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Preprint

not peer reviewed

An Exploration of the Role of Character in the Identification of Talent Across Tier One Rugby Nations

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Please cite as: Foan, Hope & Mills (2021). An Exploration of the Role of Character in the Identification of Talent Across Tier One Rugby Nations. *SportRxiv*.

All authors have read and approved this version of the manuscript. This article was last modified on November, 2021.

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ABSTRACT

Character is a complex concept which has been discussed by scholars for millennia, and researched extensively in sport. Since its conception, rugby union's ability to build character has been widely accepted. However, little is known about stakeholders' (e.g., coaches, scouts, recruitment and support staff) conceptualizations of character and how it is applied when selecting players within talent identification. To examine the understanding of character within rugby union and identify the key aspects relevant to the talent identification process. A case study design was used and interviews were conducted with nine rugby union talent identification experts from eight of the ten tier-one nations. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. No consistent understanding of character existed within the sample, however, themes suggest a neo-Aristotelian approach may provide a useful framework. Performance character virtues were valued most and included: industriousness, resilience, and perseverance. Moral character was second most valued by participants including; self-regulation, self-awareness, and honesty. Civic and intellectual aspects of character were mentioned but not as frequently.

INTRODUCTION

For millennia scholars have discussed the concept of character and it has permeated the discourse of many domains from philosophy (Forbis, 2013; Irwin, 1990; Lutz, 1997) to sports psychology (Docheff, 1997; Oddner, 2010; Sage, 1998). To this day, a lack of a unified understanding

of character exists between stakeholder and researchers (Rudd, 2005) which has led to a modernist concept of character with defined moral and social components (Beller, 2002). According to Berkowitz and Bier (2004) character can be defined as “the complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent”. Further, Within sport and education, Shields (2011) adopts a neo-Aristotelian approach to character and asserts that character development should be the goal of education by developing the four forms of personal character: (1) intellectual, (2) moral, (3) civic, and (4) performance. Taken together, these forms describe what it means to be a competent, ethical, engaged and effective adult member of society (Gray & Plucker, 2010).

Research has predominantly focused on physical education and sports ability to positively develop character in youth. The notion that sport builds character is widely accepted in society and is typically lorded by policy makers (Coakley, 2006; Docheff, 1997; Rudd, 2005; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Despite this, research into character development within sport often utilises different conceptualisations of character. This includes character as a synonym for prosocial behaviour (Kavusannu et al., 2006; Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995), moral reasoning (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984), and ethical decision making (Priest et al., 1999). As such, previous research has failed to consider the complex multidimensional nature of character (Bredemeier & Shields, 2006) which is further limited by the lack of a universal definition of character being accepted.

The lack of agreement within the literature has led researchers to hypothesise a discrepancy between how key stakeholders in sport conceptualise character (Rudd & Stoll, 2004). Given this lack of agreement, further research to understand how character is conceptualised within sport is

warranted. Due to the wide ranging nature of individual, team, invasion, fielding and striking, target, and net sports, it is prudent to begin this process by setting out parameters to explore how character is conceptualised across sports. With this in mind, the present study opted to focus on how character is conceptualised within one sport -- Rugby Union.

Character and Rugby

A visit to World Rugby's homepage demonstrates how intertwined the concept of character and the sport of rugby are. At the top of the page sits a banner stating: *Building character since 1886* (World Rugby, n.d.). Despite rugby union being a sport steeped in history and tradition, it was only in 2009 when World Rugby officially established the five values of 'character building' in the game; integrity, respect, solidarity, passion, and discipline (World Rugby, n.d.). Subsequently, the national unions followed and installed the same or similar values into their organisations (England Rugby, n.d.; Irish Rugby, n.d.; Rugby Union South Africa, n.d.; Scottish Rugby Union, n.d.; Tulloch, n.d.). In recent years the idea *better people make better players* has emerged from New Zealand after their national team the All Blacks suffered an early exit from the 2007 World Cup (Kerr, 2013). It was underpinned by the notion that holistic development off the field, would translate to performance improvement on it. Despite anecdotal evidence from national governing bodies (NGB's) and the media around the importance of character in rugby union, there has been distinct paucity of research on its role within talent identification, with the empirical work more focussed on talent development (Lambert, 2010; Lewis et al., 2015). This is somewhat surprising, given talent identification as a concept has grown markedly with NGBs and professional sports teams deeming it to be essential in order to achieve success on a domestic and global scale (Mann et al., 2017).

Given the documented lack of consensus in how both researchers and stakeholders define character, it was felt that providing a framework to discussions around character may aid recall and increase clarity in responses. With this in mind, we explored how the term character is used in relation to identifying talent within Rugby Union. Talent identification can be defined as a systematic process in which current performers are selected based on their potential to excel in a particular sport talent (Johnston et al., 2018; Vaeyens et al., 2008). Early talent identification systems were criticized for selecting athletes based on discrete, unidimensional measures of athletic potential, failing to recognize the dynamic multidimensional nature of talent (Abbott et al., 2005). However, recently talent identification research has called for a greater emphasis on the holistic assessment of players, with some arguing that psychological factors are the most important to developing excellence in sport and navigating the development pathway (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Hill et al., 2015; MacNamara et al., 2010a, 2010b). Using case study designs to interview key stakeholders, Rosevear & Cassidy (2019) and Hewetson (2016) found two interpretations of character existed; one explicitly stated by New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU), and one that was implicitly understood by coaches, the latter of whom use a combination of both interpretations. Notably, character was seen as a factor that could decide who to select when choosing between players of similar technical ability (Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019). Whilst the above research broadens our understanding of the importance of character for talent identification stakeholders in New Zealand, the authors acknowledged a need to examine its conceptualisation more globally. To this end, the aim of the present study is to address this need and to explore how character is viewed within Tier One rugby playing nations around the world.

