

Social and Moral Character of Collegiate Athletes - Is There a Difference?

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Abstract

The study of character has intrigued human minds since the ancient days of the Greek philosophers. This study investigated the relationship between social and moral character of athletes. The Rudd-Stoll-Beller-Hahm Values Judgement Inventory (RSBH) was administered to male and female collegiate athletes that played competitive sports at a NCAA Division II University. A dependent samples t-test was conducted to determine if a difference exists between social and moral scores. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to determine if there was a relationship between the social and moral scores. An ANOVA was conducted to compare social and moral character of male and female collegiate athletes who played different sports. The study revealed that athletes exhibit higher social character over moral character. There is a statistically significant difference in moral character among athletes in different sports, but the social character of athletes revealed few statistically significant results.

Keywords: Character, Sport, Athletes, Moral Character, Social Character

1. Introduction

An interest in character has been studied and revered as valuable since the ancient days of the Greek philosophers. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle spent time trying to define the good life. Plato believed that the good life was related to one's station in life and fulfilling the obligations of that station (Beckner, 2004). For Aristotle, the good life was a happy life and felt that happiness was the highest good a man could reach (Adler & Cain, 1962).

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Today, in America, obtaining the good life might often mean playing sports or watching a child play at sport. Sport is a major part of societies and cultures worldwide (Doty, 2006). Sports have been noted as “building character” among participants (Sage, 1998). Coaches, parents, and athletes at all levels have subscribed to the philosophical understanding that sport builds character. Sports have been said to provide an environment that is rich in influencing cultural, personal, and social attitudes as well as valued behaviors (Sage, 1998). However, the term character often has a vague definition. It is often referred to as mental and moral characteristics shown by any one human being. Character, then, does not necessarily have a positive or negative meaning (Sullivan, 2019).

1.1 The Problem

Athletic programs have the ability to promote the development of certain character traits that include ethical decision making, sportsmanship and the display of sportsmanlike behavior (Stoll & Beller, 2000). Scholars, coaches, and athletes have implied that values learned through sports are transferred to other aspects of an athlete’s life (Sage, 1998). However, the traits that support ethical behavior and societal functioning must be intentionally taught by coaches and parents. Ethical traits may not just appear through participation in sport (Sullivan, 2019). Poor moral character displayed by athletes has become consistent in sporting venues and experienced at all levels of participation. The display of improper behaviors and the exhibiting of poor character, such as scandalous activities, cheating, violence, disrespect, and others, have become a common theme surrounding athletes today (Doty, 2006). The amount of unsportsmanlike conduct in sport leaves one to doubt whether it really does develop character in sportsmanship (Dada, 2016). Athletic experiences may be reinforcing attitudes and behaviors that are really opposed to positive character traits seen in fair play and moral justice (Gibson, 1993).

Various researchers argue both sides of the belief that sport builds character (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Funk, Shields, & Bredemeier, 2016). Some researchers argue that sport does build character and others say that sport does not build character. Which is true (Omar-Fauzee et al., 2012; Camire & Trudel, 2010)? The amount of unsportsmanlike conduct in sports leaves one to doubt whether sports really does develop character in sportsmanship (Dada, 2016). There seems to be a disagreement on the type of character that athletes possess. Rudd (2005) determined that there are two main distinctions of character associated with athletes by two main groups of sport experts. Sport psychologists and sport philosophers define character of athletes using moral traits. Coaches, administrators, and players define character of athletes using social traits. Social and moral character consists of ethical values that differ from each other, but interact with each other (Beller, 2002). Social character includes all the social values that society deems important for social interaction; social values are about the real world. Moral character values stand by themselves and should be considered “first principles” of character (Beller, 2002). Moral character traits are displayed through ethical behavior action (Sullivan, 2019). If a moral value is broken, then relationships with people are broken directly as a result (Beller, 2002).

Since a person's character has been linked to playing sports (Arnold, 1994; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Rudd, 1998), empirical research has examined what one really means by the word character associated with sport (Rudd & Stoll, 2004; Rudd, 2005; Rudd & Mondello, 2006). Character is a social concept that has different meanings and interpretations. To understand how character is involved with sport, researchers have attempted to describe a set of attitudes, values, and behaviors associated with character as well as perceptions associated with what character is believed to be (Sage, 1998). Diverse definitions are often attached to character (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Rudd, 1998), which can lead to an unclear understanding of what character is when left undefined (Stoll & Beller, 1998; Sage, 1998). Therefore, character must be defined by a set of specific attitudes and values (Camire & Trudel, 2010). Research on both social and moral character of athletes has shown that moral character may not be developed through the participation of sport (Rudd & Stoll, 2004; Beller, Stoll, & Calmeiro, 2004; Priest, Krause, & Beach, 1999; Dada, 2016). The participation of sport may actually decrease moral character in athletes (Rudd & Stoll, 2004; Center for Ethics*, 2009; Priest, Krause, & Beach, 1999) unless moral character development is intentional (Sullivan, 2019). Since character might have an influence on the quality of human social involvement and day to day life and experiences (Doty, 2006) and since moral character may be experiencing a decline in athletes, this study investigated the social and moral character of athletes and investigated if there was a significant difference between moral and social character scores among athletes who participated in different sports.

