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‘THEY LIGHT THE CHRISTMAS TREE IN OUR TOWN’:

Reflections on Identity, Gender, and Adolescent Sports

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Abstract

Sport occupies a prominent space in the public lives and private identities of US adolescents. Using the retrospective reflections of college students, this analysis explores two questions about sport-related identities during high school: Are ‘athletes’ and ‘jocks’ distinctly separate identities? Are these identities explicitly gendered? In four gender-segregated focus groups conducted in early 2005, 32 student-athletes from two upstate New York colleges discussed their high school experiences of sport, status, gender, and identity. Three primary themes developed with regard to differences between the ‘jock’ and ‘athlete’ archetypes: academic focus, teamwork, and cockiness/aggression. Examining the intersection of gender, high-status/high-profile sport, and identity in both popular cultural imagery and the personal experiences of the focus group discussants provided support for the thesis of a ‘toxic jock’ phenomenon.

Keywords

gender; identity; sport

THEY LIGHT THE CHRISTMAS TREE IN OUR TOWN

In 2007–08, 55 percent of US public high school students (4.3 million boys and 3 million girls) participated in organized high school sports (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2008). Conventional wisdom views sport as a source of enhanced physical health, social integration, confidence, self-esteem, and social skills (Leonard, 1998; Nixon and Frey, 1996). Yet the collective impacts of teen athletic involvement are neither clearly mapped nor uniformly positive. Empirical research has linked sports with both health-promoting behaviors, such as reduced smoking (Donato et al., 1997) and suicidality (Brown and Blanton, 2002), and health-compromising behaviors, such as problem drinking (Hoffman, 2006) and interpersonal violence (Nixon, 1997). These apparently contradictory findings may in part reflect the routine conflation of several nonequivalent facets of the athletic experience. Drawing on social identity theory, the present analysis explores the distinct and gendered nature of two unique sport-related role identities: ‘athlete’ and ‘jock’.

Dimensions of Athletic Involvement

Athletic involvement has two primary dimensions: one objective (behavior) and one subjective (identity). Sports researchers most often study behavior, in part because the number of sports teams joined (Hoffman, 2006) or the frequency of physical activity (Brown and Blanton, 2002) are relatively straightforward to measure. More difficult to quantify is the subjective

component, such as commitment to a sport-related identity (Curry and Weaner, 1988) or the emotional consequences of its loss (Webb et al., 1998). However, behavior and identity are not equivalent (Lantz and Schroeder, 1999). The conflation of these overlapping dimensions of athletic involvement may obscure important distinctions.

In a series of longitudinal analyses, Miller and her colleagues found that adolescent participation in organized sports generally correlated with salutary outcomes, whereas self-reported 'jock' identity correlated with less desirable outcomes. For example, jock identity was associated with more problem drinking (Miller et al., 2003), increased incidence of both minor deviance (e.g. cheating or violating curfew) and delinquency (e.g. theft or vandalism) (Miller et al., 2007), and higher levels of sexual risk-taking, whereas sports participation was associated with lower levels of sexual risk-taking (Miller et al., 2005a). Several aspects of the divide were gender-specific; jock identity was associated with extrafamilial violence only for males (Miller et al., 2006) and with academic misconduct and lower grades only for females (Miller et al., 2005b). Eccles and colleagues (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles et al., 2003) similarly disaggregated the effects of participation and identity, linking high school athletic activity to young adult academic achievement and sport identity to psychological adjustment.

Distinguishing among Sport-Related Identities

Identity is best conceptualized as an accretion of the composite meanings individuals attach to the roles they typically play in interpersonal situations; these meanings both frame interpretations of social reality and guide behavioral expectations (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Because the relationship between self and society is recursive, identities derive from both an individual's self-reflective evaluation and others' evaluations of the individual, with a resulting dialectic that fuels an ongoing renegotiation of the meanings of the identities we hold, even those associated with conventionally well-defined roles (Mead, 1934). Individuals hold multiple identities (such as athlete, sister, blood donor, or sociologist) that they invoke to varying degrees and in different contexts. These role identities may be organized hierarchically in terms of their relative salience; the more salient the identity, the more likely that it will be invoked across a variety of contexts (Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Serpe, 1994). Moreover, a given contextual domain (such as sports participation) may foster multiple, uniquely nuanced identities (such as jock and athlete) over time and circumstance, even within a single individual. These identities may be mutually exclusive to the extent that their core meanings are inherently contradictory; or they may represent potentially complementary images of the self that differ primarily in terms of what characteristics are momentarily ascendant. Thus a given individual may invoke each identity in turn, depending on the situational context.

