

CHEATING: THE DARK SIDE OF SPORT

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ABSTRACT

There is a dearth of empirical data about cheating in sport. This study attempts to help fill this void by investigating perceptions regarding cheating in sport. The sample consisted of 233 final-year university sport science male (n=137) and female (n=96) students. The responses to a self-designed questionnaire revealed that females were less accepting of cheating than male respondents. Furthermore, rugby players indicated a greater tolerance of deliberate rule infringement than participants of other sports and non-sport respondents. The concept of “game reasoning”, which allows for deviations of moral reasoning, is discussed.

Key words: Cheating; Moral reasoning; Ethics in sport; Fair play.

INTRODUCTION

“Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with jealousy, hatred, beastliness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence. In other words, it is war minus shooting” — George Orwell (quoted in Launder, 2001:5).

In 1971 Ogilvie and Tutko published their famous article: “Sport: If you want to build character, try something else.” In a similar vein, Kretchmar (1994:239) refers to the symptomatic “moral callouses” in sport when deliberate rule violation is negated as shrewd strategy. In contrast, there are many who believe that everyone is doing it and that there is nothing wrong with it. They suggest that the use of “wits” in addition to skill and strategy, adds a dimension that makes sport more interesting (Leaman, 2001).

The media regularly report instances of cheating in sport (Miller *et al.*, 2005). One of the most infamous acts of cheating happened during the Soccer World Cup quarterfinal in 1986 when Diego Maradona illegally punched the ball into the net to score a goal for Argentina against England. The referee did not spot the infringement and Argentina won the game. Afterwards, Maradona proclaimed that the “hand of God” had scored his goal (Dixon, 2001:53).

Twenty years later, after the 2006 Soccer World Cup, Lawton (2011:23) wrote:

“So many games were decided not by skill but a sleight of dubious hand. The dive is no longer an outrage; it is an intrinsic part of the game. Here was where the 18th World Cup took its greatest defeat”.

Cheating is defined as a violation of the rules to gain an unfair advantage over an opponent (Jones & Pooley, 1986). However, there are those who accept some forms of cheating as an

inherent facet of sport. Furthermore, they reason that if there is an ethos of accepting breaching of the rules within a specific sport, it is not considered wrong, because there is no “unfair advantage”. In other words, participants have a choice whether they want to make use of such opportunities without violating the shared interpretation of the rules (Leaman, 2001). Also, a professional foul (for example, in basketball, water polo and rugby), is not seen as cheating: It is labelled “gamesmanship” because the offender does so openly and knows that he/she will almost certainly be penalised.

Cheating in sport can be classified as either institutionalised or deviant (Eitzen, 1979). Institutionalised cheating includes illegal behaviour (wasting time) that is accepted as part of the game. Many years ago the multitalented British sportsman, Charles Fry, said: “In football it is widely acknowledged that if both sides agree to cheat, cheating is fair” (quoted in Jarman, 1990:197). Deception, and even aggression and violence, that are morally suspect in the everyday life, are accepted (Edgar, 1998). Deviant cheating, on the other hand (accepting a bribe or doping), is frowned upon and is usually severely punished.

There are, of course, many people who lament the prevalence of cheating in sport. They maintain that it ruins the integrity, value and image of sport. It is not only illegal but also contrary to the spirit of fair play (Preston & Szymanski, 2003).

According to Bredemeier *et al.* (1986a), cheating is an indication of a low level of moral reasoning. Bredemeier and Shields (1986) concluded that non-athletes have a higher level of moral reasoning than a sample of basketball players. Female respondents also displayed a higher level of moral reasoning than their male counterparts. Hall’s research (Bredemeier & Shields, 1993), supported these findings when he found that college basketball players’ moral reasoning was lower than their non-athletic college peers. Smith (2003), in contrast, found no differences in moral reasoning between 15 rugby players and 15 non-rugby players.

