

## **The Role of Sports and Games in the Self-Image of Girls and Boys**

Chr. Zipprich

Institut für Sportwissenschaft, Universität Hannover, Germany

Within a research project evaluating physical education in heterogeneous or homogeneous 7th-grade classes, we focussed on different gender aspects. The theoretical basis for the considerations is the 'doing gender' conception, i.e. the idea that gender represents a socially constructed category in which a person's actions signalize, produce or reproduce the gender identity. Gender is highly relevant for a person's self-perception in all interactions especially with people of the opposite sex. The process of how a person perceives, evaluates and reflects her or his self-image is an essential part of an individual's identity.

Gender cognition itself refers to a fairly broad concept in which the gender stereotypes are commonly defined as cognitive structures or schemata, containing socially shared knowledge, beliefs and expectations about females and males (ECKES 1997, 30). Gender stereotypes have a dual nature i.e. they serve on the individual level to organize and simplify information available for the perceiver and on the cultural level to offer socially accepted explanations for events, to justify group status and actions and to provide a means for groups to differentiate themselves positively from other groups. Due to the cultural-level existence of gender stereotypes, simply labeling a person a 'woman' or 'man', a 'girl' or a 'boy', conveys much information to the recipient of the communication. The idea of the gender dualism is the basis and legitimization of the existing gender hierarchy. According to the doing gender concept, gender differences are produced and performed in all interactions as well as in rituals, fashion and behavioral settings as in sports (DIETZEN 1993, 42)

Altogether men are regarded as acting more instrumentally (e.g. independent, dominant, self assuring ambitious, aim oriented, rational, powerful, determined), women as behaving more expressive (i.e. dependent, understanding, emotional, gentle, caring, talkative, needing loving care). These gender stereotypes represent bipolar categories in that a person with instrumental behavioral aspects is not considered to act expressively and vice versa. BIERNAT (1991 in ECKES 1997, 59) showed that preschool children evaluate typically female respectively male behavior as being independent categories; however, in the process of growing up, the

concepts of the relationship between instrumental or expressive behavior transfers into the bipolar position of adults. Sex/gender differences start to exist in the children's behavior. They present and play an important role in the development of girls and boys especially during puberty and adolescence, i.e. during the entire time in school – and in our study. Within the bipolar construction of gender, the explicit manifestation of the gender identity is an essential element of growing up. The process of constructing gender equals that of performing gender, that means that a girl or a boy identifies her or himself as girl or boy but also has to be recognized by others as being a girl or a boy (HAGEMANN-WHITE 1984, 85).

The educational setting in teaching represents the triad pupil – teacher – subject. In sports and physical education all of these aspects can be considered as gender-related points of interest. Sports and physical education can be interpreted as a field in which girls and boys, women and men participate and present themselves in accordance with gender concepts, or in which they fulfill the specific gender-related expectations (boys are experts in soccer and team sports showing instrumental behavior, girls' competence is in gymnastics and dance representing expressive sports). In this everyday, 'natural', unquestioned behavior, evident in sports, the existing gender hierarchy continues to be produced and can be maintained by the fact that the sexes present themselves in a qualitatively different manner.

How girls and boys see sports and games with regard to themselves and the opposite sex greatly influences all their interactions with the social environment. It also reflects individual experiences and evaluation of competence in sports that, on the other hand, control behavior in the gymnasium. And this was the focus of an extensive questionnaire that was given to 96 girls and 90 boys in the seventh grade. They were asked to answer (among others) the following questions:

<b>question</b>	<b>for girls</b>	<b>for boys</b>
No 9	What do you think boys may perform better than girls?	What do you think girls may perform better than boys?
No 10	Would you like to do that as well?	Would you like to do that as well?
No 11	What do you think girls may perform better than boys?	What do you think boys may perform better than girls?
No 12	Do you like to be a girl? Why?	Do you like to be a boy? Why?
No 13	Would you prefer to be a boy? Why?	Would you prefer to be a girl? Why?

