



TOWARDS A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE IN ICE HOCKEY

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ABSTRACT

Ice hockey is characterised by high levels of skill and aggressive (often violent) confrontation. In this short paper, discourses surrounding on-ice violence in ice hockey are explored through ethical/sociological lenses. Based on empirical examples to illustrate the theoretical distinctions, a preliminary typology of on-ice incidents that may be described as violent rule-violations illuminates the analysis. There are (at least) three forms of violent conduct that can be differentiated and are accepted within the *ethos* (after Bourdieu, 1993) of elite level ice hockey – tactical, symbolic and actual. There is a fourth that is not tolerated.

KEY WORDS

Ice-hockey, Violence, Ethos

INTRODUCTION

Ice hockey (hereafter referred to as hockey) is characterised by high levels of skill and aggressive (often violent) confrontation. According to Gruneau and Whitson (1993) it is often an expression of working-class masculinity. In this short paper, I develop some preliminary work (Fleming 2005) and explore some of the discourses surrounding hockey. In particular, I focus on aspects of on-ice violence. I do this from the perspective of a cultural (British) outsider, though also through the lens of a sociologist with a professional

interest in the application of ethics to sport and leisure¹. The style is deliberately polemical with the intention of stimulating discussion.

The violence associated with hockey is so embedded that it has entered many forms of popular culture. There is 'literature' – for example Fischler's (1999) *The Ultimate Bad Boys* and Allen's (1999) *Crunch – big hitters, shot blockers and bone crushers*; there are movies – for example, *Slap Shot*² and *Slap Shot II – Breaking the Ice*; and there are websites dedicated to show-casing on-ice violence – for example, www.BroadStreetBully.com and . All of this, and there is much more besides, indicates a market for the consumption of hockey-related violence.

A (MINOR) MORAL PANIC?

The intention of this paper is not to criticise hockey and those involved with it (in whatever capacity) *per se*. Rather, it is to situate the centrality of perceptions of violence within appropriately informed cultural contexts. Violence in hockey is not a new phenomenon. Angela Patmore (1986) has described its escalation during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the sense of active encouragement for it that seemed prevalent at that time. In a nationwide survey in 1970, 40% of all respondents reported that they liked to see violence in hockey. There is more recent evidence of hockey's popularity rising as the level of aggression has been raised (DeNeui & Scahau, 1993). It would be naïve and simplistic, therefore, to identify the violence in hockey and seek an ethically informed interpretation of the game that was not sensitive to the prevailing circumstances.

The various interested parties in the game form a community of stakeholders, and different constituencies propagate violence in different ways. In addition to those identified above, two of the clearest can be witnessed on big game night. At the rink, the first signs of an altercation between players (usually the point at which they 'square up' to each other) may be greeted

¹ In the spirit of enabling the reader to understand the particular world-view that I adopt, a brief biographical note may help to illuminate both my 'personal baggage' as well as my theoretical emphases. My sporting background is in the major team games (in Britain, at least) of Rugby Union and Cricket, and since the late 1980s I have been a Rugby Union referee. I trained initially as a physical educator and then pursued a sociological journey that has forced me to familiarise myself with some aspects of philosophy and social psychology. My research interests include a commitment to ethics (cf. McNamee, 2000) and 'fair play'. I am also the father of three male children who are all interested in sport.

² One of the reviews of *Slap Shot* includes this dispassionate description: 'Paul Newman plays an ice hockey manager desperately trying to revive the fortunes of his team by recruiting three newcomers who specialize in violent play'.

with some suitably provocative and pulsating loud music played over the public address system. The commentators then describe the action. Far from receiving approbation for rule-violations and the violence that ensues, the players involved have their pugilistic skills evaluated as if they were boxing for a world title at Madison Square Garden. Inevitably, written text does not convey the full richness of the scenario, but one example does draw attention to the juxtaposition of the commentators' account and the music:

<p>Television commentary</p> <p>“Wiemer back on his feet [introduction to music begins] was trying to even it up a bit. Wiemer trying to sneak a couple of right hands in. Wiemer was off balance early and Brown took advantage.”</p> <p>“This started with Brown and Blake. That’s why Wiemer got involved.”</p> <p>“Now Wiemer gets a right hand. And the jersey is over Wiemer’s shoulders. Was it tied down or ripped off?”</p> <p>“Ripped off. Still tied on. Now back on.”</p> <p>“Now Wiemer has his say. Brown early,</p> <p>Wiemer late, so I guess you can call it a draw. Maybe Wiemer got the better of it in the end if you count up points.”</p> <p>[Circling officials intervene when Brown goes down on one knee.]</p>	<p>‘War’ by <i>Frankie Goes to Hollywood</i>³</p> <p>War-huh</p> <p>What is it good for?</p> <p>Absolutely nothing</p> <p>Say it again</p> <p>War-huh</p> <p>What is it good for?</p> <p>Absolutely nothing</p> <p>Yeah</p> <p>[Repeated]</p> <p>(Source: www.BroadStreetBully.com)</p>
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Yet in spite of the relish with which the voyeuristic spectator enjoys witnessing apparent on-ice brutality, there is an emerging tension amongst different groups of the game's stake-holders towards its violent character. There is a strong lobbying group that seeks to increase player safety and to reduce risk of injury. This has been led by the intervention of the medical profession (e.g., Roberts, 1999; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000; Marchie & Cusimano, 2003; Montelpare *et al.*, 2003), and some of the rhetoric now bears the hallmarks of a minor 'moral panic' (cf. Cohen, 1987). There have also been directives to match officials about the particularly violent and dangerous practice of 'head-checking'.

AN EMERGING TYPOLOGY OF VIOLENCE IN HOCKEY

A preliminary typology of the kinds of on-ice incidents that may be described as violent rule-violations sheds light on this debate (see Figure 1). There are (at least) three forms of violent conduct that can be differentiated and are tolerated within the *ethos* (after Bourdieu, 1993) of elite level hockey – tactical, symbolic and actual. There is a fourth that is not tolerated. Brief elaboration of each serves to clarify the distinctions, and the media treatment of key episodes will illuminate further.

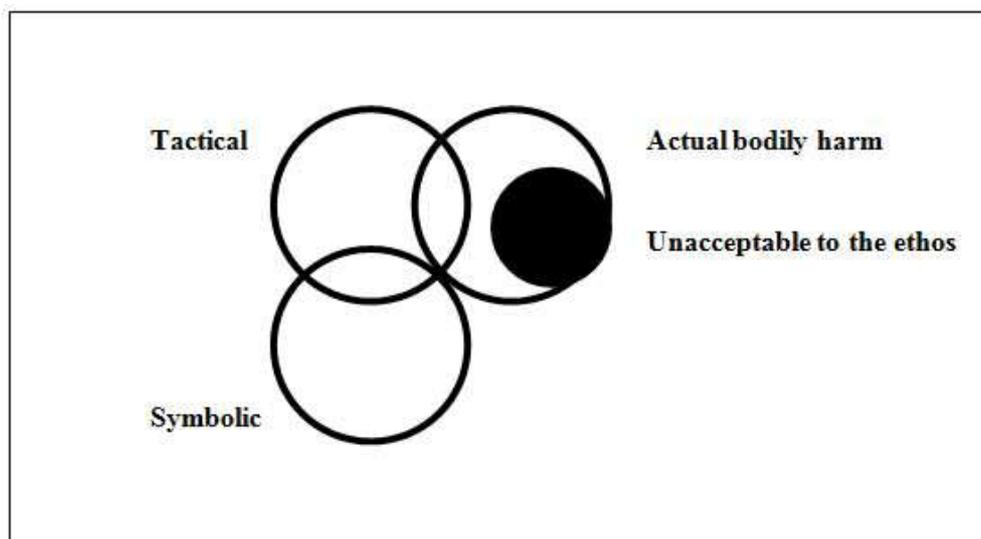


Figure 1 Understanding Hockey Violence

³ Paradoxically, this is actually an anti-war protest song from the 1980s. The lyrics should not be interpreted as a call to the protagonists to cease exchanging blows on the ice. It is the style (genre) of the music that is significant.

TACTICAL VIOLENCE

There are a number of different reasons that might lead to on-ice violence that have their origins in the perceptions that are held about their instrumental value. That is to say, players and coaches may employ violent conduct because they believe that in doing so, their chances of achieving overall outcome success are enhanced. Atyeo's (1979) rather crude (and now dated) instantiation of the principle, whilst unsophisticated, is illustrative. He refers to the tactical use of violence as "a new martial art: premeditated violence... strike only when behind and always at the star" (p.256). With a similar lack of refinement he also cites Shero (1975): "If you keep the opposition on their butts they don't score goals" (Atyeo 1979: 257).