Kavussanu and Spray (2006) presented 525 footballers with scenarios describing cheating and aggressive behaviours, which are likely to occur during a match. The players perceived the general team atmosphere in football conducive to cheating. The researchers concluded that the perceived performance climate was associated with low levels of moral functioning.

Jones and Pooley (1986) conducted a comparative study of perceptions of cheating in rugby between British and Canadian players. Players were asked to respond to four specific situations in rugby. Both groups admitted that they would cheat in some or all the situations. But, the researchers concluded that the Britons were subtler in their cheating, while the Canadian players were more open when cheating. They concluded that the players’ perceptions of winning affected their responses. These perceptions are based on cultural beliefs.

Vallerand and Losier (1994) propose that understanding why athletes play sport might help to explain how they play it. As Shields and Bredemeier (2007) emphasised, a limitation of studies on morality is the absence of “why” explanations, in other words, the reasons participants choose certain values or engage in a particular type of behaviour over others. The reasons that determine behaviour (have fun, opportunities for social affiliation, etc.), might steer athletes toward pro-social behaviours such as helping others, and adhering to the rules

of the game, which is generally classified as sportspersonship. In contrast, motives, such as the pursuit of extrinsic rewards and social approval or the avoidance of guilt and punishment, are more likely to lure athletes away from sportspersonship acts and closer to antisocial attitudes or behaviours (cheating, upsetting the opposition psychologically).

The notion that sport builds character remains a strong belief in contemporary society (Sage, 1990). This perpetuates the belief that sport participation per se contributes to character building and the development of moral attitudes (such as fair play) that can be transferred to other contexts. However, this notion does not have a firm empirical foundation (Shields & Bredemeier, 2007). Mewett (2002) is also somewhat cynical about this when he argues that fair play is simply an ideology aimed at hiding amateurism.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Due to the professionalisation of modern sport, it is imperative to study the moral and ethical issues inherent in sport (Malloy, 1982). The current study deals only with on-field cheating (deliberately infringing the rules of the contest).

Sport has been advocated as a builder of character throughout history from the earliest writings of Plato to contemporary declarations of educators, administrators and politicians. This popular belief has not been challenged often, but the current prevalence of cheating and corruption in sport has highlighted valid questions about the contribution of sport to moral development. There is a dearth of empirical studies on moral development and sport (Malloy, 1982; Bredemeier & Shields, 1993). The longstanding accepted belief in the moral value of sport could probably explain the dearth of empirical investigation into this matter. The aim of the study was to fill some of this void by comparing perceptions of different groups regarding on-field cheating in sport.

RESEARCH PROTOCOL

Sample

The research sample was made up by 233 final-year university sport science students (Male=137; Female=96; Mean age=20.3 years; Age range=18 to 26 years). Almost half of the sample (45%) was rugby players.

Procedure

The researcher distributed a questionnaire, which was available in English and Afrikaans, at three sport psychology lectures over a 3-year period. The students were requested to complete 1 questionnaire in the lecture room and give an adjusted copy to another student to complete at home. The recipient of the latter questionnaire had to be someone who had not participated in sport in his/her final 2 high-school years. These students, classified as non-participants, received a questionnaire with only the relevant questions.

Participation in this study was voluntary. The students were also instructed not to hand in a questionnaire if they had any doubt about the way (honesty) their student friend/acquaintance had completed it.

Measuring instrument

The author developed a questionnaire after reviewing the literature on ethics and moral development in sport and after consulting with 3 provincial rugby players and 2 experienced elite coaches. The questionnaire contains four biographical questions and 18 questions pertaining to sport ethics. Subjects had to respond to each question on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 to 10. The poles of the scale were anchored by words such as *Nothing wrong with it* on the one end (1) to *Extremely wrong*, on the opposite end of the scale (10).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean scores for each of the 18 questions as attained by the females and males, the rugby players, and the sport participants and non-participants.

