Moral Reasoning, Moral Action, and the Moral Atmosphere of Sport

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Moral Reasoning, Moral Action, and the Moral Atmosphere of Sport

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ABSTRACT Whether sport builds character is a perennial question. It has been argued separately that sport participation contributes to, detracts from, or is neutral when it comes to fostering certain valued traits and dispositions. In this paper we revisit this debate by examining the work of more recent and empirically based contributions to the debate (Bredemeier et al., 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1994). Rather than propose certain philosophical arguments to explicate the nature of the relationship between sport participation and character development, their empirical researches attempt to ascertain whether or not engaging in sport has a positive or detrimental effect on a persons’ character. Their methodology rejects the study of traits and dispositions and incorporates the cognitive developmental concept of moral judgment as a central character indicator. They consequently assess whether or not engaging in sport affects the maturity of the participants’ judgment. In this essay we argue that the reliability and validity of their research is damaged because of the problematic methodology employed. The research is not reliable because their methods combine insights from two different theories while staying loyal to neither. This is problematic since it is the originating theory that gives the method its raison d’être.

We argue that the validity of the research is similarly flawed because the complex and multifaceted concept of character is reduced to the narrowly defined and primarily cognitive ability of making judgments. We conclude with a plea for greater collaborative efforts in this thorny issue between philosophers and social scientists.

Introduction

In recent social science literatures many academics have attempted to investigate the celebrated idea that sport builds moral character from philosophical,\textsuperscript{1} sociological\textsuperscript{2} and psychological perspectives.\textsuperscript{3} Most recently a number of psychologists\textsuperscript{4} have adopted a range of methods to investigate the relationship between sport participation and moral character. To do this they eschew the lay methodological approach that focuses on the concept of character couched in terms of virtues and vices. Instead they rely upon a cognitive developmental concept of moral judgment taken from Kohlberg’s (1981) ground breaking psychology of moral development. Their research, however, is not exclusively reliant on Kohlbergian methods; rather it draws from an amalgam of different theoretical and methodological positions. In this paper we present a critique grounded in the problematic employment of an eclectic blend of both Kohlberg’s (1981) and Haan et al.’s (1985) theories of moral development. We argue that the primacy given to the concept of moral judgment in their research results in an oversimplified and reductive account of moral character. Moreover, we argue that the general parameters of cognitive developmental theory offered promotes an inadequate account of the moral milieu in which moral characters operate.

The Developmental Tradition

Before commenting on specific examples of research in sport, it will be helpful to examine briefly the history of the methodology employed to investigate moral character
and its development. One of the earliest attempts to examine the nature of character was the celebrated research of Hartshorne and May (1928). Unlike subsequent work in the cognitive development tradition, they attempted to identify the existence of certain virtues such as honesty, which feature in the vocabulary commonly associated with character. In a series of experiments with children, they attempted to characterize children as either ‘honest’ or ‘dishonest’. It was thought that a person who possessed the trait of ‘honesty’ would consistently exhibit this trait in their behaviour in accordance with their character. In a series of experiments, children were given certain tests to perform under school examination conditions. The first test was strictly supervised, however, in each subsequent test the level of supervision decreased. Hartshorne and May (1928) observed that as the supervision decreased so the incidence of dishonesty or cheating increased. The children were therefore considered inconsistent in their displays of honesty: they might be honest in the earlier tests but dishonest as the tests progressed. The results seemed at odds with the idea that honest behaviour was reflective of persistent or stable character traits. Honesty seemed more dependent on contextual influences than on the child’s character.

Kohlberg (1981) interpreted Hartshorne and May’s results as evidence against the existence of stable, context-independent, character traits and consequently rejected an account of moral character in dispositional terms. Kohlberg (1981), however, did not deny that there was a fundamental stable basis for moral character; he simply denied that it was to be found in dispositional terms (i.e. in terms of character traits where persons are characteristically disposed to act in certain regular and interrelated ways). For an alternative, Kohlberg turned to Piaget’s (1932) cognitive developmental tradition. Piaget (1932) argued that the defining feature of a child’s moral development was not the development of dispositional character traits. Instead he proposed that moral development was a species of cognitive development whereby cognitive maturity was a necessary but not a sufficient condition of moral maturity. Only when differentiated and adapted (mature) cognitive structures were in place could a child make mature (autonomous) moral judgments. Kohlberg (1981) followed Piaget’s lead and developed a comprehensive and complex theory of moral development founded on a partnership between cognitive psychology and formalist moral philosophy.

At the heart of Kohlbergian theory are three fundamentally important assumptions:

1. The defining feature of mature moral character is the ability to deduce, from impartial moral rules and principles, the right course of action in any particular situation.
2. Mature moral judgments emanate from, stable and universal underlying cognitive structures and reveal a subject’s maturity on an invariant (non-reversible) developmental sequence of three levels comprising six stages.
3. Examining the form of these moral judgments provides access to a person’s knowledge and understanding of these principles or rules.

