Effects of Hazing on Team Cohesion

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Hazing in athletics continues to be an issue across the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Media attention continues to remind us that hazing is occurring at all levels of sport throughout the country. Hazing is a broad term that encompasses many activities, situations and actions that an individual must tolerate in order to become part of a group or team (McGlone, 2005). Hoover (1999) defined hazing as “any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate. Based upon Hoover’s definition, research has shown that more than 250,000 student athletes have been hazed as being a part of their college team (Hoover, 1999). It is estimated that 50% of college athletes have experienced hazing in some form during their collegiate experience.

Some contend that hazing continues for a number of social reasons that serve important team functions. McGlone (2005) indicated that 52% of athletes who had experienced hazing reported feeling closer to their team and more of part of the group and 35% reported feeling like they were more accepted as a member of their team after hazing occurred. This finding indirectly supports the notion that hazing may be associated with enhanced team dynamics. In the literature, perhaps the most dominant measure of team dynamics is that of team cohesion. Carron, et al. (1998) define cohesion as “a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in pursuit of its instrumental objectives, and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs.” Whether a direct relationship actually exists between hazing and team needs to be established and clarified with respect to the multidimensional aspects of cohesion and hazing. For example, “task” cohesion reflects the degree to which members of a group work together to achieve common goals, whereas “social” cohesion reflects the degree to which members of a team like each other and enjoy each other’s company (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

Initial research by Van Raalte, et al. (2007) explored the relationship between hazing and team cohesion, and reported that hazing was negatively related to task cohesion, and unrelated to social cohesiveness. This research, using Division I athletes in team and individual sports (N = 167), was a positive start in exploring the relationship between hazing and team cohesion, but needs further replication and extension into variables that impact team cohesion, such as leadership factors (compatibility between leader and group members) and team factors (individual vs. team sports). The purpose of this research was to further investigate the assertion that hazing is affiliated with team cohesion by including both NCAA Division I coach (n = 340) and athlete (n=300) perceptions of hazing and cohesion. The relationship was further explored by comparing athletes and coaches from both individual and team sports.

Athletes completed the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) (Widmeyer, Brawley, & Carron, 1985), and a hazing/ initiation survey. Coaches completed the hazing initiation survey and a modified version of the GEQ. The GEQ was utilized to assess team cohesion regarding how individual members of a team relate to each other (social cohesion) and work together (task cohesion) as a unit. The hazing questionnaire assessed various types of hazing such as mental, physical, alcohol related, or sexual-related activities.

The results were separated into cohesion type (task or social), team membership type (team or individual), and type or category of hazing activities involved in order to answer several research questions. First, is there a relationship between hazing and team cohesion? Second, is there a significant difference in team cohesion based on type or category of hazing activities? Third, does the cohesion-hazing relationship depend on whether athletes participated in “interactive” team sports (e.g. football, soccer, basketball) compared to “coactive” individual sports (e.g. track, swimming, cross country). Finally, is the hazing-cohesion relationship different or similar when coach perceptions and athlete perceptions are compared?

Statistical analysis included establishing reliability coefficients for each of the instruments by calculating Cronbach’s alpha for all instruments in the study. All measures illustrated reliability of greater than .70 (Nunnally, 1978). Furthermore, Chi-Square, t-test, and ANOVA statistical analysis indicated that certain hazing activities were
associated with increased levels of perceived social cohesion. Results indicate this relationship may be modified slightly based on team factors or task demands (team vs. individual) and coach perceptions of cohesion and hazing. Taken together, results of this study do not support the notion that hazing is positively related to team cohesion or the anecdotal suggestion that hazing builds team cohesion.

By understanding how hazing and team cohesion interact, coaches and administrators can use the information to help educate athletes toward activities that are better suited to achieve a higher level of team cohesion and group dynamics. Furthermore, the results can be used to enhance current efforts to reduce hazing within the realm of athletics at all levels.