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# A New Spin on Gender: How Parents of Male Baton Twirlers (Un)Do Gender Essentialism

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## Abstract

Families and sports are spaces for “doing” and “undoing” gender. The author presents qualitative interviews with 30 American men who recall their parents’ involvement in the gender atypical sport of baton twirling. The author analyzes the data using “doing” and “undoing” gender as well as “hard” and “soft” essentialism frameworks. Mothers are often supportive of their sons’ twirling, contributing to “undoing” gender and relaxing “soft essentialism.” Fathers do not see baton twirling as a normative pathway to manhood or masculinity, thus reinforcing “hard essentialism.” Fathers often take on an absentee role in their sons’ twirling. In rare cases, fathers “do” gender by reformulating their sons’ twirling into a more recognizable sport. Findings consider how parents navigate gender when sons cross gendered boundaries in sports and the consequences for gender inequality.

**Keywords:** Baton twirling, doing gender, undoing gender, gender essentialism, sport, masculinity

Sports offer opportunities for family members to be involved and invest in the lives of youth especially when it comes to gender socialization (Hayoz, Klostermann, Schmid, Schlesinger, & Nagel, 2019; Messner, 2009, 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Wheeler & Green, 2014). Team sports like football, basketball, or baseball are where boys learn about

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manhood, bond with their fathers, and develop competitive attitudes (Messner, 1992). Contrary to more traditional sports settings where masculinity and men dominate, feminized or women-dominated sports are also arenas for boys' gender socialization. These sports may include figure skating (Adams, 2011), rhythmic gymnastics (Chimot & Louvaeu, 2010; Piedra, 2017), cheerleading (Bemiller, 2005; Grindstaff & West, 2006), dance (Mennesson, 2009), and baton twirling (Haltom, 2019). Men and boys in these feminized sports resist traditional models of sport and cross gendered boundaries (Haltom, 2019; Piedra, 2017). When boys break these gendered sport expectations, parents are faced with renegotiating the gender messages they attach to their child's activities.

I present the case of male baton twirlers who recall how their heterosexual parents responded in gendered ways to their son's participation in baton twirling, a feminized sport. I analyze these experiences through two sociological theories of gender: West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" framework, and an "undoing gender" framework (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). "Doing gender" assumes that people abide by routine gender practices determined by sociocultural forces in order to be held accountable to a sex category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). "Undoing gender" questions whether gender can be challenged or deconstructed entirely, an angle that becomes particularly valuable in situations where the boundaries of gender are being pushed like in the case of men in feminized spaces. Alongside these theories, I use Messner's (2011) concepts of "soft" and "hard" essentialism to place parents' actions in the context of larger socio-structural gender ideologies. Essentialism is the idea that men and women naturally and biologically differ. Messner's (2011) "soft essentialism" proposes that the liberal feminist discourse of individual choice is prominent for girls in youth sports wherein they are given the opportunity for equality with boys. Soft essentialism is also anti-categorical as it attempts to liberate women and girls from restrictive social roles. Meanwhile, boys remain "unmarked" (Messner, 2011, 161), limited by the assumption that they are naturally inclined to competitive athleticism without emotional expression. This is "hard essentialism" because men and boys are understood to be higher in the gender order and categorically different than women.

There remains a need to further explore the experiences of men and boys within families and how these relationships (un)do gender

and enforce gender essentialism. This study also fills a gap in literature on parents and gender within feminized sports. Observing the relationship between parenting and gender when the boundaries of gender are being pushed offers a unique perspective (Kane, 2006). When it comes to their son's atypical sport participation, I argue that mothers challenge or "undo" gender and, conversely, fathers reinforce "doing" gender. I also advance the idea that in the context of a feminized sport like baton twirling, soft and hard essentialism becomes more complex when considering boys. I theorize how mothers may be more open about their sons' participation in twirling because mothers have been inscribed with the liberal feminist ideology of choice and opportunity, even if they do not subscribe to feminist principles in other ways. Fathers, in comparison, reinforce hard essentialism and emphasize gender difference by expressing their disdain for their sons' sport choice or fueling masculine notions of competition and "being the best."