**Kohlberg’s Levels and Stages of Moral Maturity**

Kohlberg’s levels and stages of moral maturity are summarized in Table 1. These stages, which reveal the extent of moral maturity, supply Kohlberg with the stable person-specific antecedents of moral behaviour absent from Hartshorne and May’s account. In order to determine a person’s stage of moral maturity, Kohlberg examined their moral judgments in response to certain moral dilemmas, most famously, the Heinz Dilemma.
### Table 1. Kohlberg’s levels of moral development (adapted from Kohlberg, 1981, pp. 17–19)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) Preconventional</td>
<td>Stage 1. Punishment and obedience orientation.</td>
<td>The self is the primary concern in moral considerations. Obedience is valued in its own right and the goodness of an action is determined by its physical consequences.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 2. The instrumental relativist orientation.</td>
<td>Value is judged in terms of instrumental worth to the self. There is an ‘eye for an eye’ conception of justice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(ii) Conventional</td>
<td>Stage 3. The interpersonal concordance level.</td>
<td>The morality of the given convention or society is adopted. Persons conform to their perception of the social norm.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 4. Society maintaining orientation.</td>
<td>Rules and norms of society are respected and give rise to certain duties.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(iii) Postconventional</td>
<td>Stage 5. The stage of prior rights or social contract.</td>
<td>Moral judgments are universal and impartial. The morally right thing to do is still determined by norms and rules, however, persons are actively involved in their construction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stage 6. The stage of universal ethical principles</td>
<td>A concern for universal ethical principles guides all action.</td>
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Heinz faced the prospect of having to steal a valuable drug to save his wife’s life. By examining the form of the subject’s responses to this hypothetical dilemma, Kohlberg could identify their stage of moral maturity. These stages provided Kohlberg with the benchmark against which he could gauge moral maturity and trace its development. Although Kohlberg’s theory features in some of the sports-related psychological research, it has certain methodological drawbacks in action contexts like sports. First, what is commonly focused upon by commentators of sport (scientific and lay) is immoral action: foul play, late tackles, illegal tactics employed in order to advance self/team interests against an opponent. These kinds of actions reveal a person’s moral maturity only if the form of the judgments, which is the basis for the researchers’ evaluations, can be reliably interpreted. Observation of the actions in sport, for Kohlberg’s methodology, is simply not sufficient. The problem with this of course is that moral dilemmas used by Kohlberg can only be implemented before or after the fact. Secondly, the time-compressed nature of sport action does not commonly afford the opportunity to contemplate a particular situation and then formulate a moral judgment. Action in sport is often re-action and players’ conduct is commonly described as ‘instinctive’. Other researchers also partly recognize the limits of Kohlberg’s theory applied in an action context like sport. This problem in particular led researchers to seek a more sport-friendly methodology supposedly found in Haan’s (1983) ‘interactional theory of morality’.

### Haan and the Importance of Moral Dialogue in the Development of Moral Character

Haan’s research into the theory of moral development focuses on peoples’ moral interaction with each other in concrete situations rather than focusing on abstract reasoning about hypothetical moral dilemmas. It immediately seems better suited to
TABLE 2. Haan’s phases and levels of moral maturity (adapted from Haan, 1978, pp. 288–289)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>(i) Assimilation phase</th>
<th>Seek moral balances which benefit the self</th>
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<tr>
<td>Level 1. Power balancing.</td>
<td>Balances are negotiated to reflect self-interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2. Egocentric balancing.</td>
<td>Acknowledgement of others interests but compromises only occur when beneficial to self.</td>
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<tr>
<th>(ii) Accommodation phase</th>
<th>Seek to maintain a moral balance for the group</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 3. Harmony balancing.</td>
<td>Recognition of group interests but perceived as no different from self-interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4. Common interest balancing.</td>
<td>Persons differentiate self-interest and group interests and seek balances to maintain group norms.</td>
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<th>(iii) Equilibrium phase</th>
<th>Seek to optimize everyone’s interests impartially.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Level 5. Mutual interest balancing.</td>
<td>Recognition of the necessity of moral balances to optimize the interest of all in all situations.</td>
</tr>
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sport if we can examine the actual playing of sport. The most significant difference between her research and Kohlberg’s, however, goes much deeper than this. For Haan moral maturity is characterized by the ability to construct fair and impartial moral solutions (referred to as ‘moral balances’) in interactive moral dialogues: it is not merely the cognitive ability to deduce the right course of action, from general moral principles, to particular circumstances. Moreover, Haan employs the concepts of ‘ego coping and defending’ from the psychoanalytic tradition. She argues that any given moral dialogue (more specifically the stress that any given dialogue may produce) may effect the adequacy or maturity of a person’s contribution to that said dialogue. In order to construct fair and impartial solutions, Haan et al. (1985) argue that one must tolerate certain ambiguities in a given situation (i.e. remain coping); one must not lose one’s temper (in, for example, ego defence) or enter the dialogue in bad faith. In other words, moral maturity in dialogue is not reducible to moral reasoning ability alone. Given this difference, the assessment of moral maturity differs accordingly. For Haan moral assessment involves structured observation of actual ‘moral dialogues’ and not simply the interpretation of the universality of moral judgments in response to hypothetical dilemmas. Haan, therefore did not present subjects with moral dilemmas, rather she stimulated and observed moral dialogues that ensued amongst groups of subjects when involved in role-playing games. Like Kohlberg, however, Haan’s theory does incorporate a mixture of moral phases and levels that describe increasingly adequate approaches or performances in moral dialogue. Unlike Kohlberg’s stages though, these phases and levels do not represent an invariant developmental sequence of cognitive structures. Instead, her levels describe a continuum of cognitive and affective skills, thoughts and emotions (Haan et al., 1985) required to achieve fair moral balances. Haan’s levels and phases are summarized in Table 2.

