

## On the Boundaries of Shame. A Qualitative Study of Situations of Overstepping Boundaries (of Shame) in Physical Education as Seen from the Students' Perspective

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**Abstract:** More than any other subject, teaching physical education focuses all the participants' attention on physicality: the students' bodies are at the center of instructional activities and the reference point of evaluations; the body is touched, observed, and enacted; students compare each other's juvenile bodies along normative criteria such as weight, proportionality, and fitness. Against this backdrop, physical education also seems to carry a neuralgic potential for experiencing situations that involve an overstepping of boundaries of shame. This article focuses on a study of physical education in school that retrospectively inquired into situations in physical education that students perceived as overstepping their boundaries of shame or intimacy. The data was collected by means of short written narrations and analyzed using methods of sequential analysis. The findings show that, from the students' point of view, boundaries of shame are transgressed in various ways within the context of physical education: by exposing the body in swimming lessons, the regular touching of the body by the teacher, and so forth. The students are aware that the situations that they perceived as overstepping their boundaries can in principle be explained on didactic grounds or be characterized as "normal" by reference to common practice in sports.

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## 1. Introduction

Overstepping boundaries of shame or intimacy is rarely the subject of school and class research<sup>1</sup> as such acts are not part of the pedagogic-didactic curriculum and are only conceivable as random, individual exceptions. In this vein, pertinent experiences of this kind emerge rather sporadically in biographically oriented research on students' experiences or within the broader context of reconstructing "exceptional" situations—that is, with a long-term impact—within a teaching setting as seen from the students' point of view<sup>2</sup> (at the international level, e.g., CARDINAL, YAN & CARDINAL, 2013; STREAN, 2009; at the national level, e.g., BEHRENS, 2012; BREIDENSTEIN & RADEMACHER, 2011; FICHTEN, 1993; FROMM, 1987; HEINZEL, 2014; HUNGER, 2000; KLINGE, 2009; MARKS, 2013; MIETHLING & KRIEGER, 2004; RABENSTEIN, 2014; SOBIECH & MARKS, 2008). [1]

But what do we see empirically when we direct our research interest towards this (perceptual) aspect of "boundary overstepping," or rather, when people are asked to recall moments during their school time that they perceived as an act of overstepping their personal boundaries of shame or intimacy? The following article revolves around this issue. It focuses on a study of physical education in school in which we inquired into pertinent situations that former students experienced as an overstepping of their boundaries. [2]

In the following, we first demonstrate to what extent physical education in school carries a neuralgic potential for experiencing the overstepping of boundaries of shame (Section 2) and subsequently contour the analysis in view of our conceptualization of the subject and our methodological approach (the prompting of short written narrations and application of sequential analyses; Section 3). We then present our initial results (Section 4). We begin by outlining situations that were typically characterized as overstepping boundaries (physical exposure, touching, and body-related remarks) and then focus on aspects of perception and interpretation that the participants in our study emphasized in regard to the experienced situations or the extent to which the study participants commented on the perspective underlying their own perception in terms of its (socially) pre-structured nature or it being specific to them individually (Section 5). Following the presentation of our findings, we provide an outlook that considers the didactic conclusions to be drawn (Section 6).<sup>3</sup> [3]

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1 See the quantitative survey by WIESCHE (2013).

2 Here, we would also like to mention the case-reconstructive study by WEIGELT (2010). It deals with physical contact between teachers and students but focuses exclusively on the teachers' perspective.

3 With the exception of the recently published volume "Shame and Embarrassment During Physical Education: Facets of a Disregarded Phenomenon" by KLINGE and WIESCHE (2017).

## 2. Physical Education and Its Neuralgic Potential for Experienced Boundary Overstepping

Our research interest starts from the assumption that, in sports, students are more likely to experience situations that involve an overstepping of the boundaries of shame and intimacy (henceforth abbreviated as "experienced boundary overstepping") than in other subjects. Unlike any other subject, sports draws the attention of all class participants to physicality and in this sense is considered to involve special demands in terms of the handling of one's own body. Thus, the student's body is the basis for various educational activities and subject to evaluation. It is being touched and observed as well as enacted by means of clothing and exercise-related tasks. Compared to other classroom situations, a student's withdrawal from these situations is clearly more difficult. While in typical classroom situations such withdrawal occurs mostly internally or mentally and frequently remains undetected, body-related "non-participation" during physical education class becomes immediately evident, in which case it is likely to entail sanctions. [4]

At the same time, the body and its potential for mobility are subject to expectations that originate outside the school setting. Athleticism is regarded as an orienting value among many students, and they frequently compare and evaluate their juvenile bodies on normative criteria such as weight, proportionality, fitness, and so on. Finally, physical education's focus on the body raises the issue of the students' gender in special ways, so that its exposing of the body also potentially bears a sexual dimension. [5]

It seems obvious that this body-related blending of various demands, social expectations, and biographically based sensibilities carries a particularly neuralgic potential for individual students that is likely to increase the probability of experiencing an overstepping of boundaries. [6]

The fact that so far we largely lack empirical studies of this issue from the students' perspective indicates the following: As *the* constituent element of sports, body-related interactions are generally taken for granted as an unquestioned matter of fact.<sup>4</sup> Addressing this issue specifically and problematizing it by asking about experienced boundary overstepping might lead to discussing it in the context of the social discourse on sexual harassment and, in the worst case, placing the subject of physical education (and its teachers) under general suspicion.<sup>5</sup> [7]

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4 See also the analysis of the specific conditions that favor sexualized violence in sports (e.g., BRACKENRIDGE, 2001; RULOFS, 2015, 2016).

