



## A Comparative Analysis of Moral Authority Measures between Division III College Athletes and Non-Athletes

Kyle Busing\*

### Abstract

Previous research has suggested that athletes differ on measures of moral maturity and reasoning from nonathletes. Previous research on morality has not investigated the sources of influence on moral decisions. This study utilized the Moral Authority Scale-Revised (MAS-R), to determine to what degree athletes and nonathletes attribute influence to outside sources and to determine if measures of moral authority differ between athletes and nonathletes. This study utilized a convenience sample design. While the mean score of athletes was higher on all of the MAS-R subscales than non-athletes, significance was reached only on the mean scores of the Family Source and Educators Source subscales. This indicates that athletes attribute more influence to teachers and parents for moral decisions than non-athletes. Future research is needed to determine if this extends to coaches as well, as this group has also been demonstrated to exert influence over athletes

### Keywords

Moral authority; Athletes; Non-athletes; Morality

### Introduction

Culturally, it is a commonly held belief that “sport builds character.” In fact, this belief about sport is so ingrained that it has become institutionalized throughout societies. As Long, Pantaléon and Bruant [1] suggest, “...political institutions often rely on sport practice to develop good citizens who will assume responsibility for the future of their society.” This belief is somewhat paradoxical as social norms are frequently set aside during the performance of sport. For example, individuals are allowed and encouraged to strike one another during play, which violates traditional social norms. As concerns about athletic aggression have grown over the years, there has been an increasing interest in the moral reasoning of athletes and to what degree the sport context influences moral reasoning.

There are numerous challenges to better understanding sport morality however starting with what is seen as a lack of valid and reliable measures to assess the various moral dimensions of experiences in sport [2]. For example, Kavussanu and Boardley [3] developed the Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior in Sport Scale, which focuses on the prevalence of overt prosocial or antisocial behaviors on

team sports. While instruments like this address the need for reliable and valid measures to assess moral behavior, in comparison there is little information that tries to better understand morality from the perspective of the sport participant, including what influences moral decision making.

While many people believe that moral reasoning is enhanced through participation in sport, research does not consistently support this assertion [4]. One possible explanation for this in previous research has been to suggest that the sport context is so unique as to elicit specific moral reasoning behaviors within a sport situation, which may be different than in non-sport situations. For example, Bredemeier and Shields [5] evaluated moral reasoning in sport situations versus everyday life situations and found that athletes’ moral reasoning is higher in non-sport situations.

While athletes do demonstrate higher moral reasoning in non-sport situations, there is evidence to suggest that athletes’ moral behavior away from the field/court is less mature when compared to nonathletes. For example, in a report by the Josephson Institute of Ethics [6], it was reported that 65% of boys and girls participating in sport cheated on an exam in the past year, which was higher than non-athletes (60%). This finding is supported by Beller and Stoll [7] who suggest that there are differences between athletes and non-athletes in measures of maturity of moral reasoning with athletes scoring lower on measures of moral authority than non-athletes.

Much of the early moral development in sport research was underpinned by Kohlberg’s theory of multiple stages of moral development. The stages of moral development attempt to explain the development of moral judgement that is universal to all cultures [8]. There have been a number of important critiques of Kohlberg’s stage model however. As examples, Shweder et al. [9] challenged the universality of moral principles and Gilligan [10] has asserted that Kohlberg’s stage approach doesn’t consider gender orientation differences. Haan’s [11] interactional morality framework suggests that morality is a process borne out of interpersonal experience and socialization and not the cognitive process suggested by Kohlberg. Haan’s framework is not intended to be taken as developmental stages, but instead describes the process one might go through to reach a moral decision. While Kohlberg’s and Haan’s theoretical approaches differ, both suggest that morality is a result of moral development.

Other researchers have found Kohlberg’s notion that the structure of moral argument is more important than the content of the moral argument ignores underlying faulty assumptions [12]. Henry’s work posits that moral judgements are essentially declarations of preference and one cannot evaluate preferences as indications of moral maturity. More recently, researchers using a psychodynamic theory approach acknowledge the role that influential sources play in moral development [13]. This theoretical approach provides the foundation for Henry’s [14] assertion that it is the content of moral reasoning, or moral authority, that should be evaluated. McDaniel, Grice and Eason [15] define ascription to moral authority sources as: “the individual attributed level of influence to various sources of moral authority in decision-making”. The sources of moral authority as identified by Henry [12] are family, educators, self-interest, society’s welfare and equality.

\*Corresponding author: Kyle Busing, Department of Exercise Science and Sport Management, Schreiner University, Kerrville TX 78028, USA, E-mail: jkbusing@schreiner.edu

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While previous studies have evaluated the influence of different sources (e.g., coaches) on social behaviors of athletes [16] the current author has found no reviews that provide insight into the moral influences on athletes. Previous studies have examined various social influences that affect morality [17], moral maturity of athletes [18], and assessment of morality [2]. What is lacking amongst the body of literature is research that addresses to what sources do athletes attribute most of their influence for moral decisions and if these sources differ significantly from individuals not involved in sport.

