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Abstract

The article shows how young men who take part in a 'feminine' sport – rhythmic gymnastics – construct their masculine identity. In order to be considered as men, boys performing rhythmic gymnastics have to work to construct their identity, a construction which depends both on their personal projects and on their relationships with family and friends. Adults (parents and other family members) as well as peers exert pressure on boys taking part in rhythmic gymnastics to conform to traditional masculine norms and their constructed identity can depend on this, as well as the relationships they have with girls who also do rhythmic gymnastics. These young men implement strategies in order to reconcile the different images of masculinity they are confronted with and to construct their identity: that of a man playing a feminine sport.

Keywords

gender, identity construction, masculinity, rhythmic gymnastics, youth

Introduction

Despite the fact that organized sports are open to women as much as men, there is still a clear division between different sports along the gender line. Women are less present in traditional male physical sports – for example boxing, football, weightlifting and cycling because such sports are incompatible with the social and cultural norms defining

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femininity (Davis and Louveau, 1998). In the same way, surely any boy or man playing a 'female' sport such as rhythmic gymnastics is transgressing the representation of what it means to be 'masculine'. A sport which requires one to use one's body, more than in any other social field, allows boys and men to prove their masculinity. How can boys and men, therefore, play a sport which is traditionally female and yet construct their masculine identity?

Gender identity is central to the construction of social identity and since the 1970s research has shown that gender cannot simply be reduced to the biological (Delphy, 2001; Guillaumin, 1992; Mathieu, 1991). This article analyses how young men performing rhythmic gymnastics construct a masculine identity. We will refer to interactionist sociological models of identity which consider that identity is linked to the tension between the inner world of the person and the social world (Dubar, 1991). The case of boys doing rhythmic gymnastics is interesting because such boys are in contradiction with the masculine hegemony. We are interested in this approach because the identity attributed to boys performing rhythmic gymnastics is in contradiction to the social norms defining masculinity.

In this article, we will show that the construction of gender identity for boys doing rhythmic gymnastics is a social process, which generates contradictions, tension and even violence. Playing a 'feminine sport' is a gender transgression, which can be very difficult for young boys to cope with. Such boys are in contradiction with the gender habitus of the men of their family and must endure pressure from their peers. They are aware that rhythmic gymnastics is considered a 'feminine sport', and so they adopt identity strategies to construct a form of masculinity, which is different from the masculine hegemony present in sport. It would appear difficult to anticipate the forms of masculine identity adopted by these boys. 'Each is identified by the others but can refuse this identification and define himself differently' (Dubar, 1991: 113). The 'identity strategies' they use to construct their masculine identity while doing a 'female' sport can only be revealed through the analysis of their stories.

I. Playing a 'women's sport': Gender transgression

1.1. The construction of gender identity in the sporting world

Spontaneously, it is thought that gender identity makes direct reference to the biological dimension. Naturalist or essentialist visions play a large part in negating the social processes distinguishing men and women (Guillaumin, 1992) by putting social and sexual relations down to what is natural. Gender research has demonstrated that masculinity is not attributed at birth but is constructed during the boy's and the man's life (Badinter, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1990). 'In the sociology and anthropology of sex, masculinity and femininity designate the characteristics and qualities socially and culturally attributed to men and women' (Molinier and Welzer-Lang, 2000: 71).

Since the 1990s, gender research has demonstrated that gender is not binary and the body may permit multiple genders (Butler, 2005). These theories have shown that gender consists of activities between many identities, masculinities and femininities. And yet, young boys often have to respect the norms of traditional masculinity in order to be

considered as 'real' boys or men. Virility is thus built according to other men's eyes (Bourdieu, 1998), the ideal being to differentiate oneself from what is proper to women or their 'symbolic equivalents, homosexuals' (Welzer-Lang, 2000). Taking inspiration from Godelier's 1982 research on 'la Maison-des-Hommes' (the 'Men House'), Welzer-Lang shows that the education of boys in monosexual places (school playgrounds, sports clubs, pubs, etc.) and in any places where there are no women, is destined to form a traditional masculinity by distinguishing from anything that relates to the other sex. Doing sport, or rather doing a specific sport, offers an opportunity for 'future men' to get initiated. Sabo and Panepinto (1990) have shown that rugby bears some specific characteristics of primitive masculinity initiation rites. Some coaches put moral pressure on players by bullying them, calling them women or inciting them to be violent with their adversaries so that they conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity.

The world of sport is a popular area for research into the question of gender relationships and construction of the masculine identity. Modern sport has become the territory of masculine hegemony while other areas in which men could show their physical strength (manual work, fighting, etc.) were declining (Whitson, 1990). Confrontational sports such as football or rugby originate from popular games characterized by strong violence and masculine domination. For Elias and Dunning (1986), men tend to monopolize power when society is dominated by violence and confrontation. According to these authors, the relations between the sexes would have been modified by society's 'civilizing' process. Sport would have constituted a means for men to preserve their masculinity while not participating in illegitimate violence within society (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Some sports thus participate in perpetuating the 'masculine hegemony' by encouraging men to identify with each other (Whitson, 1990).

