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How the Socialization Norms of Athletics Affects High School Student-Athletes

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

How the Socialization Norms of Athletics Affects High School Student-Athletes

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this capstone project is to look into the implications of the norms high school athletes face with regards to socialization. Pressure to conform to gender norms can be difficult for all individuals. Along with those already formed gender norms, being a student-athlete has a culture of its own, which creates pressure from society to conform to the norms of the sports culture that can pose a danger to students at the high school level. Research has found correlations between these norms and seeking help seeking, even when it would benefit the student's mental or academic health (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Female student-athletes tend to have conflicting gender norms, so that dissonance between the two identities sends a red flag (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011). School counselors need to be aware of the implications of gender norms and the socialization process when it comes to their student-athletes in order to best reach out and service their needs.

Keywords: high-school, athlete, socialization, norm, counselor

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Introduction

School counselors create a mission and a vision for their student body that aligns with the school and district. Serving the needs of the students and creating an environment of success tends to be a common theme among all. The goal of this research is to take a portion of the student body and see where school counselors can intervene in order to create an environment for students to thrive. The focus is to see what services we can offer the student-athletes in our school. This is going to be done by looking at the socialization process that these students go through in order to be effective. An important piece is to look at what pressures or stigmas they are facing and the effects they have on student-athletes. By having that information, school counselors can have a better understanding of that population and be able to intervene. If student-athletes are being socialized in a different way than the student body as a whole, then their struggles may be different. Then, those differences need to be addressed in order for the entire student body to thrive.

Review of Literature

Researchers have done extensive exploration of the difference between masculine and feminine norms with regards to the general population. For athletes, participation in sports leads to expectations to meet the masculine values, beliefs, and rituals of that society (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011). Those expectations are called norms, or the rules of society that govern the way individuals perceive others and how they measure themselves. The masculine ideals that stem from the athletic norms in this review of literature can be defined as competition, aggression, domination, and independence (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). There are many ways in which these norms affect student socialization.

Masculine Norms

There has been a negative stigma associated with help-seeking among many groups of individuals (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Stigma can be referred to the social exclusion of individuals with certain labels that could potentially come from seeking help (Pattyn, Verhaeghe, Sercu, & Bracke, 2013). Athletes, especially male athletes, have been suggested to follow a certain set of masculinity norms. An article written by Jesse and Matthew Steinfeldt (2012) looked at the patterns of conformity to these norms among DII collegiate football players from four separate universities. They used the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory 46 item (CMNI-46) self-report instrument to assess the conformity into nine subscales. The authors had participants take the Self-Stigma of Seeking-Help Scale (SSOSH). With a test-retest reliability of .72 and correlational validity with an internal consistency coefficient of .89, the researchers used this scale to determine the athletes attitudes toward help-seeking (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). They found the more that athletes conformed to masculine norms, the more they negatively stigmatized help-seeking practices. Another discovery was that although there were a group of athletes who fell under the category of conforming to masculine norms, not all of the athletes conformed. The highest categories of difference between the non-conforming players and the conforming players was in the Heterosexual Self-Preservation and Emotional Control categories. Both of these categories fall right in line with the researches definition of masculine ideas: competition, aggression, domination, independence (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012).

Based on the research results, it could be said that there was a correlation between conformity to masculine norms and a negative stigma toward help-seeking. For example, if a student-athlete had an unsavory home-life they are not equipped to handle, they would not likely seek out the school counselor. In the sport and masculine culture, there is an expectation of

mental toughness and independence which stands in the way of student-athletes looking for outside help (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). They want to excel and it is a student-athlete perspective that supports the idea that there is no room for weaknesses or gathering help from others, especially regarding their mental health. In order to assist these students, a counselor needs to reach out in order to break down the stigma of seeking and normalize assistance for mental health purposes.

In order to reach adolescent males, it may be that administrators or school counselors must reach out to them. With their unwillingness to seek out help, one study looks at working with those athletes in order to put prevention programming in place (Steinfeldt, Vaughan, LaFollette, & Steinfeldt, 2012). Another issue that revolves around athletics is the idea that male athletes who conform to masculine norms share similar characteristics that are predictor factors for bullying behaviors. Throughout the United States, organized sports are seen as a huge contributor in establishment of socialization networks (Steinfeldt, Vaughan, LaFollette, & Steinfeldt, 2012). Overall, the moral atmosphere of athletes tends to be a high predictor of moral functioning. In the study done by Steinfeldt and his colleagues (2012), the moral atmosphere of athletes is made up not only of their peers, but their strongest male role models as well. It could be suggested that male athletes could benefit from fathers and coaches facilitating psychoeducational interventions about the socialization process of masculine norms. This could be a way to combat the negative behaviors that have potential to be expressed by high school athletes. Along with that, having those students use their peer influence to model and enforce a safe atmosphere for other students with regards to bullying and other negative effects of not being socialized into a specific set of norms.

