

How women footballers can overcome negative stereotypes

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English footballers wrote history this week. For the first time ever, they won at the knock-out stage and reached the quarter finals.

Hang on, you might say, this is cannot be true? England won the world cup in 1966 and reached the quarter final several times before? The success was in fact achieved by the women's football squad, who are competing at the Women's World Cup in Canada this month and remain hopeful of reaching the semi-finals.



Despite women's football experiencing an enormous growth in the last 10 years with girls and women increasingly playing football on both the amateur as well as professional level, women's football has not gained the same acceptance and status as men's football. Football is still associated as a "... a man's business" [Fußball ist Männersache], by Mario Basler (German professional soccer player from 1996-2004) and there is still a lack of acceptance that women are playing 'good' football. More generally, women are still underrepresented in senior positions in UEFA (with Karen Espelund as the sole woman on the Executive Board of UEFA), as official referees (e.g. Germany has 8 female and 20 male referees), and professional players earn considerably less compared to their male counterparts. This highlights the vital importance of defining women's football as a game in its own right and to overcome the negative stereotypes that are associated with women's football.

Women in football (and other sports) face many negative stereotypes ([Norwegian women's national squad mockumentary on sexism](#); [Chalabaev et al., 2013](#)). Psychological research has shown that spreading and indulging these kinds of negative stereotypes about women's football abilities can not only influences women's motivation to play football, but can also have actual consequences for their performance levels. Thus, stereotype threat ([for a definition see here](#)) affects athletic performance; previous research has shown that women dribbled slower through a difficult soccer course when the task was labelled as measuring athletic ability compared to when it was labelled as a psychological test ([Chalabaev et al., 2008](#)).

However, the negative effects of stereotypes can be mitigated when we focus on the fact that we all have multiple identities; football players are not only women but also professional athletes. From previous social psychological research we know that when multiple identities (being a woman, a professional athlete) are simultaneously activated, we have the possibility of focusing on a part of our self that is associated with high performance in the target domain (playing high-quality football).

In [a recently completed study](#), with 85 female football players we showed that that multiple social identities can eliminate the stereotype threat effect in sports relevant task. More precisely, we demonstrated that the additional activation of a positive identity (being a football player and being a woman) benefits performance compared to only activating a negatively stereotyped identity (being a women). Participants in the dual identity condition (M = 13.58 sec) completed the course significantly faster than participants in the single identity condition (M = 14.27 sec).

What do these results tell us about multiple identities and their psychological role in sports performance? Concerning performance situations, the present work showed that the activation of a positive social identity together with the activation of a negative social identity can eliminate performance decreases even in sensorimotor tasks.

These are important results from a practical perspective as activating multiple identities are an easy to implement intervention in real-life achievement situations in sports. Thus, in a female football match no matter which social identities have been activated before, the final sentence of the coach to motivate the team should be “You’re women and the best football players. Go and beat them!”

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