Rhythmic gymnastics occupies a specific place in the sporting environment, as do other sports considered as 'feminine' such as dance or figure skating. The aesthetic objective of this sport is attained by harmonizing and combining different bodily shapes with the manipulation of various tools (rope, hoop, ball, ribbon and club). As of 1910, the precursors of rhythmic gymnastics, such as Bode or Medau developed a musical sensitivity through the natural movements of gymnastics preferring 'natural', fluid, full and round gestures in reaction to the purely physical gestures of other male gymnasts of the period (Langlade, 1968). Modern gymnastics that later gave way to rhythmic gymnastics¹ became 'exclusively feminine' as early as 1948 (Jacquot, 1980). Despite the fact that modern competitive rhythmic gymnastics has moved away from its origins and is becoming more like a show through its aerial and acrobatic feats, the speed of movement and the technical manipulations, there are still few men and boys participating in the sport. In requiring harmony and the expression of the body, the sport of rhythmic gymnastics was historically created by women for women. In France, men have been authorized to participate in competitive rhythmic gymnastics since 1989 but, in 2000, they constituted only 0.13 percent of permit-holders (fewer than 30 gymnasts).² The singular situation of the boys who have chosen this sport leads us to question the way they construct their masculine identity. Sorignet (2001) has shown that by adopting a career with strong female connotations, contemporary male dancers rewrite the masculine inclinations they acquired during their primary socialization. They redefine the frontiers established between men and women, even through the way they present their

bodies. On the other hand, women doing 'male' sports construct their identity by trying to reconcile, without challenging, the necessity to acquire the skills needed to play male sport and feminine social requirements (Hargreaves, 1985). Thus, those women who do boxing, weightlifting or football, construct 'complex and partially contradictory' gender identities (Mennesson, 2000a, 2000b). Female boxers for instance, who are constantly confronted with men (in places where they train), conform to the norms traditionally defining femininity, whereas female football players, as they train rarely with men, suggest a new definition of femininity.

A man doing rhythmic gymnastics is faced with the following contradiction: he must achieve the 'feminine' technical expression that traditionally qualifies rhythmic gymnastics in order to be considered as skilful, while being identified as a 'real boy' or a 'real man'.

1.2. Methods

In order to better understand the experiences of boys doing rhythmic gymnastics and the way they construct their masculine identity, we adopted a qualitative method. We carried out five semi-directed interviews.

The sample is based on five boys aged 10 to 23, having one to 10 years' experience in rhythmic gymnastics (see Table 1). The small size sample can be understood when we remember that the number of men performing rhythmic gymnastics in France is extremely restricted itself (fewer than 30 boy gymnasts in 2000). The age-range of these subjects (10, 12, 13, 16 and 23) represents decisive periods in the construction of masculine identity. This range allowed us to analyse the process of gender identity construction just before, during and just after adolescence.

The sample is small but varied. It allowed us to analyse the boys' different experiences of rhythmic gymnastics. They belonged (and perhaps still do) to clubs and deliberately chose this activity at school or university. All interviewees had played several sports. Two of them decided to specialize in rhythmic gymnastics (at ages five and seven) and stopped all other sports. They are still performing today. The role of their mothers when starting the sport was vital. For the others, choosing rhythmic gymnastics came in the context of discovering a variety of different sports (football, karate, gymnastics, swimming, etc.). We chose boys of differing ages and decided to include those who had stopped rhythmic gymnastics. Their stories reveal the difficulties they were faced with and tell us more about how rhythmic gymnastics helped them to construct their identities as men. We met those boys no longer performing rhythmic gymnastics through a network of contacts and, at their request, interviewed them where they used to train.

Each interview started by subjects that seemed easiest for the youths to talk about: discovering the activity, training and their relationships with the other gymnasts. Then, progressively, as a climate of trust was established between the youth and the interviewer, we tackled themes that were more personal and more difficult to deal with, such as the relationship to the body and to masculinity or even conflicting relations with the others. The empirical phase of this research revealed how difficult it was to make these young boys speak about sometimes very intimate subjects.

Table 1. Interviewees characteristics

First names ^a and dates of birth	Mother	Father	Rhythmic gymnastics beginning	Rhythmic gymnastics end	Level	Training conditions
Guillaume (16 years old)	Ancillary staff of a nursery school	Builder	1990 (aged 5)	Still practising in 2001	Competition level federal club	4 to 6 hrs/week with 12 other girls from the club
Mathieu (12 and a half years old)	Cleaning in a hotel	Stepfather: worker in a foie gras factory	1996 (aged 8)	1998 (10 years old)	Free time level community group	1h 30/week with six female neighbours and friends in a community centre
Adrien (13 and a half years old)	Ancillary staff of a nursery school	Motorways electronic surveillance	1999 (aged 12)	2000 (13 years old)	School competitive level (UNSS ^b)	2 hrs/week with 10 schoolgirls in UNSS
Vincent (23 years old)	Accountant	Salesman	2000 (aged 22)	2001 (23 years old)	University competitive level (FNSU ^c)	2 to 4 hrs/week with other female students in STAPS
Fabien (10 years old)	Bank employee (at the counter)	Worker at the SNCF (French national train company)	1998 (aged 7)	Still practising in 2001	Pre-competitive level 'Coupe formation 3'	2 to 4 hrs/weeks with 10 other girls from the club

^aFictitious first names.

^bUnion du Sport Scolaire et Universitaire (School and University Sport Union).

^cFédération Nationale de Sport Universitaire (National Federation of University Sport).

The interviews were between 45 and 80 minutes long. All interviews were completely transcribed and were subject to a thematic analysis. The main themes which emerged from the five qualitative interviews have been analysed and compared.

2. Constructing a masculinity with contradictory identity references

2.1. *The men of the family: Opposed to playing a 'feminine sport'*

It appears essential to analyse the modes of familial socialization of boys having chosen to do a sport whose movements and 'body images' (Schilder, 1968) are far from those traditionally acknowledged as masculine. Such an analysis indeed enables us to better understand the 'inherited identity' (Dubar, 1991) of the family circle, which plays a role in the youth's definition of his gender identity. The 'self-identity' is both the 'inherited identity', that is, a consequence of the boy's social trajectories and individual story, and the 'target identity', constructed in relation to specific reference groups that are subjectively important for the youngster (Dubar, 1991).

