Bullying Among Adolescent Football Players: Role of Masculinity and Moral Atmosphere

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Abstract

Identifying practices of masculinity socialization that contribute to the establishment of gender privilege can help address violence and bullying in schools (Connell, 1996). Because the sport of football is considered an important contributor to masculinity construction, establishing peer networks, and creating hierarchies of student status, this study examined the influence of social norms (i.e., moral atmosphere, meanings of adolescent masculinity) on bullying beliefs and behaviors of 206 high school football players. Results demonstrated that moral atmosphere (Peer Influence, Influential Male Figure) and adherence to male role norms significantly predicted bullying, but the strongest predictor was the perception of whether the most influential male in a player's life would approve of the bullying behavior. In addition to prevention interventions highlighting the role of influential men and masculinity norms in this process, implications for practice suggest that football players can use their peer influence and status as *center* sport participants to create a school culture that does not tolerate bullying.

Keywords: meanings of adolescent masculinity, gender role norms, high school student-athletes, moral functioning, aggression, American football

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School bullying is gaining recognition as a serious threat to the mental and physical health of adolescents around the world, occurring across a diverse demographic spectrum (Aluede, Adeleke, Omoike, & Afen-Akpaida, 2008; Coggan, Bennett, Hooper, & Dickinson, 2003; Wild, Flisher, Bhana, & Lombard, 2004). Little consensus exists in the literature concerning the profile of a bully (Aluede et al., 2008; Kreager, 2009; Valliancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). However, one popular societal stereotype of a bully is that of the socially powerful jock, most typically a football player. This stereotype has long been present in popular culture (e.g., *Revenge of the Nerds*), but a relevant contemporary example can be found in the television show *Glee*. In *Glee*, the football players and cheerleaders enjoy social dominion over the high school, while the lowly "gleeks" (i.e., kids in the glee club) are continually harassed, humiliated, and rejected by their popular peers. The football players are largely portrayed as insensitive, unintelligent, bullies who enjoy tormenting students lower in the social hierarchy.

This example illustrates how athletes, particularly football players, are portrayed as perpetrators of bullying and violence. One possible explanation for this portrayal is that the sport of football not only values, encourages, and teaches instrumental aggression on the field (Messner, 1990, 2002), but it also serves as a site where boys learn values and behaviors (e.g., competition, toughness, winning-at-all costs) that are considered to be culturally valued aspects of masculinity (Messner, 1996). However, despite the aggressive and even violent nature of football on the field—combined with societal stereotypes of football players as aggressive bullies off the field—there is a dearth of empirical research that directly investigates bullying in this domain. Thus, football represents an interesting site to examine how football players balance the use of instrumental aggression on the field with standards of manhood when they are off the

field. By using a model moral action (Rest, 1983, 1984) to understand social norms operating

within this unique context, this study intended to determine if the norms of moral atmosphere

and gender role norms associated with meanings of adolescent masculinity predicted moral

functioning and bullying behaviors among high school football players.

Bullying and School Violence

Bullying is an all too common phenomenon. National research suggests that greater than

fifty percent of students in grades 6 to 10 are impacted by bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel,

2009). There is mounting evidence that bullying greatly influences the psychosocial functioning

of both perpetrators and victims (Coggan et al., 2003; Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2009; Espelage &

Holt, 2001; Kim & Leventhal, 2008; McCabe, Antony, Summerfeldt, Liss, & Swinson, 2003;

Storch, Bagner, Geffken, & Baumeister, 2004). Broadly defined, bullying is characterized as

behavior that is intended to inflict harm or stress, occurs repeatedly over a period of time, and

involves an inequity of strength or power (Dukes et al., 2009). Bullying behavior is found to

increase when it is socially endorsed by group norms, and bullying is generally considered more

acceptable when it is directed toward a non-group member (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Gini, 2008;

Ojala & Nesdale, 2004). Bullies tend to identify other bullies as friends, suggesting that bullying

behavior is socially reinforced (Espelage & Holt, 2001).

Bullying occurs in several forms, including physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, and kicking);

verbal (e.g., making threatening remarks, name-calling, teasing); and social (e.g., social

exclusion, rumor spreading). Another contemporary form of bullying is cyberbullying, wherein

this form of social bullying is carried out using technology such as cell phones and online social

networking sites (Dukes et al, 2009; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Wang et al., 2009). Wang et al.

(2009) reported a high prevalence rate for involvement in bullying, whether victim or

perpetrator, among participants from a nationally representative sample of 7,182 adolescent

students. Verbal bullying was the most common (53.6%) closely followed by social bullying

(51.4%). Physical bullying was less frequent (20.8%) and 13.6% of students reported

involvement in cyber bullying, although given that this survey was completed in 2005, cyber

bullying has likely increased as technology has advanced. In 2007, Kowalski and Limber

reported that 22% of a sample of 3,767 middle-school students had experience with cyber-

bullying.

While the detrimental effects of bullying on victims has long been recognized and

studied, the impact that bullying has on perpetrators is not as well understood (Dukes et al,

2009). Both bullies and their victims are at greater risk for social anxiety, lower self-esteem,

depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation (Coggan et al., 2003; Dukes et al., 2009;

Espelage & Holt, 2001; Jankauskiene, Kardelis, Sukys, & Kardeliene, 2008; Kim & Leventhal,

2008; Storch et al., 2004). Bulling behavior has also been associated with increased alcohol and

drug use among college students (Storch et al., 2004). Some risk factors associated with a greater

likelihood of the development of bullying behavior include: having unmarried parents, having

maternal authoritarian or permissive parenting, having a tendency toward moral disengagement

versus moral sensibility, and being of the male gender (Gini, 2006; South & Wood, 2006;

Underwood, Bernon, & Rosen, 2009).

