

## The Study of College Athletes' Moral Self-Concept and Sport-Related Moral Development

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**Abstract:** The main purpose of this study was to research the relationship between college athlete's moral self-concept and sport-related moral development. The method of stratified quota sampling was adopted in this study, in which the group studied was college athletes in the departments of physical education of national universities in Taiwan. In addition, we analyzed our data by descriptive statistics, test of homogeneity and discriminant analysis. The results of the study showed that gender and types of competition do not cause any significant disparity in the perception of moral self-concept and sport-related moral development. In order to promote the athletes' moral self-concept and enhance the development of sport-related morality, the cognitive development of the athletes' moral self-concept and sport-related moral development could adopt character education, situated teaching, as well as positive reinforcements and feedbacks.

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### 1. Introduction

There is a subtle interaction between sports and society, which makes people across political, racial and religious differences form collective beliefs (Sage, 1990). Sports are a microcosm of society. Participating in sports can provide people with an opportunity to comprehend how to learn cooperatively, resolve moral conflicts, encourage mutual endeavors and compete with each other fairly, while enhancing team loyalty and morality (Kleiber & Roberts, 1981).

However, because of various conflicting social values, making moral judgments is difficult; additionally, public alienation is growing and the functions of family, society and school face many changes. Moreover, social morality is gradually weakening, moral values are become increasingly blurred; many norms, value systems and even culture are encountering great challenges (Chang, 2002). Because competitive sports in Taiwan is popular and media, including newspapers and magazines, as well as the influence of sport gambling have contributed to the rapid development of competitive and professional sports. For example, professional baseball matured in the previous decade and became the most popular sport among Taiwanese people. However, utilitarianism misled coaches, players and fans to pursue winning, bonuses and fame, which resulted in excessive competition and misdirected incentives. Because over-competition strengthens the pursuit of profit and fame, utilitarianism overrides everything and puts athletes in the dilemma of choosing between self interest and morality. Many

unethical behaviors occur repeatedly, such as the fixing of matches, poaching, gambling, violence, the use of prohibited drugs, assaults, intentional injury of opponents, improper abstention, violation of rules, abusive language, etc. (Kavussanu, Seal, & Phillips, 2006). Such behaviors have violated "the essence of sport", "sports ethics" and "sportsmanship" and made "fair competition" into a mere slogan. Under the unfair competition in specific professional sports, the moral development of athletes is very important.

Moral education involves learning the truth in life; its purpose is to teach people to discern good and bad, and then do what is good (Lin, 1997). Morality is an internal code or a kind of self-discipline; if morality is violated, the individual will be blamed or blame himself by a guilty conscience. Li and Chen (2001) pointed out that sports ethics is an attitude and behavior standard to maintain the normal development of campaign norms for the sports people, groups or the environment. In other words, sports ethics is the spirit of sportsmanship, including fair competition, mutual learning, cooperation, hard work, encouragement, patience, and so on. In Chinese culture, morality implies the style of a gentleman (Confucius). In Western countries, athletes are generally viewed as gentlemen whose personalities are trained by the sports and widely respected by the world (Huang, 1993). Therefore, sports ethics is not only one of the important core values of sports development, but also the spirit that athletes should carry forward in their daily life. As a result, understanding the moral development of athletes can enhance moral education and prevent

immoral behaviors during sports competition. Accordingly, sporting events will not be regarded as a venue for people to make profits or viewed as a place where conflicts occur frequently. The purpose of this study is to enhance the quality of competitive sports and maintain the essence of sports.

Based on the theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest, 1984), moral behaviors involve intention and motivation; moral behaviors have long been the result of the development of personal growth, learning, social experience and the interaction of information processing. Therefore, the different nature of activities may lead individuals to learn different behaviors. Many empirical studies of sports have found that a higher moral consciousness leads to lower frequency of negative behaviors, such as pushing people, deliberately hurting an opponent, or pretending injury (Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Treasure, 2003). Silva (1983) examined the frequency of violent behaviors among different competitive sports players, and found that regardless of players' competitive level: youth, high school, or university, the frequency of attack behaviors in contact sports (such as: American football, ice hockey, basketball, football, taekwondo, etc.) is naturally higher than in the non-contact sports (such as: track and field, swimming, etc.). Not only men contact sports but also women's contact sports generate a lower sense of morality (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986). However, competitive sports emphasize the importance of sportsmanship and fair competition; according to the abovementioned literature, we found that the acts of violation of the sports spirit do occur more often in physical contact sports than in non-physical contact sports among athletes, resulting in unfair competition.