It is clear why Haan’s theory is more suitable for the moral evaluation of individuals in sport contexts. The interpersonal interaction involved in sporting contexts is much closer to a tacit or non-verbal moral dialogue than an explicit deductive process. Haan’s methods purportedly allow the direct empirical assessment of the moral skills and abilities that a given person employs in a moral dialogue and is therefore prima facie more suited for use in a sporting context. Following Haan et al. (1983, p. 68), Bredemeier (1994, p. 112) argues:
Morality of Sport

Moral dialogue can take many forms: formal negotiation, informal dialogue, non-verbal communication, indirect communication, and so on. Sport is replete with instances of moral dialogue as players negotiate the informal norms that guide their play.

In many sports the nature of the moral balance or understanding is often reached or at least negotiated early on in a contest. During the recent Rugby Union international between England and Scotland, the nature of the contest was established early on by some intimidatory physical confrontations. Similarly, the intensity of the first tackle in football, the first pitch or slide to base in baseball, the first delivery in cricket, characteristically set the tone for the nature of the ensuing contest. The balance can of course be re-negotiated during the contest. What may start out as a well mannered and fair game may soon change on account of a bad tackle, a poor decision by an official, the mood of the crowd and so forth. (Often violent play upsets the balance and retaliatory action may be used in order to restore it.)

We have briefly described two approaches that empirically quantify a person’s moral character. Both attempt to attribute scores based on the adequacy, either of moral judgment or performance, in moral dialogue. Haan’s theory purports to measure actual moral interaction in concrete contexts rather than measure deductive skills in hypothetical dilemmas. What both theories have in common, however, is that they see moral character as the ability to promote and or prescribe fair and impartial moral action. Moreover, this ability is thought to be a fairly stable feature of a person although it may be subject to certain contextually induced factors. In the next section we examine the application of these theories in sport.

Moral and Character Development in Sport Psychological Research

According to Haan (1983) adequate moral dialogue is characterized by impartial, even-handed, consideration of others’ wants, needs and goals. To display the requirements of Haan’s highest level, level 5, is to approach dialogue in a fair way. In sport, however, the goal (unlike in Haan’s moral dialogue) is not to equalize relations. The competitive principle in sport is precisely to secure victory (within the rules) which necessarily precludes the opponent(s) from doing the same. Games have a zero-sum structure: if you win then I must lose, and vice versa. Bredemeier and Shields (1984) argue that moral dialogues in sport, because of the necessary pursuit of self-interest involved, are likely to be more egocentric and less impartial in nature than in other contexts. In sport it is of distinct advantage to dominate and possibly bully the opponent. Any kind of physical or mental advantage is pressed in order to secure victory. This could be seen as selfish, egocentric, or self-interested behaviour and as such is the antithesis of morally mature moral action when judged against Kohlberg’s or Haan’s moral levels. Bredemeier and Shields (1984, p. 351) believe that:

... levels of moral reasoning about sport dilemmas would be significantly lower than levels of reasoning about life dilemmas. If the competitive sport structure is understood in our culture to encourage context-specific self-interests while discouraging moral dialogue, sport dilemmas may elicit lower levels of moral reasoning as contextually appropriate responses.

This idea that the sports contest necessarily requires self-interested action is borne out in the results of Bredemeier and Shields (1984). The results generally confirmed the hypothesis that reasoning in sport is more egocentric (less mature) than reasoning about
life according to Haan’s (1983) moral levels. Bredemeier and Shields (1986) tested the hypothesis further. Players were assessed immediately after an important game and scores were assigned based on their reasoning about themselves, rather than a hypothetical other, in a concrete situation. Again, the hypothesis that reasoning in sport is more egocentric was generally supported. This different and characteristically egocentric reasoning in competitive sport scenarios was labelled ‘game reasoning’. Shields and Bredemeier (1995, pp. 120–121) argue that ‘game reasoning’ is a kind of bracketed morality, just as sport is considered to be ‘hived off’ so reasoning in and about sport differs from reasoning in normal life:

We use the term bracketed morality to connote two points. First, the moral exchange that occurs in sport is different from that of daily life, where mature moral action is marked by attention to relational equalization in terms of obligations and benefits. Sport, however, is characterized by a greater degree of personal freedom and a lessening of relational responsibility. Focus on self-interest is not only allowed in sport, it is presupposed. But not all action supportive of self-interest is morally appropriate, even in sport; that is the second point. Bracketed morality connotes a form of moral action that is nested within a broader, more encompassing morality—the morality of everyday life.

