



June, 1999
Volume 1, Issue 1

The Relationship Between Athletics, Hispanics, and Aggression

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the subject of aggression and the role of athletics among the Hispanic population. The concept of machismo has been associated with Hispanic males and implies that there is a greater likelihood of aggression among Hispanics than any other ethnic group of athletes. However, aggression is best predicted by SES, not ethnicity. A supportive family environment has been found to act as a protective factor against aggression. Athletics provide such an environment in addition to allowing for an appropriate venue for the expression of aggressive behavior. Suggestions for future research and individuals working with Hispanic athletes are included.

Introduction

Over the course of the past twenty years an increasing amount of attention has been given to the field of athletics. Today, sports are considered to be the great equalizer since most attention is given to an athlete's abilities with little attention given to their ethnic origin. The Hispanic population has gained acceptance into professional sports organizations in contemporary American society despite overwhelming odds against their participation. Leonard and Reyman (1988) reported that the chances of entering professional sports in the United States are as follows: 4/100,000 for a Caucasian, 2/100,000 for an African-American man, and 3/1,000,000 for a Hispanic man. Today, 25 of Major League Baseball players are of Hispanic heritage. In order for athletes to be successful, regardless of their ethnic origin, they must be aggressive on the field. In the past, the concept of machismo, which implies aggressiveness (Harris, 1996), has been associated with Hispanic males. This finding suggests that there is a greater likelihood of aggression among Hispanic athletes than any other group. However, research findings do not support this notion. This paper will review the literature on the subject of aggression in relation to the Hispanic population, its development and the relationship with athletics.

Aggression and Hispanics

As was previously stated, the concept of machismo implies aggression among Hispanic males (Harris, 1996). Harris (1995) went so far as to state that Hispanic males are often more aggressive than Caucasians. Other studies have concluded that there are no differences in aggression among different ethnic groups. It is therefore important to examine the research focusing on the development and presence of aggression among Hispanics more closely.

Aggressiveness has been found to be a major source of interaction among siblings regardless of ethnic heritage (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Therefore, aggression is a major part of our socialization and communication styles from early on in our lives. This would carry over into school systems as well. One study that examined aggression within school systems found that children's in-school conduct problems were better predicted by socio-economic status (SES) than by their ethnicity (Herzberger & Hall, 1993). This provided support for earlier research that controlled for both SES and ethnicity and concluded that poverty is the most important contributor to aggressive behavior among children (Patterson, Kupersmidt, & Vaden, 1990). Both of these studies contradict Harris' (1995) suggestion that Hispanic males are often more aggressive than Caucasians perhaps as a result of a methodological flaw in his study which did not control for SES levels. It appears that coming from economic disadvantage increases the likelihood that an individual will act aggressively. Children in poor, urban communities are exposed to high levels of community violence which indirectly communicates that violent behavior is acceptable. Research has found that exposure to community violence in the previous year was related to current level of aggression (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). This was found to also be true when prior aggressive behavior was controlled for statistically (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). However, not all individuals who come from low SES backgrounds act aggressively. It is therefore important to examine those factors that have been found to act as protective factors from aggressive behavior.

The reasons why all individuals that are exposed to violent behavior in their communities do not respond in the same way are varied. One reason is that individuals may witness fewer and less extreme forms of violence than other individuals living in the same neighborhood (Richters & Martinez, 1993). A second reason for the differential responses to exposure is the family environment. Previous research has found that individuals who have a family who is supportive and with which they feel emotionally connected provides a refuge that mediates the impact of the exposure (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Clearly, the family environment is of primary importance in providing support after exposure or victimization. Because so many athletes come from lower SES backgrounds, there is little doubt that they have been exposed to similar types of violence and are at higher risk of demonstrating violent behavior.

The nature of sport is such that aggressive behavior is frequently demonstrated on the field. Early in their professional careers many Hispanic athletes demonstrate aggressive behavior but in an acceptable form. For example, Sammy Sosa is one individual who comes from a low SES background. Anecdotal reports from early in his

career demonstrate his aggressive behavior. He was described as being too aggressive at the plate, swinging at balls that were in the dirt. Another example of this aggressive behavior is Ivan Rodriguez of the Texas Rangers who is noted as being one of the best defensive catchers in the game. He has stated that he views each base runner as being a personal confrontation and that he aggressively tries to throw each one out when they are on base. Clearly, these individuals are demonstrating aggressive behavior that has been channeled into the game of baseball.

It appears that there is little validity to Harris' (1995) assertion that Hispanics display aggression more frequently than Caucasians. The research shows that when SES status is controlled for there is little ethnic differences in aggressive behavior. In fact, SES appears to be the best predictor of aggressive behavior. Because so many of today's athletes come from lower SES backgrounds, it makes sense that they would display aggressive behavior both on and off the field. However, the research shows that family acts as a protective factor for individuals exposed to violent behavior. In many cases, the athletes are able to channel their aggressive behavior into their respective sports. Perhaps, the individual's sport is acting as a protective factor. An examination of how athletics acts as a protective factor in the lives of lower SES individuals is therefore warranted.