Furthermore, gender has an impact on moral behaviors; males tend to have more attacks and immoral behaviors, lower ethical perceptions and negative moral judgments than females do (Bredemeier, 1994; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). Baack, Fogliasso, and Harris (2000) used expectancy theory to explain what variables affect individuals' moral development, finding that self-concept is the important core substance of personality and a very important part of moral development. Marsh and Craven (2006) defined self-concept as the integration of individuals' perceptions and judgments of many aspects, their overall concept, formed by experience with the environment, interactions with others and the attribution of their actions. Self-concept is not only an important core element of individual personality development, but also a determinative factor that affects the individual's

behaviors. Moral-ethical self refers to one's own moral values, religious beliefs and reflections on their image.

Rawwas, Swaidan, and Al-Khatib (2006) indicated that individuals with higher moral self-concept will tend to be positive, develop self-confidence and have a higher sense of morality; conversely, the lack of moral sense could lead to unethical behaviors. From the literature discussed above, we found that in addition to upgrading the current sports technology and sports performance, it is more important that athletes should have the right attitude, correct sport ethics and moral standards, which will help athletes improve their moral value judgments and achieve their self-realization. Accordingly, when athletes pay attention to sports morality, they will understand the meaning of sportsmanship so that the true value of sports can be restored and sports activities regain public respect.

However, the research related to sports ethics is still relatively scarce in recent years, and previous studies discussed this issue mostly based on literature analysis. There is little empirical research investigating the relationship between sports ethics and self-concept. For this reason, this paper aims to fill this research gap, examining the relationship between self-concept and the development of sports ethics among college athletes. Furthermore, it will compare moral self-concepts and moral developments based on gender and sport events, in both contact and non-contact sports. The results can provide reference to the relevant units. To reiterate, the purposes of this research are as follows:

1. Understand the moral self-concept and moral development of college athletes.
2. Compare the moral self-concept of college athletes from different backgrounds.
3. Compare the moral development of college athletes from different backgrounds.
4. Investigate the relationship between moral self-concept and moral development among college athletes.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Cruz, Boixados, Valiente, and Capdevila (1995) pointed out that young people who participate in sports are vulnerable to the impact of peers, teachers, coaches and parents in regard to moral development. Therefore, this study took national college athletes as the population, conducted stratified sampling by proportion, and surveyed students of Physical Education Department from three domestic Normal Universities. The participants in this study are characterized by their possession of sports expertise and attendance in education programs; thereby, they

will tend to engage in teaching, coaching and training in their future employment. That is, these participants may affect future sports participants in regard to their moral development. According to the distribution of the study population, the proportion of surveying, i.e. the sample size, is determined.

Chou (2004) pointed out that 400 questionnaires should be collected in the 95% confidence level. As a result, this study distributed 405 questionnaires (shown as Table 1), with 324 remaining after eliminating the invalid questionnaires; the effective rate was 80%.

Table 1. Summary table of sampling

school	The number of students	Sampling ratio	The number of questionnaires
A	400	35%	140
B	400	35%	140
C	350	35%	125
Total	1600		405

## 2.2 Instruments

In this study, questionnaires on athletes' moral self-concept and sports ethics development were taken as a research tool, and divided into three parts: moral self-concept scale, sports moral development scale and the basic variables, respectively. As the scales used in this study refer to previous scales with high reliability and validity, the scales based on the theory are reliable and valid. The details of the scales are as follows:

### *Moral self-concept scale*

The concept of moral self-perception is the moral sense generated from self-evaluation after comparing oneself with others; this scale was developed by Chen (1998) based on the Self-Description Questionnaire III (SDQIII) of Marsh (1992). This scale was been constructed for high school and college students in Taiwan; therefore, it has good content validity, expert validity and good reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .74$ ). The scale is a Likert-type scale. The scores range from 9 to 1, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Higher scores indicate higher moral self-concept, and vice versa. According to factor analysis, the factor loadings of items range from .46 to .76, higher than the set standard of .40. Internal consistency has acceptable reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ).

