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## *Examining the use of socialization tactics in team sports*

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### **Project Summary**

Sport team membership provides people with opportunities to work together toward a common goal and build supportive social relationships. Quite simply, being a member of a sport team is associated with a host of psychosocial benefits. However, joining a new sport team can be a stressful experience because of the uncertainty surrounding an athlete's role responsibilities as a new group member and whether an athlete will be socially accepted by existing group members. For this reason, the early stages of involvement in a sport team are crucial for shaping the quality of an athlete's sport experiences. To inform best-practices related to managing initial group member interactions in team sport settings, we examined the strategies that sport teams employ when integrating newcomers into their existing group (i.e., socialization tactics). In Study 1, we initiated a qualitative investigation to examine how athletes are socialized into sport teams. In Study 2, we developed a questionnaire to enable us to examine which socialization tactics are more advantageous in facilitating a positive group environment. Specifically, we documented how socialization tactics differentially related to athletes' perceptions of group cohesion, commitment to their coaching staff, commitment to teammates, and their intentions to return to the same team next season. Overall, our findings revealed that teams vary in how they integrate newcomers into their group. More importantly, initial findings suggest that certain socialization tactics are more beneficial in terms of enhancing (a) perceptions of group cohesion, (b) commitment to coaches and teammates, and (c) intentions to return.

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### **Research Methods**

We used a multi-method approach to systematically investigate the use of socialization tactics in team sport environments. In Study 1, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve coaches and twelve athletes from Canadian Interuniversity Sport teams (i.e., basketball, football, hockey, lacrosse, soccer). Within each interview, participants detailed their experiences related to how newcomers were integrated into their group. On average, interviews were 40 minutes in duration, which resulted in a total of 425 pages of transcribed data. We then analyzed these data for common themes. In Study 2, we designed a questionnaire based on the themes identified in the foregoing qualitative study. Questionnaire items were refined through quantitative and qualitative procedures that entailed gathering feedback from athletes and experts (i.e., academics in a relevant field). To document the relationships between different socialization strategies and athletes' experiences as a group member, we distributed a pen and paper version of the questionnaire to male and female Canadian Interuniversity Sport athletes near the beginning of their season (197 athletes, 104 females), and again near the end of the season (218 athletes, 84 females). A range of CIS sports were represented, including basketball, football, hockey, and volleyball. In addition to assessing the processes newcomers undergo when joining the group (i.e., sport team socialization tactics), we measured athletes' perceptions of group cohesion, commitment, and intentions to return the next season.

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## Research Results

In Study 1, we identified six core themes that covered the issues newcomers encounter when joining a group and how groups attempt to manage the integration of newcomers. Coach and athlete reflections revealed that a primary focus during a newcomer's entry into the group was developing a clear understanding of his/her role within the team, and that socialization processes differed according to the ability and status of the incoming athlete. Athletes nevertheless emphasized how concerned they were with being socially accepted by others in the group. The strategies used by sport teams to integrate newcomers included formally communicating role expectations, creating frequent opportunities for social interaction between newcomers and veterans, encouraging veterans to take on a mentoring role, and balancing the enforcement of strict rules and policies with the encouragement of individuality.

Study 2 examined how these strategies related to athletes' perceptions of the group environment. The finding revealed that when teams emphasized socially inclusive integration processes (i.e., reinforcing newcomers' sense of who they are as people, organizing social activities, encouraging veterans to share their knowledge with newcomers), athletes perceived their group as more cohesive and were more committed to the coaching staff as well as their teammates. In addition, when role expectations were formally communicated to newcomers, athletes indicated higher intentions to return to the group the following season. These findings reveal that despite the ultra-competitive nature of Canadian Interuniversity Sport, the ways in which the social environment is managed during the integration of newcomers has broad implications for understanding the quality of athletes' sport experiences.

Despite the advantages of using diverse methodological approaches, there are a number of considerations worth addressing in future research. Our qualitative findings were based on interviews with athletes and coaches from five traditional sport teams, who generally recalled positive experiences. Purposefully seeking out insights from sport participants who have had negative group entry experiences may help to elucidate additional aspects of sport team socialization processes. Likewise, the challenges associated with group-entry experiences in Canadian Interuniversity Sport may differ from other socialization contexts, such as entry into a master's level sport group or a youth sport context. Finally, given that this project is the first to examine how sport team socialization tactics relate to athletes' sport experiences, it is prudent to cross-validate the questionnaire findings with a large independent sample, across multiple time points.

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## Policy Implications

Consistent with our findings, we suggest that the ways in which sport teams manage the entry-experiences of newcomers is an important leverage point for shaping the quality of athletes' sporting experiences. Our findings are consistent with a growing body of evidence underscoring how important it is to understand the group dynamics' issues encountered in sport teams. Yet there is a need for greater education on the relationship between the group dynamics' issues that occur in sport and athletes' sport experiences. Coaching education programs at the municipal, provincial-territorial, and federal level would benefit from incorporating group dynamics' principles into their curricula. As it pertains to this project, our findings highlight several promising strategies for creating a socially welcoming group environment (e.g., engineering protégé-mentor relationships, organizing inclusive social events for all team members). Sport organizations would benefit from recognizing that the ways in which initial group-member interactions are managed in a sport team may ultimately shape how athletes think, feel, and behave as a member of their sport group.

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## **Next Steps**

Moving forward, it is crucial to consider cultural variability in how individuals may respond to a group's socialization tactics. For example, sport team socialization tactics that are advantageous for certain individuals may elicit negative responses for others because of cultural differences (e.g., individualistic culture versus collectivist culture). To promote a culturally sensitive understanding of the socialization tactics used in sport teams, there is a clear need for continued qualitative work with participants from diverse backgrounds.

A second area that requires future attention is to extend the study of sport team socialization processes to youth sport. Our findings provide clear evidence that the social aspects of group involvement are an important component of sport experiences, even at a high level of amateur sport competition. Given how important the peer group is during adolescence, the types of socialization processes that occur in youth sport contexts may have a potent influence on the developmental experiences acquired through youth sport participation.

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## **Key Stakeholders and Benefits**

- Coaching Association of Canada
- Provincial Coaching Associations (e.g., Coaches Association of Ontario)
- National and Provincial Sport Organizations (e.g., Canadian Interuniversity Sport, Ontario University Sport Association)
- Sport Canada