The boys' socialization through sports partly results from the parents' sporting experience and their implication in their son's sport activity. If most of the parents consider it important that their son do a physical activity, the fathers are generally not so positive about their son doing rhythmic gymnastics. The young gymnasts' parents generally belong to the 'workers' or 'employees' socio-professional categories. These social groups are marked by a strong gender division of work (domestic and professional): men and women do not invest the same sectors or types of jobs (Hirata et al., 2000). Thus, a majority of fathers work in the 'technical' sector such as the building industry, mechanics, the automobile industry and the clothing industry, whereas the mothers' jobs are generally in relation to child care or domestic works.³ By choosing this specific sport the boys engage in a social practice that is not in accordance to their social and gender habitus and thereby rather break with their traditional family models. DAVISSE and LOUVEAU (1998) have shown that the more boys belong to popular backgrounds the more they tend to refuse artistic sports.

If we consider their brothers' physical activities, we find no traditionally feminine sports. The fathers generally seem less in favour of their sons being involved in a feminine activity than the mothers (FAGOT and HAGAN, 1991).

My father doesn't like rhythmic gymnastics. He prefers basketball, volleyball, and sports like that. He only lets me do rhythmic gymnastics because I play other sports like football, wrestling, etc. (Adrien, aged 13 and a half)

Fabien never spoke about his father to us. When we asked questions about him, he was embarrassed. We conclude that his father disproved of his son's 'feminine' choice of sport.

My father? I don't know if he likes rhythmic gymnastics. I don't know . . .

What did he tell you when you started this sport?

My father said nothing. On the other hand, my mother congratulated me. (Fabien, aged 10)

Among our interviewees, Guillaume's father was the only one to accompany and encourage his son in his rhythmic gymnastics practice: 'He came to see me during the competitions [. . .] he encouraged me, he used to say "go on, give it the best you've got!" (laughter)'. His parents have also done a lot for their son to have access to the same training conditions as girls and enjoy the sport he has chosen. The sporting (and social) success of their son seems to prevail on the fact that he has chosen a 'feminine' activity. Guillaume, whose competitive results in rhythmic gymnastics are good, finds social recognition through the sport.

When the father is absent, other men look after the gender initiation of the boy. Mathieu (aged 12 and a half) has never met his father and says that his mother 'played mother and father at the same time'. His family made no objection to him playing the sport, but the father of one of his friends criticized his decision: 'It's a girls sport, it's old fashioned, if you want to become a man it's not the sport you should do.' In Adrien's case (aged 13 and a half), his uncle complements his father's role in forming his masculinity. He trains him in body building and puts him in situations where Adrien has to be brave. Being initiated by other men, and in particular by older men, is essential to the construction of masculinity for younger boys (Godelier, 1982; Welzer-Lang, 2000). The boy learns what being a 'real man' means by being in contact with his seniors.

As regards the boys' mothers, either they had no interest in sport and therefore left their sons free to choose, or, and this was the case for two of them, their mothers supported their son's choice of sport from a young age (five and seven years old). Guillaume's mother seemed to play a role in her son's orientation towards artistic disciplines (rhythmic gymnastics, dance), though it is difficult to say whether she was the instigator of such a practice or if she simply supported her son's choice.

Yes, anyway she supports me, she supports me all the time so it's all right [. . .] And as my mother used to do classical dance, maybe it's in our genes (smiles) [. . .] And my mother motivated me, 'Guillaume, next year you are going to do classical dance so that you can try and take auditions to enter the Opéra de Paris!'

The mothers are not opposed to their sons performing rhythmic gymnastics. The women's role in the choice of sport is to be underlined. In the case of all of our interviewees, a referent person allowed their dedication to the sport.⁴ This enabler is always a girl, a woman, mother, a female neighbour, friend or cousin, etc. The place of these girls or women in the young boys' lives seems to have been reinforced by the fact that none of them had a sister at the time of their involvement in rhythmic gymnastics.

The youngster can accept or refuse 'inherited identities' from the family circle. He thereby operates 'biographical transactions' between the will to keep his previous identifications and the will to build a new identity for the future, the 'targeted identity' (Dubar, 1991: 43). Menesson (2000a) has shown that female boxers, weightlifters or football players have multiple gender identities related to the gender dispositions constructed during childhood, regarded as rather 'feminine' or 'masculine', and the ones that are constructed while playing their sport. Some of these dispositions would represent a sort of continuity with childhood gender inclinations while others would mark a break with them.

2.2. Normative pressure from the group of peers

One may consider socialization as a passive moulding of youth by the family or institutions or as a unilateral action by adults on children or adolescents. The interaction with and pressure of a boy's peer group appears to be extremely important to the construction of the boy's masculine identity. In order to create a positive identity of themselves, young people need to feel accepted within a peer group and to belong to a group which gives them social value (Herman, 2000). Masculine socialization consists mainly of avoiding, at all costs, being likened to a girl or a woman.

The boys' peer groups believe that rhythmic gymnastics is a 'girls' sport' like dancing, baton twirling or gymnastics. These sports are the contrary of what boys call 'guy sports', 'men sports', 'sporting sports' and 'harder sports'. By using these terms they designate collective confrontation or contact sports (rugby, football, basketball, handball) or even combat sports (boxing, karate) symbolically or really presenting a fighting or warrior body (Pociello, 1981).

Fabien (10 years old), eager to see his activity recognized, is rejected by the other boys in his peer group. More than really sanctioning rhythmic gymnastics itself, the other boys sanction some of Fabien's specific attitudes that do not correspond to the hegemonic masculinity. They disapprove of the way he moves, apparently characteristic of dancers or gymnasts.

