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Exploratory Investigation Into Athletes' Hazing Experiences

INVESTIGATORS Jennifer J. Waldron and Christopher Kowalski, University of Northern Iowa

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ABSTRACT

Hazing incidents occurring in sport are being reported in greater numbers to the popular press (e.g., ESPN, 2002). Hazing is engaging in acts that are humiliating, degrading, abusive, and dangerous in order to be considered a member of a sports team (Hoover & Pollard, 2000). Unfortunately, there is limited scholarly literature about why hazing occurs and the outcomes of hazing in athletics. Waldron and Krane (2005) proposed a conceptual framework explaining health compromising behaviors, including hazing, in athletes. In this model, we integrated the concept of the sport ethic and achievement goal theory to explain why athletes may tolerate hazing. Framed within the psychosocial context of the sport ethic and social approval goal orientation, this study qualitatively investigated hazing.

The research questions guiding the study were: (a) what are athletes' experiences with hazing, and (b) what are the consequences of hazing? Participants ($N = 21$) were former or current athletes who engaged in semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. Data analysis included familiarization, open coding, and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Four higher order themes emerged from the data analysis, including the general hazing experiences, reasons why athletes haze, factors influencing the extent of hazing, and the effects of hazing. General hazing experiences comprised degrading, physically overpowering, and alcohol-related events. The lower-order themes emerging for reasons why athletes would haze included not knowing why, fun, initiation, intimidation, and jealousy. For example, a number of athletes reported that "everybody just had fun with it." Athletes also detailed different factors influencing the extent of hazing, including ability level, leadership, older sibling, physical size, sport type, and popularity. Results were equivocal within this higher order theme; for example, some athletes believed that hazing was more likely to occur with low ability athletes, while others believed it occurred more with high ability athletes.

Finally, a number of effects of hazing emerged such as, consequences for hazing victims reporting the act (i.e., being seen as a traitor) lack of sport enjoyment, physical effects, psychological effects (i.e., lowering of confidence), and positive effects (i.e., put an athlete in his place). Taken together, the results supported the theoretical framework in that quotes from participants were grounded in both the utilization of a social-approval goal orientation and engagement in deviant overconformity. Because of the potential for harm and injury, it is essential that coaches, consultants, and other leaders in sport work to curtail hazing behaviors. For example, athletic leaders should promote rituals that generate partnerships within and among teams rather than engaging in hazing behaviors that are humiliating and abusive. Additionally, leaders need to have team discussions about hazing in order to challenge athletes to critically question the impact of hazing, the sport ethic, and social-approval goal orientation.

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