Beyond Pressure: Black and Hispanic Girls’ Peer Experiences in a Sport-Based Youth Development Program

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While physical activity generally declines as youth age (National Physical Activity Plan Alliance, 2016), girls experience a higher level of decline than boys (Rew, et al., 2015). In particular, this gender disparity becomes significant in early adolescence (Lenhart, et al., 2014). For girls of color, this drop off becomes steeper as they age, causing an even greater disparity in their participation rates in comparison to White girls (Kimm, et al., 2002).

This decline in activity coincides with a time in development where the weight of peer influence begins to increase (Brown & Larson, 2009). For girls in particular, peer support is a strong correlate of physical activity (Kelly et al., 2010; Lenhart et al., 2014; Dishman, et al., 2010), and friends positively influence participation by improving confidence (Yungblut, et al., 2012). However peers can discourage participation through criticism (Casey et al., 2016), bullying, and encouraging inactivity (Slater & Tiggeman, 2010). Increasing our understanding of the role of peers in shaping participation behaviors is key to stemming the continuing decline in physical activity among girls, but research has largely centered the peer experiences of White girls (Brown & Larson, 2009). It is necessary to consider these identity markers when exploring the peer environments of Black and Hispanic girls (Rubin, et al, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand the influence of peers on the participation of Black and Hispanic girls in a sport-based youth development program.

I conducted a case study of a sport-based youth development program serving Black and Hispanic early adolescent girls. Participants included six of the adolescent participants and seven women leaders of the program. Data was collected using participant-generated sociograms, participant-observation, and interviews with adolescent participants and adult leaders. Sociograms were combined to create a network of relationships among youth participants. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti. Three key themes from the study will be discussed in this presentation. Among these are:

1) Surveillance: A fear of being watched and criticized by others led girls to shrink back from participation.

2) Relationships: Connections with other group members served as the impetus to join, but strained relationships among members discouraged continued attendance and engagement.

3) Ego-orientation: A focus on winning led to anti-social behaviors among participants.

These findings are useful to both researchers and practitioners as they provide a better basis for understanding the influence of peers on Black and Hispanic girls’ participation in these settings. They expand on previous peer studies in sport and PA with more behaviors to consider within peer environments and the inclusion of the experiences of Black and Hispanic girls. The findings point to specific ways practitioners can develop and maintain inviting environments for participants. Namely, a focus on positive relationships among group members through a focus on group composition, climate of the program, and consistent expectations should be a goal for those attempting to increase sport and physical activity participation among traditionally under-active participants.