The Determinants and Control of Violence in Sport

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Violence is an unfortunate and unpleasant aspect of many sporting contests. It is a challenging task to unravel the complex reasons that underlie the phenomenon. As of yet this task has not been accomplished fully. This paper will assess the relative importance of a number of factors that contribute to sports violence, and will suggest remedies to the problem. A wide variety of psychological, social, situational, and moral forces are examined. The paper suggests that a powerful socialization process is the primary determinant of sports violence but that other factors also play a significant mediating role. A conceptual model of the aggression process is presented, which suggests ways to curb violent behavior. It is concluded that socialization forces, particularly reinforcement, are the most readily manipulated in order to control violence in sport.

Violence is defined as harm-inducing behavior bearing no direct relationship to the competitive goals of sport, and relates, therefore, to incidents of uncontrolled aggression outside the rules of sport, rather than highly competitive behavior within the rule boundaries. As a framework for discussion, three general approaches to the phenomenon of aggression are presented. The first views aggression as an instinctive drive, the second considers it a drive stimulated by frustration, while the third asserts that aggression is a learned social behavior.

Aggression as Instinct

Advocates of this approach view aggression as an innate rather than a learned quality, which generates an aggressive "drive" that constantly presses for discharge. The work of Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz is most often cited as supporting evidence. He observed that animals will display aggressive behavior even when reared in isolation, thereby precluding the possibility that aggression is learned. Lorenz (1966) subsequently extrapolated his theories of instinctive aggression to include human beings. Experiments in genetic manipulation also suggest that aggression is innate and can be inbred into a species (Scott, 1966). Dogs bred for different purposes, for instance, display a marked difference in their predisposition for aggressive behavior.

According to innate aggression theorists, sport serves a cathartic purpose, allowing pent-up aggression to be channelled into a comparatively harm-free pursuit. Brill (1963, p. 97), for instance, called sports "a salutary purgation of combative instincts which, if

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damned up within, would break out in a disastrous way." The metaphor often used is that of the boiler needing to "let off steam" occasionally. The catharsis hypothesis has not been supported by subsequent research, however. For instance, Berkowitz (1964) demonstrated that children who became angry and were allowed to let off steam through aggressive behavior did not become more peaceful, as the hypothesis would suggest, but subsequently showed a greater tendency toward aggressive acts.

Although it is reasonable to assume that humans are endowed with some genetic behavioral characteristics, they are too complex and unpredictable to be explained purely in terms of genetic attributes. Behavior is undoubtedly influenced by forces external to the individual. Social psychologists place great emphasis on these external influences, and occasionally overlook the genetic factors altogether. To maintain a balanced perspective on violent behavior, however, it is important to recognize that while genetic factors may not be the sole determinant of violence, neither can their influence be dismissed too lightly.

The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

This hypothesis, formulated by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939), asserts that the occurrence of aggression always presupposes the existence of some form of frustration, and conversely, the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression, although not necessarily an overt act of violence.

This hypothesis transcends the innate versus learned argument because it makes no assumptions as to the origin of the frustration-aggression relationship. Nevertheless, the nature of the frustration-aggression relationship remains controversial, and the original assertion, that aggression presupposes a frustration, has been challenged consistently. Scott (1966) has argued that animals will often act aggressively with no cause for frustration present, while Bandura and Walters (1963) have stressed the concept of imitative aggression, whereby children exposed to an aggressive adult imitate that aggression regardless of the presence of a frustration stimulus, especially when the adult model is observed being rewarded for aggression rather than punished.

Although the frustration-aggression hypothesis cannot fully account for all aggressive behavior, it provides a convenient rationale for tolerating sports violence. John Ziegler of the National Hockey League (NHL), for instance, has stated,

I do not find it unacceptable, in a game where frustration is constant, for men to drop their sticks and gloves and take swings at one another. I think that kind of outlet is important for players. (Cited in Smith, 1978, p. 141)

Michael Smith, who is probably the most eminent researcher of sports violence in North America, has labeled this view, "hockey's most durable folk theory" (Smith, 1979a, p. 76)

Like most durable misconceptions, the frustration-aggression hypothesis has an intuitive appeal, which is bolstered by a limited amount of supporting evidence. For instance, Lefebvre, Leith, and Bredemeier (1980) propose several situational factors within sport that contribute to aggressive behavior by heightening frustration. One is contest outcome. Leith (1977), for example, found that losers display significantly more extra-legal aggression than winners. It is reasonable to assume that losers do experience more frustration than winners, but this does not justify the assumption of a direct causal relationship between frustration and aggression. Notably, a different relationship has been revealed in ice hockey, where winning teams displayed significantly more violent behavior than losing teams (Andrews, 1974; Cullen & Cullen, 1975), suggesting that intimidation may be
employed as a means for achieving success in hockey rather than being a reaction to frustration, as John Ziegler claims.