I present data from retrospective interviews with 30 American men who competed in baton twirling and whom I asked to think back to their parent's responses to interest in baton twirling. I find that parent's reactions were primarily supportive on the surface, but a deeper look reveals more nuance. Mothers are often supportive of their son's twirling because of the sport's ties to femininity. At times, however, this support extends to the point of becoming "stage moms" who control their son's lives. Fathers, in contrast, more often take on a passive role in their son's twirling. In rare cases fathers take on an active role by reformulating their sons' twirling into a more traditionally recognizable sport. By applying (un)doing gender perspectives and a gender essentialist frame, I provide an example of how sons interpret their parents' navigation of challenges to gender.

## **Literature Review**

### *Doing and Undoing Gender*

The "doing gender" framework is foundational to understanding gender as socially constructed (West & Zimmerman, 1987). At the center of doing gender is accomplishment and accountability. To accomplish gender is to represent the gender that matches the sex

category assigned at birth (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Parents, for example, guide their children through gender socialization by selecting gender-specific toys to ensure appropriate gender accomplishment (Kane, 2006). Accountability, in turn, is the process of others ensuring that gender is “done” appropriately in everyday interactions and the understanding that policing will occur in instances when gendered actions are ‘inappropriate’ to a person’s sex category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Establishing what is ‘normal’ when it comes to doing gender is also important. Identifying normality allows us to identify when gender is done differently than expected and to perpetuate inequities between those who are in line with the norm and those who deviate (Fenstermaker & West, 2002). When boys diverge from normative “gender activities,” undoing gender occurs (AUTHOR, 2019; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 127). In the case of sports, established norms make it easy to point out when boys step out of line.

If gender can be “done,” then this language also implies that it can be “undone” (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). Social psychologist Francine Deutsch (2007) and gender theorist Judith Butler (2004) each conceptualize “undoing gender.” While Deutsch orients undoing gender alongside “doing gender,” Butler does not engage with West and Zimmerman’s (1987) framework. “Undoing” gender is behaving or demonstrating gender characteristics opposite to one’s sex category (Deutsch, 2007). The act of “undoing” something is a form of resistance that becomes lost when scholars of gender only focus on how gender is “done” (Deutsch, 2007). In the context of the sport of baton twirling, boys who twirl challenge normative gender conventions by subverting the perception that all twirlers are women or girls and that boys should not participate in gender atypical sports (AUTHOR, 2019). But, what is the role of parents in (un)doing gender alongside their sons?

Studies of child gender socialization indicate that women are more flexible in their allowance of gender boundary crossing than men (Blakemore & Hill, 2008; Endendijk et al., 2014; McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). While reading books to young children about gender stereotypes, fathers are more likely to confirm gender stereotypes compared to mothers (Endendijk et al., 2014). Likewise, parents lead their sons away from cross-gender toys and their daughters away from gender-specific toys (Idle, Wood, & Desmarais, 1993). Younger children are allowed some leeway, but among preschool boys, freedom of

gender expression is limited by heterosexual fathers who emphasize masculinity (Kane, 2006). When sons cross gendered boundaries, parental responses become more complex especially with sport settings.

### *Masculinity, Sport, and Families*

The idea that sports are masculine institutions is not new (Connell, 1987, 2005; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Messner, 1992, 2011). A key element of masculinity is the practice of rejecting the feminine in order to bolster the masculine. Sports take on this characteristic wherein athletes are expected to aggressively dominate opponents and, in doing so, demonstrate superiority. Indeed, domination is at the center of sport while femininity is at the fringe (Connell, 1987). Encouraging conventional masculinity is part of the relationship parents are expected to have with their sons especially in sport settings (Kane, 2006). When sons choose a sport based on skill and aesthetics rather than aggression (Pronger, 1990), this new gender practice contributes to “undoing” gender and challenges gender as it is expected to play out.

Sociologist Michael Messner (2011) introduces the idea that sports have moved from a “hard essentialist” ideology to a “soft essentialist” ideology. Generally, essentialism is the belief that boys and girls are naturally different. Messner (2011) also adds sports have been categorical in their approach to gender. This means that the members of certain teams, for example, are selected because they share certain characteristics (in this case, gender or sex) and are segregated from other groups based on this determination. “Hard essentialism” is both an essentialist and categorical ideology with roots in post-WWII efforts to segregate men and women at home, at work, and in sports. “Soft essentialism” is still essentialist, but anti-categorical; it is defined by more modern liberal Feminist discourse of “choice” for girls in the name of equal opportunity. “Soft essentialism” describes how contemporary youth sports offer opportunities for girls to address gender asymmetries, but boys remain unaffected by advancement toward inclusion. Taken together, it becomes difficult to combat gender essentialism and “undo gender” when boys are limited in how they express themselves and bounded by the “masculine” sports they can play.

