
12-2-2023

"Well You Know...": Parents' Perceptions of Morality in AAA Youth Ice Hockey

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Recommended APA Citation

McCarver, Z., Wong Vickland, D., & Stellino, M. B. (2023). "Well You Know...": Parents' Perceptions of Morality in AAA Youth Ice Hockey. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(12), 3478-3493. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.6004>

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Abstract

Parents' involvement patterns serve as a catalyst to their children's moral development (Bandura, 1991). Yet, sport culture may convolute parents' authentic ability to socialize their children's moral development within a compliant structure focused on performance excellence (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The purpose of the current study was to examine how parents conceptualize morality while entrenched in a conformity-driven elite youth ice hockey environment. The following research question was explored: how do parents ascribe meaning to, and learn the behavioral representations of, moral and immoral behaviors in youth ice hockey? Parents' ($N = 8$, $M_{age} = 53.13$) perspectives of morality and immorality were explored within the culture of elite youth hockey through individual semi-structured interviews. A transcendental phenomenological approach was implemented to identify both textural and structural experiences parents used to derive their perceptions of morality and immorality in youth ice hockey (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Results exemplify how normative standards socialized through various dimensions of hockey culture obscured parents' perceptions of morality and immorality through "relatively conscious" acceptance of socialized norms. Findings highlight the socialization processes that parents use to develop their conceptions of morality by overconforming to the normative standards valorized through the youth hockey sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The "relative consciousness" findings reflected how parents transformed their moral conceptions paralleled with youth hockey culture's delineation of moral norms and values (Burry & Fiset, 2022; Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Keywords

morality, sport culture, parents, youth sport, phenomenology

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the participants' willingness to sacrifice their limited time to engage in the current research. This research would not have been possible without participants' courage and capacity to share their experiences and perspectives to contribute to the current study. Additionally, the first two authors would like to graciously thank the third author for her time, contributions, and oversight of the current manuscript.

“Well You Know...”: Parents’ Perceptions of Morality in AAA Youth Ice Hockey

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Parents’ involvement patterns serve as a catalyst to their children’s moral development (Bandura, 1991). Yet, sport culture may convolute parents’ authentic ability to socialize their children’s moral development within a compliant structure focused on performance excellence (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The purpose of the current study was to examine how parents conceptualize morality while entrenched in a conformity-driven elite youth ice hockey environment. The following research question was explored: how do parents ascribe meaning to, and learn the behavioral representations of, moral and immoral behaviors in youth ice hockey? Parents’ ($N = 8$, $M_{age} = 53.13$) perspectives of morality and immorality were explored within the culture of elite youth hockey through individual semi-structured interviews. A transcendental phenomenological approach was implemented to identify both textural and structural experiences parents used to derive their perceptions of morality and immorality in youth ice hockey (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Results exemplify how normative standards socialized through various dimensions of hockey culture obscured parents’ perceptions of morality and immorality through “relatively conscious” acceptance of socialized norms. Findings highlight the socialization processes that parents use to develop their conceptions of morality by overconforming to the normative standards valorized through the youth hockey sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The “relative consciousness” findings reflected how parents transformed their moral conceptions paralleled with youth hockey culture’s delineation of moral norms and values (Burry & Fiset, 2022; Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

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Introduction

“There is a lot of immorality in youth ice hockey,” (Participant; Hillary).

Within the context of youth sports, parents model and interpret socialized cultural behaviors that influence youth moral development (Bandura, 1991; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995) and their children’s sport experiences (Dorsch et al., 2022; Tamminen et al., 2020). Empirical evidence illuminates the positive and negative effects parental involvement patterns have on youth athletes (Dorsch et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2017). Parental involvement has primarily been examined to understand pressure and supportive behaviors on athlete outcomes (Knight, 2019). This approach has neglected to critically examine how parents traverse youth sport socialization practices, such as understanding when to apply types of support and how to manage demands of sport involvement (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Unique elements of youth sport environments, such as team dynamics and characteristics of sporting contexts, that provoke parental involvement behavioral patterns remain less understood (Dorsch et al., 2022).

Specific sport cultures are entrenched in dynamic interactions that reflect socialized and valued behaviors (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986), which encourage engagement in or avoidance of deviant sport behaviors (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Kavussanu et al., 2013). The cultural processes parents experience and adopt to derive moral conceptions have not been theoretically or empirically clarified despite their omnipresent impact on children's moral development (Bandura, 1991; Walker, 2004; Walker, 2022). The complexity of youth sport parenting as a phenomenon (e.g., Knight, 2019) requires consideration of how parents understand morality within the dynamics of competitive youth sport.

