self-emancipation sense of growth and experimentation, instead of supporting personal constructions they wind up to be predetermined interpretations that often correspond with stereotypical visions of social relationship and between genders? The question raised is relevant because it is common to notice the tendency to ignore, in the matter in question where sport education take place, individual peculiarity and his instances and, obstruct his behavioral tendencies and his inclinations.

For this reason, it is necessary to reflect on that educational work that is carried also in the places which are not specifically educational or didactics, such as sports, health and personal care (Tramma, 2015). The recognition of subjectivity, the way of a person to be different from another, to be himself, in the other words, passes through body and his behavior first of all (Husserl, 1950; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

The way in which persons conceptualize the body and the movement is considerably marked by gender culture that expresses every day itself in the different context of life (Ulivieri, 2014). The interest on gender argument refers to, therefore, theme of identity; this means having to do with the social expectations related to being male or being female within certain boundaries. From birth, boys and girls are raised differently in various cultures, sometimes even at the same, precisely in relation to a several educational conditioning pertinent to the idea that parents and the social context have about male or female.

Many research contributions that have analyzed the ways in which the gender is internalized since early childhood; more specifically, learning theory emphasizes the reinforcing component in the process of sexual typing (Schaffer, 1996); essentially, it tends to reward, encourage and incentivize the right behavior to one sex rather than to another. In the family context, than, precisely father and mother educate sons and daughters in distinction of gender through specific behavior, intentional or not. Also as Carol Gilligan (1987) has highlighted, masculine or feminine education gives more space to male autonomy and independence and encourage more social dependence for women; this causes a difference of social expectations in connection with gender and, so, unequal opportunities to one and to others, for example, approving formative opportunities and resources that effectively channel the experience according to gender criteria.

The ways with which subjects live the gender symbolize the start point for identity construction (Connell, 2002), that influences gender social relationships that will be established; identity, socialization environment and concerning enactments cause a systematic conditioning on the quality of situations of which individuals will do experience.

In regard to the sport education, it is interesting to show the matter of bonds and possibilities (Ceruti, 1986) in connection with gender discussions; in this sense, it refers to many missed opportunities, many inconveniences experienced by those persons whose native culture precludes them even to take on particular physical activity or sport. Debate sport theme with that of gender means to ask that socio-cultural imaginary that always influences our existences.

Sport symbolizes a cultural product that in turn produce culture (Dunning & Coakley, 2000). If sport is the society mirror which has produced it, than it can be addressed on an educational plan to come to light the relationship property between body, gender, identity in the current historical climate; the sport, also like media, fashion and popular cultures in a broad sense, in fact, convey ideas that play a decisive role in the body views, gender appearances and body identity, since from the early childhood (Gilbert, 1998). As widely acknowledged from supranational sport organizations (IOC, 2016), health is considered a continuous bio- psycho-social balance process among subject and life context and not simply a state of absence of disease, the sport has an exact social value. In fact, it produces positive effects on state of health and individuals' wellness and, for

this reason, it carries values such as equality and respect for diversity, intercultural and social inclusion (Isidori & Fraile, 2008). In view of this huge potential, which very often is the content of media campaign, in every day sport continuous to support many forms of inequality; among them stand out, those concerning gender differences. In women instance, for example, the sports world still goes on to give few opportunities of job placement and less tax provisions, as well as lowest salary, result of a sport culture which relegates them to subordinate positions than men (Pfister, 2010). The stereotypes in connection with gender, therefore, do not save sport world, giving rich field to build wrong legends. In this sense it is usual to think that women, compared to men, are less inclined to do sports; in the same way, from childhood, there are movement games for boys and others for girls, sports for boys and sports for girls.

All of this has considerable consequences also on selection criteria; choice a sport activity rather than another one, is guided not always by self-interests, his wishes, but, instead, by standards that are socially accepted and recognized. If it is possible to think that the attribution of specific characteristics of being male or female find in the sport a sort of social recognition, in light of the immediacy with which the body expresses the subjectivities, at the same time it can be supposed that the power of the sport to exercise influence is above all to refer to the development of sexual identity and, therefore, to all of those behavioral aspects that can be associated with being male or female as also to all of those forms of feeling that then translate in attitudes. It is absolutely evident, in this sense, as some sports are associated with male or female characteristics.

Also, concerning sport performance, the fact that women performances do not compare with those of men for well-known physiological and biological differences do not exclude the possibility for a person to choose any activity, with the aim of feeling good with himself and give wide possibility to express their subjectivity. These ways of thinking, obviously, had a crucial impact also on the diffusion of some sports linked with sex, even high level: "In many disciplines, women started competing chronologically later than their male counterparts did (hammer throw, pole vault, and 3000-m steeplechase were the last women's events introduced in Olympics; women still not compete in the 50-km race-walk). Even in 2012, the 1500-m freestyle, the longest pool event in Olympic swimming for men, is still not a competitive distance for women (who race only up to 800m)" (Capranica et al., 2013, p. 100).

Unfortunately most of sport remains a field prerogative of one sex: men are the majority to practice it, they are almost all men who represent the institutional leaders, and languages used are mainly male (McKay, Messner & Sabo, 2000). For this reason, even European Union takes an interest in gender issues in sport and, the Conference took place in Vilnius in 2013 had the main scope to create a set of actions, organized into a different level, run to realization

of environment without gender discriminations. The Conference has thus issued the “Strategy Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019” in which are some related data concerning the diffusion of violence against women in sport; as it has reported in document “[...] Gender-based violence and negative stereotypes in sport, for instance, are widespread. It harms victims not only in terms of their health and well-being, but also their working lives, thereby damaging their financial independence and the economy in general. It is estimated that 500.000 women and girls in the EU are at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM). In addition, women and girls make up the majority of human trafficking victims (68% women, 17% men, 12% girls and 3% boys” (EC, 2015, p. 8).