In regard to gender influence on bullying, research suggests that bullies tend to be boys

(Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008) and that using homophobic language is particularly common among

male bullies (Poteat & Rivers, 2010). "Bullying is a cycle that begins and ends with the *Boy*

Code, the strict rules of masculinity that punish boys who seem feminine, weak, or gay to their

peers. An escape from teasing and bullying is to act tough, succeed at sports, hide their emotions,

and avoid things traditionally thought of as 'girly' or feminine" (Pollack, 2000, p.108). Thus,

boys who worry that they are not living up to the *Boy Code* may feel pressure to tease and even

bully other boys in order to avoid being victimized by those same behaviors.

Masculinity Norms and Sport Participation

According to Connell (1996), identifying the rituals and practices of masculine

socialization that contribute to the establishment of gender privilege is an important step in

addressing violence and bullying in schools. In many high schools in the United States, sports

are considered to be an important contributor to the establishment of peer networks and to the

creation of hierarchies of student status (Kreager, 2007). Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) suggested

that sport participation increases the likelihood that an adolescent male will be welcomed into

peer groups*,* whereas young men who do not participate in sport often find difficulty gaining

acceptance from their peers and gaining access to social networks. While sport is considered to

be a major contributor to a school's gender regime and social hierarchy, some sports wield

greater influence than others in this process.

In an attempt to distinguish between sports that have differential levels of power and

prestige in promoting preferred modes of masculinity and social status, Messner (2002)

classified sports as falling into the categories of *center sports* or *margin sports*. Valued more

than margin sports, center sports (e.g., football, basketball) are sports that are close to the

institutional center, based on their long traditions within school and community structures.

Because of center sports' historical position in relation to institutional ties, sources of funding,

and social tradition, these sports create spaces where norms of masculinity are readily conveyed

and become entrenched. Furthermore, these sports enjoy a degree of insulation from pressures of

external social control that might otherwise discourage antisocial behavior by their athletes

(Messner, 2002). For instance, by rewarding physical aggression with on-the-field success and increased prestige in the sport, football is often perceived as not only socially elevating its participants above their peers, but also, "increasing [participants'] off-the-field violence toward perceived outsiders and 'weaker' students" (Kreager, 2007, p. 706).

In his ethnographic study of high school football in Texas, Foley (2001) described the ways that football contributes to the social hierarchy and how it promotes dominant gender norms among its participants, in the school, and throughout the community. The manner in which football prioritizes certain forms of masculinity not only elevates football players to higher levels of social status, but it also indirectly marginalizes non-participants (Foley, 2001). Participation in football may affect both the creation of masculinity norms enforced by team culture, and the amount of pressure placed on athletes to conform to this norm. This pressure to conform to team norms of masculinity may contribute to aggressive behavior off the field (Curry, 2000). "Reinforcement of masculine gender norms through strict football rituals in team practice creates a behavioral repertoire that may extend to other contexts, with gender norms also informing the interpersonal relationships that athletes form off the field" (Gage, 2008, p. 1016).

As mentioned earlier, a football player who is intimidating, dominating, and aggressive on the field earns respect from his teammates and coaches. According to Elman and McKelvie (2003), this recognition may contribute to a player believing he deserves this respect off the field, which could result in bullying, fighting, and other instances of off-field violence. Some research has suggested that there exists a relationship between participating in high contact sports (e.g., football, basketball) and relational aggression, including fighting and violence towards women (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Pakalka, & White, 2006; Kreager, 2009). In an attempt to determine the extent to which participating in high school sports contributes to male violence,

Kreager (2007) analyzed almost 6,400 high school adolescent males in a secondary data set (i.e., National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health). Kreager concluded that there exists "a continuum of physical contact and masculinity whereby highly masculinized contact sports increase the risks of violence" (2007, p. 717). Results suggested that when compared to non-athletes, high school football players were 40% more likely to get in a serious fight. Additionally, football players with a high proportion of friends who are their teammates were significantly more likely to engage in violent behaviors than those without a similarly high percentage of football friends. Thus, playing high school football and being embedded within a football network significantly increased the risk of serious violence for participants in this sample (Kreager, 2007).

This research assessed participation in sport as a predictive factor, but it did not assess beliefs about bullying by directly asking adolescents about these issues. While there has been relatively limited research that directly assesses the off-field dynamic of bullying among athletes, an abundance of research has examined beliefs about violence and aggression on the fields of play (Shields & Bredemeier, 2007). Much of this research has focused on moral functioning in order to explain antisocial behavior that occurs during athletic competitions (Coulumb-Cabagno & Rascle, 2006; Kavussanu, Roberts, & Ntoumanis, 2002; Kavussanu, Stamp, Slade, & Ring, 2009; Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006; Shields, Bredemeier, Gardner, & Bostron, 1995; Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2007; Stuart & Ebbeck, 1995; Stephens & Kavanagh, 2003; Visek &Watson, 2005). According to Shields and Bredemeier (2007), the model most consistently used to empirically examine moral functioning in sport is Rest's model of moral action (1983, 1984). This model operates under the premise that within each action, there are four processes: (a) interpreting the situation; (b) forming a moral judgment about the appropriate thing to do; (c)

deciding what one intends to do by selecting among competing values; and (d) engaging in the behavior. These processes are interactive, and can be influenced by a variety of factors (Rest, 1983, 1984). Much of the research on moral functioning in sport has examined the last three processes (i.e., judgment, intention, behavior) of Rest's model (Shields & Bredemeier, 2007). Because it assesses influences of group norms in sport, this model may represent an effective framework to directly examine beliefs about off-field aggression (i.e., bullying) among football players.