Of particular interest to the current author is to determine if there are differences in measures of moral authority between athletes and nonathletes. After a review of the literature, the current author can find no studies that have compared the moral authority measures of athletes and nonathletes. The purpose of the current study is to address the gap in the literature and clarify the sources to which athletes ascribe moral authority.

## Methods

### Participants

All recommendations of the Internal Review Board were carried out during this study. The participants in this study represented a convenience sample of two hundred fifty college age adults representing students who attend a small private, Texas Liberal Arts University. The study was comprised of 228 participants. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years. Participant gender was comprised of 100 males and 128 females. Out of this participant group, 83 were college athletes and 145 non-athletes. The athletes were selected from the entire student-athlete population currently playing a Division III sport.

### Measures

Procedure Researchers were trained to administer the surveys, procedures to gain informed consent and to answer questions related to this research project. Researchers met and agreed upon a script to explain the survey and informed consent procedures. After agreeing upon the script, researchers practiced presenting the instructions for the survey and informed consent. Researchers presented survey and informed consent to a pilot group and addressed all questions. After this, the researchers refined the script to better address all potential questions or problems. Subsequently, two hundred and twenty-eight university students were recruited to participate in the study. All data were compiled by the primary researcher. Participants reported demographic information related to age, gender, and participation in university athletics.

### Moral authority scale

In order to address some of the weaknesses of cognitive developmental measures and to determine “who/what” has influenced an individual’s moral development and to what degree these sources influence moral decisions White created the MAS, which is based on Henry’s [12] content reformulation of Kohlberg’s (1987) formalistic notions of moral judgment and provide the conceptual groundwork for the Revised Moral Authority Scale (MAS-R)” [19]. The MAS-R gives insight into the degree to which powerful sources influence moral decision-making. The goal of White [19] was to develop an assessment tool that was able to ascertain, to what degree, various sources influence moral development.

The MAS-R was used as a measure to determine “who/what” has influenced an individual’s moral judgment. This scale asks for opinions on moral issues and then asks respondents to identify the

amount of influence of multiple statements on each response. This scale is designed to collect information on the degree to which various sources of moral authority influence opinions on moral issues. The MAS-R presents social issues to participants and asks them to identify ‘who’ or ‘what’ influences their opinions about the social issues. A sample question of the survey is, “Should people who break the law (such as stealing, speeding, etc.) be punished?” Participants are then given statements that are rated for the amount of influence. A sample statement of the survey is, “the idea that everyone should try to make society a better place has on my opinion.” Statements are rated on a scale from one to ten indicating “no influence” to “a powerful influence.” Subscale scores can be obtained for each source of moral authority by summing the score on all items relevant to each of five subscales. The five subscales are: Family Source, Educators Source, Society/Welfare, Equality, and Self-Interest. This feature is used when researchers are interested in determining the influence of each individual source of moral authority. White [20] has reported high test-retest reliability of the MAS-R ( $\alpha=0.95$  to  $0.98$ ) for the subscales. White also reported that source items have significant correlations with appropriate source total,  $r=0.61$  to  $0.90$ .

### Statistical analysis

In relation to the research questions of interest, the data were statistically analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). A MANOVA was used to investigate differences in moral authority amongst athletes and non-athletes, as there are multiple dependent variables, and to reduce the risk of an inflated Type I error. In addition to reducing the risk of Type I error, the MANOVA analysis was used to take into account any correlations among the dependent variables. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance, and multi collinearity, with no serious violations noted. The independent variable was athletic participation. The dependent variables were the scores of the subscales of the Moral Authority Scale-Revised and the scores on these outcome variables were assessed in relation to group differences. All differences were considered significant at  $p<.05$  level. The statistical analysis was completed using the SPSS Version 20 program.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

Descriptive analyses for each subscale were calculated on each of the moral authority subscale variables for athletes and nonathletes. The means and standard deviations for both groups are presented in Table 1.

No significant differences were found between sexes of the participants on any of the subscales. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the only subscales on which there were differences that reached statistical significance, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01, was the Family Source Subscale,  $F(5, 220)=9.288$ ,  $p=0.003$ , partial eta squared=0.040 and the Educator Source Subscale,  $F(5, 220)=6.192$ ,  $p=0.014$ , partial eta squared=0.027. This suggests that athletes and nonathletes do exhibit significant differences in the degree to which they attribute influence of the various sources of moral authority to their moral decision making. Values for all subscales are reported in Table 2.

