

Evaluation of Moral Decision Making of Student Athletes on Sports Policies and Ethical Issues

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Abstract: This descriptive correlational method study is strongly based on the study of Donovan, Jalleh and Gucciardi (2015). They prescribe the research package, including standard questionnaires on: 1) moral identity, 2) sportpersonship, 3) moral disengagement, and 4) moral decision – making to assist organizations (Donovan, et al., 2015) in measuring athletes’ beliefs and behaviors with respect to their performance. This study therefore concludes that the younger the age of the student-athlete respondents the less their experience and engagement in terms of the decision making in sports. Most of the athletes are into playing basketball as this is one of the flagship sports in China. In sports, cheating can damage relationships and go against the principle of fair play, which emphasizes playing by the rules when competing. Fair play, morality, and general goodwill toward an opponent are concepts that sportsmanship encompasses. Morality is a strong component of sport participation. Moral disengagement is a set of psychological mechanisms used to disengage transgressive behavior from the self-sanctions that keep behavior in line with moral standards in playing sports. In sport, moral character is related to many aspects including cheating in sports. Student-Athletes has moral character to stay fair in sports. This study developed a modular program on sports values for student athletes in the universities.

1. The Problem and Its Setting

It has been more than 25 years since Sports Law of the People’s Republic of China (“PRC Sports Law”) was passed. Generally, this law remains unchanged; yet in 2020, other areas of law have been amended especially those overlapping with sports, encompassing civil, criminal, and intellectual property law[1] (Lexology, 2022).

This present study involves moral disengagement that involves moral justification, euphemistic

labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, dehumanization, attribution of blame, distortion of consequences, and diffusion of responsibility[2] (Bandura, 1991 in Donovan, Jalleh and Gucciardi; 2015); and moral decision making that focuses on acceptance of cheating, keeping winning in proportion, and acceptance of gamesmanship[2] (Donovan, Jalleh and Gucciardi; 2015). Both moral disengagement and moral decision-making entail policies and ethical issues in sports especially this 21st century.

As a physical education teacher and basketball coach, the researcher assumes that malicious fouls, doping, fighting and other immoral behaviors in competitive games may be considered a violation of sports ethics. The researcher thinks that some athletes believe that sports demand passion and victory. They seem completely unaware of sports moral standards. This study is deemed relevant among campus sports where student athletes compete in various sports events to represent their university and country. This self – evaluation on moral may serve as their moral compass to decision making in sport policies and ethical issues.

1.1.Statement of the Problem

This study intends to evaluate the moral decision – making of student-athlete-respondents on sports policies and sports ethical issues.

1. What is the profile of the student-athlete-respondents in terms of:
 - 1.1 Age;
 - 1.2 Sports Played;
 - 1.3 Years of Playing?
2. What is the assessment of the student respondents regarding the moral decision making of student athletes on sports policies and ethical issues in terms of:
 - 2.1 moral identity;
 - 2.2 sportsmanship;
 - 2.3 moral disengagement;
 - 2.4 decision making?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the profile of the student-athlete-respondents and their moral decision-making?
4. Based on the findings of the study, what modular program on sports values may be developed for the student – athletes?

1.2.Scope and Delimitation

This study is strongly based on the study of Donovan, Jalleh and Gucciardi (2015). They prescribe the research package, including standard questionnaires on: 1) moral identity, 2) sportspersonship, 3) moral disengagement, and 4) moral decision – making to assist organizations[2] (Donovan, et al., 2015) in measuring athletes' beliefs and behaviors with respect to their performance. Thus, this present study adapted these questionnaires since they focus on sports policies and ethical issues that involve evaluation of the moral decision making of student athletes in various sports events or competitions.

Donovan et al., (2015) strongly recommend this readily available and user-friendly tool with practical implications for interventions by facilitating research, evaluation efforts, and intervention activities by agencies and other interested parties that may lack expertise to conduct relevant research and utilize the findings of their study.