METHOD

Philosophical Beliefs and Sampling.

Due to the exploratory nature of the conceptualisation of character in rugby union talent identification and the highly limited population to sample from, a comparative multiple case study design was implemented. This approach was selected as we sought to understand both depth and breadth in the information gathered, but also taking into consideration how interpretations of character might be affected by the context within which it was situated (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Multiple case study designs involve the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences, and patterns across cases that share a common focus or goal and allow for comparison between cases (Stake, 2006). Further, evidence arising from multiple-case studies is often considered stronger and more reliable than from single-case research when developing a theory or seeking a comprehensive exploration of a specific research question (Stake, *ibid*). To this end, participants were contacted from all Tier One rugby union nations (as of the 2019-20 season) through either the respective NGB or direct contact. On meeting the eligibility criteria, nine participants were invited to take part in the study from eight nations (see Table 1). Participants had worked in a variety of roles within professional rugby including coaching, talent identification, coach education and academy director/manager.

Table 1. Participants' experience in the game

Nation	Years working in Rugby Union	Years working for NGB
Australia	15	2
England	13	1
England	13	9
Ireland	35	3.5
Italy	30	4
New Zealand	14	11
Scotland	28	13
South Africa	11	8

Note: Participants' total years worked in professional rugby ranged from 11 to 35 years (mean = 19.9 ± 8.5), with years working for their respective NGB ranging from 1 to 13 years (mean = 6.8 ± 4.1 years).

A critical realist approach was adopted, with participants offering information from a single ontological reality. More specifically, participants' knowledge was considered real to them, while acknowledging the data presented was subject to both the researchers and participants perceptions of the cultural, social and historical contexts in which they occurred (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Prior to the study commencing, ethical approval was obtained from the lead institution (ETH1920-0472). All participants gave consent and were aware of their right to withdraw from the study before the interviews took place. Participant names were replaced by a participant identification number (e.g., Participant 1 through 9) and transcripts were redacted at source. Any associated audio files were deleted once transcribed and all data were stored in-line with GDPR.

Procedure and Data Collection.

To gain understanding of the conception of character in rugby union talent identification, participants were only invited to take part in this study if they were identified as meeting the eligibility criteria. In view of Abraham, Collins and Martindale's conception of expertise in sports coaching, only individuals who had worked in rugby union coaching and talent identification for a minimum of 10 years were considered experts (Abraham et al., 2006). Moreover, participants had to have worked for their respective NGB within the last two years to facilitate awareness of recent talent identification practices implemented at the national level.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to facilitate the detailed exploration of ideas and topics that arose, which either the interviewer or participant found important (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). All interviews were conducted via phone or video call to accommodate the busy work schedules of the participants and the varying time zones. An interview guide was formulated, comprising three sections (i) introductory questions, (ii) recurring themes from the literature (iii) generic prompts or probes (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Knox & Burkard, 2009). Open questions were formulated and reviewed and questions that did not relate to the research aim or were too similar in content were removed. This meant the interview guide was structured around broad open questions which aimed to facilitate detailed conversation on the topic without being led by the question in a predetermined manner (see appendix 1). The interviews were conducted over a period of 12 weeks,

ranging in length from 35-82 minutes (mean=50± 15). The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis.

A thematic analysis (TA) was used to construct themes from the qualitative data collected (Braun et al., 2016). This method was chosen as it allowed us to analyse the data inductively (e.g. new experiences), deductively (e.g. guided by previous research), and critically (e.g. questioning social norms). The process of thematic analysis involved five distinct stages (Crisp, 2014) (i) *Familiarisation with the data*: the same researcher collected and analysed the data. To reach full immersion in the data verbatim transcripts of audio files were made and transcripts were repeatedly re-read in an active manner as to search for meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (ii) *Generation of initial codes*: an initial list of ideas was generated in accordance with the research topic. Data analysis software NVivo (version 12.0.0.71) was then used to code data perceived relevant to the research question. Code is defined as: “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998) (iii) *Searching for themes*: codes were sorted on a broader level and organised into themes so that relevant codes were grouped together forming ‘candidate themes’. A theme is data which is important in relation to the research question and ‘represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (ix) *Reviewing*

and refining themes: a two-step review process was employed to ensure themes were representative of the data set. First, coded extracts of the data were re-read to ensure they formed a coherent pattern within the theme. At this stage, themes and codes could be removed, merged or combined to create new themes that best captured the patterns of the coded data. Once the researcher was satisfied, the whole data set was re-read to ensure the themes 'worked' and were coherent in relation to the data set and the research question. (x) *Defining themes*: all researchers reviewed codes independently for triangulation purposes, which were then reviewed critically to form the final list of themes and sub-themes.

Credibility.

Within this study, the researcher was the primary instrument through which the data were collected (Patton, 2002). To aid credibility, information regarding the authors' backgrounds are disclosed so that the credibility of the results can be appropriately judged. The second author conducted all interviews. At the time of the project, he was a 24-year old male, Masters by Research candidate, at a UK University. His academic background was in Sport and Exercise Science, and rugby was his primary sport. He had experience of playing to a high level of junior competition and of working in rugby as a performance analyst both within the UK and New Zealand. As such, the interviewer had some background knowledge of the demands of rugby and the terminology used by the participants. This prior

experience and network positioned him as a cultural insider and assisted when reaching out to gatekeepers and also in building a rapport with the participants.