Moral Theory

Social cognitive theory of moral thought and action (SCT) proposes that parents socialize their children by reinforcing and modeling various social norms for their children (Bandura, 1991). SCT defines the process of moral development to be contextually dependent and multidimensional (Bandura, 1991). More precisely, moral conceptions that parents model and reinforce are dependent upon their integration of personal and normative contextual standards, or moral thinking (Bandura, 1991). Bandura (1991) proposed the process of moral thinking to illuminate how contextual and situational factors influence the individual formation and adoption of moral standards. The formation of moral standards is a dynamic process influenced by intrapersonal values (Bandura, 1991). Sutcliffe and colleagues (2020) reported elite youth hockey parents may inhibit desires to confront antisocial or immoral behavior directed at their athletes in fear of ridicule or punishment from coaches and disapproval from other parents. Parents may adapt their moral standards when witnessing behaviors directed at their children. Such interactions may be perceived as less severe of a norm violation than confronting such behaviors in the hockey context. Hockey culture requires athletes to pursue collective group goals to climb competitive ranks and conform to expected behaviors (Burry & Fiset, 2022). Despite the awareness that normative moral standards are learned through interactions with others in specific sport cultures, the means by which parents develop their moral understandings remain less understood.

Sport Ethic and Hockey Culture

Sport cultures promote unwavering pursuit of norms, values, and expected behavior known as the "sport ethic" (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The sport ethic exemplifies the processes that are emphasized to galvanize the pursuit of a "real" athlete status by making sacrifices for the game, striving for distinction, taking risks, playing through pain, and refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of athletic possibilities (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Behaviors that reflect the pursuit of the sport ethic provide coaches and athletes with the evaluative criteria of a "real athlete" status (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Moral and social standards subsumed within the sport ethic beliefs are emphasized in hockey culture to enforce athletes' adoption of valued beliefs, norms, and rituals (Burry & Fiset, 2022). Pervasive interactions coupled with a culture of conformity requires athletes and their parents to navigate the indistinctive standards and behaviors expected in hockey to sustain involvement (Burry & Fiset, 2022). Socialization processes of hockey culture coupled with pursuit of achieving a "real athlete" status may require parents and their children to adjust their moral standards to demonstrate conformity to norms of behavior expected in hockey.

Intense youth hockey socialization practices force parents to designate unwavering trust in coaches' abilities to develop their children (Todd & Edwards, 2021). Sutcliffe and colleagues (2019) evidenced these sentiments and found elite youth hockey parents to have greater interest in coaches they perceived as "competent" compared to "warmth in personality" for their

children. To sustain involvement in elite youth hockey, parents may simultaneously conform their moral thinking (Bandura, 1991) to hockey culture's valorized norms that reflect the sport ethic beliefs (Burry & Fiset, 2022; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Therefore, parents serve as an intimate conduit, dependent upon their degree of compliance, to their children's unwavering pursuit of "sport ethic" moral norms in hockey. Parents who are obliged to normative beliefs of the sport ethic may be a consequence of moral thinking to support their children's pursuit of behaviors to achieve a "real" athlete status (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Parental conformity may be a consequence of moral thinking adaptations to endorse normative moral beliefs expected of a "real" sport parent (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Despite encouragement of positive, moral standards with the "sport ethic," parents are expected to endorse standards that represent immoral behavior generally deemed immoral within greater society (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). As contended, parents may then reinforce such standards through modeled behaviors to their youth athletes (Bandura, 1991). Parents are undoubtedly and continuously confronted with situations in hockey culture that may require varied moral standards to demonstrate their status as a "real" sport parent. The sport ethic contentions provide a rich opportunity to explore what socialization processes are used by parents in their moral thinking to describe morality and immorality in the context of ice hockey. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine parents' perceptions and conceptions of morality and immorality through a phenomenological exploration of the dynamics experienced in elite youth ice hockey culture.

Context of the Researchers

Different and unique perspectives amongst the three researchers involved in this study were considered relevant to the evaluation of the data collected from the context explored. The first author, ZM, has had numerous experiences with moral phenomena throughout their history of involvement and participation in youth hockey as a player for over ten years. ZM's lived experiences and engagement in behaviors condoned in hockey culture fostered personal curiosity of moral processes within the sport of ice hockey. ZM formerly competed at the Tier I Juniors hockey level, whereas the third author, MBS is currently a parent of two elite youth hockey athletes. The second author, DWV, has no history or involvement in hockey, but has participated in various individual and group team sports, including soccer, softball, gymnastics, and swimming. Although personal differences in biases, values, and ideologies can influence how an individual researcher may interpret data (Fusch et al., 2018), our collective experiences are representative of the current study participants' perceptions. Our intention was to provide readers an accurate representation of parents' lived experiences in elite youth hockey culture that contribute to their understanding of morality.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

A transcendental phenomenological stance was implemented to identify both textural (i.e., *what* participants experienced) and structural (i.e., *how* phenomena were experienced across conditions, situations, and contexts) experiences to accurately capture the essence of parents' context-specific perceptions of morality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sharing the context, content, and experiences through parents' lenses afforded further understanding of relevant relationships and interactions to examine the social phenomena of interest (Clarke et al., 2016). The employment of this approach allowed for the exploration of cognitive and affective

components of parental experiences (i.e., within their lived reality of parenting in youth ice hockey) that shape their moral conceptions.

