Does Teamwork Spillover? Prosocial Behaviors and Attitudes Among Intercollegiate Athletes

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Prior research has examined the relationship between participation in competitive youth sports and various later-in-life measures. For example, participation in interscholastic (high school) sports appears to be positively associated with several measures of mid-career success including earnings (Kniffin et al. 2015). More commonly studied as a test of whether sports can provide “salubrious socialization” in ways that cultivate community-minded orientations and behaviors (e.g., Chalip, 2006), researchers have worked to understand which aspects of the sporting environment are most helpful for encouraging individual and social developmental benefits.

For the current study, we focus on whether participation in sports that entail relatively high levels of teamwork tends to be positively associated with prosocial behaviors and attitudes. The difference in kind (rather than degree) between sports that do or do not involve a common resource (e.g., ball) provides an intuitive basis for expecting individuals in team-oriented sports to be more likely to demonstrate prosocial or other-oriented attitudes and behaviors. Building on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the need for “reciprocal trading” in sports such as basketball, football, soccer, and hockey should – we expect – help to cultivate (if not teach) relatively strong other-oriented or prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Hypothesis 1: Participants in sports that involve a ball or puck will demonstrate significantly greater prosocial or other-oriented attitudes and behaviors.

In addition to examining differences across sports, we are interested to examine the degree to which relative intensity of commitment might constitute an independently important contributor to prosocial or other-oriented attitudes and behaviors. For example, while Kniffin et al. (2015) compare people who played and did not play at least one varsity sport in high school, they invited future work to consider whether there existed effects within the overall effect. Towards that end, our expectation is that people who are high performers in a given sport will be more likely than non-high-performers to demonstrate relatively strong other-oriented or prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Hypothesis 2: Participants in team sports who are relatively high performers will demonstrate significantly greater prosocial or other-oriented attitudes and behaviors.

In order to test our hypotheses, we draw upon responses to the Growth, Opportunity, Aspirations, and Learning of Students (GOALS) survey conducted by the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). Using responses from the most recent year for which data was available (2006), our analysis is able to consider self-reported information from 18,379 individuals who were participating in NCAA-sanctioned activity during the 2005-06 academic and competition year.

With respect to Hypothesis 1, we find that that participation in a team-oriented sport is significantly and positively associated with Volunteering behavior when taking into account important control variables (Sex, Ethnicity, Starter, NCAA Division 1, Healthy Sleeping, and Happiness).

With respect to Hypothesis 2, we find that Starters on Division 1 teams do not show any independent effect with respect to Volunteering. This pattern lends itself to the conclusion that high-performing individuals and, more broadly, members of high-performing units do not show any independently higher (or lower) associations with respect to the community-oriented activity of volunteering.

Taking together the preliminary results from examining Hypotheses 1 and 2, one implication is that to the extent that volunteering is an effective signal for prosocial behavior, then the overall suggestion is that membership in a Team-Oriented sport is sufficiently and independently important given that being a top-player has no additional effect.
Limitations of the present study that future research can address involves expanding the scope of dependent variables to include a wider array of measures. In addition to expanding the scope of measures, the present study is also limited by its cross-sectional design, which does not permit consideration of causal relationships. Given that longitudinal surveys would provide significantly more opportunity to consider whether participation in sports – of any type – plays a causal role with respect to behavior and attitudes outside of sports, we can join Kniffin et al. (2015) to highlight the potential to be gained by inclusion of sports-related questions in any ongoing longitudinal survey projects.

The present study contributes to research showing directly important relationships for participation in relation to prosocial behavior and attitudes. While prior research has shown the positive and contemporaneous influence of physical exercise on occupationally important outcomes such as job satisfaction (e.g., Daley & Parfitt, 1996), recovery from job stress (e.g., Sonnentag & Niessen, 2008), and transitions into retirement (e.g., Kloep & Hendry, 2006), a basic contribution of the present study centers on the recognition – and finding – that there exists important variation within “physical exercise” and “sports” that future research should consider more routinely.