5 Compare also the debate on *Üble Verleumdung aller Sportlehrer* [Grave Defamation of All Sports Teachers], published in the journal *sportunterricht* [Sports Instruction] as well as on the website of the German Sports Association (DSVL) in 1998 (<http://www.lehrerverband.de/sport.htm>, accessed October 25, 2018) in reaction to the publication of the results of the study on "Gewalt gegen Frauen und Mädchen im Sport" [Violence Against Women and Girls in Sports] by KLEIN and PALZKILL (1998).

Any association with the "debates on harassment" would certainly fail to do justice to the teaching of physical education. There are reasons why physical education is particularly popular with many students (e.g., GERLACH, KUSSIN, BRANDL-BREDENBECK & BRETTSCHEIDER, 2006). Moreover, physical education is associated with the psychologically and socially most comprehensive set of objectives—despite or because of what many people perceive to be its closeness to the area of leisure (see, e.g., BRÄUTIGAM, 2009; KURZ, 2001; SCHERER, 2009). Accordingly, physical education offers special opportunities for the promotion and strengthening of self-esteem compared to other subjects in which teaching takes place in mostly static classroom settings (CONZELMANN, SCHMIDT & VALKANOVER, 2011). Yet, also because of the centrality of physicality, it comes with numerous moments that might involve unpleasant acts of overstepping the boundaries of some individuals (HUNGER, 2000). [8]

The objective in the following is therefore by no means to problematize or discredit physical education and weaken its reputation or the reputation of its protagonists. What we are seeking to do is rather to shed light and reflect on student perceptions that are neither intended nor desired as neuralgic moments in order to utilize them didactically to raise prospective awareness of these aspects of everyday sports-educational activities. [9]

### **3. Study Design**

The study focuses on situations of physical education that students perceive as intruding upon or overstepping their boundaries of shame or intimacy. This section outlines the theoretical perspective that we apply in conceptualizing "the overstepping of the boundaries of shame or intimacy" and explains how (and why) we used which methods of data collection to approach the subject area. It is followed by a description of the specific study setting and the methods of analysis. [10]

#### **3.1 Overstepping the boundaries of shame or intimacy—laying the groundwork**

We pragmatically and in the broadest possible sense define the subject area as the experiencing of a subjectively unpleasant act of intruding upon that which is commonly referred to as the sphere of shame or intimacy. We assume that there exists a spontaneous and largely consensual understanding of this term in the field of study. [11]

In accordance with the social-constructivist perspective adopted here (as per BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967), a situation is perceived as "the overstepping of a boundary" in light of an individual's sense of shame and intimacy. This in turn is—in broad terms—based on the cultural and social experiences with which the individual is confronted in the socialization process<sup>6</sup> as well as on very personal

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6 It includes the sports- and body-related socialization that influences the development of conceptions of body-related normality, styles of movement, and so on (BAUR & BURRMANN, 2008).

experiences. With this in mind, we conceive of an individual's perception of a situation as an overstepping of the boundaries of shame or intimacy as a constructive act on the part of the individual: On the one hand, it refers to internalized social conventions about what is consensually defined as overstepping the boundaries of shame or intimacy in a particular social and cultural context.<sup>7</sup> This also includes legal knowledge, knowledge about how to act in a specific role, knowledge about cultural and group-specific customs, and so on.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the corresponding perception also refers to what the individual considers meaningful and "biographically rooted idiosyncracies" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967, p.131).<sup>9</sup> [12]

### 3.2 Method of data collection

To approach the phenomenon of experienced boundary overstepping by drawing on specific experiences, we have further developed the method of a "short written narration."<sup>10</sup> By giving a brief prompt to elicit a narration, we attempt to direct the research participants' attention to an experienced event in the past that left a lasting impression (here: a specific situation in the context of physical education that was subjectively perceived as boundary overstepping). In a limited time, this experience should be described in a way that its essence becomes comprehensible to others (according to the individual's system of relevance). The data obtained in the process must invariably be understood as a product of a social interaction. [13]

In an epistemological vein, we assume that situations that leave an impression on the individual are episodically stored, as it were, in the person's memory and that individuals can more or less "retrieve" the conditions and the other actors subjectively considered significant to the situation, their feelings in that situation, and so forth. Our method of short narration intends to evoke such an awareness of a past experience of boundary overstepping in physical education, that is, elicit a current memory of a situation that obviously stood out from the stream of everyday events and carried affective weight at the time of its perception (see above).<sup>11</sup> [14]

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7 See also SCHÄFER and THOMPSON (2009).

8 Scientific attempts to define situations of overstepping the boundaries of shame and intimacy mostly narrow the phenomenon down to a sexualized dimension. The legal construction also interprets the problem area in a narrowly sexualized sense (e.g., §177, para. 1 of the German penal code of November 13, 1998 [Federal Law Gazette I, p.3322], amended by Article 1 of the penal code of November 4, 2016 [Federal Law Gazette I, p.2460], <http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bundesrecht/stgb/gesamt.pdf> [Accessed: May 14, 2017]).

9 From a sociological point of view, individual experiences are of course invariably socially interpreted experiences inasmuch as the interpretation of experiences draws on existing social patterns of interpretation (SCHÜTZ & LUCKMANN, 1973).

10 Valuable considerations can be found in SCHIEK's discussion (2014), even though SCHIEK primarily refers to the written *interview*. The method of prompting narrative-generating writing has so far rarely been applied or methodologically reflected on in the context of qualitative social research.

11 The issue as to how far the narrative prompt might possibly also evoke traumatic experiences was repeatedly discussed among the team members with an eye to whether this was ethically responsible.