Athletics and Low SES Individuals

Sports may play a protective role against aggression in the lives of lower SES individuals, specially among Hispanics. Research in the field has found that family support serves to protect some individuals from aggressive behavior. However, among lower SES individuals family support is often missing. In these cases, it may be that athletics provides the individual with support that is missing in the family unit. This makes sense given the importance placed on the family unit among Hispanics. For example, Ivan Rodriguez insists that a family member (wife, father, or cousin) travel with him on all road goad during the baseball season. As children continue to participate and succeed they are rewarded with increased positive attention from family members, coaches, and peers. In addition, the financial rewards of professional athletes may keep many individuals focused on careers in sports. Thus they learn that aggression expressed in appropriate contexts has many beneficial rewards.

Hispanic families can be described as being close knit and a primary source of socialization through which cultural values and behaviors are learned. Researchers have concluded that athletics is also a primary socialization vehicle through which boys learned the values and behaviors typical of men in their culture (Lever, 1976). Because so many individuals from lower SES backgrounds come from broken homes, sports became like a second family. For example, a 32 year old Hispanic male whose mother had died at age nine stated the following: "What I think sports did for me is it brought me into kind of an instant family. By being on a Little League team, or even just playing with kids in the neighborhood, it brought what I really wanted, which was some kind of closeness" (Messner, 1989). However, the competitive nature of athletics is such that those individuals that were not successful did not receive the recognition necessary from family, coaches, and peers that would promote their continued participation. As a result

they may have engaged in other activities to release their aggression that are not considered appropriate by societal standards. On the other hand, successful individuals increased their participation so as to continue to receive the attention they may have been lacking at home (Messner, 1989). In their case, continued athletic participation provided a venue for the expression of their aggression that is societally acceptable. However, even for these individuals athletic participation is not always a positive thing.

Athletic activities by their very nature focus a great deal of attention on an individual's physical characteristics. For minority individuals this may not have a positive impact on their self-definition. Previous research has shown that race is a significant component of non-white individual's self-definition (Aries et al., 1998). Within the athletic domain this finding is specially significant. Hispanic and African-American individuals have reported being more aware of their race in public contexts than Caucasian individuals (Aries et al., 1998). Athletic contexts are the situations in which these individuals reported being most aware of their race, followed by social/leisure activities (Aries et al., 1998). In this research, involvement in academic activities resulted in the least awareness of racial differences. Aries et al. (1998) concluded that this effect may be the result of the physical focus of athletics. However, Hispanic adolescents still give a great deal of importance to athletic participation and success. According to researchers the single biggest correlation with perceived popularity among ethnic minorities is athletic status (Kennedy, 1995). The researchers concluded that this may be the result of the many physical changes occurring at this time, which in turn causes a focus on physical behaviors such as athletics.

The question of why so many ethnic minorities turn to athletic careers given the overwhelming odds against their successful achievement of a professional sports career remains unanswered. Perhaps it is because the middle-class institutional context of Caucasians emphasizes education and makes it clear that there are many alternative choices to athletic careers which are not particularly good choices (Messner, 1989). The low quality of education available to lower SES classes, the attitudes of coaches and teachers, as well as the anti-education attitude of their peers makes it extremely unlikely that these individuals will succeed as students (Messner, 1989). Consider the following quote from a 32 year old Hispanic male: "By junior high, you either got identified as an athlete, a thug, or a bookworm. It's very important to be seen as somebody who is competent in some area. And you don't want to be identified as a book worm. I was very good with books, but I was kind of covert about it. I was a closet bookworm" (Messner, 1989). This quote highlights the limited opportunities that many young Hispanics see as being available to them. Ethnic inequalities are obvious for individuals who attend high-schools where different SES levels are represented. Status symbols such as cars and nice clothes are unavailable to these young men resulting in a situation where athletics take on additional significance since it is the one arena where they feel they will be judged solely on their abilities (Messner, 1989).

Clearly, athletics plays multiple roles in the lives of lower SES Hispanic individuals. On the one hand, it provides children with a structured environment which has been found to acts as a protective factor from the aggressive behavior that many of them see in

their community. This is a venue where the expression of aggression is considered appropriate and is frequently rewarded as well through increased attention from families and peers. On the other hand, athletics is viewed as one of a very limited number of choices to achieve financial success which would result in escape from the environment that frequently results in inappropriate expressions of aggression.

Conclusion

The nature of athletics is such that aggressive behavior is frequently rewarded. In the past researchers have attempted to make a connection between aggression and ethnicity which simply does not hold up. It appears that the best predictor of aggressive behavior is low SES status. Researchers have identified a structured family environment that is supportive as being protective of aggressive behavior. It appears that athletics provides many individuals with just such an environment. One way that it may be doing this is by providing a venue for the expression of aggression that is considered to be appropriate by societal standards. In the future, researchers should attempt to empirically validate the concept of athletics as a protective factor from inappropriate forms of aggressive expression.

The Hispanic population is quite diverse. For example, native born and immigrant Mexican Americans differ in many ways, including child rearing orientations, social identities, and stereotypes of Mexican-Americans. Other Hispanic groups including Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians and other Latino groups may differ in their cultural values and beliefs. Therefore, generalizations from one Hispanic group to another become problematic in that they may be invalid. Sport psychologists who are working in culturally diverse settings need to be aware of ethnic differences in life experiences, perceptions, values, and attributions if clients are to receive maximum benefit from interventions.

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