SPORTS AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

For more than a century, the contention that sport builds character has been popular among educators. The more cautious perspective of researchers is that sport might build character, but only under the right conditions. In this paper, the authors report on three aspects of character that may be influenced by sport participation: perspective-taking and empathy; moral reasoning; and motivational orientation. In each area, research-based recommendations are offered for coaches and others in sport leadership positions.

Introduction

The idea that competitive sports provide effective means for promoting character has been around for a long time, at least since the Ancient Greeks. In modern history, the British boarding schools of the nineteenth century gave new impetus to this theme. Believing that muscles and morals develop simultaneously through involvement in team sports, these schools' administrators encouraged or required their students to participate in competitive athletics. The idea soon crossed the Atlantic and became popular in U.S. schools and culture. S*port builds character* became a popular cultural saying providing the rationale for including sport programs in a wide range of educational institutions. Even today's highly commercialized big-time collegiate sport programs are often justified by appeal to the idea that these programs contribute educational value to the athletes by nurturing positive character traits. Opponents of sports, on the other hand, often cite an abundance of anecdotal evidence of sport-related cheating, aggression, self-aggrandizement, disrespectful behavior, and corruption to suggest that sports have the opposite effect—they undermine positive character.

In this paper we summarize what is known about sports and character. While there are large gaps in our knowledge, a few evidence-based conclusions seem warranted. These conclusions point to a middle position between proponents and opponents of the idea that sports build character. At this point, it is clear that the early optimism regarding the character-building power of sports was overstated or unfounded. Participation in sports does not have any automatic beneficial effects on character. On the other hand, it seems equally evident that sports are powerful social experiences that may, *under the right circumstances,* have positive benefits. If sports are to have a positive impact on the character development of participants, the leadership and behavior of the coach is key. Consequently, in this paper we also offer recommendations for those involved in coaching or sport leadership. First, however, we must clarify what is meant by *character*.

What is Character?

The word *character* has gone in and out of vogue in the psychological literature. It was a popular term early in the twentieth century. At that time, it was thought that a person had character to the extent that they possessed a set of virtues or moral personality traits like honesty, integrity, generosity, and trustworthiness. By mid-century, however, the word had fallen into disfavor and was rarely used. The primary reason for its rejection by psychologists was that human behavior, according to the dominant theories of the time, was determined less by the individual than by the environment. In a classic series

of studies, Hartshorne and May (1928), for example, demonstrated that children could not be divided into categories like "honest" and "dishonest" or "cheaters" and "noncheaters." A child might tell the truth in one situation, yet lie in another. Hartshorne and May concluded that it was the *characteristics* of the environment more than the *character* of the individual that seemed to determine behavior. Their findings dealt a severe blow to those who thought character could be defined by a stable set of virtues or personality attributes.

The pioneering work of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984) on children's moral reasoning was key in challenging the theory that the environment determined behavior. Kohlberg found that although a person's behavior may seem inconsistent to an observer, there often were consistencies in motive and thought. For example, a child might believe that helping one's friends is central to morality. If loyalty to a friend requires lying in one situation but not in another, then the outward behavior of the child may appear inconsistent despite a consistent underlying pattern of reasoning. By analyzing the *reasons* that children of various ages provided for moral decisions, Kohlberg was able to identify stable patterns of reasoning. Based on years of longitudinal and cross-cultural research, Kohlberg further suggested that those patterns of reasoning underwent regular age-related changes. From this work, he proposed a six-stage sequence of moral reasoning development.

The details of Kohlberg's stages have been challenged and alternative models have been suggested. The lasting legacy of Kohlberg's work resides in three fundamental contributions. First, Kohlberg opened psychologists to a new appreciation of stable personal characteristics related to moral or ethical decision-making. This paved the way for a new appreciation of character. Second, Kohlberg made clear that the moral life is better understood by taking account of motivations and reasons than by focusing on behavior alone. Cognition is a key component of morality: how a person thinks about their ethical responsibilities is an important part of their character. Finally, Kohlberg found that moral or character growth follows a predictable developmental progression.

Today, it is widely recognized that *character* is a complex, multifaceted concept. While the word has sometimes been used synonymously with "personality," the term "character" has moral or ethical connotations. A person of character is a person who acts consistently in an ethical way. Character refers to those aspects of a person that guide moral life and that enable the person to live in fidelity with their moral values, judgments and intuitions. Deficiencies of character may reflect shallow or misguided moral desires or, alternately, failures of will—insufficient determination, perseverance, or courage to act consistently with one's ideals (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995).

