

Determination of University Athletes Character through Sport Participation in Niger Delta of Nigeria

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Abstract

There is increasing reports concerning the character displayed by athletes on and off the field of play. These reports are not far different from the ones observed in Nigerian University sports. This worrisome report has necessitated this study carried out on determining the character of university athletes in Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The descriptive survey design was utilized for determining the character traits possessed by university athletes in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The population consisted of four thousand two hundred and six (4206) university athletes, out of which four hundred and sixteen were sampled through systematic random sampling. A four point scale questionnaire was self-designed with reliability index of 0.65 and 0.61 alpha levels for social and moral character respectively. Mean and independent t-test statistics were used to determine levels and significant differences amongst the groups studied. The results show that athletes possessed low social and moral character traits in sports; there were significant differences between male and females and between contact and non-contact sport athletes in moral and social character. It is recommended that coaches should pay attention to character of athletes and be character role models.

Keywords: character, sport participation, social and moral character

1. Introduction

Sport ethicists are becoming more concerned about the nature of character manifested by athletes during play. Dodge and Robertson (2004) observe that ethical behaviour of sports participants concerning their character has become a topic that has garnered much attention in many countries the world over. There is growing national and international concern about ethical issues bordering on character of athletes in sports. These include decline in the standard of sporting conduct, the lack of respect for officials, tacit acceptance of rule bending, parental pressure and violence on the field (Brackenbridge, 2001; McNamee, 2001).

Character development through sport participation has long been a topic of interest to educators and academics. In higher education character development has been considered an important objective of education in general Igbanugo (2004) & (Oelstrom 2003 and athletic participation in particular (Arnold 1999). Similarly Dodge and Robertson (2004) stress that sport can be a potent instrument for teaching positive lessons. These lessons come from involvement in activities where ethical dilemmas occur. Sportsmanship and the development of positive character have long been explicit goals of schools sports (Jennifer, 2002). A strong belief exists that sport programmes have the power to promote the development of sports-manlike behaviour, ethical decision-making skills and character building (Stoll & Beller, 2000).

Character in sports seems to be viewed from different angles in sport participation. Edward (1973) observes that the exact definition of "good character" is nowhere to be found in the literature on sports. Edward further observed that there exist some assertions which suggest that persons manifesting personality traits deemed unacceptable or undesirable are selectively excluded from sports participation; that sport competition itself may be detrimental to the development of what is commonly believed to be a desirable character trait. However, one of the most significant problems according to Rudd and Mondello (2006) that plagues the investigation of character building through sport is the extreme diversity of definitions attached to the word character.

Character has been defined as engaging in morally relevant conducts or words, or refraining from certain conduct or words (Wynne & Walberg, 1984). Pritchard (1988) defines character as a complex set of relatively persistent qualities of the individual person, and generally has a positive connotation when used in discussions of moral education. Character is the habit established at first through the training from youth, of taking responsibility for oneself, of being brave, of being honourable and of using our reason or intelligence to guide

our feelings, especially when our feelings might lead us to do something unwise, unloving, disrespectful, unfair, and dishonest (Lange 2002). Stoll and Beller (2000), opine that character is right conduct, our humanness which resides in our ability and capacity to use our reason to control and moderate ourselves which result in virtue. It appears that character is the ability to think and reason clearly about our choices and not simply be led by our feelings.

From these definitions, it appears that character has a combination of moral and social values. These two dimensions of character values need to be properly defined so that character traits of University Athletes in the Niger Delta can be identified. The concept of moral character originated from Aristotle over 2000 years ago. Aristotle believed a person of moral character was someone who conducts himself or herself in accordance with moral principles such as honesty, fairness and compassion (Arnold 1999). Moral character refers to the intangibles of moral excellence—integrity, honesty, concern for others and for justice. Moral character moderates our personal desire for success with issues of justice and a concern for the greater good (Davidson, Moran-Miller & Beedy 2004). A true test of character is when one can apply these moral principles in the face of competing societal pressures and temptations. When moral values are violated, harm to individuals often ensues. For example, a relationship in which person A is continually dishonest to person B will most likely lead to an unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship (Rudd & Mondello 2006). Similarly, in sport context, the maintaining of moral values such as honesty, fairness and respect is vital to a fair and safe competition between opponents. In terms of moral goodness, Arnold (1999) insists that moral character virtues such as justice, honesty and compassion should be developed in athletes to have a good sport.