The role of parents in the lives of boys who choose feminized sports is largely missing from sport literature with the exception of a few

international studies (Chimot & Louveau, 2010; Mennesson, 2009; Piedra, 2017). Messner's (1992, 2009, 2011) body of work on gender and sport provides a close look at the development of masculinity in sport but does not extend beyond traditional sports to include gender atypical sports. Messner (1992) does, however, offer that family is the "basis upon which the young male builds his life" and that family relationships are a "foundation," "backing," or "pillars" in sports (p. 48). In turn, these relationships influence how athletes determine success or failure in sports. Sons, for example, measure their worth via other male family member's attention and affection. Participation in sport is a way for men to prove themselves to other male family members, especially to demonstrate a commitment to masculinity (Messner, 1992). In contrast to feminized sports where gender becomes a problem (AUTHOR, 2019; Piedra, 2017), Messner (2009) finds parents of children in traditional youth sports do not think about their sons as gendered beings, often struggling to find words to express gender in relation to their sons. A son's association with femininity through participation in a feminized sport is cause for alarm, however (Messner, 2009; Pronger, 1990). When such transgressions occur, certain forms of gender essentialism become activated (Messner, 2011).

For a glimpse into the relationships between boys in feminized sports and their parents, I turn to examples of small-sample, international qualitative studies on dancers (Mennesson, 2009 [n=14]) and rhythmic gymnasts (Chimot & Louveau, 2010 [n=5]; Piedra, 2017 [n=8]). Overall, fathers are not supportive of their son's participating in dance or rhythmic gymnastics. Among ballet dancers, fathers only came to support their sons after they proved themselves successful through gainful employment (Mennesson, 2009). In contrast, the fathers of jazz dancers consistently saw dance as a leisure activity rather than an opportunity for professional work and would rarely lend support. Mothers of boys in rhythmic gymnastics were either ambivalent about their sons' choice of sport or were supportive; none were opposed (Chimot & Louveau, 2010; Piedra, 2017). Fathers of rhythmic gymnasts largely did not support their son's pursuits and, like dancers, only gave approval after proof of success (e.g., winning events or employment) (Chimot & Louveau, 2010; Piedra, 2017; see also Messner, 2009). One interviewee, Fabian, refused to talk about his father because of the negative reactions he received for expressing interest

in rhythmic gymnastics (Chimot & Louveau, 2010). In contrast, Guillaume's father encouraged him to "give it the best he's got!" (Chimot & Louveau, 2010, p. 442). Guillaume's father in in the minority as only two fathers across the two studies supported their sons. Put together, parents' responses to their son's resistance and boundary crossing elicits mixed responses. In the current study, I focus on how son's make meaning of their parents' reactions through the case of baton twirling.

### *About Baton Twirling*

Baton twirling appeared during the 1920s and 1930s in the U.S. and gained popularity alongside military marching bands in parades throughout the 1940s (Robison, 1980). As the bands marched and performed, male drum majors would keep tempo, signal directions, and spin their maces. Marching bands became fixtures at universities across the U.S. and eventually the drum major position evolved into a performative one. As women entered universities, they also took on roles as feature twirlers and drum majorettes (Hindsley, 1940). Today, contemporary baton twirling can often be seen American football halftime shows and parades.

Baton twirling became an organized sport starting in the mid-1930s when the first contest was held at the 1935 Chicagoland Music Festival (Sartell, 1965). Competitive twirling events developed alongside marching bands in educational settings and were structured by baton twirling organizations. Men dominated these early competitions both as competitors and administrators (Sartell, 1965), yet women represent the baton twirling today. The gender shift can be attributed in part to historical moments like women's movement into men's roles during WWII, feminist movements, and women's increased entrance into higher education (Jackson, 1998; Jacobs, 1996; Messner, 2011). The two largest baton twirling organizations, the National Baton Twirling Association (NBTA) and the United States Baton Twirling Association (USTA) were formed in 1946 and 1958, and continue to host local, regional, and national competitions. Olympic-style international events are now held regularly and a world-level organization boasts membership in 38 countries (World Baton Twirling Federation, 2018).