Results

Based on the information gathered from participants through thematic analysis, the sub-themes were: (1) performance character, (2) intellectual character, (3) civic/social character, and (4) moral character. Whilst somewhat uncommon for thematic analyses, we chose to present the percentage of codes relating to the virtues within each dimension discussed (Figure 1). We do this solely in the interests of presenting the frequency of discussions around specific sub-themes to aid the reader in forming their judgements as to the relative importance participant's placed on each form of character. Further, given the volume of terms participants presented, a brief definition is provided to aid the reader at the start of each subheading. Results are presented in a hierarchical order based on how frequently they were discussed.

Performance Character.

Performance Character refers to the dispositions, virtues, or personal qualities that enable an individual to accomplish intentions and goals (Shields, 2011). Those with a highly developed performance character will take great pride and continually strive to improve in their work, the essence of this has been described as an *ethic of excellence* (Berger, 2003).

As shown, 40% of all codes were related to performance character virtues, making it the most discussed dimension of character by participants. The following section presents the three dominant sub-themes of performance character to emerge from the interviews. These are: (1) Industriousness, (2) Resilience, and (3) Perseverance.

Industriousness.

Industriousness can be described as an individual's desire and capacity for hard work (Eisenberger, 1992). Commonly referred to as work ethic by participants, industriousness was identified as one of the most important aspects of a player's character with 39 separate references being made across the interviews. When asked to describe their ideal player in terms of character, Participant 6 replied:

"I think if I was heading to distil it down to the ones that are kind of non-negotiable, it would sort of be around respectful, team-first, honesty, integrity, and work ethic. Work ethic is the one for me, it's certainly the one for me when I'm out looking (for players)"

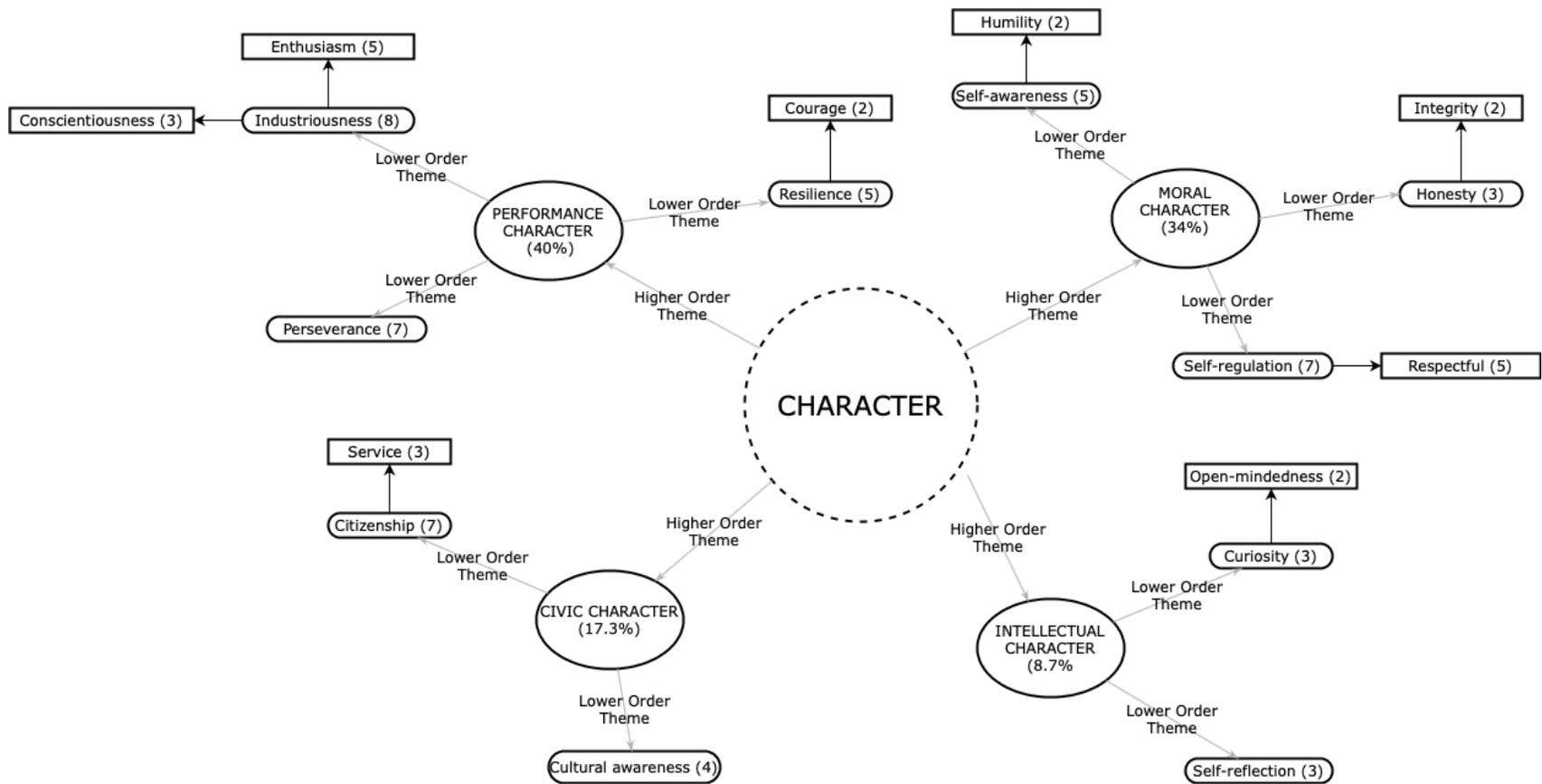


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Results Diagram

Note. Percentage indicates the total share of codes each character dimension obtained