The degree of physical contact in a sport has also been linked to acts of physical aggression. Lefebvre et al. (1980) also explained this in terms of the frustration-aggression hypothesis, in that each physical contact involves the prevention of an objective for the contactee, and therefore results in frustration and an aggressive response. If it were true that the physical nature of ice hockey is responsible for the violence, then violence should be evenly distributed throughout the sport, and throughout all contact sports. However, Canadian hockey is observably more violent than European hockey, and Canadian hockey players performing at the Olympics are observably less violent than when playing at home. Likewise, football, soccer, and rugby all contain a physical component similar to that of hockey, and yet violence is less commonplace (at least overtly) in those sports.

Table 1 contains a comparison of penalties assessed in professional hockey and football over the past 10 seasons. Although not perfectly correlative, penalties represent the best and most frequently utilized objective measure of aggressive behavior (Widmeyer, 1979). The statistics reveal a striking contrast between the Canadian Football League (CFL), in which an average of only 1.27 "unnecessary roughness" penalties were awarded per game, and the National Hockey League (NHL), in which an average of 31.4 penalty minutes were assessed per game. It is noticeable that aggressive penalties are on the decline in the CFL, whereas penalty minutes have increased in the NHL over the last decade apart from a slight improvement during the past two seasons.

It is an untenable argument that NHL players experience more frustration than other hockey players and other contact athletes. Therefore, the relationship between frustra-
tion and aggression must be considerably tempered by other influences, presumably those external to the athlete.

Although psychologists commonly object to the implication that frustration necessarily results in aggression, it is generally accepted that frustration increases the probability that an aggressive act will occur. Therefore, just as a genetic predisposition for aggressive behavior is seen as a factor contributing to sports violence, so the degree of frustration in a given situation may also be viewed as a contributing factor.

Aggression as Learned Social Behavior

In addition to psychological and situational influences, athletes are subjected to a powerful socialization process by which they learn appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), the basis of socialization lies in the dual processes of reinforcement and modeling. Although reinforcement and modeling usually act in combination, these twin influences are reviewed independently here.

Reinforcement

It is well established in the literature that reinforcement strongly influences future behavior (Skinner, 1953). Reinforcement may be either positive, in the form of explicit or implicit approval and/or material reward, or aversive, in the form of disapproval, criticism or punishment. In sport, reinforcements for acts of violence emanate from a variety of sources, which may be conveniently grouped under three headings: (a) the immediate reference group of the athlete, especially coaches, teammates, and family; (b) the structure of the sport and the implementation of rules by governing bodies and referees; and (c) the attitude of the fans, media, courts of law, and society in general.

Important Reference Others. Coaches, with their established position of control over the athletes, exert a strong influence on their team members concerning the types of aggressive behavior considered appropriate in the sporting context. A study by Smith (1979a) indicated that 52% of hockey players between the ages of 18 to 21 perceive their coaches as high approvers of violent behavior. Smith (1977) has also demonstrated that the more coaches approve of violence, the more their players will perform violent acts.

The influence of teammates is perhaps even greater. Smith's (1979a) findings revealed that even among 12- to 13-year-old hockey players, 54% perceived their teammates as high approvers of hockey violence. This figure rose to 78% among the 18-to-21 group. There is tremendous pressure within peer groups to conform to normative expectations, and if normative behavior in a sport is highly aggressive, it is inevitable that a combative ideology eventually will be internalized. The evidence is overwhelming that the internalization of violence as normative behavior frequently occurs in hockey (Smith, 1979b; Vaz, 1979).

