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Prince, Rebecca, Synnott, John and Ioannou, Maria

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Investigating the Risky Behaviour of Elite Athletes

Rebecca Prince PhD Candidate
Dr John Synnot | Dr Maria Ioannidou

University of Huddersfield

Abstract

In recent years there has been an increase in the amount of coverage regarding the off-field behaviour of elite athletes and they are often reported to engage in risky behaviour. There are many cases publicised in the media such as the Edward Lee ‘Fast Eddie’ Johnson, Jr, case, a former NBA player, who was involved with drugs and was convicted of sexual battery and child molestation. Another example is the more recent case of Adam Johnson, a former England football player, who was convicted of sexual activity with an underage girl. Much of the previous research has focused on collegiate athletes. The current research aims to explore the factors contributing to risky behaviour within athletes. A sample of elite athletes will be assessed and will aim to be complete a specifically tailored questionnaire consisting of multiple scales with the purpose of examining the factors which can lead to such risky behaviour. The paper discusses the implications of the expected findings as well as direction for future research.

Introduction

A new incident of athlete crime emerges every two days, but this does not include crimes that were unreported in the media (British Crime Survey, 2010). With the ever-increasing number of reports about the antisocial behaviour of athletes, who are published – through no fault of their own – an rising body of research, it is important to examine the central factors which can lead to risky, illegal, or otherwise irresponsible, behaviour. This can have a noticeable impact on any victim involved and society in general as they can directly affect the athlete's behaviour.

Risky behaviour is defined as activities such as rape, group sex, infidelity, gambling, drug-taking, violence, and substance abuse. The vast majority of research into the risky behaviour of athletes has been conducted on collegiate athletes (e.g., Saner & Jordan, 2006; Newman, Purcell & Toupin, 2011; Cross, Bowers, Kesslack, and Schaffer, 1986), with little academic or empirical focus being applied to elite athletes. While the differences between collegiate athletes and elite athletes are not insurmountable, elite athletes remain a distinct group because they carry our their role as a full-time job. Reports of athletes being involved in risky behaviour show no sign of abating. As such, efforts to try to understand how and why elite athletes engage in such risky behaviour should be a priority. This research will explore the factors that contribute to the risky behaviour of elite athletes and an effort must be made to understand why this group of individuals engage in this sort of behavior.

Figure 1: A snapshot of the two sides of athlete life. On the left Adam Johnson playing for Sunderland AFC and on the right Johnson as he appears in court.

Causative Factors of Risky Behaviour in Athletes

Some of the aspects related to risk-taking behavior are the following:

- Celebrity status which brings more power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006)
- Peer Influence (Crandall & Stenling, 2005)
- Sensation seeking (Morrow, Scoular & Parsons, 2012; Yaxley, White, & Pandit, 2008; Zuckerman, 1989)
- Aggression (Mizner, 2014; Olave & Kiev, 2011)
- A tendency to see the world as a threat (Keltner, 1995)
- Masculinity and femininity: Their psychological dimensions, correlates and antecedents.

Risky Behaviour Statistics

In 2010 there were 957 arrests of National Football League (NFL) players between 2010 and 2011, around 1 in 45 NFL players were arrested each year, with many of these issues being related to driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. This compares to a national rate of 1 in 144 (E.J. College Search, 2011). It has been reported that the conviction rate for accused athletes only has a conviction rate of 38% (National Crime Survey, Violent Athletes, 2012).

Figure 2: A comparison of the arrests across three major U.S. sport organizations: National Football League, National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball (U.S. College Search, 2011).

Project Aims

The main aim of this proposal is to gather unique information from elite athletes in regards to their risky behavior taking habits.

Objectives

1. To develop an understanding of risky behavior taking tendencies in elite athletes.
2. To understand the factors as to why elite athletes are in a higher risk of engaging in risky behavior.
3. To build on previous research in the area which predominantly focuses on collegiate athletes.

Method

The study will use a sample of elite athletes and amateur athletes (control group) from across the world in order to investigate their risky behavior and the factors which contribute to these behaviors. To do so we will specifically designed a qualitative and quantitative study. The questionnaire will be used to find out the following factors:

- Psychological questionnaires.
- An informed consent form.
- The Scale of Power Scale (Anderson et al, 2003)
- Personality Attributes Questionnaire (Eysenck, 1970)
- Social Anxiety Inventory-Scale (Zuckerman, 1979)
- Domain Specific Risk Taking Scale (Gosfield, 1988)
- The Academic–Professional Riskiness Questionnaire (Abrami, 2002)
- The Sensation-Seeking Behavior Index (Elliot et al., 2000)
- The Comprehensive Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire (CSEQ; Devine & Hogan, 2010)
- Using these results the study will investigate the influences of the following main aspects: risk taking:
  - Power status
  - Personality
  - Psychopathy
  - Sensation-seeking
  - Alcohol use

References

Maltreatment Project Aims

Implications of results

The findings will be presented to develop a new research to help educate existing and aspiring athletes in both a professional and collegiate setting in order to reduce the prominence of these risky behaviors. A reduction of these behaviors can create a safer environment for athletes and their families and reduce the negative impact of their actions which can have a considerable impact on any victim involved and society in general. Through these findings, we can reduce risky behavior throughout their lives whether that be as a profession athlete or in another profession.

In the long term it is hoped that by reducing risky behaviors in athletes it may decrease these behaviors in the general population later on. As research shows that elite athletes can learn from role models through vicarious and social learning (Butin, Dzidic & Reardon, 2011).

Correspondence to: Rebecca.prince@hud.ac.uk

Figure 3: A snapshot of the two sides of athlete life. On the left Adam Johnson playing for Sunderland AFC and on the right Johnson as he appears in court.

While there has been much research into the risky behaviour of collegiate athletes there is little research which focuses on elite professional athletes. Statistical information regarding elite risky behavior is not as easily accessible with the majority of statistics being reported on U.S. athletes (see Figure 1). In addition to this previous research in the field appears to focus on just one aspect of risky behavior in athletes, such as structural differences regarding risk-taking personality or social influences. This research will use the large sample size of athletes to look at all aspects of the role of aggression in the risky behavior of athletes (Mizner). Also, with certain types of risky behavior, such as sexual assault, there are victim involved and this is another factor to why researching these behaviors is so important.