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PREVIEW

**A Comparison of Self-Esteem, Gender Role Orientation, and Body Image
in Adolescent Female Athletes and Nonathletes**

by

Elissa Rosenzweig Novick

PREVIEW

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Pace University**

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ABSTRACT

Athletic participation for females has increased dramatically during the last two decades. Currently research that looks at the psychological characteristics of female athletes and the impact that sports participation has on young women are important issues concerning the psychological exploration of sports. Three variables which the literature has deemed important in determining the differences between female athletes and nonathletes are self-esteem, gender role orientation, and body image. Although there are some inconsistencies, the literature generally demonstrates that females who participate in sports have higher self-esteem, more positive body images, and perceive themselves as psychologically more masculine than their non-athletic peers. In addition, research also suggests that women who have masculine gender role orientations have higher self-esteem and more positive body image self-concepts.

The present study examined self-esteem, gender role orientation, and body image of adolescent female athletes and compared them with adolescent female nonathletes. The sample was comprised of 103 undergraduate females from three colleges in the northeast. The measures used to assess the variables were The Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (Fleming & Courtney, 1984), the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974, 1975), and The Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984). In addition, an extensive demographic questionnaire was devised to assess the women's participation or non-participation in sports and extra-curricular activities during high school. Including the latter variable makes this study distinct from previous studies that had only considered two groups: athletes and nonathletes. The current study was comprised of four groups including female adolescents who participated in sports only, female adolescents who participated in sports and extra-curricular activities, female adolescents who participated in extra-curricular activities other than sports, and female adolescents who did not participate in sports nor in any other extra-curricular activities.

Since extra-curricular participation was a continuous variable that cut across both the athlete and nonathlete group, theoretically valuable and interesting interaction effects were also investigated.

Results of sports participation (yes, no) by extra-curricular participation (yes, no) ANOVAs indicated that adolescent female athletes had significantly higher self-esteem and body esteem, and perceived themselves as psychologically more masculine and less feminine than their non-athletic counterparts. In addition, there were significant interaction effects (sport participation x extra-curricular participation) that impacted results for the hypotheses concerning self-esteem and masculine gender role orientation. The interaction effects suggested that the effects of sports participation on self-esteem and a masculine gender role were moderated by the effect of extra-curricular participation. Finally, a correlation revealed that the athletes who perceived themselves as psychologically more masculine and less feminine had significantly higher self-esteem and body esteem as compared with the other athletes.

The findings of this study can be useful for high school curricula which should be amended to require participation in sports. School psychologists can be instrumental in implementing sports programs for young women. Based on the results of this study as well as previous research, sports participation during school is invaluable for girls in terms of increasing self-esteem and promoting more positive body images.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Participation in organized youth sport programs has assumed an increasingly meaningful role in the development of children and adolescents. Sport has predominantly been considered a male activity, and until recently men dominated the athletic arena. During the past several decades, however, participation by females in sports has grown substantially. The passage of the Higher Education Act in 1972 is viewed as a crucial step that led to the current movement by female students into sport. Included in the act is Title IX, federal legislation intended to protect students from sex discrimination and stating that no one person could be excluded from participation in any educational program or activity that received federal funding on the basis of sex. Title IX is seen almost without exception "as an attempt to get equality of opportunity [for females]. Equal moneys, equal facilities ... equal programs ..." (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). By 1980, girls made up over 30% of all high school athletes and 30% of collegiate athletes. Another measure of the change in the face of youth sport was the increased amount of money spent by institutions on female athletic programs. According to Women's Sports magazine (1980), by 1980 over 700 undergraduate institutions had some type of athletic scholarship for women. Since the enactment of Title IX, participation in sports by females in high school has increased 723 percent (Kessler, 1997).

Regardless of all of the attempts of females to, "catch up" to males in sport participation, they still lag behind. Title IX was helpful in some ways. For example, additional money was put into women's sports programs. However, this money was filtered into traditionally accepted women's sports such as gymnastics and tennis, as well as to elite varsity female athletes. Therefore, only some females achieved "equal opportunity."

