

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Title: "For the love of the game": The hidden mental health consequences of sport teams' initiations

Objectives: Initiations events, often referred to as welcome activities, are a commonplace tradition in many sports teams. The short and long-term impact on the mental health of initiates, initiators, and bystanders has been a focus of recent research attention. The present study aimed to explore the initiation experiences of UK student athletes and the subsequent effect on well-being.

Design: Cross-sectional qualitative design using retrospective interviews.

Methods: Sixteen sport team members were recruited through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted exploring participant experiences of welcome activities in their university sport teams. Results were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Six themes emerged from the data. These were: rite of passage; challenges; rules; reputation; persuasion and hierarchy. These themes were mapped onto the non-relational maltreatment conceptual framework that includes physical, social and emotional elements of bullying. In contrast to U.S. based studies, the results indicated that social bullying was the most prevalent, followed by emotional, and finally physical bullying.

Conclusions: The study highlighted the occurrence of physical, social and emotional bullying during the initiation activities of sports' teams. Furthermore, reference was made to the natural time progression in university sport that perpetuates the cycle of bullying and establishes the initiates as future initiators. For initiates who successfully negotiate the events, the effects of the bullying are minimised. However, for some this bullying can have serious mental health impacts both in the short and long term, whilst the challenges and risk behaviours may threaten the broader well-being of all involved.