Current Study

While some research—along with pervasive societal stereotypes—suggests that playing football may contribute to higher rates of violence off the field, there are limited empirical studies that directly examine bullying among football players. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to investigate bullying beliefs and behaviors among high school football players. The first goal of the study was to examine if meanings of adolescent masculinity and the norms of moral atmosphere influenced the moral functioning of high school football players as it relates to bullying. We used Rest's (1983, 1984) model of moral action in an attempt to replicate the design of Kavussanu et al. (2002) by adapting the on-field moral functioning scenarios to be relevant to bullying. In order to utilize their study's framework to examine off-field outcomes among student-athletes, we substituted Meanings of Adolescent Masculinity (Oransky & Fisher, 2009) for the Motivational Climate variable, and instead of Kavussanu et al.'s influence of the coach on moral atmosphere, we expanded this moral atmosphere norm by assessing the impact of the most influential male in the life of the adolescent. Consistent with Kavussanu et al., the study's first hypothesis was that lower levels of moral atmosphere norms—combined with higher endorsement of male role norms—would predict moral functioning that endorsed a greater

acceptance of bullying, as indicated by higher scores across all three levels (i.e., judgment, intention, behavior) of Rest's model.

The second goal of the study was to determine whether moral atmosphere and meanings of adolescent masculinity predicted the likelihood that these players would engage in any of the four bullying behaviors: (a) physical bullying; (b) relational cyberbullying; (c) verbal bullying—physical threat; and (d) social bullying—homophobic. In order to inform the development of bullying prevention, this study aimed to test male role norms and the direct effects of the norms of moral atmosphere (i.e., most influential male, peer influence) on bullying behaviors. Thus, the study's second hypothesis was that higher adherence to adolescent masculine norms, along with perceptions of acceptability of bullying among peers and by the most influential male figure in the adolescent's life, would predict higher levels of bullying behaviors among high school football players.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 206 high school football players between 14 and 18 years of age who attended one of three high schools in the Midwestern United States. The average age of the participants was 15.77 ($SD = 1.51$), and the sample consisted of 48 freshmen, 60 sophomores, 41 juniors, and 57 seniors. The participants self-identified their race as European American (83%), African American (4%), Multiracial (2%), Asian American (2%), Hispanic American (3%), and American Indian (3%). Three percent of the participants did not report a racial identification, and the racial composition of the sample was consistent with the racial demographics of the community. Forty one of the participants played football at the *freshman* level, 58 played at the *junior varsity* level, and 107 played at the *varsity* level. When asked who

the most influential male figure in their life was, 66% of the players responded it was their

father, 14% of the players indicated a brother, 8% of the players identified their coach, and 12%

or the players responded with "other" and filled in such people as a teacher, grandfather, uncle,

mother, or famous person (e.g., Brett Favre, Jesus).

Measures

Meanings of Adolescent Masculinity. The MAMS (Oransky & Fisher, 2009) is a 27-

item self-report instrument that uses a four-point Likert-type scale with possible responses

ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). By drawing items from the narratives of

boys, the MAMS is designed to assess endorsement of traditional male role norms among

adolescents. Higher scores represent higher levels of endorsement of traditional male role norms.

The MAMS has four subscales: (a) Constant Effort (e.g., "Acting manly should be the most

important goal for guys"); (b) Emotional Restriction (e.g., "If a guy is upset about something, he

should hold it in"); (c) Heterosexism (e.g., "Being thought of as gay makes a guy seem like less

of a man"); and (d) Social Teasing (e.g., "In order to fit in, guys must be able to tease other

guys"). These four theoretically driven subscales were derived from factor analytic procedures,

and present four distinct patterns of norms associated with adolescent masculinity. Evidence for

the validity of the MAMS has been established through relationship with MAMS subscales and

measures of psychological adjustment (e.g., anxiety, self-esteem). Oransky and Fischer reported

additional convergent validity based on the MAMS' statistically significant relationship to other

psychometrically validated scales of masculinity, including the Adolescent Masculinity Ideology

in Relationships Scale (MIRS; Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005) and the Male Role Norm Scale

(MRNS; Thompson & Pleck, 1986). In support of the scale's reliability, Oransky and Fischer

reported the following internal consistency coefficients: Constant Effort = .79; Emotional

Restriction =.80; Heterosexism = .80; and Social Teasing = .61. Consistent with those findings, the internal consistency coefficients for the current study were as follows: Constant Effort = .69; Emotional Restriction =.75; Heterosexism = .78; and Social Teasing = .56.

