

Aggressive behavior in professional ice hockey: A cross-cultural comparison of North American and European born NHL players

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Abstract

Objectives: The current investigation examined the mediating role of an athlete's birthplace (e.g., North America, Europe) on the use of aggressive behavior in professional ice hockey. In doing so, the study attempts to uncover whether or not the use of aggressive behavior in professional ice hockey is better understood according to within-competition determinants (e.g., score differential) or should be explored in the future using broader social factors (e.g., cultural socialization).

Design and method: The study was archival in nature and utilized the penalty records from the first 200 games of the 2003–2004 NHL regular season. A total of 2185 penalties were recorded and categorized according to Widmeyer and Birch's [1978. *Results from an aggression questionnaire administered to professional hockey players at Huron Hockey School*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ont.] and Widmeyer and McGuire's [1997. Frequency of competition and aggression in professional ice hockey. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 28, 57–66] hockey aggression criteria.

Results: The results indicated that North American players committed significantly more aggressive, and non-aggressive, acts than did their European counterparts. However, the distribution of both group's aggressive acts were relatively similar when examined according to the determinants under investigation (e.g., score differential). Subsequent analyses revealed that no significant performance differences existed between the two groups, indicating that either style of play is conducive to success in the NHL.

Conclusion: These results appear to refute the commonly held notion that aggressive behavior is a natural by-product of the frustration inherent within hockey, and also that such behaviors facilitate performance. Rather, these behaviors may be better explained as learned responses that are modeled and reinforced

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differently for each athlete. Moreover, that these early learning experiences play an important role in shaping the future behavioral repertoires of these athletes, and are therefore deserving of future attention. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Aggression; Hockey; Violence; Cross-cultural; Socialization

Introduction

Violent and aggressive behaviors have become relatively common in the sport of ice hockey, with a substantial body of literature concerned with the determinants and consequences of these behaviors (McMurty, 1974; Pascall, 2000; Tenenbaum, Stewart, Singer, & Duda, 1997). However, studies interested in these intentionally harmful behaviors have focused solely on the conduct of North American ice hockey players, and thus have neglected a large segment of the sport's participants (e.g., Europeans). This investigation attempts to address this limitation by examining the use of aggressive behavior with an international sample of professional ice hockey players.

One of the barriers facing researchers interested in examining hockey aggression cross culturally lies in the fact that Europeans and North Americans play the game of ice hockey under considerably different conditions. More specifically, the European game of ice hockey is played on international size ice surfaces (200' × 100'), while the North American game is played on the NHL size ice surfaces (200' × 85'). At first glance this may not seem like a substantial difference, but in a game where physical contact and a confined playing surface are believed to be at least partially responsible for aggressive behavior, such a difference is significant (Wennberg, 2004). Also, the Europeans play by the international ice hockey rulebook, which includes differences in the use of the red line (e.g., no two line passes in Europe) and also the degree to which certain infractions are penalized. This second difference may not necessarily be due to a different conceptualization of the infraction, rather the formal punishment associated with these indiscretions. For example, fighting is almost entirely absent from the European game of hockey, whereas it is a relatively frequent occurrence in North American hockey games. According to the IIHF or European rule book, athletes engaged in fisticuffs will be assessed a 10 min misconduct penalty, whereas the NHL or North American rule book, only stipulates a 5 min penalty. Nevertheless, such external and confounding factors have made the direct comparison of North American and European hockey very difficult.

In light of the fact that aggressive behavior has never been empirically studied cross-culturally, it is interesting that a marked difference in the exhibition of aggressive behavior is believed to exist between North American and European hockey players (Beacon, 1998; Buczkowski, 2000; Grossman & Hines, 1996; McCreath, 2002). These behavioral differences are currently anecdotal; however, such speculations do provide the impetus to examine these behaviors using a more diverse sample of players.

Fortunately for the study of aggressive behavior in hockey, the national hockey league (NHL) has become increasingly more heterogeneous over the years, with European born players currently accounting for over one-third of the NHL roster (IIHF, 2001). As a result, aggressive behavior in hockey can now be examined using an international sample of players participating under common competitive conditions (e.g., rink size, penalty infractions). In doing so, the influence of previously cited influential factors (e.g., score differential, player position) may be re-evaluated on a more diverse

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