TABLE 1: MEAN RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions	Females (n=96)	Males (n=137)	Rugby (n=106)	Part. (n=209)	Non-part. (n=24)
Q1. How important do you personally consider winning in sport?	7.1	8.1	8.3	7.8	6.9
Q2. How do you normally experience losing in sport?	5.3	6.4	6.6	6.2	—
Q3. What is your opinion of a person deliberately infringing the rules in sport?	9.1	8.0	7.9	8.4	8.5
Q4. Do you think that deliberately wasting time in order to prevent the opponents from winning in sport is “cheating”?	6.6	6.1	6.1	6.4	5.9
Q5. Do you consider holding on to the ball after the opponents have been awarded a penalty kick/free throw/ etc. [preventing the opponents from taking it quickly] as “cheating”?	6.8	6.1	6.0	6.4	6.4
Q6. Would you deliberately infringe the rules in sport in order to help yourself gain a personal advantage over your opponents?	3.1	5.1	5.4	4.3	—
Q7. Would you deliberately infringe the rules in sport in order to help your team gain a personal advantage over your opponents?	3.2	5.5	6.0	4.7	—

1 = *Not at all important*

10 = *Extremely important*

Q1

1 = *Not at all unpleasant*

10 = *Extremely unpleasant*

Q2

1 = *Nothing wrong with it*

10 = *Extremely wrong*

Q3

1 = *Definitely not*

10 = *Definitely yes*

Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7

(continued)

TABLE 1: MEAN RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE (cont.)

Questions	Females (n=96)	Males (n=137)	Rugby (n=106)	Part. (n=209)	Non-part. (n=24)
Q8. Do you consider deliberately infringing the rules in sport without being seen by the referee, as “cheating”?	7.1	5.7	5.4	6.3	6.4
Q9. In your opinion, what is the prevalence of players deliberately infringing the laws of rugby as compared to other sports?	7.0	6.9	6.7	7.0	6.9
Q10. How often have you in the past deliberately infringed the rules in sport?	2.9	4.6	4.7	4.0	—
Q11. Do you consider a person who deliberately infringes the rules in sport as a “bad person”?	4.9	3.4	3.2	3.9	4.3
Q12. What, in your opinion, is the likelihood of sportspersons who deliberately infringe the rules in sport would also cheat in other spheres of life?	6.2	4.5	4.0	5.0	6.2
Q13. Do you think that rugby teaches players the wrong values?	3.8	2.8	2.2	3.1	3.6
Q14. Do you think that sport “builds character”?	9.0	8.6	8.7	8.8	8.7
Q15. Do you think that rugby “builds character”?	7.6	5.0	4.4	5.9	6.7
Q16. What is your opinion of a situation where a player injures an opponent in a crushing, but legal, tackle?	4.9	4.1	3.8	4.3	5.3
Q17. Do you think that sports coaches in general encourage [intentionally or unintentionally] their players to deliberately infringe the rules in sport?	5.4	4.8	3.7	5.2	5.3
Q18. Do you think that rugby coaches in general encourage [intentionally or unintentionally] their players to deliberately infringe the laws of rugby?	5.8	5.3	2.7	5.8	5.4

1 = *Definitely not*1 = *Occurs very frequently*1 = *Never*1 = *Extremely unlikely*1 = *Extremely undesirable*10 = *Definitely yes*10 = *Occurs extremely infrequently*10 = *Regularly*10 = *Extremely likely*10 = *Extremely desirable*

Q8, Q11, Q13, Q14, Q15, Q17, Q18

Q9

Q10

Q12

Q16

The confidence level of significance [2-tailed] of the t-tests of differences between group means was set at $p < 0.05$. Mainly significant differences were reported.