## Data & Methods

The analysis in the current study is based on a study of American men aged 18 or older who twirled and who competed in at least one competition sanctioned by either the USTA or NBTA. To participate in a baton twirling competition even once requires immersion in baton twirling culture. Data was collected in August and September of 2014. Participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews in two ways: convenience and purposive sampling via social media and e-mail. I posted a scripted recruitment message and advertisement via social media sites and sent it to potential participants in private messages or e-mails. In the end, 30 interviews were available for analysis. The recruitment strategies and interview schedule were approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB).

I was able to gain access to the baton twirling community as a former competitor. This is both a limitation and a benefit. One such limitation is my inability to be completely objective in my analysis. As Haraway (1988) argues, however, I instead am able to situate myself within baton twirling to critically assess it. I do not include my experiences in my analysis, nor do I believe my roles affected interviews. Rather, my 'insider status' aided in my understanding of the dynamics of the sport through rapport and shared commonalities of gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc. Because of this background knowledge, I am familiar with sport-specific terminologies, settings, rules, etc. Upon the conclusion of interviews, participants often commented on how "cathartic" it was being able to talk openly about issues of gender. While I analyze the roles of parents in their twirler's lives, I cannot speak to parents' actual parenting strategies. Rather, I analyze their son's perceptions of their parenting as these have real consequences (see Pugh, 2013).

The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Participants were given the option to conduct the interview via phone (93%), Facetime (3%), or Skype (3%). The average interview lasted one hour and forty minutes, and ranged from thirty-four minutes to over two hours. Respondents resided in 15 states across the United States and Washington D.C. The interview schedule was organized by theme and included general demographics, twirling career information, personal background and familial involvement,

perceived stigma, twirling technique, personal definitions of masculinity, and organizational differences. Participants were asked to look back on their time as competitive twirlers; thus, these were in part “retrospective” interviews (Scott & Alwin, 1998). One disadvantage of retrospective interviews is that they may misinterpret or misremember past events. The twirlers’ interpretations of their parents’ gendered parenting strategies offer different data than would parents’ direct accounts or real-time observations. However, the meanings interviewees assign to their personal histories have real implications on their lived experiences and interviews are opportunities to express subjective interpretations of accounts of moments from the past (Pugh, 2013; Scott & Alwin 1998).

### *Analysis*

Interviews were conducted and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques common within qualitative research where the goal is to uncover and interpret meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coding, the categorizing of segments of data into meaningful depictions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), was performed in three phases using Atlas.ti (Berlin, Germany). First, categorization occurred through the thematic organization of the interview schedule. The structure of the interviews allowed for codes to be organized into broad categories early. Second, I conducted line-by-line coding to discover 40 sub-codes. For example, as the category of “family” developed, sub-codes of “father,” “mother,” and “siblings” became relevant. A basic component of qualitative sociological research is the construction of meaning by participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process involves interpretation of participants’ experiences, noting how they construct their social worlds, and observing the meaning they attribute to their experiences. Thus, as a third and final phase, I used focused coding to develop more detailed narratives of the twirlers’ experiences (Charmaz, 2014). The patterns within these narratives provide a look into how parents’ reactions and support correspond to (un)doing gender.

**Table 1.** Profile of Participants

	% (#)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
Gay	63 (19)
Heterosexual	23 (7)
Bisexual/No Answer	13 (4)
<b>Race</b>	
White	90 (27)
Non-White	10 (3)
<b>Education</b>	
HS or Less	7 (2)
Current College Student	13 (4)
Associate's or Bachelor's	67 (20)
Master's or PhD	13 (4)
<b>Age (Avg. = 41.1)</b>	
18-29	37 (10)
30-39	10 (3)
40-49	13 (4)
50-59	30 (9)
60+	10 (3)
<b>Location of residence</b>	AZ, CA, FL, LA, MD, MI, NE, NJ, NY, OH, PA, TN, VA, WA, Washington, D.C., and WI
<b>Twirling Information</b>	
	<b>Range</b>
Started Twirling (Avg. = 9)	3-19
Retired (Avg. = 22)	15-31
Twirling Career (Avg. = 14)	5-25
Active Involvement*	70 (21)
<b>Twirling Involvement**</b>	
Current Competitor	10 (3)
Coach/Teacher	53 (16)
Judge	37 (10)
Administrator	17 (5)
No Current Involvement	37 (10)

\* Active includes involvement as competitors, judges, administrators, or coaches

\*\* These positions are not mutually exclusive; percentages do not add to 100%.

