Bullying and hazing in sport teams

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What are bullying and hazing in sport? Should sport psychology consultants be concerned with these behaviors? If so, what role should sport psychology consultants play in dealing with abusive relationships in sport? These questions are the major issues we explore in this chapter. We understand bullying and hazing as abusive behaviors related to group dynamics that occur within teams and also when team members harass, bully, or haze non-team members.

The role that power and power dynamics play in sport

As Fisher, Butryn, and Roper (2003) observed, power is a concept not frequently discussed in the field of sport psychology nor in sport psychology consultation. Although sport studies scholars frequently examine power and the power dynamics inherent in sport, only a few sport psychology researchers and practitioners have done so (e.g., Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). Recently, Fisher, Roper, and Butryn (2009) suggested that such an analysis could provide a meaningful understanding of athlete’s experience and welfare. This type of understanding seems critical for sport psychology consultants, coaches, parents, and administrators who work with athletes and care about their overall well-being.

Brackenridge (2008) summarized over 600 cases of sexual abuse and exploitation in sport. Most relevant for this discussion, Brackenridge proposed that there are several aspects of sport that may allow for the exploitation of athletes to occur: we believe these aspects include not only harassment but bullying and hazing as well. In particular, Brackenridge (2001) posited that

the male-dominated nature of sport, prevalence of high-ranking sport positions populated by men, adherence to hegemonic masculinity, and emphasis on the physical body are each significant contributors to the development and maintenance of a culture of violence and objectification of sport women and men.

(p. 44)
Further, although most sport participants see exploitation and abuse as personally perpetrated and personally experienced, Brackenridge revealed a complex network of stakeholders in abusive and exploitative situations that included coaches, teachers, team managers, trainers, sport organizations, the media, and even peer athletes, parents, and sport scientists. Sport psychology consultants could play an important role in educating such stakeholders about sexually transgressive and other abusive behaviors. At the minimum, consultants could engage stakeholders in discussions about how bullying and hazing are defined. At most, consultants might find themselves in the position of being the first person an athlete tells about being a victim of these behaviors.

In 2003, Fisher et al. described how the power dynamics in sport contexts can encourage homophobic, heteronormative, racialized, and classist “accepted” behaviors. To combat such practices, consultants should be aware of how sexuality, race, gender, and class may be “viewed not as simple categories, but as relations of power, as spaces where individuals negotiate for greater agency within the existing power structure” (p. 396). Further, consultants should acknowledge gender-biased and homophobic behaviors within the hyper-masculine structure of many sports, as well as to confront ways that consultants, whether male or female, have the potential to be both perpetrators and victims of discriminatory practices themselves.

Power dynamics are at the heart of many sport behaviors that occur in locker rooms, sport club settings, coaches’ houses, and on the field. In these spaces, more experienced athletes and coaches often work hard to maintain their control and power over less experienced participants (Curry, 1991). Actions that are accepted in these contexts may be considered deviant in other spheres of society. For example, it is not unusual for “coaches to scream at athletes, belittle them, or challenge the masculinity of male athletes. At times, it appears only the most outrageous coaching behaviors lie outside the accepted norms” (Coakley, 2007, p. 152). Similarly, in many sports athletes use power via violence, aggression, and intimidation in ways that potentially would be considered criminal behaviors outside the boundaries of sport. Also, the dynamics of bullying and hazing in sport are often not the same as in schools or the workplace (Institute for Global Ethics, 2007).

Some bullying and hazing behaviors in sport may also be rooted in overconformity to what Coakley (2007) referred to as the sport ethic. The norms in the sport ethic include athletes’ unwavering dedication to their sports, striving for distinction, accepting risks and pain, and overcoming many obstacles in the pursuit of their goals. Bullies often attack those whom they define as outside the range of what they consider acceptable or “normal” in terms of appearance, behavior, musical preference, interests, friends, and so forth (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Because athletes often learn to use power strategically in sport via aggression and intimidation and may receive positive feedback for their aggressive behaviors (Coakley, 2007), athletes who bully and haze non-athletes may overconform to notions such as striving for distinction and accepting risks and pains. Similarly, some coach bullying and hazing behaviors could be brought into the locker room because coaches are overconforming to the accepted norm of using intimidation in their sports.