Our findings support that of Hill and colleagues (Hill et al., 2015) who found that 12 out of 15 academy directors/head coaches of English premiership rugby academies directly stated the importance of a positive work ethic in a player's ability to succeed in a talent development setting. Further, two separate case studies conducted in New Zealand found industriousness/work ethic to be one of the key components of a player's character when being assessed in a talent identification setting (Hewetson, 2016; Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019). While the exact definition of a 'good work ethic' varied slightly between organisations, a common focus was placed on the individual knowing and demonstrating hard work and application in rugby as well as other aspects of their lives, such as schoolwork (Hewetson, 2016; Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019).

Four participants in the present study cited the use of a player's effort in school as a method to infer industriousness. For example, Participant 6 stated (school at that age) *"that's their job, that's their nine to five"*. The importance placed on industriousness in school shows implicit support for the theory of learned industriousness (Eisenberger, 1992; Hickman et al., 1998), where reinforced high effort can transfer to other tasks. This was viewed as bi-directional transfer among our participants, where players can apply their industriousness in rugby into academic pursuits. As expressed by Participant 3:

"I've seen straight edge students who are doing as I said three to four A- levels and still get B's still get A's still get A stars, and yet they might be the best player. And you're thinking, actually, he

gets it. He understands it and he understand if he works hard at rugby. He understands why he's doing it. He's improving just the same as if he's in math or science or English or geography."

Support for the theory of learned industriousness appears to be widespread by key stakeholders in rugby union. Interviews conducted with experienced Australian coaches found they believed in the transfer of effort from one domain to the other (Light & Evans, 2013) perceiving this as a marker for industriousness when selecting athletes into development programmes. Industriousness has also been used to explain how players reach the very top of their game, with a positive work ethic a prerequisite to produce 'great' players (Light & Evans, 2013). This was also observed in our study, with Participant 6 stating:

"All those that have gone on to international or super rugby level, what sets them apart, you know, is the willingness to work harder than anyone else. You look at Player A. I remember watching him [sic] fitness test and strength and conditioning coaches sort of saying: 'Here comes the freak' you know? He knew what the test was, how it should go and degradation should take place over a certain period of time. But it was almost like he was trying to beat the fitness test.

It's like a video game, trying to clock a game, that was his mindset."

Resilience.

Much like the concept of character, the term resilience is frequently defined differently based on the historical and sociocultural context in which the research is being conducted (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Therefore, we adopted Fletcher and Sarkar's definition of psychological resilience as; the role of mental processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). In more lay terms resilience is often seen as the ability to 'bounce back' from failure, a viewpoint supported by Participant 4:

"So you want performance to increase and the mistakes to reduce, but you want to create an environment where they can make mistakes; and resilience for me is the ability to bounce back from those defeats and those mistakes, to embrace and say, okay, I'm better than that, and if I'm not better than that now, I will be by understanding what I've done and how I can improve."

Resilience was valued highly, with five participants directly citing a player's resilience as being important on 15 separate occasions. This is supported by current rugby union literature in which resilience is seen as key to cope with the demands of the development environment and could be used to differentiate between those who progress and those that do not (Hill et al., 2015). Further support for the importance of resilience in rugby union talent identification can be found in the NZRU's interpretation of character which includes resilience as one of its five values (Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019). Much like

industriousness, high levels of resilience has also been highlighted as necessary to be a 'great player' with elite coaches and eight world cup winners naming it as vital to success at the elite level (Light & Evans, 2013; Morgan et al., 2015). Further support for the perceived value of resilience was demonstrated by Participant 6, who when asked to describe what they perceived to be 'good character', replied: *"Resilience is another one [. . .]which is kinda an overarching aspect to character, you know do they bounce back from those initial setbacks and failures? Or are they someone who you know has a very fixed mindset"*.

While the common understanding of resilience was concerned with dealing with failure, participant 3 showed more nuance in their view of the concept:

*"I think as well, we always talk about resilience, dealing with failure. It might be that I'm getting it right and I'm getting it right, because I've got a good coaching staff. I've got a good attitude and approach and I understand what I'm doing, but I'm having quite a lot of success. And I might be winning the gold medal, and I might be playing well, I might be a seven, eight out of ten every week, and then I do produce a nine out of ten or a ten out of ten performance, but I can then manage that. I.e. that I don't get too big for my boots. I don't get rest on my laurels and I'm like
look; everything that's getting me to this stage. I need to keep doing it."*

Perseverance.

Perseverance and resilience are two closely related dimensions of character. Whilst resilience is concerned with the ability to cope with the effects of negative stressors, perseverance is concerned with the effort exerted in the face of challenging situations (Gucciardi et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2015). We therefore defined perseverance as the continuous application of effort to a task, despite challenges or setbacks. Participants placed value on a player's perceived perseverance within a talent identification context with 12 direct mentions across the data set. It should be noted that 'grit' was often used to describe persevering behaviours which can be defined as the combination of perseverance and passion (Duckworth et al., 2007). This reflects research in the field whereby 'grit' and 'commitment' have been used interchangeably to describe perseverance (Hewetson, 2016; Hill et al., 2015; Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019). Regardless of the terminology, there was a shared understanding among our participants that players need to both cope with a setback and then work towards overcoming this. As participant 1 stated:

"And we do talk to the kids about that. You know, can you handle getting told your dropped or you're not selected, or your tackle technique is rubbish? So you have be able to go back to the drawing board and work to do it all again"

Intellectual character.

