Moral Reasoning among Sport Management Majors: A Troubling Future?

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Kohlberg’s work (1976, 1981, and 1984) of developing a distinctive component, or moral self, from moral reasoning philosophies subsequently underscored its value apart from moral beliefs, opinions, and behaviors. This distinction can help gauge an individual’s reasoning skills when faced with a moral dilemma rather than their positions on the issues themselves (Mayhew & Engber, 2010). A myriad of empirical studies have been conducted to measure moral reasoning, or character development, in the sport competition context (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995; Coakley, 1994; Kihl, 2007; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981; McCormack & Chalip, 1988; O’Hanlon, 1980; Ogilvie & Tutko, 1971; Rees, Howell & Miracle, 1990; Sage, 1988, 1998; Stevenson, 1975, 1985; Stoll & Beller, 1998). These studies have generally focused on the question of whether character (including its various definitions) may be developed within sport participation settings, or in other words, mainly centered on populations within sport competition. A few studies have been conducted to explore the moral values and practices of sport managers (non-coaching) in amateur athletics. Thompson’s (1992) work identified moral problems and the methods to resolve them from female athletic directors at the high-school level. Results showed the administrators drew from principles of responsibility, justice, utilitarianism, and social contracts to resolve their moral issues. Timmer (1999) found religiosity and educational levels were significant predictors of moral reasoning for NCAA DIII athletic directors. Individuals with these attributes were associated with higher moral reasoning scores measured on the Hahn-Beller Values Choice Inventory (HBVCI). Scant research has been conducted to determine moral reasoning choices of future sport managers, or sport management majors. Research has shown the longer a person participates in organized sport, the lower their moral reasoning skills scores (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995; Stoll & Beller, 1998). This paper contributes to the moral reasoning in sport work relative to students in sport management.

The HBVCI was administered to research moral reasoning of sport management majors. The HBVCI centers on moral values of honesty, justice, and responsibility, thereby reinforcing the deontological ethical theory. Undoubtedly, moral development, or character may be expressed in other contexts such as teamwork, loyalty, and self-sacrifice (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995; Coakley, 1994; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981; McCormack & Chalip, 1988; O’Hanlon, 1980; Ogilvie & Tutko, 1971) which also serve as essential characteristics of future sport managers. Kohlberg (1976) used the core concept of justice to ground his moral reasoning thought. Connor (2009) found justice is the overall preferred moral orientation in viewing resolve strategies among 200 high school teachers.

In answering the call for more informed scholarship that addresses the need for added ethical and moral reasoning consistency among policy and decision makers in organized sport settings, this study’s purpose is to better recognize our future sport administrators’ values choices respective of honesty, fairness, justice, responsibility and a commitment toward social justice -- preferred characteristics and qualities of school administrators (Gurr, Drysdale, and Muford, 2006). These attributes can be more fully understood and developed for those administering sport programs. This discussion can also assist in the sport management ethics curricula.

The population for this study consisted of sport management majors (n= 174) at two southern U.S. universities. Participation was voluntary and involved completing the HBVCI at the end of the term. The inventory was distributed by an independent professor outside the sport management department. The return rate was 100%. All material was collected during three class periods. The sample had a mean age of 21.7 years, 72.2% were male and 38.4% identified themselves as ethnic minority. Analysis indicated that male students’ moral reasoning scores were lower than their female counterparts. Years of organized sport participation and moral reasoning scores were statistically significant (r=.68, P<.01). The results support previous findings (Stoll & Beller, 1998) that moral reasoning scores decrease as years of participation increase. Results also showed measurement invariance across moral reasoning and sport type. No significant relationship was found between ethnicity, or academic classification and moral reasoning scores. Further results are discussed in the presentation.