Sport psychology consultants are in a critical position in their work with athletes. Many espouse an athlete-centered approach where athlete welfare is first and foremost (Fisher et al., 2009). As Brackenridge (2008) pointed out, however, practitioners need to also be
concerned with sport environments and whether they are safe for those who participate in them. Because of the close relationships developed between consultants and athletes, athletes might reveal incidents of bullying and hazing to consultants before telling others. Therefore, consultants need to develop the necessary skills to educate themselves, athletes, and teams about appropriate and inappropriate sport behaviors including hazing and bullying. They can also develop skills to help athletes once they have been bullied or hazed.

**What are bullying and hazing in sport?**

**Bullying**

Bullying in sport is a historical and international problem that affects a broad range of individuals. For example, bullying was a daily occurrence in English public schools from the eighteenth century through to the present. Early forms of student-organized rugby football games became a means for older, stronger boys to exercise control over younger boys (Dunning & Sheard, 2005).

Bullying has been defined as “a conscious, willful, deliberate and repeated hostile activity marked by an imbalance of power, intent to harm, and/or a threat of aggression” (Government of Alberta, 2005, p. 1). Many theorists regard the continued, systematic abuse of power as a defining aspect of bullying; bullying often includes the systematic harassment of weaker individuals via humiliation and torment (Lines, 2008). Specific forms of bullying can occur before, during, and after sport-related events in the form of verbal taunts, social exclusion, physical attacks, and cyber harassment. More specifically, sport bullying could include:

(a) unwarranted yelling and screaming directed at the [athlete]; (b) continually criticizing the [athlete’s] abilities; (c) blaming the [athlete] for mistakes; (d) making unreasonable demands related to performance; (e) repeated insults or put downs of the [athlete]; (f) repeated threats to remove or restrict opportunities or privileges; (g) denying or discounting the [athlete’s] accomplishments; (h) threats of, and actual, physical violence; and (i) emails or instant messages containing insults or threats.

(Government of Alberta, 2005, p. 1)

Many insults or put downs of athletes are homophobic, focusing on personal attacks related to athletes’ sexual orientation, femininity, or masculinity.

**Hazing**

Historically, hazing has occurred in universities since medieval times, in the American fraternity and sorority systems, in high school and university athletic settings, and in modern sports (Trota & Johnson, 2004). In recent times, research has been conducted related to hazing in professional hockey (Robidoux, 2001), military combat units (Malszecki, 2004), and even in sport reporting (Nuwer, 2004). Hazing has been defined as “a rite of passage wherein youths, neophytes, or rookies are taken through traditional practices by more senior members in order to initiate them into the next stage of their cultural, religious, academic, or athletic lives” (Trota & Johnson, p. x). Allan and DeAngelis (2004) suggested that based
on a United States National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) survey (see Hoover, 1999), hazing can be further delineated into three major categories:

(a) questionable behaviors: Humiliating or degrading activities, but not dangerous or potentially illegal activities; (b) alcohol-related behaviors: Drinking contests, exclusive of other dangerous or potentially illegal activities; or (c) unacceptable and potentially illegal behaviors: Activities carrying a high probability of danger or injury, or which could result in criminal charges.

Both bullying and hazing can refer to either the actions of an individual or a group or team. Although definitions vary in the degree of specificity regarding individual versus group acts, the systematic and deliberate abuse of power is a main theme in each. Nevertheless, the inclusion of intent in both definitions can often be confusing for those in sport to interpret (Lines, 2008). For example, sport participants may believe that belligerent coaches do not intentionally hurt their athletes; they might believe that coaches intend to bring out "better" performances. In addition, cultural values specific to sports in certain countries may promote an "ends justify the means" approach to sport bullying and hazing. American basketball coach Bob Knight is often discussed in the context of the "potential positive effects of strategic bullying behavior on unit or team performance [including a] … short-term increase in productivity [and] underperforming employees [voluntarily deciding to leave an organization]" (Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007, pp. 202–203). Although Knight's treatment of players has long been controversial and has often been used as an example of bullying in sports (Myers, 2000), because Knight was one of the most successful coaches in American men's collegiate basketball, many appear to have championed his style of strategic assertive bullying. Such a positive view of bullying (and by extension, hazing) is obviously problematic because it may justify and encourage the use of coach bullying and hazing within sport teams.