1.2 Gamesmanship

Gamesmanship, studied by researchers, is thought to be strategies used by players during game situations that stretch the rules to the limit. Often, those who participate in gamesmanship during a game do so without getting caught (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2003). Gamesmanship is associated with the value placed on winning (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019). The goal is to do whatever it takes to win the game. Rudd (2008) performed a qualitative study on moral reasoning of athletes. In his study, he found a theme that suggested that gamesmanship strategies were used by athletes for two reasons, (1) they are just a part of the game, (2) they are considered good strategy to get ahead of the opponents. Camire and Trudel (2010) studied high school age students in Quebec, Canada. They discovered similar findings through a qualitative study as Rudd (2008) described. They noted that gamesmanship strategies like physical and verbal aggression and hostility were reported as being used by athletes and the athletes just considered the actions as part of the game.

Camire and Trudel (2010) included moral values in their qualitative study of high school aged athletes. Some athletes did provide examples of moral values applied while playing sport; however, moral values were exhibited differently in different situations. For example, some athletes said that less respect was given to opponents during the game compared to normal life situations. Long, Pantaleon, Bruant, and d'Arripe-Longueville (2006) described similar findings. They noted that athletes tended to justify defying the rules in game situations due to a strong need to win. As the level of competition increased, athletes had a higher tendency to legitimize sport aggressive behaviors using the Sport Behavior Inventory (SBI) (Conroy et.al, 2001). Shields et al. (1995) used demographic information that found behaviors of cheating and aggression as more expected behaviors at the collegiate level opposed to the high school level. Males were also more apt to accept cheating and aggressive behavior than females. The older the athletes and the more experienced the athletes the more cheating and aggression was accepted in sport (Shields et al., 1995)

1.3 Purpose of the Study

A careful perspective should be used when evaluating empirical study results of character. Character is complex, socially bound, and can be interpreted many different ways (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Jones, 2005; Camire & Trudel, 2008). Character can have multiple definitions (Sage, 1998) and is perceived differently by various experts in the field of sport (Rudd & Stoll, 2004). Though research has investigated team sport and individual sport differences, not as much research has specifically looked at differences of character and the type of sport played. This study had three purposes: (a) to determine if there is a difference between social values and moral values of athletes, (b) to determine if a difference exists between the athlete's moral value scores who participate in different sports, (c) to determine if a difference exists between the athlete's social value scores who participate in different sports. It was expected that understanding character of the athletes through empirical research would add to the body of knowledge associated with character of athletes and create discussion among professionals in sport.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Selection of Participants

Participants selected were National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II student-athletes who attend the same public university in Texas. The university that participated in this study was a four-year public university in north central Texas with an enrollment of over 13,000 students. The athletics department sponsors twelve NCAA Division II athletic teams. The participants selected were student-athletes that were on a team roster and were males and females between the ages of 18 and 26 years old. The athletic program of the university selected to participate was structured in a way that promoted the development of each athlete's awareness of teamwork, sportsmanship, competitiveness, and loyalty to the university. Character traits that are in line with the university's core values including integrity, civility, tradition, leadership, service, and excellence were also promoted. Each athlete was assisted in applying appropriate transferable skills into life situations at the university. The sample consisted of 324 athletes (206 males and 118 females) at the university.

2.2 Survey Instrument

The instrumentation selected for this study was the Rudd-Stoll-Beller-Hahm Values Judgement Inventory (RSBH). The RSBH was specifically designed to measure character of athletes using sport contextual scenarios that are divided into social and moral indices.