A feminine or homosexual gender identity is attributed to boys who perform rhythmic gymnastics, boys whose chosen sport is considered as a 'sign of femininity'. Men who present 'signs of femininity' via their voice, clothes, corporal hexis, are indeed likened to homosexuals (Welzer-Lang, 2000). It seems here that sexuality is less 'stigmatized' than manners which are considered as feminine and seem to bring into question traditional representations of the masculine identity (Duret, 1999). The way the interviewees recounted these types of situation is indicative of the emotional cost for the 'stigmatized' ones (Goffman, 1963). The young boys reconstituted the dialogues they took part in, to explain the conflicts more clearly:

And sometimes even now, I boast, just to annoy them, they take the piss out of me, but I tell them 'yeah, go on, carry on', 'no, no, it's all right' (with a small voice), 'then don't bug me, 'cause it's not worth it . . .'. Otherwise (laughing) I move myself, 'come on, stop moving like that you queer' and I tell them 'go on, do it' and they leave. (Guillaume, aged 16)

For Fabien, the insults lessened after he kept away from the other boys for a while, but the suffering remains strong. The war vocabulary employed by the youngster reveals the violence of the 'stigmatization' and the intensity of the conflict:

They are always warring against someone. There is always someone who gets rejected by the others. And at the moment, it's me. So everybody is against me, everybody hits me. [. . .] Actually there are two of us – Jeremy and me. We're the only ones to get slaughtered. The weakest boys. Actually we have just ended a war against them because Jeremy insulted Arthur and it went on for a month. And I felt sorry for Jeremy, because he got hit, they took his underpants down and they laughed at him. I don't like that. (Fabien, aged 10)

His choice of words really shows the physical and psychological suffering that some young boys endure throughout the various stages of the construction of their masculine identity. The peer group pressurizes the youngster to conform to the characteristics of his gender. It is worth noting that attitudes considered as infringing the gender social order seem better accepted among girls than boys (Laberge and Albert, 2000). Considering the hierarchical organization of sex categories, the latter consider adopting 'feminine' values or behaviour as degrading or strongly stigmatizing (Archer, 1989).

2.3. Boys in the world of rhythmic gymnastics: A controlled integration

Interaction between the boys we interviewed and women belonging to the world of rhythmic gymnastics (trainers, leaders or girls in the training group) contributes strongly to the construction of their identity. Most of the boys seem to appreciate this exceptional situation within the rhythmic gymnastics environment and even admit that this position can be favourable to them:

And I get applause, from the smallest clap to the loudest applause even before I get to the gymnastics mat. Well, I don't mean the crowd goes wild, but I mean, it's almost [...] (laughing)
No, I was about to say a silly thing, but I think that that's what makes the public like me . . .
Maybe it's because I'm the only boy . . . (Guillaume, aged 16)

Boys do not feel weaker than girls in their practice; Guillaume and Fabien even feel superior. 'I'm the best at jumping. [...] I feel a little strong because I am already the best of the group, one can see it in the championship results' (Fabien, aged 10). The good level these boys have acquired partly explains their integration and the credibility the other girls from the training group grant them.

Boys train with girls and are generally integrated into the group without any problem or sexual discrimination. Though the female trainers are sometimes reticent because of their lack of experience in managing boys, they are absolutely favourable to it and even encourage it. Françoise, who is Mathieu's coach, would have appreciated seeing more boys in her class. Vincent and Adrien's trainers are sports teachers and also encourage both sexes to participate in rhythmic gymnastics. They try not to put the boys aside or to 'treat them differently to the girls'. In fact, none of the boys has ever had the feeling that they were rejected by the other girls in their training group. 'We were all together, there were seven of us. And I didn't feel the strongest, we were all alike, we were starting, it was great . . .' (Mathieu, aged 12 and a half). Mathieu hardly talks about the girls but almost always uses 'we' when he refers to the group. Using this pronoun seems to show his successful integration and the bond he has built up with the girls. The local aspect of the training structure partly explains this friendly atmosphere.

The acceptance of a boy into the world of rhythmic gymnastics seems easier within the club than at a national or international institutional level. The women and girls in the club adapt to the arrival of these masculine gymnasts whereas the technical managers of the federation impose limits, as the boys cannot access the highest levels of competition. This is what happened to Guillaume, whose was refused access to the superior competitive category:

. . . because of Mrs B. (the head of rhythmic gymnastics in France), I can't enter federal competitions. At least I think it's because of her. She doesn't want me to get to the federal stage because the internal rules have supposedly only been made for girls, because, I don't know, it doesn't interest them . . . anyway she doesn't want me to . . .

3. 'Boys in a women's world'⁵

3.1. *Women's and men's sports*

The boys we interviewed distinguish between the characteristics of 'girls' sports' and those of 'boys' sports'.

If you start doing gym or dancing or twirling, you start off well. [. . .] I love figure skating. [. . .] I mean, [rhythmic gymnastics] it seems artistic and not everybody likes what's artistic. Erm . . . and it also doesn't thrill everyone to wear a leotard. It could very well have been for boys. But boys don't dance . . . (Fabien, aged 10)

Vincent has studied science of sport and considers that he does not have any preconceived ideas about the male/female division of rhythmic gymnastics. Nevertheless, he admits that 'artistic disciplines seem to suit women more than men, [and that] women are more graceful and can therefore transmit a feeling more easily' and that 'there are men who can dance very well and transmit feelings but [. . .] that women are maybe better at it' (Vincent, aged 23).

