The Perceived Legitimacy of Rule Violating Behavior in Sport

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Some sport scientists have suggested that various rule violating behaviors (including aggressive player behavior) are normative behaviors perceived to be "legitimate violations" by participants (e.g., Silva, 1981; Vaz, 1979). In an attempt to determine if sport socialization influences the degree of perceived legitimacy of rule violating sport behavior, 203 male and female athletes and nonathletes were shown a series of eight slides. Seven of these slides clearly depicted rule violating behavior. The subjects rated the unacceptability-acceptability of the behavior shown on each slide on a scale of 1 to 4 (totally unacceptable-totally acceptable). Subjects were categorized according to: (a) gender, (b) amount of physical contact, (c) highest level of organized sport participation, and (d) years of participation. Regression and polynomial regressions indicated that male respondents rated rule violating behavior significantly more acceptable than females. Trend analyses on the other categorical variables indicated support for an in-sport socialization process that legitimizes rule violating behavior. This perceived legitimacy was considerably more pronounced for males than for females at all levels of analysis.

Strategy is an essential part of any athletic contest. Devising and executing plans that increase the chances of success is both a science and an art in athletics. In order to employ strategies successfully, one must be well acquainted with the constitutive or formal rule structure of a sport to determine what strategic actions are allowable and what are violations. Yet, strategy is not so simplistically defined in actual practice. Strategy has also become operationally defined as "using the rules" or knowing how to circumvent the rules and still gain a tactical advantage. This latter type of "strategy" has become so important that participants in many sports must learn not only the written rules, but the unwritten or normative rules of their sport in order to be accepted.

Normative rules, while often in violation of the formal rules, have a powerful influence over player behavior. McMurtry (1974) found that individuals failing to comply with normative rules pertaining to aggressive behavior in ice hockey were often negatively labeled and in some instances socially rejected by team members. McIntosh (1979) also provides supportive evidence for the importance of normative

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rule violating behavior among professional and amateur soccer players. For example, when asked if a male player in position to score should be brought down unmercifully, 70% of professional and 54% of the amateur athletes responded with agreement. Other types of compliance to rule violating such as toughness, deception, dishonesty, and the display of tactical anger were condoned and supported by the respondents.

Silva (1979) conducted a field experiment designed to measure the amount of affective guilt experienced following the exhibition of aggressive behavior in a sport setting (basketball) as compared to a nonsport setting. The results indicated that individuals in the sport setting experienced significantly less affective guilt than subjects exhibiting similar behavior in a nonsport setting. It was hypothesized that subjects participating in organized sport may unlearn internal prohibitions against rule violating behavior (aggression is but one type) through a process of socialized legitimacy. Because rules as well as rule violating behaviors are learned, it was suggested that the longer one receives social learning in organized sport the more salient the perception that normative rule violations are legitimate behaviors.

There appears to be some evidence, from the sport of ice hockey, that would support the contention that a social learning process which fosters normative rule violating behavior is influenced by the level of organized play. Smith (1974; 1975) has reported that young ice hockey players model themselves after the play of their professional heroes who often exhibit violent behaviors during game play. As young participants “move up the competitive ladder” the same actions exhibited by their pro models become expected of them. Smith (1975) has also noted that approval for fighting, a rule violating behavior in ice hockey, increases from sources such as parents, coaches, and teammates as the competitive level of organized play increases.

McIntosh’s (1979) study of soccer players and Webb’s (1969) study, which tested over 1200 subjects from grades 3, 6, 8, 10, and 12 each found that participants’ attitudes toward fairness in competition were adversely affected as the length of involvement in organized sport increased. Basically, the results from these two studies found participants became less concerned about process (fairness) and more concerned about outcome (winning) as their length of involvement in organized play increased.