Participants

Purposive, snowball sampling was implemented to recruit participants from AAA (subsequently termed “elite” for clarity) youth ice hockey programs in the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States. The AAA designation is indicative of the most competitive, *elite*, level of youth hockey in the United States (US). The contextual focus of competitive AAA youth hockey followed recommendations of purposive recruitment relative to age, expertise level, and environmental characteristics (Thomas et al., 2015). Participant inclusion criteria consisted of a parent of a current AAA hockey player at the U13 (i.e., under 13 years of age) or U14 (i.e., under 14 years of age) competitive level. The athletes’ ages were of poignant focus because they can legally “check” in hockey in the US. Getting “checked” in hockey refers to intentional, physical body contact to stop a player from advancing the puck on the ice that often results in high impact between two or more players. Parents ($N = 8$, $M_{\text{age}} = 53.13$ years) identified as White/Caucasian ($N = 8$), parented White/Caucasian male athletes at the U13 ($n = 5$), U14 ($n = 2$), and at both U13 and U14 ($n = 1$) competitive levels. All participants were given pseudonym names to maintain anonymity.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was provided by the researchers’ institution prior to the study commenced. Coaches or parents, who were team managers, received emails requesting permission and access to team parents. After obtaining informed consent via email, all parents were provided the option to engage in various formats of individual interviews (in-person, over the phone, or over video conferencing; Zoom) to increase participation during and immediately following the hockey season at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020. Gray and colleagues (2020) illuminated the increased quality of utilizing Zoom or other video conferencing tools to conduct qualitative dialogues with research participants for convenience, enhanced experience of personal interface, and time-saving benefits. Interviews included time for participants to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Individual interviews were organized to accommodate parents’ and researchers’ schedules at a mutual place of convenience (i.e., local coffee shop, via video conference). Each participant was first asked a series of general questions about their overall experience parenting their son(s) in AAA youth hockey to build rapport and establish trust (Kitzinger, 1995). The semi-structured interview guide was then employed to investigate parent perceptions of what morality and immorality is, feels, sounds, and looks like in youth hockey and any exceptions to their conceptions of morality and immorality in AAA hockey. Exploration of parents’ perceptions of *what* morality and immorality was implemented to examine the study purpose, whereas follow-up probes of *feels*, *sounds*, and *looks* were included to explore cultural nuances that guide their moral and immoral conceptions in hockey. The first two researchers were present for all eight interviews to increase rigor and maintain consistency of interview protocols and procedures. The first author asked the questions and follow-up probes to obtain content while the second author took specific notes of what parents wore (i.e., hockey team attire), interaction nuances, body language, and reactions throughout the interviews (Morgan, 1996; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). All interviews were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Interview data were first transcribed verbatim by the first or second author, and then confirmed for accuracy by the third author, who did not initially transcribe the transcripts. Researchers assigned pseudonyms to participants to maintain anonymity. A six-phase abductive thematic analysis was implemented (Clarke & Braun, 2017). An abductive approach was used for two primary reasons: (1) the purpose of the study was novel, and (2) the constructs investigated were inherently ambiguous and complex (for review see Walker, 2004; Walker, 2022). An abductive approach consisting of inductive and deductive coding cycles were implemented to capture the breadth of parent experiences and perceptions relevant to characterizing morality and immorality in elite youth ice hockey (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Data analyses were conducted inductively for the first four interviews, then deductively for the last four interviews. The second set of four interviews were used to deductively analyze the transcript codes to the themes established from the first four interviews and the generation of additional viewpoints to further saturate pre-existing themes from the initial inductive analyses ($n = 4$ for inductive analysis; $n = 2$ mothers, $n = 2$ fathers, $M_{\text{age}} = 49$ years; and $n = 4$ for deductive analysis; $n = 2$ mothers, $n = 2$ fathers, $M_{\text{age}} = 45.25$ years).

Inductive Data Analysis

After individually generating initial codes searching and identifying themes, we then initiated the reviewing of themes phase. Similar and different codes were independently sought and found in an attempt to further define the themes that would encompass the most illustrative representation of the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). During this stage, data of participants' visual reactions, body language, and the nuances of interactions were also incorporated to support the representation of participants' lived experiences by the first two researchers. Any discrepancies between the first two authors' identification and inductive placement of codes for initial theme generation were discussed until consensus was reached. After establishing preliminary themes, all three researchers collectively deliberated on the initial findings, triangulated, explored the multiple realities, and deciphered between the most pervasive themes to create a parsimonious description of how parents conceptualized morality and immorality in AAA youth ice hockey. Themes were transformed repeatedly until consensus was reached among the researchers over the duration of a two and a half hour meeting.

Deductive Data Analysis

Following development of initial themes from the inductive analyses, four additional interviews were conducted to deductively analyze transcripts from the themes generated shortly after the conclusion of the hockey season (e.g., approximately five months after initial interviews). The deductive approach paralleled the inductive approach with slight deviations since the initial analysis was conducted from the first set of interview data. The deductive analysis entailed: (a) immersion in data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) deductively placing codes into themes, (d) reviewing new codes in respect to themes, (e) defining new themes for newly developed codes, and (f) writing the report (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

Trustworthiness

To address reliability or dependability, an audit trail was kept throughout the research process that consisted of clearly labeled informed consents, interview guides, demographic questionnaires, audio transcripts, and detailed researchers' notes of each interview (Sparkes &