### *Profile of Participants*

Table 1 outlines participant demographic characteristics. A majority of the twirlers, 63 percent (19), self-identified as gay. The sample was also majority white (90%). As in the case of many sports, the ability to compete in baton twirling also implies social class selection

(Eitzen, 2016). Competitions, lessons with coaches, costumes, and travel require high financial commitments (entry fees are often well over \$100). Participants were also asked to report their highest degree obtained; responses ranged from less than high school to a PhD. Men twirlers begin twirling at an average age of 9, with a starting age range between 3 and 19 years old. The average twirling competitive career lasts approximately 14 years. Twirlers “retire” from competing around age 22 on average. Participants were still largely active (70 percent) in baton twirling as competitors, judges, coaches, or administrators (e.g., contest directors, board members, etc.). The remaining 30 percent are no longer involved.

## Findings

### *Messages from Mothers*

On the surface, twirlers reported their mothers appeared to support their son’s twirling (see Table 2). Twirlers recalled how their mothers drove them to lessons, sat on the bleachers during long contest days, and paid for twirling-related expenses. Only in two cases (7%) were mothers unsupportive of twirling, and in these instances, it was more a matter of absence than adamant rejection. Andy’s (late-50s, bisexual) mother, for instance, got too nervous watching him twirl (“She literally had to take Valium”).

Some mothers encouraged their sons to twirl either because they also twirled or danced. Ian’s (early 40s, gay) mother was a coach and

**Table 2.** Twirling Parent Support

	% (#)*
Both Supportive	63 (19)
Neither Supportive	13 (4)
Mother Only Support	13 (4)
Father Only Support	7 (2)
Mother Unsupportive	7 (2)
Father Unsupportive	20 (6)
Stage Mom	10 (3)
Stage Dad	3 (1)

\*Some categories overlap, percentages do not add up to 100%.

judge, so “she encouraged it because it was something she did.” Nate (early 30s, gay) too was encouraged by his mother, a dancer, twirler, and coach. Because of his success in twirling and masculine presentation, Nate felt pressure not to come out as gay. The pressure to be both a masculine and straight male twirler kept him from coming out until he was 16 or 17. He says, “I felt like the trophy child of ‘look this guy can do this activity with a bunch of females and be straight’ and I was completely smashing that dream.” The dream he refers to is his assumption that his parents were raising a rare, masculine, heterosexual male twirler. Nate felt pressure from his mother to conform to certain masculine standards and his perceived failure to uphold these standards led to stress on his part. Even while encouraging her son to twirl, Nate found he had to perform gender (and sexuality) in a way that still conformed to certain masculine standards.

Others, like Quinton (mid-30s, gay) were not at all supported by their mothers. Quinton was estranged from his family in part because of his twirling and, after winning a world-level preliminary competition overseas, called her to share his news:

I stayed up all night to call her when it was in the day time here in the U.S. and I was like, “Mom I’m going to win a medal!” ... She was like, “Well that’s good.” You know, kind of like not excited like, you know. And it kind of tore me to pieces, but then I kind of learned over my years of being independent from my family doing twirling that, you know, my success only should and only does matter to me....

Quinton quickly learned that heartbreak was a part of his family dynamic and, even after such success, came to accept that his mother would not support his twirling.

Among participants, three (10%) made a point to call one or more of their mothers “stage moms,” a term related to “helicopter” parents who “hover” in their children’s lives and may border on obsessive or invasive. Steven (mid-40s, heterosexual), Uri (late-20s, heterosexual), and Chuck (early 60s, gay) in particular relayed how their mothers controlled or enforced twirling. Steven remembers how his mother eventually let go of her “stage mom” status as he aged. A member of a big family, money was hard to come by. Around the age of twelve,

Steven's mother told him that if he wanted to continue twirling, he was going to have to show his parents how committed he was by practicing on his own. By age 17, his parents stopped footing the bill.

