Public Responses to Violence in Quebec Junior Hockey: An Unobtrusive Analysis of the Patrice Cormier-Mikael Tam Incident

Curtis A. FOGEL

While much is known about how players perceive violence in Canadian sport, little research has been conducted on public perceptions of this violence. This paper provides a preliminary enquiry into how the public perceives acts of excessive violence in Canadian ice hockey through an unobtrusive analysis of 923 responses posted electronically on an internet site following a media article pertaining to a single violent act. The online media article describes an incident involving a Quebec Junior Hockey League (QJHL) player, Patrice Cormier, elbowing an opposing player, Mikael Tam, in the head causing physical injuries. Using open coding, the responses to this article are analyzed.

Keywords: violence, hockey, sport policy, unobtrusive measures, public opinion
Introduction

In an incident of violence in the Quebec Junior Hockey League (QJHL), junior player Patrice Cormier skated across the ice at full speed with his elbow raised striking an opposing player, Mikael Tam, in the face. Tam fell to the ice in violent convulsions with a broken jaw and a brain injury with yet to be known long-term severity. Cormier was suspended for the remainder of the season by league officials and pled guilty in Quebec court to assault causing bodily harm and was given an absolute discharge, which carries no criminal record (Beacon, 2011). This incident marked the third violent elbow that Cormier had thrown within a 1-month span. Cormier, the captain of the Canadian junior team playing in the 2010 World Junior Hockey Championships, had elbowed two other players in the face during the championships. The third elbow, on Mikael Tam in league play, was the only to lead to more than an in-game penalty. Patrice Cormier now plays professional hockey in the National Hockey League (NHL).

The focus of this paper will not be on describing, explaining or understanding this specific incident of violence in Quebec junior hockey. Instead, public perceptions of this incident will be explored through an unobtrusive analysis of 923 comments posted electronically following an online media article pertaining to the violent act (Leahy, 2010). While much is known about how players perceive violence in Canadian sport, little research has been conducted on public perceptions of this violence. This paper seeks to provide a preliminary enquiry into how the public perceives acts of excessive violence in Canadian ice hockey.

This paper begins with a review of the literature on the existing empirical research pertaining to public perceptions of violence in sport. The unobtrusive methodological approach used in this study will then be highlighted. Through the unobtrusive data analysis, several themes emerged surrounding public perceptions of the violence in sport that will be discussed in detail. These themes include: a) intolerance of the act, b) intolerance of the player for his actions, c) league concerns, d) perspectives on punishment, and e) limited glorification of hockey violence. The overall result was that the vast majority of spectators in the study did not perceive the Cormier-Tam incident as favourable or enjoyable to watch.

Research on Public Perceptions of Violence in North American Sport

Much of the existing research on public perceptions of violence in sport has been developed using experimental designs, rather than real life events. While this has allowed researchers study various aspects of public perceptions, such as gender variables and how spectators react under certain controlled conditions,
something appears missing from the equation. That is, how does the public respond to incidences of violence in sport that actually occur as opposed to simulations? Furthermore, how do spectators respond to acts of violence in sport when not under the purview of an empirical researcher, when they are in a naturalistic setting? This study seeks to fill these voids in the empirical literature, by examining public perceptions of violence surrounding a specific incident while employing an unobtrusive approach that involves no direct human contact with the study participants.

In one study using experimental design, David Sullivan (1991) found that dramatic commentary shapes viewers enjoyment of violence and aggression in sport. That is, participants who were exposed to dramatic commentary while watching a basketball game were more likely to perceive and enjoy hostility in the game than participants exposed to neutral commentary or no commentary at all. Cominsky, Bryant, and Zillmann (1977) employed a similar experimental design to study spectator enjoyment of violence in ice hockey, for which they came to the same conclusion: that commentators shape spectators enjoyment of violence in sport. That is, by embellishing the action, spectators find the violence more enjoyable. In 1981, Bryant, Cominsky, and Zillman conducted another experiment involving scenarios of violence in football and found that men, more so than women, enjoyed the game more as violence escalated.

