



An outcast from the team: Exploring youth ice hockey goalies' benching experiences

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Anecdotal evidence suggests that youth may experience negative outcomes when benched, such as a lack of fun and intentions to quit (Frank, 2013; O' Sullivan, 2015). In the sport of ice hockey, it is speculated that amongst position players, including goalies, forwards, and defenders, the negative effects of benching may be exacerbated for goalies, presumably due to the public manner in which the benching takes place (Hertz, 2010, 2013). The purpose of this study therefore was to examine competitive youth ice hockey goalies' experiences of benching as a result of not playing well during a game.

Methods: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of seven male competitive youth ice hockey goalies between the ages of 13–15 years. Data were analyzed using a thematic narrative approach (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016).

Results: Participant stories suggest that benching can be detrimental to an athlete's feeling of self-worth and relations with coaches and teammates when experienced as a form of punishment. Across all of the goalies' stories, notions of feeling like an outcast on their team after experiencing benching were articulated. Four overarching narratives were developed from their stories: the skate of shame, the banished bench, the lonely locker room, and the silent celebration.

Conclusions: This study advances current youth sport literature as it is one of the first to examine youth athletes' benching experiences empirically. Recommendations for future research and practice are suggested.

Ice hockey is a popular sport in which many male and female North American youth participate (Canadian Heritage, 2013; Peters, 2014). While sport is commonly cited as benefitting athletes' physical, psychological, and social development, athletes are not immune from harmful sport experiences (Coakley, 2011; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). More specifically, researchers focused on the quality of youth experiences in the sport of ice hockey have criticized the aggressive, violent, and performance focused nature of the sport, which emphasizes body checking, fighting, and win-at-all-cost mentalities, as harmful to youth (Allain, 2008; Emery, McKay, Campbell, & Peters, 2009; Marchie & Cusimano, 2003). These sport ideals and normative practices often lead to increased injuries, such as concussions (Macpherson, Rothman, & Howard, 2006; Warsh, Constantin, Howard, & Macpherson, 2009), and may influence maladaptive coaching practices and thus negative sporting relations between the coach and athlete (Stirling & Kerr, 2013).

One of the ways in which athletes may experience harm from a coach is through the use of punishment (Battaglia, Kerr, & Stirling, 2017; Burak, Rosenthal, & Richardson, 2013; Richardson, Rosenthal, &

Burak, 2012). Punishment is broadly defined as the application or removal of a stimulus following an undesirable response that decreases the likelihood of that response occurring in the future (Skinner, 1974). Punishment can be dichotomized into positive and negative forms with positive punishment referring to the direct application of an aversive stimulus and negative punishment referring to the removal of a potentially rewarding stimulus in attempts to alter or change unfavourable behaviours (McConnell, 1990). Exercise as punishment is an example of a positive punishment commonly used in ice hockey, and involves coaches directing athletes to engage in excessive amounts of skating until exhaustion following a team loss (State of the Game, 2011; Wharnsby, 2009). Given the documented negative effects of using exercise as punishment (Battaglia et al., 2017; Burak et al., 2013; Kerr et al., 2016), some authors have advocated for the use of benching as an alternative behavioural management strategy (Richardson et al., 2012; Rosenthal, Pagnano-Richardson, & Burak, 2010). However, we argue that depending upon how benching is used, it may be considered a form of negative punishment as it involves coaches withholding desirable playing time to address undesirable behaviour, such as poor

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performance or lack of effort (Richardson et al., 2012). In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that youth may experience similar negative outcomes when benched as when punished through exercise, such as a lack of fun and intentions to quit (Frank, 2013; O' Sullivan, 2015).

With respect to ice hockey specifically, benching for goalies is a common practice that can occur in two forms. Goalies may be benched before a game, which is considered missing their rotation or scheduled starts, or they may be benched during a game, which is typically referred to as being pulled. The latter form of benching will be the focus for the current study and thus throughout the manuscript the terms benching and being pulled will be used synonymously. Importantly, although goalies may be benched for a variety of reasons, including strategic purposes, the following study will focus specifically on examining goalies' experiences of being benched during a game as a result of not playing well.