The narrative prompt aims to encourage the study participants to sequentially and logically put an experience that they regard thematically relevant and worth telling in a closed written form that is generally comprehensible to others. In so doing, the experience is transformed into a verbal statement; in a sense, it is "objectified" or rather *reformulated* by the writer, making it available to him/herself (once again):

"[...] my own subjective meanings are made objectively and continuously available to me and *ipso facto* become 'more real' to me. [...] Now [...] as I objectivate my own being by means of language, my own being becomes massively and continuously available to myself at the same time that it is so available to him [the other] (BERGER & LUCKMANN 1967, p.38).<sup>12</sup>

"Writing is a recursive process of semiotizing, arranging, and revising content and as such is at the same time complex and precise. It enables coping with experiences and feelings, giving them a form, and also erasing or rephrasing them" (SCHIEK, 2014, p.384; our translation). [15]

In the underlying writing process, the writer spontaneously provides only the information that the person deems relevant to the intended overall understanding of the situation. In this sense, the information provided thus varies in accordance with the writer's "needs." That is to say, it *can* be of subjective importance for the writer to supply further information about the behavior of observers of the situation, information about his or her own feelings, information for the readers to help them put the situation in the proper perspective, and so on in addition to describing the moment of boundary overstepping. These narrative references are by no means to be thought of as accidental; they rather follow a (more or less unconscious) system of relevance that the writer draws on in the situation of data collection or social communication.<sup>13</sup> All in all, the event is presented in consideration of communicative-functional aspects and from a perspective that subjectively weighs and evaluates it (CARROLL & TIMM, 2003, p.694). [16]

The reason for selecting this method of data collection was, in particular, the desire to encourage the participants to focus on the subject. As opposed to interviews that rely on narration, for instance, this methodological approach intends for the participant to deliberately reduce the experienced situation to its subjectively perceived essence. In our opinion, the method is particularly well suited to addressing issues that cannot be communicated in a face-to-face situation or that respondents cannot easily talk about in such situations—for example, topics that touch on the respondents' privacy in specific ways, are on

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12 In this sense, the described experiences invariably involve multiple acts of (re-)construction on part of the study participants: as a consequence of the subjective processing of social reality (at the point in time at which the situation was perceived as overstepping boundaries), in the form of mentally turning one's attention to the past experience, or by way of forming a gestalt of feelings (in response to the narrative prompt in the research setting) and giving the experience a written form (in complying with the narrative prompt).

13 See also the "constraints" mentioned by SCHÜTZE (e.g., 1984, 2008) in the context of narrative analysis (the constraint to close the textual form, the constraint to go into details, the constraint to condense), or the resulting structuring activities by the respondent in the process of narrative presentation.

the borderline of social interaction, and/or, as in the current case, involve intimate and personal experiences. [17]

### 3.3 Research setting and participants

We asked the participants in our study to perform the following task: "Please describe a specific experience that occurred during physical education class that, in your opinion, involved an overstepping of a (physical, sexual, or another kind of) personal boundary." The participants, who had been sought out at university lectures, were asked to spontaneously and anonymously write down their memories on half of a DIN-A4 page. Such data was collected at five different points in time at the University of Göttingen, Germany. We visited basic lectures, which take place in large auditoriums, to collect the greatest possible amount of data. The participants were students of sports science, German studies, business administration, history, economics, and medicine. The choice of lectures primarily followed pragmatic aspects, such as the willingness of the lecturers to allow the data collection to take place during their lectures.<sup>14</sup> By including students from a wide range of disciplines, we sought to ensure diversity among the study participants in terms of their "sports socialization." We are aware that, owing to this sampling procedure, we must largely assume uniformity in terms of the attended school types (advanced-track upper-secondary education or other school forms that qualify for higher education).<sup>15</sup> [18]

The age of the respondents ranged between 19 and 25 years, which implies that the writers reported experiences in retrospect that may date back several years. Each time, the data was collected at the beginning of the lecture without informing the participants about our research interest. After a brief welcome and a kind request to participate in the study, the students were immediately confronted with the writing prompt. Our refraining from elaborating our research interest was to ensure that the study participants produced their written text on the basis of their *own* understanding of an overstepping of the boundaries of shame and intimacy. For the same reason, we took care that the writers had as few as possible opportunities for exchange with their fellow students sitting next to them. They were also supposed to be able to complete the writing task with as little disturbance as possible and unobserved by others. The written narrations were collected after a short time (about ten minutes). So far, we have analyzed about 300 of the collected short narratives. In 80% of them, the participants outlined an experience in accordance with the narrative prompt. On average, the experiences were described in five to seven lines. [19]

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14 That is to say, the respective study program played no role in the sampling. The only exception was the discipline of sports science insofar as it can be assumed that these students—in contrast to other students—tend to regard their experiences with physical education as altogether positive. However, with regard to our research question, this aspect should also not be overestimated.

