

Soccer Participation and Self-Concept in the Lives of Girls of Color

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Introduction

This qualitative research study examines the lives of girls of color and how interscholastic soccer participation influences self-concept. In addition, this study examines the ethnic identity of girls of color and its significance in their lives and soccer experiences.

Adolescence is a period in which many young people begin separating from the family, exploring their own identity, and searching for a place where they fit in and are accepted. Adolescence is a period in life which is generally characterized by emotional stability, psychological well-being, and a smooth transition to adulthood (Covey & Feltz, 1991). However, for many female adolescents this is not the case. In comparison to male adolescents, female adolescents report more unhappiness, emotional distress, shame, and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Covey & Feltz, 1991; The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Report, 1997). As girls grow and develop through the adolescent years their self-esteem drops dramatically. Maintaining a high and stable self-esteem is a major concern for adolescent girls (Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000; Jaffee & Ricker, 1993). Adding to the complexity of female adolescents' self-development are concerns about peer acceptance, conflicting gender role expectations, body image, and social status. Given the difficulties many girls experience throughout adolescence, it is imperative to understand what specifically can contribute to a more psychologically healthy adolescent experience.

Interscholastic sport has long held a position of prominence in American public education (Butterfield & Brown, 1991). Interscholastic sport can provide an environment which fosters a healthy adolescent experience. A functionalist theoretical approach to interscholastic sport is based on educational merit and the development of individuals integrating within a harmonious community. In other words, functionalist theorists would advocate that interscholastic sport provides an arena in which values are learned and developed. These values include work ethic, perseverance, and working cohesively with other teammates. Certainly these values are positive and may indeed contribute to an adolescent's overall social and personal development. However, these values are not automatically acquired and a functionalist perspective does not allow one to assess the weaknesses of interscholastic sport. A major weakness of the functionalist approach to interscholastic sport is the assumption that the needs of all groups within a society are the same as the needs of society as a whole (Coakley, 2001). A result of this perspective is the homogenization of female adolescents. In other words, the functionalist perspective does not account for differences in race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, for example.

Given the one-sided nature of the functionalist perspective, it is critical that a more diverse view of interscholastic sport be addressed. In other words, it is imperative that we ask what needs to be present in interscholastic sport so all groups enjoy a positive experience. An important step toward increasing the benefits which interscholastic sport can provide would be for people in leadership positions, such as coaches, to understand each participant's unique characteristics. Each student-athlete will bring her own set of circumstances to an athletic experience. These circumstances include, but are not limited to racial identity, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and family experience. Educators must go beyond the provision of equal programming to acknowledge the wider social and cultural forces that affect the education and development of girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Understanding the unique circumstances of individual athletes can aid in fostering an environment in which interscholastic sport becomes a positive aspect of each participant's life.

It is essential that leaders in interscholastic athletics understand how to create a positive environment simply because sport offers so many benefits to its participants. There is significant research to support the notion that physical activity can contribute to female adolescents' feelings of psychological well-being and positive self-concept. Studies which examined the correlation between sport participation and psychological well-being found that athletes reported higher scores on measures of body image, confidence, and self-acceptance (Covey & Feltz, 1991; Jaffee & Ricker, 1993; Richman & Shaffer, 2000; The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Report, 1997).

While studies on the self-esteem of girls of color exist, there is limited consistency with results and limited research which specifically examines how sport participation influences self-esteem. This lack of consistency and limited inclusion of sport participation suggests the need for further research. Concern for this lack of research exists on two levels. First is the alarming issue of low self-esteem and its deleterious effects on female adolescents. Low self-esteem is associated with depression, suicide, substance abuse, unwanted pregnancy, eating disorders, and lower academic achievement (Carlson, Uppal & Prosser, 2000; Harter, 1990; The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

Report, 1997). The second level of concern focuses on the potential consequences that a minority racial or ethnic status can have on sport participation rates of female adolescents. Girls of color can face unique obstacles in relation to physical activity and participation (The Girls Report, 1998). Some constraints girls of color face are cultural. One constraint, which affects girls' athletic participation, is the notion that some minority populations are less tolerant of behavior which defies traditional gender roles (Women's Sports Foundation, 2002). Ascribed gender stereotypes can limit girls to feminine-only roles, which has consequences on the type of sport a girl chooses to play or whether or not she participates at all. In addition, traditional notions of appropriate gender roles can limit parental support of girls who wish to play sports.