Therefore, this study employed this recommended tool that provides a comprehensive guide for the standard questionnaire (Section 1 in Donovan et al., 2015) and a suite of questionnaire modules (Section 5 in Donovan et al., 2015) for measuring athletes' responses in each of the Sport Drug

Control Model's domains; guidelines on methodological issues for collecting data from athletes (i.e., various sampling methods and interviewing modes) in (Section 2 in Donovan et al., 2015); guidelines for analyses and interpretations of survey data, along with recommended actions where the data indicate areas requiring attention (Section 3 in Donovan et al., 2015).

The comprehensive guide helped the researcher with a detailed step by step process to conduct an evaluation according to the variables indicated in the four prescribed questionnaires, the basis of the prescribed number of items and the Likert Scale, sample size, data analysis; and development of intervention based on the findings of this study.

This study was conducted in the three universities, namely Hunan University of Arts and Science, Hengyang Normal University, and Shaoyang University in Hunan, China. The respondents of the study will be student athletes who will evaluate themselves in terms of the following: 1) moral identity, 2) sportspersonship, 3) moral disengagement, and 4) moral decision – making to assist organizations (Donovan, et al., 2015). The first two variables evaluate the respondents as a person and student athlete; while the next two variables evaluate their competitiveness and fair play in sport.

This study developed a modular program on sports values for student athletes in the universities.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is strongly framed from the Fairness or Justice Approach of John Rawls (1921-2002) as cited in Bonde and Firenze (2013), who argued, that just ethical principles are those that would be chosen by free and rational people in an initial situation of equality. It is considered fair or just because it provides a procedure for what counts as a fair action, and does not concern itself with the consequences of those actions. Fairness of starting point is the principle for what is considered just. This study emphasizes moral decision making that entails fair play of student athletes. This moral decision making involves acceptance of cheating, keeping winning in proportion, and acceptance of gamesmanship (as cited in Donovan, Jalleh and Gucciardi; 2015)

Bonde and Firenze (2013) explain that ethics provides a set of standards for behavior that helps a person, like an athlete, decide how he ought to act in a range of situations. Thus, ethics is all about making choices, and about providing reasons for these choices. They clarify that a good system of law should be ethical, but the law establishes precedent in trying to dictate universal guidelines, and is thus not able to respond to individual contexts. Both law and ethics deal with questions of how a person, like an athlete, should live together with others, but ethics is sometimes also thought to apply to how individuals act even when others are not involved. Xiuchang (2014) synthesizes sports ethics as the human relations established during sports process, and the principles people shall observe when dealing with those relations [3].

In this study, international and China laws and policies in sports as well as sports ethics are taken as context of sports and student athletes in selected universities in China. Bonde and Firneze further delineate morality for the state of virtue; while ethics as a code that enables morality, provides a rational basis for morality, thus, provides good reasons for something is moral. This study highlights the evaluation of moral decision making of student athletes in sports policies and ethical decisions.

Moreover, this study is strongly framed from Virtue Approach since ethics in sports entails virtues of athletes. Hanson and Savage (2012) point out that ethics in sport requires four key virtues: fairness, integrity, responsibility, and respect [4]. Fairness demonstrates that all athletes must follow established rules and guidelines of their respective sport; promotes fair competitive advantage; is inclusive of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Integrity illustrates that any athlete demonstrates personal integrity and the integrity of the game. Responsibility requires players to take responsibility for their performance and their actions; requires that players be up to date on the rules

and regulations governing their sport; demands that players conduct themselves in an honorable way off the field, Respect expects all athletes should show respect for teammates, opponents, coaches, and officials.

In this study, these virtues are encompassed in sportpersonship which refers to the extent to which an individual endorses or rejects behaviors that carry moral connotations because they relate to issues of respect, fairness, and the rules of their sport (Vallerand et al., 1997 in Donovan et al., 2015). Moreover, Xiuchang (2014) synthesizes fair, righteous and open, honest, sincere and true as sports ethics [3].

Therefore, Hanson and Savage (2012) recommend that sportsmanship model is built on the idea that sport both demonstrates and encourages character development, which then influences the moral character of the broader community [4]. How an athlete competes in sports can have an effect on his personal moral and ethical behavior outside of the competition.