Past researchers have posited a single core identity associated with sports participation (e.g. Brewer et al., 1993; Curry and Weaner, 1987; Donnelly and Young, 1988). A separate research literature on adolescent peer crowds (e.g. Brown et al., 1986; La Greca et al., 2001) frequently invokes a 'jock' crowd, but the term has largely been treated as synonymous with 'athlete'. Such global constructs may obscure important internal distinctions. Different sport-related identities may follow unique developmental trajectories and vary in their implications for health-compromising behaviors. The cumulative experiences of a professional soccer player and a recreational skier can lead to drastically divergent perspectives and behavior even if the identities they foster are highly salient for both. Similarly, different sport contexts may temporarily highlight the salience of one identity over another, without requiring the wholesale rejection of the latter. Yet little attention has been devoted to the partitioning of sport-related identities.

Often used interchangeably, the 'athlete' and 'jock' labels have distinct meanings in the adolescent and young adult lexicon. The extant body of research in this area has provided insufficient data to assess the extent to which these two sport-related identities overlap.

However, three recent analyses of a survey of Northeastern public university students (the 2005–06 Athletic Involvement Study) have offered preliminary evidence of differences between them. First, a general-population sample ($N = 791$) was asked to rate how well a series of descriptive terms applied to either jocks or athletes. Respondents assigned significantly higher scores to jocks than to athletes on Risky Masculinity characteristics (e.g. macho, risk taker, sexually aggressive); the reverse was true for Prosocial characteristics (e.g. good team player, plays fair, self-disciplined), and Gender Neutrality (i.e. could be female). These perceived contrasts were especially strong for female raters; that is, women tended to perceive a greater difference between jocks and athletes than men did (Miller and Hoffman, 2009).

Where the previous analysis examined general perceptions of the ‘typical’ jock or athlete, two additional analyses of sport-involved subjects in the same sample assessed correlates of self-identified jock and/or athlete identity. Strength of jock identity correlated with conformity to masculine norms and with an ego-oriented approach to sports, whereas strength of athlete identity correlated with a task-oriented approach (Miller, 2009). Self-identification as a jock was associated with elevated odds of a past-year suicide attempt, whereas self-identification as an athlete was associated with lower odds of a suicide attempt as well as lower depression scores (Miller and Hoffman, 2009). While associational rather than causal in nature, these findings with respect to gender norms, goal orientation, depression, and suicidality support the conclusion that jock and athlete identities differ markedly in their correlates – and presumably their antecedents as well.

Gendering Sport-related Identities

Past research suggests that sport-related identities may not be equally embraced across gender. Girls are less likely than boys to perceive themselves through an athletic lens (Eccles et al., 2003; Miller et al., 2005b). This comes as no surprise, since sport has historically been a near-exclusively male preserve (Dunning, 1986); not until the passage of Title IX in the early 1970s did schools begin to implement gender equity in athletic programs, and despite substantial progress most institutions still suffer from a marked imbalance in this regard (National Women’s Law Center, 2002). Absent empirical research that distinguishes between unique sport-related identities, however, it remains to be seen if girls and women are merely less inclined to see themselves in sport-related terms altogether due to the prohibitive pressures of lingering cultural norms, or if they are more amenable to the identity of ‘athlete’ than ‘jock’. Moreover, it remains unclear if ‘jock’ means the same thing to female sports participants that it does to their male counterparts.

Methods

Focus groups were used to explore the characteristics linked with the related but distinct identities of ‘athlete’ and ‘jock’. Focus group methodology, with its particular capacity to facilitate in-depth and detailed exploration of inadequately operationalized concepts, is well-suited as a starting point for the generation of emergent, discussant-driven insights regarding sport-related identities (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Sample

In February and March 2005, 32 young adult student-athletes were recruited from two colleges in upstate New York, with the permission of their Athletic Directors. Two focus groups were conducted at each location, consisting of two-hour, semi-structured group discussions guided by a moderator. To facilitate frank discussion of sensitive topics, each focus group was restricted to a single gender. Each session was audiotaped to permit the later identification of emergent major themes.

Several precautions were taken to maximize the validity of the results. As recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000), discussion questions were pilot-tested in a practice focus group to ensure that they were clear and used language appropriate to the target population. Each group was led by a trained moderator who initiated discussion questions and sought clarification of ambiguous responses, while a colleague with extensive experience in sport research observed, took notes, and contributed occasional questions. At the end of each session, discussants were asked for their final impressions and issued an open-ended invitation to share any observations that had not been raised previously. After discussants departed, the researchers remained for a debriefing to compare impressions regarding emergent themes and relevant nonverbal data not captured on audiotape.

Participants

Each of the 16 women and 16 men certified that her/his age was at least 18. Three participants (one woman and two men) were African American; all others were white. Two women were Canadian citizens; the rest were citizens of the United States. Offered the opportunity to classify their sport-related identities during high school, three men and one woman described themselves as 'jocks'. All others rejected the term, identifying themselves as 'athletes'.