The interviewees insisted on the difference between the sports that are more destined for boys and those activities favouring aestheticism that are meant for women. In this respect, Fabien evoked a 'sporty sport':

Well, it's usually a sport with a ball in which you have to jump, you have to (breathes heavily), you have to sweat, and it's hot. For example, I don't know, football, handball, compared to gym, to rhythmic gymnastics, it has something else. I don't know how to explain it, I don't know if there's a word. (Fabien, aged 10)

Just as 'masculine professions' and 'feminine professions' exist (Kergoat, 1984: 207), the young boys distinguish 'male sports' and 'female sports'. A physical activity that uses the body, the body being the physical expression of identity, should show the difference between the masculine and the feminine. Men have muscles and strength, whereas women have suppleness and artistic qualities. The choice or rejection of certain physical and sporting activities shows the difference between the sexes from an early age. And this differentiation, in terms of sport, becomes stronger during adolescence, a period during which sexual determination intensifies particularly in the working class (Davis and Louveau, 1998).

In spite of this traditional representation of the sexing of sports, the interviewees, being probably aware of their 'atypical' situation, asserted that they were not shocked by girls (or women) doing a 'masculine' sport, or by boys (or men), who, like them, do a 'feminine' sport.

It's like gym, there are boys who are very good at it [. . .] I have played football and there were two girls playing in the team, they played well. I don't see what's wrong with it. (Adrien, aged 13 and a half).

The way in which boys doing rhythmic gymnastics define their own activity but also the position they occupy in it informs us as to the representation they have of their masculinity. According to them, the activity requires specific female physical skills and needs less physical potential and strength than other sports:

. . . I don't think it's too tiring. In fact, it's rather quiet. Sometimes I fall asleep listening to the slow music [. . .] compared to gym, it's a little more for girls. (Adrien, aged 13 and a half)

I think that being muscular is less useful than in gym, the elements are weaker. It's more a question of suppleness, I'm not saying that we don't need any either, some elements request it. I think that suppleness is more important in rhythmic gymnastics; the coordination and the manipulation of the tool are most important. Using the tools does not require a strong muscular structure. (Vincent, aged 23)

The interviewees are conscious of doing, or having done, a 'feminine' sport. They anticipate having to stop this activity at a certain age as it will not enable them to enter the 'men's world'. They feel that it is necessary for them to leave the 'women and children's world' even if it implies suffering (Sabo and Panepinto, 1990).

I'd like to go further [in rhythmic gymnastics] rather than stopping now, at 13, because if you love sport . . . [. . .] Yes, it would upset me if someone told me one day 'Fabien, you're a boy so you can't continue rhythmic gymnastics anymore.' That would upset me. (Fabien, aged 10)

3.2. To be masculine but not virile

The boys performing rhythmic gymnastics refer to the traditional categories of femininity or masculinity even if they practise or have practised a sport assigned to women. Most of them insist, just as the other young boys of their age, on the importance of differentiating themselves from women, be it through their bodies or their personalities. In order to define themselves they refer to femininity to show its limits, to show the differences or the similarities with their masculine identity.

. . . boys need to be slightly more . . . more . . . (silence) strong than a girl, I was looking for the word. Stronger than the girl, yes because if one sees a skinny boy, it is not very nice, and he looks more like a girl than a boy. (Guillaume, aged 16)

. . . I think that boys should have muscles, well I like that. (Adrien, aged 13 and a half)

Even if Adrien thinks he lacks courage in specific situations, he still considers that he has a boy's personality. Vincent, the oldest, is aware of the classical corporal norms defining

the contours of masculinity and femininity. But he also considers that men pay as much attention to their bodies as women:

There is always the idea of strength and protection. The man is supposed to protect his wife and children, at least that's the idea people have. Erm . . . it's complex, virility . . . it's true that when one says virility there is always the idea of violence behind . . . it's true that the idea of strength is linked to the notion of violence. But . . . I don't know, masculinity . . .? It's true that in the idea of femininity, we have the notion of grace. That sticks out a mile. The notion of vanity is maybe weaker among men, though a lot of men, through doing body building, sculpt their body, and I think, they have a certain form of vanity. Brushing one's hair, shaving in a special way, it's always vanity. Now we are in a society in which looks are very important and . . . I think the frontiers get closer and tend to merge so . . . It's still visible at the physical level through the stature, the size of a man who's always taller than a woman, at least on average, erm . . . through a man's hairiness, but it's true that in respect to the care he gives to his body or can give to his own person, a man is equivalent to a woman. And it's true that the man is a little less feminine in his gestures, a little less graceful . . . but he still starts to . . . I'd say, become more feminine, so that's it. (Vincent, aged 23)

How do these young boys position themselves in regards to the traditional norms defining masculinity? They generally have a good image of their body and consider being in an 'acceptable average' for men: 'not too muscular, not too skinny'. Mathieu considers his body as 'normal'. So, apart from Fabien, the other boys express their desire to possess the physical characteristics that are generally attributed to men.

. . . I sometimes do bodybuilding . . . [. . .] it can also be useful to be sturdier. I wanted to do some to see what it would be like, and also to develop.

Would you like to be more muscular?

More muscular yes, but not like bodybuilders, just a bit more muscular. Not that sturdy (laughing). It's just for the pleasure of doing some, doing press-ups or stuff like that. (Adrien, aged 13 and a half)

The young boys reinforce the difference between the sexes by insisting on physical qualities to define the boundaries of masculinity (Duret, 1999). To define themselves, the boys refer to notions of femininity in order to show the limits, differences or similarities between themselves and notions of femininity. The fact that the boys do not define masculinity by physical and virile traits shows that they have a tendency to 'devalue virility and its demonstrations of physical strength' (De Singly, 1993). Most of the interviewees consider themselves as boys (or men) without feeling they belong to a virile definition of their masculine identity, including the ones who have given up rhythmic gymnastics.