Conceptual Paradigm

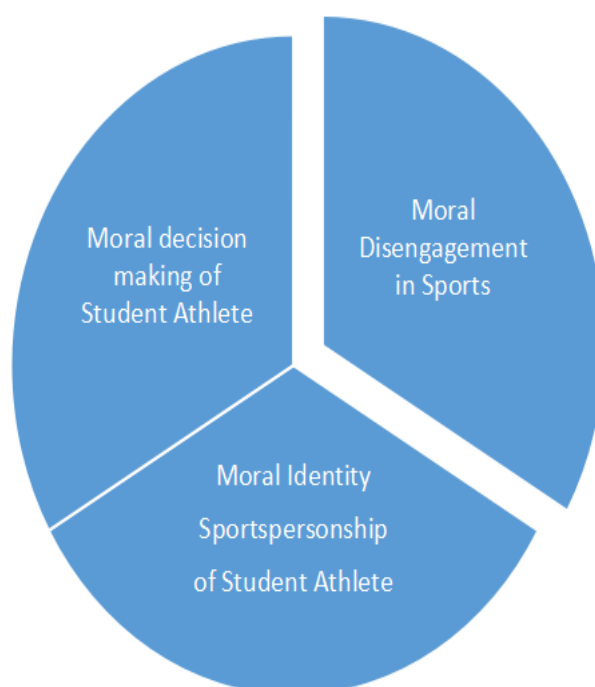


Figure 1. Self – Evaluation of Student Athletes

Figure 1 shows the self – evaluation of student athletes on moral identity, sportspersonship, moral disengagement, and moral decision making.

The respondents will evaluate themselves as a person and student athlete. This study believes that evaluation must begin with the student athlete himself/herself because only him/her can account for such evaluation that entails reflection and decision. Moral identity involves internal view of oneself and a public dimension. Sportsmanship includes respect for social conventions, rules, and the officials, one’s full commitment toward sport participation, one’s opponent, and a negative approach toward the practice of sport [5].

The paradigm shows a portion that disengages from the whole. This clearly illustrates moral disengagement that may involve a student athlete in any of the following: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, displacement of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame [6]. Any of

these disengagements which may relate to his/her moral identity and sportspersonship; then test or lead him/her to moral decision making.

Thus, moral decision making is supposed to be placed parallel to moral disengagement to illustrate that a student athlete should weigh any of these disengagements to arrive at a moral decision. Moreover, moral decision making situates a student athlete to weigh or evaluate acceptance of cheating, keeping winning in proportion, acceptance of gamesmanship. Moral decision making is attached to moral identity and sportspersonship to show that these must go together such that a person and athlete must weigh and balance his/her moral identity and sportspersonship in making moral decision.

3. Research Methodology

This chapter discusses the research method to be used in gathering, analyzing and interpreting data. It also includes the research design, research locale, population and sampling, data gathering procedure and statistical treatment of data to be gathered to accomplish the study.

3.1. Research Design

This descriptive correlational method determines the relationship of moral identity, sportspersonship, moral disengagement, and moral decision making in sports policies and ethical issues of the student athletes with the profile variables taken as test factors.

This study conducted a self – evaluation on the moral decision making of the student athletes in sports policies and ethical issues. The four standardized questionnaires on moral identity, sportspersonship, moral disengagement, and moral decision making (Donovan et al., 2015) were utilized to obtain the relevant data for the purpose of this study.

This study hopes to develop a modular program on sports values for student athletes in the universities.

3.2. Research Locale

This study was conducted in the three universities, namely Hunan University of Arts and Science, Hengyang Normal University, and Shaoyang University in Hunan, China. The respondents of the study are student athletes who evaluated themselves in terms of the following: 1) moral identity, 2) sportspersonship, 3) moral disengagement, and 4) moral decision – making to assist organizations (Donovan, et al., 2015). The first two variables evaluate the respondents as a person and student athlete; while the next two variables evaluate their competitiveness and fair play in sport.

3.3. Sampling Technique

This study targeted three universities in Hunan Province where the student athletes are studying and playing/competing in various sports events to represent their school.