Participants' athletic histories were remarkably varied, and in most cases reflected an interest in multiple sports at the high school level. The men reported involvement in a wide range of high school sports, with particular emphasis on (American) football, baseball, basketball, volleyball, and track/field. The women's high school histories were less concentrated in contact sports; their most prevalent sports were softball, basketball, volleyball, soccer, and track/field. On average, women reported participation in a greater number of sports during their high school years (mean = 2.9 sports) than men did (mean = 2.2 sports). Due to the greater competitiveness of college teams, and the availability of fewer positions relative to the size of the student body, most discussants had narrowed their primary focus to a single sport by their college years.

Analysis

The discussion of jock/athlete distinctions began with an exploration of whether differences existed at all. Discussants were asked to consider 'the ways that people identify themselves in relation to their sports involvement', with the observation that 'some people think of themselves or others as athletes; some use the term jock. Do you think there's a difference between an athlete and a jock, or is it just two different ways to describe the same person?' In all four focus groups, this question prompted an immediate, spontaneous, and spirited discussion of the nature of the differences between these identities, drawing on both personal experiences and observations of others. Therefore, while the moderator initially introduced the concept of multiple sport-related identities, the subsequent development of themes relating to differences between athletes and jocks was primarily respondent-driven, with the moderator asking follow-up questions to clarify or confirm ambiguous points. Once participants had discussed the issue at length, they were also invited to comment on a preconstructed sample list of possible characteristics for each identity, compiled prior to the session for the purpose of stimulating discussion.

After the session, audiotape transcripts were examined to identify what the participants perceived to be core differences between the two sport-related identities. An open coding scheme was used to sort responses on the basis of several criteria including frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). After careful evaluation, these data were classified into broad categories related to three emergent general themes. While neither entirely mutually exclusive nor exhaustive of the respondents' far-ranging and nuanced evaluations of jock/athlete distinctions, these three themes undergirded the lion's share of the discussions. In the following section, excerpts from

the transcripts are illustrative of each of these themes. As a final coda to the thematic discussion, I have drawn on the discussants' spontaneous comments regarding the sport-specific, celebrity/status-driven antecedents of jock identity, with particular emphasis on the strong linkage between jock identity and football in US high schools.

Results

Differentiating Jocks and Athletes: Primary Themes

Almost universally, discussants affirmed that there were clear differences between high school jocks and athletes, and there was broad consensus on what those differences were. Overall, three predominant themes emerged to differentiate jocks and athletes: 1) academics (low vs high prioritization); 2) teamwork (glory seeking vs sportsmanship); and 3) self-aggrandizement (cockiness/aggression vs modesty/respect for others).

THEME: Academics (Intelligence, Well-roundedness, and Dimensionality)—

Discussants identified a well-rounded 'student-athlete' archetype, echoing the efforts by administrators and coaches to promote a broad ideal of excellence both in and out of the arena. For volleyballer Dylan, academic performance and commitment were just as central to the athlete identity as sports performance itself. Basketball player Ann further emphasized the high standard to which athletes were typically held in her high school:

The teachers always expected us as athletes to always get high grades and stuff like that. And if we would get in trouble for the smallest thing, they would say, Oh, I'm going to tell Coach on you.

Impressions of the jock archetype were far less positive. However, despite conventional 'dumb jock' imagery, when reflecting on their own experiences, these discussants painted a nuanced portrait that emphasized academic focus or interest rather than intelligence. Where athletes were committed to performing well in the classroom, jocks placed a low priority on school work and devalued education for its own sake. Noah, a wrestler who also played soccer and ran track in high school, summed up the difference:

If you're an athlete, you know what it takes to be an athlete, you know: hard work, dedication. But if you're a jock ... it's all you think about all day. Like, it doesn't matter what you got on your math test. As long as we win the game, I'll be all right.

According to Leah, a runner with a history of soccer, basketball, track/field, and softball, and the only female self-identified jock:

I actually put my sports ahead of my academics in high school ... The only reason I got like motivated to do like academics was ... my coach would be, like, you're going to get academic probation. I'd be, like, oh, crap. So I would work on it. But to me, it was all about playing a sport.

Female discussants strongly emphasized jocks' one-dimensional focus. In Maya's high school, calling someone a jock meant that 'sports was what they were – that was almost all they could do'. Denise suggested that jocks were one-trick ponies even in an athletic context:

They just have one sport. I think an athlete would be someone who's able to do more ... If you play basketball, you can also play softball. You can do other things besides just one. A jock is just a football player. That's it.

Discussants also identified academic privileges associated with high school sports. The personal experience of special treatment was reported almost exclusively by the three male jocks: Ben, Frank, and Ethan. Reflecting on his high school football days, Ben observed, 'If

you had your good grades in your classes, then it was just a walk-through.’ Frank further outlined the implications of the school attendance policy where jocks were concerned:

The athletic office is where the attendance is, so I was always in there, because I was chilling there, and I was cool with the attendance people, and I would always come late. I went to school late almost like every other day ... You know, you’re supposed to get detention if you have like ten lates or something, but I never did.