### *The scale of moral development in sports*

The scale of moral development in sports was developed by Chen (2009) on the basis of the three moral levels and six moral stages of Kohlberg (1969), and the scale of Rest (1979). Furthermore, Chen requested two scholars with sports backgrounds and a national-class coach to develop a moral development

scale in sports. After the retest reliability, the scale has a good reliability of .92 (Chen, 2009).

In the scale of moral development through sports, the examinees are asked to make judgments and decisions in the face of dilemmas; it is a simulation of participating in official competitions. The examinees choose between friendship and competition, and the stage of moral development can be determined by whether they conduct immoral behaviors such as showing favoritism toward their friends.

Sports moral development is divided into three periods (six stages); the definitions are described as follows (Chang, 2003):

### **Level 1: Pre-conventional level**

#### *Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation*

In stage 1, individuals tend to avoid punishment, determine the consequences of good or bad behavior, with blind obedience to authority. This study set the fear of being punished by the General Assembly and to the avoidance of being scolded by teammates as the first stage.

#### *Stage 2: Self-Interest Orientation*

Individuals are relative utility-oriented so they judge their behavior by checking whether or not the consequences can meet their own needs. This study took the worry of not getting qualified for national team and negative feedback from teammates in the future as the second stage.

### **Level 2: Conventional level**

#### *Stage 3: Interpersonal Accord and Conformity*

In stage 3, individuals seek approval from interpersonal relationships and determine whether behaviors are good or bad by whether they can get appreciation via these behaviors. This study set the attainment of national team qualification and the winning of teammates' appreciation as the third stage.

#### *Stage 4: Authority and Social-Order Maintaining Orientation*

Individuals tend to comply with social regulations, laws and regulations in this stage. This study set the unwillingness of undermining the system of the first national team selection and the abundance of team's norms as the fourth stage.

### **Level 3: Post-conventional level**

#### *Stage 5: Social Contract Orientation*

Individuals understand that social norms are established through the consent of the public and can be changed as long as a consensus is reached by the majority. This study put unfairness directed at other players and the number being elected to national teams as the fifth stage.

#### *Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles*

Individuals determine the behavior of good and bad by a personal's ethical values, which have

consistency and universality. This study put the moral conscience of protecting players' own fairness and justice as the sixth stage.

### Variables

According to related literature (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986; Silva, 1983), the background variables of this research were gender and sports properties. Sports properties are divided into physical contact sports (basketball, taekwondo, football, hockey, handball, etc.) and non-physical contact sports (tennis, badminton, archery, athletics, etc.) (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984).

### 2.3 Data processing

Data collected in this study were analyzed by SPSS 17.0 statistical software and descriptive statistics; Spearman rank correlation, chi-square test and discriminate analysis were conducted. Focusing on the questions proposed in this study, the analyses were performed;  $\alpha = .05$  was the benchmark of significance of the statistical test level.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Sampling

The sample of this study comprised 175 males (54%) and 149 females (46%) from 19 to 27 years old, among which 21 and 22 years old (208, 64.2%) accounted for the majority; as for sports properties, 107 athletes (33%) partake in physical contact sports and 217 in non-physical contact (67%).

### 3.2 Moral self-concept and moral development in sports among college athletes

This study found that the overall average of physical education students' moral self-concept is 7.09 (SD = .98), implying that in general, physical education students achieve a very high degree of moral self-identity and affirmation. In the aspect of moral development in sports, the overall average is 3.50 (SD = 1.67), suggesting that physical education students are in the second stage of seeking recognition in the moral development through sport; however, in the first and the second stage those exhibiting utilitarianism are numerous and the distribution of the development of sports ethics is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The frequency distribution of moral development of college athletes

	Moral development in sports					
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
Number	44	71	46	51	66	46
Percentage	(13.6%)	(21.9%)	(14.2%)	(15.7%)	(20.4%)	(14.2%)

### 3.3 The difference of moral self-concept among college athletes based on different background variables

According to the literature, this study adopted different backgrounds, gender and sports properties, respectively, to conduct the comparison of moral self-concept. The results show that the mean of the moral self-concept is 7.12 for the males and 7.06 for the females (t value is .60); the results represent insignificant differences ( $p = .54 > .05$ ) and imply that gender plays an insignificant role in moral self-concept. As for sports properties, the mean of the moral self-concept is 6.95 for the physical contact sports and 7.16 for non-physical contact (t value of -1.81 ( $p = .71 > .05$ )), suggesting no significant difference between physical contact sports and non-contact sports in the aspect of moral self-concept.

