Improving Socialization Through Sport: An Analytic Review of Literature on Aggression and Sportsmanship

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Abstract

Socialization can take place through participation in sports since sports provide a microcosm for living and society. The structure of social relations in sports influences the participants' development of social skills. Researchers have strived to answer whether sports provides a positive outlet for, or teaches and reinforces, aggression. This paper reviews and extends research on aggression and sportsmanship, examines how aggression is developed, and makes recommendations.

I. Introduction

Human beings cannot live a fulfilling life in isolation, and can have more effective and healthy lives through association with others. This means that human beings must somehow learn how to live together. Socialization can take place through participation in sports since sports provide learning environments where participants have the opportunity to learn competition, cooperation, role-playing and discipline regarding rules, regulations, and goals (Bloom & Smith, 1996). In this sense, sports can be seen as a laboratory of human experience. The structure of social relations in organized sports can give participants experience in various roles and group interaction, and contribute to the development of social characteristics that integrate them into existing larger social structures.

Unfortunately, a "win-at-all-costs" philosophy has often led to unethical and aggressive behaviors, impacting negatively and destructively on the development and well being of young athletes and of society at large. Researchers (see, e.g., Arms, Russell, & Sandilands, 1979; Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986; Ewing, Gano-Overway, Branta, & Seefeldt, 2002; Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Terry & Jackson, 1985) have strived to answer whether sports provides a positive outlet for an instinctive drive of aggression or whether sport teaches and reinforces aggression through the highly competitive nature of many sport settings. The purpose of the present paper is to review and extend past theories and perspectives on aggression and sportsmanship, to explore how aggression is developed and to make recommendations. For this purpose, three theories that address aggression are examined: 1) instinct theory, 2) frustration-aggression hypothesis, and 3) social learning theory. The impact of significant others such as coaches, peers and parents on young athletes' aggression and moral reasoning will be examined, and possible recommendations will be suggested based upon social learning theory.

II. Theoretical Background

Proponents of instinct theory such as Freudians argue that aggression is instinctive, and that vigorous physical activities provide cathartic benefits by releasing the pent-up emotions of participants. Sloan (1979) wrote, "Catharsis or reduction of aggression level will occur either by participating in an aggressive act or vicariously through watching acts of aggression by others. Thus, they [pent up emotions] must be relieved periodically or erupt, producing catharsis in either case" (p. 23). Minninger (1948) argued that competitive games provide a medium through which aggressive tendencies are discharged. Johnson and Hutton (1955) used the House-Tree-Person test to determine the cathartic effects of a combative sport by

testing eight college wrestlers approximately three weeks before a season, and again the morning after the competition. The findings revealed a cathartic effect as a result of competition.

Although aggressive behaviors may sometimes provide catharsis, an opposing view is that participating in or viewing aggressive behaviors is more likely to elicit greater amounts of aggression than to result in decreased aggression (e.g., Bandura & Walters, 1974; Berkowitz, 1970; Geen, Stonner, & Shope, 1975). Gelfand and Hartmann (1982) found that participation in competitive games raised both boys' and girls' level of aggression, regardless of competition outcome. It was found that spectators also become more aggressive after observing the event. Bloom and Smith (1996) noted that violence in hockey often spills over into violence in other social settings for spectators as well. A slight increase in hostility has also been found for non-contact and non-aggressive sports (Arms, et al., 1979; Goldstein & Arms, 1971). And, Zillman, Katcher, and Milvasky (1972) found that even vigorous physical exercise using a bicycle-ergometer could enhance aggressive tendencies.

The frustration-aggression hypothesis has been proposed to explain human aggressive behaviors, maintaining that aggression is caused by frustration (Bird & Cripe, 1986; Gill, 1986; Husman & Silva, 1984). In this view, frustration occurs due to the blocking of one's efforts to achieve goals. Critics of the frustration-aggression hypothesis have questioned whether all frustration causes aggression. Although frustration sometimes leads to aggressive behavior, a direct causal relationship between frustration and aggression cannot always be claimed.

In sport context, the losing of a game can be an important factor eliciting frustration. Evidence cited by Martin (1976) supported the contention that competitive sport generates either catharsis or increased aggression, depending upon the outcome of the game. Martin administered the Rosenzweig Picture-Frustration Study to 32 male undergraduate students to determine the impact of winning and losing on participants' aggression: Individual sport athletes experienced more frustration than did team athletes upon losing; yet, participants of both type of sport enjoyed reduction of aggression when they won. Further, Reyes and Lorant (2001) administered the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire to 150 8-year-old children who were beginning martial arts training. They found that only the children who were receiving judo training did not score more aggressive; those receiving other forms of martial arts training did in fact score more aggressive.

Social learning theory maintains that aggression is a behavior learned through the processes of reinforcement and modeling (Bandura, 1973; Bloom & Smith, 1996). In this view, participation in sports may teach and/or reinforce either aggression or sportsmanship. Alland (1972) observed a Pacific people, the Semai of Malyaya. Since the Semai did not express any aggressive behavior when a role model of aggression was absent, Alland concluded that aggression is not instinctive. In this view, sports can serve as a medium for teaching and reinforcing sportsmanship and moral reasoning, with aggression and unsportsmanlike behaviors occurring primarily in response to adverse and "dog-eat-dog" situations and to sport situations involving leadership (coaches, etc.) who do not discourage aggression or support sportsmanship in the participants.