Moral functioning. In this current study, moral functioning was assessed by adapting a measure used to assess on-field moral functioning of student-athletes by Kavussanu et al. (2002). This framework has been previously replicated to examine on-field moral functioning with high school football players (Steinfeldt, Rutkowski, Vaughan, & Steinfeldt, 2011), and it was further adapted to assess bullying behaviors and attitudes among high school football players in this current study. For this model assessing the moral functioning and moral atmosphere variables, Kavussanu et al. (2002) utilized a Multitrait-Multimethod (MMTM) analysis to validate the two indicators (i.e., coach, teammate) of moral atmosphere and the three indicators (i.e., judgment, intention, behavior) of moral functioning across the four scenarios. Utilizing confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling, the results of their MMTM analysis demonstrated support for this model. Thus, results suggest that this model is appropriate to use as a valid measure for assessing moral atmosphere and moral functioning in sport, and the results of our analyses indicate that the adaptations we made resulted in a model that statistically significantly fit the data.

Through consultation with football coaches, school administrators, and psychologists, the four scenarios in this measure were revised to reflect potential bullying scenarios that a high school student might encounter. The adapted scenarios used in this study are:

(a) *Physical Bullying*: A classmate is walking down the hall. You bump your shoulder into him as he passes so that his books fall out of his hands onto the floor.

(b) *Relational Cyberbullying*: You take a picture of a classmate while he is crying and forward it to other students.

(c) *Verbal Bullying—Physical Threat*: You threaten to physically harm a classmate if he doesn't allow you to sit where you want in the lunchroom.

(d) *Social Bullying—Homophobic*: You call a classmate a degrading name that questions his sexual orientation in front of other students.

These scenarios were assessed across the last three levels (i.e., judgment, intention, behavior) of Rest's (1983, 1984) model of moral action. For the first level, Judgment, participants were asked after each scenario to judge how appropriate they deemed the behavior to be. The items used a 5 point Likert-type scale with possible responses ranging from 1 (*never appropriate*) to 5 (*always appropriate*). Scores were summed across all four scenarios to provide a total score for Judgment. The internal consistency coefficient for the Judgment scale was .87, higher than the Cronbach's alpha of .67 reported by Kavussanu et al. (2002) for this scale. A similar procedure was followed for the intention and behavior levels. Participants were asked if they would engage in the behavior (i.e., intention), and were then asked how often they had actually engaged in the behavior in the past two months (i.e., behavior). Both Intention and Behavior were assessed using a 5 point Likert-type scale with possible responses ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Scores for these scales are also summed across all four scenarios. The internal consistency coefficients for the Intention scale ($\alpha = .81$) and Behavior scale ($\alpha = .75$) were also consistent with the Cronbach's alphas of .72 and .70 reported by Kavussanu et al. (2002) on the respective scales.

Moral atmosphere. Moral atmosphere can be considered the collective norms that contribute to the unique construction of a group's ethos (i.e., moral climate; Kavussanu et al., 2002; Shields et al., 2007). In this study, moral atmosphere was comprised of two dimensions of moral influence: Peer Influence norms, and the norms established by the participant's Most Influential Male. To assess Peer Influence norms across the four scenarios of moral functioning,

participants were asked how many of their friends they thought would engage in the described

behavior. A 5 point Likert-type scale was used, with possible responses including 1 (*none*), 2 (*a*

few), 3 (*about half*), 4 (*most*), and 5 (*all*). To assess the norms of the Most Influential Male

variable across the four scenarios, participants were asked how they thought the most influential

male in their life would view the behavior in the scenario. A 5 point Likert-type scale was used,

with possible responses ranging from 1 (*strongly discourage*) to 5 (*strongly encourage*). Scores

were summed across all four scenarios to provide a total score for Peer Influence and a total

score for Most Influential Male. The internal consistency coefficient was $\alpha = .74$ for Peer

Influence and $\alpha = .86$ for Most Influential Male, consistent with the Cronbach's alphas of .82 and

.70 reported by Kavussanu et al. (2002) on the comparable scales of Teammate Influence and

Coach Influence, respectively.

Social desirability. In order to determine if participants responded to questions in a

socially desirable manner, the short version of the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale

(Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) was administered. The scale contains 10 items that describe socially

desirable attributes (e.g., "I never resent being asked to return a favor"), and respondents are

asked to indicate if the statement is true or false, as it relates to them personally. A participant

received a score of 1 on that item if he responded in a socially desirable manner, and a score of 0

was awarded if the response was not socially desirable. The total score was calculated by

summing the numbers assigned to each statement.

Procedures

Research was conducted in compliance with Institutional Review Board approval from

the first author's institution, and in compliance with the review process of the school district.

After receiving this approval, school system administrators, school principals, athletic directors,

and coaches were contacted. The first author was invited to attend team meeting where he

distributed parental consent forms to participants and explained the rationale for the study. At a

later team meeting, participants were provided the opportunity for voluntary participation if they

returned with signed parental consent forms. Participants took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to

complete the survey packet. In addition to assurances of anonymity, participants were informed

that all their data would be kept confidential and in a safe locked location. In order to ensure

voluntary participation, participants were informed that they could write in their playbooks and

turn in a blank survey packet at the end if they did not want to participate in the study.