Critiquing their own work, Bryant and Zillmann (1983) suggest that little is known about the limits of violence that spectators enjoy, if in fact any limits exist at all. They write:

The truism appears to be correct: At least with certain limits, sports spectators do love aggression. The limits are unclear, however. Does sports enjoyment thrive on fierce competitiveness? Or need the competition entail blood and gore, incapacitation and mutilation, even death- as some sports writers and analysts apparently believe?... It takes a low view of human nature, indeed, to suggest that they would. Notwithstanding speculation, research fails us at this point. The effect of injurious play in sports on spectators’ enjoyment is simply not known (203).

Over 25 years since Bryant and Zillman made this claim, still little is known about spectators’ perceptions of violence in sport.

In a non-experimental study conducted in the 1970s, Russell surveyed 205 amateur hockey players during the 1975 Canada Winter Games to explore the favourability of violent players over less violent players in the National Hockey League (NHL). For the study, the amateur players were asked to rank their
favourite NHL players. This data was then compared with statistics compiled on penalty minutes that each NHL player had received. Russell (1979) found that no correlation existed between the favourability of players and the amount of penalties players received for violence on the ice.

An Unobtrusive Methodological Approach

The methodological approach of this paper is informed by unobtrusive or what is sometimes termed non-reactive measures (Webb et al., 1981). This process entails the use of data that a) involve no human contact, and b) were not created for the direct purpose of academic study. The data used for this paper consists of 923 comments posted electronically following a media article pertaining to the specific incident of violence in Quebec junior hockey involving Patrice Cormier and Mikael Tam. The data collected was coded using what Glaser and Strauss (1967) term “open coding”, which involved the purposive thematic coding of all comments pertaining to perceptions of violence in Quebec junior hockey. In some instances, different sections of specific comments were coded into different themes.

This unobtrusive approach allowed for the accessible examination of public perceptions of violence in Quebec junior hockey. The reactive potential within face-to-face interviews, surveys and experimental designs was thus avoided through this approach. Furthermore, this approach allowed for a large sample of participants with 923 comments being posted. This does not necessarily represent 923 participants, however, as it could be possible for individuals to post more than one comment.

A limitation of this methodology, which should be noted, is that the study’s accuracy in depicting public responses to violence in junior hockey is limited to the accuracy of the data that were used. The use of non-reactive data prohibited the possibility of questioning the individuals who posted comments further about their perceptions. Furthermore, no demographic information was available on who the individuals were who posted comments, such as whether they were male or female, sports fans or not, Canadian or non-Canadian, their age, or other potentially relevant variables to consider. Given these limitations, this paper is not intended to provide a final say on the topic of public perceptions of violence in sport but rather, the aim is to provide a preliminary examination of the topic using a novel methodological approach that could be followed up with further qualitative and quantitative approaches to social enquiry.
Public Responses to Violence in Quebec Junior Hockey

With 923 comments posted following a brief article detailing the Patrice Cormier-Mikael Tam incident of violence in Quebec junior hockey, it is abundantly clear that the viewing public has something to say about violence in sport. These 923 comments all came following a single article, within a 24-hour time span of the article being posted on Yahoo Sports Canada. For this study, these comments were treated as data that could be analyzed for overarching themes. That is, themes that appeared repeatedly across a large minority or majority of comments. As has been noted at the outset of this paper, the four main themes that emerged included: a) intolerance of the act, b) intolerance of the player for his actions, c) league concerns, d) perspectives on punishment, and e) limited glorification of hockey violence. Each of these will be discussed in further detail in this section.

a) Intolerance of Injurious Violence. While much is said in the popular press that violence in Canadian ice hockey is an integral part of the sport and is part of the lifeblood that keeps the sport financially viable through drawing spectator interest, intentional injurious violence does not appear to be tolerated by the vast majority of the viewing public. Over 75 posts following the Cormier article specifically stated variations of the notion that such violence is unacceptable. According to one respondent:

That is something that is wrong with some of the hits you see these days. The player delivering the hit cares only about lining the victim up and punishing him as hard as he can. Its like a contest or something to see who can lay the biggest hit. The mentality is completely wrong. Hitting is meant to separate the player from the puck. Not to hurt the player. But that is what the mentality is now for some. You can tell, and especially in this case, that a guy’s eyes light up and he’s thinking “Alright this guy’s dead “ Not the way it was meant to be played.