Comparison of perceptions of females and males

The mean scores of females differed significantly from those of the males on 12 of the 18 questionnaire items. They perceived winning as less important [Q1] and experienced losing

less unpleasant [Q2] than males. They were more negative towards deliberate infringements in sport than their male counterparts [Q3; Q6; Q7; Q8]. They differed from the male respondents by reporting that they themselves had cheated less in sport [Q10]. They labelled cheaters in sport more strongly as “bad persons” than the male respondents [Q11]. They believed more strongly than male respondents in the likelihood that sportspersons who deliberately infringe the rules in sport would also cheat in other spheres of life [Q12]. Both males and females did not believe that rugby teaches players the wrong values. However, female’s perception albeit strong, was less convincing than that of the male respondents [Q13]. Females showed less empathy than males for sportspersons who suffered injuries sustained in legal actions in sport contests [Q16].

Despite misgivings about cheating in sport both males and females nevertheless believed that sport in general, and rugby specifically, builds character [Q18; Q19]. This may sound surprising, but it must be kept in mind that the great majority of the respondents in this investigation were sport science students. One would expect them to hold positive attitudes about the value of sport, including its character-building potential.

Comparison of perceptions of sport participants and non-participants

The mean scores of non-sport respondents differed significantly from sport participants only on 3 of the 18 questionnaire items. They considered winning in sport less important than participants [Q1]. They also believed more strongly than sport participants in the likelihood that persons who cheat in sport would also cheat in other spheres of life [Q12]. Their attitude towards players being injured in sport, albeit within the rules of the particular sport, was not as negative as that of the active sport participants [Q16]. This finding could possibly be attributed to non-participants’ lack of understanding and empathy of the impact that an injury might have on the well-being of a sportsperson.

Comparison of perceptions of rugby players and other sport participants

Rugby was singled out for special attention: firstly, because rugby players formed the largest group (45%) in the sample, and secondly due to the nature of the game. It is a high-contact game and there are many opportunities for infringing the laws of the game (rucks, mauls, scrums), which the solitary on-field referee and spectators may fail to spot.

The mean scores of rugby participants differed significantly from other sport participants on 14 of the 18 questionnaire items. They considered winning more important than other sportspersons [Q1] and consequently also experienced losing as more unpleasant than other sport participants [Q2]. In general, they were more tolerant towards deliberate infringements of the rules in sport [Q3; Q5; Q6; Q7; Q8; Q10; Q11]. They also believed more strongly than other sport participants that persons who cheat in sport would also cheat in other spheres of life [Q12]. They were more positive than other participants in their perception that rugby does not teach the wrong values [Q13].

Contrary to expectation, they believed less strongly than other sport participants in the character-building potential of rugby in particular [Q15]. Rugby respondents did not consider the consequences of getting injury [albeit in legitimate circumstances] as negatively as other sportspersons [Q16]. This may be an indication that they were realistic and accepted the risks

involved in playing the game. Rugby respondents believed more strongly than other sport participants that rugby coaches in general [intentionally and unintentionally] encouraged their players to deliberately infringe the rule in sport [Q18].

DISCUSSION

The current investigation produced similar results with regard to the gender differences pertaining to perceptions of the legitimacy of rule violations in sport in a study by Dodge and Robertson (2004), with a similar sample (university students). Sportswomen were less favourable in their attitude towards rule violations than their male counterparts. Some authors (Silva, 1983; Bredemeier *et al.*, 1986b) propose that it is an indicator of the socialisation process. Boys are generally perceived as more aggressive than girls in sport, as well as outside the sport context. More boys consequently tend to participate in sport characterised by physical confrontation, which is often accompanied by assertive behaviour or aggression. This, in turn, heightens competitiveness, which could create a “win-at-all-cost” environment that accommodates cheating. Bredemeier and Shields (1986) go as far as claiming that high-contact sports are associated with immature moral reasoning.