The 1990's has seen a continued influx of females into the sport arena. The media's role in this trend cannot be ignored. Athletic equipment companies have begun using women athletes to endorse their products. Athletes such as Gabrielle Reece, Monica Seles, Mia Hamm, Sheryl Swoops, and Venus Williams to name just a few, appear on television and in magazines promoting the company product, of course, but also promoting sports and it's positive benefits. A survey of Fortune 500 companies reported that 80 percent of its women leaders were "jocks" during their school years. A 1998 study (Hunt) cited in USA today concluded that girls in high school who participate in sports are less sexually active and therefore less likely to become pregnant than those girls who do not play sports. This study (Hunt, 1998) attests to the positive benefits of female athletic participation. Overall, for girls the message has changed. Sports are not just for boys, and girls can play any sport that they want.

It is important to recognize that although more girls are involved in sports today, they still may experience negative social pressures by participating. Since sport is traditionally considered a male activity, girls who engage in sports may perceive themselves as less feminine or may be viewed by others as unladylike and masculine. In the book, *The Sporting Woman* (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983), the authors state:

Certain sports are stigmatized by the people participating in them. Social suspicion of the female athlete is increased when the female is black, from a lower class, lesbian, or necessarily must develop characteristics that are defined as "masculine," such as strength. Thus, black women in track events; strong, muscular women in field events; lesbian women in team sports like softball and basketball, all face multiple problems of acceptance. (p. 45)

The literature on women and sport is growing and is a contemporary research trend. Understanding the psychological make-up of the young female athlete and how

she differs from her non-athletic counterpart is a current topic of interest. Different psychological variables have been investigated including self-esteem, gender role orientation, and body image. The results are valuable as well as interesting and the main purpose of this research has been to attest to the positive benefits of adolescent female sport participation.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Self-esteem

The first variable included in the study is self-esteem. Self-esteem, as defined by Coopersmith is, " ... the evaluation which an individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself. It expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy" (1967, p. 4-5). Pelham and Swann (1989) extend the definition further, contending that self-esteem is multiply determined, and believe that an individual's general feeling of self worth is determined by three factors: one's positive and negative feelings about oneself, their specific beliefs about themselves, and the way the individual frames those beliefs.

Early literature examining self-esteem or self-concept of athletes compared to nonathletes was ambiguous. In a 1976 study (Ibrahim & Morrison) results indicated that at the high school level male athletes had *lower* scores than nonathletes on self-esteem measures, while no differences were found in a comparison of women athletes and nonathletes. The investigation also included athletes and nonathletes at the collegiate level where no significant differences were found for men or women on measures of self-esteem.

Today, the role of physical activity in maintaining psychological well-being and increasing self-esteem is well documented (Delany & Lee, 1995; Wilkins, Boland & Albinson, 1991). The research that utilizes female samples (Delany & Lee, 1995; Harris & Jennings, 1977; Wilkins et al., 1991) is consistent with the findings that athletes exhibit higher self-esteem than nonathletes. Delany and Lee (1995) noted that, "The evidence linking physical activity to positive psychological states suggests that high-active respondents, both male and female, will score higher than low-active respondents

on measures of positive psychological adjustment" (p.85). In other words, the investigators found that self-esteem was higher for the high-active (athletic) group as compared to the low-active (non-athletic) group which supports the notion that involvement in sport or regular physical activity is likely to benefit self-esteem. Delany and Lee's (1995) findings are consistent with previous research (Plummer & Koh, 1987; Wifley & Kuncze, 1986) that utilized different self-esteem measures but obtained similar results: i.e., levels of self-esteem were greater among those who exercised regularly or participated in sports.

Some current research exists that is surprising and ambiguous including a study (Hall, Durborow & Progen, 1986) that found no significant differences between the self-esteem of athletes and nonathletes even though the investigators do admit that the athletes scores were higher on the self-esteem measures, however, not significantly higher. Surprisingly, a more recent study (Finkenberg, Mitchel & Weems, 1991) had similar results. The investigators (Finkenberg et al., 1991) observed no significant differences between women athletes and nonathletes in levels of self-esteem. In general, studies such as these (Durborow & Progen, 1986; Finkenberg et al., 1991) where no differences were observed on levels of self-esteem between athletes and nonathletes are uncommon today.

Although the literature generally supports the theory that involvement in sports benefits self-esteem, there is some conflicting evidence regarding levels of self-esteem among female athletes in different sports. One such study (Snyder and Kivlin, 1975) hypothesized that gymnasts should have higher scores on measures of self-esteem than basketball players. The investigators theory was based on early literature that certain sports were more socially acceptable for females. In this case gymnastics places an emphasis on balance and grace while basketball emphasizes hard running, bodily contact, and generally "unlady-like" actions. Snyder and Kivlin's findings confirmed their