This study adapted the guide of Donovan et al., (2015) in determining the appropriate sample size (without having to refer to formulae). They recommend to identify the size of the population of interest and the margin of error (degree of accuracy) that is acceptable. A margin of error of 0.05 means that the sample proportion for a measured outcome is plus or minus 5% of the actual proportion in the population of interest. (See Table on Sample size calculation at 95% confidence level in Donovan et al., 2015)

Since the population of full – time students in every university is between 24, 000 and 26, 000 or an average of 25,000; thus a sample size of 378 respondents is required to obtain a proportion on

any question that is within plus or minus 5% of the population of 25, 000 at a confidence level of 95%. However, it is important to note that at the time this study is being proposed, the researcher has no access yet to the accurate population of the student athletes per university. In case the actual data are provided to the researcher upon the consent of the university administrator, then this sample size was recomputed. This study used the following criteria as guide to qualify the respondents: Any course offered in the three selected universities, Sports played by the student athletes, Years of Playing must be inclusive of the 4 – year bachelor’s degree program, Sports Organization Affiliation.

Table 1. shows the total number of samples and the amount of samples drawn

University	Total Population	Sample Size
Hunan University of Arts and Science	25,500	133
Hengyang Normal University	24,000	125
Shaoyang University	26,887	140
Total	76, 387	398

3.4. Instrumentation

This study is strongly based on the study of Donovan, Jalleh and Gucciardi (2015), who prescribe the use of the standard questionnaires on: 1) moral identity, 2) sportspersonship, 3) moral disengagement, and 4) moral decision – making to assist organizations (Donovan, et al., 2015) of the student athletes. Thus, this study adapted these questionnaires since they focus on sports policies and ethical issues that involve an evaluation of the moral decision making of student athletes in various sports events or competitions.

Therefore, this study employed this recommended tool that provides a comprehensive guide for the standard questionnaire (Section 1 in Donovan et al., 2015) and a suite of questionnaire modules (Section 5 in Donovan et al., 2015) for measuring athletes’ responses in each of the Sport Drug Control Model’s domains.

The comprehensive guide helped the researcher with a detailed process and steps to conduct an evaluation according to the variables indicated in the four prescribed questionnaires, and the basis of the prescribed number of items (Donovan et al., 2015). This study considered self – evaluation questionnaires since the researcher believes that the student – respondents themselves can account for their own moral decision making in sports policies and ethical issues.

3.5. Statistical Treatment of Data

Microsoft Excel and Statistical Package for Social Sciences were used in treating the gathered data in this study. Frequency count and percentage were used to describe the profile of the student-athlete-respondents.

Weighted mean was used to describe the moral decision making of the student-athlete-respondents and the following Likert Scale was used:

Table 2. The moral decision making of the student-athlete-respondents

Mean Range	Verbal Description	Verbal Interpretation
3.25 – 4.00	Strongly Agree	The moral decision making is consistently observed.
2.50 – 3.24	Agree	The moral decision making is observed.
1.75 – 2.49	Disagree	The moral decision making is less observed.
1.00 – 1.74	Strongly Disagree	The moral decision making is not at all observed.

Table 2 shows the mean and descriptive significance of the student-athlete-respondent ethical decision-making

Lastly, Spearman rho was used to determine if there is a significant relationship between the profile of the student-athlete-respondents and their moral decision making.

4. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

This chapter presents the summary of findings based on the gathered data following the problems cited in this study. This also includes the conclusions drawn and the recommendations based on the results of the study.

4.1. Summary

4.1.1. Profile of the Respondents

The findings show that majority of the student-athlete-respondents are 19 to 21 years old. The result signifies that most of the respondents are in their middle year in their college journey. The respondents are into acquiring experiences in sports such as moral identity, sportsmanship, moral disengagement, and decision making. At this age, they have experienced how to deal with their own decision making and be with different people with diverse experiences according to their age.