Chuck was not so lucky. Competing throughout the 1960s, Chuck had a tumultuous relationship with his mother in particular. He recalls how his parents enjoyed seeing their names next to his accomplishments often printed in local newspapers—fodder with which his peers at school would tease him endlessly. As one example, Chuck was twirling at a professional football game with other twirlers.

I remember sitting there waiting until it was time to perform and someone from the stands dumped popcorn on me and half of a soda. ...

I felt ashamed and I told my mother, I said, "Do not make me go back there for the rest of the season, because I don't want to do it." I said, "Look what has happened" and she said, "Oh it's just a stain it will wash out." What she didn't realize was that that stain went to my soul and it didn't wash out ever, and she made me keep going back there because she got free admission to the football game.

While his mother was supportive, this support and need for attention caused Chuck's mother to ignore the harassment he experienced. Because of interactions with his mother at competitions and reactions from school peers, he was often truant from school and eventually skipped his graduation ceremony all together. This collection of experiences caused Chuck much stress and trauma throughout his life.

Uri, who started twirling to get closer to girls, was reportedly not allowed to quit twirling while living under his mother's roof. He describes how his mother "clung" to twirling after a nasty divorce from his father. Uri was not allowed to play other sports based on his mother's fear that he might be injured and unable to twirl. After peers at school bullied him, her response was not empathetic.

I would come home crying from high school like, "Mom I don't want twirl baton anymore. They're so fucking mean and I don't want to do it!" and she'd be like, "Don't let them

hurt you. They're just jealous" and I'm like oh my god. That was her go-to, "they're just jealous." "Jealous that I'm a fag? Come on, mom!" It was just so bad, but ... my involvement in baton twirling was highly not up to me, like I was in it to win it and there was no option.

Uri's strained relationship with his mother and his forced participation in twirling made him feel like he could not be himself. It was not until college that he finally felt like he had agency in his life.

Overall, the twirlers largely told of their mother's support of twirling in one way or another. Through their support, mothers helped undo gender by allowing their sons to twirl, pushing the boundaries of acceptable sports for young men. By giving their sons this option, they also deconstruct "soft essentialism" by giving men and boys' the choice to participate in a gender atypical sport. For Chuck and Uri, however, their mothers' insistence that they compete in baton twirling came at a cost. In these cases, the pressure and stress became problems. Nevertheless, the majority of mothers supported their sons, perhaps due to an unconscious result of the liberal feminist rhetoric of choice.

### ***Directions from Dads***

In contrast, active support from fathers was as a mixed bag (see Table 2). While 19 (63%) participants initially noted that both their parents approved of their twirling, they later followed up by saying how their fathers were rather distant. The twirlers elaborated on how their dads' only contributions were paying the bills or how dad would make the occasional remark about a "cool trick." Few of these seemingly supportive fathers watched their sons perform or compete. Thus, the reported frequency of support is misleading.

Six (20%) twirlers recall their fathers adamantly discouraging their sons from twirling. In comparison, only two (7%) fathers were supportive. There is much tension among fathers who did not support their sons, a tension rooted in the gendered nature of sport. Among the fathers who were actively supportive, they approach their son's twirling in a way more conducive to traditionally male-dominated sports by managing their son's practice and training regimens.

According to accounts, unsupportive fathers' responses to their son's twirling came in terse interactions. After Tim (late-50s, gay) brought home a first-place trophy, "my dad would say, 'Why did you waste your money?'" Steven's dad harshly asked him, "When are you going to quit that damn thing?" Darryl's (early 50s, bisexual) father pulled him into the kitchen after school one day only to cryptically say, "You know people are starting to talk." The twirlers interpreted these reactions to mean their fathers thought their twirling as a "waste" and embarrassment. In talking about unsupportive fathers, the twirlers did not have much to say, perhaps because these memories are painful. Nevertheless, it is clear by their fathers' reactions that baton twirling was not in line with the gender-typical sports these fathers saw as appropriate for their sons.

Early on, Paul's mother and grandmother helped conceal twirling from his father. Of the fathers who were absently-supportive, Paul's (mid-40s, gay) dad, realizing that his son was not going to give up twirling, struck a deal with his mother. Dad would pay for competitions, but it was mom's responsibility to pay for lessons. Prior to this deal, Paul remembers how he would play with his mother's baton at his grandmother's house, but he was forced to leave it behind when he left.