Unlike moral character, it is difficult to find explicit definition of social character in the sport literature. However, social values are succinctly defined by Rudd and Mondello (2006) as values that have been deemed by a society or culture as being vital in reaching a desired end state. In the context of sport, the desired end states are two-fold. A sport sociologist Sage (1988) view sport as a medium for teaching values such as self-sacrifice, loyalty and work ethic. People possessing these values would then be able to contribute to the corporate world. Secondly, athletes who are loyal, hardworking and team oriented will increase the potential for a winning team. Thus social character reflects how all team members contribute to win in competitions. Social character values emphasize interpersonal relationships. Social values are different from moral values in that social values may not have moral ramifications. For example, it is difficult to consider an athlete in a club immoral for refusing to practice beyond the normal training period; rather a willingness to extend practice hours is a demonstration of self-sacrifice and the concept of being a team player a social value.

Character in many sports is tied to a long history of male dominance and female exclusion. Dominant forms of sport have been shaped and organized in connection with character values and experiences of males in the society. Bredemeier (1985) opined that males at all levels of participation prefer instrumental character values for everyday life in sport while female preferences varied depending upon levels of sport involvement. It implies that male athletes that are used to contest require physical exertion to achieve success in life much more than females. The more competitive females are, the more their preferences and character resemble those of males. The movement towards an instrumental value orientation by female athletes at higher levels of sport competition runs counter to general socialization patterns demonstrating that sport may have a powerful influence on their character value preferences. According to Bredemeier and Shields (1986), this character logic of sport especially power and performance sport implies that female athletes must be unemotional in character, willing to play in pain and willing to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of victory. To show character, females must be male – like in terms of traditional definitions of masculinity. The events which were originally designed for male athletes such as soccer are now being introduced to females. That means for females to fit in properly they must develop such masculine characteristics that enable men to play such sport. If they do not strive to dominate opponents, be unemotional, sensitive to risk of injuries, they are seen as lacking character. The results of the review by Proios, Athanailidis and Giannitsopoulou (2010) have revealed that physical activities affect some significant traits of personality, such as moral and social qualities. They concluded that physical activities can constitute a means for the development of the females' character.

Character may likely be influenced by activities in different sport subcultures. A sport subculture may differ sufficiently in character value from the mainstream of other sports to warrant its being labelled a deviant sport subculture (McPherson, Cutis & Loy, 1989). For example, tipping or pushing an opponent who is about to score is common in soccer and basketball while such acts is non-existent in volleyball and athletics (Calhoun 1987). Bredemeier and shield (1986) found that close – skilled non-contact collegiate athletes (e.g. athletics) were superior to open-skilled contact sport participants (e.g. soccer) in moral character. Bredemeier and shields

speculated that the discrepancy found between the two categories of sport may be explained by nature of different situation that evolve in interactive contact team sport and individual self-paced non-contact sport. From these findings, it appears that sport-type has a moderating function in character development of athletes which is applicable to university sport environment.

Hoffman (1999), Laughlin (2005) believe that sport is a vehicle for education, health, leadership and sportsmanship. The fact is that these values are not automatically or necessarily transmitted through sport. Others believe that sport is failing to achieve its potential to positively influence the moral and character development of youth and strengthen communities (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2003). Antisocial behaviour that constitutes unacceptable behavioural patterns or indiscipline in sports abound. Research report of longitudinal study by Priest, Krause and Beach (1999) show that intercollegiate athlete's sportsmanship orientations declined with long participation in sport. Similarly, Camire and Trudel (2010) reported Kavussanu, Seal Phillips (2006) who found that youth soccer players exhibit antisocial character more than prosocial behaviour. In a more recent study, Rudd (2008) reported that athletes rationalized the use of gamesmanship strategies because they are part of the game and because they are good strategy used to gain an advantage on opponents.