Both subscales use a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree to gain a total sum for each index. The scores for each subscale were averaged to obtain two separate scores for each participant; a social index score and a moral index score. Each participant's score ranged from 10-50 on each index. For the purpose of this study, the social index Likert scale was coded inversely to the moral index Likert scale. The purpose of inverse coding of the social index Likert scale resulted in the character scores of each participant being interpreted in the same direction for both social and moral character indices. For example, the higher one scored on the social or moral index, the higher the social or moral character. The RSBH is not intended to measure moral or social reasoning. For this research, internal consistency reliability test showed Cronbach alpha scores when computing the internal consistency of the social index ($\alpha = .71$, $ns = 10$) and the moral index ($\alpha = .88$, $ns = 10$). The combined moral and social indices resulted in a high internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$, $ns = 20$).

2.3 Procedures

Coordination with the athletics department and athletic teams was necessary to attain survey data from the athletes. The survey included an informed consent at the beginning of the survey, followed by demographic questions such as gender, ethnicity, athletic participation year at the university, classification of the athlete, and sport participation. Also included were ten social scenarios and ten moral scenarios evaluated by a Likert scale. Athletes were assigned a specific time to take the survey during a study hall or team meeting determined by the head coach of each athletic team. The participants who attended the study hall or team meeting were provided a link and password to the instrument for completion. Athletes who were not able to attend the specific meetings gained access to the instrument via an email from the head coach of their athletic team. Athletes could complete the instrument on a university computer or personal cell phone and were given a timeline of six weeks to complete the survey.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Demographics of Participants

Results for this study were based on data collected from 253 collegiate athletes out of a possible 324 athletes that were listed on the sport rosters of the same NCAA Division II university and completed the RSBH Value Judgement Inventory survey. Three participants did not complete the survey and their scores were not included in the statistical analysis. Demographic characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 1. In order to investigate social and moral character by sport, each participant was asked to select which sport he or she played at the university. For the purpose of this research, cross country, track and field were combined into one sport category due to cross country athletes also participating in track and field. Three athletes indicated playing two different sports for the university. The primary sport played by each athlete was selected for analysis. Participant numbers and percentage are listed in Table 2.

3.2 Is there a difference between social character and moral character of athletes?

A dependent sample t-test was calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics to determine if there was a difference in social and moral character of athletes. The scores for the social index were statistically significantly higher ($M = 33.62$, $SD = 7.06$) than the scores of the moral index ($M = 23.65$, $SD = 7.98$), $t(249) = 20.78$, $p < .001$, a large effect size was represented when a Cohen's d was calculated, $d = 1.32$. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to determine if there was a relationship between the social and moral scores of athletes. There was a positive correlation between the social character scores and the moral character scores of athletes, $n = 250$, $r = .497$, $r^2 = .25$, $p < .001$. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics by sport for the Moral Index Mean Scores and the Social Index Mean Scores. Figure 1 shows a scatter plot of the social and moral scores of the athletes.

When discussing character of athletes, there were two main types of character referenced. Moral character (Rudd, 2005) values consist of fairness, honesty, respect, compassion, responsibility (Arnold, 1999; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Beller & Stoll, 1995; Rudd & Mondello, 2006) fair play, and justice (Beller, 2002). Social character (Rudd, 2005) values consist of self-sacrifice, teamwork, perseverance, work ethic, mental toughness, loyalty (Arnold, 1999; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Beller & Stoll, 1995; Rudd & Mondello, 2006; Camire & Trudel, 2008) dedication, and good citizenship (Beller, 2002). The results suggested that athletes exhibited higher social character over moral character, which matched perceptions of character by players described in previous research (Rudd, 1998, 2005; Rudd & Mondello, 2006). Data from all athletes and sports were compared together. The social scores overall were moderately high, being closer to the highest score of 50.

The moral scores were moderately low compared to the social scores (Figure 1). The findings supported the results that social character of athletes was higher than moral character of athletes (Rudd & Stoll, 2004; Krause & Priest, 1993; Calmeiro, Stoll, & Davis, 2015). These results showed a clear difference between the two subscales. A moderate correlation did exist between social character and moral character of athletes indicating a relationship between the two different character subscales. The correlation was direct which could suggest the higher an athlete's social character, the higher the athletes' moral character.

3.3 Is there a difference between moral character of athletes who participate in different sports?

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed to investigate the difference between the moral character scores of athletes who participated in different sports using the RSBH Values Judgment Inventory ($p < .025$). Because separate ANOVA were computed to compare social and moral sub scores among the different sports studied, an adjusted alpha level of .025 was used to control for an increased likelihood of committing a Type I error. There was a statistically significant difference between groups of the moral character index $F(7,242) = 11.143$, $p < .001$. A Levene statistic did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the homogeneity of variance which is an assumption of ANOVA analysis. A Tukey post hoc test revealed that football, softball, cross country, track and field, tennis, and golf athletes' moral character scores were statistically significantly higher than baseball moral character scores. Cross country, track and field moral character scores were statistically significantly higher than football moral character scores. Tennis moral character scores were statistically significantly higher than all other sports except golf.