Perhaps the most critical element in understanding constraints is the effect this knowledge has on a coach's ability to motivate and encourage girls of color to continue soccer participation. Research has demonstrated that leisure participation has the potential to enhance individual empowerment (Shaw, 2001). Sports, exercise, and physical activities may be one way that girls can find a sense of entitlement and empowerment in their lives (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996). In addition, sports involvement that emphasizes strength and speed may help young women challenge restrictive gender roles (Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995). Given the many constraints which can limit sport participation, and the consequences of low self-concept, it is clear more research is imperative which explores the influence of sport participation among girls of color.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate what participation in an interscholastic soccer program means in the lives of adolescent girls of color. More specifically, the study addresses the following three questions: 1. What is the significance of interscholastic soccer in the lives of girls of color? 2. How does participation in interscholastic soccer influence the self-concept of girls of color? 3. How does ethnic identity mediate the life and interscholastic soccer experiences of girls of color? This study does contain potential limitations. One limitation is that not only am I the researcher, but also the coach of the participants. A qualitative method demands that the researcher fully understands the participants and their experiences. Being the coach of the six participants allowed me to do just that. However, this relationship may have affected the nature of the data that I collected. In other words, participants may or may not have been as candid with me as they would have been with an interviewer who was not their coach. I had to be aware that my role as the participants' coach might have an effect on the data I was able to collect.

Methods

Six participants were interviewed for this study. These participants were all members of a high school girls soccer team in Berkeley, California and all are girls of color. Each girl volunteered for the study. In addition, each participant selected a pseudonym to preserve anonymity. The six participants' ethnicities are Mexican American (Jasmine), Mexican American and Egyptian (Precious), Argentinean and white (Xochil), Chinese and white (Lotus), and two participants are Hispanic, Hawaiian and white (Wanda and Marga).

Qualitative research methods were used to collect data for this study. This research study gives adolescent girls of color, who have not readily been researched especially within the field of sport, a voice. In addition, a qualitative method creates a discourse, engaging a diverse audience in a greater understanding of the lives of girls of color. In this study I used semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interview process consisted of two interviews with each participant. The first interview included a specific set of pre-determined questions in order to capture precise data of a codable nature. This interview guide included open-ended questions about family, ethnicity, and soccer, however the interviews were not so structured that they limited responses and left no room for variation. The first interview was approximately 90 minutes in length. The second interview, which took place one week later, consisted of follow-up questions and member checks, which clarified participant responses in order to reduce researcher interpretation and bias.

Data analysis began by first transcribing the audio interview tapes into transcripts. These transcripts produced a precise account of each interview. I then reviewed interview transcripts multiple times to glean key words and phrases. My first reading provided a general overview and increased my familiarity with the data. During subsequent readings I analyzed the transcripts' key words and phrases. This analysis consists of finding all the places in the transcripts where particular words or phrases appear. The critical element of key-words-in-context lists is ensuring, as the title suggests, that the key words and phrases are kept in context. For example, a reference to a key word will include a minimum of 30 words before and after the word. Maintaining the context within which key words and phrases appeared ensured a more appropriate interpretation of the data.