Shields and Bredemeier (1995) also suggest that those engaged in sport at a high level where sport dominate their life, college football for example, fail to recognize this separate or bracketed nature of sport. To view sport as separate or different in this way may be problematic in light of the important part sport plays in our society. Sport is played at school, it dominates the media, it takes up our leisure time, sporting metaphors dominate our language and sports contests provide vehicles for the exhibition of national pride. It is not surprising then that the values of sport spill over in to every day life (such a distinction is one made by the research in question, it is not one to which we necessarily subscribe). Skelton (2000), for example, suggests that the values and norms surrounding football are significantly potent that they come to characterize and influence relationships and action outside the football context. Skelton argues that the values and norms of this sport (what we have called its ethos) are problematic since they are sexist and exclusive. Similarly, the values of a competitive and self-interested mindset that are important in sport are not acceptable in morally all contexts. We will return to these important matters later.

Kohlberg also accepted the role of the context inasmuch that the given context in which moral action occurs might influence the maturity of judgments made therein (Kohlberg & Higgins, 1987). He refers to the ‘moral atmosphere’ of a particular context (in one case, a prison population) where the prevailing norms and values of a given group effect a person’s moral reasoning. Bredemeier and Shields (1986) suggest that the phenomenon of ‘game reasoning’ as a characteristically egocentric approach to dialogue is a function of the prevailing ‘moral atmosphere’ of the sporting context (or what we prefer to call, its ethos). The fact that the phenomenon of ‘game reasoning’ was more prevalent in certain sports (basketball more than swimming) and for different populations (collegiate men more than women), illustrates that there is no such thing as a universal sporting moral atmosphere. The idea of a sporting ethos is therefore a particularist notion. This highlights an important weakness of some portions of the philosophical literature who adopt the formalist position that the rules define the activity so that the cheat (who flaunts the rules) cannot logically win the game (Lumpkin et al., 1994). Bredemeier and Shields’ (1984) research illustrates an important point against the formal-
ists: sports, especially those involving bodily contact, characteristically involve periods of negotiations about the norms and values that will guide the sporting action over and above mere formal rule observance. This process of negotiation is a crucial part of the ethos of each particular sport and varies between and across sports levels, ages, genders, and culturally too. Each game or sport at different levels generates its own moral atmospheres, has its own ethos, which in turn affects moral reasoning and action. Shields et al. (1995, p. 325) propose that:

Central to the concept of moral atmosphere is the idea that any group, over time, develops collective norms about appropriate behaviour on the part of group members.

The prevailing moral atmosphere is thought to be highly influential on the maturity of moral judgments. Shields et al. (1995, p. 325) argue that the, ‘… moral atmosphere characterizing a sport setting will play a significant role in mediating moral action’.

To summarize, by employing methodologies adapted and evolved from Kohlberg and Haan, with the firm belief that the concept of moral maturity is an important factor in a person’s character, the following empirically-driven conclusions are drawn:

(1) Those engaged in certain kinds of sport tend to reason less maturely about moral issues in sport than in everyday life (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984)

(2) This phenomenon labelled ‘game reasoning’ is attributed to the strong effect the moral atmosphere of the sporting context has on moral reasoning/action (e.g. Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996, p. 169).

Theoretical and Methodological Critique

These conclusions raise three different though connected problems. The first problem is the idea that moral reasoning is a form of moral action and/or provides a valuable indication of a person’s character. The second relates to the researchers’ reliance on the concept of ‘moral maturity’ which is intelligible only in terms of deeply normative and contested philosophical and cognitive psychological beliefs, which they fail adequately to acknowledge. Any research, that adopts Kohlberg’s and Haan’s methodology, is also implicitly committed to the normative stances entailed in the original research programmes from which they draw theoretical support. The third problem is related to the concept of the moral atmosphere of sport. We believe that the account outlined in the research discussed above in unsophisticated and fails to describe adequately the nature, and in particular the practice of sport, viz its ethos.

The first problem is that the research claims to measure the nature of moral action in sport but often uses the concepts of moral action and moral reasoning interchangeably. Moral action and moral reasoning are discrete concepts; one can make a moral judgment but never implement its requirements. In addition the research employs an eclectic theoretical approach that sometimes isolates the methodology from its originating theory. The claim here is that the researchers implicitly assume that the data is theory neutral and therefore inter-translatable within and between the different research projects. This is an unacceptable theoretical assumption. It is claimed (Shields et al., 1995, p. 325) that the research investigates moral action in sport. Moreover, Shields et al. (1995, p. 325) claim that: ‘Bredemeier and Shields and their colleagues have investigated moral action in sport using the tools of structural development and social cognitive psychology’. Such claims are made in light of the theories we have described (Kohlberg and Haan). Both purport to measure moral maturity or adequacy. Kohlberg’s is a theory of moral action,
however, only if we accept that moral reasoning is a form of moral action or at least is predictive of moral action. Haan et al. (1985, p. 68), however, argue that ‘Dialogue is the form of all moral activity and dialogue is action’. If this is accepted, then Haan’s theory is one of moral action only if we study actual moral dialogue. It is therefore fundamentally important if one is to stay faithful to the originating theory. This would mean the assessment of athletes involved in the moral dialogues that take place on the field, both verbal and non-verbal.