Many athletes gain their dedication to the sport through a socialization process where they gain a unique sense of self. This process integrates athletes into society by teaching norms, values, and appropriate behaviors through social roles (Beamon, 2010). Two theories guided a study done by Beamon (2010), which are the social imitation theory and the social learning theory. She collected qualitative data of African American males whose socializing agents and environments lead them into sports participation starting at a young age (Beamon, 2010). The consequences experienced by the males who grow up in this type of community tend to be low levels of academic achievement. Role models for young males in the African American community tend to be athletes or entertainers, not businessmen, doctors, or lawyers. “The term *African American community* in these findings signifies a larger context of culture and the respondents’ perceptions of African Americans as a collective entity,” (Beamon, 2010, p293-294). However, Beamon (2010) discovered that many of the reported role models were individuals that the males interviewed knew. This finding only supports the ideal that the means to success in athletics is a tangible feat. Being aware of the very few African American role models outside of the athletic or entertainment world, would be important to future mentors for young males in that community.

Feminine Norms

Strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, and independence are characteristics typically associated with masculinity. However, male athletes are not the only ones taking on those attributes. Female athletes live in a paradox of attempting to conform to feminine norms while trying to be competitive in their sport (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011). This article looked into three hypotheses regarding female athletes, their level of conformity, and the effects of that circumstance compared to non-athletes or male athletes. One way that females

live in a paradox is when it comes to body image and esteem. Although no significant evidence could predict body esteem in females, there was a large report of body dissatisfaction in sports that either have more revealing uniforms or that value a feminine physique. In addition, they found that female athletes did not perceive themselves as less feminine than non-athletes.

However, it is also found that they reported higher levels of winning and risk taking, which have been known as traditional masculine norms. Unlike in males, studies have found positive effects of risk taking in female athletes, linking this trait to higher body esteem (Steinfeldt et al., 2011).

On the other hand, many female athletes relate better to males than their female, non-athlete, peers. Overall, female athletes need to balance the socialization aspects of conformity of both female and masculine norms in order to fit into the societal expectations.

Although females who are athletes have to balance the socialization of both the masculine and feminine norms, sport participation has many benefits linked to self-esteem. Sport involvement holds predictive factors for increased school attachment and lower levels of peer isolation (Daniels & Leaper, 2006). Unlike males, just being in a sport does not contain the high of predictive factor with regards to a sense of belonging to a social group for females. One study looked into just how much the peer acceptance piece had to do with a female athlete's levels of self-esteem. Daniels and Leaper (2006) found significant evidence to support that peer acceptance mediated the relationship between participation in athletics and an individual reporting high self-esteem. The females who were physically active in a sport and who are accepted by their peers, were likely to experience increased feelings of self-esteem. Therefore, females who have high levels of self-esteem can then reap the benefits of being an athlete. More research needs to be done on those who are not accepted by peers in order to look into the effects of that circumstance.

Socialization of Athletes

Many of the attributes resulting from masculine norms result in negative effects for athletes. One of those traits were risk taking and its result of high alcohol consumption. Studies have shown significantly higher levels of alcohol use and abuse in athletes than their non-athlete peers (Martens, Cox, Beck, & Heppner, 2003). However, the exact motivators behind this excess consumption has been unclear. A group of researchers though the University of Missouri looked at positive and negative motivators along with internal versus external motivations to see if there was a connection (Martens et al., 2003). It was suggested that the norm of risk taking proved significant as an external, positive motivator for athletes to consume alcohol. The study suggests that “athletes have a greater psychological or physiological motive to experience the stimulation that is brought on by the consumption of alcohol” (Martens et al., 2013, p 238). Along with that, there was a socialization piece that also acted as an internal, positive motivator. Overall, it seemed as if positive motivation suggested more influential than negative motivators (i.e. coping mechanism due to increased stressors).

Organized sports have been known to provide benefits to school-aged students for a multitude of reasons. A major benefit of organized athletics for an individual was the increased physical fitness level over their peers. But one article looked at the connection between organized athletics and socioeconomic status (SES). In order to determine if SES was indeed a factor, the researchers assessed different components of junior high boys’ and girls’ fitness from a public, urban, Illinois middle school. They used the FITNESSGRAM assessment tool endorsed by the American College of Sports Medicine to validly and reliably assess body composition, cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular strength, muscular endurance, and muscular flexibility (Bohr, Brown, Laurson, Smith, & Bass, 2013). They determined the SES status off of

the students' eligibility for the federal free lunch program. What the researchers found was no significance could be found between boys of different SES categories with regards to physical fitness. As for girls, the results showed a significant "difference in both body composition and physical fitness between girls of high and low SES" (Bohr et. al., 2013, p 544). The researchers suggested that this difference was a result of the data that showed that girls were more physically active if they were a member of an organized sport, which occurs more for higher SES students. They tend to have more access to facilities and equipment than those of lower SES. The researchers suggested that school administrators and physical educators encourage low SES females to participate in organized sport of some kind.