The construction of gender identity is particularly sensitive and can be violent, particularly at adolescence. Extracts from Guillaume (aged 16) and Mathieu's (aged 12 and a half) stories show the ways in which these young boys have perceived the changes between their childhood ('before') and their adolescence or manhood ('now') (see Table 2).

Table 2. Changing identity at adolescence (Guillaume and Mathieu)

Before	Now
I was still little and could stand still. (Mathieu)	Well I need to move a lot, I can't stand still so it's great to let off steam ... (Mathieu)
I was little and I didn't have that kind of spirit ... Actually, we were not judging ourselves. (Mathieu)	We are all judging ourselves, even at secondary school. [...] But that's just the way it is, when we're big, we enter the stupid age. (Mathieu)
I had a lot of suppleness. I mean I was rather thin. I was little, it's normal, I was good at it. (Mathieu)	I prefer rugby to rhythmic gymnastics now. It's a bit normal I think, because I am older, it's a sport for older ones. (Mathieu)
... as I was little one could make everything of me. (Guillaume)	I mean it really started in the last primary class [French CM2], the fact of calling me poof and all. (Guillaume)
Of course, at the beginning it upset me a little so I cried ... (Guillaume)	I doesn't hurt me anymore and I even boast sometimes, just to scoff at them ... (Guillaume)
I had a leotard and I had boxer shorts, a little cycling shorts ... (Guillaume)	I am academic. Outside rhythmic gymnastics I wear all styles ... I prefer large trousers like the American style in fact. (Guillaume)
I was little, I wasn't very tall, I was little, it's true that I was a little skinny, but I wasn't tall, still I was kind of little. (Guillaume)	I don't mean either that I am extremely fat or skinny. It's alright for me, my size and my calibre. (Guillaume)

Note: For Table 2 we have only selected extracts from the interviews with Guillaume and Mathieu as the gender differentiation accentuation at adolescence seemed the more manifest.

For Vincent (aged 23), the adolescence period was particularly characterized by an accentuation of physical gender differences. Adrien (aged 13 and a half) started wishing to be more muscular at age 11. Guillaume is the one feeling the most the transition between childhood and manhood. By describing the case of a young boy doing rhythmic gymnastics with him, Guillaume opposes a sexual identity that, according to him, can be ambiguous during childhood, to that of adolescence or adulthood, which calls for a clear definition:

But I haven't seen him since. He was a little bit of a queer. No, I'd rather not say that (laughing), because then you're going to say that I don't like being insulted ... but above all, he was young, so whether you're a boy or a girl you still have a way of acting ... I mean young boys have girly manners. But he was also a little camp. He used to do that with his female friend. (He shows a game in which children tap their hands.) But it's normal at that age, and also he talked a little bit like a queer. But it was normal, he was little, now I think he has changed, he does judo now. He has really gone in the opposite direction. (Guillaume)

Adolescence is, among other upheavals, characterized by the transition to sexuality with partners. The adolescent progressively builds his sexuality by being in contact with different socializers: peer networks, family, the media and school (Bozon, 1997). When the boys leave the women's world (their mothers) and get together, they live and experiment with a 'homosociality' phase.⁶ The 'little men' initiate one another to the

apprenticeship of masculine sexuality (Welzer-Lang, 2000). We can thereby understand that the construction of the masculine identity for these 'boys in the women's world' is subject to questioning.

4. Playing a 'feminine' sport and being seen as a man: Implementing 'identity transactions'

Some contradictions may exist between the process of identity attribution by institutions and the agents who interact with the individual, and the individuals' active internalization of their identity. The individual can then implement 'identity strategies' or 'identity transactions' to combine these different forms of identity (Dubar, 1991).

The analysis of the stories of the young boys practising rhythmic gymnastics reveals a 'Do It Yourself' strategy of identity construction enabling them to reconcile the different identity forms at the crossroads of their biographical paths, their relations with their acquaintances, their past and their future plans (Dubar, 2000). The three profiles we have identified illustrate the identity strategies, more or less conscious, that are adopted by these young boys in order to construct a form of masculinity. As Whitson (1990) demonstrated, the construction of the identity of these young boys is carried out under the pressure of adults (parents, members of the family, etc.) and of peers to conform to traditional roles of masculinity.

4.1. Coping with the pressure of men and the violence of boys (Fabien aged 10)

The group of boys at school rejected Fabien and questioned the fact that he was a 'real boy'. Fabien's behaviour and the activities he participated in, including rhythmic gymnastics, are not considered as masculine ways of being. 'I like to walk like dancers on tiptoe' (Fabien). His mother said to us that when he was younger, he loved looking at figure skating on TV and playing and dancing with tea towels.

Fabien has to face a battle (real and symbolic) with the other boys from his peer group. This battle shows the suffering (both psychic and physical) that the young boys have to endure during the initiation into masculinity. The positions adopted by the family members concerning his rhythmic gymnastics practice are split between Fabien's father and brothers (the men of the family) who are opposed to his practice and his mother who supports and encourages him in his choice. For Fabien, the model of his male family members is closer to that of his peer group and the model of his mother is in contradiction with these traditional models defining masculinity.

Faced with these tensions, Fabien tried to build a 'self-gender identity'. He described the characteristics that he believed were needed to be a boy and considered that he did not possess these qualities.

The qualities of a boy?? . . . (Thinking) the qualities of a boy, well, everyone doesn't have them but . . . they can run fast, they can do whatever they want, they can wear whatever they want, whereas girls can't; [. . .] Well, there is another quality, boys don't cry, so . . . well . . . when I cry . . . You just need to touch me and I cry so I really don't have this quality at all.

And does it bother you?

No. Except when people tell me 'Come on, you're not a girl, come on, don't start to cry!'