Allen's (1999) account of tactical violence is more context-sensitive and hence more compelling. His rhetorical style is also more vivid. He locates a sub-typology of tactical interventions:

Types of tactical violence	Television commentaries
<p>a) <i>Black knight</i> – the player who seeks to intimidate members of the opposition, and even prevent them from continuing in the game. There is even a willingness to engage in a clearly articulated rational process of evaluating relative importance: “It makes sense to try and take out a guy who’s more important to his team than I am to mine; if I take out Brad Park, that’s not a bad trade is it?” (Dave Schultz cited in Atyeo 1979: 258).</p> <p>b) <i>White knight</i> – the player who seeks retribution for a ‘wrong’ exacted on himself or, more likely, a team-mate.</p> <p>c) <i>Flag waver</i> – the player who, through his behaviour on the ice, seeks to galvanise his team and his team’s supporters;</p> <p>d) <i>Personal feud</i> – the player who has a ‘history’ of some sort of conflict with a member of the opposing team.</p> <p>e) <i>Mutual destruction</i> – the player who is known to seek violent conflict on the ice (a reputation that is likely to be well deserved) as a source of deterrent to a similar player on the opposing team.</p>	<p>“Well here we go. Brashear and Jim McKenzie.”</p> <p>“Good call Doc. It’s just what you said would happen. I thought if McKenzie would come out on the ice against Brashear this might occur. Two heavyweights going at it. And Brashear knows that he had to mix it up; he had to try and change the momentum. And of course, Jimmy McKenzie was ready. Both fighters trying to give short chops in tight. Nice clean break. Love it. That is great. And so does the crowd. And the players banging their sticks and gloves on the ice.”</p> <p>“Wait a minute,”</p> <p>“And now Angelstad and Hordichuk in round two of the heavyweights. Will they throw the lumber like they did down in Orlando in t he season opener. Yes they are.” [Laughter]</p> <p>“Look at that!”</p> <p>“Both are throwing right hands. Angelstad with a right upper cut. Hordichuk coming back now.”</p> <p>“Hordichuk coming back now and trying to throw a left hand. Angelstad blacks a left hand now switches up.”</p> <p>“Ouch!”</p> <p>“He throws a couple of right hands. Hordichuk comes back at him again. They’re still going.”</p> <p>“That’s it.”</p> <p>“And now they grab each other.”</p> <p>[Crowd applause and the match officials close in and pat the combatants on the back.]</p> <p>“I’m tired!”</p> <p>“And that was just like it was on opening night in Orlando. Wam, bam, thank you mam!”</p> <p>(Source: www.BroadStreetBully.com)</p>

Figure 1 Understanding Hockey Violence

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

This form of violent conduct within the context of the game draws its theoretical exposition from the work of Marsh *et al.* (1978), amongst others, about manifestations of ritualised aggression as culturally patterned behaviour. A somewhat simplified account of their analysis is that the apparently chaotic and unplanned scenes associated with sport-related disorder are often actually conforming to the (unwritten) rules of disorder. Inevitably, of course, this analysis was subjected to stern critique as it did not accommodate satisfactorily those instances when real physical and psychological harms ensued. Nevertheless, this conceptualisation of violent behaviour as being associated more with the performance and spectacle of aggressive conduct than with the actual consequences of violence has some application for hockey – if only as part of a larger theoretical framework.

Formal Elements of Ritual	Television commentary
<p>a) Patterned routine – in which there is almost a sense that the conflict is choreographed. Whilst the action is not as much as sham as some aspects of professional wrestling often in, it is largely an act of defiant and aggressive symbolism.</p> <p>b) Signs of message and sub-text – in which the behaviour may be interrogated, ‘unpacked’ and understood on different levels of analysis (cf. Mills, 1959).</p> <p>c) Clear expression of approval or disapproval – (usually the former) as registered by team-mates, coaches, spectators and media pundits.</p> <p>d) Relation between the ritual and outcome – the ritual is performed and the social act achieved by its completion (Marsh <i>et al.</i> 1978: 121). It is difficult to ascertain with any real confidence, but whether real or imagined, it is likely that the <i>perceptions</i> of the effectiveness of the behaviour become real in their consequences.</p>	<p>“And the two have begun [short burst of pulsating music over the stadium public address system] to throw punches. Boy, look at them sluggin’ each other. I mean, this is a heavyweight tilt. They both have gotten in good punches. Mel Anglestad and the Silver Bears’ RC Hordichuk still going at it toe to toe, lefts and rights. Hordichuk trying to get in that last left hand – he’s a southpaw, [Hordichuk goes down on one knee, and match officials previously circling the exchange, intervene immediately] as over the top comes Mel Anglestad with what appears to be the 900th punch.”</p> <p>“[Laughs] That was the greatest fight I’ve ever seen.”</p> <p>“My Lord.”</p> <p>[There appears to be no ‘damage’ to either protagonist, both continue to take a full and active part in the game.]</p> <p>(Source: www.BroadStreetBully.com)</p>