Intellectual character can be defined as "the overarching conglomeration of habits of the mind, patterns of thought and general dispositions toward thinking that not only

direct but motivate one's thinking-oriented pursuits" (Duckworth et al., 2007). This dimension of character was the least valued virtue among the stakeholders with total codes equating to just 8.7%. Two of its six dispositions were identified as key themes within the present study. These are: (1) Curiosity, and (2) Self-Reflection (Shields, 2011).

Curiosity.

Curiosity was defined as; the disposition of wanting to know or learn more about a wide range of things (Baumgarten, 2001). Much like the other aspects of character identified by the participants, they were described in terms of the behaviours observed from which aspects of character can be inferred. For example, three participants spoke at length about the importance of a player actively wanting to learn and seeking support on how to improve. Participant 6 used the term 'coachability' to encompass curious behaviours:

"That said coachability [. . .] as the name obviously suggests is their ability to be coached and their willingness to learn. Sometimes, they're gonna need some prompting but, you know, as opposed to probably the old school didactic way of just firing answers at players, coachability is a willingness to learn and take advice on."

This view is consistent with the NZRU's criteria of good character in which the coachability of the player is seen as integral for a player to play at international level (Hewetson, 2016). Additional research conducted on provincial level rugby found that another term was used

to describe curious behaviours; 'self-reliance', which can be described as the player taking responsibility for their own development and seeking ways to improve (Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019).

Self-Reflection.

We adopted Zimmerman's theory (Zimmerman, 2000) of self-reflection in sport, which can be viewed as the ability of individuals to (a) critically value their learning process by evaluation of previous performances, and (b) use new information in subsequent learning situations to improve performance (Jonker et al., 2012). Three participants highlighted the importance of self-reflection, as evidenced by Participant 3 when asked what they felt constituted good character:

[. . .] "Erm...reflection. Which is a bit of let's watch the game back. Let's watch my clips back. Or I've been working on this skill for the last six weeks. Let's look (back) at six weeks ago when I was doing it.. My follow through wasn't very good. But now look at my follow through it is very, very good"

This view is supported by talent identification research in rugby union, where key stakeholders saw value in a player's ability to self-reflect. It was further suggested that staff members should avoid over-supporting athletes on the development pathway as the inevitable challenges that occur can provide valuable opportunities for reflection and

growth by the athletes (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Hill et al., 2015). The importance of self-reflection being an organic process was supported by Participant 8 (when asked to what extent they believe aspects of character could be developed):

“Whether you can actually make them more positive or make them more reflective or things like that...I'm not sure because I think you can show them the doors to those things but I don't know whether you can actually pull them all the way through.”

Moral character.

Moral character has been defined by Berkowitz et al. as “the composite of those characteristics of the individual that directly motivate and enable him or her (sic) to act as a moral agent” (Berkowitz & Puka, 2009). Put simply, it is the disposition to seek what is good and right in the world (Shields, 2011). This construct was shown to be highly valued by the participants with 34% of codes relating to the importance of moral character virtues. Three aspects of moral character were identified as being important to rugby union talent identification. These are: (1) Self-regulation, (2) Honesty, and (3) self-awareness.

Self-regulation.

For self-regulation in sport, we adopted the definition of; the self-initiated thoughts, feelings and actions used by athletes to attain a variety of goals (Kitsantas et al., 2018; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). The importance of a player's ability to self-regulate was

highly valued by participants, with seven highlighting requisite behaviours to increase the likelihood of being selected onto and navigating talent development pathways. Punctuality proved to be the most common, with other recurring themes including; organization of kit, sleep management, diet/nutrition, and effective time management (especially in relation to the balance between education and rugby). On the topic of being late, Participant 3 stated:

“But it's all this behavioural stuff that adds to the character; timekeeping, punctuality, awareness, application. Knowing that my actions affect your actions. If I'm late for practice, well, it means that the session starts late and you don't get as much time”

It is clear from a practical standpoint the value of having players that are punctual and can self-organize. These traits have also been linked with athletes who can navigate the development pathway more successfully than others who cannot regulate their actions as effectively (Hill et al., 2015). Self-regulation links heavily with the virtues of curiosity and resilience as players must negate the potential negative effects of daily stressors (such as being on time, making healthy choices) and regulate their behaviour in such a way as to take responsibility for their own development. Previous research has shown a link between a mastery climate and self-regulation processes, which in turn, can facilitate increased levels of effort and feedback seeking behaviours (Kitsantas et al., 2018).

Honesty.