Ethan explained the mechanisms for helping team members to meet academic requirements:

At our school we had a team study group. The whole team would go and make sure they got all their work done and stuff that other kids didn’t get to do. The coach would set up and have a couple of tutors come in, some of the teachers, and they’d just make sure everybody got their work done before some of the games and stuff. To make sure everybody was eligible for all of the games and stuff.

The jocks attributed such treatment more or less generically to their participation in sports. Self-identified athlete Alex vehemently disagreed:

I don’t know about those sports, but in volleyball, we didn’t get anything special. We were just expected to do well. And if we didn’t do well, then our coach would come down on us ... I think those kids got more special privileges, football, basketball, because they were more the popular sports, even though they didn’t win or anything.

By reframing the observations of the jock respondents, Alex’s observation underscored the sport-specific conditions of celebrity privilege that, at least in some schools, may contribute to the disproportionate development of jock identity within the context of high-status sports such as football or basketball.

THEME: Teamwork (Sportsmanship, Esprit d’corp, and Glory-seeking)—

Learning sportsmanship is often touted as a reason to encourage youth sports participation. Athletes strive for team advancement, rather than self-promotion; they play for the sake of friends and for the love of the game, rather than the glory or attention associated with it. Asked, why do what you do as an athlete, Noah confirmed the importance of team loyalty:

Because the people around you practice together. You’d do anything for one another. Like in baseball, if someone commits an error, you’re backing them up right away. Because if they’re hurting, you’re hurting too.

Alex concurred that the roar of the crowd was of secondary importance:

It’s nice to have fans in the stands, but you’re gritting it out through practice every day with your teammates. You’re there for them. They’re there for you. So you’re more playing for them and for your coach, and not more for the fans. After the game, they’re all excited for you, but what it comes down to, you’re playing for them.

No one, jock or otherwise, claimed to be motivated by extrinsic considerations alone. The bond among teammates was a powerful recurrent theme especially among the men, regardless of whether they saw themselves as jocks or as athletes. In fact, football jock Ben best typified this ideal in his response to the question: if no one is watching, is it still worth doing?

The biggest game of my life, there was nobody there. We had this game where lightning struck, so it got postponed, nobody came back. There was ten people or something there, a couple of parents. And there was a double overtime. Just a tough, muddy, gritty game. It was the greatest feeling in my life. And when the game was over and we won, there was nobody there. It’s nice to have people there, but regardless ... I had great friendships with my friends and with my coaches. To the point where

I didn't care. I just wanted to win. I wanted to play with them. You know. Didn't really care who was watching.

Ben's recollection militates against the interpretation of jock and athlete identities as mutually exclusive. To the extent that a boundary exists between these identities, it is clearly permeable; that is, an individual may hold and draw upon both identities in different contexts. His comments also serve as a reminder that, while these identities may be oppositional in some respects, they may also be subject to considerable overlap, as in their mutual emphasis on attachment to teammates or desire to win. However, when directly juxtaposed with the 'athlete', the overall emergent image of the 'jock' was one of a glory-seeker who plays for the sake of the spotlight. As noted by runner Logan, 'The jocks do it more for glory and not just for the game. They just do it so they can get the attention.' Echoes of this somewhat exaggerated ideal type could be found in the comments of the self-identified jocks themselves. Frank unabashedly admitted that he found public adulation to be a powerful motivator; the crowd contributed a significant kick. 'There's nothing like scoring a touchdown and three thousand people standing up and you hear that big roar of the crowd and you hear the cheerleaders [mimics cheering] ...'

For some adolescents, the primary purpose of team membership – particularly football – is the associated social cachet. Mike, the captain of his college football team, identified these status seekers as jocks. '[T]here's kids that played on a team, got their number tattooed on their bicep, dropped out senior year ... They did it to have the number or the varsity jacket.' Actually getting onto the field might not even be necessary in this dynamic. Ben derisively referred to 'jersey getters', back benchers motivated by a desire for attention rather than a desire to play:

There were kids on our football team who didn't really know that much about football ... They took a lot of pride in wearing their jersey around and being friends with the guys on the team. They didn't have a shot to play.

THEME: Self-aggrandizement (Cockiness, Vanity and Aggression)—A third recurrent theme coalesced around a nexus of ego, self-regard, and interpersonal aggression. Participants in high-profile sports tend to be rewarded with significant social status, both informally from peers and more formally from the official apparatus of the school itself. As Noah reflected,

I remember in high school there were a lot of announcements before school started ... And they said, Congratulations to the basketball team for winning the game, and Congratulations to this guy for shooting the winning shot. They don't say, like, Congratulations Timmy for getting an A on your spelling test.