Although length of participation in organized sport may influence the legitimization of rule violating behavior, there is some evidence that the nature of the sport may also play a role in the social learning process. Research by Widmeyer and Birch (1979) and Vaz (1979) has found that rule violating aggressive behavior in the collision sport of ice hockey is often viewed by coaches and participants as related to enhanced performance. Because the rule violating aggression is “functional,” it is encouraged and fostered in this sport (Silva, 1981). More rule violating behaviors can potentially receive normative or legitimate status as the amount of physical contact/collision inherent in the sport increases. For example, fighting (an extreme act of rule violating aggression) has normative status in the collision sport of ice hockey, but not in the contact sport of basketball. Since noncontact, contact, and collision sport forms have different rule and rule reinforcement structures governing the nature of acceptable play, it would not be unexpected to find participants’ perceptions of “legitimate behavior” varying as a function of the amount of physical contact/collision implicit in their sport.

While the length of participation in organized sport and the nature of the sport form are two important issues that can potentially influence the perceived legitimacy
of rule violating behavior, another variable of importance needs to be considered. This variable is the gender of the participant. Gilligan (1977) has noted that differences in the socialization of males and females contributes to divergent moral ideologies regarding fairness, sensitivity for the rights of others, and detachment or impersonalization in the decision-making process. To date, the male moral ideology generally tends to be less concerned with fairness and sensitivity, yet more detached and impersonal. Thus, males may more readily socialize other males to accept rule violating behavior as coolly calculated, expected behavior in the competitive environment of organized sport.

Utilizing the results from related literature and employing a social learning perspective that assumes generalized expectancies for behavior to influence actual behavioral output (Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972), the purpose of the present study was to determine if rule violating behavior depicted in a series of action slides was perceived to be legitimate sport behavior. Additionally, differences in the perceived legitimacy of rule violating sport behavior as a function of subject gender, the amount of physical contact/collision characteristic of the sport played, the highest competitive level of organized sport played, and the number of years the respondent had participated in organized sport were examined. Four basic hypotheses were generated for testing: (a) the social learning received by females toward legitimizing rule violating behavior will be significantly different from that received by males. Specifically, females will perceive fewer rule violating behaviors as acceptable or legitimate as compared to male respondents; (b) as the amount of physical contact/collision characteristic of the sport played by a respondent increases (none, noncontact, contact, collision, combination), perceptions of legitimacy for rule violating behavior will also increase; (c) as the level of participation in organized sport increases (none, youth, high school, college), perceptions of legitimacy for rule violating behavior will also increase; (d) as the number of years a respondent has participated in organized sport increases (none, 1-5, 6-10, 11-above), perceptions of legitimacy for rule violating behavior will also increase. Hypotheses b through d all predict a positive linear trend for both male and female respondents. The type of relationships predicted for the data suggest that while females’ overall ratings of perceived legitimacy for rule violating sport behavior are lower than males, both genders’ ratings are influenced considerably by the nature and length of their participating in organized sport.

Method

Slide Selection

A series of 12 slides were selected that illustrated rule violating behavior in the sports of baseball, basketball, football, ice hockey, and soccer. All slides depicted male athletes participating at the collegiate or professional level. These 12 slides were shown to a panel of college coaches (n = 9) and professors in physical education (n = 7). The panel was asked to rate how clearly each slide depicted a rule violating behavior on a scale of 1 to 4 (very ambiguous, ambiguous, clear, extremely clear). Seven slides received a mean rating of 3.3 or above with response intercorrelations of .865 among coaches, .826 among professors, and .854 between coaches and professors. These seven slides and one additional slide, demonstrating acceptable player
behavior, were chosen as the stimuli to be rated by subjects. Slide 1 exhibited two ice hockey players fighting, Slide 2 a brushback pitch in baseball, Slide 3 a trip on a driving basketball player, Slide 4 an elbow to the upper body-neck area of a soccer player moving in on goal, Slide 5 two players going up for a rebound in basketball (appropriate behavior), Slide 6 spearing in football, Slide 7 slashing in ice hockey, and Slide 8 a high arm tackle in football (clothes lining).

Subjects

The subjects were 203 male and female undergraduate and graduate students (age 19-26) representing various academic departments. Subjects were requested to participate in a study designed to determine: (a) the degree of accuracy students possess in appropriately classifying various sport behaviors and (b) the acceptability-unacceptability of various behaviors exhibited in sport. Subject participation was voluntary and recruitment took place in physical education activity courses, introductory psychology courses, and social psychology courses.

