

BRAZEN BULLYING BEHAVIORS WITHIN U.S. FOOTBALL

by

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## ABSTRACT

**Bullying** is one of the most prominent social issues being faced across the world today. The aim of this research was to detail the problems associated with **bullying** and **hazing behaviors** within the context of **U.S. football**. For the purpose of this project, the term “**bullying**” will be operationally defined as an “imbalanced relationship with reoccurring negative interactions.” Similarly, “**hazing**” will be defined as “the imposition of difficult and degrading initiation rituals.” Finally, the word “**sport**” will be operationally defined as “an activity that requires skill in which an individual or team competes.” Although research has been performed identifying how organized **sports** can reduce bullying, far too little work has been done identifying the potential negative effects. This literature review will describe the study of **bullying**, assert the distinction between **hazing** and **bullying**, address existing research and the gaps within it, and finally persuade the reader to enlighten themselves on an under-reported subject. Results from this thesis derived that the terms **bullying** and **hazing** are often misused and interchanged, and concluded that more research must be completed to fully understand the relationship between sports and **bullying behaviors**.

## **Significance**

The act of bullying has likely been around since the beginning of humanity. Bullying can be manifested in any environment imaginable, including sporting organizations. The purpose of this psychological honors thesis is to understand the relationship between sport-involvement and bullying and assess the literature to determine what aspects of this relationship need to be more fully clarified and researched. Until recently, the prevailing assumption has been those who participated in sports were less likely to encounter bullying. This has been widely believed and accepted given that being involved in sport organizations can bolster the development of teamwork, cooperation, and friendship skills. These attributes are considered pivotal to the building of a supportive social structure. However, new research has exposed that some sporting environments may breed systematic bullying and can even become detrimental to developing adolescents.

Bullying exists in every culture and is used to intimidate, pressure, and maintain social power. Bullying can take place in a myriad of different forms, and the implications and consequences of receiving this treatment are just as plentiful. Kentel (2015) asserts that the most prevalent consequences surrounding bullying are “school absenteeism, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation” for those who have been forced to endure bullying (p. 367). Bullying is one of the most underreported crimes that takes place in school and sport surroundings. Graham (2016) believes that upwards of 40% of school bullying goes unreported, which lends credence to the claim that if no one knows about the issue then no one is trying to solve it (142). One common issue faced by athletes experiencing bullying in the modern world is that of eating disorders. Anorexia nervosa,

bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder are far too common today. Anorexia nervosa is defined by repeated voluntary self-starvation. Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder characterized by an individual using vomiting or laxatives in order to purge calories. Binge-eating disorder is when someone overeats to the point of pain in a short time. These debilitating disorders can be evoked by having low body confidence due to the perpetuation of bullying. Having experienced severe bullying myself motivates my desire to explicate the subject and convey something new to the field in the form of this research thesis project. The significance of this project lies in the fact that it may lead to a better understanding and clarification of the interaction between sport-involvement and the phenomenon of bullying.



## **Starting to Study Bullying**

Experiencing bullying can significantly decrease both an individual's emotional and physical development. Ellen deLara (2019) postulates that "children who are bullied are many times more likely to develop eating disorders, trust issues, and experience stunted development" when compared to those who are not (p. 2780). Based on these repercussions, it is surprising that bullying has only recently received the nation's spotlight of attention. For many years bullying was accepted to be both a rite of passage and a form of character building. Only in the 1970s when Dan Olweus began his innovative prevention program did America begin to wise up about how detrimental this experience can be. Dan Olweus is credited with being the first researcher to extensively study this specific field. Dr. Olweus created the "Olweus Bully Prevention Program" in an attempt to reduce school bullying rates. In the early 1970s, Dr. Olweus initiated the world's first systematic bullying research study. The results of his studies were published in Sweden during 1973 and in the United States in 1978 under the title "Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys." After this work was released to the public it spurred the initiative of many similar organizations to extend the research and further cut down on this egregious activity. Based on the success of the program, legislation in both America and Norway soon followed to support their findings. This was the first time that large government had played a pivotal role in reducing rates of bullying. Americans have long held the belief that "children are the future" but evidently have only recently begun to value their well-being appropriately.

## **Bullying Within Football**

Sports involvement or participation may be a predictor variable for how likely a participant is to endure bullying victimization. Every sport is different and the social climates within them are vastly contrasting. For example, United States Football, also referred to as “gridiron,” is considered to be one of the most influential and determining high school experiences for a young man. Steinfeldt (2012) conveys that “the sport of American football is considered an important contributor to masculinity construction, establishing peer networks, and creating hierarchies of student status” when explaining the significance of their study (p. 342). Research conducted in this study shows that the violent nature of football, paired with the notion that “might makes right” ingrained in the sport, may create an atmosphere that supports aspects of bullying. Findings from this experiment support the hypothesis that athletic capability is the strongest predictor variable for whether a football player will get bullied, and that the expected reaction from the main “influential male figure” is the strongest predictor variable for whether a football player will bully others. It is worth noting that this study based its methodology on a similar longitudinal study that measured reported bullying from the same high school football team over several years and found that the trend appears to be declining over time. On a more positive note, Steinfeldt also dictates that football players can use their peer influence and status as center sport participants to create a school culture that does not tolerate bullying. Oddly enough, the same traits of strong verbal language and people persuasion skills that are found in bullies can be found in leaders. Football is an incredible example of how dynamic the effects of sport organization can be. Depending

on the coaching, team and school environment Football can generate leaders and bullies alike. This sport can have both positive and negative effects on bullying as an entity.