Data Analytic Plan

Structural Equation Modeling using AMOS (Arbuckle, 2008) was used to test the two

hypothesized models of relationships between moral atmosphere, male role norms and two

outcomes: moral functioning and bullying behaviors. In each structural equation, model error

terms were correlated for each scenario used to measure moral atmosphere for influential male

and peers. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

(RMSEA) were used to assess model fit, as Chi Square statistics are sensitive to both sample size

and high correlations and are thus less indicative of good model fit (Kline, 2005). Values greater

than .95 on the CFI and less than .06 on RMSEA are indicative of good model fit (Schreiber,

Stage, King, Nora, & Barlow, 2006). According to Kline (2005), the current sample size of 206

is adequate for SEM, as validated by the results of the post-hoc power analyses for RMSEA that

we conducted. Using power analysis procedures suggested by Preacher and Coffman (2006),

power estimates for the current study were greater than .80 for both models. Furthermore, all

variables were assessed for normality. Four variables were log transformed due to high levels of

skew (values > 2). These included two variables representing "relational cyberbullying" and

"physical threat" for the influential male, bullying behavior, and social desirability.

Results

Structural Equation Model 1: Predicting Moral Functioning

The first hypothesized model (see Figure 1) estimated the relations between moral atmosphere, male role norms, and moral functioning while controlling for age and social desirability. The first model achieved good model fit (CFI = .98; RMSEA = .04 [90% C.I. = .02-.06]). Figure 1 presents standardized regression weights and significance for each path. There were significant paths between moral atmosphere and moral functioning (β = .92; p < .001) and moral atmosphere and meanings of adolescent masculinity (β = .27; p < .01). Those adolescents who perceived that their friends and the most influential male in their life had engaged in or would encourage bullying were more likely to have judged bullying as appropriate, disclosed their intention to bully, and engaged in bullying. Likewise, perceptions of permissive attitudes about bullying from friends and influential males were also positively related to identification with male role norms. Finally, identification with traditional male role norms was also significantly related to moral functioning (β = .15; p < .05). Thus, a higher endorsement of male role norms was also related to more permissive attitudes about bullying. The path from age to moral functioning was not significant. Social desirability significantly predicted moral functioning (β = -.13; p < .01) with greater levels of social desirability being related to less permissive attitudes about bullying. Overall, the social norms of a moral atmosphere that condones bullying and a strong identification with male role norms were positively related to moral functioning that reflects judgments, intentions, and behaviors that support bullying.

Structural Equation Model 2: Predicting Bullying Behaviors

The second hypothesized model (see Figure 2) aimed to test the relations between the

importance of influential male and peer dimensions of moral atmosphere, masculinity, and bullying behaviors while controlling for age and social desirability. The aim of this second model was to understand the roles that adults, friends, and male role norms play in bullying behaviors among football players, in order to inform prevention efforts. This second model also achieved good model fit (CFI = .97; RMSEA = .05 [90% C.I. = .03-.07]). Standardized regression weights and significance for each path are presented in Figure 2. Of primary interest were the paths from influential male and peers to bullying behaviors. The moral atmosphere norm cultivated by participants' perceptions about the attitudes of their most influential male figure were positively and significantly related to bullying behaviors (β = .51; p < .001). The more a player perceived than his most influential male figure was supportive of bullying, the more the player reported having recently engaged in bullying behaviors. Likewise, the moral atmosphere norm of peer influence was also significantly related to bullying behaviors, (β = .32; p < .05). The relationship between the moral atmosphere of influential males positively related to that of peers (β = .76; p < .001). In terms of meanings of adolescent masculinity, the perceived moral atmosphere created by the most influential male figure was also related to higher identification with more traditional male role norms (β = .25; p < .01). Higher identification with male role norms was in turn related to more bullying behaviors (β = .15; p < .05). Taken together, results demonstrate that the perceived moral atmosphere created by influential males had the most impact on bullying behaviors among adolescent football players. Again, age and social desirability were not significantly related to bullying behaviors.

Discussion

Impact of Social Norms on Moral Functioning Process of Bullying

The results of the study indicated that collective norms that comprise the team's moral atmosphere—in addition to adherence to male role norms—have an impact on how high school football players perceive bullying. The results suggested that a football player was more likely to endorse the acceptability of bullying if he perceived a lower moral atmosphere (i.e., he reported that his friends were doing it, he perceived that bullying was acceptable by the most influential male in his life) and if he reported higher endorsement of male role norms. Past research has linked conformity to masculine role norms to a host of negative outcomes, including low self-esteem, depression, alcohol abuse, and sexually aggressive behavior (Locke & Mahalik, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003; Oransky & Fisher, 2009). However, compared to the volume of studies examining the experience of adult males (see O'Neil, 2008), little research has been devoted to adolescent males' experiences with gender role socialization. This line of research could provide a better developmental understanding of adolescents' emerging experiences with masculinity. Also, no research to date has directly examined if endorsement of masculine norms within the unique context of specific sport cultures might be related to bullying or other issues of school violence. Thus, this study addressed a variety of gaps in the literature by reporting that meanings of adolescent masculinity, in combination with the norms of moral atmosphere, predicted the acceptability of bullying beliefs and behaviors among high school football players.