15 The fact that only young adults with a high level of formal education participated in the research must certainly be considered in assessing the limits of our study. We have taken this into account by considering the findings in light of the special *structures* of physical education in our conclusions.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Our method of analysis builds on our preliminary theoretical considerations about the research subject and the method of data collection and can be outlined as follows: We strictly follow the students' perspectives, that is, we do not decide whether a boundary was actually overstepped but assume that from the respective perspective of the respondent the overstepping of a boundary did happen as the described experiences, according to the writing prompt, were associated with this interpretation accordingly. We furthermore do not categorize the nature of the experienced boundary overstepping (e.g., sexualized boundary overstepping or similar). What we attempt to do instead is to follow the research participants' narrative perspectives by first creating categories primarily inductively. The objective of our analysis was to reconstruct the phenomena that the respondents described as an overstepping of boundaries and from which perspective and drawing on which information they did so. We did this by following a sequential-analytical methodology (SOEFFNER, 2004; SOEFFNER & HITZLER, 1994a, 1994b), in the sense of a hermeneutic sociology of knowledge, and by drawing on the pertinent methods applied in the context of speech-act theory<sup>16</sup> (WUNDERLICH, 1972). [20]

The detailed analysis is (generally) done on a word-by-word and line-by-line basis and proceeds in the following manner: We start with the first sequence of meaning in the respective text and (while blocking out context knowledge to the best possible extent) attempt to generate a wide variety of interpretations in a thought experiment. In terms of their implicit semantic content (i.e., the subjective meaning and the socially pre-interpreted meaning of the utterances), these interpretations are explicated or differentiated in greater detail. In addition to considering the description of the situation (to whom and what is being referred and in what situational context), the analytical focus is aimed at the writers' generalizations, normative statements, morally descriptive accounts, social attributions and patterns of explanation, patterns of quasi-theoretical knowledge, taken-for-granted "truths," and so on. Thereafter, we review—and confirm, modify, or dismiss—the hypothetical interpretations of the first sequence on the basis of the following sequences, which are subjected to the same procedure. [21]

This detailed analysis is repeated several times to explore various interpretational alternatives, validate the plausibility of the interpretation, and so forth (SOEFFNER & HITZLER, 1994b, p.45). By means of this microanalysis, we attempt to "pierce through the superficial informational content of the text in a methodically controlled manner and thus reach the deeper (in a sense, 'latent' or 'hidden') layers of sense and meaning" (HITZLER & HONER, 1997, p.23; our

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16 Speech-act theory conceptualizes utterances as verbal action. "The unit of linguistic communication is not ... the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (SEARLE, 1999 [1969], p.16). Speech-act theory assumes that a speaking person "acts" with each utterance, that the speaker pursues intentions that extend beyond the mere fact that the other person should notice *that* she or she said something. The basic assumption is that speech acts are performed in accordance with systems of constitutive rules. In our context, we have also analyzed the intentional communicative aspect of our respondents' statements by drawing on these systems of rules.



translation). Then we categorize the individual experiences across the individual cases according to their reference to phenomena and examine which common structures (e.g., the class setting) can be found in the data. All in all, the data analysis thus aims to identify the phenomena of experienced boundary overstepping and interpret them in terms of their social meaning by drawing on the interpreted indications of the mode of subjective processing, patterns of attribution, contextual embedding, and so on. [22]

The following considerations—which are to be regarded as preliminary findings—were classified in a first step according to the different categories of "physical exposure," "physical contact," as well as "body-related remarks" (Section 4). The categories were generated with an eye to phenomena experienced as boundary overstepping. Subsequently, we explicitly discuss (in Section 5) the "interpretations of the situation" that are offered by the participants themselves. The reason for this is that remarkably they do not limit themselves to describing the experience but frequently also comment on their own perception, for example, by explaining *why* they characterized the situation as boundary overstepping. [23]

#### **4. Phenomena of Boundary Overstepping**

In reality, the categories described in the following are of course intertwined in many ways and are presented separately here only for analytical purposes. Within the context of this classification scheme, we address references to the instructional embedding or the didactic context of the experienced situation and analyze their significance for the affected individuals. [24]

##### **4.1 Physical exposure: "That you have to show yourself nearly naked"**

A recurring issue in the data is the aspect of "physical exposure" in physical education. For some of the students, the fact that one's own body is enacted by sportswear or by engaging in the required exercises is in essence boundary overstepping. Some students must overcome their shame boundary just to *take part in physical education classes*, knowing that their body is exposed and unofficially and officially observed, evaluated, and commented on. The degree and long-term impact of situational embarrassment equally depends on individual sensibilities, instructional enactments, and the scope of publicity. [25]

A paramount and therefore often cited example is school swimming class, during which one is required to expose one's own body nearly completely uncovered to others over an extended period of time. This involves a wide range of individual sensibilities, for example, regarding a student's pubertal state of development, weight, bodily proportions, skin, and various (neuralgic and otherwise hidden) body parts. But irrespective of self-detected "trouble spots," the fact that "you must present yourself nearly naked" and that intimate body parts or contours become visible in class and class-related settings causes shame and insecurity: "During swimming class, I often did not feel comfortable since I felt stared at by

others while wearing my bathing suit, quasi 'nakedness,' also in front of the teacher" (3/34).<sup>17</sup> [26]

The direct contrast between forced intimacy and the official student role (otherwise) becomes virulent: Swimming class is not only about the display of performance, but in a specific way it is also invariably about the (almost complete) display of one's own physical materiality. This involves a peculiar breakdown of the otherwise pre-constructed physical distance primarily towards the teacher (but also towards other actors in the school setting; "I didn't want him to see me like that" [2/70]). The students obviously perceive the fact that the nearly naked body must be displayed on a regular basis as a potential embarrassment inherent in the subject of physical education that they cannot escape because of their obligatory institutional commitment. [27]

Beyond the embarrassing experience with the bathing suit—and this also becomes clear from the short narrations—other special boundaries of intimacy can be offended as well, depending on the extent to which the didactic arrangement exposes or focuses on neuralgic body parts.

