

A Review of Literature:
Violence by Male Athletes
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Abstract

This review identifies, summarizes, and discusses scholarly research that examines the tendency of adult-male athletes to express aggressive behaviors and attitudes away from a competitive sport context. Results from multiple searches yielded 16 articles fitting parameters for inclusion. Most empirical studies examining the phenomena frame it from a masculinity standpoint - focusing on gender violence and sexual assault. Evidence linking athletic participation to aggressive behavior in adult males is inconclusive. Future scholarly efforts examining the phenomena should consider using a longitudinal design.

A Review of Literature:

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Violent crime is a major issue facing communities across the United States. According to the latest census data, the US continues to lead the world in rates of criminal activity and incarceration. In 2009, violent criminal acts including: murder, forced rape, robbery, and aggravated assault occurred at a rate of 429 per 100,000 (USDOJ, 2010). While violence has been in steady decline over the last two decades, it remains prevalent in the US. The group most likely to perpetrate violence is young-adult males.

In 2009, young-adult males between the age of 15-19 and 20-24 were arrested for violent crime at a rate of 730.3 and 667.5 respectively per 100,000, as opposed to a young-adult female rate of 151.0 and 162.3 (CDC, 2010). Accounting for the majority of anti-social behavior at the hands of young adult-males is gender violence. Violence against women includes instances of rape, physical battering, sexual assault, threats of sexual or physical abuse, and psychological and emotional violence.

Young women are particularly susceptible to sexual violence. In a recent study of college age women, it was found that between 20-25 percent of participants were victims of rape or attempted rape (CDC, 2010). Another study reported similar results, finding that almost 1 in 4 adult women are victims of battery or rape by an intimate partner (NNEDV, 2010). The disproportionately high rate of women victimized by men has received considerable scholarly attention and is framed within the greater context of hegemonic masculinity and its relationship with sexual aggression.

In contemporary US culture, males and females are subject to gendered social norms early in life. Males learn from a young age to value traditional masculine ideologies, and that

those who exhibit the most “manliness” will be rewarded with greater social rewards as they grow older. Values such as toughness, strength, competitiveness, and dominance are internalized through repeated social cues that permeate cultural institutions across the US. A product of hegemonic masculinity is the belief that females are inferior to males. The result of the dichotomous system of gender values is a culture that marginalizes women and traditional feminine characteristics (Schwartz, 2005). An institution that has been observed to perpetuate traditional masculine values is sport (Messner and Sabo, 1994).

In recent years, athletic participation has been subject to numerous research efforts by masculinity scholars interested in the relationship between sport participation and aggression. In particular, scholarly research has focused on establishing a link between hyper-masculine sports and sexual aggression.

Emerging from a historically patriarchal society, hyper-masculine sports are those that dominate American sports culture and epitomize manliness. Sports such as football, basketball, baseball, hockey, wrestling, and lacrosse are characterized as hyper-masculine due to their rough nature – where physical domination of an opponent is needed for success. While referencing football, Messner and Sabo (1994) successfully capture the essence of scholarly interest in a relationship between sport and violence, “ the combination of violent adult athletic role models and rewards from coaches, peers, and the community for the willingness to successfully use violence creates a context in which violence becomes normative behavior” (p. 91).

Purpose and Scope of Research

The purpose of this review is to identify, synthesize, and discuss scholarly work that examines the propensity for male athletes to express aggressive feelings and behavior outside of the sports domain. This review does not seek to explore aggression during game-play, as some

sports are by their nature more violent than others, rather, the goal is to better understand how athletes think and behave away from their respective fields of play. Examining the interplay between characteristics of male athletes and factors associated with anti-social behavior will further help to conceptualize the phenomena.

Using Academic Search Premier, multiple searches using combinations of the following terms were conducted: violence, athletes, masculinity, aggression, sexual assault, college athletes, professional athletes, contact sports, and gender violence. Results were further refined to include only peer-reviewed articles published in the last 20 years. After reviewing the yield of abstracts, 16 articles fit the established parameters for inclusion.