Another respondent asked the question: “Is this street fighting on ice or hockey which is supposed to be a sport?” Another stated: “Just because you are playing hockey, you can’t just intentionally maim other players.” One respondent goes so far as to proclaim: “I know longer watch or follow hockey. It is a sport ruined by so called tough guys.” These quotes, among many others, suggest a real intolerance for acts of extreme, on-ice violence.

The rationale provided by article respondents for their intolerance towards injurious violence appears rooted in two main concerns. First, many respondents labelled the violence “gross”, “disgusting”, “nasty”, “brutal”, and/or “disgraceful.” The violence could be perceived as a personal offence against
their morals. Others cited the source of their disgust as a concern that the sport of hockey is tarnished by such acts. One respondent wrote: “On or off the ice, sly moves like this is assault and not part of this great game.” Another wrote: “This kind of behaviour is reprehensible. I don’t care who you are or how ‘talented’ you may be you don’t belong in this beautiful sport if you conduct yourself like this.”

b) Intolerance of the Player for his Actions. While many respondents revealed an intolerance for the act of violence perpetrated by Patrice Cormier, even more revealed an intolerance for Cormier as a player and person following this incident. Over 140 respondents wrote comments suggesting strong discontent for Cormier. The negative comments directed towards Cormier came in two main forms. First, many respondents wrote short comments insulting his character, such as: “tool”, “jerk”, “dumbass”, “psychotic”, “piece of shit”, “disgrace”, “idiot”, “piece of crap”, “meathead”, “loser”, “asshole”, “immature”, and/or “classless” among many other insults.

Other negative comments indicating intolerance for Cormier as a person following the violent incident centered on sentiments of revenge. That is, many respondents came up with creative ways to seek revenge on Cormier for injuring Tam. One respondent claimed: “This guy deserves to have his face smashed in.” Another suggested: “They should take him and bust his jaw with a baseball bat.” Another: “As much as it pains me to not back up Canadian players, this goof needs to get his teeth punched down his throat.” Others went as far as to make claims like:

I hope some god somewhere finds it in his heart to run over Cormier with a rusty, slow moving combine...But I hope he survives and is forced to watch the video over and over until the day his body just gives up. What a scumbag. Or maybe he could just have his hips broken and his legs amputated forcefully. So that every day when he looks down and sees his legs gone and feels the tremendous pain of his broken hips he will remember why.

And, taking it to a real extreme, one respondent proclaimed: “I hope this kid dies.” These quotes suggest anger and outrage towards Patrice Cormier for the violent act he committed against Mikael Tam.

c) League Concerns. Many other respondents directed their disgust less towards the player and his act, and more towards hockey administrators and officials who tolerate and promote extreme acts of on-ice violence in Canadian ice hockey. For these respondents, blame must be placed at a higher level than the individual player. Instead, it is the league itself that should shoulder some responsibility for the perpetration of injurious, on-ice violence. In total, over 25 respondents cited league concerns about the administrative handling of on
ice-violence and its relation to this specific incident. One respondent asked: “The question arises - how did he get this far without someone stopping this behaviour?” Another made the point: “The league had plenty of opportunities to already handle this. Instead of waiting until someone was almost killed, don’t you think that any league should be handling out penalties far more severe for the first instance of illegal hits, instead of waiting until someone gets seriously hurt?” Many respondents also cited that Cormier had recently committed similar infractions with minimal consequence, sending him a message that such acts would be tolerated.

d) Perspectives on Punishment. The most common response by article readers, with over 155 comments, was to suggest possible penalties that Cormier could receive. These comments took three main forms. First, respondents suggested possible forms of violent revenge against Cormier, which was previously discussed. Two other forms of punishment discussed frequently include: hockey penalties and criminal penalty.