Bandura, Ross, and Ross' (1961) investigation of children aged 37 to 69 months sought to determine whether aggressive behaviors are learned and reinforced through adult modeling. They found that aggression is learned in that the children who were exposed to an adult model of aggressive behavior (such as kicking and punching a "Bobo" doll) displayed an increase in physical and verbal aggressive behaviors. In contrast, the children who observed non-aggressive models did not behave like their counterparts during later play. Clearly, social learning theory supports the contention that human beings are greatly influenced by their environments and role models.

Some argue that athletes tend to be more unsportsmanlike than their non-athlete counterparts, and that a long period of involvement and high

degree of physical contact in sport impacts negatively on participants' moral reasoning (Bloom & Smith, 1996). Gardner and Janelle (2002) asked athletes and non-athletes to judge the legitimacy of overtly aggressive acts performed by both contact and non-contact sports participants. They found judgments legitimizing aggressive behavior to be inversely related to the respondents' moral reasoning. Bredemeier, et al. (1986) conducted a study with 106 children at a summer sport camp and found that participation in high contact sports was associated with greater aggression and with lower levels of moral reasoning. Similarly, Beller and Stoll (1995) found that high school non-athletes scored significantly higher in terms of moral reasoning than did high school athletes. Treasure (2002) argued that participating in sports with the wrong kind of coaching could have devastating lifelong impacts on a child's moral development. Guivernau and Duda (2002) interviewed 194 soccer players, 13 through 19 years of age. They found that regardless of gender, the players reported that they would be more likely to be aggressive if they thought their coach supported such behaviors. Both Guivernau and Duda and Stephens (2000) found players' perceived team pro-aggressive norms were the best predictor of the players' likelihood to aggress. From these studies, it can be argued that unsportsmanlike behaviors of young athletes are learned and reinforced depending upon the type of sport and leadership of coaches. On the other hand, Loughhead and Leith (2001) interviewed and observed hockey players (10 to 15 years of age) and their coaches, and found that, regardless of age, players' views were unrelated to coaches' views on aggression.

The following research studies revealed a positive correlation between sportsmanlike behavior and moral growth when both quality leadership environments that support such behavior and growth were guaranteed. Giebink and McKenzie (1985) used three intervention strategies (instruction and praise, modeling, and a point system) to investigate the effects on children's sportsmanship through a 22 day recreational basketball class. They found that with each strategy, unsportsmanlike behavior (e.g., fighting, cheating) was reduced yet there was little increase in sportsmanship (e.g., congratulating opponent winners). The point system with contingent reinforcers was most effective in producing positive changes. Silverman's (1998) study suggested curriculum (in particular, 'Fair Play For Kids' curriculum) was effective in promoting moral development in young children enrolled in physical education.

Wandzilak, Carroll, and Ansorge (1988) conducted a study with 20 male junior high school basketball players during a 9-week season and found improved moral reasoning and sportsmanship among half the group who were positively reinforced for all sportsmanlike behaviors and negatively sanctioned for unsportsmanlike behavior. According to Nelson, Gelfand, and Hartmann (1969), "Rather the bulk of the evidence supports the . . . view that in a permissive setting in which aggression is either actively encouraged or simply not punished, modeled aggressive stimulation such as that provided by competition tends to increase subsequent aggression" (p. 1095). Needless to say, positive reinforcement should be given when players show sportsmanlike behaviors.

One can assume that an athlete who experiences competitive situations under quality leaderships and healthy environments is more capable of coping with aggression-inducing situations than his or her counterparts. Thirer (1993; 1978) asked female athletes and non-athletes to view a violent film and to complete an aggressive attitude inventory before and after the viewing. Thirer found that athletes displayed a non-significant change in aggressive attitude score pre- to post-viewing whereas non-athletes showed a significant increase in their score. This finding supports social learning theory and implies that athletes are less vulnerable in aggression-inducing situations. Furthermore, Daniels and Thornton's (1989) study revealed that combative sports could possibly serve to reduce hostility under good leadership. Smith, Watson, Fischer, and Sung (2003) conducted a longitudinal study with 325 children aged 7 to 14. In determining whether

socio-demographic variables affect trajectories of aggressive behavior in middle childhood, they found family environment and temperament variables had a greater impact than did socioeconomic factors.