However, how the adolescent responds to this attention varies across the jock/athlete divide. Discussants painted a portrait of jocks as cocky egotists who routinely flaunt their superiority over others, whereas athletes eschew self-promotion. This divergence was a source of marked animus by some of discussants. Cross-country runner and softball player Emma observed, 'Our football team ... They just are so cocky, and they'll shove it in everyone's faces, "We won the states"'. Alex was even more blunt:

Jocks have an air to them, really ... They just sort of walk around school like, you know, nobody can mess with them, nobody can touch them. They wear their letterman jacket or something like that. They're basically jackasses to everybody else.

Baseball player Ian contrasted 'respectful' athletes with aggressive jocks who 'muscle everybody around just because they can':

I picture ... a football player, wearing their jacket, varsity letter on it, being very muscular, just going through a crowd and pushing everybody out of their way, because

they're the main guy ... Basically, I see a bully in my head as a jock ... I just see somebody who has no respect for anybody else other than themselves.

As these discussants saw it, cockiness is a near cousin to social dominance and aggression. To explain the link between jock identity and bullying, Greg (a college volleyball player with a high school history of volleyball and basketball) suggested a kind of spillover effect from the competitive sport milieu to other social arenas:

You have to be cocky and be fierce and competitive against the other team while you're playing. As an athlete, you can separate that from your normal life. But if you're a jock, well ... you carry that over to everything else.

In fact, Bloom and Smith (1996) have found empirical support for this hypothesis, observing more frequent violence in extra-athletic settings and greater approval of violence in competitive Toronto hockey players compared to non-competitive players or non-players. Alex explicitly identified spillover as a jock characteristic, noting that athletes, in contrast, compartmentalize their aggression: 'I can be sort of loud and obnoxious and sort of not the nicest guy in the world, but off the court, I'm pretty nice to everybody.' Frank the jock endorsed this interpretation:

A jock wouldn't shake someone's hand after ... A jock is the type of person that really wouldn't want to shake the other team's hand, because whatever happened on the field, it just carried over.

Just as some identities are more salient to the individual than others, identities may also be stratified by level of commitment, which strengthens the link between identity and role performance (Burke and Reitzes, 1991). The inability to compartmentalize suggests that jock identity holds more salience, and invites a stronger level of commitment to the role, than athlete identity; that is, jocks may be less facile than athletes at setting aside their sport-related selves and viewing the world through a non-sport-related lens, even in contexts that clearly call for such a shift. This comparatively greater rigidity may place the jock adolescent at elevated risk for identity foreclosure, a premature commitment to a career or lifestyle to the exclusion of other, unexplored alternatives (Adler and Adler, 1989; Murphy et al., 1996; Sparkes, 1998).

Jocks, Athletes, and Gender

Unsurprisingly, the symbol-laden iconography of sports carries gender connotations. By strong and immediate consensus, all of the male discussants identified 'typical' athletes and jocks as male. Among the women, athletes were perceived in gender-neutral terms; however, the masculinization of the jock archetype was absolute. In both female focus groups (but neither male group), the issue of gender was immediately raised as soon as the jock/athlete distinction was introduced by the moderator, and by multiple discussants, in terms both vehement and unequivocal. Jaime (soccer) 'would never think of myself as a jock'. Nell (field hockey) would 'never, ever' consider herself in those terms; 'I've always just looked at myself as an athlete'. Isabel (soccer and basketball) was especially firm on this point:

I always see jocks as guys ... We're athletes. People always talk about the jocks, but they're always talking about the guys, they're not talking about us. We're athletes. They're, like, jocks. We're not on the same status. We can't be called the same thing.

Chloe (basketball) actually found the jock label insulting – not because of its implications for academic achievement, team spirit, vanity, or aggression, but because of its implicit gendering:

When someone's describing you, I'd much rather be known as an athlete than as a jock ... Like if I heard somebody call me a jock, I'd be really offended. [MOD: Why?] Because ... It seems like it's something for a guy.

In contrast, the women characterized athletes as gender-neutral. Asked to visualize an athlete and then describe the person she saw, Ann responded without hesitation, 'I see myself.'

The women offered a plausible explanation for their own subjective polarization of the jock and athlete archetypes: conventional stereotyping in commercial films. Several noted that popular movies commonly depicted male sports participants as comically stereotypical 'jocks' (this theme was reiterated by the men, who enthusiastically identified classic 'jock' characters). Films featuring women in sports, such as *Bend It Like Beckham*, *A League of Her Own*, and *Million Dollar Baby*, have instead generally presented characters in sympathetic and multidimensional terms. Thus, even when a woman exhibits classically jock attitudes or behavior, she still avoids the jock meme, as Chloe observed:

Well, if you look at the movie ... *Love and Basketball*, they had two different people in it. They had the guy and the girl, both basketball players. But I would see the guy in that as a jock. I would picture him as a jock, and her as an athlete. And yet they both did the same thing. They both played basketball. They both went D1 ... (Hannah): He was also very cocky. (Denise): Yeah, but so was she.