## **Bullying vs. Hazing**

Unfortunately, bullying within organized sports is often accepted as playful hazing. This means the bullies can remain unscathed and the victims remain untreated. Both bullying and hazing in sports extends all the way from formative to professional years. Vveinhardt reports that “over 25% of college student athletes” claim experiencing hazing at some point during their college career (1111). Many coaches and athletic administrators at all levels retain the archaic belief that hazing builds comradery and team spirit but fail to recognize the damaging ramifications to the individual and team alike. Bullying and hazing both include an imbalance of power, but bullies intend to exclude, and hazers intend to initiate. There is a clear and undeniable fundamental difference between bullying and hazing; hazing has an end in sight, while bullying does not.

Perhaps the most glaring example of bullying and hazing at the professional sport level was the 2014 NFL Wells Report. Tofler describes the Wells Reports as “detailed investigations of controversial NFL allegations.” (22) NFL investigator Ted Wells followed up on an unsavory claim made by a former Miami Dolphin offensive linemen Jonathon Martin about patterns of harassment. Martin claimed, and Wells confirmed, that several players and coaches were targeting others based on sexuality and race. Many executives and athletes within this organization perpetrated systematic hazing as a “Dolphin tradition.” Several older players on the team continuously instigated degrading and inappropriate tasks for rookies. One of the more striking examples from Tofler was the Miami fine book of “unacceptable behaviors.” (3) Players would receive financial penalties for arbitrary infractions such as “being a p\*\*\*y, acting gay, or lack of spirit.” (4). There was also clear bullying however. Jim Turner, one of the Miami coaches during

the time, reportedly mocked a homosexual player after giving him a male sex doll as a Christmas bonus. This was blatant bullying and had no hazing or initiation components. This inequality and aggression led to many members of the organization resigning. Several key players and coaches disclosed to Wells that the hazing, bullying, and harassment was critical to the “bonding, cohesion, and success of their team.”(22) Following extensive interviews, it was discovered that the team owner Stephen Ross was not fully informed of what was going on. Fortunately, people spoke out and this egregious pattern of disrespect was brought to a halt. According to Weiss, Ross claimed to “own the problem” and swore towards conducting an internal review and recommended that other teams do the same (142). Ross also hired an independent third party to review and advise the organization policies. Professional football is a game played by those who exude size, strength, and speed. This example highlights how bullying can drive even these peak-athletes into severe distress.

## **Methodology and Confounds**

Most psychological research studies based around the topic of organized sport-related bullying follow the same general guidelines for their methodology and standards. Methodology, as it relates to Psychology, is defined by the “specific procedures the researchers identify in order to assure other researchers can produce identical results.” The main three types of study design for psychological research are experiments, correlational studies, and descriptive studies. That being said, many studies have inadvertently skewed their data by failing to isolate the differences between hazing and bullying. It is difficult to draw generalizable conclusions when the variable in question is ambiguous by nature.

In an experiment, the independent variable is manipulated, and the dependent variable is measured to establish control and explanation. Correlation studies are when researchers use correlations, associations of varying strength, to see if a relationship between two or more variables exists, but the variables themselves are not under the control of the researchers. A descriptive study design is when the researcher’s main focus is to analyze a sample or population at one specific point in time without trying to make inferences or causal statements. When looking at bullying behaviors within the context of sports, true experiments are rare because it is considered immoral and unethical to manipulate the occurrence or intensity of bullying without causing undue harm to participants. To respect the autonomy of the sample population, researchers must use a correlational or descriptive study design in this field. The most popular forms of psychological data acquisition for bullying-related cases are interviews, surveys, document analysis, observations, and focus groups. Jones (2012) posits that interviews

are the more informative design for learning about sport-related bullying, but he claims they are only relevant if the interview questions are “easy to understand, allow for developed answers, and only ask one question at a time” (p. 55). Interviews provide first-hand descriptions of the event but can be skewed by personal opinion and bias. Although surveys are an extremely cheap and easy way to collect data from lots of participants, there is always the confound of survey-response bias. Usually, only people who are passionate about the subject respond to surveys and that is not the most accurate data when trying to represent the entire population. Focus groups have brought about a plethora of new information about sport-related bullying because as Ian Jones (2012) articulates, “focus groups allow for interaction between group members that enriches data as a result of members clarifying, challenging, and discussing the schema at hand” (p. 68). Many researchers performing recent studies have employed the tactic of focus groups to gather more focalized data on the subject but have run into some issues associated with the design.