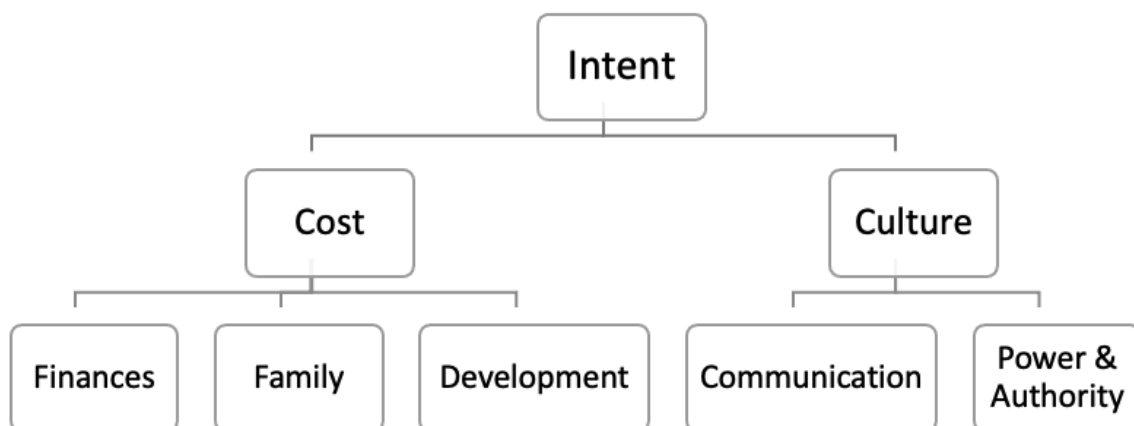
Smith, 2013). The audit trail illustrated the research process, observations of interview interactions, and authentic responses to interview questions (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Validity, or ensuring truthfulness, was pursued through peer debriefing and triangulation (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The first two authors implemented peer debriefing by immediately reflecting on each interview and processing what occurred while simultaneously reviewing their notes. Triangulation was conducted by all three researchers who contributed to the truthfulness of the data analysis by individually coding and thematizing the data (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Data saturation was conceptualized in the current study through two precise steps for both the inductive and deductive analyses as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). Saturation was first assessed through the inductive generation of themes by the first two authors' discussion of codes representing themes. The codes were then confirmed through the expert check process from the third author to question the rigor of theme generation until all codes identified were situated within a theme. Data saturation was confirmed through the deductive analyzation, and again through the expert check of the newly identified codes through deductive thematicization.

Results

The findings of the present study revealed both textural and structural experiences represented by themes and subthemes that parents used to describe their perceptions of morality and immorality (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The raw data quotes provide context of the cultural processes and norms that parents internalized to form their conceptions of morality and immorality within elite hockey. Themes reflect how accustomed parents were to the demands and challenges of hockey culture, which led to altered conceptions of morality and immorality in the youth hockey context. Parental experiences reflected in themes present both textural and structural elements of hockey culture that were used to explain their conceptions of morality and immorality. Specific feelings and perceptions perpetuated the hierarchical themes (See Figure 1 for hierarchical thematic structure) related to cultural nuances influencing conceptions of morality and immorality: *intent*; *cost* [Development, Family, and Finances]; and *culture* [Communication and Power & Authority]. Intent was hierarchically the highest-level theme that parents evaluated to differentiate immoral from moral behavior. All sub-themes reflected in the higher-order structure evidence participants' deliberation of intent.

Figure 1

Thematic representation on hierarchical results



Intent

Grounded in the data from participants' perspectives, intent was defined as the relative consciousness of purposeful tolerance and allowance for events and actions the parents and children experienced. For example, when asked, "what is immorality?", parents described the differentiation between morality and immorality as intent fueled by emotional reactions to behaviors. Gordie explained how perceptions of intent are interconnected to the choice to act or not: "It seems like immorality has had, there's greater [thought pause] purpose of choice. And, so because there's more intention with whether or not it's controlled intention or not." (Gordie). The quote above illuminates the foundational understanding of morality and immorality from the witnessed action combined with the volition to act.

Conceptions of morality and immorality were evoked through parents' contemplative tolerance of the elite hockey culture in the form of a "relative consciousness." "Relative consciousness" is anchored by the malleable evaluation of intent to meet the required compliance of socialized hockey norms. Parents perpetually clarified their acceptance of, and emotional investment in, behaviors inherent to the youth ice hockey culture. For example, Bobby expressed how immoral behavior was evaluated as the intent to injure, and valorized when directed at an opponent to protect a teammate (e.g., when a teammate is boarded, which is violently propelling another player into the boards, it is viewed as immoral compared to physically responding to an opponent who hit your goalie as moral):

I mean, if somebody boards your player, you gotta come in there and help defend them. Um, somebody slashing your goalie, I think that, but you still need to kind of, you still aren't trying to injure. So, I don't know if that's exceptions to morality, or not (Bobby).

Two parents reported responses to immoral behaviors from opponents were considered as moral in ice hockey. Parents acknowledged their athletes' engagement in behaviors that have the intent to injure their opponents but are considered moral when aimed to protect their teammates as expressed in the following two quotes from Amanda and Bobby: "I would think, but probably the fighting, you know, like, uh, drop the gloves fighting. But to me it doesn't bother me" (Amanda); "When you deal with the whores of the world, you send a whore" (Bobby).