The men in the focus groups were more prone than the women to see athletes as exclusively male. However, they were far more amenable than their female peers to the proposition that a woman involved in sports could legitimately be perceived as a jock. Dylan, Cody, Frank, and Ben all observed that women could be just as competitive as men, a criterion they saw as important to a jock identity. Although he considered her an exception to the broader rule gendering sport-related identity, Ethan defined one high school girl of his acquaintance as a jock based on her high sports profile relative to her academic performance:

Probably one of the biggest jocks in our school was a girl ... She played basketball, and she was our point guard, and she was getting recruited by tons of the D1 schools, and she was like averaging thirty points a game. She was always in the paper, picture was in the paper, and like, she'd always bring it in and hang it up ... Like she was one of the guys. She was the only girl in our school that was like that.

Ethan's recollection of his female classmate demonstrated that the gendering of sport-related identity is not absolute; in fact, under conditions such as these (still fairly unusual in girls' high school sports), gender may in fact be trumped by the imperatives of sport-based celebrity. Still, the emergent consensus in all focus groups was that women were, as a general rule, better classified as athletes than as jocks. Whereas female discussants reached this conclusion based on a *prima facie* equation of jockdom and masculinity, though, the men felt out the linkage in more depth – perhaps because they had not previously thought about it with respect to female sports involvement. Cody explained the key difference between female and male athleticism in terms of the tension between glory-seeking and teamwork:

I'm not going to go to a girls' game and watch somebody drive coast to coast and dunk on somebody. I'm not going to go to a softball game and see a girl out in center field jump up on the wall like Ken Griffey Jr. and make a grab. I think they're more fundamentally sound in the game, setting screens and running plays and whatever helps the team. I think it's more of a team sport for girls. The teams are stronger than the guys' teams. With guys, you always have the egos and 'I'm better than this person'.

For Owen, the key difference lay not in performance style but in motivation:

A guy, you know, if he keeps working hard, you can be a jock and go all the way up through the ranks up to professional, and that could be your goal. You know, it's not that you want anything else other than money for playing your sport. Whereas for a girl, if she's playing, chances are she's playing just because she loves the sport.

Both female and male discussants agreed that women tend to develop an athlete identity, whereas men are more susceptible to developing a jock identity; but they arrived at that general conclusion via different routes. Men tended to deconstruct gender differences in how and why the game is played. By contrast, women generally saw the distinction between jock and athlete

very much as a matter of public image and of privilege. They analyzed how jocks are portrayed in film and how they are treated on an institutional level. This system for classifying jocks and athletes actually had relatively little to do with the game itself.

Bound for Glory: Jocks and the Football Connection

One reason for the marked masculinization of the jock may be the persistent linkage of this identity with a narrow range of high-profile, high-status sports, most notably football. Women were particularly inclined to explore the issue of institutional privilege as a correlate of jock identity. However, the degree to which discussants – female and male, self-identified jocks and athletes alike – collectively made this equation was remarkable. Two of the three male self-identified jocks were past or present football players. When asked to encapsulate the iconic ‘jock’ in a single word, four discussants spontaneously responded, ‘Football’. Ian’s bully lettered in football; Emma’s ‘typical jock’ was her entire high school football team. Ben even suggested that his own primary sport-related identity as a jock was ascendant only during football season, to be supplanted by an alternate athlete identity the rest of the year – including when he participated in other sports such as track or baseball.

These respondents’ equation of jock identity with football invites exploration of the dynamic by which the celebrity associated with participation in a high-status sport may facilitate the development of a jock identity (Miller, 2009). An extraordinarily large slice of the social landscape of contemporary US high schools is devoted to this sport; institutional traditions (e.g. homecoming games, parades, and dances) have evolved around football, the likes of which exist for no other sport – indeed, no other school-related activity. Should a (male) adolescent seek a route to glory, no surer strategy beckons than the first string of the local team. While many teens no doubt play out of love of the game, loyalty to teammates, and desire for personal excellence, if there exists any sport with the potential to serve as a convenient spotlight mechanism, football is it.

Several discussants spontaneously noted the disproportionate attention and institutional resources devoted to football. The women wavered between bewilderment and amused resignation in response to Denise’s comparison of the disparate responses to the championship games won by her high school’s (male) football and (female) rugby teams:

Our football team ... won the national. They were the best in Canada. And they were so cocky about it. But our rugby team also won the exact same title. *The exact same title*. The football team got a special day dedicated to them, where they all got to wear their uniforms. We had an assembly, where they all went up ... They had like four busloads of fans go to [their championship] game. Our championship game, we had maybe five fans. No one knew about it. And when we got back – People said congratulations, but it was totally different. Totally different.

