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**EATING  
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## Gender, ethnicity, self-esteem and disordered eating among college athletes

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### Abstract

#### *Objective*

This study was undertaken to compare ethnic and gender differences regarding self-esteem and various disordered eating attitudes and behaviors among elite college athletes.

#### *Method*

A total of 1445 student athletes from 11 Division I schools were surveyed using a 133-item questionnaire.

#### *Results*

White female athletes reported significantly lower self-esteem than Black female, Black male and White male athletes. Black female athletes' self-esteem was equal to both Black and White male athletes. White female athletes reported significantly higher drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, and more disturbed eating behaviors than Black female and both groups of male athletes.

#### *Discussion*

The current study demonstrates that White female athletes appear to be most at risk for having difficulty with eating disorders. Their reporting of significantly lower self-esteem indicates that this may be a risk factor that is

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more characteristic of this ethnic group. Questions are raised about what factors exist in the Black female culture that protect them from low self-esteem and disordered eating attitudes and behaviors.

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*Keywords:* Disordered eating; Bulimia; Anorexia; Gender; Ethnicity; Athletics; Athletes

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## 1. Introduction

Low self-esteem is a primary risk factor for developing an eating disorder and is highly correlated with body dissatisfaction, another primary risk factor for eating disorders (Garner, 1991; Johnson & Maddi, 1986; Thompson, 1996). Women, overall, report lower self-esteem and higher body dissatisfaction than men, suggesting a gender bias (Garner, 1991; Thompson, 1996). One notable exception to these overall findings is among Black women. Numerous studies have demonstrated that Black women report higher self-esteem and lower drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction than White women. These data suggest that there may be factors within certain ethnic groups, particularly African Americans, that protect against eating disorders (Abrams, Allen, & Gray, 1993; Chandler, Abood, Lee, Cleveland, & Daley, 1994; Crago, Shisslak, & Estes, 1996; Glass, Serdula, Pamuk, & Collins, 1993; Rucker & Cash, 1993; Story, French, Resnick, & Blum, 1995; Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 1996, 2000; Wilfley et al., 1996).

As part of the search for protective factors against eating disorders, the question has been raised whether success in athletics for women would be a protective factor against body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and low self-esteem (Johnson, Powers, & Dick, 1999; Powers & Johnson, 1996). The current study was undertaken on a large sample of Division I National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes to compare gender and ethnic differences regarding self-esteem and various eating disorder attitudes and behaviors. Findings presented are a follow-up of Engel et al. (2003) demonstrating a number of disordered eating predictors in elite collegiate athletes and a more comprehensive investigation of the variables of gender and ethnicity.

## 2. Methods

A total of 1445 (562 females, 883 males) collegiate varsity student athletes participated in this study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous and followed policy for university and federal guidelines for human subjects. The athletes in this sample were from 11 schools in 11 different sports. All participants were from Division I NCAA member institutions.

### 2.1. Selection of participating school and sports

The 11 Division I schools that participated were selected to represent all geographic regions of the United States and had highly competitive programs in the sports that were surveyed. The men's and women's sports were selected based on a brief survey the NCAA conducted among coaches to identify high-risk sports for eating disorders.

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