Impact of Social Norms on Bullying Behaviors

The results indicated that high school football players did not report a high degree of involvement with any of the four specific bullying behaviors (see Table 1). The majority of players responded that they have never or that they have rarely engaged in any of the bullying behaviors. This finding does not provide support for societal perceptions of football players as stereotypic bullies. Although we didn't have a comparison group (e.g., non-athletes), this is an

interesting finding given that there is little consensus in the literature on what constitutes a valid profile of a *typical* bully (Aluede et al., 2008; Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Kreager, 2009; Valliancourt et al., 2003). Some researchers do characterize bullies as being members of the popular group who gain strength by bullying members of other groups (Duncan, 1999). On the other hand, "though some people may stereotype them [bullies] as being cocky, malicious, hyperaggressive individuals, most boy bullies, in reality, are insecure, isolated, and exceedingly unhappy" (Pollock, 2000, p.109). These conflicting theoretical positions, when combined with the results of this study, suggest that more research is needed in order to establish a valid profile of a typical bully that can elucidate societal stereotypes of bullies.

In addition to reporting the frequencies of bullying behaviors reported by high school football players in this sample, the study's results provided support for our second hypothesis. Higher adherence to adolescent male role norms, along with perceptions of acceptability of bullying by peers and by the most influential male figure in the adolescent's life, predicted higher levels of bullying behaviors. Given the focus on peer influence and peer pressure in the developmental literature (Espelage & Holt, 2001; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008), one might expect friends to be the strongest predictor of bullying. Although peer influence was significantly related to bullying behavior in our model, the perceived beliefs of the most influential male figure were the strongest predictor of bullying behaviors. This is an interesting finding which may speak to the structure and culture of sport because authority figures wield great influence and power over athletes within this unique context (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990). To this point, fathers, brothers, and coaches were reported as the most influential male figures in the lives of the high school football players in this sample. These results suggest that fathers can play a significant role in shaping their sons' interpersonal skills as it relates to decisions whether or not

to be a bully. Taken together with research on the influence of coaches in sport (Becker, 2009; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2006; Steinfeldt, Foltz, et al., 2011), the results of this study suggest that coaches, fathers, brothers, and other influential male figures can influence not only the development of male role norms, but these men can also positively impact the bullying beliefs and behaviors of adolescent football players.

Implications for Prevention Programming

The implications of the current study have direct relevance to research and practice elements of prevention, based on the best practice guidelines for psychologists in the area of prevention practice, research, training and social advocacy (Hage et al., 2007). Initial steps prevention research aims to identify those risk and protective factors that are salient to a particular problem (i.e., bullying). In the current study, we found that adherence to masculine norms, peer influence, and the encouragement of bullying behaviors by influential men were directly linked to engagement in bullying behaviors. As key elements of the preintervention stage of prevention research (Hage et al., 2007), these findings can inform the development of bullying prevention interventions for high school communities. Parental and adult monitoring have been shown to be protective factors in reducing relational aggression in schools (Leadbeater, Banister, Ellis, & Yeung, 2008; Totura et al., 2009). Efforts toward decreasing bullying behavior have been shown to be most effective when directed toward family and school domains (Wild et al., 2004). The results of this study suggest that influential males may need to play a central role in the intervention, and that discussions about adherence to traditional masculine norms should be included in these interventions. Thus, it might be effective to train fathers and coaches to co-facilitate an intervention component on masculine norms and how these norms influence the behavior of their sons and players.

In accordance with the prevention guidelines, psychologists in this setting would aim to "prevent human suffering through the development of proactive interventions" (Hage et al., 2007, p. 501) that work toward eliminating bullying and school violence. Thus, not only do the current results have implications for the development of prevention interventions, they can also inform the current practice of psychologists who work with adolescent student-athletes. One way that the current research informs this practice is by focusing on bullying within a specific population in a specific context. In fact, prevention efforts that address bullying and school violence have aimed to understand the contexts in which youth are developing with particular attention to interactions between parents, peers, and schools and deliver prevention within these contexts (Espelage & Horne, 2008). In the context of sport, psychologists are called upon to play a big role in the psychosocial development of student-athletes (Steinfeldt, Foltz, et al., 2011). Thus, psychologists working with adolescent football players may want to consider bullying within the broader context, particularly the ways that traditional masculine norms are conveyed by peers and influential males within the unique context of football.

Not dissimilar to the development of empirically based prevention, psychologists in current practice might not only enlist the help of coaches, fathers, and brothers in choosing and delivering their interventions, psychologists may also choose to involve football players themselves in this process. Similar to the significant relationship between peer influence and bullying in our study, a robust body of literature has suggested that peers play a role in this process (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Espelage & Holt, 2001; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004). Thus, football players can be encouraged to use their peer influence—enhanced by their potentially elevated social status as center sport participants—to set and enforce the norm that bullying is unacceptable in their schools and communities. As such, in addition to

enlisting influential males in implementing bullying prevention programming, identifying the most effective peer leaders (e.g., high school football players) may also be important in prevention efforts.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations to note. First, the study design was cross-sectional and self-report in nature. From a social learning and developmental perspective, it makes sense that influential males and adherence to masculine norms would influence moral functioning in regards to bullying. However, the temporal ordering of these constructs cannot be definitively determined because of the cross-sectional nature of the study. Additionally, the experience of this sample of football players may not be representative of the experience of other adolescent males from different regions of the country. The particular schools in this district may have unique policies, personnel, and experiences—both successful and challenging—that may not represent the experiences of other school districts, particularly as it relates to bullying and school violence. Thus, the results of this study may not be generalizable to other schools, to other groups of adolescents, or to other groups of high school football players. Further research should continue to explore the dynamics of bullying within the unique context of sport in order to triangulate the results of this study with the results from other sites.