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of gender on measures of moral authority. The results of the initial

**Table 1:** Means, Standard Deviations, and Range of Scores for All Variables.

Subscale	Athlete		Non Athlete	
	M	SD	M	SD
Family Source	40	12.41	34.43	13.35
Educator Source	31.22	12.48	26.63	12.84
Society/ Welfare	46.96	8.30	45.58	9.26
Equality	50.13	7.09	48.09	9.58
Self -Interest	43.39	11.65	41.50	12.57

**Table 2:** Comparison of Means by Athletic Participation and Moral Authority Test.

Test	Athletes (M)	Athlets (SD)	NA (M)	NA (SD)	P	F	df	Eta Squared
Family Subscale	39.94	12.45	34.43	13.35	0.003	9.288	220	0.040
Educator Subscale	31.02	12.5	26.63	12.84	0.014	6.192	220	0.027
Equality Subscale	50.22	7.15	48.99	9.582	0.312	1.027	220	0.005
Self Interest Subscale	43.44	11.72	41.5	12.57	0.254	1.309	220	0.006
Society Subscale	46.81	8.25	45.58	9.262	0.319	0.998	220	0.004

NA= Nonathletes

one-way MANOVA revealed no significant multivariate main effect for sex, Wilks'=0.964, F (5, 219)=2.067, p=0.071, partial eta squared=0.045. Thus, we may conclude that the differences between athletes and nonathletes on moral authority subscale measures were not due to the influence of gender.

## Discussion

The present study was an investigation conducted to elucidate which sources of moral authority influence athletes' moral decision making to the greatest degree and to determine if there were differences between athletes and non-athlete's moral authority subscale measures. The results of this study suggest that participation in college level sport is associated with differing levels of influence from moral authority sources when compared to non-participation in sport. Although the effects of participating in sport on moral reasoning have been documented [7], previous research has not addressed moral authority measures of athletes.

The current study is one of the first to evaluate moral authority measures and athletes and cannot be directly compared to previous studies that have evaluated moral reasoning and moral functioning. The findings of the current study add to the literature regarding measures related to morality between athletes and non-athletes, and do support previous findings that demonstrate that there are differences between athletes and non-athletes on measures related to morality [18].

The use of a moral authority measure has not been used in previous studies involving morality and athletes [21,22]. Assessments of moral reasoning and moral development do not measure the influence of various sources on moral decision making as does the moral authority scale. Consequently, measurements of moral authority may illustrate, more accurately, what could be focused upon to affect change in moral development. Participation in sport has frequently been considered an activity that will support moral development, but previous research has demonstrated that sport should be considered separate from everyday life [23], and thus, the sources of influence on moral behavior may be different in a sport context than those in a different environment.

Previous research has suggested that "important others" like spouses, friends, and family have an influence on psychological needs of individuals [24]. The current study did reflect that important outside others (e.g., parents & teachers) seem to influence athletes more so than non-athletes. What remains unclear however is to what degree coaches influence moral decision making. Previous research suggests that coaches can influence athletes' sportsmanship [25]. In addition, recent research suggests that coaches become the most important influence on moral development as athletes age [26]. As sport settings can influence moral development, and some research suggests that coaches are an important influence on moral development investigating the specific influence of coaches would merit further research.

The major strengths of this study were: 1) measuring moral authority amongst athletes reflects to what degree various sources influence moral behavior, which has not been done in previous studies; and 2) comparing moral authority measures of athletes to those of non-athletes, which extends the literature on how sport involvement affects moral behavior.

This study also has several limitations, however. First, separate analysis of the participants was only done based on sex. No separate analysis was done based on specific sport participation (e.g., basketball, volleyball, etc.) and thus the results of the current study can only be generalized to an overall population of athletes. Second, the sample used was a convenience sample, which limited the variability of the participants and may have biased the results. Further studies, need to be done with a greater variety of participants. Lastly, the current research used participants of Division III athletics only. Further research should incorporate athletes from other NCAA athletic divisions to determine if any differences in moral authority are present as the performance level of the athlete changes.

## Conclusion

Previous authors Bredemeier and Shields [5] Kavussanu and Roberts [27] have suggested that sport participation and the achievement orientation of athletes seem to be associated with lower levels of moral functioning. The preliminary evidence of this study suggests that athletes do differ from non-athletes in measures of moral authority, but while the MAS-R does consider the influence of important outside others, it does not specifically identify coaches as a source of influence. The underlying moral theory used by White [20] in the construction of her scale would identify coaches as "external" moral authorities, and thus the MAS-R scale should discern the influence of coaches. It is the contention of the current authors that helping significant others (e.g., coaches) realize their impact on moral reasoning may hold some promise for influencing moral growth. Future research that attempts to ascertain the influence of coaches specifically is warranted.

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## Author Affiliation

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Department of Exercise Science and Sport Management, Schreiner University, USA

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