Character is comprised of a number of distinguishable components. Since virtually every conceivable psychological quality, capacity, or process can at least indirectly influence a person's moral commitments and behavior, a complete list of character components is probably impossible. But it is relatively easy to identify a number of clear and important components of character. For present purposes, we identify three clusters: perspective-taking, role-taking, and empathy; moral reasoning and beliefs; and motivational orientation. Elaboration of each of these clusters is provided in the relevant section below.

Sports and Perspective-Taking

Central to a life of character is the ability to understand and consider the views of others. Correspondingly, a significant failure of character occurs when a person is overly self-centered and either cannot or will not empathize with others. Perspective-taking and empathy are distinct but related psychological processes. Perspective-taking is primarily cognitive and involves understanding a situation from multiple points of view. Empathy is more of an affective skill. It is the ability and tendency to vicariously participate in the experience of another person or group of people. Both skills provide a foundation for moral behavior because a person cannot act appropriately and responsibly unless they understand and empathize with all those involved in a conflict situation. There is considerable evidence, for example, that juvenile delinquents and criminals have less developed perspective-taking ability and lower empathy than the average person (Emler, 1999).

Unfortunately, very little is known about the impact of sport participation on the development of perspective-taking ability and empathy. Theoretically, it seems reasonable that participating in strategy-based team sports might increase perspective-taking ability (Coakley, 1984; Martens, 1976). Such abilities are needed to optimize the use of strategy during competition. For example, if I understand the sport setting from my opponent's perspective as well as my own, I am better able to take advantage of strategic openings. Moreover, to understand my own role on a team, it is important to see how it is coordinated with the roles of my teammates. Understanding game

strategies requires combining many perspectives at the same time, thus requiring high social perspective-taking ability.

While sport may encourage perspective-taking, it may also discourage empathy. Feeling concern about others, particularly opponents, may interfere with the narrow focus athletes are typically encouraged to have during competition. If, for example, an opponent is injured, a coach might counsel her athletes to keep their "minds in the game" and take advantage of the newly created weakness of the opposing team. While the research in this area is slim, the available evidence supports the notion that sport discourages empathy. Kalliopuska (1987) found that 8- to 16-year-old girls and boys became less sensitive to others the more years they spent in Finnish baseball. Kalliopuska (1992) also demonstrated that athletes who are less empathic have lower self-esteem and are more self-centered.

Physical activity that occurs outside of competitive sports may be better suited to promote empathy. Miller, Bredemeier and Shields (1997) integrated development of empathy into the goals of a physical education program. Kalliopuska (1989) demonstrated that intensive dance training tended to increase empathy. Further work in these areas is clearly warranted.

Despite the tendency of competition to dampen the experience and expression of empathy, sports are often emotionally charged experiences that can provide rich opportunities for developing empathic skills. Coaches who wish to encourage perspective-taking and empathy can do so by using techniques developed by Socrates so many centuries ago. Coaches can ask leading questions that help athletes relate to the experience of others. For example, "How do you think Shawna felt when she was benched?" "What do you think led to John [an opponent] exploding at the official?" Particularly when problematic incidents occur, coaches can help athletes step back and view the situation from multiple perspectives, and allow an opportunity to empathize with others.

Sports and Moral Reasoning

As noted above, a lasting legacy of Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) groundbreaking studies on moral reasoning is a developmental and cognitive approach to understanding important dimensions of character. People's ethical behavior is influenced by how they reason or think about moral issues. Like mathematical thinking, Kohlberg concluded that there are universal patterns of development in the way people think about moral values. The approach that Kohlberg pioneered is often referred to as a structural developmental approach.

There are numerous variations (see, especially, Gibbs, 2003; Haan,1991; Haan, Aerts, & Cooper, 1985; Hoffman, 2000; Kohlberg, 1981, 1984; Rest, 1979; Turiel, 2002), but all researchers within this tradition share a common view that children undergo regular age-related changes in the underlying structure of their moral reasoning. Growth in reasoning comes from appropriate experiences. Progressing toward moral reasoning maturity is typically described in terms of a step-like sequence of stages, levels, or phases.