An additional limitation of this study is the low reliability reported in some subscales of the MAMS (i.e., Constant Effort, $\alpha = .69$; Social Teasing, $\alpha = .56$). Although the reliability of the Social Teasing subscale was low, this internal consistency coefficient is consistent with the level ($\alpha = .61$) reported by Oransky and Fisher (2009) in their original psychometric validation of the scale. Social teasing and bullying may be intuitively connected, if bullying is conceptualized as social teasing that escalates when the teasing has been taken too far. However, because of the

low levels of reliability reported by this particular subscale, the results of this study may not sufficiently represent the relationship between these constructs. Future research should continue to examine the psychometric properties of the MAMS, in addition to examining the relationship between social teasing and bullying. Results should be interpreted in light of these limitations.

Conclusion

Football is a sport that teaches its players how to be violent and aggressive on the field (Gage, 2008; Messner, 1990), but little research has addressed if players learn to compartmentalize this instrumental aggression and deem it to be appropriate only on the field. Societal portrayals of football players depict them as perpetrators of bullying on a wide scale, despite a lack of empirical research to justify these stereotypes. The results of our study suggest that bullying was predicted by social norms—both the norms of moral atmosphere and endorsement of male role norms. The strongest predictor of bullying was the perception of whether a player's most influential male in his life would approve of the behavior. In addition to prevention interventions that highlight the role of addressing masculine norms and including influential males in this process, implications for intervention programming also suggest that football players can be instrumental in creating a school culture that does not tolerate bullying. Because the center sport of football often provides high school football players with access to higher levels of the school's social hierarchy (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Kreager, 2007; Messner, 2002), interventions that utilize peer leadership models can access football players' relational capital and social status to combat school violence and positively impact the overall school environment.

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Figure 1. *Model of Moral Atmosphere, Masculinity, and Moral Functioning Among High School Football Players*
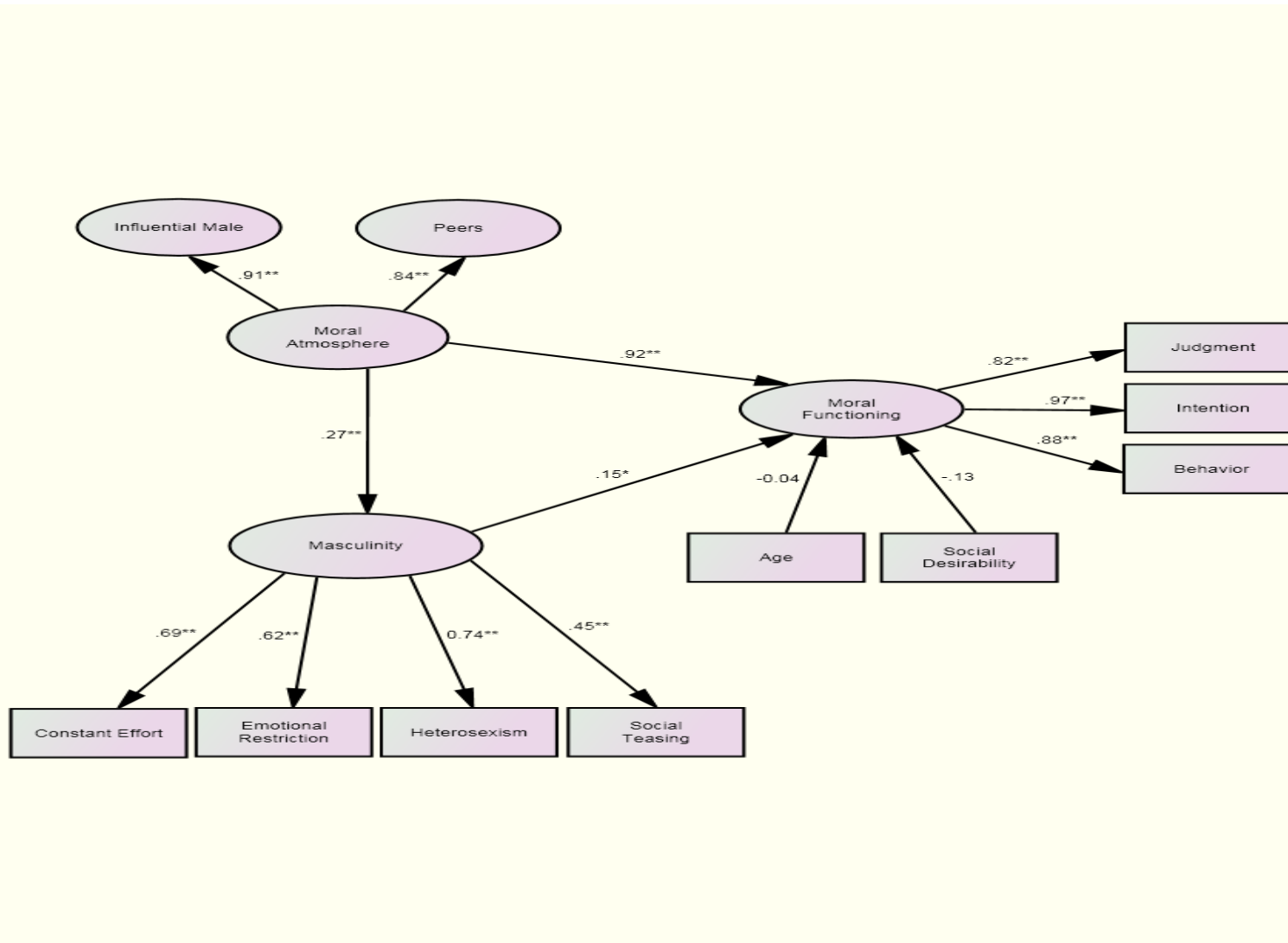
*Note: *p* < .05; **p* < .001.*

