Effects of Negative Stereotypes on Female Student Athletes:

Applying Social Identity Perspective

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Introduction

The benefits of participation in intercollegiate athletic opportunities are immense. Leadership development, building a sense of community within a team, being valued for one’s athletic contributions and balancing multiple responsibilities are all benefits inherently derived from athletic participation. On a given college campus, student athletes are subjected to negative perceptions and stereotypes due their identity as an athlete. The resulting separation from the larger student population leaves student athletes more vulnerable to stereotyping (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986) and stigmatization on campus.

Students and faculty have been found to hold negative perceptions of student athletes and these beliefs are particularly prominent for female student athletes. Female student athletes are perceived to be lesbian and masculine (Kauer & Krane, 2006). The foundations of these stereotypes appear to stem from a lack of adherence to traditional feminine norms. The social identity (SI) perspective (Kauer & Krane, 2006) provides a useful lens for understanding the processes surrounding group identity development of female student athletes through the evaluation of other group identities. The effects of exposure to negative stereotypes can be detrimental to a female student athlete’s identity development, as well as other arenas of personal, academic, physical, and mental performance and well-being. Through the lens of the SI perspective and the consideration of the unique experience of female student athletes in intercollegiate athletic programs, implications are provided for the careful consideration of student affairs professionals and athletic program administrators.

General Perceptions

General perceptions of student athletes are primarily centered on academic capability and motivation, but they are also viewed as being socially inept (Sellers, 1992). Faculty may have
more negative attitudes toward college student athletes than other student, administrators, and alumni (Leach & Conners, 1984). The inherent mismatch between the student outcomes of athletics and academia may explain the root of these generalized perceptions by faculty members (Leach & Conners, 1984). Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen (1995) found that faculty had negative perceptions of male student athletes regarding services provided for student athletes, the provision of full athletic scholarships, university admission despite low SAT scores, their ability to receive an “A” in a class, and receiving public attention for athletic accomplishments. Although these stereotypes are for male student athletes, these perceptions by faculty provide a starting point for understanding the classroom environment for all student athletes.

Athletic environments for women are viewed as heterosexist and homonegative (Griffin, 1998; Krane and Barber, 2005; Wellman and Blinde, 1997) and can create a hostile environment for student athletes perceived to be gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Female athletes are perceived to be lesbians and masculine, and these stereotypes are more prevalent for athletes participating in basketball, soccer, golf, and softball (Kauer & Krane, 2006). They are labeled manly, butch, dyke, or lesbo for participation these sports which are typically more aggressive or traditionally masculine in nature (Kauer & Krane, 2006).

**Foundations of Stereotypes**

The origins of stereotypes for female student athletes appear to be closely related to traditional gender roles and the lack of conformity to “hegemonic, White, heterosexual femininity” (Kauer & Krane, 2006, p.52). Female athletes receive a surplus of criticism for their physical appearance, grooming habits, and their attire. Not wearing make-up during a game, having short hair, wearing sweats or baggy clothing, and not appearing “put together” are grounds for negative perceptions (Kauer & Krane, 2006). The severity of these perceptions
varies depending on the physicality of the sport and the uniform style of the sport. Participation in a sport that is perceived to be more feminine, like gymnastics or volleyball, earns less negative attention. Association with lesbian-identified or athletes perceived to be lesbian also leaves the female athlete up for scrutiny.

**Effects of Negative Stereotypes**

Negative stereotypes can have detrimental effects on a female student athlete’s identity development, in addition to their athletic and academic performance, and overall personal well-being. Kauer and Krane (2006) assert that stereotypes operate to trivialize the accomplishments of female athletes, justify discriminatory behavior, and limit their social acceptance. Additionally, negative stereotypes reinforce the superiority of specific groups and perpetuate oppressive power structures.

**Effect on Self-Image**

Negative perceptions of female student athletes can have devastating effects on self-image (Sellers, 1992; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips & Waters, 1981; Zingg, 1982). College students are engaged in intricate processes of identity development and through exposure to negative perceptions they may internalize these stereotypes (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Kauer and Krane (2006) conducted a study of 538 Division IA student athletes to collect information on their reactions to stereotypes. They found that 59.6% of college students perceived negative stereotypes of student athletes in addition to 33% of professors. Student athletes’ reactions to stereotypes were anger, annoyance, and shock when exposed to stereotypes. They also discovered that student athletes with higher levels of self-acceptance were able to cope more effectively.
Female student athletes have several distinctive strategies for coping with negative stereotypes (Kauer & Krane, 2006). Disassociating from their athletic identity is a primary strategy, in which female athletes will refrain from wearing athletic clothing or team paraphernalia. Acting out exaggerated forms of accepted femininity and heterosexuality, including distancing one’s self from lesbian or bisexual teammates is a common response to perceptions of athletes as lesbian or masculine. Female athletes that do identify as bisexual or lesbian may respond to the heteronormative environment of athletics by concealing their sexual identity, “passing” as heterosexual, and using vague language or sharing limited personal information (Kauer & Krane, 2006).

Social Identity (SI) Perspective

The Social Identity (SI) Perspective allows us to understand the complex and fluid nature of identity for marginalized and subordinated groups, such as female student athletes. This perspective asserts that female student athletes first develop social identities consistent with the accepted values and norms of the social group. Soon after, they evaluate their group identity in comparison to others, such as female college students, and are able to recognize the variant privileges and status ascribed to other female students. Correspondingly, they are able to identify the marginalized status attributed to female athletes. Kauer and Kane (2006) term this process social comparison. They also assert that once female athletes realize the systems of power and privilege in which they occupy subordinated status in the academic environment, they use a series of social enhancement strategies in an attempt to perceivably occupy a group with a higher social status. Examples of social enhancement strategies are distancing themselves from teammates that may embody non-heterosexual or non-feminine characteristics and wearing make-up during athletic performances to adhere to traditionally feminine expectations.
Discussion

Even in consideration of the challenges female student athletes face resulting from participation in intercollegiate athletic programs, there is a tremendous amount of benefit derived from this experience. Coaches have an opportunity to create an environment where stereotypes can be openly discussed and challenged to maximize the benefits of their participation. Through the creation of a tolerant and communicative team, female student athletes can actively work to challenge hegemonic femininity and negative stereotypes.

As student affairs professionals, student learning outcomes are centered on the development of a strong sense of identity and self-esteem. By developing a strong sense of identity as an athlete, students may feel strong enough in this identity to challenge negative stereotypes. The work of combatting stereotypes is a task that requires collective efforts from institutional constituents. Outreach efforts to the general campus population to correct these perceptions in combination with self-esteem building programming for female student athletes may prove useful in correcting a negative culture. According to the SI perspective, student athletes will compare their privileges and power relative to other groups on campus and the goal is to decrease the dissonance perceived in this process.

It is also important to take into consideration the larger systemic power structures that are not exclusive to the arena of athletics or the university environment, which determine the power and privileges assigned to women in society. Challenging these stereotypes within athletic programs and on college campuses is not an easy task, nor will it change the socio-historical context of women’s condition in society, but it is a step forward in providing the environment necessary for female student athletes to develop a strong positive identity to ready them for realities of the world.
References