Sport symbolizes a powerful instrument to propagate social stereotypes that feed and exacerbate gender differences. Consider, for example, how female athletes can raise doubts about their femininity and heterosexuality due to their aggressive attitudes in the discipline practiced and how male athletes, showing themselves aggressive, can, instead, keep away from homosexuality spectre. To the men are required to appear muscular, strong and vigorous, orientated so hard to win at all costs, while women have to appear light, sinuous and graceful, besides to counterbalance the sports participation emphasizing their femininity (Salvini, 1982).

## **2. Sport and Sexuality: Which Condition of Educability?**

On a pedagogical perspective, is worthwhile reflect on how sport can becomes a context able to allow subjects to test themselves freely, even developing abilities and behaviors useful to feed life skills to a harmonious growth with themselves and in their own living environments (Bellantonio, 2014).

In order to build body identity, sport is a particularly important place, not only because it focuses on body and physicality, but also because it is an opportunity for self-knowledge, own resources and limits. The discrimination messages are very frequent and most of the time they have not direct and clear appearances, but the signals are implicit, hidden and nonverbal, not for this less effective. Body dimension encloses a direct communication mode, without mediations and, therefore, it is not coincidence that, sport is a place where predominant cultures find a preferential vehicle to diffusion, an environment where, according to someone, homophobia is regulatory and structural (Rizzo, 2006). This point of view can only marginalize homosexual because it does correspond the physical shape ways of being, doing and interacting already determined and where it is expected that each individual, male or female, it is recognized.

The presence of homosexual person in sports contexts is not accepted willingly where it refers to a certain collective imagination to behaviors and attitudes that contrast with some plots that characterize the sport, quite clearly distinct, often distinguished in its deepest meanings, between male and female.

The lack of cohesion to certain gender stereotypes which see male athletics stand out, among others things, for strength, competitive spirit and female athletics more focused on recognition and social acknowledgment and on the research of a completeness of female athletic image represent in some way a potential threat; call into question of predominant values on which even a certain socio-cultural system is based does not put only sport at risk, in the sense of consent from a public opinion that doesn't find anymore some civil cohabitation mainstays, but indirectly that male and female self-identity which identify in several sport champions their own favorites and reference models, often to imitate. (Gross, 2001). Around the most important athletes turn a lot of economic and advertising interests, since many companies hire them as their testimonial. Sometimes is necessary to take heterosexual behaviors to preserve group relations and also to guarantee the sponsorship and financial support continuity; for this reason, not by chance, most of homosexual professional athletes decide to *coming out* at the end of their career; for this reason/speaking on which, it must be remembered that the tennis player Martina Navrátilová, after announced her homosexuality, lost as many as 12 billion dollars of advertising contracts in the Eighties.

In consequence of all of this many homosexual athletes therefore, do not reveal their identity to avoid imaginable effect on their personal lives. If the individual identity is built with the interaction with the others, for homosexual athletes this interaction can be reason of pain and exclusion; from sexual membership point of view and what ensues from attitudes plan, predominant social message is that it cannot be anything else, it is required be alike, the same, accept and propose again a quality of being and socializing that is recognized, punishment is to be marginalized, mock, or even reject explicitly. Existential events of athletes or aspiring prove that sport seems to be a redemption experience, a possibility to recreate the community judgment; sport is proposed, in this sense, as a unique opportunity to conquer a physicality that might suggest self-confidence, influencing self-esteem and self-image positively. it is obvious that working only on the appearance strengthen , instead, values focused on appearance and does not stimulate the research of coherence forms between how you feel, how you would like to be and what you feel like other people's judgment.

The educational instance that emerges strongly is which that consists in supporting individual paths of self-research, which could mean a suffered journey that requires difficult integrations. In light of this, what can be the educability dimension which should be supported by a sport that focuses on the individual's subjectivity, thus also his sexuality? If sport is a context where methodological and relational choices conduct the act, orienting the action to

educational sense, then it can reveal itself as an advertising instrument of subjects' independence and emancipation (Cunti, 2015). Intending sport in a broader sense, and then considering all forms of organized activity related to movement, it might be appropriate to induce several aspects that may confer to sport that educational value, as previously said, too often remains only in intent and that it is not practiced. It is at this point that the pedagogy is called upon to reflect critically on sports situations, to direct actions towards the construction of the learning *setting* that can promote the wellness of involved persons; in that meaning, a pedagogical perspective calls into question of *comparison* and *diversity*. The development of the comparison, in the etymological sense to put in correlation one thing with another to know the similarities and differences, enriches the sport of educational value, stimulating self-knowledge through the understanding of the other and the use of empathic abilities. The comparison theme, therefore, is closely linked to that of *diversity*, because it is precisely the comparison to stimulate the recognition of similarities and differences by the parties implicated. It becomes necessary, at this point, a *meeting space* with the other (Callari Galli, 1996), in order to tear down a multiplicity of antinomies which finish up reduce the complexity smoothing over the differences and producing gender stereotypes; in this regard, the meeting becomes an ethical space, advocate social and educational of cultural relativism and not of hegemony absolutism. A sport supporter of universal ideals must undoubtable accept many *voices of diversity* (Callari Galli, Ceruti & Pievani, 1998), preferring that educational purpose able to support values of subjectivities.

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