The next step of data analysis was to code, or categorize the common themes that emerged from the transcripts. Coding is the heart and soul of narrative, free-flowing text analysis and it forces the researcher to make judgments about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To code the data, it was necessary to identify and pull together common themes which emerged from the text. Creating key-words-in-context lists was an essential step in

this process, however, I also identified themes before, during, and after the participant interviews. These themes emerged from a variety of different sources including literature reviews, my own experiences, and from the transcript text itself (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Critical in the identification of these themes from the interview transcripts was a diligent, thorough reading of each transcript and an awareness of how these themes affected the participants within their social world. In addition, marking the text, or tagging, was necessary in coding. Tags enabled me to retrieve text and assigned key words or phrases with a specific code, which represented a specific theme. Different color pens were used to tag each code. Finally, saturating these codes, or themes, with examples enabled me to demonstrate their relevance (Silverman, 2000). In other words, the more examples I could attach to a theme increased the validity, or the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers (Hammersley, 1990).

The final step in data analysis was to compare and contrast themes to see when, why, and under what conditions these themes occurred (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The goal of comparing and contrasting was to find connections, common themes, and links among the different sets of data. In addition, the purpose of comparing and contrasting these themes was to create a more general framework with relevance to the outside setting (Silverman, 2000). The purpose of this research study was to look at the roles soccer and ethnicity play in the lives of girls of color, with the ultimate goal being to collect and present data which professionals can use in order to determine more effective ways to work with this population in an athletic setting.

Being the head coach of the participants and the interviewer in this research study could have led to potential problems in my ability to be objective in data analysis. To account for potential bias and to ensure validity, I used three different techniques. The three techniques I used were an acknowledgment of possible bias, interview method guidelines, and the use of a panel of experts. As the researcher of this project and the coach of the participants I was aware that limitations and bias could affect the research. First, it would be naive to assume that my role as head coach of the participants would not have the potential to affect the interviews and the information I acquired. I accounted for this potential as a limitation of the research. My role as an authority figure may or may not have influenced the participants' responses in the interview sessions. Participants may have perceived possible consequences of being candid with their responses. In other words, participants may have believed their responses in the research could affect their role within the team. As head coach, I could have acquired less in-depth information as opposed to an interviewer who did not coach the participants.

I was also aware that my athletic experiences have shaped my identity and ultimately my perceptions of how I view female athletics. It is these perceptions which I attempted to avoid imposing during my qualitative interviews. My soccer experiences led me to bring my own knowledge about sport to participant interviews. For example, I have strong opinions regarding girls' right to participate and the notion of gender equity in sports. Therefore, it was necessary that I took care not to impose my ideas and perceptions of the research topic into the interview.

In order to reduce bias and increase validity I utilized specific guidelines when interviewing participants to ensure the best possible data were collected. First, I stated the confidentiality of the interviews so the participants felt comfortable in being candid with their responses. Secondly, I clearly stated to participants that this research project was in no way tied to the high school team and that no part of the interview process would have an effect on the daily operations of the team. To account for this possible conflict with daily team operations, I interviewed participants after the season was complete. In addition, I conducted the interviews with an open mind, free from leading participants toward my opinions or perceptions regarding being a female athlete. I listened carefully and probed thoughtfully for clarification and elaboration regarding participant responses. Qualitative research requires a thorough understanding of the participants, their situations, and their experiences. As the coach of the participants, I was aware my leadership role had a potential to affect the research. As previously mentioned, information which I gained in the interview process may or may not have been what an outsider would be able to acquire. My role as head coach and researcher may indeed have created a limitation in the study. However, my dual role as coach and researcher could also lead to the benefit of acquiring extensive and in-depth data that an outsider might not be able to attain.

To ensure my interpretation of the data was valid, I used a panel of experts to review interview transcripts. This panel consisted of three people with varying academic and professional backgrounds. Qualifications and experiences of the panel members include coaching girls' and women's soccer teams, graduate school degrees, and academic teaching. These panel members were selected because of their backgrounds in academia, coaching, and experience with qualitative research methods. Each panel member received a set of research transcripts from all interviews. I instructed each panel member to analyze independently the transcripts utilizing the same methods which I implemented in my data analysis. In conducting independent analysis, panel members developed their own codes, or themes. I compared the panel members' themes to my own data analysis to examine whether the conclusions I drew from the interviews were similar. Panel

members' themes were comparable and supported my data analysis, assuring the likelihood that my data interpretation was accurate. In other words, each panel member also recognized the four themes I identified as emerging from the data.