"Swimming lessons: We students were asked to perform the typical 'frog movement' in front of the male teacher while facing the floor. During this exercise, the teacher had a clear view of our sexual characteristics. Although we girls all wore bathing suits, I perceived the fact that the teacher stood behind us to closely observe our leg movement as a boundary-overstepping situation" (3/11). [28]

The embarrassing physical exposure is also present during "normal" physical education classes, where the body (or parts thereof) is also exposed to view or is regularly the focal point. Here, situations are described in which shifting clothing involuntarily gives a free view of some body parts (over-the-head movements during which the abdomen or torso become visible, shifted pants when legs are spread, etc.). Another topic with girls is sportswear, which may often consist of tight shorts, sport-tights and snug sport-tops making the body contours clearly visible. The aspect of the non-voluntariness of wearing form-fitting clothing applies here in that loose-fitting sportswear is often considered unfashionable by female students and frequently as dysfunctional by teachers and is thus discouraged. The explicit verbal thematization of physical exposure by teachers is also perceived as boundary overstepping.

"I was in 11th grade and wore a 'normal' sports-top and long pants. My sports teacher had me show an exercise during gymnastics and afterwards said in front of the whole class that I should dress differently in the future because my female curves could not be overlooked and that I was to blame if boys/men would look at them, while demonstratively looking at them" (5/65). [29]

Also, bodily reactions in more or less "common" exercise situations like running or jumping can provoke a boundary-overstepping feeling of physical exposure.

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<sup>17</sup> The first figure in brackets refers to the time of data collection (a total of five [instances]), the second identifies the document (all documents were numbered).

Women mention memorable experiences of this kind in which intimate body parts such as the buttocks or breasts "jiggle" and cause feelings of shame. "A girl was repeatedly called up to perform running and stretching exercises in front of the whole class in 9th grade. This involved a deliberate choice of exercises that emphasize the female body shape" (2/4). [30]

Male participants with excessive overweight mentioned involuntary movements of the abdomen or breasts. Excessive sweating, or sweating visibly in certain body areas, redness of the skin, and so on were also described as overstepping the boundaries of intimacy.

"I still remember that in the 5/6th grade I found it totally embarrassing that sweat stains showed on my T-shirt during sports at school. To avoid this, I intentionally did not strain myself as much and did not lift my arms" (5/14). [31]

The intensity of embarrassment is even reinforced in all aspects when the didactic arrangement involves enacting the body. In this vein, the respondents regularly mentioned, for example, the teacher's methodical decisions that specifically directed attention to one's own body ("everyone pay attention to Tim now") or that called for the exposure of intimate body parts ("flex your backside," "push your chest out,") or also situations of physical exposure as a result of organizational measures.

"I remember clearly a gymnastics class with bar exercises. One after the other we had to support ourselves on the bar and perform some gymnastics up there. As it was my turn (I was slightly overweight), I felt the gazes of the other students on my backside and I knew what my peers were thinking. Tensing would not help here. I could not escape the situation" (1/36). [32]

In some cases, there were complaints about the physical exposure of the teacher that was perceived as boundary overstepping insofar as the teacher failed to maintain the minimum limit of coverage of his or her genital area. There were, for instance, reports of physical-education teachers whose genitals clearly stood out in the (tight) clothes or became visible by spreading their legs in front of the students.

"My sports teacher in school always wore very tight sprinter shorts during class and sometimes sat with his legs spread apart in front of us while he made announcements. You did not really want to look there. Whether he realized it himself, I don't know" (2/87). [33]

#### **4.2 Physical contact: "Rewarded ... with a pat on the backside"**

A further phenomenon of boundary-overstepping situations is "physical contact." It is present in team sports as well as in "small games" in which mutual touching is a substantial part of successful action. Participants report feelings of disgust while touching their teammates' or their opponents' bodies as well as perceiving unpleasant body odors because of physical closeness. Furthermore, the content of sports classes that is constitutively based on contact such as "scuffling and wrestling" or "acrobatics" or also games that revolve around the subject of "cooperation" and "stimulation of the senses" were characterized in terms of overstepping personal boundaries: "Games for stimulating the senses. Task: To pass through a group of classmates while blindfolded and by means of touching others. During the attempt to complete the task, there was intentional and unintentional touching" (3/12). [34]

Physical closeness to and touching by physical-education teachers have a special significance. Even though the students know the teachers act within an official didactic framework, they perceive their body-related actions as contradictory to their otherwise professional distance. The respondents frequently mention instances in which the teachers operate within close physical distance of their students and come into close contact with their physically strained body (e.g., when the student was supposed to "cover the sweaty teacher during team play" [5/78]) or demonstrate a motion directed by the holding hand of the teacher. But primarily situations were described in which the touching was done proactively by the teacher. The teacher providing support during gymnastics is a typical example: "While we were leapfrogging, he touched the girls' backside as a 'securing aid'—but not the boys" (3/32). [35]

Numerous other acts of touching by teachers were also described that did not serve the purpose of student safety but rather sought to improve sequences of movement, posture, and so forth. The following were perceived as "embarrassing," "unpleasant," or "gross": the touching of naked skin ("[while explaining, our addition], he had his hand on my neck the entire time" [2/36]), the touching of body parts such as the backside or thighs, for example, when supporting gymnastics exercises ("in school, we were performing gymnastics, and the teacher helped the girls with the front swing while always touching their backside much more than necessary" [1/11]), the performance of standardized movement sequences such as spreading the legs, stretching the chest muscles, or the backswing movement ("the teacher always stood directly behind us and performed the movement 'with us,' while holding our hand" [5/24]), the correction of body posture by touching the hips, the head, the shoulders, or also the usage of touch as a gesture of recognition or motivation ("a physical education teacher at school rewarded a successful hit during badminton with a pat on the backside" [3/30]). [36]

### 4.3 Body- and gender-related remarks: "In your case, it looks like jelly with legs"

Another recurring topic in the data is *verbal* boundary overstepping. This includes, for example, critical statements from the teacher relating to the student's body (size, form): "The subject of the class was jogging. I told my sports teacher that I had knee pain, to which he replied in front of all the others: 'That's no surprise given your weight. You should really start losing weight.' I did not know what to say" (1/24). [37]

Another instance of experienced boundary overstepping were defamatory remarks from the teacher regarding the students' posture ("When you do it, it looks like jelly with legs" [4/57]). Along with such derogatory comments about the body, female participants report teachers' statements related to intimate body parts such as the breast, backside, or legs.