Athletics has not only shown benefits for athletes physically, but academically as well. Yeung (2015) took high school non-athletes, athletes, and athletic leaders' cognitive scores in multiple academic areas. An athletic leader is a student-athlete who is the leader of their sport team. Yeung (2015) saw that athletic leaders had significantly higher scores than those of non-athletes. Although not as significant, athletes in general had consistently higher scores than those of non-athletes. This provided data to support the idea that athletics had a strong positive relationship with academics. Another study used an intervention to combat social norms in athletics. The study looked at athletes who used mindfulness practices in order to build up their self-efficacy (Blecharza, et al., 2014). These practices included yoga, breathing exercises, visualization, and meditation. An unintentional finding was that students who used mindfulness practices also had increased performance compared to those athletes who did not. Although there has not been research on the direct effects of mindfulness, athletics, and academics combined, it may be said that there have been benefits seen out of all three used together. The ideals of confidence and competition can be applied to academics and athletics (Steinfeldt &

Steinfeldt, 2012). If an individual applies these athlete ideals into their academics, there is research to suggest that they will be likely to succeed in multiple domains. That can explain the reason for athletes and athletic leaders to score higher on cognitive tests than those of non-athletes. Therefore, it can be said that athletics suggest a positive effect on academics and that academics benefit from an individual's participation in athletics.

The socialization of student-athletes is a process unlike that of many other groups in high schools. This group is typically overlooked when schools talk about the at-risk population because of the benefits typically associated with athletic participation. However, with the positives of exercise, academic performance, and peer acceptance for males, comes issues that non-athletes may not have. The masculine ideals student-athletes value are directly related to a negative help-seeking stigma, which can hide the struggles that are prevalent with this group. A struggle that presents itself to athletes whose sports emphasize weight or wear revealing uniforms is disordered eating (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Carter, & Steinfeldt, 2011). This can also be connected to individuals with low self-esteem, which typically comes from low peer acceptance, more commonly found in females. An issue prevalent with minority males is the lack of role models, which results in low career maturity for this group. For school counselors, they can find ways to combat these issues by using positive behavior intervention strategies and positive motivators. The socialization that high school student-athletes face and the norms they are to fit into are not always healthy. Therefore, it can be left to the school counselor to identify the struggles of this population and ways to combat the issues they face.

Discussion

High school student-athletes have a unique socialization process that leads to factors in which student services within the schools should be aware of. However, the correlation between

the masculine ideals of athletics and the negative stigma to help-seeking can make it difficult for school counselors to identify any issues. Athletes are expected to have adapted the masculine ideals of competition, aggression, domination, and independence. Many of these values go hand-in-hand with excelling in academics, which may be another reason why student-athletes issues may go unnoticed. Their academic performance is typically at a higher level than non-athletes, which prevents them from being an at-risk population in many schools. Student-athletes have learned ideals that positively relate to academics and they rarely seek out help, which makes it difficult for individuals within schools see the issues that may be underlying.

One issue that faces males, specifically the minority population, are the lack of role models. The high level of African American males who aspire to be professional athletes can be a result of learned behavior. Notably successful CEOs, doctors, lawyers, scientists, and teachers are predominantly white males. Males of a minority status have their socializing agents in the entertainment industry, with very few outside of that. Following the path of famous African American athletes can be perceived as low-risk and high reward. The socializing environment of the African American community accepts this path for their student-athletes. The literature emphasizes the lack of models that these students have, which can limit opportunities for minority students. This can be detrimental to career maturity, as they may only see themselves in these restricted domains. Reaching out to this population may be better received if done by an individual or group of individuals that minority students can relate to.

Another issue that student-athletes must balance are physical challenges. Although an adequate amount of exercise is a benefit that a majority of student-athletes receive, body image pressures can be difficult to manage. A balance that female athletes have to combat are being strong enough for their sport, but still fitting into the feminine ideals. For male student-athletes,

there is a strong correlation between being an athlete and self-esteem, with regards to having a sense of belonging to a group. Being accepted into their peer groups typically requires this idealized body type. This acceptance raises self-esteem, which positively correlates to having a positive body image of one's self. The socially accepted body type of female athletes is to be toned, but not too muscular. However, the sport environment has risks for all genders with regards to body image. Athletes who have more revealing uniforms or emphasize weight are much more likely to produce athletes with disordered eating. Therefore, being a part of the athletic environment puts student-athletes at risk for issues with body image and self-esteem.