Results

In this section I will present and analyze the themes which emerged from participant interviews. I elicited these themes from participants' responses to specific interview guide questions. However, some themes emerged or were more supported during conversational tangents in the interviews. In order to fully understand and interpret the themes which emerged from the interviews, it is critical that I have established a relationship with the participants and have a broad perspective on their lives. Understanding each participant's circumstances will serve as a transition to the analysis of themes, with the goal being to provide a clearer context of how these themes relate to and emerge in participants' lives. Four themes emerged from the interview transcripts. Each theme resonated among all participants. Within these themes are some differences which relate the cultural dynamics present among the participants. The four themes which emerged in the participant interviews are: (1) family influences on soccer participation; (2) the benefits of soccer participation; (3) potential consequences without soccer; and (4) playing for life.

Family influences on soccer participation was the first theme to emerge from participant interviews (Table 1). Family had a profound influence on all participants' soccer experiences. In addition, ethnicity and heritage depict the stark cultural disparities in participants' lives. A salient distinction in family influence on soccer participation is the ethnicity of participants' fathers. Five of six participants have fathers or male guardians. Of these five participants, three received complete support in their soccer participation and two received little support. The only difference, which stood out in comparing these five participants' fathers, was ethnicity. The three participants who received complete support have white fathers or male guardians. The two participants who received little support, Xochil and Jasmine, have Hispanic fathers. Xochil's and Jasmine's responses in the interviews suggest that Hispanic culture is responsible for their fathers not supporting them in soccer. For example Xochil believes, "my father brings a lot of sexism from his culture about girls and soccer." Xochil recalled that soccer was something she simply was allowed to do, as opposed to feeling "completely supported in it." Xochil experienced great frustration in this lack of support. Jasmine has similarly struggled with her father's lack of support in soccer and culture and ethnicity have played a role. Jasmine states, "I wanted to play soccer ever since I could remember. I saw my whole family playing soccer and I wanted to play too. But my dad didn't want me to play. He said it was because I was a girl and soccer is not a feminine sport." The theme of family influences clearly depicts the role ethnicity can have on the athletic participation of girls of color. Participants' responses illustrate the significance of ethnicity and how culture can affect the level of parental support. It seems appropriate to state that ethnicity plays a significant role in the support participants received from their fathers or male guardians, and that cultural constructions of gender can vary, depending on ethnicity.

Table 1- Family Influences on Soccer Participation

Athlete	Comments
Wanda	"My dad is my biggest fan. He is always there to support me at the games."
Precious	"He [guardian] loves coming to my games, he is very supportive."
Jasmine	"I've never really felt that I had my dad's support in soccer. I think I would have gone a lot further in soccer if my dad had supported me more."
Xochil	"I've always strived to do soccer as part of my culture, for my father, so he could see that I'm trying to carry something on in our family. It's not a good feeling knowing that my dad doesn't support me in soccer."
Marga	"My aunt completely supports me in soccer."
Lotus	"My mom and dad support me in everything I do, and soccer is no different."

The second theme emerging from participant interviews was the notion that soccer participation produces many benefits for adolescent girls. The first benefit that participants claimed to experience was a sense of increased self-confidence (Table 2). Participants stated, in varying ways, that soccer contributed to their overall confidence, expressing that without soccer, their self-confidence would not be as high. The second benefit participants claimed to experience through soccer participation was an increased feeling of health. All six participants maintained that soccer made them feel healthier, stronger, and contributed to their overall fitness. This study did not determine specific physical improvements as a result of soccer participation. Instead this study provided insight into participants' perceptions of health. Participants' responses suggested that soccer participation contributed to their overall self-image, including perceptions of their bodies. Adolescent girls can experience many gender role conflicts in sport participation. These conflicts can include notions that most sports are not feminine and can contribute to 'masculine' characteristics, such as aggression and increased muscularity. Participants' responses suggested that soccer participation contributed to healthy self and body-images.