In recent times, mass media reports have availed us with unprecedented news of deviant character in sports. These are perpetuated either by athletes, fans or even officials on and off the field of play. These reports indicate that athletes are failing to demonstrate character values which the society is expecting. The above scenario underscores the need for determining the character of Nigerian university athletes.

The purpose of this study is to determine character traits manifested by Nigerian university athletes in sports. The study on character traits possessed by university athletes has a variety of values for university coaches, physical education teachers and other sports administrators. It will help to increase empirical data and knowledge on the status of university athletes' character in the Niger Delta. It may help to highlight the status of moral and social character traits possessed as it relates to their sport types and gender. Differences in sporting activities may likely determine how athletes respond morally and socially. Coaches would appreciate the need to introduce skill and activities that will enhance the moral and social character of athletes who participate in contact and non-contact sport types. Moral and social character differences arising from gender are better understood to include strategies that are appropriate for the female athletes.

2. Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in this study:

1. What is the status of moral character traits possessed by university athletes who participate in contact and non- contact sport in the Niger Delta?
2. What is the status of moral character traits possessed by gender of university athletes in the Niger Delta?
3. What is the status of social character traits possessed by university athletes who participate in contact and non- contact sport in the Niger Delta?
4. What is the status of social character traits possessed by gender of university athletes in the Niger Delta?

Hypotheses:

There is no significant difference in the mean scores of moral and social character traits possessed by university athletes by sport-types and gender

3.0 Method

The descriptive survey design was utilized for determining the character traits possessed by university athletes in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The population consisted of four thousand two hundred and six (4206) university athletes, from the Niger Delta area who participate in Nigerian university games. They were used for determining the university athletes' character status because they are conversant with situations in sports required to determine athletes' character. Four hundred and sixteen (416) university athletes were systematically sampled through balloting technique. The questionnaire titled university athletes character traits questionnaire (UACTQ) that has five sections was used for data collection. Section A consists of bio data of the athletes which includes gender and sport types (Individual & team sports). The gender has male and female while the sport type (individual/team sports) includes contact and non- contact sports. Section B, comprised eight questions

measuring moral character, traits (moral character indices) C consist of ten questions on social character traits, (social character indices); the content and construct validity of the instrument were estimated using factor analysis. The varimax with Kaiser normalization methods of principal components analysis (PCA) and the extraction method were used in extracting the content and construct validity. The social character indices with ten questions were selected with rotated component matrix ranging from 0.57 to 0.90. This is an indication that the item in this subscale has construct validity. The rotated sum of square loading revealed a cumulative variance of 71.87%. The moral character indices with eight items have rotated component matrix ranging from 0.56 to 0.90 and cumulative variance is 61.9%. The Cronbach alpha was used to determine the reliability index of the UACTQ instruments according to subscales. The social character subscales, yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.65 ($P < .05$), moral character subscale yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.61 ($P < .05$).

4.0 Result

Research Question 1

What is the status of moral character traits possessed by university athletes who participate in contact and non-contact sports?

Table 1: Status of Moral Character Traits possessed by University Athletes who participate in Contact and Non-contact Sport.

S/N	Items	Sport Types					
		Contact			Non- contact		
		N=198			N=218		
		\bar{X}	SD	Decision	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1.	Players fake fouled to gain advantage over opponents	1.61	.67	L	1.65	.69	L
2	Players break game rules of officials will not catch them	1.8	.97	L	1.90	.67	L
3	Home based teams locate matches in bad playgrounds to gain advantage	1.75	.71	L	1.95	.78	L
4	University coaches field non university athletes in competitions	1.94	.79	L	1.87	.83	L
5	Players report team mates using illegal drugs to perform	1.81	.74	L	1.99	.76	L
6	Players retaliate bad plays	1.82	.68	L	1.94	.80	L
7	Players deceive opponents	1.82	.74	L	1.89	.77	L
8	Players hurt opponents if that will enable them win the game.	1.71	.72	L	1.84	.72	L
Grand mean =1.83 SD =0.76							

Criterion $N = 2.50$, L for low moral character Criterion ($\bar{X} < 2.50$) H for high moral character. ($\bar{X} > 2.50$).