ACTUAL VIOLENCE

The critique of the symbolic (ritualised) account of hockey violence rests, to a significant extent, on the evidence of actual violence that occurs. In short, violence can not be merely symbolic of players really get hurt. Some of this may be a result of a failure to recognise the cues and signals from an opponent in the tacitly agreed ritual combat that occurs. It may also be a result of a lack of competence and/or sophistication in 'acting out' the role. But whatever the reason, there can be no disguising the real harm(s) that can accrue.

One brief episode in which one player administered a 'king hit' to an opponent was described by a commentator in the following way:

We had a fight: Jesse Boulerice – Aaron Downey. Boulerice, in the red, misses. Downey hits. Like my grandpa used to say: 'there'll be two hits, I hit you, you hit the floor'. That's what happened if we take another look. Boom, good night. (Source: www.BroadStreetBully.com)

VIOLENCE THAT IS UNACCEPTABLE TO THE ETHOS

The three preceding types of violence are accepted within hockey. They also represent something of a paradox. For whilst the actions are, *de jure*, violations of the game's constitutive and regulative rules, they have also, *de facto*, become normalised and legitimised within the social fabric of the game (Colburn, 1986). They are contests within the game itself and even display some virtues of 'fair play': (in the main) they are well matched combatants, they demonstrate endeavour, and there is evidence of some respect for opponents. The final type of violence, however, does none of these.

The clearest recent illustration of violence that is unacceptable to the ethos of hockey was the well-documented assault by Marty McSorley on Donald Brashear. The match-night commentary was descriptive and non-judgmental:

"Watch Marty McSorley, two-fisted chop right on the side of the head of Brashear who goes down and bangs his head on the ice. After that the entire Vancouver team attack McSorley. Brashear carried off on a stretcher with a neck brace." [emphasis added]

A separate news item, this time a retrospective account, was more graphic and detailed:

Boston Bruins forward Marty McSorley has been hit with what could turn out to be the longest ban in National Hockey League history for on-ice violence. McSorley attacked Vancouver Canucks star Donald Brashear from behind in his side's 5-2 defeat on Monday, striking him across the right

temple with a two-handed swinging slash with his stick. Brashear fell backwards, his head hitting the ice and with blood pouring from his nose before being stretchered off and diagnosed with concussion, which could leave him sidelined for up to three weeks. The NHL reacted swiftly and have banned McSorley for the remainder of the season - at least 23 matches if Boston reach the play-offs...NHL vice-president and director of hockey operations Colin Campbell said, "This incident is not indicative of how ice hockey is played or how it should be played. I have been involved in a lot of hockey games myself in 30 years and I have never seen a player strike another player like that from behind. McSorley's act is entirely unacceptable. It would be grossly unfair to suggest that his conduct is at all representative of the game, of the other 700 players who play in the NHL or of the countless others who play hockey at all levels. We regret that this act occurred and that it has brought this kind of attention to our game." [emphasis added]

There are five points to emerge from these reports. First, the incident itself, a cowardly act that has contravened the established (but unwritten) protocol for acceptable on-ice violence⁴. Second, the immediate demonstration of disapproval and approbation from all of Brashear's teammates; violence begetting more violence. Third, the sanction imposed by the National Governing Body – amongst the most severe of its kind⁵. Fourth, the unambiguous and forthright condemnation of the act by a senior institutional figure. Fifth, his explicit regret of the negative publicity brought to hockey.

CONCLUSION

These different forms of violence pose a significant set of issues for the hockey community, for whilst there are concerns about the risk of injuries and the image of the game, there are also commitments to protect the essence of hockey as a practice and as a spectacle. Brian Burke conveys the current organisational disposition of the CHA: 'As long as I'm director of hockey operations, hockey will never turn into ballroom dancing'. More prosaically, the challenge is to mediate between the real concerns that do exist without emasculating the game itself. To fail to act, though, in view of the robust scientific and medical evidence, would be an abdication of institutional responsibility.

⁴ Eric Dunning's work in conjunction with Norbert Elias on the 'Civilising Process' provides an interesting theoretical framework with which to interpret the McSorley episode – see, in particular, Dunning (1999).

⁵ Whilst the sanction may have been severe in the context, it does raise the question of exactly what a player must have done to get 'banned for life'.

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