Contextualizing Ethics and Morality in Sports Management: The Case of Match-Fixing

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Socio-Cultural - Other (Professional Sport)  Thursday, June 1, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  8:55 AM
Abstract 2017-011  Room: Yale

Ethics and morality has risen to a vital issue in Sport Management, as corruption in sports received large amounts of media attention at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Alleged as a new epidemic of sport (Haberfeld, & Sheehan, 2013), match-fixing is a phenomena deemed an extremely detrimental threat to the integrity of sport. As match-fixing has emerged as a serious global problem (Gokhale, 2009; Hill, 2010; Carpenter, 2012), numerous scholars have related the cause of this widespread social ramification to professional athletes’ moral development (Haan, 1987; Kim, 1994; Shields et al., 2007; Han, 2014).

Under the pervasive cheating atmosphere in sports setting, sports spectators has become inculcated with negative values (Hoch, 1972). As Chappelet (2015) argued, contraction of the spectators are inevitable in such circumstances; ultimately deleterious to sponsors and broadcasters. Intriguingly, despite of repetitive occurrences of unethical and immoral behaviors emanated by athletes, the annual attendance of spectators for Korean professional baseball league showed gradual increment and marked the highest in 2016, attracting over eight million spectators for the regular season (KBO, 2016). This paradoxical phenomenon raises a question whether if the rise of five million spectators over the course of ten years, disregard of cheating, is an implication of spectators learning to accept cheating that purportedly have infiltrated sport; further, which particular value of morality is triggered to spectators through sport that results in this paradoxical phenomena.

Based on the current macroscopic wonder between match-fixing in Korean professional baseball and undeterred number of sport spectators, the main purpose of this research is to provide an observation on why spectators seemingly accept cheating in sports and continuously attend baseball stadium. This study suggests three essential variables to analyze the sport spectators’ acceptability of cheating in sport: A focus on the mediating effect of bracketed morality as well as two independent variables; overcomformity towards athletes, and sport media exposure.

Bredemeier & Shields (1984) pioneered the concept of bracketed morality, asserting that there are two moralities in action contexts to explain the antisocial behaviors of athletes such as aggressiveness and cheating: Athletes’ moral reasoning and judgement emanates behaviors inside a sports context as more acceptable than behaviors outside of a sports context. Kavassanu (2012) developed the concept of Bracketed Morality by arguing that sport is a social context that poses moral dilemmas between individuals and groups surrounding principles of harm, fairness, and loyalty. Haidt (2001), a founding scholar of moral foundation theory, also supports Kavassanu’s idea of pluralistic view on morality, stating that cheating in sports is a type of fairness violation out of five moral foundations consists of harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity.

Overconformity or so called positive deviance and Sport Media Exposure are two socialization factors that could contribute to bracketed morality. Overconformity is regarded as an unconditional acceptance of – and overcommitment to – the goals and norms of sport (Hughes, & Cockley, 1991). A common precedent would be the usage of illegal performance enhancing substances by athletes, accepted as a part of sport ethics of competence, excellence, and success. In addition, an eight year longitudinal media exposure research lead by Vangruderbeek, and Tolleneer (2010), has confirmed as an upsurge in sport media exposure, the participants seem to have developed a more diffuse morality on the doping issue. Proving the argument of Dunning (2002), spectators could be influenced by the media context surrounding the moral and ethical dilemmas or issues in sport.

The implications of the research, two academic and one practical respectively are as follows: First, this research extends literature on the effect of bracketed morality on sport spectators and its detrimental aspect of accepting
cheating in sports. Second, the research extends literature on providing new framework mediating sport spectator by implementing the concept of bracketed morality to sport spectator. Third, the research provides basis for sporting organization on further understanding of moral behavior and judgement of sport spectators. Bracketed morality can be a new tool to bridge the gap between the prevalent defraud in sport and the acceptance of cheating.

The study is among initial endeavors to apply the concept of bracketed morality in sport management field specifically geared towards sport spectators. By grafting the concept from the subject of athletes’ perspective on to the sport spectators’ perspective, the study is worthwhile to examine the suitability of the concept. Further, the study provides a profound understanding of the current paradoxical phenomena of spectators accepting cheating in sports at a different demographic circumstance from the West, South Korea. Thus, this theoretical analysis provides sociocultural and psychological qualification as well to genuinely explain why sport spectators are in parallel with athletes on the bracketed morality.