Fabien does not find any likeness between himself and what he calls 'Mister Muscles'.

In fact I start . . . getting fat I'm already too fat for my age.

And would you like to be more muscular in the future?

No, it doesn't interest me for the jobs I want to do. It's useless for a baker or an activity leader in a holiday camp.

Fabien did not wish to acquire or develop the physical or moral skills that are necessary to become a virile man in the future. Nevertheless, he refused to be attributed a feminine sexual identity.

Rhythmic gymnastics seems to allow Fabien to construct and express an identity different from the traditional stereotype of virility in an environment that is less hostile than school for example. The girls from the rhythmic gymnastics training group, as well as the female coach, consider Fabien a boy. But the girls or women from the other clubs, who do not know Fabien, doubt his masculinity. In relation to the tension between the 'identity attributed' by the other boys and his 'targeted identity', Fabien withdrew and held back. He knows that from a certain age (13 years old according to him), he may be asked to quit his activity, as it could be too 'risky for the construction of his masculine identity'. One of the strategies enabling Fabien to continue rhythmic gymnastics is to do, similarly, another sport that is recognized by other boys: 'I do like another sport on the other hand, handball is more boyish.'

4.2. Stopping rhythmic gymnastics and doing a 'masculine' sport (Adrien aged 13 and a half, Mathieu aged 12 and a half)

The peer group stigmatize these two young boys, just as in the previous case. The boys inherited a very traditional masculine identity from the family. The men in both families (fathers, uncles, stepfathers, etc.) are opposed to the boys' rhythmic gymnastics practice, fearing that it could prevent them from becoming 'real' men. The mothers seemed quite passive and were not opposed to rhythmic gymnastics. Rhythmic gymnastics marked a break from the sexual dispositions acquired during childhood. On the other hand, they were integrated members of their rhythmic gymnastics circle and their masculinity was never questioned.

These boys adapted to the traditional identities, attributed by peer group and family circle by keeping to only 'masculine' sports, that is, activities explicitly attached to virility (Adrien does wrestling and Mathieu rugby). According to them, rhythmic gymnastics is an activity reserved for girls (or women) and children. The lack of initiatory experiences among boys, which are important in the social construction of sexuality, could explain why these boys abandoned the activity at adolescence. They had no other solution than

to stop their activity in order to assert themselves as men and conform to a traditional masculine identity. For the stigmatized person, 'adolescence (associated with the influence of the peer group at secondary school) commonly brings about a clear decline of identification with ones own kind at the same time as an increase of identification with normal people' (Goffman, 1963: 52).

The stories of those boys having abandoned rhythmic gymnastics at the time of the interview seem interesting because they show that doing a 'feminine' activity is costly for the construction of masculine identity, particularly at adolescence. Indeed, the young boys who have done a 'feminine' sport – even after having stopped it – seem to have built a masculine identity escaping the stereotypes that are traditionally linked to virility. Adrien (aged 13 and a half) and Mathieu (aged 12 and half) stopped rhythmic gymnastics six months and two years respectively before the interview. These periods correspond to pre-adolescence or adolescence, both of which are important in the construction of the masculine identity. During the interview, they placed less emphasis than the young boys continuing rhythmic gymnastics on the pressures exerted on them by the others to conform to the traditional norms of masculinity. Despite this, it seems that the symbolic violence these young boys had to endure to fit with the gender social order strongly influenced their decision to stop rhythmic gymnastics. Even if they justified this decision as a personal choice with precise reasons (medical, geographical), performing rhythmic gymnastics had become too costly in terms of sexual identity at a critical period for their masculine identity construction.

These two cases contrast with the following cases, Guillaume aged 16 and Vincent aged 23, who have continued the rhythmic gymnastics and had more luck in overcoming difficulties in constructing their gender identity.

4.3. Asserting oneself at rhythmic gymnastics (Guillaume aged 16, Vincent aged 23)

Vincent has chosen to do rhythmic gymnastic at a university specializing in sport (he wants to become a sports teacher). He takes full responsibility for his choice and says that others students acknowledge this. He knows that boys playing 'feminine sports' are generally subject to other people's judgment, however, he thinks that they are considered in a more positive light at a university specializing in sport because the other students are familiar with different sports and are more understanding.

The other boys do not consider Guillaume as a 'real man' but as a 'queer'. However, Guillaume establishes a difference between the group of his close friends who do not criticize his activity or have become used to the fact that one of them does rhythmic gymnastics, and the other boys with whom the conflicts may take the form of real insults or violence.

In reality, it was alright with my little group, that I am with everyday. But with the others I'm 'the queer' because I do a girls' sport, I am the only boy . . . (Guillaume, aged 16)

After a period of adaptation, the girls from the rhythmic gymnastics class have accepted Guillaume's and Vincent's masculine specificity. The identity Guillaume targeted is

not totally contradictory with the one he inherited from the family circle. Guillaume's parents do not consider that their son's practice of a feminine activity could have consequences on his identity as a man. Guillaume distinguishes the period of his childhood, during which his masculine identity was not determined from the current and future period during which he defines himself as a complete man. Vincent didn't tell his parents that he does rhythmic gymnastics. He has probably anticipated a negative judgment.

Consequently, one can see the potential tensions existing between the male identity they give themselves and the identity the other boys assigned to them. Boys implement 'identity negotiations' (Dubar, 1991) in order to reduce these gaps.

Guillaume adopts a strategy of provocation towards the other boys in order to assert his identity. He describes himself as someone 'mentally resistant'. Such a strategy cannot be implemented without conflict. Guillaume's age – 16 – enables this kind of attitude contrary to Fabien – 10 years – who does not yet seem capable of asserting himself. To 'negotiate' their identity, the boys doing rhythmic gymnastics legitimize their activity by comparing it to other people in a similar situation. Thus, they compare their own situation to that of girls playing traditional masculine sports (football, rugby, combat sports, etc.) or boys playing a traditional feminine sport (dance or rhythmic gymnastics).