Procedure

Subjects were scheduled in groups of 10 to 12 individuals. Subjects were seated in a dimly lighted room and were given a consent form and a cover sheet that required them to indicate their age, gender, sport participated in at the youth sport, high school, and/or college level, highest level of organized sport participation, and years of participation in organized sports. The subjects were informed that they would be shown a series of eight slides. Each slide would be projected for a period of 10 sec. During this period they should note the following on the answer form provided: (a) the sport being played, (b) the primary behavior or act being portrayed on the slide, and (c) in their own opinion, how acceptable or legitimate would it be for them (the respondent) to exhibit the behavior shown at some point during the game. Each answer form had the slide number and space for the identification of the sport form and the labeling of the behavior depicted. A 4-point scale appeared below each response space (totally unacceptable, unacceptable, acceptable, totally acceptable) with the numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) appearing in ascending order above each response choice. Subjects simply circled the desired number that corresponded with their level of perceived legitimacy. At the end of the series each slide was reshown for an interval of 5 sec.

Data Selection

Response Validity. At the conclusion of all testing each subject's answer form was examined to determine its validity for analysis. Each subject was required to identify the sport being played and the primary behavior or act portrayed on the slide. Only subjects who were able to accurately provide this information were used in the analysis of the data. If a subject could not identify the sport or thought they were viewing an action other than the behavior intended to be projected their data were not used. In essence, they were not rating the legitimacy of slashing in ice hockey if they did not know that the behavior projected was slashing. Thirty-six (17.7\%) of the original 203 subjects tested were unable to identify either the correct sport(s) or behavior(s) projected. Thus, the actual data analyzed were based on 167
subjects \((n = 89\) male; \(n = 78\) female) who accurately identified the sport forms and the behaviors projected on the slides.

**Variable Coding.** Subject classification for the amount of physical contact was numerically coded in an ascending order (no participation, noncontact, contact, collision, combination). Noncontact sports were operationally classified as baseball, softball, swimming, track and field, and volleyball. Contact sports were operationally classified as basketball, field hockey, lacrosse (women’s), soccer, and wrestling. Collision sports were operationally classified as football, ice hockey, lacrosse (men’s), and rugby (men’s and women’s). Categorization of a sport into noncontact, contact, or collision groupings was based upon the degree that physical contact is an implicit (as opposed to incidental) part of appropriate player behavior. For example, in baseball physical contact at any base between a sliding base runner and the defensive player is incidental, not required, and extremely well defined in the formal rule structure. Sports such as basketball and soccer allow considerable physical contact between opponents; however, extreme contact or collisions are not implicit or required actions of these sports. Football, ice hockey, lacrosse (men’s), and rugby are all sports that have contact and collision behaviors as integral pre-designed aspects of appropriate goal-directed behavior.

Subjects who participated in sports that came from two or more of the three categories (noncontact, contact, collision) were placed in the combination category. The majority of subjects who fit into this category were males (see Figure 1) and had participated in a combination of contact/collision sports. Thus, it was assumed that the additive effect of participation in a combination of contact/collision sports provided monotonic properties to the categorization scale which is based on amount of physical contact. The highest level of organized sport participation and the number of years participation in organized sports were also numerically coded in an ascending order.

**Results**

Subjects’ scores on the seven slides depicting rule violating behavior were analyzed using linear regression and polynomial regression analyses. The possible range of perceived legitimacy scores was from 7 (total unacceptability) to 28 (total acceptability).

**Gender Analysis**

A regression analysis indicated that there was a significant negative linear trend for the gender factor, \(F(1,162) = 184.66, p < .001\). Males \((n = 89; M = 21.4)\) clearly perceived the behaviors depicted on the slides as more legitimate than did the female respondents \((n = 78; M = 15.2)\). The overall mean for the total sample of 167 was 18.5, with a standard deviation of 4.1. The gender factor alone accounted for 57.1% of the variability in the perceived legitimacy rating scores.

**Categorical Variables**

Polynomial regression analyses were employed in order to determine the
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Figur.e 1 - Amount of physical contact and perceived legitimacy ratings.

nature of any trends for the categorical variables (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973). The results of each analysis will be presented separately.