Although male and females do have different gender expectations when it comes to socialization, the traits that are a result of conforming to the student-athlete socialization norms have evidence to support similarities. Risk-taking is a huge social piece of being a student-athlete. More research needs to be done on what about athletics goes along with the risk-taking characteristic found in a majority of student athletes, but it does have a strong positive correlation with high levels of alcohol consumption. It was previously stated that there is significant research to support that many athletes binge drink as a coping mechanism and as a way to socialize with others. Both of those factors are positive motivators for athletes to consume alcohol. The negative motivators would be the physical symptoms that can hinder performance. Therefore, it can be theorized that the positive motivators seem to be more inviting for student-athletes than are negative motivators. School counselors can keep in mind that using positive motivation and reinforcement on athletes may be a solution to any academic or behavioral woes that may arise or already exist.

Implications for School Counselors

All of the underlying struggles and pressures that face student-athletes have potential for being addressed by the school's pupil service department. School counselors have a unique role in being able to be proactive in using skill training and intervention strategies. Student-athletes typically let the positives outweigh the negatives with many aspects of their lives. Therefore, using a rewards system with this population tends to be the most effective. Using positive behavior intervention strategies can provide positive solutions to many of their woes. If a student-athlete is told about the positives of a behavior, they are more likely to apply that skill to their lives. For example, telling student-athletes about the negatives of abusing alcohol and binge drinking will have a very little effect on them. On the other hand, if they are told about the positives of not using these substances, then they may be more likely to keep those toxins out of their bodies. This framework can be applied to other psychoeducational topics like body image, self-esteem, mental health, academics, and careers. It is important for school counselors to know how students are motivated, as they are collaborators on the intervention strategies that schools tend to use.

Knowing what motivates a student relates to their values. Although school counselors are to put their values aside when working with students, it is important to use past experiences. Being able to relate to a student builds greater rapport and may be able to provide helpful insights into what the student may be experiencing. Having similar experiences can be advantageous, so long as the counselor can separate the student's experience from their own. In that case, a counselor with the background of athletics may be highly beneficial for student-athletes. They will be able to provide an empathetic atmosphere with a high level of understanding to the demands from a social, academic, and personal standpoint. In some cases it

has been seen that related experiences creates an environment for countertransference, but the data is not significant enough to cause concern. Therefore, in most situations, having related experiences can improve the counseling relationship.

Another way a school counselor can help their athletes in the social, academic, and career domains is by bringing in different individuals from the community. These individuals can be effective in providing information, interventions, or just by being an adult outside of school they can go to. Bringing them into schools or by setting up ways to take students to professionals in the community has a lot of benefits. This can be highly valuable, especially if the counselor can connect with people of a minority status in a professional setting. Many students who are of a minority status, particularly who identify as black, have very few high status role models who are not in the entertainment industry. Seeing individuals similar to themselves in a multitude of occupations can open up their minds to more career opportunities. Teachers and coaches may also be beneficial to the counseling program by providing curriculum and building relationships with students. They are individuals who potentially have daily contact with students. That much exposure can aid in rapport building and can have a significant impact on a student. Overall, school counselors can be effective in the development of the students by connecting community members and school staff with the students.

Facilitating connections for students can be presented in many fashions. One way they can be utilized is for interventions. A highly influential practice that has been shown to also improve academic and athletic performance is mindfulness. Using mindfulness strategies like yoga, visualization, meditation, and breathing exercises can have a direct positive effect on athletic, academic, personal, and social domains. Therefore, having others implement these strategies either in a small group, into the school curriculum, or during athletic practice could be

highly beneficial to student-athletes. These practices can be shown to students by community members, school staff, teachers, coaches, administrators, or the school counselors. This could build relationships that may not have been there before.

Conclusion

Through researching high-school athletes there was information I discovered that was both expected and unexpected. The masculine ideals that are embedded deep into the athletic values plays out in both positive and negative ways. I was aware that males benefit much more from conforming to those masculine ideals because it aligns very closely with their gender norms. However, females have a much tougher time balancing the masculine ideals because they can be completely adjacent to the feminine norms they are socially expected to follow. However, it was found that in general, high school athletes tend to overlook the negative aspects and overemphasize the positive effects that they may receive. They put in the hard work and long hours in order to win games and be successful. This idea applies to all areas of their life, not just athletics. Although there is a negative stigma toward help seeking, this is the piece that school counselors can take and apply to psychoeducational activities in order to improve the likelihood of effectiveness when working with student-athletes.

It is so important for school counselors to know the population they are working with. What I found out through this research is that by digging into the social aspects of students, the academic and career domains are related. By working on one domain, the others can be positively impacted. In my future career as a school counselor, I will look into what motivates students. I now know that this can come from how they are socialized to interact, the norms they are expected to follow, and how all of these factors are outwardly expressed. I have also gained

concrete ideas that can be implemented into the curriculum that will be developed. Overall, this information will be used to enhance my ability to be an effective school counselor.

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