Therefore, it is crucial to educate coaches, athletes, consultants, and other stakeholders about how bullying and hazing in sport may make teams appear to perform better in the short term but can have long-term damaging consequences. In addition, given sport psychology consultants' ethical codes and laws related to reporting abuse, once consultants are educated about sport bullying and hazing definitions, they may be in a position to report incidents of bullying and hazing before others can (Brackenridge, 2001, 2008; Fisher et al., 2009). Although ethical codes apply to all sport psychology consultants, legal ramifications pertain especially to registered/licensed psychologists. What complicates matters further is that psychologists are bound to confidentiality if a client reveals information in confidence and in the privacy of a one-on-one consultation.

**Ethical codes related to sport psychology and athlete welfare**

Several national and international professional organizations in sport psychology have ethical codes concerned with the welfare of athletes. Two are reviewed here: the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP, n.d.) and the Association of Applied Sport Psychology (AASP, 2005). The ISSP code states that among sport psychology consultants' tasks is the protection of athletes' welfare and the guarding of sport in general "against any
dangerous threats to morality” (para. 1). The challenges for consultants are not only to enhance the performance of athletes but also to help “formulate ethical guidelines for conduct of athletic programs” and to “develop means by which athletes are protected against psychological and moral damage” (para. 3). Consultants could contribute their professional expertise to these efforts, focusing on a wide range of stakeholders including athletes, administrators, coaches, parents, physicians, and trainers.

The primary goal of AASP’s (2005) code of ethics is “the welfare and protection of the individuals and groups with whom AASP members work” (para. 6). Thus, members of organizations such as ISSP and AASP are called upon to encourage ethical conduct among their members, colleagues, students, and those constituencies with whom they work. Members of these professional bodies can help sports organizations develop and implement their own codes of ethics and policies regarding bullying and hazing. Consultants can partner with athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators to prevent harmful bullying and hazing behaviors as well as help those who have already been hurt.

**Specific suggestions for change**

As a starting point, we believe that sports teams and clubs at all levels of competition should adopt anti-bullying and hazing policies if they have not done so already. There are several components that should be built into an anti-bullying and hazing policy, including definitions of bullying and hazing, what the punishments for both are, how to report offenders, how to respond to these behaviors when they occur, and, in the case of hazing, how to develop alternative ways to initiate or bond with other athletes (see Crow & Phillips, 2004). Regardless of whether an organization has a policy in place or not, consultants should have an understanding about how to work with athletes who have been bullied, those who bully others, how to work with teams/coaches/parents on these issues, and also how to refer out to a qualified specialist if the situation is beyond their expertise.

**Working with athletes who have been bullied**

There may be times when athletes come to sport psychology consultants first before telling anyone else that they have been bullied. According to the website for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Health Resources and Services Administration Department (2009), those who are qualified mental health professionals (such as consultants who hold licensure as clinical or counseling psychologists) should help give those who have been bullied:

(a) permission and support to tell what has happened to them and to talk about their feelings; (b) protection from continued bullying through adult supervision, consequences for those who bully, and adults taking reports of bullying seriously; (c) strong, positive relationships with adults and peers; (d) assistance from peers in feeling that they belong; (e) assistance in not blaming themselves for the bullying; and (f) support with post-traumatic stress symptoms, in some cases, even after the bullying has been stopped.

