

“Cheating Behavior” in Junior Competitive Tennis  
A Socialization Perspective

Cheating behavior in junior competitive tennis is no new phenomenon. This “hot button” sportsmanship topic has been addressed developmentally, empirically and scientifically by coaches, organized youth sport leadership and sport psychologists for decades. Most recently, critical findings related to this topic were contained in the United States Tennis Association’s (USTA) commissioned research study conducted by the University of Central Florida (UCF) through which the proposed American Development Model (ADM) junior competitive tennis initiative for 2021 emerged. The purpose of this paper is to offer my view of how this study and proposed competitive initiatives connect with psychosocial development theory, possibly revealing an “unexplored” avenue for addressing cheating behavior in junior competitive tennis.

The unprecedented crisis which temporarily suspended USTA junior tournament play this past March afforded me an opportunity to reflect on the UCF study and proposed ADM initiative. Doing so crystalized in my mind the USTA’s strong belief that in order to achieve its overarching aim of junior tennis being viewed as a “model sport” two key impediments must be overcome: 1) Global player development-centered outcomes must assume more prominence within the overall competitive product; 2) Negative human behavior must be eliminated.

As a USTA certified official who officiates approximately 100 days of junior tournament play a year I find myself consistently at the epicenter of (possible) cheating behavior and, more importantly, anecdotal reference to its occurrence from players, parents, coaches and tournament directors (TD’s). And permeating these references is the belief that a major contributor to cheating is *inadequate on-court-presence of certified officials* (findings consistent with the UCF study).

Unfortunately, a 2019 officiating study revealed that 70% of USTA sections did not have enough certified officials to staff their tournaments. Locally, this finding is substantiated by the significant number of Chicago District Tennis Association (CDTA) and Northern Illinois Tennis Association (NITA) tournaments conducted without an assigned certified official on site (approximately 100 during a 6 month period in 2019). And the majority of tournaments using certified officials typically hire 1 per day, where the volume of matches (and length of work day) often makes it difficult to maintain adequate on-court presence to prevent cheating. Adding to this shortage is difficulty recruiting new officials and retention in general, as well as the enticement of college officiating opportunities which provide *a more financially lucrative and palatable work experience*.

***“The significant problems we face today cannot be solved at the level of thinking that created them”***

Albert Einstein

As one who is exposed to (possible) cheating behavior in an up-close and personal way, I contend that, given the above limiting factors, too much focus on initiatives targeting increased officiating presence as a “sustainable” stop gap measure for cheating might (falsely) lead adult stakeholders to thinking of this as merely a “tennis problem.” Evidence revealed through my substantial investigation of junior competitive tennis within a developmental and behavioral framework the past 6 years suggests that cheating is a *socialization* problem with underpinnings linked to *global player moral development and socioenvironmental influence, the most significant being parent behavior*.

To paraphrase Dr. Ron Quinn, Professor of Sports Ethics, Xavier University, “A junior tennis player, by nature, initially sets out to compete within the rules. However, once he or she realizes how important results outcome i.e. winning is to significant adults e.g. parents, cheating becomes a learned behavior.”

I believe such astute observation makes learned behavior a construct worthy of exploration.

The event surrounding suspension of USTA sanctioned junior tournament play highlights an inescapable truth: *we live in a social world*. Doubters of this truism need only look at how “social distancing” has and continues to consume our thoughts and reshape daily behavior and language (while its first known use occurred in 1824, “Coronavirus” i.e. COVID 19 has led to inclusion of social distancing as a new dictionary entry for 2020). Inferred in social distancing is change in physical proximity, which most humans have embraced as a (necessary) “wellness” enterprise. Such an unprecedented social behavioral shift led me to reflect on cheating within a developmental context and how a (necessary) wellness enterprise worthy of exploration regarding this phenomenon might be *socialization* i.e. *social responsibility*.

Socialization, by definition, is the process through which youth acquire the prosocial attributes of civil society. Social responsibility defines the adult role of sustaining this process by cultivating and reinforcing prosocial values in youth across a variety of social contexts, one of which is junior competitive tennis. And while this responsibility rests with all adults associated with tournament play, its primary trustees are *parents*.

Social responsibility entails understanding that junior tournament play is, in essence, a *social environment* in which *the activity of one entity affects the activity of all others*. (This point is validated by the social distancing phenomenon. One person’s attempt to avoid possible contraction of COVID 19 is, in large part, dependent upon the cooperation of others around him.) As added context, the perceived “negative reputation” (globally) ascribed to CDTA player/parent sportsmanship by outsiders is directly attributable to the (*anti*)-*socialized* behavior of what (statistically) is a fraction of its participants.

Specific to cheating, I will briefly address this phenomenon from a social cognitive perspective to show how manipulating these conditions may begin, as noted by Jonathan Fralick, at the *dinner table*.

Two developmental conditions need to be considered as possible antecedents to cheating behavior. One is a junior’s ability to make decisions guided by an understanding of “rightness” and “wrongness” i.e. *moral reasoning* and the other is his or her beliefs about *determinants* of tennis success.

***“To educate a person in mind only and not in morals is to educate a menace to society”***

Teddy Roosevelt (Courtesy of Dr. Ron Quinn)

Deliberately making an incorrect line call i.e. cheating is *intentional* behavior that may occur as either an impulsive act (momentary) or a pattern (repetitive). However it manifests, as a *social cognitive function*, it occurs with *forethought*.

Forethought influences i.e. motivates human behavior in the direction of anticipated (desired) outcomes (Bandura, 2005). This suggests that a junior’s *deliberate* incorrect line call is made *knowing* the intended outcome will be realized at the expense of *fair play*. Further, the influence of forethought extends to *officiating presence*. As any roving official can attest, with rare exception, attempts to cheat tend to cease *once they arrive on court*. This too is attributable to forethought. Here, the anticipated outcome of *cheating to win a point* temporarily shifts to *not being caught doing so (and possibly overruled) by the official* (a behavior shift often substantiated by the offended player complaining to the official that the cheating will resume once they leave.)