Within sports, moral reasoning level has been shown to relate to such important moral variables as aggression (Bredemeier, 1985, 1994; Bredemeier et al., 1987; Bredemeier & Shields, 1984a, 1986a), sportspersonship (Horrocks, 1979), and beliefs about fair play (Stephens, Bredemeier, & Shields, 1997). Thus, it is important to know whether sport participation influences moral reasoning development.

For those who look to sports to stimulate advances in moral reasoning, the research has not been encouraging. Hall (1986) found that her sample of 65 male Division I intercollegiate basketball players scored lower on moral judgment than do most college students. Similarly, Bredemeier and Shields (1984) found that their sample of intercollegiate basketball players scored lower on a measure of moral reasoning than reported norms of college students.

In the first study to directly compare athletes and nonathletes on moral reasoning maturity, Bredemeier and Shields (1986b) assessed the moral reasoning of 30 male and female intercollegiate basketball players and 10 nonathletes. They found that the athletes had significantly less mature moral reasoning than their peers. However, a follow-up study that added 20 swimmers to the sample concluded that there were no differences in moral reasoning development between the swimmers and the nonathletes (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986b). In sum, the basketball players, but not the swimmers, scored lower on moral reasoning than their nonathlete peers. Since athletes from only two sports were assessed, it is unclear whether the differences were due to the different types of sports (e.g., team sports vs. individual sports, contact sports vs. noncontact sports) or factors extrinsic to the athletes' sport experiences (for example, the study did not control for GPA).

Stevenson (1998) assessed the moral reasoning development of 213 Division I student-athletes and 202 general student peers. Tapping a broader cross-section of sports than the previous work, he found that the team

sport athletes had significantly lower moral judgment scores than did either the nonathletes or the individual sport athletes. In contrast, Proios et al. (2004) did not find differences in moral reasoning maturity in athletes across different sport areas (football, handball, and basketball) or in terms of years of sport experience.

Most research on moral reasoning and sport has been cross-sectional in design. An exception is a study by Priest, Krause, and Beach (1999). In a longitudinal study of 631 U.S. Military Academy cadets, the authors found that sports participation, especially in intercollegiate team sports, had a negative impact on moral reasoning. However, their study, like the one by Stevenson (1998), used a measure of moral reasoning maturity that has not been adequately tested for reliability and validity (Bredemeier & Shields, 1998).

Overall, the results from these studies suggest that participation in some sports at the intercollegiate level, especially team sports, may be associated with lower moral reasoning maturity. However, results are mixed and none of the studies controlled for the fact that recruited athletes, on average, enter college with lower academic test scores (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Controlling for academic achievement and other potentially confounding variables should be a high priority in future research. The longitudinal methodology employed by Priest, Krause, and Beach (1999) provides the best evidence of a potential negative effect of sports involvement. Until these results are replicated, however, they should be viewed with caution.

Results are also mixed at the high school level. In a study of 1,330 male and female high school students, Beller and Stoll (1995) found that the nonathletes scored significantly higher than the team athletes. However, in the Bredemeier and Shields (1986c) study mentioned above, no difference was found between high school athletes and nonathletes. Similarly, Rulmyr (1996) found no differences between athletes and nonathletes among his sample of 540 students in southern Arizona high schools.

Finally, in a study of children in the 4th through 7th grade, boys who participated in high contact sports and girls who participated in medium contact sports were significantly less mature in their distributive justice reasoning than children who had participated in other sports or in any organized sport program (Bredemeier et al., 1986a). Level of physical contact may be an important variable. Children may have a difficult time distinguishing between genuine aggression and non-

aggressive, but physically forceful, play. This, in turn, may hinder the development of fairness concepts.

Taken together, the results from these studies underscore the importance of not lumping all sports or sport participants together. For several reasons, broad generalizations about "sports" are unlikely to be helpful. For one, the rule structures of the various sports promote different types of social interaction. The developmental stimuli provided by a boxing match are likely to differ from those of a golf tournament. In addition, each sport tends to have its own subculture and implicit moral norms. The culture of rugby is quite different from that of competitive swimming. There are also differences based on age and competitive level. Major league baseball and Little League provide quite different social experiences. Even within a single sport area and developmental level, individual sport teams are different because each team develops its own unique moral microculture through the influence of particular coaches, athletes, fans, parents, and programs. Moreover, even within a single team, participants' own appraisals of the experience may vary substantially (Vallerand & Losier, 1994; Weiss & Bredemeier, 1986, 1991).