Aggressiveness as a desirable male stereotype is perhaps a significant root cause of the positive reinforcement that male athletes receive for acting aggressively. Parents play an important role in this respect by conveying appropriate standards of behavior to their offspring from a very early age. Research suggests that, especially among lower socioeconomic environments, physical aggression is promoted by parents (particularly fathers) as a desirable male characteristic (Dietz, 1978). On the basis of interviews cited by Smith (1979a), some parents apparently view highly aggressive sports as an appropriate preparation for the rigors of the highly aggressive society that their sons will one day face.
Several government reports on violence in sport (McMurtry, 1974; House of Representatives, 1977, 1980) have stressed certain structural factors within the sports themselves that contribute to violence. First, they mention the intense competition and the resultant emphasis on winning. Also, they mention rule structures which do not effectively prevent violence. Many rule books contain penalties that are not stringent enough to deter offenders. In the light of Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1974), this is an extremely salient factor.

Social Exchange Theory is based on the assumption that every individual has a built-in calculator which weighs the advantages and disadvantages of any interaction. The individual will naturally attempt to maximize the rewards while minimizing the costs. In other words, an athlete will weigh the punishment associated with a rule violation against the potential benefits to be gained by breaking the rules. So, if a hockey player can prevent an opponent from scoring a goal by employing extra-legal aggression, and receives only a 2-minute penalty as punishment, then clearly the reward outweighs the punishment and the extra-legal aggression is positively reinforced. In this situation, the only forces that may deter the individual from acting violently are the expectation of aversive reinforcement from his coach and teammates (this is an unlikely event) or the influence of strong personal convictions which the individual may hold.

It is unfortunate when extra-legal behavior contributes to the goal of winning. It is even more unfortunate when the use of physical intimidation has potential benefits which so outweigh the potential punishment that violence becomes a tactical means of achieving victory. Sadly, this situation appears to prevail in the NHL. The success of violent hockey teams such as the Philadelphia Flyers in the early 1970s saw the birth of the now familiar designated fighter or “enforcer,” whose sole job is to intimidate opponents in order to disrupt their effectiveness. During the 1982-83 season, one enforcer received 13.5 penalty minutes for every minute he was on the ice (Fotheringham, 1983).

Another factor that exacerbates the problem of lenient rules is substandard and inconsistent officiating. If referees fail to penalize extra-legal aggression, then the aggression receives positive reinforcement which increases the probability of its reoccurrence. It has been estimated that only 8% of the rule infractions committed in hockey are penalized by the referee (Neron, 1978).

Although ultimately the responsibility for sports violence rests with the athletes themselves, the sports’ governing bodies play a very influential role in determining acceptable behavior because they establish the rules and sanction serious offenders. As the quote of NHL commissioner John Ziegler demonstrates, a remarkable tolerance for violence exists among the administrators of some sports. The NHL have shown incredible leniency in the past when dealing with violent offenders. In 1975, for instance, Boston Bruin Dave Forbes committed a vicious attack upon Henry Boucha of the Minnesota North Stars. During the assault, Forbes butt-ended Boucha with his hockey stick just above the right eye. As Boucha dropped to the ice, stunned and bleeding profusely, Forbes pounced on him, grabbed a handful of hair, and proceeded to hammer Boucha’s head into the ice. Forbes received from the NHL disciplinary committee only a 10-game suspension. By contrast, Chris Jones, a prop forward for Treorchy RFC, was banned for life by the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in 1984 for assaulting an opponent during a game.

Society Influences. Two important sources of reinforcement for professional athletes are the spectators and the media. It is impossible to determine the exact proportion of spectator response and media coverage which provides positive reinforcement for sports violence. However, it can be deduced from the lack of overt disapproval that both spectators and the media largely condone violence as part of the game. For example, a hockey
fight is more likely to receive shouts of encouragement than howls of disapproval. Similarly, North American television commentators are slow to condemn sports violence and quick to recall outstanding fights of the past.

It should be noted, however, that the degree of spectator and media acceptance of violence depends upon the sport in question. In some sports, violence has attained, in Smith’s terms, “an aura of legitimacy.” This seems to be the case in hockey and lacrosse, and to a lesser extent in rugby, football, soccer, and major-league baseball. Fortunately, violence remains absent from the majority of sporting contests, particularly those involving women. Nevertheless, the social importance and visibility of those sports in which violence is legitimated indicates the extent to which violence has permeated the sports arena.