Table 1 above shows that from the result, the a grand mean scores of 1.83 is below the criterion mean which implies that contact and non-contact sports participant possess low moral character traits.

To determine the difference in mean scores of moral character possessed by contact and non-contact sports participant's hypothesis two was tested.

Research Question 2:

What is the status of moral character traits possessed by gender of university athletes in the Niger Delta?

Table 2: Status of Moral Character Traits possessed by Gender of University Athletes.

S/N	Items	Gender		Female	
		Male n=212	Decision	n=204	Decision
1.	Players fake fouled to gain advantage over opponents.	1.63	L	1.63	L
2	Players break game rules if officials will not catch them	1.84	L	1.88	L
3	Home based teams locate matches in bad playgrounds to gain advantage	1.90	L	1.80	L
4	University coaches field non university athletes in competitions	1.99	L	1.81	L
5	Players report team mates using illegal drugs to perform	1.95	L	1.86	L
6	Players retaliate bad plays	1.89	L	1.88	L
7	Players deceive opponents	1.92	L	1.80	L
8	Players hurt opponents if that will enable them win the game	1.83	L	1.72	L

Criterion, $\bar{X} > 2.50$ L = low moral character $\bar{X} > 2.50$ H= high moral character ($\bar{X} > 2.50$) As shown in Table 2 above, the mean scores of all the variable items generally are less than the 2.50 criterion mean indicating a low moral character level.

Research Question: 3

What is the mean score of social character traits possessed by university athletes who participate in contact and non-contact sport?

Table 3: Status of Social Character Traits possessed by University Athletes who participate in Contact and Non-contact sport.

S/N	Items	Sport Types		Non- contact	
		Contact n=198	Decision	n=218	Decision
1	Players are angry at their team mates for making mistakes.	1.85	L	1.88	L
2	Players with draw from practicing difficult skills	1.98	L	2.04	L
3	Athletes obey games rules only when it is convenient	2.03	L	2.11	L
4	Players easily give up during extra time	2.11	L	2.06	L
5	Athletes treat opponents as friends	1.98	L	2.08	L
6	Athletes work hard on performing difficult tasks at all times.	1.97	L	2.26	L
7	Players encourage one another when things are not moving well.	2.12	L	2.21	L
8	Players help teammates who are striving to be fielded for competition.	1.84	L	1.99	L

Criterion $\bar{X} > 2.50$, L for low social character, ($\bar{X} > 2.50$) H for high social character. ($\bar{X} > 2.50$)

As shown in table 3 above, all the mean scores for contacts and non-contact sport participating are less than the criterions mean 2.50 indicating that they possess low social character traits.

Research Question 4

What is the mean score of social character traits possessed by gender of university athletes in the Niger Delta?

Table 4: Status of Social Character Traits Possessed by Gender of University Athletes.

S/N	Items	Gender			
		Male n=212 \bar{X}	Decision	Female n=198 \bar{X}	Decision
1	Players are angry at their team mates for making mistakes.	1.90	L	1.86	L
2	Players with draw from practicing difficult skills	2.10	L	1.92	L
3	Athletes obey games rules only when it is convenient	2.09	L	2.05	L
4	Players easily give up during extra time	2.17	L	1.99	L
5	Athletes treat opponents as friends	2.22	L	1.84	L
6	Athletes work hard on performing difficult tasks at all times.	2.30	L	1.94	L
7	Players encourage one another when things are not moving well.	2.22	L	2.10	L
8	Players help teammates who are striving to be fielded for competition.	1.93	L	1.90	L

Criterion $\bar{X} > 2.50$, L = low social character $\bar{X} > 2.50$, H = high social character. ($\bar{X} > 2.50$)

The results above show that Generally the mean scores for both gender are below the criterion mean 2.50 indicating a low social character traits possessed by university athletes.

To determine the gender and sport-types differences, the mean score on social and moral character traits possessed, hypothesis four was tested.