The concepts of intent and "relative consciousness" were reinforced through parents' body language during interviews and/or how situations were described and perceived. Seven of the eight parents subtly, but audibly, laughed awkwardly and repeated in response to the question, "what is immorality in youth ice hockey?" The presence of their unconscious laughter conveyed a sense of discomfort, potentially indicative of parents' awareness of how difficult it may be to truly define morality in the context of elite youth hockey culture. All parents stated they believed their children learned important moral lessons from playing hockey, despite having to endure negative experiences to achieve the desired outcomes: "So, it's the dealing with adversity, just shaped them to who they are" (Kendall); "It's been uh, an uphill struggle for him. He loves it so much we tolerate it" (Wayne). In addition, parents rationalized immoral behaviors by stating their children experienced benefits from participation: "Like the wrong behaviors kids and parents do. Sometimes you have kids that do horrible things" (Hillary); "It would be like, like feeling, like cheated, you know. Like something was, was unrightfully taken away from you" (Gordie).

The emotional intensity was demonstrated by all participants and was pervasive throughout all the themes identified. The following quote illustrates the intent being intimately connected with tolerating normative behaviors perpetuated in hockey culture:

Nobody that I know who's sensitive could've tolerate what [oldest son] has gone through and none I say have to. So my wife and I worry constantly, we are on an emotional rollercoaster, we don't know whether we are making the right choices or not being involved enough, are we being too involved. It's just an incredibly difficult sport to navigate (Wayne).

The theme of Intent permeated throughout the sub-themes generated to reflect the magnitude and effect of hockey culture on parents' formation of moral and immoral conceptions. Perceptions of morality and immorality were contingent on parent engagement in "relative consciousness" to embrace hockey cultural norms witnessed and experienced and are exemplified in the following sub-themes.

Cost

Parents discussed how participation in AAA youth hockey demanded financial and time costs which were impactful to their evaluation of morality and immorality in hockey: "You have a lot of affluent people you know affluent parents that have their kids in sport, and they expect a lot from it" (Hillary). "It's expensive. Um, and the state of [Rocky Mountain Region], um, my, my closest from [Midwest], the cost of hockey is nothing like what we pay here in [Rocky Mountain Region]. And that's very stressful for families" (Amanda).

Cost was not only inclusive of the required level of sacrifice from the player, but also the athlete's family. The level of sacrifice parents shared was derived from mental, emotional, and psychological facets that contributed to differential conceptions of morality: "I mean you're investing so much money, so much time, and I think that makes people have wildly different views on that what, you know, what morality might look like" (Hayley). Cost was further broken down into sub-themes of *development*, *family*, and *finances* that reflected processes parents used to rationalize their "relatively conscious" conformity to cultural norms representative of both moral and immoral behaviors.

Development. Development was defined as psychological, emotional, and physical development that a child may have gained from their hockey participation. Development was perceived as a beneficial product from the negative situations parents consistently witnessed their children endure while unwaveringly continuing to invest through financial costs and time spent as described by Mario: "[It] [is] satisfying to watch as a parent and watch your kid, um, you know, come out the other side from a, from a negative turning negative positive" (Mario).

Parents were quick to justify immoral situations as beneficial to positive development as expressed by Kendall and Wayne: "But [we are] totally one-hundred percent supportive and loving how it shaped them to who they are now as far as just a good teammate, respectful-uh well-travelled, they know how to act in public they're-well versed" (Kendall); "I don't want to be sour grapes [my child] is having a great experience so far and it's been great for his confidence so far and his emotional development" (Wayne). Parents' "relatively conscious" evaluation of hockey culture's developmental intent enabled mindful deliberation of the "positive" outcomes with minimal attention directed to the malicious behavioral processes appraised to produce them. The quotes also demonstrate "bracketed morality" (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986).

Participants rationalized that continued costs associated with advanced development of their children were worth the time, efforts, and emotion as expressed by Hillary, Mario, and Hayley: "It certainly demands a higher level of commitment, uh, by, by the player and by, by the parents too...but hearing you know, he just talks of loving, loving the game" (Hillary); "It's important to me that he sort of understands the path that he wants to go forward on." (Mario), "Building up these kids and helping them to find their, you know, their path" (Hayley).

Family. The cost to family refers to the emotional outpouring, sacrifice, and time invested at the expense of family and other obligations. Hockey culture places an emphasis on competitive pursuit and dedication, which may distort parents' views on morality as described by Amanda and Wayne: "We tried to not put that [costs] on them and we talk it, you know, we talk to ourselves, my husband and I, about it, not when they're [kids] in the room" (Amanda); "They were horribly taken advantage of - so much so my son for sure had PTSD. My wife and I cringe every time you know that something comes up, it's like here we go again" (Wayne). Participants reported the demanding nature of costs association with participation, such as sacrificing opportunities for alternative family activities, allowed for conceptions of morality and immorality to be distorted as expressed by Hillary:

But I feel like the parents, ummm the parents will ... they have a difficult sense of umm right and wrong cause they just want to further their kid and do what is best for their children. They want their kids to go further that they will do anything, that morality kind of goes out the window. Parents want so much for their kids that it can create some of those deceptive immoral behaviors (Hillary).