***“An official’s presence may change a junior’s “in moment” behavior – however, it may not necessarily change his “moral code””***

Some answers as to why cheating occurs may lie in “Achievement Goal Theory” (AGT) where empirical evidence has linked such behavior to the manner in which a junior reconciles two diametrically opposed goal orientations described as *task* and *ego*. While both are shown to exist simultaneously, when task orientation is dominant, a junior considers *personal effort* to be an accurate measure of a successful outcome whereas when ego orientation is dominant, a successful outcome is primarily measured by *peer comparison* i.e. defeating one’s opponent (Duda, Newton, 1993). Subsequently, the fidelity of ego orientation may at times be such that cheating becomes the only recognized means of achieving a desired result.

As another antecedent to cheating behavior, we must consider the impact of the *environment*.

As stated, we live in a social world where a constellation of socioenvironmental influences direct adolescent moral and other self-systems development. In the context of competitive tennis, one of the most powerful influences is that of parents, whose socialization activities are scrutinized by youth and play a role in shaping sport-related beliefs, participation levels and enjoyment (Kanters et al, 2008). When a junior deliberately makes an incorrect line call or manipulates score, rest assured, in many instances *a parent is watching*, in which case the question might be asked; “Is the parent *supporting such behavior?*” While I have yet to find empirical evidence that answers this critical question, an answer may be inferred by what has been revealed through sport parent and youth behavior studies. In one such study, a significant percentage of parents self-reported having verbally criticized a sport official or angrily criticized their child’s sport performance (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi & Power, 2005). Similarly, in this same study a significant percentage of youth reported that a parent got angry when they performed poorly. In another study, while not empirically validated, interviews conducted with juniors suggested that parental pressure (to succeed) may be linked to cheating (Casper, 2006).

Also, socioenvironmental influence on adolescent growth and development occurs across contexts, which suggests that (as noted by Fralick) a junior’s moral trajectory and beliefs about tennis success are strongly influenced not only by the *behavioral climate established and reinforced by parents* on “game day” but by that established and reinforced in other social settings e.g. home.

So what is known is that a parent is likely in direct observance of his or her child’s cheating behavior. What is not known, however, is whether the parent’s perception (and subsequent assessment) of such behavior mirrors what is alleged by an opponent and others in full view. And more importantly, if considered morally wrong, *what attempts, if any, are made to correct such behavior*. Again, while empirical evidence doesn’t provide answers, I theorize a parent’s *tacit* acceptance/support of cheating behavior may be caused by *Global Aspirational Amnesia* (GAA) and harbored beliefs and expectations centered on a *results outcome* competitive model as opposed to *development*.

GAA is a condition conceptualized after Kahn’s theory of *Environmental Generational Amnesia* (EGA) (2002). EGA evolved from a child study of pollution in Houston Texas, where findings suggested that even growing up in one of the most polluted cities in the United States and possessing a fair amount of knowledge of its harmful environmental effect, a disproportionate number of children in the study failed to acknowledge this effect on their health. It is theorized that gradual increased exposure to such conditions over time led to a gradual change in children’s perceptions about their immediate environment, *resulting in a normative shift in terms of what once constituted clean air* (Kahn, 2002).

As stated, parental values strongly influence the trajectory of how children are socialized (Kasser et al, 1995; Kanters, Bocarro & Casper, 2008). Thus, due to GAA I theorize that a parent’s repeated exposure to a competitive environment where results outcome i.e. winning is predominant causes a normative shift in their behavioral reference point. Subsequently, perceptions, values, beliefs and expectations

regarding tennis participation passed on to their child that were once development-centered now become secondary, which might account for tacit acceptance/support of their child's cheating behavior. And due to "habituation," this new behavioral reference point becomes a self-reinforcing (*bad*) habit that becomes *disconnected from intelligence and reasoned decision-making* (Dewey, 2004). Further, from a socioenvironmental standpoint, over time this shift is likely to influence a junior's competitive behavior towards an ego orientation to such extent that it too becomes self-reinforcing.

The purpose of this paper was to address cheating behavior in sanctioned junior tournament tennis from a socialization perspective. Substantial empirical research findings couched within a psychosocial developmental framework combined with speculative theory derived through my experience as a USTA certified official was used to connect this perspective to key findings contained in the USTA commissioned UCF research study and proposed ADM initiative for junior competitive tennis. Substantial evidence exists suggesting that antecedents to cheating behavior in junior tennis may be linked to an overemphasis on results-centered performance outcomes as opposed to global player development outcomes as well as adult antisocial environmental influence, making exploration of future sportsmanship initiatives centered on socialization a worthwhile endeavor for adult stakeholders.

Movement in this direction poses a number of significant questions.

How can socialization and moral development be blended into existing sportsmanship initiatives?

With parents, how do you approach social responsibility within a competitive tennis framework?

With education initiatives, who is the "target audience?"

How can/should parents of players with a known history of cheating behavior be held accountable?

How do TD's integrate *in moment* i.e. on site moral training?

What about the role of on-court officials during play?

(The extent to which this perspective on cheating behavior becomes part of any sportsmanship conversation remains to be seen. However, research evidence aside, my substantial (and continued) exposure to cheating and other egregious displays of antisocial behavior during junior tournament play on court and, sadly, *in the stands*, fuels my belief that any attempt to construct sportsmanship initiatives without considering the "socialization effect," no matter how well-intended, is, in my humble opinion, tantamount to *straightening deck chairs on the Titanic.*)

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