Figure 2. *Norms of Moral Atmosphere, Masculinity, and Bullying Behaviors Among High School Football Players*
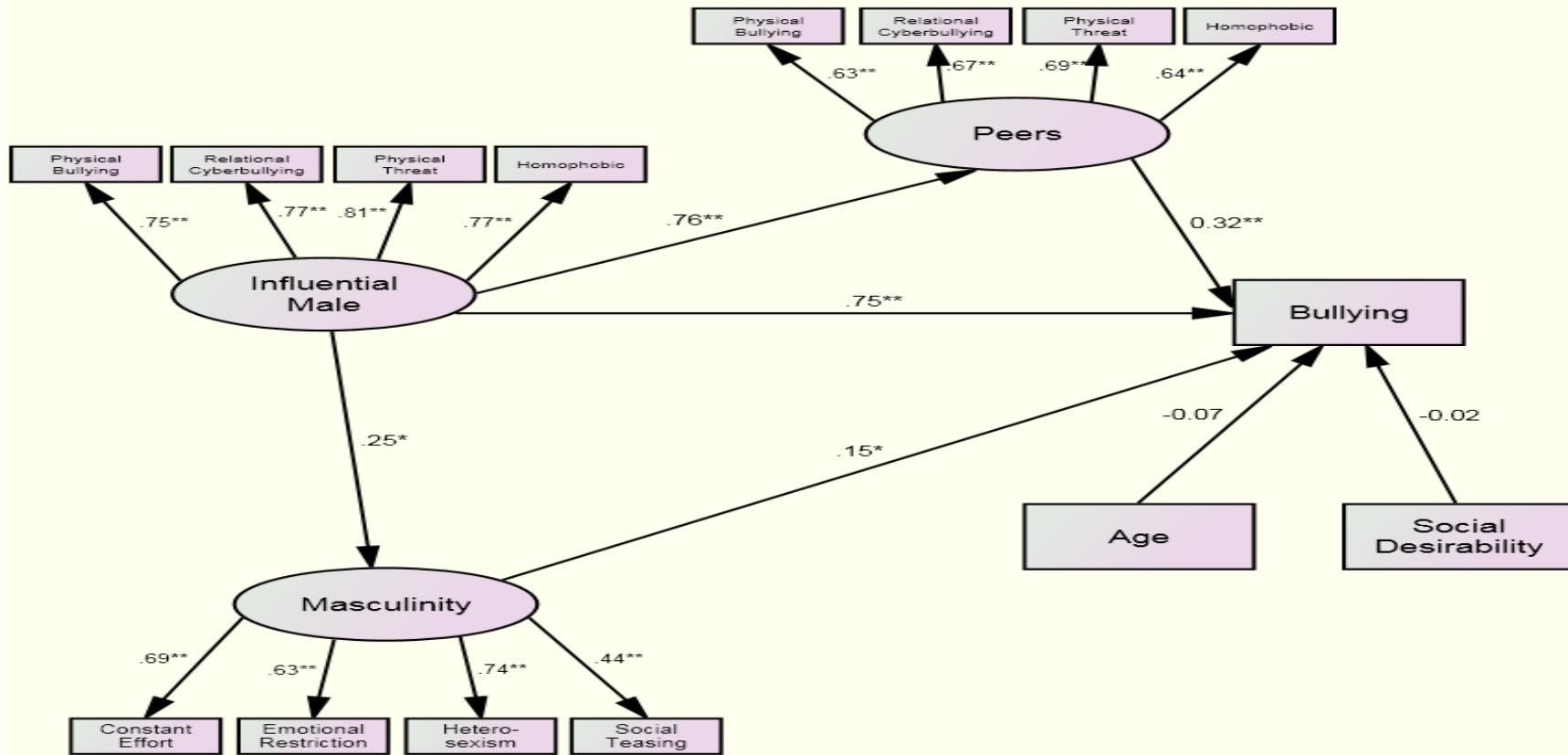
*Note: *p <. 05; **p < .001.*

Table 1

Responses and Frequencies of Bullying Behaviors of High School Football Players (N = 206).

Behavior	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Physical Bullying	143 69%	34 17%	20 10%	3 1%	6 3%
Relational Cyberbullying	179 87%	13 6%	6 3%	5 2%	3 2%
Verbal Bullying (Physical Threat)	153 74%	31 15%	14 7%	5 2%	3 2%
Social Bullying (Homophobic)	93 45%	55 27%	35 17%	12 6%	11 5%

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Main Study Variables (N = 206).

Variable	Mean	SD
Heterosexism	23.79	4.06
Emotional Restriction	16.15	3.21
Social Teasing	13.97	2.16
Constant Effort	17.95	2.98
Most Influential Male	5.90	2.88
Teammate Influence	8.78	2.76
Judgment	6.70	3.49
Intention	7.03	3.30
Behavior	6.18	2.83
Social Desirability	4.74	2.78