It is clear that the research by Bredemeier et al. (1997) is not a direct measure of moral action. Although they prefer Haan’s theory to Kohlberg’s, they employ Kohlberg’s methods in assigning moral maturity scores by assessing reasoning about moral dilemmas. They score responses, however, according to Haan’s levels based on moral judgments rather than ‘action’ in dialogue. The data are not the product of observed moral dialogue taking place in sport. The researchers have not observed whether a sportsperson is aggressive and violent, belligerent and coercive, submissive, withdrawn, whether they cheat and complain, apologize or shake hands. Yet these are precisely the forms that moral negotiations take on the sports field. Similarly if a person exhibits fair play, generosity and magnanimity, patience and understanding, or attempts to maintain their composure and hold back from retaliation in the face of violence, then such a person, again according to Haan’s levels, demonstrates moral maturity. It is clear that this fudge undermines the data with respect to the methodological benefits of measuring moral dialogue (as a form of moral action) directly as set out by Haan.

The reasons Bredemeier et al., do not employ such techniques is not simply attributable to the procedural difficulties involved in such observational field studies. They are more complex and relate to the first problem highlighted above, namely the philosophical and psychological commitments inherent in the theories they embrace. Shields and Bredemeier (1995, p. 82) argue that a person cannot be commended on the decency of an action if that person was not morally motivated. An action can rightly be called moral only if it is done for the right reason. In other words, what defines an action as moral, what gives it its moral status, is the intention or motivation of the actor. Moreover, for the actors to be legitimately described as ‘morally mature’ they must also understand why their actions are moral. So not only must the person have intended to perform a certain action, they must also understand why that action is right and good. As we have mentioned, the criteria for mature moral action are essentially deontological. A morally mature action is one that instantiates the principle of justice or fairness. Such actions reflect the requirements of moral principles that are impartial and universalizable.

Even at the highest level of soccer in Great Britain it is generally agreed that if a player is injured (relatively seriously), then whosoever is in possession of the ball ought to kick the ball out of play thus allowing the injured player to receive medical attention. Moreover, after the injured player returns to the play the ball is returned to the team who put it out of play. Prima facie both players, player A who put the ball out of play and player B who returned the ball, are acting in a praiseworthy way, they maintain the conventions of soccer. To access their moral maturity, however, we must know why they performed such an act. Player A might say that it is what is required by the norms (ethos) of the game. This is an example of conventional morality (Kohlberg’s level 2 or stage 3 and 4). Player B might answer that he/she was attempting to equalize relations and maintain an impartial and fair contest, such a response is post-conventional (level 5) and morally superior to the response of player A. Alternatively, player B might simply want to bring the official ‘on-side’ if he or she has performed three or four fouls and is on the verge of being cautioned. Observation of behaviour does not readily provide access to
these motives, reasons and intentions. To use another example: a particularly harmful challenge in a football match may be simply the result of a lack of skill rather than malice. Conversely, a helping hand or handshake following such a foul may be a cynical attempt to avoid censure from officials rather than a genuine act of altruism. To reiterate, true motives and intentions are not always or readily observable to the scientific observer (although in sport the official is characteristically required to divine such). Given the nature of sporting contexts one can sympathize with the difficulties involved with assessment of moral behaviour and the character of those involved. Their commitment to the cognitivist account of moral action whereby the moral status of the act is determined by the intentions of the actor causes certain methodological problems. Observation of behaviour may be deemed insufficiently revelatory of the motives and intentions of actors. Moreover, the actors understanding of the rightness and wrongness of their motives and intentions are simply not observable. This leaves little option for cognitivists but to study the maturity of reflective moral judgments in responses to moral dilemmas.

A potential solution to this problem may be wrought from the cognitive developmental tradition, in particular Kohlberg’s early work. Kohlberg (1981, p. 30) embraced the Platonic belief that ‘he (sic) who knows the good chooses the good’. In other words, knowing what ought to be done was considered strongly motivational and ought to lead to moral action. Stephens and Bredemeier (1996, p. 160) in relation to Kohlberg also contend that:

To believe that something is right or correct is at one and the same time to experience the motivation to act in accordance with that belief. Of course, there may be other, and perhaps stronger, motivations present, but reasons entail motives.

The acceptance of Bredemeier et al.’s conclusions concerning moral action presupposes the adequacy of this cognitive theoretical belief that knowledge is directly motivational. There is, however, wealth of evidence against that position, both philosophically and psychologically (Haan, 1983; Flanagan, 1991). Murdoch (1992, p. 9) argues that:

There is an important difference between learning about virtue and practising it, and the former can indeed be a delusive substitute that effectively prevents the latter.