"During that time, the sport-tops, which I also wore during sports class, were very fashionable. [...] my teacher was supporting me, which was ok. But then he commented: 'That's a very sporty top you are wearing, [name]!' In combination with the support position, I arrived at some interpretations that I perceived as unpleasant. He clearly overstepped a boundary, even though he might have only intended to compliment me" (3/6).

"During the preliminary talks concerning my final exam in badminton, the (male) teacher said to me, 'It should all work out fine if you wear a short t-shirt tomorrow.' It was meant as a joke, and I understood it as such, but it was nevertheless an extreme overstepping of a boundary by the sports teacher" (5/52). [38]

The same applies to gender-related statements that affect students of both genders in a degrading manner:

"He was not my teacher, but we encountered each other at school competitions. Because of his resolute manner as well as verbal abuse, you actually felt emotionally attacked, but you (or frankly all of us) took it with a smile. I perceived the remark that we girls look like 'apes' while playing soccer or 'whether we were capable of anything at all' as an insult" (2/45).

"Female physical education teacher: 'When it comes to dancing, you boys are kind of dyslexic'" (4/23).

"He jokingly said: 'Mixed doubles at a tennis match is playing with a ladies' handicap'" (2/8). [39]

Even though such remarks are commonly declared to be acts of overstepping, their emotional assessment proves to vary considerably. Whereas in the event of negative connotations of physicality and motoric achievement a sense of shame and personal offense prevailed, alleged compliments evoked a mixture of feeling complimented, confused, and insecure and embarrassed ("I found that a bit weird"; "did not know initially what was meant by it" [2/76]; "somehow I did not like it at all" [1/17]). "Somehow" the student likes the positive comments, but they are

perceived as being out of line or inappropriate in this hierarchically structured situation. [40]

## 5. Remarks on and Identification of Boundary Overstepping

As mentioned above, many participants did not limit their short narrations exclusively to describing the situation but frequently also commented on the event or their own perception of it. In the following, we will address two patterns that stand out:

1. The declaration of the described situation as one marked by ambiguity. This pattern is significant insofar as it indicates a structural problem inherent in physical education, namely, that touching by a teacher can potentially be interpreted along the lines of didactic necessity and/or individual desire.
2. The declaration of the event as sexual (or rather sexually motivated) harassment. Here, the aforementioned possibility of interpretational ambiguity gives way to an assessment of the event as an intentional, sexually motivated act. This pattern also highlights the hierarchically pre-structured "student–teacher" relationship and illustrates the problem that students are not in a position to oppose their teacher, even though they can pinpoint the overstepping of an intimate boundary.<sup>18</sup> [41]

### 5.1 Evidence of the possibility of multiple interpretations of the situation: "You can but don't have to see it that way!"

A recurring pattern that shows up in the short narratives is accompanying statements that point out that the described situation is *one* perception that *could* potentially diverge from other perceptions of the situation and that the description provided must not (necessarily) be understood as an accusation or as imputing a motive. In addition to the "experience of harassment" at issue here, the respondents explicitly mentioned didactic necessities, common practices in sports, or "different attitudes." Frequently, they explained or complemented their specific perception of the event by reference to "weaknesses" in their own character or an individual lack of "relaxedness." [42]

In this sense, many descriptions exhibit a certain ambivalence in their assessment of the situation. Although the reports clearly show *that, in the respondent's own perspective, boundary overstepping did take place*. When it comes to assessing the event, the respondents often took a step back and were more cautious in that they offered different interpretations of the situation:

"In eleventh grade, we had to practice a handstand for an exam. While ten or eleven girls were practicing, the sports teacher smacked only my backside and said out loud: 'Well, this one sure isn't a firm one!' You can take it with humor, but it was unnecessary" (37). [43]

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<sup>18</sup> On the issue of and the state of research on sexualized violence in sports, see most recently RULOFS (2016).

By pointing out alternative interpretations, the respondents relativize the inevitability of their own perception or categorization of an event as boundary overstepping. This figure of reasoning declares the situation at issue here to be more a "private matter" and a matter of "individual perception," at the same time exonerating those who were the source of the experienced overstepping of boundaries. In the situation described above, the teacher was assumed to have meant to be humorous. Even if the touching of intimate body parts does not seem technically necessary, it can still be explained or declared to be humorous or a "normal gesture in sports." [44]

Another pattern is the relativization of the situations perceived as boundary overstepping by referring to the "normality of sports." This possibility of interpretation results from the immediate proximity of physical education to the field of sports and how it is conveyed by the media and experienced outside of the school setting. Knowledge of the existing code of conduct and habitus in sports—which becomes manifest in a pronounced "relaxedness," a direct and occasionally aggressive tone, or also in physically very close interaction—relativizes the individual assessment of a situation as one of boundary overstepping. Thus, knowing that a pat on the backside is common behavior in sports makes the personal perception of such a situation as unpleasant and boundary overstepping appear as personal "stiffness" or "hypersensitivity." A common phenomenon in this context is to refer to the experienced situation in terms of a potential overstepping of boundaries while detaching one's own interpretation from this reading by referring to one's own sports socialization:

"While playing soccer at school, there were verbal and physical confrontations. Some might take it personally and feel offended, but as an athlete in organized sports I don't see it that way because I feel that it is a part of the game" (4/14).

