The Experiences of Minors Who Compete in Senior Community Sport Teams: Is Alcohol a Team Socialization Tool?

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It is a well-established finding that sport provides positive mental, physical, and social outcomes for both adult and youth age groups (cf. Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013a, 2013b). Despite the positive effects of sport participation, cultures of alcohol consumption in some sporting groups mean that young people are frequently exposed to alcohol-related risks. Outside the area of on-field sports performance, very little research has examined how minors (those under the age of 18) are influenced by the behavior of senior team mates, particularly in the area of alcohol consumption.

Further, the sport management literature increasingly addresses the sport/alcohol nexus as a factor which increases alcohol use of community sport participants. Previous research frequently focuses on the sport sponsorship link (Kelly et al., 2011a, 2011b; Kelly et al., 2014; Kelly, Ireland, & Mangan, 2016; O’Brien et al., 2014; O’Brien, Lynott, & Miller, 2013; Sawyer et al., 2012), alcohol advertising exposure (Collins, Ellickson, McCaffrey, & Hambarsoomians, 2007; Ellickson, Collins, Hambarsoomians, & McCaffrey, 2005; Kelly & Edwards, 1998), or alcohol consumption of adults in the community sport club setting (Black, Lawson, & Fleishman, 1999; Fuchs & Le Henaff, 2013; Huang & Dixon, 2013; Rowland et al., 2015; Snow & Munro, 2000). To date there has been limited empirical research that examines the alcohol consumption of minors in the community sport club setting.

Calls have been made for alcohol and sport research that extends the traditional focus of hegemonic masculinity and the assumption that sport sponsorship by alcohol industry increases alcohol consumption (Palmer, 2011, 2013, 2014). The outcomes of juniors playing in senior sport teams, including the impact on their overall wellbeing and alcohol consumption decisions need to be further explored. This research thus undertakes to: (1) understand the experience of minors who play in senior competitions in an off-field context; and (2) document and explain the interactions and rituals that may be protective or promotive in relation to alcohol consumption.

Interviews are currently underway with 15 to 17 year old males who play in senior sport teams. These interviews allow for exploration of the off-field experience of juniors who play in senior sport teams in community sport clubs, how they integrate themselves into the team, and the negotiations involved in deciding to consume alcohol or not. Respondents participate in popular Australian sporting activities such as cricket and Australian Rules Football (AFL) in two Australian locations, one rural and one urban. A minimum of 20 interviews will be conducted.

This research employs an open ended interview protocol to explore the importance of sport, meanings attributed to playing with adults and the opportunity to play at a higher level. Their attitudes towards the sport/alcohol nexus, off-field behaviors, and finding their place in the team are also discussed. Whilst the on-field skill development is important for minors, there is also the potential of off-field opportunities for personal development through socializing with adult team mates. Decisions about joining the senior team and participation in team activities are affected by the people around them and their behavior towards the minor. Through socialization, minors learn the accepted behaviors of team members and decide which of these behaviors they will adopt and which will they will actively avoid. Through their decisions to drink alcohol or not, to stay and socialize with team mates or leave, and participation or not in certain behaviors the minor creates a space for themselves on the team.

Preliminary findings identified the role of the club culture in the promotion of minors playing in senior teams and in the formation of acceptable behavior of a team. Alcohol sale facilities, common in Australian community sport
clubs, and encouragement of players to stay and socialize at the sport club after a game or training, along with the historical ties between alcohol and sport, promote alcohol consumption of minors. The safety of the change rooms after a game provides a setting at the club for the team to relax, debrief and have a drink away from the view of outsiders.

For minors who do not wish to consume alcohol, removal of themselves from off-field activities is most frequently reported – not staying after the game and not attending club or team events. These minors who do not socialize with team mates off-field need to seek other opportunities to find their place in the team.

The full qualitative findings from this research will be presented and will provide insights into the experience of juniors who play in senior teams and the effect of off-field interactions with adult team members. The findings will be shared within the community sport sector and other related agencies in order to encourage and open a new discourse around safe socialization and healthy behaviors between junior and senior players with respect to alcohol consumption.