Wayne also shared the struggle to decide if the decisions they made were the "right ones" in an effort to provide their children the opportunity to play elite youth hockey: "I very much worry for [child's name] cause he's a super sensitive kid and it - it's not a world for sensitive kids, so my wife and I worry constantly" (Wayne).

Finances. Throughout the majority ($n = 6$) of the interviews, parents consistently mentioned the significant financial costs for their child to participate in elite youth ice hockey: "It's incredibly expensive - I mean...I pay at least \$25,000 a year for each of my kids...to travel to team games..." (Wayne). "We're paying a lot of money for this, especially at AAA level. We do hear that a lot. I'm paying, you know, I'm working three jobs to get you on the ice kind of thing" (Amanda). "I know some parents say, Oh, there's no, you just stick an A, an A on it and you add \$5,000 and you're a "triple A" team" (Amanda).

In addition to the participation costs, parents shared their experiences and disapproval of other families' intent of covert financial investments (e.g., paying for private lessons, providing coaches with gifts, or paying for extra training or playing time): "I have seen coaches in the past that are jaded by gifts, and that kind of stuff. And will have extra playing time for being friends with parents" (Hillary). Although the financial cost to participate was technically the same for all families, parents' "relatively conscious rationale" endorsed the norms and appraised the developmental outcomes as valuable and worth the financial investment.

Culture

Culture was defined as the acceptance and adherence to the overall atmosphere of elite youth ice hockey. Parents "relative consciousness" justified their compliance to hockey culture processes that place immense pressure on their children to perform well: "We tried to kind of alleviate that pressure. Um, I know a lot of kids feel a lot of pressure" (Amanda). In addition to pervasive pressure, each parent spoke to witnessing either their child(ren) being "checked" in game play, or witnessing other children come into physical contact with another player's body due to an intentional collision during a game. Unwavering acceptance of the uncertainty of "checks" being illegal, or not, was normal within the hockey culture. As described by Kendall, regardless of the perceived intention of a check, one must accept the action is part of the sport culture:

The whole hockey, um, oh gosh what would you call it...um, so you have to be...you almost have to be expected to get hit and to be hit not necessarily to get hurt. It kind of goes with the territory. Whether it's legal or illegal, that is like the hockey culture (Kendall).

Parents evaluated if the intention of the “check” was to injure their child and disagreed with the coach's approach to manage these culturally ambiguous rule violations to focus on competitive performance success instead of their athlete development and well-being: “Coach was like no, you know, you should've gotten to the puck faster. It was one where I, I disagreed with him [the Coach]” (Kendall). As illustrated in the quote above, parents are required to suspend their authority to the coach regardless of moral and immoral criteria and subsequent consequences for their child.

Furthermore, the team's locker room was unanimously understood as the most sacred space exclusively for athletes and coaches, which has previously been noted to exacerbate conformity to norms (Burry & Fiset, 2022) as evidenced in the following quote:

The locker room is a sanctuary how dare you leave a piece of tape on the floor and he [coach] skated them around. A half number of kids were throwing up and falling over. If you're going to treat our sanctuary like this then you're not going to have any respect - I am going to make you respect and it - it was exactly like the “Miracle on Ice” scene where they're throwing up and you know, get up you fucking pussies and that kind of stuff at the U16 level (Reference to coach and athlete interaction; Wayne).

As Wayne illustrated, the locker room is used as a space to demand athletes' respect, conformity, and adherence to expected behaviors. Parents also expressed how they were required to conform to the cultural norm of the locker room as a space strictly for coaches and athletes as described by Bobby: “That type of respect really showing I think a lot of morality where, you know, if, obviously the coaches have to demand that, um, otherwise it's kind of Lord of the Flies in there [locker room]” (Bobby). Parents rationalized their conceptions of morality by refocusing on the intent of malicious cultural practices that afforded conformity to norms for development. This was also evident in the sub-themes of Communication and Power & Authority.

Communication. Communication was defined as the profound nature of verbal interactions among hockey personnel (e.g., coach, parent, athlete, official/referee). Parents frequently referred to the presence of expletive language used by coaches to communicate to the players, who were all boys fourteen years old and younger as a cultural norm. Parents disclosed the persistent acknowledgement of expletive interactions when asked “what does immorality sound like?” but not overtly appraised as immoral by parents. Such communication patterns were widely tolerated and described by Wayne, Hayley, and Amanda: “It's....you're the fucking pussy and you-you know, you got to have your mom and dad protect you?” (Wayne), “It's constant criticism and there's no actually constructive criticism as to how that player can better himself” (Hayley); “There's a lot of like, ‘fuck yeah,’ ‘hell yeah,’ ‘fuck you.’ You know, to other players and coaches, which you're going...really, okay. Um, some, some rinks, you can hear it more than others” (Amanda). Parents expressed the use of profanity was not only tolerated, but also utilized as a coach communicative tactic during competitive games as expressed from Hayley: “Some parents are critical of coaches that are stern with kids to the point of, um, you know, maybe using some profanity or yelling” (Hayley). Despite the disapproval of coaches using profanity with their children, the culture of hockey calls for moral and immoral conceptions and intentions to become transformed.