"Our sports teacher often crossed through the girls' locker room to get to the gym. Some felt it was boundary overstepping and complained; but honestly, I never perceived it as disturbing as I am used to such situations from playing handball where such a thing is completely normal" (4/1). [45]

Another form of verbalization of the perceived ambiguity of a situation is to "absolve" the protagonist of the situation from harboring any ulterior intention, which amounts to exonerating the person from any wrongdoing.

"During my table-tennis class in elementary school, the teacher always stood right behind us and guided us through the movement, while guiding our arm, for us to internalize the strokes. I didn't feel directly harassed, but I found the closeness generally unpleasant, even though the exercise as such helped a lot" (4/46). [46]

The respondent perceives the teacher's physical closeness as unpleasant but denies the potential motive of harassment and legitimizes the situation instead by reference to a didactic consideration. Thus, the focus of the interpretation is shifted from the respondent's own perception to the professional necessity of the teachers' action. [47]

The way the respondents comment on situations experienced during physical education indicates their dilemma: the feeling of boundary overstepping cannot be easily communicated or bemoaned in the moment of experiencing it, as the situations are generally justified on didactic grounds or can be plausibly explained by reference to the "normality of sports."<sup>19</sup> The students are obviously aware of the possibility that the gazes and touching perceived as boundary overstepping could at any time be deemed didactically necessary in light of what is being taught, the teaching objectives, ensuring safety, and so on, or that the physical exposure could be characterized as "normal" by referring to common practices in sports. This frequently results in an experience of boundary overstepping turning into a personal problem in a double sense: on the one hand, because the respondents experienced the situation as burdensome; on the other, because they seek the cause for their reaction (partially) also within themselves inasmuch as they attribute to themselves a lack of "relaxedness," as pointed out above. [48]

## **5.2 Declaration of behavior as being sexually intended boundary overstepping: "Who was known to enjoy touching the girls during physical education"**

The data also contains descriptions of boundary overstepping that are declared to constitute *intentionally* sexually motivated behavior, beyond any ambiguity and potential for interpretation. Here situations were described (almost exclusively by female participants) in which a male teacher aimed to establish a situation of intimate physical closeness. Examples include teachers observing the students in the locker rooms or showers, or also taking a shower alongside them, asking about a student's menstrual cycle during a personal conversation, offering physical closeness, taking photos of the students, physically exposing themselves, and so forth. Frequently, the respondents mention situations characterized by a teacher seeking exclusive personal contact with individual students:

"A teacher showed quite an interest in the underwear of females" (2/66).

"In my school days, I had a teacher who took pictures in the summer of students swimming" (2/24).

"In our canoeing course, we took a camping trip. The trainee sports teacher jokingly said to a friend of mine that they could share a tent and that the field trip would then no longer be so boring for her either" (1/34).

"One of our sports teachers frequently visited the girls' locker room to check 'if everything was okay.' Furthermore, he often made verbal sexual intimations, and the pretty girls always got the best grades" (4/45). [49]

The option of an explicitly sexualized connotation of the experience was primarily selected whenever interpreting the experienced boundary overstepping along the lines of "didactic legitimacy" or "normality in sports" hardly seemed possible

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<sup>19</sup> An interpretation of the described problem against the backdrop of GOFFMAN's (2003 [1959]) role theory would certainly be a very insightful endeavor but cannot be provided within the context of this article.



and/or others interpreted the experience as sexually connoted as well. Thus, in the short narrations declaring these events to have been "sexually motivated," we repeatedly found evidence that other students perceived the situations as boundary overstepping in a similar manner. Or the descriptions indicate that the teacher already had a respective reputation at the school or had already been associated with other, seemingly intentionally sexualized actions: "There was a teacher at our school who was known for groping the girls during physical education" (5/78). [50]

In our opinion, the inherent pattern in the short narrations of supporting one's own perception by reference to the perceptions of others indicates that it is easier for those affected to clearly label the overstepping of a boundary as such when this assessment is shared by others or when referring to such a shared perception increases one's own credibility. [51]

Across all examples, it is noticeable that some writers *explicitly* indicate that they have classified the experienced boundary overstepping as sexually intended only in retrospect—and on the basis of a greater ability to reflect on it—whereas at the time of the event, they regarded the situation as plausible "normality in sports." "My teacher often touched my hips during gymnastics in physical education. I always perceived it as harmless, but somehow it's still in my head" (3/13). [52]

In the process, they frequently ironically indicate their knowledge of the teacher taking advantage of the protective guise of his professional position as a teacher by using quotation marks such as "clearly accidental" or "supposedly," or "unintentional" ("while in supporting position, his hand "clearly accidentally" slid to my naked thighs" [5/63]). Similar to the assessment in the previous section, we see signs of a long-lasting emotional impact on students who experienced "sexually motivated" situations: in terms of realizing, for one, that they had served as an object of sexual ambition and, for another, that in their role as students they were more or less helplessly exposed to the situation. [53]

## 6. Final Remarks

Our research findings indicate that, from the students' perspective, physical education apparently involves recurrent acts of overstepping the boundaries of shame or intimacy, be it by exposing one's nearly naked body during swimming lessons, perceiving glances directed to distinct body parts, the teacher touching one's body, or experiencing sexually motivated "advances." The situations frequently carry affective weight and are often described as shameful or embarrassing. The evident nature of these situations is (also) rooted in the fact that they are marked by a suspension of the student role inasmuch as the situations are primarily focused on the students' physical materiality (including their gender). [54]