The U.S. Government report on violence in professional sports (House of Representatives, 1980) asserted that the spectator acceptance of violence has been exploited by the promotor of professional hockey. The report proposed that in the late 1960s, when hockey franchises increased from 6 to 18, hockey was introduced into cities such as Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Kansas City, where prospective fans knew little about hockey but were very appreciative of on-ice fighting. With tremendous intersport competition for consumer dollars, the report claims that violence was used to sell tickets. Several professional hockey players support this claim by confirming that on-ice violence is not merely encouraged, it is demanded (Conacher, 1971; Dryden, 1983). An eminent sports attorney has testified that physical courage is now the prime requirement of NHL coaches when selecting draft picks, even to the extent that potential draft choices are offered boxing lessons if their fighting skills are deemed insufficient (Woolf, 1980).

The evidence presented thus far has concentrated on factors that tend to reinforce violence positively. However, on occasions the courts have provided severe aversive reinforcements. It has been established that a violent act is not legal just because it occurs in the sports arena. And while most public prosecutors are reluctant to pursue cases of sport violence, a federal court did award $3.3 million in damages against basketball player Kermit Washington of the Los Angeles Lakers for one devastating on-court punch to the face of Rudy Tomjanovich of the Houston Rockets. In sharp contrast, a jury failed to convict Dave Forbes of aggravated assault on Henry Boucha because it was argued that the fight in question was a normal occurrence in hockey and therefore Boucha willingly “assumed the risk” of being injured in a fight.

Although many argue that the law should intervene more often to control sports violence, the prevailing edict in most sports deters athletes from pursuing legal action. The unwritten law, that incidents of violence should be dealt with “within the family,” is so deeply ingrained that players who attempt to seek compensation in the courts run the risk of being ostracized by their fellow teammates. A case involving a South African rugby player demonstrates this perfectly. In 1984 Johan Human sought damages against an opponent who allegedly punched him during a game. He was officially disowned by his club for pursuing court action. Furthermore, five local businessmen offered to pay the legal fees incurred by the defendant on the grounds that, by pressing charges, Human brought the sport into disrepute. Therefore, it can be concluded that the scarcity of court action, and the inconsistency of its outcome, severely limits the potency of the judiciary system as an effective deterrent to sports violence.

**Modeling**

Modeling involves the imitation of behavior, especially that which is perceived as successful. Because sport, particularly professional sport, receives so much media
coverage, it is quite normal for young athletes to imitate the behavior of their heroes in the professional leagues. Research suggests that imitative behavior does include the emulation of violence. Russell (1978) found that high school hockey players whose favorite NHL players were violent received more assaultive penalties themselves than did those young players who chose less violent models. Further evidence was provided by Smith (1978a), who found that 56% of the junior hockey players interviewed claimed they had learned techniques for extra-legal aggression from watching professional hockey, and had subsequently incorporated them into their own playing style.

The modeling process endows professional sport with a special responsibility to set desirable examples of behavior, as today's professional athletes have the power to influence the next generation of sportsmen and sportswomen. However, as the behavior of professional athletes is in turn influenced by the reinforcements and pressures directed at them by coaches, teammates, fans, the media, sports promoters, and league executives, then the responsibility for creating healthy role models must be spread evenly among all those sources.

Momentarily overlooking the responsibilities that athletes have to others, it should be acknowledged that they also have a responsibility to themselves. Hodgkinson (1983) proposes that every individual develops moral values which function in a self-regulating way. Hodgkinson's paradigm includes four levels of values based, in ascending order, upon preference, consensus, consequence, and principle. Values based on either consensus or consequence mediate behavior through rational consideration (in the manner of social exchange theory) whereas principles derive from such transrational entities as conscience and intuition. Principles have the capacity to influence behavior on the sports field. For instance, a rugby player who finds himself standing over a prostrate opponent, out of view of the referee, may decline to kick the opponent on the head—not because he is afraid of being caught and punished, and not because there is no potential gain to be had from such an action, but purely and simply because he holds the principle that it is morally wrong to kick an opponent.

On the other hand, Hodgkinson notes that principles may be held without necessarily being operant. For example, a hockey player may behave violently for the sake of peer acceptance and task completion, while at the same time retaining the principle that violence is immoral. In other words, he may act according to a value based on consensus and consequence, but may hold a higher moral principle that it is wrong to do so. In such instances the strength of the external pressure overrides the athlete's personal convictions. Understandably, this may cause inner conflict within the athlete and give rise to such comments as "I don't approve of the violence, but it's expected and it wins games." In general terms, moral values should be viewed as a variable influencing the potential of an athlete to act aggressively, but not necessarily preventing violent behavior.