It was the intention of this researcher to include scholarly articles focused on males participating in college and professional sports, but results of numerous searches yielded little empirical research focused on the phenomena beyond the college ranks. Consequently, the ensuing review of literature is focused almost exclusively on aggression and gender violence perpetrated by male college aged athletes.

Review of Literature

Researchers have examined numerous dimensions of athletic involvement and predictors or evidence of violent behavior. The majority of the studies conducted survey research, measuring participant's identification with gender roles, masculinity, rape-myth acceptance, sexual behavior, alcohol consumption, drug abuse, peer-group association, and aggressive behavior. Two studies collected and examined data from police reports or campus security offices in an attempt to enumerate actual instances of violent behavior perpetrated by male student-athletes. Another two studies used qualitative methods, relying on data collected from

recorded interview transcripts and participant observation. Additionally, several literature reviews concerning the phenomena have been published.

Several themes emerged from the literature. In most cases, athletes were compared to non-athlete samples. Women participated in a few of the research efforts, but the majority used a heterogeneous male sample. In several cases, researchers compared and contrasted participants by sport-type and contact level.

Sport-Type, Masculinity, and Risk Factors Associated with Aggression

Gage (2008) compared gender attitudes and sexual behaviors among male athletes competing in large revenue producing sports and non-traditional sports, to a group of male students representing the collective student body. Participants completed surveys measuring levels of gender identification, attitude towards women, sexual aggression, and hyper-masculinity. Findings indicated that athletes participating in the large revenue producing rated higher on scales of hyper-masculinity.

Studying sexually aggressive attitudes and behavior among British undergraduate students, Smith and Stewart (2003) theorized that student-athletes participating in contact sports would exhibit greater levels of aggression than their non-contact sport and non-sport peers. In all, 282 males were administered several surveys measuring dimensions of sexual aggression and behavior. After data analysis, Smith and Stuart determined that contact sport athletes were no more aggressive than the other two groups. The researchers also concluded that men who held more rape supportive beliefs were more likely to perpetrate sexual violence.

Locke and Mahalik (2005) surveyed 254 male undergraduates at four universities in the Northeast part of the United States: two small institutions and two large institutions - with an even public/private split. Researchers examined levels of masculinity, alcohol abuse, and athletic

involvement as mediators of sexual aggression. Involvement in varsity athletics was not found to be a strong determinant of sexual aggression. Instead, high levels of alcohol consumption and a strong identification with masculinity were more accurate predictors of aggressive feelings towards women and the acceptance of rape myths. Specifically, men with malevolent views of homosexuality and a desire for interpersonal power were found to be the best predictors of sexual aggression.

Chandler, Johnson, and Carroll (1999) conducted a study of 342 college students at a traditionally black university in the southern United States in an effort to better understand abusive behavior and athletic participation. In all, 126 athletes, and 216 non-athletes completed a questionnaire designed to measure abusive behavior. Findings from the study suggested that athletes have more sex and are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence compared with their non-athlete classmates.

Humphrey and Kahn (2000) asked 52 upper class students at a large university to rank the school's fraternity and sports teams based on how likely they were to have a party where sexual violence might occur. After determining the risk levels associated with each group, researchers distributed questionnaires to four groups at high risk and four groups with low risk. Research measured a total of 182 male participants for levels of sexual aggression, hostility towards women, and alcohol consumption. Analysis of the data indicated that the groups who were associated with facilitating risky party atmospheres had attitudes that were more sexually aggressive and hostile towards women.

Surveying a group of participants with ages ranging from 18-43, Keeler (2007) examined male and female athletes engaging in collision, contact, and non-contact sports. A total of 92 females and 69 males answered a questionnaire measuring levels of sport aggression, life

aggression, and life assertion. Collision, contact, and non-contact sport participant comprised of rugby, soccer, and volleyball athletes. Controlling for age, experience, education, team, and success level, Keeler concluded that there were no differences between sport type and gender across the dimensions measured.