When goalies are pulled during a game, a stoppage in play is required to allow the goalie time to skate off the ice to the bench. This occurs in a very public manner as coaches, teammates, opponents, and the audience watch until the goalie takes the bench before the game proceeds. This experience is very different from other position players who are benched without a stoppage in play. As a result, it is speculated that the negative effects of being benched during a game may be exacerbated for goalies, presumably due to the public nature in which benching takes place (Hertz, 2010, 2013).

To-date, no research has examined goalies' experiences of being benched during a game in the sport of ice hockey or any other youth sports that require a goalie. The purpose of this study therefore was to examine competitive youth ice hockey goalies' experiences of benching as a result of not playing well during a game.

1. Methodology

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study. Narrative inquiry aims to develop a detailed understanding of human experiences that are bound within social worlds and the multi-layered meanings people assign to aspects of their lives through the stories they tell (Riessman, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This methodological approach applies a relational research process; specifically, emphasis is placed on “understanding and meaning making of experience through conversations, dialogue, and participation in the ongoing lives of research participants” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 542). Narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study given the purpose of gaining a detailed understanding of the youth goalies' experiences of benching as punishment. Specifically, the focus was on eliciting youth goalies' personal benching stories and examining the meanings associated with these stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Smith, 2010).

1.1. Research paradigm

Underpinning narrative inquiry is the philosophical assumption that stories are actively constructed from and through social interactions and cultural influences (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Accordingly, the following study utilized a social constructivist paradigmatic position. Ontologically, a social constructivist perspective embraces a relativist view, which recognizes reality may be represented in multiple ways between participants as it is constructed through meanings developed socially and experientially (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Epistemologically, a social constructivist approach adopts a subjectivist/transactional view in which the researcher and the participants are actively involved in the development of knowledge (Lincoln et al., 2011).

1.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 7 male youth ice hockey goalies, 13–15

years of age. At the time of the study, all of the goalies played in local ice hockey leagues within a large Canadian city and were elite participants, competing at the highest level for their age group and spending roughly 4–6 days per week in sport-related activities. The average number of years of competitive involvement amongst the youth goalies was 5.1 years. All goalies indicated that their playing status on the team was equivalent with their goalie partner (i.e., there was no starter versus backup goalie designation). A youth sample was chosen as during adolescence, participants are trying to achieve important developmental tasks (e.g., competence and positive relationships; Holt, 2016) and thus the influence of benching in response to poor performance may be most pronounced. Competitive youth goalies were chosen as it was speculated that pressures to win at the highest levels might be associated with greater use of benching in response to poor performance. A maximum of one youth goalie per team was selected to enhance diversity and gain multiple perspectives (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

1.3. Recruitment

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Board. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The principal investigator initially contacted two known youth goalies who had been benched during a game, as well as the goalies' parents, from references acquired through participants involved in previous investigations about youth sport. If the goalies were interested in participating, an interview session was arranged. Following interview completion, participants were asked to suggest other competitive youth goalies who had experienced benching during a game and may be interested in participating. All athletes were contacted by email, in which the purpose of the study as well as specific details for their involvement were described including the requirement that the goalies had familiarity with being benched during a game. Prior to study commencement, each youth goalie was asked to sign a Letter of Assent and parents of the youth goalie were asked to sign a Letter of Consent. Participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

1.4. Data collection

Consistent with a narrative approach, the youth ice hockey goalies were invited to share personal stories of their benching experiences through the use of an individual face-to-face semi-structured interview (Chase, 2005). All interviews were conducted at locations of the athletes' and/or their parents' choosing (e.g. their house or coffee shops) and ranged in length from 60–75 min. With the participants' consent, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in approximately 115 pages of data. In narrative inquiry, the ability of the researcher to develop a trusting and authentic relationship with his or her participants determines the extent to which detailed stories are elicited (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). In an effort to purposefully build rapport with the participants, the principal investigator shared his own sport background, invited questions throughout the research process, reiterated the voluntary nature of participation, and began each interview with introductory questions (e.g., “What led you to want to get involved in hockey?”; “How important is hockey to you?”; and “Describe some of your most memorable experiences in hockey.”). The participants were then asked open-ended questions, providing them an entry point to tell their benching stories and allowing the principal investigator to learn more about their experiences. For example, the participants were asked questions such as “Imagine your benching experiences can be told as a story. Describe this experience.” and “In your own words, what did the benching experience mean to you and what did it tell you about yourself as an athlete?” To further encourage participants to elaborate on their benching stories, probes such as “What happened?”; “How did you feel?”; and

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