Human rights and sports mega-events: The role of moral disengagement in spectators

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Abstract

Human Rights issues such as freedom of speech, equality and displacement are repeatedly connected with the hosting of sports mega-events. Governments and event organisers require public backing to ensure these events remain sustainable; this study provides an explanation as to how the general population continue to provide this support in spite of these concerns through the framework of Bandura’s (1991) social cognitive theory of moral agency. Four focus groups consisting of 18 individuals who had attended a sports mega-event were carried out using a semi-structured format, covering the topics of freedom, protection, access, equality and ability. Subsequently, the data were analysed deductively using definitions of the mechanisms of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1991). The findings provide preliminary evidence of moral disengagement in members of the public who support sports mega-events. Implications for Human Rights organisations and other key stakeholders are discussed.

Keywords

Moral disengagement, Human Rights, mega-events, Olympics, FIFA
Human Rights and sports mega-events: The role of moral disengagement in spectators

Horne (2015) identified six Sports Mega Events (SMEs) as: the Summer Olympic Games, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, the UEFA European Championships, the Winter Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games and the Pan-American Games. Horne (2007: 82) stated that SMEs can have “…significant consequences for the host city, region or nation” providing the opportunity for communication with billions of people as they “…attract considerable media coverage.” Although there is great scope for SMEs to have a positive legacy, there is also the potential for them to be associated with negative consequences. Numerous studies have highlighted the Human Rights (HR) issues associated with hosting SMEs (for example, Brackenridge, Rhind, & Palmer-Felgate, 2015; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Horne, 2007; Lenskyj, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2012; Rowe, 2012; Smith, 2009). There has been widespread reporting of these HR issues in connection with both previous and forthcoming SMEs (for example, the 2018 and 2022 World Cups in Russia and Qatar respectively, Human Rights Watch, 2015; Jones, 2015). Event organisers have also been criticised for their handling of HR issues (Associated Press, 2014; Jennings, 2011). Despite the widely acknowledged concerns connected with SMEs, public backing for these events endures. The purpose of this study is to find evidence of moral disengagement (MD) in those who support SMEs. This will provide a crucial first explanation for what is a cornerstone of the continued growth of SMEs and the increasing financial prosperity of their governing bodies and sponsors. In addition, it shall inform future MD research in connection with HR issues. **Human Rights and Sports Mega Events**

Adams and Piekarz (2015) divided the HR issues associated with SMEs into five categories derived from the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR):
freedom, protection, access, equality and ability. Freedom concerns issues such as media
restrictions; for example, the “Olympic Bubble” (Horne, 2007, p. 89; Lenskyj, 1996, 2004, 2008,
2012; Schausteck de Almeida, Bolsmann, Marchi Júnior, & De Souza, 2015). This concept
suggests that through flooding the host nation with positive rhetoric and by placing restrictions
on the use of certain phrases (such as, “Olympics” or “gold”) SME organisers not only ensure
maximisation of profits for sponsors at a cost to local businesses but also create an environment
of censorship, restricting criticism of the event. This classification also addresses the
compromising of individuals’ rights to protest, which was noted in connection with the Beijing
Olympics, where an application was required for this right, which came at great personal risk and
it was restricted to specified “zones” (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010). Similarly it was highlighted
around the London 2012 Games, where protests were geographically marginalised (Giulianotti,
Armstrong, Hales, & Hobbs, 2015) or barred, including the long-standing anti-war protests in
Parliament Square (Bowcott, 2012). Given the contrasting influences of sport, the media,
sponsors, politics and security on those managing sports events (Emery, 2010) there are
logistical, financial, branding and governmental agendas to be satisfied. One area where this
dynamic may impact is freedom.

The widely reported issue of human displacement is covered under protection (Adams &
Piekarz, 2015). The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) compiled figures for
numerous SMEs and revealed that, amongst others, 720,000 people were forcibly evicted from
their homes ahead of the 1988 Seoul Olympics and 1.25m individuals were displaced before the
2008 Beijing Olympics (COHRE, 2007). The frequency with which this matter arises is detailed
by Porter, Jaconelli, Cheyne, Eby and Wagenaar (2009) who claim, “Displacement is a defining
feature of the mega-event” (p. 395) in their research on the 2012 London Olympics and the 2014
Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. This theme also concerns human trafficking for the purposes of prostitution, street crime or begging, which is the subject of specialised control measures before SMEs (for example, London Councils & GLA Consulting, 2011) and has been highlighted for both adult and child populations (Adams & Piekarz, 2015; Brackenridge et al., 2015).

