

Don't mistake an athlete for a 'toxic jock'

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The difference between an "athlete" and a "jock" is substantial, says Kathleen Miller.

(PhysOrg.com) -- A rose by any other name is still a rose, but is an athlete by another name... a jock?

"The terms 'athlete' and 'jock' are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are really descriptions of two distinct sport-related identities," says University at Buffalo researcher Kathleen E. Miller, Ph.D. "In terms of goal orientations toward sports and conformity to gender norms, these two identities represent very different perspectives and may be associated with different behaviors."

Miller, a research scientist at UB's Research Institute on Addictions, explained that the differences between the jock identity and the athlete identity may have implications for health-risk behavior. To some extent at least, jocks may constitute a specialized -- and problematic -- subset of athletes. Research by Miller and others is exploring a "toxic jock" model that links involvement in high-status, high-profile sports with rigid adherence to stereotypical expectations of masculinity, a tolerance for risk and health-compromising behaviors such as substance use and unsafe sex.

The practical implications of these findings are clear: developing ways to help sports participants generate "athlete" (rather than "jock") identities could potentially help buffer adolescents and young adults against health-compromising behaviors.

Miller's Athletic Involvement Study surveyed 581 college students with histories of organized sports participation to rate how strongly they saw themselves (or believed others saw them) as athletes or as jocks. Only 18 percent of students strongly identified with the identity of "jock," while 55 percent strongly identified with the identity of "athlete." In fact, students were twice as likely to reject the jock label.

Self-identified athletes tended to be task-oriented; they defined sport success in terms of skills development and mastery and the pursuit of personal excellence, Miller found. Jocks were more ego-oriented; they defined sport success by comparing their own performance to that of others.

Endorsement of stereotypical masculine norms in the study was also stronger among jocks than among athletes. Students who identified strongly as jocks were likely to support "masculine" attitudes about violence, sex, winning, dominance and risk-taking; those who identified strongly as athletes supported some of these attitudes (commitment to

winning) but actively rejected others ("playboy" attitudes about sex) and were neutral on the rest (propensity for violence, dominance and risk-taking).

Both sport-related identities were stronger among men than among women. Two thirds (68 percent) of men and 39 percent of women surveyed identified themselves as athletes. Twenty-five percent of men and only eight percent of women identified themselves as jocks.

More information: These results were published in the March 2009 issue of the *Journal of Sport Behavior*.

Source: University at Buffalo ([news](#) : [web](#))

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