Honesty can be considered as a virtue (Wilson, 2018) and simply refers to the act of being truthful and free from deceit. This was valued by three participants and considered to be an important aspect of character within talent identification. When asked to describe what they perceived as 'good character' Participant 6 replied:

"I think yeah [. .] integrity and honesty, you want guys that when you're out on the field, and you're asking a lot of guys when they're on the playing field. They're gonna respond and they're gonna, you know.....if you can try and kid other people, then you will probably kid yourself as well. And you might come back to the effort you said that you put into certain areas and the training and all the preparation and recovery and so forth. So honesty and integrity are fairly significant"

While there is no direct causal link between honesty and better performance, it has been posited that honesty is not emphasized as much in team sports as it less likely to lead to a winning outcome (Rudd, 2005). However, participants highlighted the need for players to be honest about their own actions towards development, thereby linking with self-regulation and curiosity. Participant 6 highlighted generic examples of dishonesty within practice:

"They're not maliciously dishonest, you know, they're not a liar, thief, criminal or anything malicious like that. But, you know, the kid that doesn't do the work when there's no one hovering over them. But you know, they might say they have. It's dishonest and, you know, just those sorts

of things. So that's, you're lacking in integrity. You haven't done what you said you're going to do.

You've been a little bit dishonest about it"

Within the talent identification literature, key stakeholders have listed honesty as an aspect of good character but consistently failed to elaborate further on the reasons behind this (Hewetson, 2016; Hill et al., 2015; Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019). Dishonesty, such as that highlighted in the above statement, was seen as a major 'red flag' which would cast serious doubt over a player's selection into the talent development pathway. When asked to give his thoughts on the now famed 'No dickheads' policy (1), Participant 1 began by saying; *"we tend to find the dickheads weed themselves out"* and then went on to give an example of when they had to remove a player from the development pathway; *"You know we met this one kid he was telling us lies, so there is your honesty, [. . .] they put themselves first not the team, look I don't need to go into details but like bro..you're gone"*.

Self-awareness.

We define self-awareness as the process of an individual making themselves the object of their attention (Wicklund, 1975) and includes the mental processes of mindfulness and rumination to construct an understanding of one's self (Sutton, 2016). Seven participants highlighted the importance of this character virtue. For example, and when asked to rate aspects of character they valued the most in a player, Participant 1 said;

"I think something around...how to just be the best version of you, regularly. So probably some stuff around confidence or self-belief or whatever that might be, whatever language people use around that. And I wouldn't understand that many fancy words. What I would definitely ask myself to be able to do is to interact with people (as a coach) and help them understand themselves better and can give them support in getting better at stuff"

It was a player's ability to understand themselves, which was seen as critical by this participant in facilitating their development. This has been identified as a key psychological characteristic of developing excellence (PCDE) in sports performers (Bailey et al., 2010; MacNamara et al., 2010a, 2010b) and further a key characteristic of players who navigate rugby union talent development pathways more effectively than their less self-aware counterparts (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Hill et al., 2015). Self-regulation and associated virtues, such as self-awareness and self-reflection have been discussed in relation to players who are more likely to become elite and potentially outperform other elite players who did not demonstrate these characteristics (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). Interestingly, self-awareness has been identified as an aspect of leadership within NZRU talent identification criteria. It is stated that self-awareness gives a player the ability to lead themselves first, then have the ability to lead others. This classification of self-awareness as a virtue important to leaders has theoretical support within occupational research, with leaders that are aware of their actions being positively linked with greater leader

effectiveness and follower satisfaction (Tekleab et al., 2008). The inclusion of self-awareness as important criteria for talent selection, combined with the findings of the current study show that self-awareness was highly valued by those responsible for talent identification in rugby union.

Civic/Social character.

Civic/Social character is defined in the literature as “the set of dispositions and skills that motivate and enable an individual to effectively and responsibly participate in the public sphere in order to serve the common good” (Arthur et al., 2008). In other words, it is the passion and desire for public good (Shields, 2011). Civic/Social character virtues represented 17.3% of total codes in the present study, split across two themes: (1) Citizenship and Civility, and (2) Cultural Awareness.

Citizenship and civility.

In the context of rugby union talent identification, we define civility as behaviours that are consistent with cultural norms and values of the team and work to further the common good of the team in pursuit of a shared goal. Our findings demonstrate that when selecting potential athletes, participants placed importance on a player's ability to be civil and work with their teammates toward a common goal and understanding that players actions should benefit the team first and then the individual. Seven of our participants

highlighted a range of civil behaviours, which they believed to be beneficial to a player's ability to function in a team environment. When asked for their thoughts on the statement 'better people make better players' Participant 9 stated;

"Well it's an opinion as opposed to something that is evidenced by a pile of academic research. It's just really well-rounded humble young men, who are good role models, who are popular with their teammates. Team members that become popular off the field become popular on the field and generally, these are the ones that buy into the culture which is important for a successful side - and they're just good people."

The participants felt that it was vital for a player to be able to interact socially with others and implied a link between popularity within the team and playing ability. It is logical to assume that within a sports team, players who can interact more effectively and value the needs of the team above their own could be beneficial in fostering a more cohesive environment and perhaps improving performance (Nielsen et al., 2012). This assumption has theoretical support from occupational psychology which has shown a positive link between increased organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB); seen as seemingly insignificant voluntary actions directed towards the good of the organization, and overall cohesion and effectiveness (Nielsen et al., 2012). While cohesion does not necessarily predict performance in team sports, it is a desirable trait most coaches aim for (Carron & Brawley, 2008). There exists limited research applying OCB to team sports, however,

promising evidence has suggested a positive link between OCB particularly altruistic behaviours, to be a predictor of team cohesion and performance (Aoyagi et al., 2008; Collins, 2008; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009).