The questions are very general; they are not specifically related to physical education nor sports. This paper will focus on the questions No. 9 and 11 that seek to identify the gender-related abilities that girls and boys believe to be relevant to the category of gender. The answers will give information on sex role orientation and on the present gender stereotypes of the seventh graders. The answers altogether were categorized to a certain extent. The analysis will provide information about the image that 7th-grade girls and boys show about abilities, and especially of those in sports, that are inherent in the self-image and in that of the opposite sex, and about the acceptance or rejection of the other sexes' abilities.

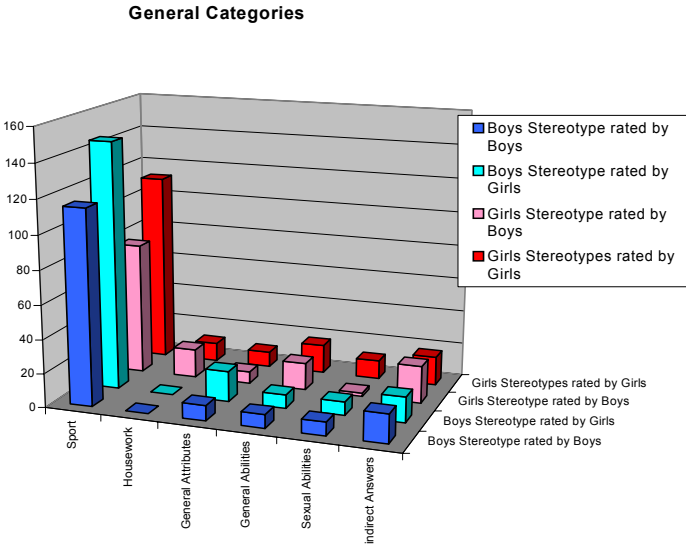


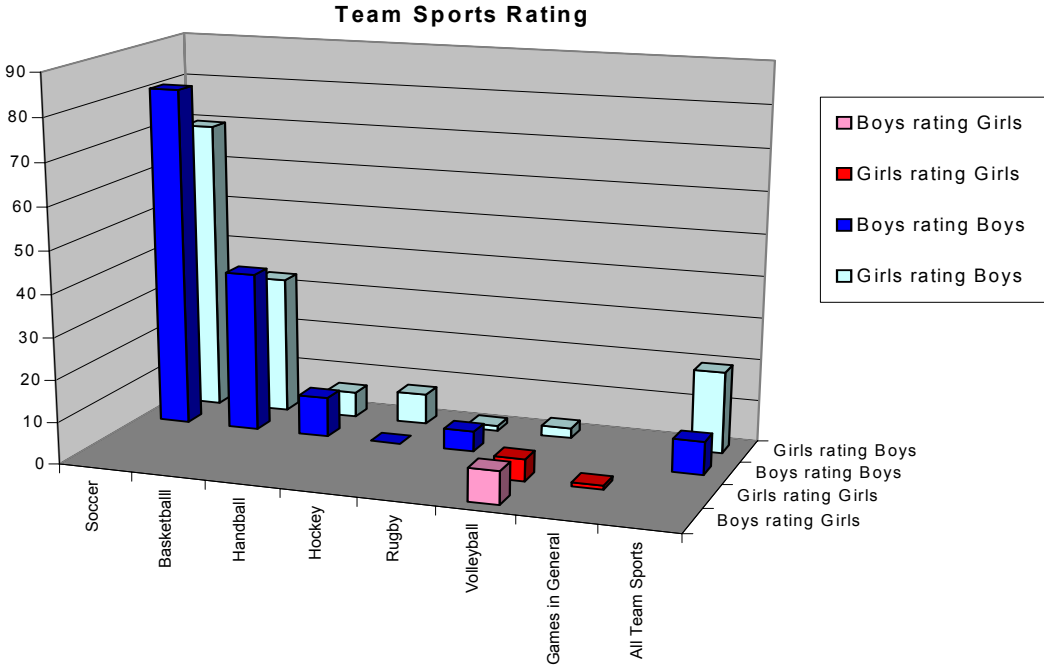
Diagram 1: Ratings of General Categories

