College Sport Environment and Athletes' Perceptions of Concussion Injuries: An Empirical Analysis

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Research Purpose

Many scholars have pointed out that substantive and meaningful changes in the organizational environment of college sport are needed to improve the welfare and rights of student-athletes (Staurowsky et al., 2015). Following such suggestions, this study proposes to examine student-athletes' perceptions for concussions, under the belief that they are interconnected with the current organizational environment and management processes of college sport (Malcolm, 2009). To do so, a survey was designed and distributed to a large sample of student-athletes at a Division-I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) university. Specifically, the research question guiding this study was: whether athletes of varied characteristics (e.g., category of sport, race, gender, and scholarship status) had significantly different perceptions of concussions in relation to the athletic, academic, and policy domains of the college sport environment.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Organizational culture theory is adopted as a framework for this study (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984). From a structuralist point of view, organizational culture is a result of a complex mechanism composed of the interworkings of formal structures, strategies, policies and management processes (Levi-Strauss, 1973). Notably, individuals learn to interpret the culture of the organization and to make sense of his/her interactions with the organization and its members through socialized processes (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984). From this lens, athletes' perceptions of concussions are shaped by the values and norms embedded in the interaction patterns and power relations within the college sport environment.

Firstly, in regards to the domain of the athletic environment, it is important to note that athletic departments (especially Division I schools) are under the pressure to provide competitive entertainment products driven by market forces. As a result, athletes may be socialized and encouraged to maintain a tough, competitive, as well as disciplined image (Cunningham & Fink, 2006). Secondly, recently the NCAA has initiated efforts to create and mandate concussion policies among college athletic programs. Notably, policy change can represent a discourse shift in the organizational environment, which influences how individual members are categorized and given statuses (Shore & Wright, 2003). As such, whether student-athletes are aware of these policies and how they perceive the policies may play a role in their decision making. Thirdly, in regards to the academic domain, it is revealed that college athletes have consistent struggles against deeply-entrenched stereotype as those who are isolated from the academic environment and without serious effort for intellectual development (Staurowsky et al., 2015). As such, the academic environment can compose another layer of cultural complexity for athletes to approach concussions. Fourthly, athletes many make different meanings of concussions along various structural factors, such as ethnicity, gender, category of sport, scholarship status, and so forth. These factors can assist to bring athletes to varied social processes of college sport and thus different understandings of concussion injuries.

Method

A survey was designed and distributed to student-athletes at a public FBS university in the Southeast region. In all, 179 completed surveys were collected between May to August 2017, representing about 33 percent of the total number of athletes at this university. The summary statistics revealed that the sample was composed of 38% males and 62% females, with a racial makeup of Caucasian (74%), African-American (18%), Hispanic (6%), and Asian (2%). Notably, athletes from 10 different sports were represented in this sample, with 32 percent of them playing contact sports, and 18 percent having had a previous history of concussions. One-way analysis of variance
ANOVA) was conducted to measure the differences between groups in regards to each question and the overall constructs. Additionally, Bonferroni and Sidak multiple comparison tests to identify the specific groups that were different.

Results and Discussion
In regards to the athletic environment, it is found that African American athletes are less likely to feel supported and more likely feel insecure in regards to concussion injuries (p<0.05, in “it is okay to return to play as long as I have not lost consciousness,” “my role on the team is jeopardized if I am diagnosed with a concussion,” “I feel comfortable to discuss concussions with athletic staff and teammates”). Meanwhile, it is found that players with a history of concussion are more likely to feel that they would let their coaches down if a concussion is reported, who also reveal stronger agreement in that “if I report a concussion and stop playing, my teammates would consider me as weak.”

Next, in terms of the academic environment, African American athletes are more likely to agree that “if I inform a professor about a concussion, he/she may think that I would be less intelligent,” and “If I tell a classmate that I have a concussion, he/may think that it is an excuse,” as well as “if my grade drops because of a concussion, I find it hard to explain to the professor.” Furthermore, similar results are also revealed for male athletes in regards to the first two statements.

Furthermore, in terms of the policy environment, African American athletes have significantly less awareness for the NCAA policy that “any student-athlete exhibits symptoms of a concussive injury should be withheld from participation for the remainder of that day.” African American and Asian athletes indicate significantly less confidence in that “the NCAA policies make me feel more comfortable to discuss about concussive symptoms.” African American and Hispanic athletes are less likely to agree that “the policies indicate attention and care to protect athletes.” Finally, seniors indicate significant less agreement with “my coaches are aware of the policies and show support,” while freshmen reveal stronger agreement that the policies indicate care to protect athletes.

The results serve to expose how structural factors are associated with different socialized understandings of concussions among college athletes. The vulnerability of African American athletes in approaching concussions is consistently revealed in all three domains. This is certainly related to the observation that compared to others, sport has been particularly regarded as a path towards educational and social mobility by African American athletes (Hawkins, 1999). More critically speaking, the results lead to a further reflection on how a big-time business culture and marginalization of African American athletes in classrooms, as embedded in the interaction patterns and human relations, have come to influence athletes’ perceptions of concussions. Altogether, the results yield significant implications for future practices to be taken to provide more welfare, understanding, and empowerment for athletes in dealing with concussions in the college sport environment.