Haan’s theory was developed in part to try and explain the heterogeneity of a person’s moral judgments, how they behaved with apparent inconsistency in structurally similar situations. Given the weight of evidence against the Kohlbergian idea of holistic stages of moral maturity she abandoned the concept of concrete stages in favour of a kind of continuum of development. Moreover, Haan also introduces the concepts of ego coping and defending (see above) to explain contextual diversity in moral maturity. She argues that there are other capacities apart from moral knowledge that enable a person to act in a morally mature way in any given situation. For Haan, tolerance, patience and determination may be conducive to mature behaviour and conversely, anger may inhibit it. Haan et al. (1985, p. 69) explain:

From the interactional view, two well-known characteristics of practical morality are inconsistency in the quality of the same people’s moral action in different situations and the emotions moral issues generate, both moral indignation and the glow of the good conscience. Thus practical morality cannot be understood unless the notions of inconsistency and the role of emotions are
properly explained. Study of people’s strategies of ego coping and defending should elucidate both these phenomena.

In light of Haan’s reservations, her assessment procedure was designed specifically to assess actual moral behaviour and measure the coping or defending strategies employed. Given that moral dialogue is the forum for exhibiting moral qualities, Haan observed her subjects in dialogue measuring their negotiating and their coping or defending strategies. We might say, then, that one of the principal advantages of Haanian over Kohlbergian methodology is its ecological validity. This would highlight the need to observe as well as, for example, to interview research subjects in order to corroborate or ‘triangulate’ the data. Furthermore, in order to claim authority of Haan’s theoretical position they would need to do this in appropriate contexts. Not just any dialogue will do, how people act in one situation, an intra-mural game, might be vastly different from a College-Bowl final.

As we have seen, in the sport specific research however, Haan’s levels are used to indicate the moral maturity of judgments made in response to certain dilemmas and is not based on observation of dialogues. Any possible advantage wrought from the use of Haan’s theory is lost because her methodology is not followed. Haan’s definition of moral action and her means for its assessment are inextricably linked, a link that the research has failed to address and indeed one which it has unfortunately fudged.

Returning to the third problem highlighted earlier, there is a common feature evident in Haan (1978), Kohlberg (1981) and the sport research such as Stephens and Brede- meier (1996). Implicit in the methodologies is the very need to be able to evaluate individuals certain kinds of moral judgments as ‘immature’, ‘inadequate’ or ‘inconsistent’. The first two ascriptions refer to moral judgments that fall short of given criteria of adequacy and/or maturity, namely universality and impartiality. The third refers to judgments that fall short of the reliability requirements of the research. As far as the latter is concerned, we have seen that sports such as basketball and football may foster a particular kind of moral atmosphere which leads to apparently less mature moral reasoning (Bredemier and Shields, 1984). This phenomenon is described as a ‘bracketed morality’ and referred to specifically as ‘game reasoning’. The bracketed nature of moral reasoning in sport is separate from, less mature and therefore inconsistent with reasoning about real life. This psychological distinction between games and real life is co-terminus with a conceptual distinction proposed by Huizinga (1950) to which Bredemeier and Shields (1984) subscribe. Huizinga argued that sport, as formalized play is somehow separated from and less serious than real life. Sport is hived off from real life, and it is defined by its own particular temporal and spatial boundaries. To this we propose two closely related critical arguments.

First, the concepts of ‘inadequate’ or ‘immature’ moral reasoning or action are inextricably linked to, and indeed can only be made sense in the light of the normative commitments of Kohlberg and Haan (moral goodness is defined in reference to universal and impartial moral principles). To accept such ascriptions is to accept the normative commitments they entail. To be morally mature is to be fair, impartial and just or at least articulate what is fair, impartial and just. Justice and fairness are given moral priority; they stand as the primary moral principles, the yardstick by which moral action and reasoning is to be judged. The primacy of these moral principles is, however, contestable. They do not have an a priori claim to moral primacy.

The second point regarding the normative objection to moral maturity is psychological in nature. The concept of moral maturity is heuristically attractive because it serves as
fairly stable and reliable insight into the kind of person one is. Moral maturity scores, once identified can be compared and contrasted with other variables, in this case sport participation. The results suggest that certain sports experiences are detrimental to moral maturity. For research purposes the concept is valuable and attractive because it provides certainty or concreteness on two levels. On the one hand, its normative structure prescribes a course of action, it tells us what ought to be done. It gives clearly defined criteria of morally correct action. On the other hand, it also purports to predict with a certain degree of accuracy *ceteris paribus* what will be done.

**Discussion: The Relationship of Theory and Data**

The crux of our critique rests on the failure to recognize the critical relation between the data and its diverse originating theories. Specifically, Bredemeier *et al.* (1997) fail both psychologically and normatively to recognize the importance of the given context in moral action. First, we will discuss the relationship between context and character. Then we will discuss the relationship between context and good, right, fair, ‘moral action’.