The first diagram shows that sports seems to represent the main aspect that the pupils identified for describing the different abilities of girls and boys. Boys less often mentioned sports as being part in their image of girls, girls, however, more often mentioned sports as being part in their image of boys. (Diagram 1)

Taking any responsibility for household work does not occur in the image that is inherent for the boys; however, 17 boys mention that girls are better in housework, whereas only 11 girls report that of themselves. General attributes and abilities can be differentiated into those that are evident for masculine and female behavior

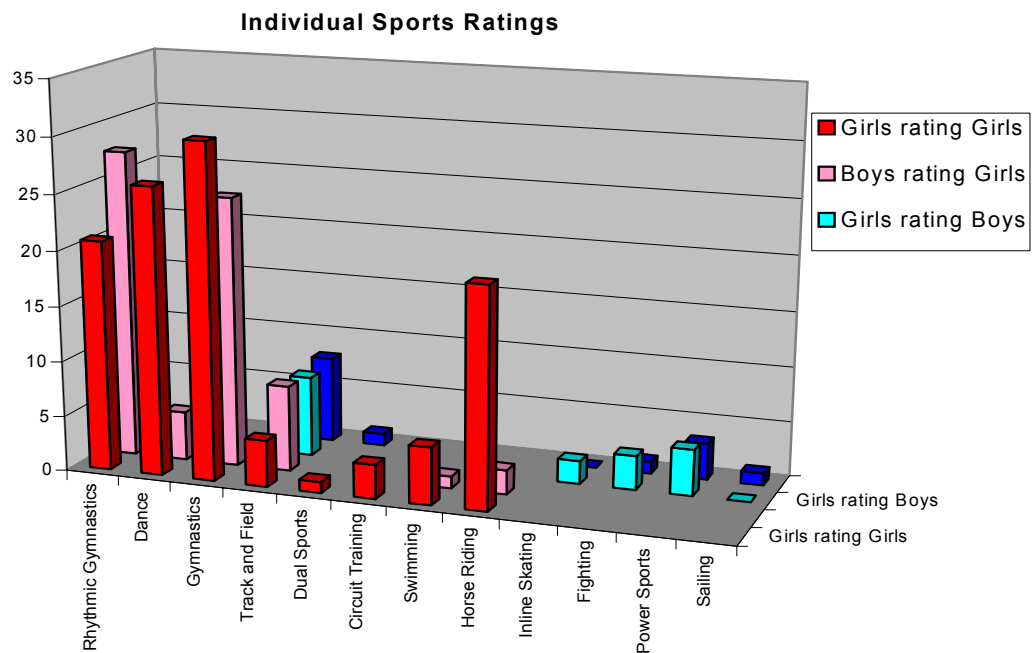
respectively: (see diagrams at the end of the paper). Boys are ‘better at everything’ (describing their overall superiority), or particularly good at dealing with technical matters, computers, mathematics as well as with driving, watching soccer, hanging around. On the other hand those abilities that are dominant for girls are beautiful handwriting, drawing, singing, communication, cognitive abilities and school performance. Being courageous, strong, aggressive and so on are attributes boys are characterized with; being skillful, tidy, patient, quiet, arrogant, deceitful, prone to scream, all these are attributes, girls are characterized with. In this overall view the self-image and that of the other sex highly corresponds with the gender stereotypes. A closer look will be taken at the category of sports rated by the girls and boys.

Diagram 2: Ratings of Team Sports



In gender identity sports play a very different role for girls and boys. Still the classical stereotypical gender images are existent and evident: boys see themselves and are seen by girls as experts in all team sports. Team sports appropriate for girls are volleyball and games in general.