I think that's what kept me interested because it was almost like a taboo that for some reason I wasn't allowed to do it. I could do it at grandma's house, but I wasn't allowed to bring it home or do it at my house and it never really made sense on the why and how come.

Paul's grandmother eventually bought him his own baton, but he had to keep it at her house and he was not allowed to tell his father. On the rare occasion Paul was caught twirling at his grandmother's house, his grandfather would remark "Oh your dad doesn't like you to do that!" Paul could not understand why baton twirling was so "taboo"—he often wondered if it was the forbidden attribute of twirling that kept him interested.

The behaviors of fathers who showed encouragement stand out in comparison. Victor (early 50s, bisexual), Brian (early 60s, gay), and Hayden (mid-20s, heterosexual) recalled how their fathers helped



them train for competitions by approaching baton twirling like any other sport: through competitiveness, analysis, and training—frames of reference taken from their own knowledge of basketball and baseball. Through success and accomplishment, both Victor and Brian sought their father's approval. In fact, attempts to gain admiration from others by winning competitions, or even simply by not dropping the baton, were common ways the twirlers framed their relationships with their fathers.

Victor's dad would watch practices and analyze tricks Victor too frequently did not catch in order to determine what he was doing incorrectly. Victor was told, "Whatever you're going to do, just be the best at it." Brian's father echoed this sentiment, "I'll get you [twirling] lessons, but keep in mind that if you're going to do this, you're going to have to be good in this sport if you're going to be a boy twirler." As Brian became more involved in baton twirling, his father learned the ins-and-outs of the scoring system and made him twirl lead bars to strengthen his wrists for increased speed. For Brian, it was all about recognition which was a big deal "because if I was accepted, that means that my dad would look favorable upon me and I had done my job ... It was nice when I won, but I really wanted that whole element of acceptance." Similarly, Hayden often heard from his father, "The day I have to tell you to go practice is the day you're done because you should want to win from the inside, because you're not going to win because I want you to." In support, Hayden's dad helped with practices by standing in as Hayden's duet partner for specific tricks (Hayden admitted, "I don't know if he ever caught one.").

Fathers showing an active interest in their sons' twirling by actively attending competitions demonstrated their approval and support. In one instance, this support was in the form of taking down signs that barred Hayden from using the restroom to change clothes. Because women and girls dominate baton twirling, they often take over the spaces where competitions are held. Contest directors post signage for designated changing areas and often, this means commandeering men's bathrooms and locker rooms. At one such competition, Hayden recalls how the men's bathroom was being used as a dressing girls' room and how his dad "came unglued" out of anger: "I thought we were going to get kicked out of the gym because he flipped out so bad. He ripped down all of their dressing room signs and we went into that

bathroom and we changed and that was that.” This act is exactly what Hayden needed to see, “[My dad] was undoubtedly the picture of what I needed as a young male growing up in this sport.” Other fathers also got involved in competitions by keeping tabs of when competitors drop the baton (which results in a penalty) or helping run contests by officially tabulating judge’s scores. The twirlers interpreted these action as both approval and support.

When dads were involved in their son’s twirling lives, they used a script for doing gender that added legitimacy to the sport and made twirling about reinforcing masculinity. At the same time, this support encouraged the twirlers to succeed because of the positive attention they received from their families and especially from fathers. Regardless of whether they approved or not, the fathers of male twirlers confirmed that masculinity and manhood in sports are defined by certain criteria (e.g., success and competitiveness). In this way, all fathers reinforce hard essentialism either by discouraging their son’s choice to twirl or treating twirling like a more conventional sport—both approaches encourage differences between boys and girls and thus also emphasize distinctions between boys’ and girls’ sports. Uri, for example, found some relief from his mother when he was finally allowed to join the wrestling team in his senior year of high school. During this time, he felt he bonded most with his formerly absent father—likely because he showed interest in a more traditionally masculine sport (the irony of trading one spandex costume for another was not lost on Uri, however).