The most commonly proposed hockey penalty was a complete ban on ever being permitted to play hockey again at any level or location. According to one respondent: “I like to see big, bad hits. But this is pure insanity. A guy like that needs to be kept out of any and every hockey arena across the world.” Another stated: “Guys like him should be banned for life!” Another: “Make an example of this clown. Suspend him for life!!” Others suggested he be banned from ever playing junior hockey again. As one respondent stated: “At the very least he should no longer be allowed to play juniors in Canada ever again. And I think any suspension he gets from the Q should be upheld by all other hockey leagues, as he could just skip over to the ECHL/AHL if not.” The most minimal hockey penalty suggested by some respondents was a suspension for the remainder of the season, which is what Cormier received. Illustrating this, one respondent stated: “I hope the QMJHL does what seems to be appropriate and suspend this kid for the rest of the season.”

Many other respondents suggested that the incident should be considered a criminal matter as it had very little to do with the sport of hockey but instead, could be perceived as criminal assault. According to one respondent: “Charge him… I want talent on the ice… not criminals. Another stated:

Unbelievable. He should face criminal charges without a doubt. That is intent to injure in its purest form. Throwing an elbow like that outside a bar at closing time would land you in the clink. This guy deserves to never play the game of hockey again and spend some time in a jail cell to think about what his disregard for fellow players means to the game of hockey.
Similarly, one responded stated: “From a purely criminal standpoint he had both intent and ability to cause severe harm, and should be charged.” Another stated: “Ban him for life and send him to jail! This was well beyond the intensity of a sporting event.” Another: “Criminal charges should be brought against this player and any player who chooses this kind of brutality.”

e) Limited Glorification of Violence. In total, less than 20 comments out of 923 could be interpreted as perceiving the incident in a positive light, thus making a definitive statement about public perceptions towards violence in Canadian hockey. The vast majority of comments suggest that the viewing public is concerned with and/or disgusted by Cormier’s violent act. One neutral comment by a respondent was: “Things happen at fast speeds with quick reactions....that’s hockey.” Another suggested: “If people do not want to get hurt or don’t like seeing people get hurt don’t watch or play hockey. This kids life should not be ruined over someone not being able to take a hit.” Though a small minority, several respondents did celebrate the violent act perceiving it in a positive light. One respondent proclaimed to other respondents: “What babies, this is old school hockey!!” Another wrote: “Good Canadian boy- makes Don Cherry proud!”

Conclusion

The 923 posts alone indicate that this incident generated significant public interest. The general sense that comes from the data is that this incident has gone beyond the public’s belief in acceptable violence in Canadian ice hockey, with only a small minority seeing extreme violence positively. In the continuing debates surrounding the possible ban on fighting in ice hockey and increased penalties for headshots, many argue that lessening the violence will be bad for the game. This research provides some evidence to the contrary. En masse, the viewing public does not appear to celebrate acts of violence on the ice. Intentional acts of injurious violence are perceived as unacceptable. The league officials who tolerate this violence are condemned by the public for their inaction and failure to protect players and the integrity of the sport of hockey. Players who commit this violence are perceived as gutless, as cowards, and as thugs with no place in the game that many Canadians cherish. The data presented in this paper provide ample evidence that curbing excessive violence in Canadian ice hockey might not hurt the game and spectatorship numbers, but might align with the vast majority of perceptions of hockey fans and spectators. As one respondent stated, “It’s time for the culture of violence in hockey to end, Don Cherry and his ilk be damned.”
References


Curtis A. FOGEL, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Lakehead University in Orillia, Ontario, Canada. He teaches Criminology. His ongoing research is in the area of crime and deviance in the context of sport.

**Corresponding address:**
Curtis A. Fogel  
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Lakehead University Orillia  
500 University Ave  
Orillia, Ontario  
Canada  
L3V0B9  
E-mail: cafogel@lakeheadu.ca