(HRSA, 2009)
There may also be times when those same consultants are working with athletes who are bullying others. According to HRSA (2009), qualified mental health professionals should:

(a) help them see the consequences or the cost of bullying behavior and consider alternatives; (b) hold them fully accountable for their actions by confronting excuses that minimize the behavior or externalize the cause of the behavior; (c) help them fully acknowledge their behavior; (d) support authority figures in holding them accountable for their actions and not suggesting or allowing rationalizations; (e) once they are able to recognize problems with their behavior, help them set and work toward goals for change (e.g., channeling aggression into leadership), help them track their progress toward new behaviors, and feel pride about those changes; and (f) help them build genuine empathy and conscience; after learning that their own actions can cause them to get in trouble, they can begin to appreciate the impact of their actions on others.

Working with teams

A recent report in *Sports Illustrated* highlighted the involvement of high school athletes in anti-bullying workshops in California (Roberts, 2008). By sharing their knowledge of sport cultures and moral behaviors, both athletes and consultants could support and facilitate such groups. Consultants could begin by holding workshops to educate athletes about how to critically examine otherwise “accepted” sport behaviors and norms such as overconformity and the concept of the “sport ethic” (Coakley, 2007). They could also help athletes learn to not praise overconforming teammates and elevate them to the status of role models for others. Such an approach would not just target bullying and hazing behaviors but could also help teams question behaviors such as athletes playing hurt or practising excessively, above and beyond expectations.

Consultants can also work to educate athletes about what they can do to prevent bullying and hazing on their teams. The Government of Alberta’s (2005, p. 2) bullying prevention program tells athletes:

- Trust your instincts. If someone’s behavior is making you feel uncomfortable or threatened, don’t ignore it. You have the right to be treated respectfully.
- Talk to someone you trust – a parent, friend, coach, manager or another player. Remember to keep speaking up until someone helps you.
- Stay calm. Bullies love a reaction, so don’t give them one.
- Project confidence. Hold your head up and stand up straight. Bullies pick on people who they think are afraid. Show them you’re not.
- Don’t reply to messages from cyberbullies. If you’re receiving threatening text messages or emails don’t reply, but keep the messages as evidence. The police and your internet service provider and/or telephone company can use these messages to help you.

Consultants can also encourage athletes to interfere when they witness bullying. Instead of fighting the bully physically, speaking up, getting help, and helping the target are appropriate reactions. Quiet bystanders give bullies the audience they want. Once athletes...
understand bullying and its negative effects, they are more likely to speak up against it. Athletes also need to learn about alcohol responsibility, because many hazing events are fueled by the overconsumption of alcohol. Consultants could then help athletes construct alternative initiations, team-building, or bonding rituals that are not humiliating, degrading, or toxic (Johnson & Donnelly, 2004).

Working with coaches

Once policies have been established related to sport bullying and hazing, coaches should have thorough knowledge about and understanding of those policies, and then provide strong leadership for the athletes with whom they come into contact (Johnson & Donnelly, 2004). These steps require first noticing sport bullying and hazing, then interpreting these behaviors as problems. Next, coaches must recognize their own and others’ responsibilities to change a bullying/hazing culture and acquire the skills necessary to make such a change. Finally, they must take action to eliminate bullying/hazing on their teams (see Allan & DeAngelis, 2004, as related to Berkowitz’s [1994] five-step model for educating males about sexual violence).

To facilitate these steps, consultants could hold workshops to educate coaches about bullying and hazing and help them learn how to model and reinforce positive behaviors. Coaches’ responsibilities include creating “a safe and respectful sport environment by not engaging in, allowing, condoning, or ignoring behavior that constitutes, or could be perceived as, bullying” (Government of Alberta, 2005, p. 2). Consultants can teach coaches how to establish positive communication patterns between all parties involved and how to provide and receive constructive criticism. Most important, such workshops can help coaches become critically reflective practitioners who examine their own behaviors.

Consultants could also help established coaching certification programs to empower coaches to think critically about the structure of their sport programs and encourage them to make changes to the same (Coakley, 2007). Because most coaching certification programs tend to be geared toward helping coaches become “sport efficiency experts rather than teachers who help young people become responsible and informed [about] … who controls their sport lives and the contexts in which they play sports” (Coakley, p. 148), such workshops could provide a space for coaches to talk openly about pressures related to a focus on winning.