The study revealed a statistically significant difference in moral character among athletes who participated in different sports. Particularly tennis players, who had higher moral scores than all other sports except golf. The result of the "all female" tennis team could be explained by previous studies that compared male and female moral character and found that females tended to have higher moral character over their male counterparts (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986; Beller, Stoll, & Calmeiro, 2004; Calmeiro, Stoll, & Davis, 2015; Rudd & Stoll, 2004; Dada, 2016). However, golf was another "all female" sport that did not share the same results as tennis. Since tennis was found to have moral character that was statistically significantly higher than other "all female" sports including volleyball and softball, it would not benefit the outcomes to imply that gender was a factor in the higher moral character of the tennis athletes. Tennis, with the exception of golf, is the only sport within the study that is consistently responsible for requiring the players to make rule judgment calls during action play. The responsibility of making personal rule judgements within a sport might influence moral character. Unlike golfers, who make moral judgements based on personal play, tennis athletes must make moral rule judgements that can affect the player and the opponent in front of an audience. All the other sports studied, excluding golf, require officiating to ensure athletes adhere to the rules of the game. Some researchers have found that different athletes rely on a referee to make crucial judgement calls during a game and may encourage athletes to manipulate the rules to achieve a desired outcome. Since tennis players are responsible for refereeing their own rules, the athletes may have a higher respect for the rules of the game.

Baseball was a sport in this study that displayed the opposite results as tennis. Baseball's moral character scores were found to be statistically significantly lower than most other sports studied, excluding basketball and volleyball. One reason for the lower moral scores might be the long-held tradition of the "baseball code" practiced in baseball. Some actions are not considered illegal, but are considered unsportsmanlike and practiced as part of the game. Baseball players who have played the game for a number of years may view this code to ensure opportunities at winning a game. Cross country, track and field were found to have statistically significantly higher moral character than football and baseball on both the moral and social index. Cross country, track and field is considered an individual sport, while baseball and football are considered team sports. Previous research has indicated that team sports have lower moral character than individual sport athletes (Camire & Trudel, 2008; Rudd & Stoll, 2004) which is like the findings of this study. Contact and non-contact sports also experienced statistically significant differences in moral scores. Non-contact sport athletes had higher moral character scores than contact sport athletes (Rudd & Stoll, 2004; Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). Cross country, track and field are considered a non-contact sport compared to football as a contact sport. Results showed cross country, track and field showed higher moral character than football. Discrepancies between the moral scores of these sports may be explained by the nature of player interaction that arise in contact sports and non-contact sports (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986).

3.4 Is there a difference between social character of athletes who participate in different sports?

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed to investigate the difference between the social character scores of athletes who participated in different sports using the RSBH Values Judgment Inventory ($p < .025$). Because separate ANOVA were computed to compare social and moral subscores among the different sports studied, an adjusted alpha level of .025 was used to control for an increased likelihood of committing Type I error. There was a statistically significant difference between groups of the social character index, $F(7,242) = 6.386$, $p < .001$. A Levene statistic did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the homogeneity of variance which is an assumption of ANOVA analysis. A Tukey post hoc test revealed that cross country, track and field ($n = 69$, $M = 3.70$, $SD = .689$) social character scores were statistically significantly higher than football ($n = 67$, $M = 3.06$, $SD = .729$) social scores, $p < .001$ and baseball ($n = 37$, $M = 3.11$, $SD = .563$) social character scores. The social scores of the remaining different sports did not reveal any statistically significant findings.

The investigation of the social character of athletes did not reveal many statistically significant results. In this study, cross country, track and field social character was found to be higher than football and baseball social character, which is like the moral character findings when comparing the three sports. The higher social character of cross country, track and field compared to football and baseball support previous results that found non-contact sport college athletes had higher social character than the contact sport athletes (Dada, 2016; Rudd & Stoll, 2004). Conversely, Rudd & Stoll (2004) reported that team sport athletes showed higher social character than individual sport athletes. Though the team and individual sports tested were not identified in the study, it contradicts this study's finding where an individual sport, cross country, track and field, had higher social character than two team sports, football and baseball. It should be pointed out that the different findings could be related to the different levels of physical contact, which create different types of social interaction between participants in different sports (Bredemeier & Shields, 2006). It is possible that contact team sports will influence antisocial behaviors (Rudd, 1998) and in turn influence social character.

