

Moral injury, moral resilience, and the consequences of expectation

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There have been several recent allegations of [abusive coaching behaviours](#) in British Olympic and Paralympic sports.

Not in any way to condone what has been reported recently, but I find it difficult to believe the coaches involved are (or started out as) the bullies and abusers they are now revealed (alleged) to be. Or, indeed, that any coach went into sports with the prior intention of doping his provide his athletes.

So what might have happened to the coaches?

Moral injury

I came across the term on an online course (highly recommended) on providing Psychological First Aid — [COVID-19: Psychological First Aid](#), futurelearn.com.

[Moral injury](#) is a concept first described in the military, where it was defined as psychological distress resulting from actions (or the lack of them) which violate someone's moral or ethical code. Following orders, in some instances. In healthcare professionals, the term has been used to refer to the accumulation of negative effects by continued exposure to morally distressing situations — the example of healthcare staff working with inadequate PPE, or hospitals compelled to discharge elderly patients to care homes without first checking their COVID-19 status.

The accumulated moral injury will surely have a negative impact on mental health and well-being.

And just as surely, moral standards can erode under pressure.

Moral injury and coaches?

I do wonder about the psychological impact on “elite” coaches driven to achieve medal success irrespective of the injury, physical and psychological, caused to the young athletes in their charge.

Even coaching at the participation level, I have experienced (albeit at a *very* low level) “moral distress” at work, but never had a name for it. Generally, in the form of a commercial imperative that overrides best practice or even duty-of-care — doing the wrong thing because it is what is expected, or demanded by management.

“Yes, the kids might enjoy it more if we had fewer of them on the summer camp and they each had more time with the coaches, but we can make more profit if we increase the numbers to cram in as many as we can.”

And how much greater must be the cumulative moral injury to the coach driven by a national imperative to win Gold.

A question for the Coach Developers

How do we empower coaches (all coaches, not just in performance environments) to stick to what they know is right?

Do we need to include ethics alongside safeguarding in coach education programmes?

Yes, it is about “doing the right thing” and “being good”, but I’m not sure that can be taught in Coach Dev — sometimes “it’s wrong because it’s wrong” should be all the argument needed.

But Coach Dev perhaps also needs to be about providing perspective, giving coaches the time and space (and the tools) to reflect on what they are doing, on what they *want* to do and how they want to coach.

Perhaps by allowing the coach to redefine their own success?

Perhaps NGBs and funders need to support the development of moral resilience in their coaches (see “[Cultivating Moral Resilience](#)”, by Cynda Hylton Rushton) — the ability to respond positively (or, at least, less negatively) to repeated moral distress?

But coaches also need to know that they won’t see contracts terminated because they aren’t willing to push their charges just that little bit harder, to prove that they (the coaches) really want that success.

So difficult, when “success” = medals.

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