Diagram 3: Ratings of Individual Sports



Girls are excellent at individual sports that require body expressiveness like rhythmic gymnastics, dancing, tumbling. Horseback riding as being performed quite often by the girls is part of the girls' self image, however, not recognized as such by the boys. This probably occurs because horseback riding does not belong to the spectrum of sports performed by boys. Individual sports of boys represent those activities that include strength, confrontation and fighting, competition. However the number of answers is quite low compared to the attribution of performing team sports.

The results of our study correspond with those of BREHMER (1997) or BISKUP/PFISTER (1999) in German schools. The gender stereotypes are reproduced by school children and sports play an essential part in their construction of gender. Girls and boys define the same abilities and level of performance according to the gender stereotype, and are even more 'traditional' concerning those of the opposite sex. Of course we have to consider that the questions provoked stereotypical answers. However, it is evident, that an almost bipolar, dichotomous image of sports exists even if some of the pupils answer in question 10 that they themselves perform

activities being rated as appropriate for the other sex. In the analysis of question No. 10 we found that girls gave quite different answers (for example: “*in general not but be may sometimes*”; . . . “*I would like to play ball games, but I do not want to play soccer*”) and discussed their answers, whereas boys tended to a more or less clear, categorical *no* (73.8% boys; 43.6% girls). 19% of the girls answer that they are able to perform those sports activities that they attribute to being stereotypical for boys, whereas only one boy admits the same. One third (34.9%) of the girls would like to be able to perform ‘male’ sports, but only one fifth (21.5%) of the boys would accept being good at ‘female’ sports. Girls are more open and positive towards the ‘male’ sports, boys show more disapproval of ‘female’ sports.