### 3.4 The difference of moral development in sports among college athletes based on different background variables

The independent variables: gender and sports properties, are both categorical variables, as are the six stages of moral development. Therefore, the test of homogeneity of proportions was conducted to perform two difference analyses (Wu & Tu, 2005) to explore whether there are significant differences in the percentage distribution between groups of

variables. The results showed that  $\chi^2$  value of gender in moral development in sports is 6.22 ( $p > .05$ ), revealing no significant difference between men and women in the cognitive stage of sport morality. As for sports properties,  $\chi^2$  value is 10.70 ( $p > .05$ ), revealing no significant difference between physical contact and non-physical contact in regard to moral development through sports.

### 3.5 The relation between moral self-concept and moral development in sports among college athletes

Examining the relation between moral self-concept and moral development in sports, this study conducted a discriminant analysis test using linear combination to compute independent variables (moral self-concept). The dependent variables (moral development stage in sports) are classified and the accuracy rate of its re-grouping was tested (Wu & Tu, 2005) to determine whether the moral self-concept can efficiently predict the six stages of moral development in sports. The results showed Wilks'  $\Lambda = .81$  ( $p < .05$ ), reaching a significant difference, and implying that moral self-concept can efficiently predict the moral development of athletes through sports.

In Table 3, a summary is shown of the correct cross-rate of moral self-concept and moral

development in sports. There are 44 athletes in the first stage of moral development; however, the predicted number is 4 athletes so the correct prediction rate was 9.1%. There are 71 athletes in the second stage, while the predicted number is 34 so the correct prediction rate was 47.9%. There are 46 athletes in the third stage seeking approval; the predicted number is 0, so the correct predicted rate is

0%. There are 51 athletes in the fourth stage but the predicted number is 1, so the predicted rate is 2.0%. There are 66 athletes in the fifth stage, but the predicted number is 12 so the correct prediction rate of 18.2%. There are 46 athletes in the sixth stage, while the predicted number is 30, so the correct prediction rate is 65.2%. To sum up, the overall prediction rate is 25%.

**Table 3: Summary of the correct cross-rate of moral self-concept and moral development in sports**

Sports moral cognition	The actual classification of Samples	The classification of predicted results					
		Stage1	Stage2	Stage3	Stage4	Stage5	Stage6
Stage 1	44	4 (9.1%)	16 (36.4%)	6 (13.6%)	0 (0%)	6 (13.6%)	12 (27.3%)
Stage 2	71	11 (15.5%)	34 (47.9%)	5 (7.0%)	4 (5.6%)	8 (11.3%)	9 (12.7%)
Stage 3	46	7 (15.2%)	22 (47.8%)	0 (0%)	3 (6.5%)	3 (6.5%)	11 (23.9%)
Stage 4	51	9 (17.6%)	11 (21.6%)	1 (2.0%)	1 (2.0%)	13 (25.5%)	16 (31.4%)
Stage 5	66	8 (12.1%)	9 (13.6%)	7 (10.6%)	1 (1.5%)	12 (18.2%)	29 (43.9%)
Stage 6	46	0 (0%)	2 (4.3%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.2%)	30 (65.2%)
The accuracy of total prediction= 25%							

#### 4. Discussions

The education in Taiwan has been exam-oriented for a long time, and students face many intense competitions in academic studies for the purpose of getting high scores and having access to top-ranked schools. Lin and Ku (2007) pointed out that excessive examinations with their concomitant punishment and rewards not only strengthen the competition and performance, but also make students carry out many unethical behaviors, highlighting the ineffectiveness of the schools' moral education and jeopardizing social stability. It is the same in sports; athletes, under the pressure of high intense competition, tend to take drugs at the expense of their lives, conduct aggressive and unethical behaviors, with a view to winning victories and fame (Kavussanu, Seal, & Phillips, 2006). In this study, we investigated the moral self-concept of moral development in sports among the domestic athletes, and hope that the results of this study could be useful for educators and researchers in the future.