Table 5: t-test of moral and social character of athletes by sport-type and gender

Character traits	variables	No	Mean	Df	t-value	t-critical	p.	Decision
Moral character	Contact sports	198	14.22	414	2.99	1.96	.003	S
	Non-contact	218	14.90					
	Male	212	14.92	414	3.10	1.96	.002	S
	Female	204	14.22					
Social Character	Contact	198	19.36	414	-2.75	1.96	.000	S
	Non-contact	218	20.08					
	Male	212	20.50	414	6.26	1.96	.000	S
	Female	204	18.97					

P<.05 Level of significance.

The result in Table 5 shows that the calculated t-value (2.99) is greater than critical t (1.96), and $P < 0.05$. The hypothesis is rejected. This result implies that there is no significant difference in the mean score of moral character traits possessed by university athletes who participate in contact and non-contact sports. The summated mean score of non-contact sport (14.90) is greater than 14.22 mean score of contact sport indicating that non-contact have higher moral character.

The calculated t-value is 3.097 while the critical t is 1.96. The P (.002) is less than .05 alpha level ($P < 0.05$). The hypothesis is rejected. The result implies that there is a significant difference in the mean scores of moral character traits possessed by gender of university athletes. The summated mean scores for males (14.92) is higher than females (14.22) indicating that males have higher moral character than females

As shown in the table above, the t-value is -2.749 while the critical t is 1.96. The sig. P (.000) is lesser than the alpha (.05) ($P < 0.05$). The hypothesis is rejected. This result indicates a significant difference in the mean score of contact and non-contact sports participants. From the summated mean scores, non-contact 20.08 indicates higher social character traits than contact (19.36) sports participants.

As shown in the above table, the t-value of 6.26 is greater than critical table value (1.96). The P is less than alpha level 0.05. $P < 0.05$. The hypothesis is rejected. The result implies that there is a significant difference in the mean scores by gender of university athletes. Furthermore, the summated mean scores of males (20.50) indicate that they possess higher social character traits than females (18.97).

4.1 Discussion

4.1.1 Moral Character Traits Possessed by University Athletes

The result of the study shows low mean scores of moral traits such as faking fouled, breaking game rules if officials do not catch them, dishonesty retaliation and even causing injury to opponents. These results agree with the findings of Stoll and Beller (1997), Rudd and Stoll (2004) that majority of athletes will not support the moral ideal in a competition. The reason for low moral traits may be that the competitive atmosphere affects their moral reasoning thus leading to deterioration in moral character (Lowe, 2004). Thus, if cheating or use of deceitful methods to win are not noticed, athletes may employ them as skills in sports (Beller and Stoll, 1995).

Contact and non-contact university sports participant had low mean score responses on moral character. This implies that in both sports cultures, athletes exhibit negative moral traits, had tendencies to break games rules, faking fouled placing opponents in a disadvantaged position and even condoning athletes that use illegal drugs to perform. Accepting that these traits prevail in university sports indicate a low moral character. These results agree with Rudd and Stoll (2004) that contact and non-contact sports participants had low mean scores on moral character. There was a significant difference in the mean scores of moral character traits possessed by contact and non-contact sports participants. The non-contact sports participants had higher mean scores than the contact sports athletes. Similarly, Rudd and Stoll (2004) reported that non-contact sports athletes scored higher than contact sports participants on moral character. This result further confirms the findings of Bredemeier and Shields (1986) in which the close-skilled non-contact sports participants (swimmers) were superior to open-skilled contact sports participants. Bredemeier and shield speculated that the discrepancy found between the two sports types may be explained by nature of different situations that evolved in interactive contact team sport and individual self-spaced non-contact sport. Other researchers further explained that the reason for contact sports milieu in which many teams' contact sports athletes believed that winning takes precedence over the moral ideal. (Dreyfuss, 2001, Eitzen, 1999).

