Moral Reasoning of Collegiate Athletes and Intramural Sport Athletes: An Investigation of the Influence of Religiosity, Gender, and Type of Sport Played

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The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of religiosity, gender, and type of sport played (individual or team sport) on levels of moral reasoning for intercollegiate athletes and undergraduate students who are involved in intramural sports. Moral reasoning for this research was defined through the insight and application of Kohlberg's (1983) moral development theory. The sport specific measurement instrument utilized for this study was also grounded in Kant's (1968) deontological ethical framework, which focuses on moral reasoning from a duty and obligation perspective. This research is important as a means for better understanding the reasoning behind why some unethical behavior occurs in sport, since scholars believe that moral reasoning is a good predictor of actual ethical behavior (University of Idaho Center of ETHICS*, 2009).

The majority of extant literature related to moral issues in sport deals specifically with what Morgan (2007) calls “the depressingly sorry moral state in which sports presently find themselves” (p. xi). As such, academic interest in the ethics of sport over the past 50 years has been mostly concerned with articulating the various moral pitfalls in sport germane to concepts such as sportsmanship (Keating, 1964), fair play (Butcher & Schneider, 1998), doping (Hoberman, 1995; Simon, 1984), gender and sexual equality (English, 1978; Francis, 1995), race/ethnicity (Valentine, 1999), and violence (Simon, 1991). Within each one of these categories scholars have written about the various moral issues that exist at the participatory, leadership, and organizational levels. However, in these research papers there is a noticeable gap in empirical data related to ethical decision making or the moral reasoning process of athletes. Thus, the aim of this research was not only to illuminate the relationship between variables that influence moral reasoning, but also to do so using quantitative data collection and statistical procedures that advance the mostly theoretical research of sport ethics.

Academic research in moral reasoning has previously considered the variables of personal religiosity, gender, and type of sport played as continuously measurable or nominal categories that might affect someone’s level of moral reasoning. For example, team sport athletes, especially males, have been found to consistently reason at lower moral levels than individual sport athletes (Brendemeier & Shields, 1986; University of Idaho Center of ETHICS*, 2009). Additionally, scholars in various fields have conducted studies whose results indicated that females generally reason at a higher moral level than males (Keller, Smith, & Smith, 2007; Walker, 1984). Likewise, researchers have concluded that personal religiosity in cultures all around the world is a strong influencer of moral development and moral reasoning (Galbraith & Jones, 1976; Rich & DeVitis, 1985).

Quantitative research into moral reasoning in sport has primarily been conducted the past several decades using an instrument called the Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory (HBVCI). This instrument was designed to assess moral reasoning by asking those being surveyed to respond to moral dilemmas common in sport. The scholars that have administered the HBVCI to athlete populations have found that male athletes in team sports score significantly lower in moral reasoning than individual sport athletes (University of Idaho Center of ETHICS*, 2009).

Additionally, the HBVCI has revealed in various studies that the longer a person (male or female) participates in sport, including at higher levels of competition, the more eroded their moral reasoning becomes (University of Idaho Center of ETHICS*, 2009). The research questions addressed in this study related to these findings from HBVCI-based studies the past decade or so include: Do male intercollegiate and intramural sport athletes reason at a lower moral level than female intercollegiate and intramural sport athletes? Do team sport athletes, regardless of gender, score at a lower level of moral reasoning than individual sport athletes? Do intercollegiate female team sport athletes score at a lower level of moral reasoning than female team intramural sport athletes who participate in recreational team sports? Do intercollegiate male team sport athletes score at a lower level of moral reasoning than male team intramural sport athletes who participate in recreational team sports? What is the relationship between level of moral reasoning and personal religiosity for athletes? Does gender moderate the relationship between personal religiosity...
and moral reasoning? Does type of sport played moderate the relationship between personal religiosity and moral reasoning?

Data were collected via questionnaires that were distributed in person to a convenient sample population (N= 213) of collegiate and intramural sport athletes at a large, Midwestern university in winter 2013. Each questionnaire contained the 16 moral dilemma items of the HBVCI and the eight items (one fill in the blank question and seven multiple-choice questions involving practices and behavior related to issues such as prayer, worship attendance, and influence of faith in daily life) from the Religiosity Measure Questionnaire (RMQ) instrument (Rohrbaugh & Jessor’s, 1975). The other independent variables of gender and type of sport played were noted by checking the appropriate box on the questionnaire.

Data analysis for this study included the use of independent samples t-tests, simple linear regression and multiple regression analysis in order to determine the relationship between independent variables and the dependent variable. The results of this study indicated that female athletes morally reason at a higher level than male athletes, and that individual sport athletes morally reason at a higher level than team sport athletes. Also, it was found that neither gender nor type of sport played moderated the relationship between personal religiosity and moral reasoning; however, it was determined that a negative correlation existed between personal religiosity and moral reasoning for the entire sample of athletes.

The results of this study are important as a means for better understanding moral reasoning and its influences among collegiate and intramural sport athletes. If ethical behavior is more predictable given the presence of certain levels of moral reasoning among this population then sport practitioners (coaches, athletic directors, educators) should be able to use this data to more effectively educate their athletes in moral development (University of Idaho Center of ETHICS*, 2009). Thus, it is recommended that moral development educational programs be designed and implemented for athletes at the collegiate level. Furthermore, the negative relationship that was found between moral reasoning and personal religiosity can not be ignored, especially since previous non-sport studies in disciplines such as accounting and business have found positive correlations between these same variables (Clark and Dawson, 1996 & Keller et al., 2007).

Future sport research into athlete moral reasoning will be discussed during the presentation, including proposed ideas about other variables and their relationships that might influence moral reasoning.