A Conceptual Model of the Aggression Process

The rationale for this model rests on the assumption that in order to reduce violence in sport to a minimum it is first necessary to develop a solid conception of the aggression process. The model is an attempt to explain the interaction of several variables that determine the incidence of aggression, and to isolate those variables which can be successfully manipulated to deter violence in sport.

The model proposes that each individual develops a certain potential, or propensity, for aggressive behavior which is shaped by the innate predisposition for aggression of that individual combined with the moral and social influences to which he/she is exposed.
While it would be more parsimonious to incorporate moral values under the umbrella of social learning, a separate category has been retained to stress the enduring nature of an individual's principles. The model suggests that social learning is the dominant factor in determining an individual's propensity for aggressive behavior.

Consistent with the Lewinian notion that behavior is a product of the person and the environment, aggression is conceptualized as resulting from interaction between the situation and the individual. It is evident that highly charged situations elicit different levels of aggression from different individuals. (This supports the concept that individuals possess varying propensities for aggression.) Similarly, any individual, no matter how great his or her propensity for aggression, will not display aggressive behavior in every situation.

However, identifying the determinants of aggression solves only half of the problem. The major task is to devise strategies to reduce violence. Assuming that an individual's genetic predisposition for aggressive behavior is a constant, and that moral values remain fairly stable, then the most effective way to reduce his/her propensity for aggression is through the medium of social learning. A very important feature of the model is that the consequences of aggression function in a social learning capacity, which in turn influences the individual's propensity for future aggressive behavior. This suggests that a reinforcement system of tangible rewards/punishments can reduce the probability of deviant behavior. In practical terms, this involves punishing aggression severely enough to deter further aggressive behavior, combined with substantial rewards for fair play. Rule compliance may not be internalized, however, without the prolonged aversive reinforcement of extra-legal aggression by coaches, teammates, referees, spectators, and the media.

As the model indicates, an alternative means for controlling aggressive behavior is to modify the situation, thereby reducing the amount of frustration present. This may involve fundamental rule changes to reduce the amount of physical contact or to outlaw certain high-risk practices which, although not unlawful themselves, often act as the catalyst that provokes a violent response. Such legitimate but potentially dangerous practices would
include the use of the helmet as a weapon in football, checking in hockey, and rucking over an opponent in rugby. Alternatively, frustration levels could be reduced by deemphasizing winning at all levels of sport, particularly the lower levels. It is acknowledged, however, that the competitive ethic is so deeply engrained in sport that this remedy may be neither realistic nor even desirable.

Although the model clearly identifies social learning and situation as the two critical variables for controlling aggression, it does not imply that reform is easy. Often the nature of social learning and the structure of professional sport depends on social, financial, and political issues that extend far beyond the sporting arena. The primary cause of sports violence, therefore, may be none of the factors already outlined, but rather the underlying nature of our society. To use an historical parallel, just as the decline of the Roman Empire was accompanied by "sporting" bloodbaths in the Coliseum, so it may be that the current ascendency of violent sports reflects the decay of our own civilization. However, this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, and is mentioned purely as food for thought.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to identify factors that contribute to aggression and violence in sport. It may be concluded that an extensive socialization process is the major influence contributing to sports violence, but that psychological, moral, and situational factors also play a significant role. It may also be concluded that the socialization forces, particularly reinforcement, are the most readily manipulated. In order to keep a check on aggression, the reinforcement structure of a sport should be such that rule violations result in punishments that have greater deterrent value than any potential advantages.

It has been argued that the responsibility for providing appropriate reinforcements rests with several independent but interrelated sources. Those immediately surrounding the athletes are particularly influential and therefore have a special responsibility. The coach and teammates form the nucleus of an athlete's sporting environment, and exert strong pressure on the athlete to conform to normative standards. If they provide aversive reinforcement for extra-legal aggression, then such behavior will diminish. If the reinforcement is positive then violence will increase. The same relationship will hold true with respect to less constant but equally important sources of reinforcement, namely, referees, spectators, league administrators, and the media.

The other factors that may be manipulated to contain violence are largely situational in nature and involve deemphasizing victory or reducing physical contact and frustration through rule modification. It has been noted that the complex interdependence of sport and society makes such fundamental reform of sport structures difficult. Ultimately, however, the final responsibility for eradicating violence must rest with the conscience of every athlete who participates in sport.

References