Participants recounted the way mothers, fathers, and players reacted to the profanity coaches, other players, and parents employed: “There’s a lot of language and then I’ll, I’ll question my kids, I’ll be like, what did you say? And he’s [my son is] like, oh, don’t worry about it” (Amanda). Overall, parents expressed that general communication was essential for the overall development of their children within this elite youth sport context:

Continuing to keep the communication lines open, both with coaches and players, but also it’s the, you know, having coach expectations that their players, these are people who are developing and growing into young adults and, um, and, and how that’s handled (Hayley).

Power & Authority. Power and authority was defined as the ability to directly influence, give orders and enforce obedience. Coaches were reported to exert their power and authority over players and their parents in intense and harsh ways. The power dynamics placed parents in a susceptible position and required them to suspend their interpretation of moral and immoral behaviors in the context of hockey. Furthermore, they relinquished any ability to intervene between their children and coach. Moreover, parents were simultaneously required to adhere to the norms established through coach power and authority representative of morality and immorality as illuminated by Wayne, Gordie, and Bobby: “The coach was new. He kind of came into hockey late, at a later age and was very much a Hitchcock disciple” (Wayne); “A coach, a person, uh, uh of different power” (Gordie); “When obviously the kids come and tell mom and dad, he comes back and he starts yelling at him for telling their mom and dad and they shouldn’t tell anybody. And they’re all snitches” (Bobby).

Parents also reported “buy-in” to the cultural praxis of coach’s power and authority. Parents consciously acknowledged questioning the methods coaches would take to guide their athletes. Nonetheless, they accepted and condoned the actions as part of the sport’s culture as expressed in the following quotes from Kendall, Hillary, and Bobby: “They’ll do whatever the coach asks them, whether it’s something moral or immoral. They want to please. Do what you know, whatever it takes” (Kendall); “Coaches that will belittle them and attack their character. You know it’s not necessarily about their work ethic on the ice. Like we have coaches that will keep kids an hour after practice and just absolutely demoralize them” (Hillary); “When coaches talking, nobody’s doing anything. You gotta, you’re not making a noise sound, you’re not tying your skates. You’re not untying your skates, you’re not taking a sip of water” (Bobby).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate processes in the hockey culture that parents grapple with to form intrapersonal conceptions of morality and immorality (Bandura, 1991; Walker, 2022). The findings from the current study extend insights from Hughes and Coakley (1991) that establish evidence of how parents’ overconformity to sport cultural praxis may deviate from their moral and immoral conceptions. The results of the current study also extend cultural theoretical implications that affect transitions in parental moral standards, which are critical to youth moral development (Bandura, 1991). Parents’ moral thinking was inextricably linked with hockey culture’s socialization practices. Variant forms of “relative consciousness” were implemented to conform to social and moral norms. Though parents were not easily able, if at all, to define morality and immorality, numerous cultural components revealed parents “relative conscious” conceptions of morality and immorality. Parents’ engagement in “relative conscious” appraisals of morality and immorality were intricately connected to their perceptions of intent.

Parents' conformity to cultural norms flourished when "relatively conscious" moral thinking allowed perceived intent to conform with socialized values. As evidenced by participants, intent reflected the "relative consciousness" of purposeful tolerance and allowance for events and actions the parents and their children experienced. Results from the present study reveal that parents alter their evaluative criteria of intention to conform to specific cultural norms and social influence. Yet, they were restricted in their ability to critically integrate the consequences of "relatively conscious" interpretations of intent of valorized processes in the hockey culture. Sage and Kavussanu (2007) described intent in relation to the goal of behavior rather than the motivational intention of the perpetrator in sporting contexts. More precisely, parents' evaluation of intent focused on the tolerable and allowable goals of behavior that they experienced in addition to their children.

The pervasive professionalization of youth sport may distort parents' moral standards to provide their children with every opportunity to advance their competitive hockey career (Tamminen et al., 2020). Critical to this notion is the sentiment that parents feel obligated to sustain involvement to avoid parental failure (Coakley, 2006). Coakley (2006) suggested competitive youth sport programs provide the opportunity for parents to experience moral worth if their child experiences continuous success. For example, Preston and colleagues (2020) suggested hockey parents may have used their child's performance success to enhance their prestige on the team and the greater hockey community. Parents have been reported to engage in conflict with elite youth ice hockey coaches who emphasize a culture of competition to potentially enhance their social status or provide their children opportunities to achieve success (Preston et al., 2020). The intent of cultural norms may not be deviant in conception but may become morally distorted through parents' and coaches' endorsement of cultural norms exemplified through their behaviors (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Each parent in the present study spoke to knowing or having an idea of what their children experience at a cost emotionally, physically, and psychologically from elite hockey participation. However, they continue to dispense hockey "costs" in pursuit of developmental opportunities for their children. By engaging in unique sacrifices for the "game," parents relentlessly conceded to behaviors expected to meet the demands of the hockey culture (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Yet, they are hesitant in their attempts to condone the processes that lead to their children's moral development. Reluctances among parents were consistently evident when processing their interpretations of hockey culture's approach to character building, but precisely appraised as necessary for youth development to occur. The inability to ascribe moral and immoral value to hockey cultural processes may allow parents to elevate their status as a "real" sport parent through a "relative consciousness" adherence to perceived developmental outcomes. The magnitude of required costs perpetuates vastly different parental expectations. Therefore, varied conceptions of morality and immorality may depend on parents' relinquishment of control to the powerful figures (e.g., coaches) in hockey culture, (Burry & Fiset, 2022; Todd & Edwards, 2021). Further, dispensing costs are rooted in "relatively conscious" tolerable acceptance of the intent of these processes to afford their children developmental opportunities within the confines of youth ice hockey.