Male and female university athletes had low mean scores on moral character traits. This result is in line with Stoll and Beller (1997). From their studies with well over 72,000 athletes, the sport had not supported moral character of athletes generally. There was a significant difference in the mean scores of moral character traits possessed by male and female university athletes. Males had higher mean scores than females in the moral character index. This result agrees with the findings of Rudd and Stoll (2004), and Rudd, Stoll and Beller (1997) in which they reported a significant difference between males and females on their moral character. On females scoring lower than males on moral character, Stoll and Beller (1997) observed that female team sports athletes are becoming more morally calloused: lack of respect, honour, and dignity towards fellow competitors, team mate's rules and the spirit of rules. The difference in the mean scores of males and female university athletes according to Gilligan (1987) could be attributed to a moral perspective that organized thinking. She posits that males define morality almost exclusively relative to principles of justice, whereas females concept of morality concern standards of responsibility and care. However, this moral thought is facing criticism as females are beginning to have equal right to participate in sports and receive benefits that accrue to sports participants. It, therefore, stands that females are getting more calloused than males in moral character (Kretchmar, 1994).

4.1.2 Social Character Traits Possessed by University Athletes

Contact and non-contact sports participants had low mean scores on the social character index indicating low social character traits. These findings are consistent with the assertion of Kohn (1991) that competitive sports may likely support or result in anti-social character. Similarly, research evidence indicates that competitive sport may also have a negative influence on social character development. Generally, this finding contradicts the assumption that sport fosters social values such as hard work and cooperation, learning to persevere, to sacrifice and to be self-disciplined (Shields and Bredemeier 2005; Lumpkin, Stoll & Beller. 2002, & Eitzen 1995). There

was a significant difference in the mean scores of social character traits possessed by university athletes who participate in contact and non-contact sports. The non-contact sports participants have a higher mean score than contact sports participants. This result is consistent with the findings of Rudd and Stoll (2004) which reported a significant difference between contact team sport and non-contact individual sports athletes in the level of social character. Similarly, Bredemeier and Shields (1986) in their study also observed a difference between children of 4th grade and 7th grade who participates in high contact and medium contact sports. Bredemeier and Shields (2006) asserted that levels of physical contact are an important variable in the study of social character. Their reason is that the rule structures of the various sports promote different types of social interaction. For example, the culture of rugby is quite different from that of competitive swimming. The development stimuli provided by a boxing match are different from those of golf tournament (Vallerand&Losier, 1994; Weiss &Bredemeier, 1991). The reason for the difference could be obvious from previous findings.

Male and female university athletes had low mean scores in the social character indices. However, males had greater mean scores than the females in social character. The result is consistent with the research by Rudd (1998) which reported that sports may build and support a sort of “anti” social character attributes such as hard work, dedication, loyalty and sacrifice. The reason for low mean scores in social character de-competition whereby the opponents are not seen as honourable opponents but rather as an obstacle of little worth to overcome. The result is further contrary to that of Kavussanu and Roberts (2001) in which females were found to score higher than males in their attitude towards social inventions, rules and officials, opponents and negative attitude to opponents and officials.

There is a significant difference in the mean scores of social character traits possessed by gender of athletes. The findings agree with that of Rudd and Stoll (2004) in which they reported a gender difference in social character. The males scored higher than the females in social character. Similarly, Tsai and Fung (2005) reported a gender difference in the social convention but females scored higher than males. It appears that previous results are not consistently in one direction as regards gender issues on the social character. It implies that other factors not yet explained may be responsible for inconsistencies in results on social issues. However, it appears that females are becoming socialized into sports by a process similar to males; and learning values, norms and character similar to males. It implies that in sports females want to be perceived as equal to male athletes and demonstrate valued male social character traits.

5.0 Conclusion

From the result of the study, it is concluded that all athletes, contact and non-contact sports participants and both gender of university athletes in the Niger Delta possess low moral character traits. There is a significant difference between moral character traits possessed by contact and non-contact sports participants and by gender of the athletes. The athletes in Niger Delta who participate in contact and non-contact sports types and by gender have low social character traits. There is a significant difference in social character traits possessed by contact and non-contact sports participants and by gender of university athletes in the Niger Delta.

5.1 Recommendations

- (1) Coaches and university sports organizers should pay attention to character manifested by athletes in the field of play
- (2) Coaches alongside training should study their athlete’s character and be role models for athletes.

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