Diagram 4: Girls’ Acceptance of Boys Sports

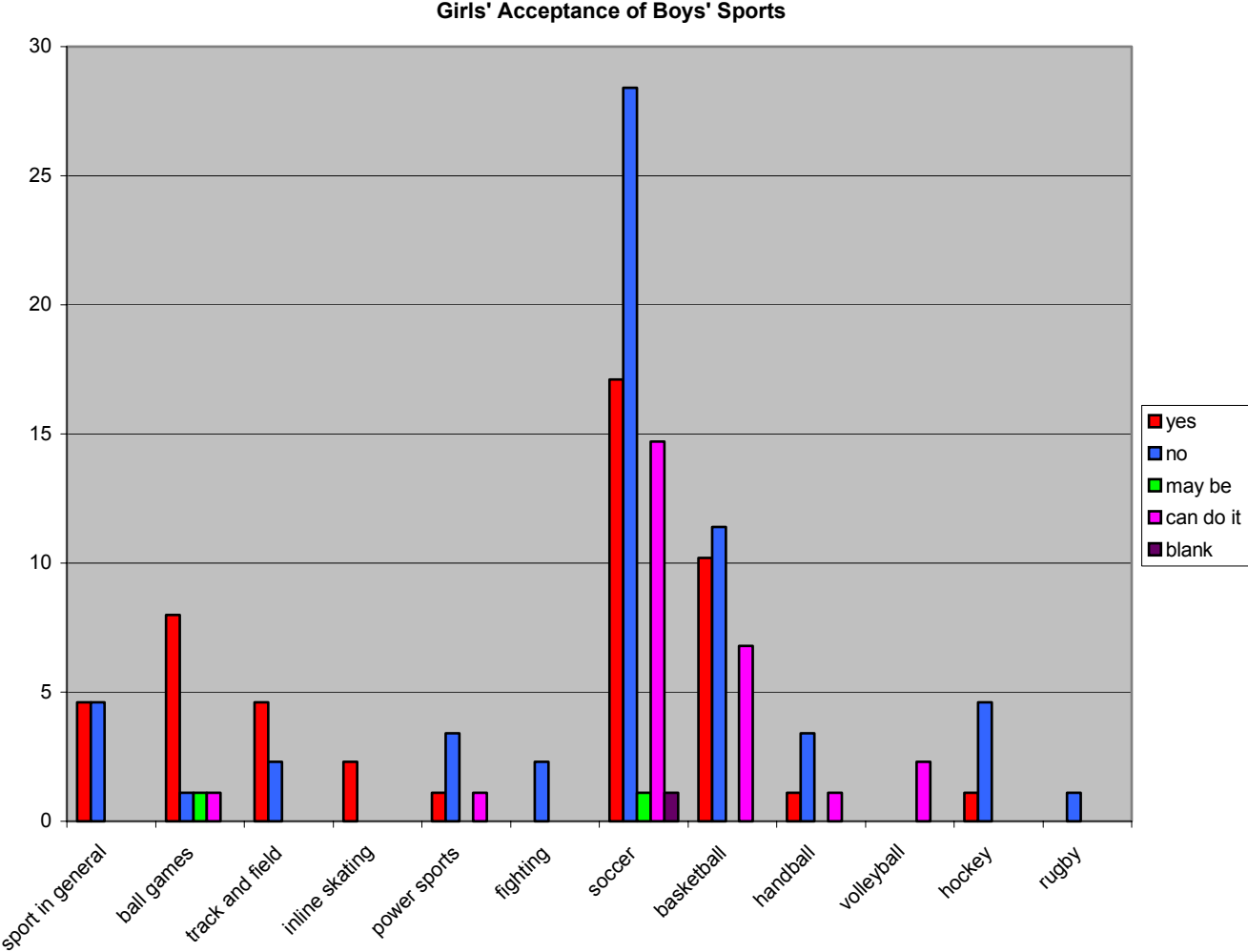
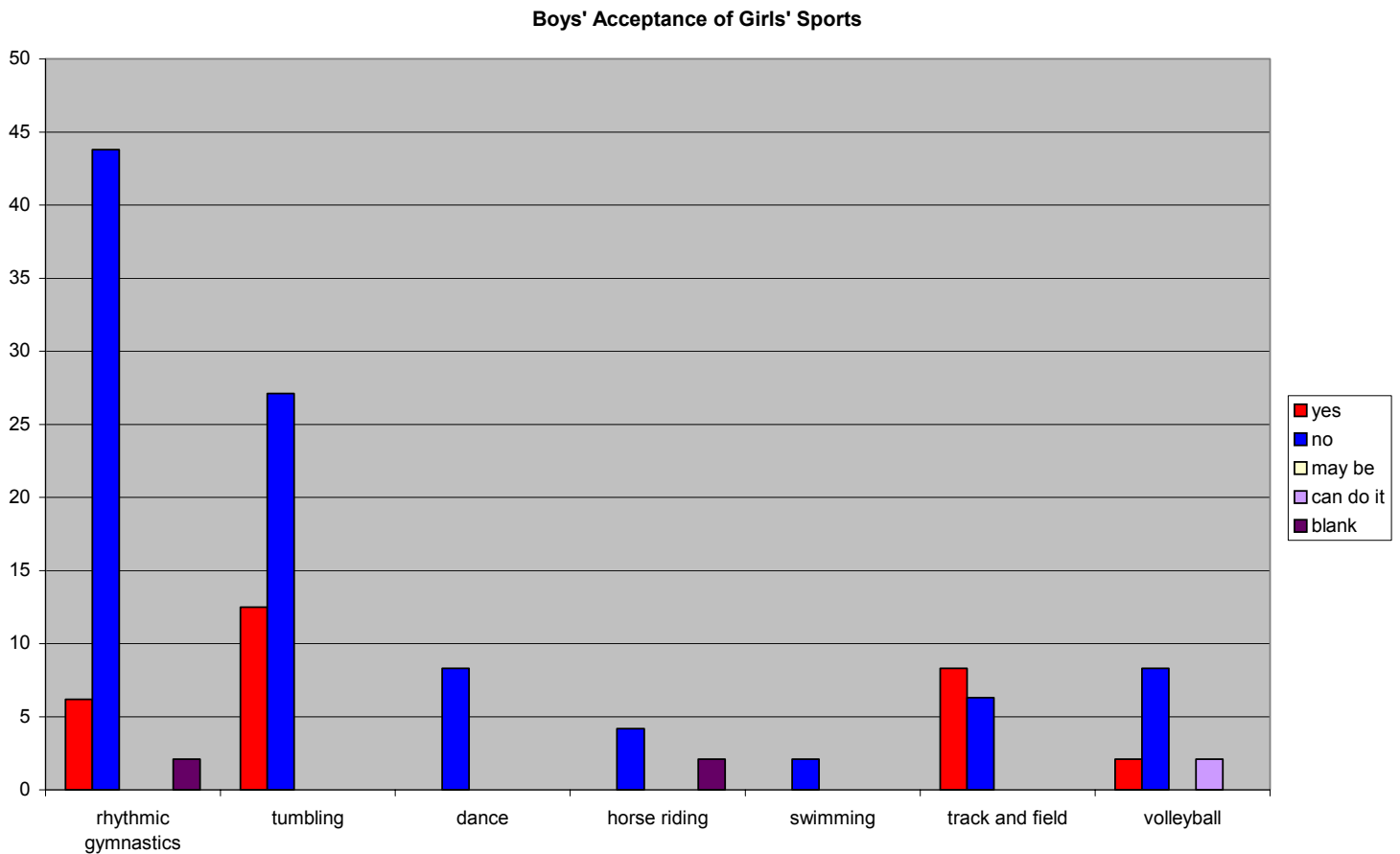