Overall, the examples illustrate a position that is difficult from the students' perspective. Knowing that the glances and physical contact perceived as boundary overstepping could be plausibly explained on didactic grounds in almost

all cases or characterized as "normal" by referring to conventions in sports (e.g., "a relaxed approach to the body") makes it almost impossible for the affected students to oppose these situations. Even in situations that are beyond what can be justified didactically and are perceived as sexual harassment, defending oneself is difficult owing to the hierarchical pre-structuring of the situation or the possibility of misinterpretation. The long-lasting effect that such situations can have in some instances clearly also points to the aspect of experienced helplessness and loss of autonomy. [55]

As mentioned at the beginning, this article does not address questions of responsibility, truth, or (sports-) didactic necessity but rather the students' *perspective in order to uncover their personal experiences*. In the scope of this article, we also cannot answer the question of how often the students encountered the described phenomena or how often they experienced situations as an overstepping of their boundaries of shame and intimacy.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, we also stress once more that the situational descriptions were deliberately evoked by us as outsiders: from the stream of events in physical education class, we had the respondents filter out *pertinent experiences*. [56]

That said, what do we make of these findings? What do we conclude from these insights into the experiences of shame from a didactic viewpoint? In the following, we would like to offer, if not a solution, some food for thought and present some didactic options. These considerations specifically do not refer to situations that give reason to believe that the teachers might be guided by an attitude, motive, or routine other than professionally attending to their students and didactic necessity. Behavior violating professional standards cannot be dealt with didactically but is rather to be strictly condemned and sanctioned in everyday life. This requires an atmosphere that not only encourages students to set boundaries but (among other things) also an environment that reports behavior that clearly does overstep boundaries (see RULOFS, 2015). [57]

If we take the findings as a whole and consider them from the perspective that the students' individual boundaries of shame collide with the structures of physical education class, a basic problem becomes evident: Focusing on the body is seen as the constitutive point of departure of physical education, physical closeness is implicit in much of the content taught in physical education (e.g., one-on-one defense), physical contact between teachers and students cannot always be avoided (e.g., in giving support), and dress codes (in swimming pools) do not seem to be very flexible to name but a few aspects. If we want to leave the (common) basic structures of physical education untouched and nevertheless seek options to provide emotional relief to vulnerable students, such options can be derived primarily from a didactically reflexive approach by the teacher in dealing with the instances described above that are potentially burdensome for some students. For example, situations in class that expose the body can be organized so as to decentralize them. Situations of physical closeness can be

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<sup>20</sup> In principle, the findings could be quantified in future studies, using the same methodological design. An analysis of the data considering the gender of the concerned students and teachers is certainly still warranted.

defused by allowing a free choice of partner or type of support. Experiences of feeling almost naked during swimming lessons can be alleviated by limiting the time spent outside the pool or by permitting the use of towels for body coverage. In this sense, it seems possible to lower the emotionally burdening potential of many of the boundary-overstepping situations in our findings by attempting a (sensitizing) change of perspective and by implementing more or less simple didactic measures. Regularly obtaining anonymous feedback on situations involving the overstepping of boundaries in one's own classroom can contribute to detecting the potential for embarrassment inherent in didactic measures (methods, organization, offerings). Last but not least, teachers' increased attentiveness to avoiding body-related remarks and physical contact that are not absolutely necessary for instruction can lower the potential of boundary overstepping.<sup>21</sup> [58]

If we consider the findings altogether—this time not in light of a collision between individual sensitivities and the structures of instruction in physical education but by focusing on the fact that certain structures of physical education vary from the structures of other subjects—yet another picture emerges. The physical closeness between teacher and student, the required exposition of one's own physical materiality, and similar prove to be *subject-specific* challenges that differ from other educational routines and pre-structured interaction between teachers and students or contradict these. Those who are best prepared to deal with these structural peculiarities or subject-specific expectations are primarily those who have been socialized in extracurricular sports and who—by the logic of leisure sports—are familiar with this approach to physicality (per the authority of his or her position, an adult touches an adolescent; the body is shown scantily dressed; and so on). [59]

Against this backdrop, it would be advisable to inquire into physical education from an ethnographic perspective and ask what kind of physical socialization its structures presuppose and to consider, in light of increasing diversity, which groups of students can be assumed to have been socialized accordingly (and for whom this can be taken for granted) or whether the standards of normality that feed educational practice and to which the students are expected to conform are indeed *appropriate* and *desired*. Prospectively, it would make good sense to make precisely these normative expectations (which are routinely inherent in physical education classes) reflexively available to teachers and students,<sup>22</sup> so that particularly the latter are given the chance to position themselves accordingly. [60]

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21 Areas where we can look for elements of such didactics are, for example, discourses on teacher professionalism (e.g., MIETHLING & GIESS-STÜBER, 2007), on the general quality of instruction (e.g., BALZ, 2010; WOLTERS, EHNI, KRETSCHMER, SCHERLER & WEICHERT, 2000), on inclusive school sports (e.g., SCHEID & FRIEDRICH, 2015), or also on a teaching methodology that accounts for gender (e.g., GRAMESPACHER, 2013).

22 Very valuable connecting points for the further pursuit of this aspect can be found in the research on case work in the context of the training of physical education teachers (see particularly LÜSEBRINK, 2006, 2013; LÜSEBRINK, MESSMER & VOLKMANN, 2014; SCHIERZ, 2012; SCHIERZ & THIELE, 2002).

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