The sports-specific research on moral character and development was not of course the first to identify that moral responses varied from one context to the next. Kohlberg (1981) and Haan *et al.* (1985) both observed similar context diversity. Earlier we saw that Hartshorne and May’s (1928) results suggested the important role context play in moral action. Experiments by Milgram (1974) further highlighted the effects of the context on certain behaviour. Milgram implemented experiments that purported to investigate the effect of punishment on learning. Subjects were required to administer electric shocks to a learner if the learner made an error. Each error required an increased level of shock up to a level above 450 volts. The learner, a confederate of the experimenter, deliberately made mistakes and acted to mimic the effects of the electric shock. Milgram found that 65% of the subjects continued to increase the voltage up to 450 volts even though the confederate was banging on the walls at 300 volts. If the subjects expressed concern about the experiment they were told that they must continue. Given the range and diversity of the subjects, between 25 and 50 years old and from varying economic and educational background, it is surprising that so many performed such morally outrageous acts. If these results are interpreted in light of the cognitivist theories discussed, two issues come to light: either the respondents were morally immature, they lacked the cognitive (and other capacities) to act in the right way, or the context, ‘the moral atmosphere’, inhibited mature or adequate moral action. In contrast, Flanagan argues that the personalities of the subjects are situationally sensitive:

> We should not be so naïve as to think that the main variable differentiating compliant souls from non-compliant ones is some single unyielding trait … (1991, p. 295)

There is, however, a third alternative. What these experiments suggest is that the subjects did not lack some kind of single moral quality (viz. consistency, integrity), nor were they morally immature in a Kohlbergian sense. Rather, the quality of the moral response is inextricably tied to the context in which it occurs. In the case of these experiments, compliance is usually a correct and appropriate response because we are usually conditioned to obey authority figures. It is difficult, therefore to withhold this compliance if compliance conflicts with other traits or dispositions. Similarly, in the context of sport the conventions, atmosphere or ethos will inevitably influence moral action. To this extent, however, sport is no different to any other context. It is platitudeous, though no
less true for that, to say that our behaviour is intimately tied to and influenced by the particularity of given contexts. We may often behave politely and courteously in the company of elderly relatives; however, we may not extend the same courtesy in the same way to our friends or peers. This difference ought not to be described as an inconsistency but a contextually specific response. Whether the response is appropriate is a different matter and will be discussed next. The important point is that different moral responses in different contexts are not necessarily nor automatically to be thought of as morally immature, inadequate and/or inconsistent.

We have suggested that to describe the moral atmosphere as a phenomenon that leads to more or less mature moral responses is to oversimplify the effect of the context. Different contexts do elicit different moral responses, however, these responses cannot be ranked according to an *a priori* criterion like fairness or impartiality nor should they be evaluated in isolation from the context in which they occur. The kinds of responses that are characterized as immature or inconsistent may in fact be the kind of responses suitable for that particular context. Sport is but one form of human interaction (with its moral atmosphere or ethos) that demands a certain degree of self-interest if the values and benefits are to be enjoyed. Certain sports *demand* the expression of certain kinds of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours like aggression, determination, self-belief, skill, concentration, courage, fairness, co-operation and patience. The kind of moral response appropriate in any given circumstance is not simply to be found by referring to a hierarchical list of principles or rules. The evaluator is better equipped if he/she is well versed in the rules, norms and values *vis-à-vis* the ethos of the sport than if he or she is equipped with a kind of universal moral barometer. In order to distinguish, for example, between legitimate and illegitimate use of the feet to release a rugby ball from a ruck we must look to the ethos of rugby and not to universal, action guiding, principles.

This kind immanent assessment requires a more complex understanding, not only of the particular ethos of a sporting contest but how it relates to ‘normal or real life’. The psychological difference in the nature of moral engagement in sport (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984) draws on conceptual support from the distinction between sport and real life proposed by Huizinga (1950). Midgley (1981) and Eassom (1998) disagree with this distinction between sport and real life. Midgley (1981, p. 139) argues:

... actual games normally classed as such do not keep themselves to themselves in this way but flow over in a perfectly recognised way into the rest of life.

Any professional soccer player or tennis player similarly would fail to recognize this dichotomy. Sport is not a distraction from real life for them nor indeed for numerous others, sport is simply part of life. Sport dominates the media; it infuses popular culture and even furnishes our language with a whole range of metaphors. It seems paradoxical that we need only look to the collegiate sports that feature in most of the sport research under scrutiny to illustrate the importance of sport in people’s lives. If sport were not real life it would be interesting to know what constitutes real life for some of these athletes. There may not be many things more important than making the team or winning a cup, and if these athletes ‘who lose are able to return unscathed to their normal lives at the conclusion’ as Shields and Bredemeier (1995, p. 113) suggest then the contest cannot have meant much to them. One is reminded of a remark by Bill Shankly, one of the greatest British professional soccer managers, when asked whether the game was really a matter of life and death; ‘oh no’ he replied ‘it’s much more serious than that’. And the very briefest of glances through past issues of sports psychology, sociology and philosophy journals would suggest that sport is often the most serious of undertakings to its
participants at all levels of ability, despite its logical structure and close associations with play.