Diagram 5: Boys' Acceptance of Girls' Sports



Summarizing it can be concluded that

1. Pupils indicate that sports are a main category to describe gender stereotypes
2. Sports themselves are not as dominant in the attribution of the stereotype of girls especially from the opposite sex
3. Sports are primarily attributed to the traditional gender stereotypes
4. Team sports are appropriate for boys, individual sports (tumbling, dance and rhythmic gymnastics as well as horseback riding) for girls
5. Sports are part of the gender construction of pupils
6. Girls are more open towards 'male' sports activities, boys tend to reject 'female' sports

In our research project, we tried to focus on differences in heterogeneous or homogeneous physical education classes. The results show that the girls and boys

live in quite different sports worlds. Teaching in sex homogeneous groups seems to facilitate the teacher's job. Girls '*do not to bother boys in their sports activity*', as one teacher explained in an interview; this notion honors the boys' sports as the regular, normal situation in physical education classes (ZIPPRICH 2001). However, in the present pedagogical discussion on coeducational physical education classes, the focus lies in teachers' being sensitive to of gender differences in sports. During the developmental phase of our adolescent pupils, a chance to influence gender-related aspects does exist if pupils know more about and understand more fully their own sex role and that of the opposite sex.

In teaching physical education, teachers have to be aware of this specific gender construction in sports, that is, the gender-related expectations as well as the gender-related abilities and attitudes lead to the existence of gender differences in the gymnasium. If teachers are aware of these differences and want to influence pupils' construction of gender, they have to apply all their pedagogical skills. In order to ensure a more or less equal chance of participation in sports for everyone, especially in coed classes, teachers have to initiate processes that encourage and allow girls to participate in sports more instrumentally and that expose boys to athletic activities that promote empathy and expressive abilities. However, one has to be aware, that sports or physical education classes are not a separate sphere and changes will be successful only if other parts within our society also focus their aims on overcoming the hierarchical gender construction.