Evidence suggests that it may not be sport as such but the emphasis on an ego orientation commonly found in high levels of competitive sport that may be partly responsible for the moral immaturity in sport. For example, Kavussanu and Roberts (2001) conducted a study with 56 male and 143 female athletes determining the moral functioning, sportsmanlike attitudes and judgments about the legitimacy of intentional injurious acts. They found that an ego orientation was associated with the judgement of behaviours, such as intimidating an opponent, faking an injury and risking injuring to an opponent as acceptable. In a later study Kavussanu and Ntoumanis (2003) confirmed that ego orientation mediated the effect of moral reasoning in student sportspeople. In other words, an ego orientation was associated with lower levels of moral reasoning.

Sage and Kavussanu (2007) set up an experiment to study the effects of task and ego involvement in a competitive table soccer setting. Their observations revealed that players assigned to the task-involving condition exhibited more pro-social behaviour than those in the ego-involving and control groups. Subjects in the ego-involving group displayed more antisocial behaviours than those in the task-involving or control groups. They also observed that females engaged more frequently in pro-social behaviours than males.

Bredemeier and Shields (1986) point out that sport is sometimes characterised as a world separate from the world outside the contest where the norms of everyday life are often set aside. According to the social learning approach, moral development is socially defined. Moral behaviour is therefore actions that conform to the pro-social norms of a specific environment or society. Morality is therefore relative. What may be accepted as moral in one setting (the world of sport), may be unacceptable and condoned in another (life outside sport). Kretchmar (1998) supports this view and points out that one should look at cheating in sport within the setting in which it occurs. He argues that all games have settings. He bemoans the tendency of analysts who give the sport community advice on how they ought to act in sport, before considering the unique environment in which these normative actions occur. He argues that one cannot try to behave ethically *in vacuo* in a situation where competitiveness on the

one hand, and sportsmanlike behaviour, on the other hand, often place sportspersons in a conflicting situation. Sportsmanship implies that there are limits to competitiveness. Competitiveness suggests that athletes try their best to win, but sportsmanship dictates that it should be done only within the rules of the contest. "Trying to do ethics *in vacuo* may change athletes from vibrant, caring, connoisseurs of sport to generically nice players who are often confused about how they should act" (Kretchmar, 1998:31).

Likewise, Hyland (2001) points out that it is easy to automatically condemn cheating in sport as morally indefensible, but it is a much more complex phenomenon. It is suggested that while athletes are competing they are protected by a type of moral immunity that differs from the morality that is the norm outside the sport context.

Although sport is seen as a "world within a world", it cannot separate itself completely from the real world. Game reasoning must therefore continue to consider basic moral understandings. "To remain legitimate, the sport participant can only 'play' at egocentrism. When the play character of game reasoning is lost, sport can deteriorate into a breeding ground of aggression, cheating and other moral defaults" (Bredemeier & Shields, 1993:596).

When game reasoning loses its "set aside" character, it can have an effect on moral reasoning beyond the context of sport. The increasing encroachment of "daily life" rewards (money) into sport may lead to a blurring of the distinction between sport and everyday life (Bredemeier & Shields, 1993:596). This could have a negative effect on the moral development of those who are intensely involved in sport.

A few theorists have used the social-learning approach to investigate sport morality. Studies by Kleiber and Roberts (1981), Orlick (1981) and Giebink and McKenzie (1985) have produced inconsistent results. No strong case could be made for the development of pro-social behaviour by means of sport experiences. But, there are indications that by implementing theoretically grounded instructional strategies, moral growth can be stimulated (Bredemeier *et al.*, 1986b). Hellison *et al.* (1990), using physical education instruction, found positive results among at-risk youth in the promotion of pro-social behaviour, such as self-control and respect for the rights of others. However, these studies do not pertain to elite competitive sport.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Firstly, sport science students outnumbered other [non-sport] respondents, comprising 84% of the total sample. Consequently, the findings of this study can be generalised only to a similar population. Secondly, the focus on cheating presents one side of sport only: Pro-social behaviour received no attention. Lastly, it should be acknowledged that perceptions and reality might differ. However, the aim of the study was to compare the perception of cheating by different groups (males vs. females), and not the actual occurrence of cheating in sport.

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