Reinforcement of both athlete- and parental-expected behaviors subtly shifted perspectives of disdain and tolerance to accept and endorse morally ambiguous norms that are socialized to promote athlete development. This was evidenced through reported tolerance of coaches' and athletes' deviant behaviors in pursuit of enhanced performance. This shift affords conceptions of morality to become distorted through reinforcement of parents' conformity to, and affirmation of, the hockey culture operations suggested to provide competitive success. However, a recent intervention in Canada revealed a significant decrease in immoral athlete behaviors when youth hockey leagues made parent education mandatory compared to leagues that did not (Tamminen, et al., 2020). Changing parent perceptions of morality through

intervention education programs may combat the currently pervasive behaviors embedded in the socialization processes of hockey culture. Bringing awareness to the possible consequences of parents' decisions to conform to the sport ethic may ignite contemplation of processes appraised to afford youth moral development.

Consistent with the *power & authority* theme, parents reported an overt acceptance that their children do as they are told by coaches without deviation. When there was question or hesitation, it resulted in a team punishment, individual punishment, or encouragement for teammates to engage in sanctioned bullying. Furthermore, parents reported seeing and hearing what coaches have said, but not being able, or willing to directly intervene. If parents intervene, their children reap the consequences (e.g., extra drills, ridicule from coaches and teammates). As a result, current findings corroborate previous contentions that parents' endorsement of hockey culture's sport ethic norms elevate unwavering acceptance of deviant actions to achieve success (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) through varied appraisals of morality and immorality.

Limitations

In asking participants to define morality and immorality within the context of elite youth hockey, the questions were purposively left vague so that parents could answer freely without specific parameters. A major limitation in this study was repeated parental admittance, sometimes reluctance, and general inability to willingly share and overtly conceptualize definitions of morality and immorality within elite youth hockey. Most of the facial expressions and body language among participants were difficult to capture within the transcripts but were more evident in the actual real-time interviews. As researchers, we witnessed parents' reactions to questions and probes with awkward chuckles, unease, pauses, fidgeting and shifting of body positions when asked about their perceptions and conceptions of morality and immorality. Our sample of parents all identified as Caucasian as did their children, which is reflective of the broader elite ice hockey demographics and further evidenced the sport's lack of diversity. Despite these limitations, the current study magnified how this highly competitive, investment-intensive, youth sport culture encourages specific behaviors that cloud parents' ability to define morality. Our results provide preliminary evidence of how parents' conceptions of morality become convoluted by overconformity to the hockey culture's sport ethic.

Conclusion

In the present study, multifaceted emergent themes revealed parents' subtle uncertainty in navigating nuances in elite youth ice hockey culture to define morality and immorality. Important to note is the context of elite youth ice hockey in the United States as compared to elsewhere in the world, may present different cultural factors that impact parents' conceptions of morality and immorality, such as financial costs to participate. Parents' have been reported to allocate guardianship of their elite youth ice hockey players to family members in Canada due to the minimized costs with participation (Todd & Edwards, 2021). As illuminated in the present study, many cultural factors impacted parents' conceptions of morality and immorality, such as costs, while participating in elite youth hockey in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States.

Parents, in addition to athletes, undeniably conform to hockey culture's enactment of the sport ethic to achieve the status of a "real" sport parent despite personal uncertainties across the moral to immoral continuum. Based on the findings from this study, it is evident that parent beliefs are deeply rooted in their "relatively conscious" internalization of hockey cultural norms, where immoral circumstances are deemed acceptable and often necessary for youth development and success to occur. Parents experienced constant vacillation in efforts to

rationalize their acceptance of immoral or typically unacceptable behaviors. This is indirectly related to conformity driven gradations embedded within the hockey culture, such as allocating unwavering commitment of power and authority to coaches (Burry & Fiset, 2022; Todd & Edwards, 2021). Evidence from this exploration suggests that parents have difficulty conceiving and adhering to clear and consistent parameters of morality, or lack thereof, while entrenched in the juggernaut of the hockey culture.

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Acknowledgements: The authors would like to acknowledge the participants' willingness to sacrifice their limited time to engage in the current research. This research would not have been possible without participants' courage and capacity to share their experiences and perspectives to contribute to the current study. Additionally, the first two authors would like to graciously thank the third author for her time, contributions, and oversight of the current manuscript.

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Article Citation

McCarver, Z., Wong Vickland, D., & Stellino, M. B. (2023). "Well you know...": Parents' perceptions of morality in AAA youth ice hockey. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(12), 3478-3493. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.6004>