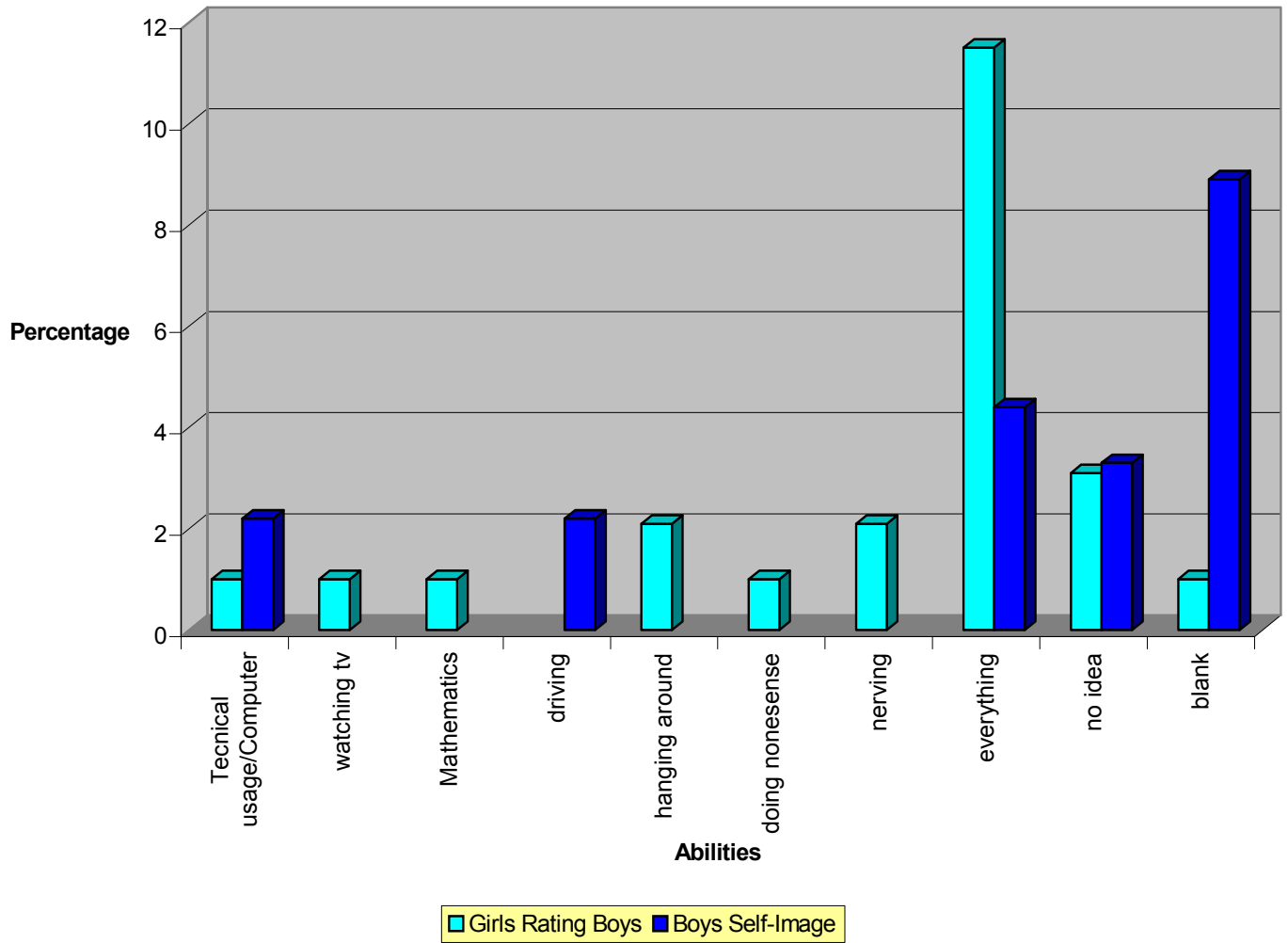
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### Boys Stereotype - General Abilities



### Girls Stereotype Abilities