Emma topped Denise’s recollection with a singular observation about the high school football team’s elevated status in her own small town: ‘They close down part of our town and the boys literally have a parade. They light the Christmas tree in our town.’ This announcement momentarily silenced the rest of the focus group: a genuine conversation stopper.

Both Denise and Emma posited a baldly gender-based explanation for the football team’s comparative ascendancy. Yet male participants in lower-profile high school sports, such as Greg, envisioned a hierarchy of sports rather than a hierarchy of gender:

At our school, our football team, high school through elementary, their budget was a million dollars a year. And our volleyball budget was three hundred dollars ... We got a new net or a couple balls a year. Everything else we had to fundraise for.

Greg's observation highlighted what Messner (2002) has ably described as the disjuncture between the powerful 'center' of sport, including wealthy, visible, and high-status sports programs at the professional and college level – most commonly the purview of men – and sport that takes place at the margins, enjoys less attention and fewer resources, and is accessible to women and men alike. These discussants described a high school status hierarchy that closely parallels Messner's typology, one in which football and a handful of other boys' sports occupy a contested but still dominant center. The center constitutes a privileged space that may translate into extra academic support, opportunities for glory, and tolerance for cockiness or bullying – conditions with the potential to facilitate development of a jock identity.

Discussion

Through focus group interviews with former high school sports team members, this study examined the meaning of athlete and jock identities from the inside. Extant research about the health-risk implications of youth sports has largely relied on quantitative analyses that treat athletic involvement as a yes/no proposition. In contrast, focus groups are well-suited to the task of teasing out nuances of subjective meaning. This study found that 'jock' and 'athlete' are not interchangeable identities, a difference extending beyond mere emotional valence; these identities are patterned by both gender and specific sport context. Images of the hegemonically masculine jock archetype were strongest among women, and this perception was overwhelmingly associated with the high-profile, high-status world of high school football. The self-identified jocks in this study were not reducible to caricatures; they held attitudes, reported experiences, and expressed a worldview distinct from, if overlapping with, those of their athlete peers.

Illuminating the 'Toxic Jock'

This study provides a new lens through which to view previous findings regarding the behavioral correlates of jock identity (Miller et al., 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007). Until quite recently, data limitations have largely precluded direct comparison of athletes and jocks. Two emergent studies have now begun to demonstrate empirical differences between these identities. In a sample of nearly 600 undergraduate students at a Northeastern public university, strength of jock identity also correlated with conformity to masculine norms and with an ego-oriented approach to sports whereas strength of athlete identity correlated with a task-oriented approach (Miller, 2009). In the same sample, self-identification as a jock was associated with elevated odds of a past-year suicide attempt, whereas self-identification as an athlete was associated with lower odds of a suicide attempt as well as lower depression scores (Miller and Hoffman, 2009). However, while those quantitative studies asked subjects to indicate how strongly they identified with each identity, no universal definitions of jock or athlete (or operationalization of their contrasting meanings) were supplied. In the present study, therefore, the thoughtful and nuanced evaluations of these focus group discussants invite greater confidence in the validity of a 'toxic jock' phenomenon. Occurring at the nexus of gender, athletic participation, and identity, this phenomenon appears to derive from the marriage of hegemonic masculinity and high-profile, high-status high school sports (Miller, 2009).

In a preliminary exercise prior to the administration of these focus groups, a general-population sample of undergraduate students in an online discussion forum setting were asked to discuss perceived differences between jocks and athletes. Almost immediately, a polar divide emerged between these social identities. Some discussion-forum students quickly surrendered to the considerable weight of cultural iconography, dismissing the jock as a cartoonish figure lacking in any particular redeeming value, while elevating the athlete to Olympian nobility. This tendency was particularly pronounced among students who had little or no personal history of

sports involvement and thus were drawing their conclusions exclusively on the basis of popular cultural imagery.

In contrast, the sport-experienced discussants in the present focus groups applied considerable thought and personal experience to the development of a more sophisticated profile of these identities. Athletes and jocks were not merely (as the forum discussants sometimes implied) Jekyll and Hyde aspects of the same personality; nor were they necessarily at opposite ends of a polar continuum. In fact, while all of the discussants clearly indicated primary affiliations as either jocks or athletes, several people noted that these identities were not always mutually exclusive; that is, a single individual might draw upon both identities in turn depending on the circumstances. However, both the focus group discussions in this study and quantitative findings elsewhere (Miller, 2009; Miller and Hoffman, 2009) suggest that these identities are sufficiently distinct from one another to invoke separate attitudinal and behavioral expectations both on and off the playing field.