Amount of Physical Contact. Polynomial regression on the amount of physical contact characteristic in the sport(s) played indicated a significant positive linear trend for the responses of males. Ratings of perceived legitimacy increased as function of males participating in particular sports (see Figure 1). This positive linear trend yielded a significant $F (1,84) = 59.23, p < .001$. The analysis of female data demonstrated a significant quadratic trend $F (1,73) = 3.99, p < .04$. Inspection of the trend indicated slightly elevated scores for females who have not participated in organized sport and for females who have participated in collision or a combination of sports. Females participating in noncontact and contact sports, however, had slightly lower mean ratings of perceived legitimacy (see Figure 1). Because the number of females participating in collision or in a combination of sport forms is very low, this trend should be viewed cautiously. The mean scores for females at all points on the figure indicate less perceived legitimacy than indicated by the males. In addition to lower perceived legitimacy scores, female mean scores generally indicate ratings of unacceptability while male mean scores in the categories from contact through combination clearly indicate ratings of acceptability for the rule violating behavior depicted.

Years Participation. Polynomial regression on the number of years subjects

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-/-

MALES [N=18] [N=19] [N=18] [N=21] [N=16]

FEMALES [N=15] [N=22] [N=27] [N=2] [N=2]
had participated in organized sport resulted in a significant positive linear trend for the responses of males. Ratings of perceived legitimacy increased as a function of the number of years played (see Figure 2) and the trend was significant, $F(1,85) = 45.06, p < .001$. The female data resulted in a significant quadratic trend $F(1,74) = 8.24, p < .005$. Inspection of this trend indicates that females who have not participated and females who participated in organized sports for 11 years or more had slightly higher mean ratings of perceived legitimacy. Females who participated for 1-5 years or 6-10 years, however, had lower ratings of perceived legitimacy (see Figure 2). Males generally rated the behaviors depicted as acceptable, while female mean scores indicate ratings of unacceptability.

**Highest Level of Organized Sport.** Polynomial regression on the highest level of organized sport played also resulted in a significant positive linear trend for males, $F(1,85) = 50.23, p < .001$. Ratings of perceived legitimacy increased as the level of organized sport participation went higher (see Figure 3). The trend for the female data yielded a significant quadratic trend, $F(1,74) = 4.81, p < .03$. Inspection of this trend indicates that females who have not participated and females who have participated at the college level had slightly higher mean ratings of perceived legitimacy, while females who participated only at the youth sport or participated at the high school level had lower ratings of perceived legitimacy (see Figure 3). Mean ratings for males, once again, indicated general acceptability while female mean
ratings indicated that they perceived the behaviors as unacceptable.

Pairwise Comparisons. Intercorrelations between the three categorical variables (amount of contact, years, level) all equalled or exceeded .86 indicating a considerable amount of redundancy in the data. Therefore, as suggested by Kerlinger and Pedhazur (1973), only one post-hoc analysis was done on the data. A Newman-Keuls analysis was computed on the data for the highest level of organized sport variable with \( p < .05 \). This categorical variable was selected for analysis since it had the lowest intercorrelation values with the other categorical variables.

The results of this analysis indicated no significant pairwise differences among the female means. Female youth sport and high school sport participants' ratings of perceived legitimacy were significantly lower than male ratings at any level. Female nonsport participants and college sport participants ratings of perceived legitimacy were significantly lower than the ratings provided by male high school and college participants. Male nonsport participants and youth sport participants' ratings of perceived legitimacy did not significantly differ from each other, but were significantly lower than male high school and college participants' ratings. Male high school and college participants' ratings of perceived legitimacy did not significantly differ from each other.

Figure 3 — Highest level of organized sport participation and perceived legitimacy ratings.
Discussion

The major objective of this study was to determine if the perceived legitimacy of rule violating sport behavior is systematically influenced by a respondent's gender, the amount of physical contact characteristic in the sport(s) played, the years participation in organized sport, or the highest level of participation in organized sport. The results indicated that the gender of an individual significantly influenced perceptions of legitimacy. Females not only rated the projected rule violating behaviors as unacceptable, but had lower ratings than males at every sampling point on all of the categorical variables assessed. This gender difference seems to indicate that female socialization toward potentially dangerous rule violating sport behavior does not legitimize this type of behavior to the same extent present for males.