We do not advocate the uncritical acceptance of the current and prevailing sport values and norms, only their proper recognition in social psychological research. We share the growing concern about the bad examples that are set in sports today. The unsavoury abuse and intimidation of officials in Britain’s Premier Football League recently is a clear indication of the problem. The growing concern about the ethical character of sport and sportspersons is also reflected in academic literature. Skelton (2000) in particular identifies the excessively masculine values that characterize the ethos of football which are particularly problematic when expressed in an educational environment. She argues that football, or involvement in football which is currently enjoying a cultural renaissance in Britain, perpetuates and reinforces masculine hegemony. Skelton (2000) has argued that football, footballing ability and football knowledge were all variously employed to exclude girls both by boys and male teachers in school. Similarly Gard and Meyenn (2000) examined contact sports in Australian schools and the nature of pain and pleasure therein. They suggest that the tolerance and infliction of pain on others in sport not only serves as a label of identification but contributes to standing within a group. They express concern, again with the powerful nature of sports and the possibility that such a ubiquitous cultural phenomena can recruit submission ‘to severe bodily damage in contact and non-contact sports.’ (Gard & Meyenn, 2000, p. 32) Both these papers essentially question the health of certain sports’ norms and values, or the inappropriate transfer of values into a non-competitive or educational context. These concerns are real, not least in certain North American universities and their varsity teams, however, we cannot address these issues presently. We have argued elsewhere that the desired values and norms are inculcated through the words and actions of good exemplars. This is true in sport and in school, indeed children behave and exhibit appropriate behaviour only if they have been shown the appropriate behaviour and discouraged from inappropriate behaviour. Skelton’s research shows clearly that good examples were absent as the teachers themselves inappropriately reinforced competitive and masculine values in inappropriate contexts. It also, contra Kohlberg, evidences the well known folk psychological and virtue-theoretical point that good conduct requires good characters to emulate and imitate.

Conclusion

The research suggests that sport is a particular kind of activity separate from normal life with its own moral atmosphere. It concludes that participation in sport is often accompanied by less mature moral reasoning which reflects the self-interested nature of the activity. We have laid bare the problematic mix of theoretical and methodological support from which such research has drawn. We have argued that sport is a particular kind of human interaction governed not only by rules but also by an ethos. Participation in sports does not lead to some kind of arrested moral development or maturity; rather the particular contexts of sport call for particular kinds of moral response. The kinds of moral responses appropriate are neither restricted to impartial nor universal moral judgments. The situation may call for courage, compassion, determination, honesty, loyalty or fairness, but we will not know which a priori. Sporting ethoses ought not be accepted uncritically; researchers ought not to go native as the anthropologists remind us. Nonetheless, morally acceptable and unacceptable conduct and character will more felicitously be investigated by observing and consulting with those subjects and partici-
pants who are familiar with the particular sports ethoses, than with universal context-independent scales of moral maturity. Good examples need to be set and followed in football as in all spheres of social life. Many in football know that it is unfair to exclude women, however, as long as such an ethos prevails these values will dominate. Any attempt at assessment of the moral characters of those involved in sport must start from a more complex and less structured account of moral character and the world in which they play. Essentially then, this is a plea for an empirically informed philosophy of sport and a philosophically informed social science therein.

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Notes

[4] In this paper our main focus is the work which either features either Brenda Bredemeier and/or David Shields or work that employs a similar methodology, for example, Bredemeier & Shields (1984), Bredemeier (1985), Bredemeier & Shields (1986), Bredemeier et al. (1987), Bredemeier (1994), Shields et al. (1995), Stephens & Bredemeier (1996), Stephens et al. (1997).
[5] For the locus classicus, however, see Ryle (1949).
[6] Both Piaget and Kohlberg’s conception of moral maturity is derived from a formalistic moral philosophy. Formalists like Kant identified moral judgments, not in terms of their particular content or subject, but rather in terms of their form. A mature moral judgment is one which is impartial and universally applicable.
[7] It should be noted, however, that by calling the theory Kohlbergian, we draw attention to the prevalence of Kohlberg’s methodology and presuppositions that continue in more recent work. See for a particularly anti-philosophical psychological example Blasi (1990).
[9] We recognize that the final assumption is a caricature of Kohlberg’s earlier position and that he significantly moved from such a concrete account of the stages, however, the nature of a mature moral judgement remained the same even if its source, i.e. stage specific cognitive schemes changed.
[12] The ego processing function are an important part of Haan’s theory, they do not, however, feature in the application of Haan’s theory in a sporting context. To this extent we will not provide a detailed explanation of what they entail.
[14] Of course, now everything will hang on precisely what is to constitute ‘observation’. It will be clear that our predilection will be biased towards ethnographic accounts to support other, more traditional social psychological methods.

References

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