Moreover, majority of the student-athlete respondents play basketball. This result established that the history of playing basketball in China is one of the most played sports. Most of the students' especially male students are into playing basketball. Basketball has been in China for a long time, longer than most people realize. In fact, Basketball was introduced to China in 1895; this was only 4 years after it was first invented in America. Since basketball has played in China for such a long time it has been established as a treasured sport in the country.

The sport was also popularized by the Chinese army as a training and team-building sport. This then spread into schools and developing neighborhoods. Also, basketball courts were a better investment for urban investment. This is because they took up less space. Moreover, Chinese government is in full support in providing access, awareness, budget and facilities in playing sports and other physical activities.

4.1.2. Moral Decision Making of the Student-Athlete-Respondents in Terms of Moral Identity

The findings show that majority of the respondents choose the statement 1 “It would make me feel good to be a person and athlete who has good moral”. This only means that moral is really important and should be shown in the daily life even in playing sports. Thus, we can get the concept of sports ethics, which will be the human relations established during sports process, and the principles people shall observe when dealing with those relations, such as “fair, righteous and open”; “Swifter, Higher and Stronger”; “Honest, sincere and true”, etc.. So, we can say that sports ethic category is a summary of various moral norms involved in relationships among referees, coaches, athletes, sports lovers, individuals and teams.

In Chinese ethics history, morality is mainly about adjustment of human relations and code of conduct, and sometimes the evaluation of good and evil, individual quality, cultivation and ideal state for people. Therefore, morality may be defined as follows: Morality is a special social ideology of superstructure determined by economic foundation, and also a code of conduct that has good and evil value attributes and is maintained by public opinion, traditional custom and innermost belief. While sports morality means the subjectivity spirit with which people participating in sports internalize the “moral behaviors” buried in sports ethics to be their individual characters and qualities, then pursue morality by their self-discipline conducts and try to surpass themselves in truly honest and fair sports activities.

4.1.3. Moral Decision Making of the Student-Athlete-Respondents in Terms of Sportsmanship

The findings show that majority of the respondents choose the statement 7 which is “I do not give up even after making many mistakes. This means that the student-athletes are determined to do their best at all times. Their passion and being self-driven are some of the good qualities of Chinese athletes to pursue their dreams. Majority of the Chinese athletes begin their Olympic journey at very young ages. For the glory of the country, most of them sacrifice their childhoods and grow up among coaches, officials and fellow athletes, usually away from their families so they can focus on training.

Moreover, Chinese government really provides support to the schools to hone their students in doing sports religiously. In fact, there are lots of sports schools in China and kids are encouraged to take up sports full time at a very young age. Also, there are subsidies and funding for the athletes who play the sport at a particular level. They do not have to worry about doing day jobs and taking out time for the sport.

4.1.4. Moral Decision Making of the Student-Athlete-Respondents in Terms of Moral Disengagement

As shown, item 2 “Bending the rules is a way of evening things up.” obtained the highest weighted mean of 3.59 verbally described as strongly agree while item 5 “A player should not be blamed for injuring an opponent if the coach reinforces such behavior.” obtained the lowest weighted mean of 1.73 verbally described as disagree. Overall, the student-athlete-respondents assessed their moral decision making in terms moral identity with an average weighted mean of 3.10 verbally described as agree.

The finding show that majority of the respondents choose the statement 2 “Bending the rules is a way of evening things up” has a highest weighted mean.

4.1.5. Decision Making of the Student-Athlete-Respondents in Terms of Decision Making

The findings show that the majority of the respondents choose the statement 1 “It is ok to cheat if nobody knows” has a highest weighted mean. This shows that the student-athletes don’t believe that they will cheat if other people are doing this. However, there are instances when student-athletes are tending to cheat if there is no one can see it. The decisions of the student-athletes vary depend on the situation. There is a need to conduct a consultation and briefing in terms of morality in decision making to make things right and to realize the importance of what is morally right in decision making.

The psychology of cheating in sports is a complex subject, and scientists are discovering more and more reasons why individuals break the rules, use performance-enhancing substances, or engage in other forms of cheating. The primary cause of sports fraud, though, is not at that complicated. Athletes strive for victory. The difference between first and second place at the top levels of sports is sometimes countless and enormous amounts of renown. Some athletes may consequently think that winning is the only thing that matters. For them, the fortune and fame that come with being the greatest outweigh the chance of being discovered and being branded a cheater. On the other hand, the statement 7 “If other people are cheating, I think I can too” has a lowest weighted mean.