Table 2 - Building Confidence

Athlete	Comments
Wanda	"I feel more confident since I started playing soccer. It gives me confidence in other areas too, like the classroom."
Precious	"Soccer offers so much to me. When I do well I can't help but feel good about myself."
Jasmine	"Soccer does so much for my confidence...and it's not just on the field, it's everywhere, in school, with my friends, at home."
Xochil	"Soccer has given me a sort of confidence that I never would have had if I didn't play...it's carried over to the rest of my life."
Marga	"When I have a good game and I play well, my confidence goes way up. I feel like nothing can stop me...I'm on top of the world."
Lotus	"Soccer is a tough game to play...I know that I can compete...Soccer gives me confidence and makes me feel strong."

The third benefit which participants' experienced was using soccer as a positive outlet. In varying ways, participants maintained soccer participation assisted in stress release and dealing with issues in other areas of their lives. While this study cannot account for stress level measurements, it provides insight into the psychological benefits of stress relief which girls of color can experience through the use of physical activity. This study also provides a unique look into the use of physical activity as a distraction from problems in the lives of girls of color.

Initiating friendships and appreciation of working in diverse peer groups was the fourth benefit to emerge in participant interviews. All participants maintained they have met diverse friends as a result of soccer participation, and these friends are people they might not have been exposed to or had a chance of meeting without soccer. In addition, each participant expressed that working in a diverse group has developed their ability to work cooperatively with people very different from themselves. The theme of benefits, which emerged in participant interviews, delineates the significance of soccer participation in the lives of girls of color. All six participants recognized the psychological enhancements they enjoy from playing, which suggests that soccer is a critical activity in their lives and significantly contributes to their overall self-concepts.

Potential consequences without soccer was the third theme to emerge from participant interviews (Table 3). All participants were cognizant, in varying ways, that they would be different without soccer. In addition, participants recognized their lives would be different if they were not members of the soccer team. Participants alluded to a variety of individual differences which they could suffer from without soccer. For example, each participant suggested they would suffer from a diminished sense of self-confidence and decreased physical fitness and health. Participants also perceived their lives would be different without soccer. Two participants, Marga and Jasmine, maintained they would have lower academic standards without soccer, admitting that school would be less important without the motivation of staying eligible to play. This finding provides critical evidence regarding the potential influence athletic participation can have on the academic performance of girls of color. Marga suggested she would be much more likely to use marijuana if soccer was not an integral component of her life. Participants' responses illustrated how soccer is critical in reinforcing the

overall development of adolescent girls of color. Soccer participation has been a positive component of participants' physical, psychological, academic, and social development.

Table 3 - Potential Consequences Without Soccer

Athlete	Comments
Wanda	"I would be a more narrow minded person without soccer. Soccer has just made me realize more and more that we're not all the same and its really helped me to appreciate differences."
Precious	"I would miss the camaraderie of the team and would be more lonely without soccer."
Jasmine	"Without soccer I would not be as sure of myself. I wouldn't have the same confidence. I might be more like my dad wants me to be, staying at home and taking care of things, but that wouldn't make me feel good about myself."
Xochil	"I wouldn't be as confident and as mentally strong if I didn't play soccer."
Marga	"There is no way I would care as much about my grades without soccer. I want to play soccer in college. Without soccer I doubt I would even want to go to college."
Lotus	"If I didn't play soccer I would miss the exercise and I wouldn't feel as healthy. I would also miss the interaction and working with my teammates."

Playing for life was the fourth theme to emerge in participant interviews. Each participant expressed she would continue to play soccer after high school. While some participants stated they wanted to play collegiate soccer and others expressed they would play at the intramural or city league level, all participants declared their desire to continue playing. It is clear that participants' passion for the game motivates them to continue playing. As Xochil stated, "I will always play soccer because I love the game and the way it makes me feel."