This lends increasing support for the importance of the virtue of citizenship in rugby players, in particular the value of altruistic behaviours. This is reflected in the NZRU's definition of character, with altruism being one of the 'professional qualities' players should be assessed on, implying that acting in a 'team first' manner is seen as a prerequisite to being 'professional' (Hewetson, 2016). In a case study of a provincial rugby union in New Zealand, it was found that the 'selflessness' of the player was a major aspect of character that the coach considered when selecting players. This was supported by Participant 8 in the present study:

"There have been players that I've seen who have the ability, that I was talking about before but haven't functioned well, because they don't get on with coaches or the players, and they are deselected because they don't fit into the jigsaw"

The virtue of citizenship is clearly important within team sports, especially when characterized by voluntary behaviours that are done for the good of the team. An increase in these may potentially lead to improved cohesion and possibly better performance for the team, although more needs to be done to examine this relationship in rugby union (Martínez & Scott Tindale, 2015). The specific civil behaviours which would contribute to

being a good citizen of the team are dependent on social norms. However, altruistic behaviours appear to be considered important throughout rugby union talent identification and development pathways.

Cultural awareness.

Team culture is a well discussed topic within organizational (Balthazard et al., 2006; Schein, 2010) and sports psychology (Baumgarten, 2001; Cole & Martin, 2018; Frontiera, 2010; Schroeder, 2010) with a plethora of research highlighting cultural awareness as one of the prominent factors in an organization's success (Bretz Jr & Judge, 1994; Caldwell & O'Reilly III, 1990). Cultural awareness in the present study was defined as the degree to which an individual understands values, beliefs, expectations, practices and social norms of the group (Cruickshank et al., 2013). Four of our participants identified cultural awareness as an important aspect of a player's character within talent identification. When asked whether the team culture shaped the character of the players within it, or the character of individuals in the team shaped the culture, participant 4 replied:

"A bit of both...Again, it's very hard to plan to develop a culture. There are so many variables within it. However, good management does accelerate good luck. So if you understand your own culture first and what you're trying to achieve, whether it might be something as simple as we want, you know, we want honesty, we want a work ethic. I don't know whatever your key areas are. You agree if you have buy into that, if you could articulate it well, and the players in

particular understand it and can articulate it to fellow players, new ones coming in, then it's a lot easier"

Once a strong organizational culture has been developed, the key determinant in performance is the degree to which players can identify with and understand the team culture (Cole & Martin, 2018). Further sports-specific research has shown team culture to be a key contributor to success and even a differentiating factor between successful and unsuccessful teams when controlling for talent of team members (Schroeder, 2010). Hence the importance of cultural awareness and fit when assessing potential players.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore how character is across Tier One rugby playing nations around the world. To our knowledge, this is the first study to attempt to understand the conceptualization and application of character in rugby union from a global perspective. Akin to the wider confusion of the way in which the concept of character is understood in academia and society as a whole (Docheff, 1997; Oddner, 2010), our findings demonstrated how the understanding of character among talent identification stakeholders in rugby union is highly variable. Eight of the nine stakeholders rooted their conception of character from a virtue ethical perspective, highlighting the importance of traits such as honesty and perseverance. This serves to emphasise the schism that exists in

the conceptualization of character between sports philosophers and that seen in applied practice (Bredemeier & Shields, 2006; Docheff, 1997). To this end, these participants had their own implicit understanding of character that was used within the talent identification process. As an outlier to this, Participant 5 believed character to 'not exist' in the sense that it could not be defined and therefore should not be used in practice. This was an interesting perspective and it was unclear how this participant navigated the narrative of rugby 'build's character' put forward by World Rugby (n.d.).

By applying a multidimensional version of character to understand the virtues seen as important to talent identification, our research offers a unique insight into the conceptualization of character in rugby union. While virtues were identified across all four dimensions of character, Performance character was the most valued dimension with respect to talent identification. At a granular level, the virtues of industriousness (n=8), resilience (n=5) and perseverance (n=7) were found to be of particular significance. These virtues all relate to the dispositions and qualities of an athlete to accomplish their goals and intentions (Shields, 2011), hence their value within an elite performance environment, especially when considering the inherent challenges posed by the talent development pathway (Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Hill et al., 2015). In this regard, a prevailing theme of participant discussions was that of injury setbacks, given the high physiological demand of the sport (Phibbs et al., 2018). The virtues of resilience (when faced with) and perseverance

(to overcome) were highlighted to be of paramount importance when dealing with such negative stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Notably, preliminary research has shown support for the efficacy of resilience workshops in rugby union to both facilitate and support talent development pathways (Edwards et al., 2019).

In addition to overcoming setbacks from injury, perseverance was seen as a key trait in overcoming challenges such as being dropped or told a particular skill was not at the required level. This fits with Collins and MacNamara's (Collins & MacNamara, 2012) work, which suggests that for skills to be taught and developed they need to be exercised and supported against real-life challenges. More specifically, Collins and MacNamara (Collins & MacNamara, 2012) encourage practitioners to integrate 'structured trauma' into training, which they believe can help facilitate positive adaptation to future challenges. From a talent identification perspective, it seems logical to recruit players who are resilient and can persevere through challenges, yet the ability to develop these traits in athletes should not be underestimated. Although undoubtedly important, the ethics of exposing young people to trauma to build resilience is questionable. Practitioners should seek to understand resilience as not merely an athlete's ability to cope with significant life events (e.g. large setbacks/failures) but coping with ongoing daily stressors faced by the athlete (e.g. pressure from continued success; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Clearly, within any talent development programme there are many potential pitfalls such as injury and deselection.

Sport provides ample opportunities for the development of resilience and perseverance without requiring coaches to set their athletes up for failure.