4.1.6. Summary of the Moral Decision Making of the Student-Athlete-Respondents

The findings show that all variables in moral decision making of the student-athletes got the verbal description of agree. Given the great importance of morality and values in modern sports, especially among young athletes, in this study, the moral decision making observed in Chinese athletes can be divided into the following four categories such as moral identity, sportsmanship, moral disengagement, and decision making. Moral judgment in sport refers to the thought process that occurs when an athlete uses existing moral norms or standards to perceive moral phenomena in sport. The goal in sportsmanship is not simply to win, but to pursue victory with honor by giving one's best effort. Ethics in sport requires four key virtues: fairness, integrity, responsibility, and respect. All athletes and coaches must follow established rules and guidelines of their respective sport.

Moral values, rules, and virtues provide standards for morally acceptable decisions, without prescribing how we should reach them. However, moral theories do assume that we are, at least in principle, capable of making the right decisions. Consequently, an empirical investigation of the methods and resources we use for making moral decisions becomes relevant. We consider theoretical parallels of economic decision theory and moral utilitarianism and suggest that moral decision making may tap into mechanisms and processes that have originally evolved for nonmoral decision making. For example, the computation of reward value occurs through the combination of probability and magnitude; similar computation might also be used for determining utilitarian moral value. Both nonmoral and moral decisions may resort to intuitions and heuristics. Learning mechanisms implicated in the assignment of reward value to stimuli, actions, and outcomes may also enable us to determine moral value and assign it to stimuli, actions, and outcomes. In conclusion, we suggest that moral capabilities can employ and benefit from a variety of nonmoral decision-making and learning mechanisms.

4.1.7. Relationship Between the Profile of the Student-Athlete-Respondents and their Moral Decision Making

Age is positively correlated to sportsmanship, moral disengagement and moral decision making

by having correlation coefficients of .116, .173 and .107 respectively with corresponding significance or p-values of .020, .001 and .033. It means that older student-athlete-respondents are more consistent in terms of sportsmanship, moral disengagement and moral decision making.

Overall, there was a limited correlation between the profile variables and moral decision making of the student-athlete-respondents. Thus, the null hypothesis “There is no significant relationship between the profile of the student-athlete-respondents and their moral decision making” was not rejected. It implies that in general the moral decision making of the student-athlete-respondents had nothing to do with their profile.

4.2. Conclusions

1. The younger the age of the student-athlete respondents the less their experience and engagement in terms of the decision making in sports.

2. Most of the athletes are into playing basketball as this is one of the flagship sports in China.

3. In sports, cheating can damage relationships and go against the principle of fair play, which emphasizes playing by the rules when competing.

4. Fair play, morality, and general goodwill toward an opponent are concepts that sportsmanship encompasses.

5. Morality is a strong component of sport participation. Moral disengagement is a set of psychological mechanisms used to disengage transgressive behavior from the self-sanctions that keep behavior in line with moral standards in playing sports.

6. In sport, moral character is related to many aspects including cheating in sports. Student-Athletes has moral character to stay fair in sports.

4.3. Recommendations

1. Universities in China must encourage more young student-athletes to participate in different sport events to learn more values in sports including morality.

2. Coaches must provide a comprehensive consultation and discussion with the moral decision making of each athlete from the simple to complex situation.

3. Sports Administrators must provide a training-workshop for coaches and athletes in terms of moral decision making that will immerse them on the process of moral decision making.

4. Coaches must provide individual and team training to strengthen the moral and ethics of the student-athletes.

5. Coaches must incorporate activities in their training matrix that will enhance the critical thinking, logic and reasoning, problem solving and teamwork.

6. The University must provide more services related to sports psychology to deal with the dilemma and concerns of the athletes.

7. Coaches must utilize the proposed Sports' Moral Decision Making Plan

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