The nature of the trends for each gender also offered divergent results. The trends for males were clearly linear and positive. This finding indicated that the more "physical" the participation, the longer one had been involved in sport, or the higher the competitive level of participation, the more legitimate rule violating behavior was perceived.

Females, however, actually had lower ratings of perceived legitimacy as a function of participating in noncontact or contact sports, participating for from 1-5 or 6-10 years, or participating at youth sport or high school levels only. Thus, it appears that some forms of sport participation may actually serve to decrease the legitimacy of rule violating behavior for female participants. The slightly elevated mean score for females who never have participated in sports may be related to a "common culture" orientation. That is, never having experienced "in-sport socialization" they may relate more to the orientation of significant males who may or may not participate in sports. This vicarious interaction in the absence of any direct socialization in organized sport could explain the rise in the female nonparticipants mean toward the mean for male nonparticipants. Females playing collision sports or a combination of sports, as well as females who have participated for 11 or more years or participated at the college level, also show a slight rise in the perceived legitimacy ratings. This may demonstrate some increase in the socialization toward legitimacy for rule violating behavior in the higher competitive levels of female sport. It is important to note, however, that the post-hoc analysis indicated that these differences within the female groupings were nonsignificant. Thus, the perception that rule violating sport behavior is not acceptable is consistent in the female respondents and was not altered significantly by the categorical variables assessed.

Perceived legitimacy for the male respondents was significantly greater for high school and college level participants as compared to male nonparticipants and youth sport participants. This finding suggests that for male athletes, socialization toward accepting rule violating behavior may be most intense at these higher competitive levels. These findings are supportive of Brown (Note 1) and Kleiber and Roberts (1981) research on the effects of sport socialization. Brown (Note 1) found that males participating in contact/collision sports were significantly more willing to accept violent behavior as a way of solving problems as compared to noncontact athletes or nonathletes. As mentioned previously, violent player behavior is but one form of rule violating behavior and some of the slides utilized in the present study could be considered illustrative of violent rule violating behavior. Kleiber and Roberts' (1981) research provided evidence that sport competition seems to have the effect of reducing some prosocial behaviors in male participants. It is entirely possi-
ble that the outcome-oriented environment of competitive sports contributes to the development of acceptance of noncontesting behaviors such as violence, cheating, and other asocial actions. At the present, the available research tends to indicate that these effects are pronounced for male sport participants and much less obvious for female participants. As females become increasingly involved in highly competitive organized sports it will be interesting to see if female participants’ perceptions of legitimacy for rule violating sport behavior change.

Examination of the males’ results indicates that it is entirely possible that in order to enhance continuation in organized sport, male athletes (especially in contact and collision sports) must learn and follow expectancies for normative rule violating behavior. This is essentially what McMurtry (1979), Smith (1975), and Vaz (1979) have all reported in their research for the sport of ice hockey. The present study, utilizing a more diverse sample of athletic populations, tends to support this idea for male participants. Additionally, it is extremely important to note the strong linear trends in the male data for years of participation and highest level of organized competition. Players learn the rules and they also learn to violate them. Males who have participated at higher competitive levels or for longer periods of time, regardless of the nature of their sport, perceive rule violating behaviors as more legitimate. If these individuals are the “survivors” of the sport socialization process, one might legitimately question the nature and quality of the sport experience they survived. If, as suggested, increased sport socialization tends to facilitate the perceived legitimacy of rule violating behaviors there appears to be a need for a clearer discrimination between acceptable and unacceptable player behavior among male participants. The responsibility for equitable play and the development of “character” should be a consideration that is translated in one’s teaching and coaching methodologies beyond the level of philosophical discourse. Yet, until various sports modify their rule structures in a manner that renders rule violating behavior as dysfunctional rather than functional, coaches and players will continue to be placed in the difficult position of choosing between appropriate behaviors that result in tactical disadvantages or inappropriate behaviors that result in tactical advantages.

Reference Note


References


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