Nixon (1997) administered questionnaires to 195 athletes and 218 non-athletes at medium sized division I college in an attempt to study aggressive behavior outside of a sport context between male and female athletes and their non-athlete counterparts. The researcher found that data supported gender and sport stereotypes. Male athletes were more prone to aggressive behavior away from the playing field than female athletes and females participating in contact sports were more aggressive than their peers in non-contact sports. Male athletes participating in contact sports were the only group linked to physical violence.

Examining the relationship between group membership and the proclivity for rape supportive attitudes, Boeringer (1999) surveyed 113 fraternity members, 52 athletes, and a control group of 312 males from a larger southwest university. Boeringer found that students who are members of a fraternity or an athletic team were more likely to have attitudes that support rape. The author suggested that hyper-masculine peer influence might reinforce hostile attitudes towards women.

Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Pakalka, and White (2006) sampled a group of college freshmen at a small private university located in the Midwest United States. Looking for a relationship between high school sports participation and sexually aggressive attitudes, Forbes et al (2006) found a link between students who played high school sports and increased sexual hostility. Specifically, men who played contact sports in high school were more likely to condone rape, sexism, violent acts, and have negative views of gay men.

Studying the effects of sports participation on aggression in both athletic and on-athletic contexts, Gardner and Janelle (2002) compared 66 male and female college athletes and non-athletes. The athletes were categorized by sport contact level. Football, basketball, and soccer were considered high contact sports, while baseball, softball, and volleyball were considered low contact. Researchers asked participants to rank the appropriateness and legitimacy aggressive behaviors shown to them through a series of video clips. Males found behaviors more acceptable in video clips in both terms.

Qualitative Research

In a study of college football coaches, Steinfeldt, Foltz, Mungro, Speight, Wong, and Blumberg (2011) interviewed 10 assistant coaches from schools participating at each of the four NCAA football divisions. Interviews were conducted over the phone and assistant coaches were picked due to their close personal relationship to a small number of players. The researchers hypothesized that coaches would endorse hyper-masculine behavior was not supported. Rather, coaches were found to express a diverse range of values.

Focusing on aggressive behavior outside of the context of sport, Pappas, McKenry, and Catlett (2004) studied five hockey players from the Canadian minor leagues using participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Researchers concluded that violent and aggressive behavior in the participants was not limited to the ice. The athletes continually expressed their toughness in social settings with alcohol abuse and sexist beliefs compounding aggressive attitude and behavior.

Documented Instances of Violence

Examining instances of battering and sexual assault perpetrated by male athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics, Crosset, Benedict, and McDonald (1995) gathered

reports from judicial affairs offices and campus police departments at 10 large universities with major sports programs. The data included 20 cases of battering and 69 cases of sexual assault. Researchers determined that athletes were overrepresented in the data in comparison to their non-athlete student peers.

Comparing arrest and conviction rates of college and professional athletes with the general population, Benedict and Klein (1997) reviewed 217 police reported cases of sexual assault. Data collected from 1986 to 1995 indicated that athletes were much more likely to be arrested for sexual assault, but less likely to actually be convicted than members of the general population. However, the researchers noted that athletes were no more likely to be given special treatment by government officials than would be given to a normal citizen.

Literature Reviews

A meta-analytic review authored by Murnen and Kohlman (2007) found 27 studies related to athletic participation, fraternity membership and instances of sexual aggression. Murnen and Kohlman established 57 effect sizes and determined that results were wide ranging. Members of sports teams or fraternities were found to be slightly more likely to have sexually aggressive attitudes. Athletic participants were also found to be more sexually aggressive, but only to a small degree. The authors found a strong relationship between athletes and hyper-masculinity.

Kimble, Russo, Bergman, and Galindo (2010) reviewed the research efforts from the last 30 years on athlete aggression both on the field and off the field. Across both environments at every age, researchers determined that the question of whether athletes exhibit more aggressive behavior has yet to be determined. While the researchers noted a large body of literature dedicated to the phenomenon, very few are empirically legitimate. They found it likely that

stereotypical attitudes attached to athletic involvement has likely persisted over the last three decades due to a lack of rigorous methods throughout the body of scholarly research.