4. Conclusion

Sport continues to be a highly popular activity among many individuals around the world. Many athletes, coaches, parents, and fans believe that sport builds character. The purpose of this study was to investigate social and moral character of athletes. These results may help to add clarification to the differences and relationships between the pre-defined social and moral character of athletes. Understanding any differences between social and moral character of athletes might help coaches, athletic administrators, players, officials, parents, and sports fans make invaluable decisions regarding the various aspects of the sport milieu, including character education.

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Simple Scatter Plot of Social and Moral Scores

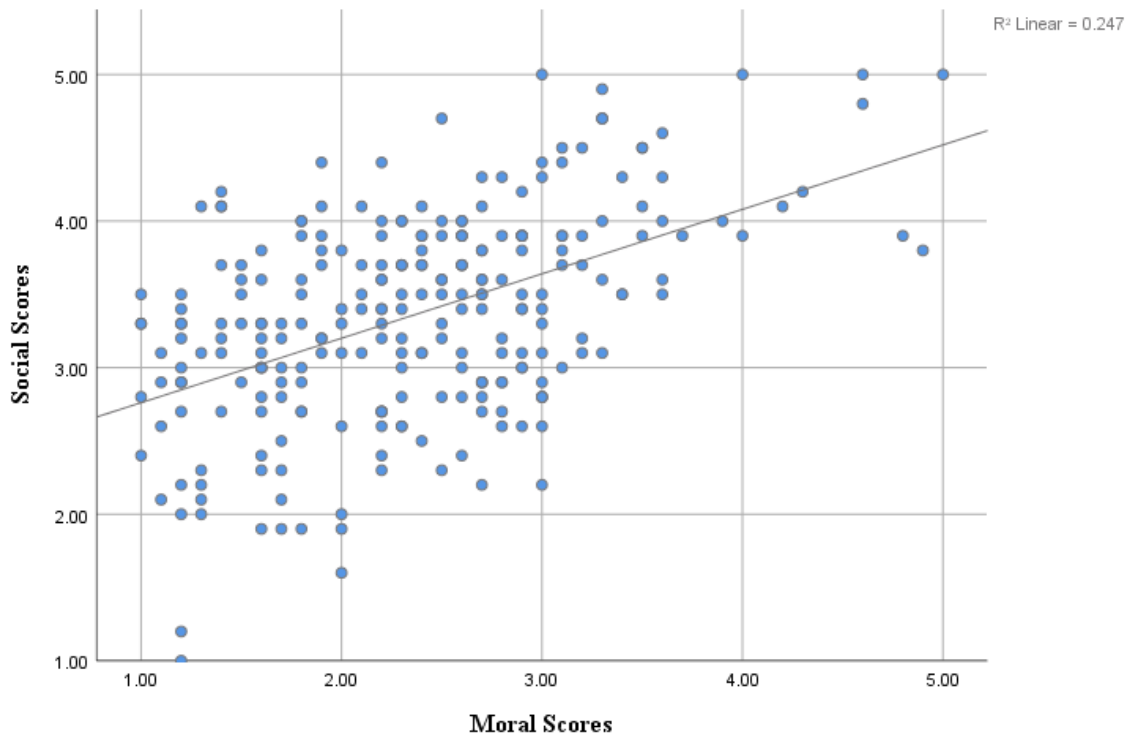


Figure 1. A positive correlation was depicted by the placement of the social (y-axis) and moral (x-axis) scores on the regression line of the scatterplot.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N = 253)

Category	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	159	62.85
Female	94	37.15
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaskan Native	8	3.16
Asian	2	.79
Black or African American	88	34.78
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	5	1.98
Hispanic	28	11.07
White	145	57.31

Table 2. Numbers of Participants and Percentage by Sport (N = 253)

Sport	Frequency	Percent
Football	69	27.27
Basketball	31	12.25
Volleyball	14	5.53
Baseball	37	14.62
Softball	20	7.91
Cross Country	14	5.53
Track & Field	71	28.06
Tennis	5	1.98
Golf	8	3.16

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics by Sport for the Moral and Social Indices (N = 250)

Sport	N	Moral Index		Social Index	
		M	SD	M	SD
Football	67	2.27	.65	3.06	.73
Basketball	31	2.24	.64	3.28	.71
Volleyball	13	2.34	.63	3.44	.48
Baseball	37	1.71	.59	3.11	.56
Softball	20	2.37	.77	3.50	.53
XC, Track & Field	69	2.69	.82	3.70	.69
Tennis	5	3.84	.58	3.88	.66
Golf	8	3.04	.65	3.73	.37

* XC denotes Cross Country.