Working with parents

At times, parents become bullies targeting their own children, players on opposing teams, referees, and coaches. Consultants could hold seminar workshops for parents addressing many of the aforementioned issues and strategies. In addition, interested consultants could work with parent sport education programs because parents have become increasingly involved and controlling when it comes to channeling their children into organized, competitive youth sports (Coakley, 2007).

The consultant as part of the problem

Many of the suggestions listed above may appear easy to understand and, by extension, easy to implement. Nothing could be further from the truth for ending sport bullying and hazing.
Consultants can be part of the “bystander effect” or “turning a blind eye” to what is occurring on the teams with whom they work. As Finley and Finley (2006) suggested, hazing is really about groupthink or when people act differently in groups versus when they are alone.

The hard reality is that groupthink includes sport psychology consultants who might, for example, quickly report incidents of sexual abuse in children with whom they are working but who are afraid to report incidents of bullying or hazing on sport teams. Consultants may choose not to report bullying or hazing for myriad reasons, including beliefs that: (a) they hold little power in the sport organizations or with the athletes they serve; (b) if they do challenge those in power about the “way things are done,” they may find themselves quickly out of a job; (c) they will certainly lose money if the consulting job is lost; (d) they might feel more comfortable trying to effect change by working within the immediate system (e.g., with an individual athlete or team) versus challenging those higher up in the sport structure; and/or (e) they see change in sport organizations as slow and frustrating.

Deciding to report bullying and hazing for whatever reason is certainly difficult and complex. Similar to Brackenridge’s (2001, p. 96) assertion about those who experience sexual exploitation in sport, those who know about bullying and hazing also face what seems like impossible choices:

if [one] speaks out [one’s] integrity remains intact but [one’s] survival in elite competitive sport is hazarded. If [one] allows the abuse to continue without reporting it, [one’s] personal … integrity [is] violated but [one’s] performance in the sport might be salvaged.

Non-reporting has a domino effect. If athletes see consultants and other stakeholders ignoring bullying and hazing, they may conclude that they will not be supported in reporting these behaviors themselves. We strongly suggest that consultants educate themselves about definitions of bullying and hazing and how to work with (or refer out) those who have been a part of these behaviors.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have suggested that bullying and hazing in sport are serious, problematic behaviors that occur because of power dynamics in sport, sport cultural traditions, and overconformity to the sport ethic (Fisher et al., 2009). We believe that although it will not be easy and will take time, sport psychology consultants can help create sport cultures where bullying and hazing no longer exist. If interested, consultants could play an integral role in changing coach education programs to include bullying and hazing definitions, creating policies related to athlete welfare and behavior, and also helping teams develop healthy and appropriate initiation or bonding alternatives (see Box 37.1). National and international psychology and sport psychology association codes related to the protection of athletes can serve as some guidance in these areas. Further, we believe that consultants could help coaches, athletes, and parents use the process of critical reflection to examine where they get their values about appropriate boundaries in relationships and how athletes should treat each other on teams (Brackenridge, 2008). Finally, as Brackenridge (2001) suggested, sport psychology consultants have specialized training and responsibilities to see that athletes get their psychological needs addressed and psychological injuries prevented.
Box 37.1

What sport psychology consultants can do to help prevent bullying and hazing

- Obtain and share information about the psycho-social conditions that contribute to abuse and exploitation in sport as well as the psychological effects of bullying and hazing.
- Support the adoption of anti-bullying and hazing policies.
- Facilitate workshops to educate coaches, athletes, and parents about bullying and hazing.
- Contribute to the development of coaching certification programs.
- Help teams develop healthy and appropriate initiation or bonding alternatives.
- Intervene by treating or referring out when observing abusive behavior.

Note

Although Hoover (1999) examined NCAA athlete hazing behaviors, the NCAA itself has discussed hazing issues but has yet to put any policies in place that we know about as of 2009.

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