Discussion

Scholarly literature focused on the link between male athletes and violence is inconclusive. There is no causal evidence directly linking male athletes with violent behavior and anti-social characteristics. Some research efforts have reported a relationship and others have not. Inconsistent methodology, failure to collect demographic information, and a lack of longitudinal studies tracking athlete attitudes and behavior chronologically make the utility of any findings ambiguous.

The two research efforts that use actual police and institutional reports of criminal activity perpetrated by college and professional athletes failed to gather any demographic or socioeconomic information. The data provided in both Benedict and Klein (1997) and Crosset et al. (1995) linking male athletes to violence are often cited without a complete understanding of the methodologies used in each study. The findings in each certainly suggest a relationship between male athletes and violent acts, but without comparing the athletes to a national average and controlling for background information, it's hard to determine whether they are actually more or less likely to commit a violent act. The validity of Crosset et al. (1995) is also uncertain given that the data was collected without a uniform definition of the crime perpetrated. Each institution that provided data decided what constituted sexual assault or battering. Creating further ambiguity amongst the research is a lack of long-term studies.

None of the literature in this review examines aggression and violence by college and professional age athletes in depth for a period lasting longer than six months. The majority of the studies included in this review relied on self-reporting by participants at one point in time.

Without repeated observations and measurements over an extended length of time it can be difficult to draw conclusions on how sports participation influences individual development across changing environmental contexts and biological maturation. As recent breakthrough's in neuroscience and social-psychology have suggested, an individuals attitude and behavior are not merely the product of their environment, nor inherent upon birth. Rather, interactions between the two make for a decision making process that is multidimensional.

Conclusion

Despite the amount of literature and media attention that has been dedicated to sport participations influence on aggressive tendencies in male athletes away from their respective fields of play, scholarly efforts have yet to find any causality. While some research has shown a relationship exists, there is no way of determining whether sports breed aggressive characteristics, or aggressive individuals gravitate towards sports.

A significant part of the problem lies in measuring behavior or perceptions at a single point in time, and irrespective of critical factors shaping human development. While humans have the capacity to acquire new skills and behavior as they age, there is little doubt among scholars that the most influential years are those from conception through adolescence. Relationships, environments, cultural institutions, and hereditary factors interact to create a multidimensional set of potentialities. Abusive and aggressive actions by a collegiate or professional male athlete cannot be understood without considering such factors, and to do so would be simply reductionist. The context in which he was raised must be considered. As Perry (2001) notes, "if a child has been raised in an environment of persisting threat, the child will have an altered baseline such that the internal state of calm is rarely obtained" (p. 19). Unstable environments increase the sensitivity of the "flight" or "fight" response as a child grows into an

adult who is more prone to erratic and volatile behavior in nuanced situations. Heritable traits may also compound with environmental factors to increase the risk of aggressive tendencies and perpetuating transgenerational violence (Perry, 2001).

Current and future research exploring the interaction between genes and the environment may hold the key for a more complete understanding of human development. One study conducted by a group of researchers examining the role of genotype studied a group of children from youth through adulthood found a relationship between a specific enzyme and anti-social behavior. A significant factor mediating the effects of the enzyme in contributing anti-social character traits among the participants was the presence of domestic violence and unstable social environments. Indicating that both nature and nurture interact to produce a range of possible outcomes (Caspi et al., 2002)

Future research geared towards uncovering a relationship between aggression and male athletes should consider longitudinal studies that document familial and peer relationships, environment, cultural norms, and hereditary markers. A better understanding of sport participations influence on aggression in male athletes outside the lines of play may only be achieved through rigorous documentation of the full human experience.

Interventions aimed at curbing hyper aggression and gender violence in male athletes should occur prior to attending college. As Murnen and Kohlman (2007) state in their review, “These data suggest that male athletes probably come to college with attitudes and behaviors supportive or rape, so prevention programs should focus on high school-age boys or younger” (p. 155). Additionally, awareness raising programs aimed at parents, coaches, and college and professional athletes can also be effective given the highly influential roles they play in the lives of young people.

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