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

Findings from this study exemplify how male baton twirler’s parents both “do” and “undo” gender (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Mothers “undo” gender by supporting their sons’ twirling, whereas fathers continue to “do” gender with their sons in a way that upholds traditional masculinity. Sons who twirled interpreted their parents’ support as uneven and gendered. Mothers were more supportive according to twirlers’ recollections. But, even when supportive, both mothers and fathers could be “too supportive.” What this over-support looked like was gendered insofar as mothers were

overly supportive by emphasizing the feminized traits of the twirling. Fathers, in contrast, were overly supportive by conceptualizing the sport in a more masculine and competitive way.

Overall, mothers were more supportive than fathers. Through their responses of encouragement and even helicopter parenting, mothers defied gender by allowing their sons to twirl. Via these behaviors, mothers do not promote traditional sports as a pathway to manhood in the same way as fathers and thus mothers contribute to how their sons “undo” gender. Mothers’ more affirmative and supportive responses may be a product of how femininity is imbedded in baton twirling alongside modern feminist rhetoric of choice more broadly (Messner, 2011). For example, many mothers twirled in their youth and participants often had sisters who twirled as well. These women grew up in a time of increasing options for sport participation thanks in part to widely held liberal feminist beliefs and to policies like Title IX (Messner, 2011). Mothers were more apathetic than fathers and were reportedly more flexible with gender (Blakemore & Hill, 2008; Endendijk et al., 2014; Kane, 2006; McHale et al., 2003). Mothers aid in redefining representations of sporting masculinities by allowing their sons to twirl which addresses issues of “unmarked” boys within “soft essentialism” (Messner, 2011). In the case of baton twirling, mothers appear to inadvertently encourage the opportunity to choose a gender atypical sport outside of conventional parameters of masculinity. In doing so, they help their sons “undo” gender by pushing the gender boundaries in sports.

Fathers’ strategies, though different than mothers, were also gendered. Fathers of male baton twirlers reinforce how their sons “do” gender by policing masculinity and pulling their sons towards “normal” notions of masculinity. Sons remember how their fathers often wanted no part in baton twirling or reacted with stern negativity. These responses confirm how fathers are often more conservative with their views on gender and masculinity (Blakemore & Hill, 2008; Kane, 2006). Research also contends that sports are a way for young men to prove themselves and demonstrate success to their parents, especially when it comes to masculinity (Messner, 1992; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). In baton twirling, success (described as catching tricks, winning competitions, or twirling in college) also led to acceptance among some fathers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Mennesson,

2009). As Messner (2011, 164) puts it, “fears that their sons may fail to develop properly, lead many adults to engage in (or at least tolerate) a hardening and toughening of boys.” I find this fear among fathers may lead to avoidance of twirling altogether or reinforce “hard essentialism.” Reframing baton twirling as a more traditionally recognizable sport is unique within research on parents of boys in feminized sports. It demonstrates how fathers who support their sons, even as they cross gender boundaries, do so in gendered ways that indulge gender essentialism (Kane, 2006; Messner, 2011). This reinforces masculine hegemony, the importance of sports in boyhood, how gender is expected to be “done,” and the idea that males are naturally prone to competitive athleticism. Such reframing supports hard essentialist gender ideologies that provide women the choice to push gender boundaries, but assumes men need no such opportunities.

This study is not without limitations—I identify two key restrictions. First, I rely on the accounts of the sons who twirled rather than the parents themselves. The viewpoints of parents and other family members would provide richer context for how gender was constructed and communicated within families. Many siblings of participants also twirled; their take on their brothers’ twirling would provide insight into family dynamics. Regardless of this limitation, the twirlers’ views of their parents should not discount either the meanings they assign to their memories or the analysis I present here (Pugh, 2013; Scott & Alwin, 1998). Second, future research should pay careful attention to the experiences of non-white participants. Any exploration of non-white twirler’s experiences in the current study would violate participant confidentiality due to the low number of non-white men in the sample.

The application of the findings presented here should inspire scholars of sport and leisure to think more about the gender essentialist stereotypes especially within families and sport settings. With a focus on a feminized sport like baton twirling, this study makes clear how young men are expected to conform to masculine norms in alignment with more traditional sports, especially when fathers are involved, but that doing so perpetuates gendered inequalities. All in all, parents can help upend essentialist gender structures by allowing boys to push boundaries through participating in gender atypical sports like, but not limited to, baton twirling.

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