Given the huge diversity of sport experiences, is it reasonable to think that coaches can be trained to provide positive experiences that will promote growth of moral reasoning? We believe so. Despite all the various shapes and sizes of sports, there are certain commonalities that can be used to advantage by the knowledgeable and skilled coach. For example, in all competitive sports, participants will experience some temptation to deviate from rules to gain advantage. All sports provide an opportunity to pursue excellence, both of physical performance and character. Virtually all sport teams can be turned into miniature caring communities where growth is stimulated through mutual encouragement, challenge, and support.

There is some evidence that coaches or physical educators who actively seek to promote moral reasoning development can do so (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields & Shewchuk, 1986; Romance, Weiss & Bockoven, 1986). The most important educational process is probably *dialogue*. Moral reasoning is unlikely to advance if the athlete is simply a passive recipient of the coach's exhortations, however prosocial they may be. Children and adolescents need to talk about their values; they need to discuss their views of right and wrong, both with their peers and with respectful adults. Coaches should make space in team meetings for discussion of moral issues relevant to

sports in general and to the life of the team in particular.

The power of dialogue will be amplified if it is combined with meaningful responsibility. Athletes who cooperatively share in important dimensions of team decision-making are likely to benefit substantially. To maximize social and moral growth, coaches should use a democratic leadership style in which responsibility for developing team norms, goals, and expectations is shared with the members of the team. If team members develop a sense of ownership for the team and feel responsible for maintaining the team's expectations, they can learn important lessons about both character and citizenship.

Sports and Motivation

As noted previously, Kohlberg suggested that to truly understand morality, it is important to investigate motives. In Kohlberg's work, motives were equated with reasons, or the cognitive rationales for behaviors. Thus, for Kohlberg, investigating moral reasoning was the same as investigating moral motivation. A related but different approach has been implemented by a number of sport psychologists who have sought to investigate relationships among moral phenomena and achievement motivation.

For the past couple decades, motivation has been one of the hottest topics in sport psychology research. Much of this work has utilized an approach known as achievement motivation theory. One of the primary architects of this approach, John Nicholls, suggested that achievement contexts like sport can elicit two distinct types of motivation. Consider the following two equally talented young athletes:

- *When Roger plays basketball, he is motivated by the desire to improve his skills. He is good, but he knows he can get better with continued practice. He is eager to play because competing with other talented athletes enables him to improve.*
- *When Tameco plays basketball, she is motivated by the desire to showcase her talents. She knows she was born with innate ability and she is eager to compete so that she can demonstrate her superior skills through defeating others.*

In the terminology of Nicholls' theory, Roger enters the basketball arena with a *task* motivational orientation. In contrast, Tameco has an *ego* orientation (Nicholls, 1983, 1989, 1992). When a task-oriented person enters an achievement context, he/she is motivated primarily by the desire to become competent in the task. Competence, in turn, is understood as mastery of a task

or skill, and mastery is obtained through application of effort. The task-oriented person measures success by comparing his/her current performance to either their previous performance or to an objective standard. In contrast, when an ego-oriented person enters an achievement context, he/she is motivated primarily by a desire to display competence (or at least avoid appearing incompetent). Competence is understood as having higher ability than others and is, thus, measured through social comparison. For the ego-oriented person, innate ability is the primary determinant of mastery, rather than effort. The ego-oriented person is particularly motivated by a desire to outperform others in a competitive situation. While these two orientations are clearly distinguishable, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. People invariably experience both orientations. Still, people have dispositional tendencies toward one or the other type of achievement motivation.

Nicholls (1989) proposed that the task and ego motivational orientations are likely to be associated with moral perspectives. This was put to the test by Duda, Olson and Templin (1991) in a study that examined correlations among motivational orientation, approval of sport aggression, and attitudes toward sportspersonship. Results indicated that a low task orientation and high ego orientation correlated with higher endorsement of unsportspersonlike play, and that ego orientation positively related to rating aggressive acts as more acceptable.