There are boys doing rhythmic gymnastics in Japan and once there was a boy team at Bercy but apparently it was a disaster so they stopped. There is a boy who managed to get to the federal stage, who was in a duo with a girl and it went really well, it was very beautiful. [...] Actually, I do have female friends who do taekwondo, but that's all. They are two girls but people say they are like boys . . . (Guillaume, aged 16)

The two boys that we met, interpret and adapt the activity for their comfort. They choose music that will enable them to express themselves differently to girls and say they prefer more 'dynamic' music.

We chose music that was like us, that matched our personality and our tastes. We chose routines that . . . that we are able to do, not everyone is capable of doing the splits. [...] That was at the time of the movie called *Gladiators* [a war movie]. I bought it because I thought it fitted well, it was very loud, I liked that music [...] It was rhythmical, in fact, the music was . . . dizzying, so I enjoyed doing my routine to it. (Vincent, aged 23)

Just as the girls who practise rhythmic gymnastics with him, Vincent chose a piece of music and choreography adapted to his personality and to his gender. He (more or less consciously) expresses his wish of putting a touch of masculinity into his practice:

I haven't chosen the ball or the ribbon . . . Though the ribbon is easier to manipulate [...] but I chose the rope. Why did I choose the rope? Because it reminds me for example when guys use ropes during training sessions to work on their stamina. And it's true that I chose the rope . . . I didn't think about that, at least I didn't tell myself that the rope would be more masculine, but now, looking back at the action, I must say that the rope is more masculine and that's why I chose it. (Vincent, aged 23)

He also admitted that he preferred more spectacular rhythmic gymnastics, based on daring, physical qualities and strength, rather than artistic capacities:

I would base myself much more on the sporting aspect rather than on the artistic. Difficult throws, very difficult moves requiring suppleness. I would take more pleasure in seeing something 'extreme', in inverted commas, rather than something artistically beautiful. (Vincent, aged 23)

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is the identity construction of marginalized boys who do not reproduce the prevailing 'masculine' stereotypes in sports. In order to construct their masculinity, the boys who perform rhythmic gymnastics have to negotiate between the often negative identity that others attribute to them and the one they define for themselves.

We have identified three forms of 'identity strategy' adopted by these young boys, strategies which depend on context, nature and effectiveness. First, the young boy, aged 10, has chosen rhythmic gymnastics among other 'feminine sports' such as dance or figure skating. His behaviour is considered to be 'feminine' and he is stigmatized by other boys from his peer group who consider him a girl. He continues to be involved in rhythmic gymnastics despite the violence of his relationships with other boys and his distress.

In the second place, the two boys, aged 12 and a half and 13 and a half, chose rhythmic gymnastics with girls from their group of friends. When we interviewed them, they had stopped this sport to play a sport considered 'more masculine' like football or rugby. When they were performing rhythmic gymnastics they were not encouraged by the men of the family and were stigmatized by other boys. This 'feminine' practice became too costly for them within the framework of the construction of their gender identity at adolescence. Third, the two young men, aged 16 and 23, were still performing rhythmic gymnastics at the time of the interview. The first one has done rhythmic gymnastics since his childhood in a good club and the second has started at a sports university. The first boy has encountered more difficulties from his group of peers than the second. However, he has overcome, with difficulty sometimes, a stigmatization which made itself particularly felt at adolescence. The second young man started rhythmic gymnastics when he was a young adult and was able to explain to others his atypical sporting choice. The two boys' parents have not prevented their sons' involvement in rhythmic gymnastics.

The aim of this article is to challenge the masculine hegemony in the sporting world. The analysis of the 'identity strategies' adopted by boys participating in rhythmic gymnastics shows that masculine identity can be constructed in different ways depending on context and relationship with others. However, references to traditional forms of masculinity are very present and powerful in sport. And so, the case of these boys shows that gender transgressions are not simple and can even be violent. Practices which transgress gender order are costly in terms of identity construction, particularly at adolescence.

The results of this study are in concordance with research concerning the difficulties linked with transgression of gender for women doing 'men's work' and women in 'men's work'.⁷

Notes

1. In France, rhythmic gymnastics was called *Gymnastique Moderne* in 1948, *Gymnastique Rythmique Moderne* in 1963, *Gymnastique Rythmique Sportive* in 1975 and *Gymnastique Rythmique* in 2000.
2. These statistics were produced by the French Gymnastic Federation (*Fédération Française de Gymnastique*) in 2000.
3. Concerning the opposition between technical masculine jobs and traditionally relational feminine jobs, the medical example is interesting (see Cromton and Le Feuvre, 1997).
4. Except Vincent, who studied at the French UFRSTAPS (*Unité de Formation et de Recherche en Sciences et Technique des Activités Physiques et Sportives*), and who chose rhythmic gymnastics rather than gymnastics in order to obtain a better mark at the evaluation.
5. The situation of the boys doing rhythmic gymnastics is symmetrical to the situation developed in 2000 by Menneson. We should also note that G. Fraisse and R. Bachelot have given the same title to their book on women in politics: *Deux femmes au royaume des hommes* [Two Women in a Men's World].
6. Welzer-Lang (2000: 115) defines homosociality as 'the social relations between people of the same sex, i.e. the relations between men or the relations between women'.
7. For example, compare studies on women engineers (Marry, 2004), women business leaders (Laufer and Fouquet, 1998), women police officers (Pruvost, 2002) or men dancers (Sorignet, 2001).

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