Discussion / Implications

Participant responses in this study illustrated the significance of soccer in participants' psychological, physical, social, and academic development. In addition, ethnicity has proven to be a critical factor in their lives and soccer experiences. Given the critical roles that soccer participation and ethnicity play in the lives of this study's participants, it is important to be cognizant of relevant implications of the study. In the following discussion, I will present two implications which could resonate for girls of color.

Participants' responses in this study suggested that soccer participation provides significant benefits to girls of color. While this qualitative research presented detailed and insightful portraits of unique individuals, one can suppose that sport participation in general could provide the same benefits to other girls of color. Therefore, the first implication of this study is the ability for its findings to resonate for other girls of color who play sports. In participant interviews, themes emerged which touched upon significant benefits each participant experienced, as a result of participating in soccer. All participants stated playing soccer led them to feel more confident and healthy. Participants maintained playing soccer provided an environment which aided stress release and distraction from problems in other areas of their lives. Each participant recognized the benefits of working with a diverse peer group, acknowledging the development of cooperative learning skills. Participants were cognizant their lives would be different without soccer, admitting that school and exercise would become lower priorities. In addition, not playing soccer would result in unfilled time, which one participant recognized would lead to a greater likelihood of marijuana use. Participants were cognizant that participating in high school soccer increased the likelihood they will continue athletic participation as they grow older. Given the innumerable benefits that are available to girls of color who participate in sports, it is critical that this population actively pursues opportunities to participate in athletics and maintains athletic participation.

A second implication, which could resonate for girls of color, is the use of athletic participation as resistance. Shaw (2001) conceptualized leisure resistance as acts which challenge the structured power relations in such domains as race, ethnicity, and gender. Shaw (2001) maintained that oppressed or disadvantaged groups or individuals who are acting to change power relations and gain personal or collective empowerment exemplify resistance. Both Xochil and Jasmine consider their heritage to be a critical component of their lives, therefore strongly identifying with their ethnicity. Despite the pride Xochil and Jasmine have in their heritage they are both able to question what they perceive to be wrong with their culture. In other words, Xochil and Jasmine have both used soccer to resist the gender ideologies, pervasive in their culture, which channel girls into specific gender roles, such as household obligations, and feminine activities, like dancing. Xochil and Jasmine have resisted elements of their culture which could potentially limit the role soccer plays in their lives. Xochil and Jasmine have essentially used soccer as a tool to question their ethnicity, therefore resisting the pervasive notion that soccer participation does not fall into a feminine category. While Xochil and Jasmine take great pride in their heritage, neither is able to submit to her culture's and father's notions that soccer is a masculine sport and, therefore, inappropriate for girls to participate.

Using soccer as resistance can initiate personal empowerment in girls of color, whose culture suggests aggressive sports are not appropriate activities for girls. Empowerment can result when girls of color defy stereotypes that label them as passive and weak. Using sport as resistance liberates girls from their culture's ascribed gender roles and provides them with the conviction to challenge dominant gender ideologies (Shaw, 2001). It is important to note that not all cultures or all Hispanic men will subscribe to the notion that sport is inappropriate for girls. This study suggests, for these specific participants, that ethnicity and fatherly support is a relevant issue.

Xochil's and Jasmine's use of soccer to resist their fathers' ideologies of girls and athletics illustrates personal empowerment. Resisting through sport participation also offers the potential for collective empowerment. This collective empowerment can translate to girls of color, as a population, using sport to resist power structures, such as ethnicity and gender. Using sport to resist dominant ideologies offers the potential for personal and collective empowerment, with the culminating purpose of precipitating social change in perceptions of gender roles. Xochil's and Jasmine's experiences illustrate how ethnic identity has the potential to be a relevant component in the lives of girls of color without limiting their ability to question cultural ideologies, which do not promote strength and confidence in girls.

This study has provided an insightful account of six high school girls of color and the significance of ethnicity and soccer participation in their lives. All participants conveyed the importance of soccer in their lives and reported the many benefits they enjoy as a result of participating, suggesting that soccer enhances their overall self-concepts. In addition, participants described the role ethnicity plays in their lives and the effect it can have on soccer experience.

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