The results show that domestic athletes have a certain degree of confidence (average 7.09) in their own moral self-concept. In the aspect of moral development in sports, the first stage and the second stage (relative utilitarianism) accounted for the majority, showing that athletes in the face of sports ethics have a lower perception than in general moral life, which accords with the empirical results of

Bredemeier and Shields (1984, 1986); they interviewed high school and college students, investigating the ethical issues in the daily life and competitive sports among athletes and non-athletes. Their results revealed that athletes show lower moral reasoning in sports than in daily life, which is in accordance with the results of our study. We presume that athletes' moral judgment may be affected by external incentives or inner needs coupled with utilitarianism, the media, business practices, As a result, athletes may have lost their sense of morality. This result also supports Cole Berger's moral development theory, that in the face of moral dilemmas, the individual will make judgments from many aspects, taking in account people, self, advantages, disadvantages and social norms (Chang, 2003).

Different gender and sports aspects in moral self-concept of general life and moral development are not significantly different, which corresponded to empirical results by Chen (2009), but is inconsistent with other studies (Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Treasure, 2003; Silva, 1983). We presumed the reason may be that Chen (2009) used the structure development theory to develop a sports morality scale, while other studies tended to conduct questionnaire surveys based on academic theory. Accordingly, inconsistent results may be ascribed to different instruments and different

samples. According to Marsh and Craven (2006), moral self-concept and moral development may be affected by environment, education or peers; therefore, cultural differences, sports facilities and different sports environment may contribute to different results in empirical studies.

As for the relation between general moral self-concept and moral development in sports, the results show that the general moral self-concept can significantly predict moral development, meaning that the athlete with a higher moral self-concept would have a higher level of moral development in sports. This result is consistent with Rawwas, Swaidan, and Al-Khatib (2006), and also confirms.

Bredemeier and Shields (1984, 1986); they pointed out that self-concept is the individual different factor that affects moral development in sports, implying that the development of self-concept is an important factor in personality development, and has a significant impact on individual behavior and self-control (Marsh & Craven, 2006).

Based on these results, we propose the following recommendations:

#### *Recommendations related to education*

First, as for education, many present studies confirm that self-concept and moral development are influenced by significant others, like coaches, teachers and parents in the process of athletes developing (Cruz, Boixados, Valiente, & Capdevila, 1995). Therefore, it is proposed that coaches should set a good example to athletes in their training, make regulations and maintain discipline for the team so that athletes may comply with sports rules and social norms.

Kohlberg (1981) indicated that moral education can enhance children's moral self-awareness; therefore, it is recommended that teachers and parents could implement moral education in general education and daily life, and pay positive attention to encourage athletes and cultivate their righteous character, moral perception and self-discipline; accordingly, moral self-concept and moral development through sports will be advanced.

#### *Recommendations related to practice*

Kohlberg (1981) pointed out that the cognitive training of ethical behavior only teaches athletes what is moral; the practice must be combined with ethical behavior and put into practice. According to Rest (1984), ethical behaviors must contain two elements: emotions and psychology, respectively. In the practical aspect, the development of sports movement will be advanced from the initial "no law", to "discipline" after teammates' and rivals' supervision, and then finally to the last level, "self-discipline". The order of moral development is in accordance

with Piaget's moral cognitive theory (Lin & Ku, 2007).

As a result, it is proposed that providing athletes with sports-related situations and peer interaction in daily life can enlighten them on how to proceed with self-perception and moral judgments, and then offer feedback to correct their behaviors so that athletes can learn mutual respect and what is fair competition.

#### *Limitations and suggestions*

This study took students from three Physical Education Departments of Normal Universities as the sample for examining the relation between moral self-concept and moral development in sports. Therefore, since the inference will be limited, we suggested that future studies can focus on different levels of sports and different training ages of athletes for performing difference tests related to moral self-concept and moral development in sports. Moreover, as for research tools, we adopted a self-report questionnaire so that the measurement of moral self-concept might be affected by the social restrictions; that is the second limitation. Thereby, we suggest that future studies can adopt different approaches, such as observation or conducting relevant research based on different moral theories. In addition, future research can explore moral development by examining other variables, such as sports values of athletes, interpersonal relationship, training environment and leadership style of coaches to get more results that could be meaningful for educational and practical uses. What is more, this research is a pilot study, and the results found that athletes in general have a high degree of moral self-concept, but in the aspect of moral development, they only reach the second stage. Accordingly, we suggest that future research can adopt "The Theory of Planned Behavior" (TPB) to probe into images, attitude, perception and cognition of individual athletes, and the impact on their behavior in order to more clearly understand the reasons why athletes engage in unethical behavior.

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