Moral character virtues such as self-regulation and self-awareness were highlighted by participants as being valuable in athletes. Interestingly, the second most mentioned theme was a player's ability to be punctual (which we classified as part of self-regulation). The act of being on time has no clear impact on an individual's competency as a rugby player yet it was consistently identified as being a highly regarded trait, and a means to assess a player's level of commitment to the ultimate goal of becoming a professional rugby player. Interestingly, self-regulation has been shown to be facilitated by two other virtues identified in the present study; self-awareness and self-reflection (Grant et al., 2002; Sutton, 2016). Therefore, players who fail to effectively self-regulate may also possess deficiencies in self-awareness and reflection that allow an individual to pay attention and evaluate their internal states and behaviours (Unnithan et al., 2012). That said, biopsychosocial and contextual differences may influence an athlete's development of self-regulatory behaviours, and evidence exists to suggest a bidirectional relationship between adolescent self-regulation and social relationships (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). By creating a team culture which fosters high caring positive social relationships between the players, it may be possible to enhance a player's self-regulatory ability, and thus likelihood of becoming a professional athlete (Finkenauer et al., 2005).

Civic character was found to be important by our stakeholders, specifically the virtues of citizenship and cultural awareness. The notion of cultural awareness was highlighted by five of the participants as an integral factor in determining a player's successful navigation of the development pathway. The importance of creating 'synergy' between the norms and values held by the players and the organizational culture have been emphasised previously within previous literature (Cole & Martin, 2018). From an applied perspective, if stakeholders desire players to display specific norms and values they need to provide opportunities for these behaviours to be exhibited and positively reinforced, which in turn shape the personal values of the athletes (Finkenauer et al., 2005; Mills, 2019).

Cultural awareness is directly linked with the virtue of citizenship, as for a player to act with civility they must first understand the values and norms of the organization. This trait was considered to be particularly important when selecting players into squads who only had a limited amount of time before matches were played such as Junior World Cups. Social identity related behaviours which were deemed to 'put the team first' were also highly valued. This position is well supported within the rugby union specific talent identification literature (Hill et al., 2015; Rosevear & Cassidy, 2019), as well as other sporting contexts (Aoyagi et al., 2008; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). These studies suggest that an increase in OCB within teams can lead to increased team cohesion, athlete

satisfaction and perceived performance. Much like civil character, cultural awareness can facilitate the development of other virtues dependent on the values of the organization they are working in.

Our findings showed that intellectual character was the least highlighted dimension for potential players to possess. Self-reflection was seen by three participants as a valuable virtue when identifying players for entry into the talent development pathway. This was most likely due to the importance of self-reflection in exercising other virtues such as self-regulation and perseverance, which were both valued highly by stakeholders in the rugby union talent identification process. Further, the importance of players actively seeking knowledge or opportunities to improve (i.e. curious behaviours) appears to be common across the rugby union talent identification, albeit terminology, somewhat understandably, appears to differ; self-reliance, coachability or willingness to learn.

Limitations.

Given the case study nature of our work, the aim was not to directly extend theory but gain deeper insight into a unique sample of talent identification stakeholders from major rugby playing nations across the world. This means findings may lack transferability outside of professional rugby union. Further, participants in the current work were not asked to specify the stage of talent identification they were discussing, which is significant given the broad age range in which talent identification is undertaken. To this end, and

while consistency can be seen across nations at U18 and U20 age groups, earlier talent identification (and development) structures can differ considerably. For example, some nations use the school system as the primary development pathway, while others rely on professional clubs, and some combine the two as a means to produce future athletes.

Given the ethical considerations adopted to protect participant identity, we were unable to explicitly compare national or hemispheric perspectives on conceptualisations of character. This is regrettable, as research has highlighted performance and organisational differences between the two hemispheres (Jones et al., 2017; Pulling & Stenning, 2015; Sasaki et al., 2007), and thus may be an interesting area for future research. Research should also seek to investigate the personal values of stakeholders in order to create a more coherent pathway for value alignment between stakeholder, organization and athletes, and ultimately a more synergistic working environment. The development of a rugby specific measure of character would be an important step to improving practice and allow tracking of potential changes in virtues over time to assess the effectiveness of cultural and training practices in developing desired character virtues in their athletes.

Conclusion

Performance and moral character were seen as the most valuable dimensions of character with the virtues of; industriousness, self-regulation, resilience, and perseverance being identified most frequently as important to rugby union talent identification. The

significance of civic character was also outlined with players needing to be aware of the organisational culture and act with civility if they were to be considered for selection into development pathways. Interestingly, many variables were theoretically linked to the development of other virtues, such as resilience and perseverance, as well as self-regulation with self-awareness and reflection. Therefore, stakeholders should seek to assess a players' character more holistically as deficiencies in one virtue may impact on other virtues accordingly. Conversely, the development of a specific virtue may lead to improvements in other areas of a player's character. From a practical perspective, stakeholders should seek to create opportunities for players to demonstrate the desired virtues as this dictates the preference for said behaviour in future. Due to the interdependent nature of virtues, the process of developing better players, may -- in a positive environment-- go some way to help develop better people.

Contributions

Contributed to conception and design: JM, EH

Contributed to acquisition of data: NF

Contributed to analysis and interpretation of data: NF, JM, EH

Drafted and/or revised the article: NF, JM, EH

Approved the submitted version for publication: NF, JM, EH

Funding information

No funding was received in relation to this research

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