The most prominent issue associated with the focus group design is that of participant anonymity. Participant anonymity can easily be compromised because the group members may repeat what others say in an outside setting. This compromising factor can lead to limitation of what subjects are willing to divulge during the sessions. Researchers are ethically compelled to protect the autonomy of their participants, and that remains the case when it comes to focus groups. Due to the high risk of subject dropout, focus groups operate with the inherent possible expense of destroying usable data when subjects feel uncomfortable and wish to leave the study. Another issue associated with focus groups is that of the completion incentive. Too small of an incentive can lead to too

small of a sample population, while too large of an incentive can be so attractive you sacrifice the normality and averageness of the sample participants. All of these data-gathering designs have their place within this field, as long as their caveats are understood and respected.

Although research has increased since sports participation has been identified as a potential mechanism to decrease the likelihood of experiencing bullying behaviors, serious gaps remain in the research of bullying within the context of sports. One of the most glaringly obvious confounds is that the majority of studies conducted in this field were performed in WEIRD, western-educated-industrial-rich-democratic, nations. This makes results and findings egregiously hard to generalize to the world population as the sample is inevitably flawed. Another problematic issue within this field is the difficulty that arises from the “observer effect.” The observer effect is when participants alter their behaviors because of the presence of someone watching. Due to this phenomenon, researchers must play a more passive role when observing populations in order to minimize complications. Given that researchers cannot actively take notes when observing populations without compromising the observer effect, it often forces the researcher to rely on their memory which brings about another dilemma. Humans are prone to misremembering details, and by relying on memory as opposed to objective empirical data researchers face “observer bias.” Observer bias is defined as “any expectations, beliefs, or personal preferences that the research unintentionally influences upon their subjects.” Another common obstacle within this field is the prevalence of researching exclusively males. This notion most likely stems from the fact that Nery (2019) states how “only 25 percent of women participate in sports, compared to 43



percent on men” (p. 449). Even though men comprise the majority of the research population, limiting studies based on gender presents an undeniable predicament.

These highlighted confounds amplify the lack of existing research on this subject, but they are not unsolvable issues. By acknowledging these gaps and creating new means of studying participants researchers can bypass these difficult hurdles and create meaningful discoveries that benefit the world.

## **Treatment and Prevention**

A convincing amount of research has demonstrated how bullying behavior is associated with negative outcomes. Educational institutions create a microcosm of society where bullying can be observed and influenced. Most schools have sports, clubs, and other organizations wherein large groups of individuals congregate and interact. Due to this, many schools have instituted bullying prevention and treatment contingencies. This includes, but is not limited to, “anti-bullying propaganda, bullying awareness campaigns, counselor improvement, and bullying interventions,” Merrell (2008) conducted a meta-analytic study of bullying intervention program research to determine their effectiveness. Unfortunately, he found that these programs have recorded relatively low positive effects. The metanalysis determined that of the intervention programs initiated, only a third of the programs reflected significant results. The results concluded that there is evidence to support the effectiveness of bullying interventions, but the methods themselves need to be tinkered with to increase the success rate. This study, like many others, was based on “K-12<sup>th</sup> grade” statistics as those are the most prevalent sample populations for research on this topic. Bullying prevention programs can benefit from improvement but should continue to be utilized.

Treatment for cases surrounding bullying varies greatly. Bullying most often takes the form of physical, verbal, social, or cyber assault. Physical bullying is the most easily apparent form of bullying and refers to acts of harms against the human body. Verbal bullying is the use of insults and derogatory terms intended to belittle a victim’s psyche. Social bullying, often mistaken as hazing, has to do with the exclusion and alienation of victims from social organizations. Cyber bullying refers to a bully

employing social media or internet applications to enact hate and pain. Steinfeldt claims that all of these forms of bullying occur within the sport of US football (347). Due to the varying case by case nature of bullying victims, treatment is prescribed on an individual basis. The most common form of treatment is professional counseling. Of the individuals that seek and receive help, almost “75%” report feeling better following treatment plans, according to Veinhardt (182). In the case of football, many individuals refuse treatment for fear of admitting that the trauma got to them. This shame induced reluctance keeps people suffering in silence. Although the current treatment options are successful, getting people to utilize them can prove to be difficult. Far too many victims of bullying remain to this day untreated.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, bullying and hazing both exist in United States football across the board. This phenomenon negatively impacts players and distracts from the positive nature of the sport. The distinction between bullying and hazing cannot be understated, regardless of the fact that many people remain ignorant and indifferent to their contrast. Bullying behaviors are observed in both formative and mature stages of the human lifespan. Despite the gaps in the existing research, there is strong evidence that supports the theory that participation in sporting activities is beneficial when it comes to reducing rates of bullying. Current bullying prevention techniques do not meet the challenge presented to them. Isolating the multitude of variables at play, reducing external influence, and understanding the context of environment is central to establishing any significant claim in this field. Researchers should continue to explore the association between sport involvement and bullying behaviors to better understand the significance of the correlation.

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