

## Gender and Race Patterns in the Pathways from Sports Participation to Self-esteem

One of the justifications given for funding school-based athletic programs is that they boost self-esteem. This viewpoint gained greater prominence in 1961 when Coleman reported the centrality of athletics in the status system of American high schools for boys. Research has since provided evidence to support the claim that sports participation is associated with higher self-esteem for both boys and girls. For example, Gruber's (1986) meta-analysis of the outcomes of physical activity showed that higher self-esteem was associated with engaging in physical activity even for elementary school-aged children (and more so for children from economically disadvantaged families, and those with mental or physical disabilities). McAuley (1994) also examined the outcomes of many studies to arrive at a similar conclusion that higher self-esteem was one of the several positive outcomes of engaging in physical activity. While physical activity can take place outside of participation in a sport and sport teams exist outside of schools, in this paper we focus on participation in school-sponsored sports as the major vehicle through which adolescents get physical activity.

Because Coleman's findings (1961) were about boys and, even after the passage of Title IX, more boys than girls participate in interscholastic athletics (President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports 1997), a number of studies have specifically focused on examining the relationship between sports and self-esteem for girls. Three studies conducted at the Melpomene Institute (Jaffee and Manzer 1992; Jaffee and Rickert 1993; Jaffee and Wu 1996) examined the relationship between self-esteem and physical activity among girls in relatively small but racially, economically, and geographically diverse samples of girls. All three studies found a strong positive relationship between physical activity and self-esteem. Erkut, Fields, Sing, and

Marx (1996) also documented, in a racially, economically, and geographically diverse sample of girls, aged 6 to 18, that the most frequently given response to the open-ended probe, “Tell me about an activity that makes you feel good about yourself,” referred to an physical activity.

Covey and Feltz (1991) found in their sample of high school adolescent girls that the physically active group reported significantly more positive self-image and coping characteristics than the physically inactive group. While this body of research suggests that for both boys and girls physical activity (by itself or physical activity associated with participation in sports) and self-esteem are positively related, the psychosocial mechanisms underlying this relationship are less clear.

### **School Attachment**

Marsh's (1993) analysis of the High School and Beyond data collected in 1980-1984 suggests that school attachment may be a mechanism that mediates the relationship between sports participation and self-esteem. He found that sports participation in high school was positively related to a number of senior year and post-secondary outcomes including self-esteem and academic achievement. He reported that these results, which held across race, gender, social class and school-related factors, were mediated by academic self-concept and educational aspirations, which led him to interpret the positive impact of sports participation in terms of school attachment. Snyder and Spreitzer's (1992) analysis of the High School and Beyond data also lends support to the hypothesis that school attachment mediates the association between sports participation and self-esteem. The researchers found that when they classified male high school students into four groups — scholar-athletes, pure scholars, pure athletes, and nonscholar-nonathletes — the scholar-athletes and pure scholars were found to exhibit the highest scores on self-esteem. Pure athletes exhibited lower scores than pure scholars while the nonscholar-