In this context, reference must be made to the unresolved years' long debates regarding tolerance for body checking and violence among minor hockey league programs for children (some as young as 5-years-old). On the one hand, it is argued that since body checking and hitting is part of professional hockey, those athletes trying to get into and to survive in professional leagues need to be taught to hit and be hit. Others ask at what age young players bodies' are really prepared for such, and/or assert that we are ruining the sport by encouraging aggression over the learning of skills. Tom Couvillon, a Windsor (Canada) Minor Hockey Association coach of 11-year-olds, noted that hockey is a competitive game but emphasizes the significance of *how* competition, winning and losing, and reactions to winning and losing, are being handled (personal communication, June 4, 2003). And while the debate in Canada today asks whether we should first allow body checking in hockey with 9-year olds, or with 11-year olds, Couvillon observed that his 9-year-old players are relatively similar in body size and skill but that body size and skill vary greatly among his 11-year-old players. Given the ages cited, such observations could clearly reflect developmental (physical, cognitive, and affective) differences in children.

It can be contended that sport participation facilitates and teaches sportsmanship and moral reasoning if quality leaderships and environments are provided. As opposed to aggression and "dirty" play, sportsmanship is fair and honest conduct. Arnold (1984) identified three different views on sportsmanship as, first, a form of social union, second, a means in the promotion of pleasure, and third, a form of altruism. The idea of sportsmanship as a form of social union stresses the values of fellowship and goodwill beyond just abiding by the rules and regulations. This view of sportsmanship helps in promoting pleasure and the spirit of play in sport. Also related is the idea of sport as a form of altruism, with genuine concern for the other's interest and good.

III. Conclusions

This paper attempted to present theories and perspectives on aggression and the nature of sportsmanship, to use competitive sports as an educational vehicle for young athletes, and to make recommendations. It can be suggested that positive behavior changes in children are assured when children are positively reinforced and exposed to quality role models. Conversely, aggressive and unsportsmanlike behavior is likely to increase under the lack of good leadership, especially when young athletes are involved in highly competitive sport.

Aggression or sportsmanship can be learned and/or reinforced by significant others, the structure of sport, and the society's attitude (Terry & Jackson, 1985). Loopholes in sport rules and inconsistencies in rule application may trigger reinforcement of aggressive behavior. In addition, practices by some sport marketers are related to the use of violence for selling products. According to the findings of Russell (1986), violence may not increase box office receipts.

Increased aggressive behaviors in sport settings cannot be fully understood without reference to the dominant social ethos. Sage (1978) persuasively argues. ". . . that organized sport— from youth programs to pro—has nothing at all to do with playfulness—fun, joy, self-satisfaction— but is, instead, a social agent for the deliberate socialization of people into the acceptance of our most salient organization form . . . They are programs for the formation of a common consciousness—internalization of the bureaucratic ethic." (p. 42).

The potential role of media should be recognized in moderating aggression in sports (Lefebvre, Leith, & Bredemeier, 1980). The broadcaster should identify aggressive and unsportsmanlike behaviors immediately in terms of rule regulations and sportsmanship conduct. Lapchick (1996) has contended that the punish-

ment for professional athletes' violence in sport must be harsh enough to reduce and to deter such violence. According to Lapchick, "Fines are useless for players making more than $1 million each year" (p. 192). Appropriate and effective ways for sanctioning athletes must be determined.

The coach is perhaps the most significant person influencing the amount of aggressive or sportsmanlike behaviors displayed in the competitive sport context (Conan, 1980; Cratty, 1983; King, 1990; Terry & Jackson, 1985). Smith (1983) reported that nine percent of hockey players (N=166) between the ages of 12 to 13 perceived their coaches as approvers of hockey violence. The role of referees has also been identified as a significant factor affecting athletes' subsequent behaviors (Lefebve, et al., 1980). Failure of referees to correct an athlete's aggressive behavior may reinforce and increase the probability of reoccurrence.

Parents sometimes push their children into competitive sports. They may wish to realize their personal, unfulfilled desires through their children, or to have their children exposed to excessive competition, believing it is appropriate preparation for later, adult life. Pagelow (1984) noted that aggressive children tend to have aggressive parents and that parents can be strong models of aggression. Similarly, Freischlag and Schmidke (1979) stressed the importance of parents' influences on young athletes' moral reasoning.

Aggression or sportsmanship can be learned and reinforced in many different ways. Multiple reasons rather than a single one influence such behaviors. Reinforcement and modeling of aggressive behaviors and/or sportsmanship by parents, coaches, referees, peers, and the media influence their reoccurrence. Young athletes need positive, appropriate and constructive role models to teach and reinforce sportsmanship and moral reasoning. It is our privilege, right, and responsibility to teach and reinforce moral reasoning for our future hope—young athletes.

IV. Recommendations

Several possible solutions for controlling young athletes' aggression and encouraging values of good sportsmanship are suggested. First, coaches, teachers, and parents should serve as positive role models of moral reasoning and sportsmanship and provide playful and healthy environments for young athletes. Second, the rules and structure of sports should be modified to satisfy each young athlete's developmental needs and growth. Third, media and referees should encourage, facilitate, and highlight sportsmanlike behaviors and negatively sanction inappropriate behaviors. Fourth, young athletes must be encouraged to join in the classes of academe with the same enthusiasm as competitive sport. Fifth, coaches must not be evaluated (and often promoted or fired) solely on the basis of their win-loss record. Finally, we need to help each athlete develop more advanced levels of moral reasoning as well as sport-related strategies and skills in the educational system.

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