The social identities of jock and athlete derive in part from the formative influence of different subcultures, gender expectations, and (perhaps most importantly) access to resources. It is, for example, doubtful that one would find many jocks in a school milieu devoid of high-profile, male-only sports, although athletes might thrive in such a setting. The recurrent focus-group references to a relationship between jock identity and football (in the sport histories of the self-identified jocks, as well as in both jock and athlete discussants' observations about others) offers a case in point. Playing football does not preclude the development of an athlete identity, and many participants love the game for its own sake. Still, given the cultural valorization and wildly disproportionate institutional resources devoted to football (often at the expense of other sports), an adolescent boy with dreams of glory might well gravitate in its direction, irrespective of any intrinsic rewards. No other structured activity offers a more convenient and reliable route to status and privilege in the high school milieu, especially in the United States. Therefore – whatever the merits of the high school football experience, whatever its appeal for the athlete (and to be sure, such an appeal exists) – it is also the natural habitat of the jock.

The gender partitioning of sport-related identities raises interesting questions. How women negotiate the tensions between conventional femininity and involvement in the historically masculine domain of sports has been examined elsewhere. Some observers have identified distinctly 'masculine' signature behaviors among at least a subset of female sports participants; for example, the high-energy, disruptive, and bullying 'Basketball Girls' in Pascoe's 2007 ethnography of masculinity in high school seem emblematic of several 'jock' characteristics, although they were notably not labeled as such by their peers. In contrast, others have noted the persistence by which the gender order is reproduced within high school sport, either through the institutional and cultural creation of two-tiered systems (Shakib and Dunbar, 2002; Theberge, 2003) or through pressures on young women athletes to defend their femininity by conspicuously 'doing gender' in their grooming, body language, and self-presentation both on and off the field (Malcom, 2003).

The focus group participants in the present study clearly distinguished between the masculine jock and the more gender-neutral athlete, but it is unclear to what extent they socially constructed and imposed this distinction rather than observing it empirically. Do female sports participants tend to behave differently from their male counterparts, as implied by Cody and Owen above? Or do observers merely apply different identity rubrics to similar behavior, as suggested by Chloe? Locating female sport-related identities on the continuum between these two poles has implications for the future of the institution of sport as a whole. Sport has historically been a playground for men, with women peering over the fence as observers, cheerleaders, and marginal participants. Women have now begun, in large numbers, to appropriate a place in that central terrain. There are two strategies by which they may achieve

this: by jumping the fence and adopting an overtly 'masculine' approach to sport, or by knocking the fence down and reconstructing the institution along gender-neutral lines. In other words, whether women will transform sport more than sport transforms women remains an open question (Theberge, 1994).

Caveats and Future Directions

These discussants were all current members of Northeastern college varsity sports teams, with long histories of athletic participation and psychological engagement with sports. As such, their responses may not typify the perceptions of adolescents and young adults in general, or those of more casual sports participants. It may be that high school jocks are underrepresented among college-bound teens; if so, non-college samples will be needed in order to explore the jock perspective more fully. Furthermore, the data in this study were somewhat one-sided; the jock perspective was represented by only three men and one woman, whose self-designation was challenged by other women in her focus group. Although the jocks in fact contributed more than their fair share of commentary to the discussions, providing some of the most illuminating insights to the analysis, their small numbers further underscores the need for replication of these results. Nevertheless, the unanimity of some conclusions (e.g. the importance of team bonding, or jock masculinization) speak to the generalizability of these findings.

This analysis has only begun to explore the nuances of competing sport-related identities. The next step is to trace the developmental pathways that led to their formation. Given its potentially toxic implications, it is particularly important to understand the evolution of the jock identity. Several key questions invite clarification. First, does gender or social status matter more in the making of the jock? The women in these focus groups adamantly rejected the jock label, but the men were more inclined to decouple jockdom and gender. Under conditions comparable to those enjoyed by male football players in many high schools today, would female athletes take on the identity of the jock as well?

Second, what lies at the heart of the jock identity? These discussants clearly distinguished between the athlete and the jock, but the nature of the contrasts between them calls for further analysis. One interpretation would be to view jocks as essentially overcommitted athletes, unable to balance their sporting selves with other competing identities. Yet, while not necessarily polar opposites, jocks and athletes as described here were unique constructs whose differences could not be reduced to a mere matter of degree. It is tempting to conclude that jock identity is in essence a corruption of the athlete identity; that athletes, given an excess of praise, privilege, and institutional power, become toxic jocks. Yet there may in fact be strengths associated exclusively with a jock identity that were not highlighted in these focus groups. Discovering such virtues would demonstrate a functionality which at present appears to be lacking.

Given the pervasiveness of the toxic jock effect across multiple domains of risky or delinquent behavior (e.g. substance use, academic outcomes, violence), the answers to these questions have serious policy implications. Too often, prescriptions regarding youth sport have failed to temper enthusiasm for its positive and character-building qualities with recognition of its potential to promote risky, antisocial, or downright obnoxious behavior. Developing mechanisms for fostering an athlete identity, to the exclusion of a jock identity, is a project that coaches, school administrators, and adolescents themselves might be well-advised to pursue.

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Biography

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