Other researchers have reported similar findings. High ego orientation is associated with cheating and approval of poor sport behavior (Lee et al., 2001; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003), intention to engage in poor sport behavior (Stuntz & Weiss, 2003), approval of aggression (Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004), likelihood to be aggressive (Stephens & Kavanagh, 2003), and antisocial behavior in sport (Sage et al., in press; Kavussanu, in press). In contrast, task orientation has been found to be associated with some dimensions of sportspersonship (Dunn & Dunn, 1999; Lee et al., 2001; Lemyre et al., 2002; Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004; Gano-Overway et al., 2005), as well as moral functioning (Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003) and prosocial behavior (Kavussanu, in press). While these findings suggest that task motivation has a positive relationship with prosocial attitudes, values, and behaviors, some studies have been inconclusive (Duda et al., 1991; Dunn & Dunn, 1999; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Stephens, 2000, 2001; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996).

Task and ego motivational orientations are relatively stable characteristics of the person. However, they are malleable. The environment can help shape the extent to which a person is task-motivated or ego-motivated. Some environments tend to pull for one orientation more than the other. The term *motivational climate* is often used to refer to features of the environment that pull for one motivational orientation more than the other (Ames, 1992). When environments are so structured as to nurture and support task motivation, they have been called *mastery climates*. In contrast, *performance climates* exert a pull for ego motivation.

A number of investigations have demonstrated that mastery climates tend to support positive sport-related attitudes, values, or behaviors, while the reverse is generally found for performance climates (Gano-Overway et al., 2005; Kavussanu, in press; Miller et al., 2005; Ommundsen et al., 2003; Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004). However, Gano-Overway et al. (2005) failed to find the expected relationship between performance climate and sportspersonship, which may have been due to a sample that had a very low average perception of performance climate.

The above paragraphs summarize how motivational variables relate to moral variables. However, the operational dynamics are often highly complex. Both the task and ego dispositional orientations and the perception of performance and mastery motivational climates are orthogonal constructs. It is possible, therefore, for a person to be high on both task and ego, high on one and low on the other, or low on both; the same is true of perceived motivational climate. Consequently, there are numerous possible interactions that one could examine and a number of researchers have begun to explore more complex relationships (Dunn & Dunn, 1999; Gano-Overway et al., 2005; Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003; Lemyre et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2004; Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004). Though more research is needed, the overall results from the various studies are clear. If the aim is to reduce morally problematic behaviors and/or to increase prosocial ones, then coaches need to simultaneously increase task motivation and decrease ego motivation.

This research is particularly significant for coaches because the coach can shape the climate of the sport team. Thus, a number of specific recommendations for coaches flow from investigations of motivational climate variables. The following three are particularly important.

- Emphasize effort and task mastery rather than ability and competitive outcome.

Stated differently, emphasize what is within the athletes' control rather than what is outside their control. Most importantly, athletes can control their effort, so increased effort (regardless of skill level) should be acknowledged and celebrated. Increased effort also leads to greater task mastery if appropriate self-referenced task goals have been established. Athletes cannot, however, control their genetics or the performance level of competitors.

- Emphasize team cooperation rather than rivalry.

Encourage athletes to help one another and see everyone on the team as uniquely valuable. Build a sense of supportive community in which every athlete feels needed and cared about. Finally:

- Help athletes appreciate the important role of mistakes in the learning process.

Keeping the team climate positive and constructive, coaches should focus primarily on what athletes are doing right and help them see errors as learning opportunities

Conclusion

There are ethical problems in the world of sports that need to be addressed. For example, in a recent investigation of youth sports (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005), it was found that nine percent of the fifth through eighth grade athletes acknowledged cheating. Thirteen percent said that they had tried to hurt an opponent; nearly a third acknowledged having argued with a sport official, and 27% said that they had acted like a "bad sport." Problems were also identified with the behavior of coaches and spectators. Despite reports such as these, many sport enthusiasts maintain that sport builds character. In this article, we have sought suggest that sport *can* build character, but only if coaches deliberately seek to do so and are adequately informed regarding the educational processes required.

We have highlighted three clusters of psychological variables that are particularly important to character: perspective taking and empathy, moral reasoning, and motivational orientation. For each cluster, specific strategies for coaches have been identified.

All sports provide an opportunity to pursue excellence, both of physical performance and character. Virtually all sport teams can be turned into miniature caring communities where growth is stimulated through mutual encouragement, challenge, and support.

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