

Godfrey, Michael
University of Windsor
Eys, Mark
Doctoral Fellowship 2019

Cultural diversity in interdependent sport teams

Team sports attract individuals from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Given this diversity, sport psychology researchers have highlighted the importance of understanding how athletes' cultural backgrounds influence both individual and team outcomes (Schinke et al., 2014). Research from related areas of study (i.e., organizational psychology) suggests that cultural diversity has complex and inconsistent effects on group functioning (Stahl et al., 2010), although its effects in team sport contexts are not well understood. This is problematic since sport teams have several characteristics that make them divergent from work groups (e.g., homogenous in other diversity characteristics like gender, age, and area of expertise). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to gain an in-depth understanding of athletes' perceptions of ethnic diversity (a specific type of cultural diversity), as well as its influence on team functioning and individuals' experiences, through a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 intercollegiate team sport athletes [4 women; 9 men; self-identified 8 White, 2 Black, 1 Asian, and 2 Mixed (Black and White; White and South Asian)] from various interdependent team sports (e.g., basketball, soccer, rugby, baseball). Interview data were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using both inductive and deductive processes (Hayes, 1997; 2000). Findings revealed that athletes perceived ethnic differences among teammates, and expected these differences to be influential upon several facets of team functioning (e.g., cohesion, communication, playing styles) as well as individual experiences (e.g., personal growth, intentions to return to sport, satisfaction). Notably, however, participants discussed several boundary conditions that were necessary to realize the effects of diversity. As examples, athletes discussed that ethnic diversity could challenge effective team functioning early in teams' seasons and/or if coaches did not perceive diversity as beneficial. Collectively, these findings set the groundwork for future research to consider the complex effects cultural diversity has on interdependent sport teams. It is anticipated that this work will lead to coach and athlete education/diversity training programs that aim to create inclusive environments for athletes from various cultural backgrounds and maximize athlete participation and retention.