The theme of access relates to the right to the presumption of innocence within an impartial legal system (Adams & Piekarz, 2015). This was evidenced in Brazil, with authorities bypassing the legal system, using extreme force to “pacify” favelas (shanty towns) in host cities ahead of the 2014 World Cup (Amnesty International, 2014; Steel, 2014). COHRE (2007) also noted this issue, reporting on the criminalisation of specific groups ahead of a number of SMEs. One instance was the issuing of 9,000 arrest warrants for homeless individuals ahead of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

The fourth theme is that of equality (Adams & Piekarz, 2015). COHRE (2007) note that consistently, minority groups and those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are affected by SMEs. Recent examples include indigenous Muslims ahead of the Beijing Olympics (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010) and those affected by the changes in the Brazilian favelas (Steel, 2014). Horne (2007) comments on the tendency to promote values held by the middle-classes, such as the leisure and business opportunities that accompany SMEs, as being beneficial for the general population, when actually this ignores swathes of poorer people. Lenskyj (2008) exemplifies this by noting that developments in and around Olympic sites inflate property prices and rents which excludes those on lower incomes, breaking up communities. Smith (2009) explains that SMEs “…may exacerbate urban social divisions, rather than heal them. The potential for
negative social consequences is now so well recognised that those representing the rights of citizens are now seeking related assurances before events are even awarded” (p. 112).

These preceding themes relate to the fifth, that of the ability to maintain physical, social and psychological well-being (Adams & Piekarz, 2015). SMEs affect numerous populations in various ways, impacting on well-being. Given the Olympic charter sets out that Olympism respects fundamental ethical principles and should be enjoyed without discrimination (International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2014) and FIFA claims the World Cup tackles discrimination and promotes equality (FIFA, 2014), the impact of SMEs on well-being is an important human rights issue. SMEs have therefore been associated with a range of human rights issues. However, the public continue to support them through attendance, purchasing merchandise and watching on television. Public backing also means that governments still desire to host SMEs and investors and sponsors prosper from them through increased revenue, positive image and branding (Horne, 2007). There is little empirical research or theoretical basis explaining how they are accepted by the supportive masses. Moral disengagement, as proposed by Bandura (1991), provides a possible explanation for this behaviour and forms the theoretical framework for this investigation into how SMEs are allowed to prosper in spite of stark reasons for the opposite

Moral Disengagement (MD)

Fiske (2004) defines MD as a process of convincing the self that ethical standards do not apply to oneself in a particular context by separating moral reactions from inhumane conduct and disabling the mechanism of self-condemnation. Firstly, the HR concerns that are outlined above represent the inhumane conduct; secondly, the moral reaction to this conduct would be to withhold backing for the SME or support the dissenting voices concerned with these issues and
thirdly, the disabling of self-condemnation comes in the form of MD allowing oneself to support
the SME in whichever form that may be.

The social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura, 1991) proposes that individuals’
behaviour is directed by the affectations that it will bring, actions that induce feelings of self-
worth and satisfaction are preferred to those that bring self-reproach. These emotional responses
are governed by the personal standards of right and wrong that have been developed by the
individual. Behaviour is evaluated against the situational circumstances and the individual’s
values and regulated accordingly. As suggested by Bandura (1999), such sanctions are only
applied if they are activated. He proposed eight psychosocial mechanisms that are employed in
order to avoid self-sanctioning, allowing behaviour contradicting personal morals to occur
(Bandura, 1999); these are outlined in table 1.

Through the use of both qualitative and quantitative methodology, MD has been found in
broad-ranging areas, including: social behaviours, such as bullying (Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno,
2012), aggression (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Li, Nie & Boardley, 2014) and meat eating
(Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012), in corporations (Moore, 2008; Moore, Detert,
Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009) and in atrocities and the military
(Bandura, 1999; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006). In a sporting context, it has been found in
relation to performance-enhancing drugs (Boardley, Grix, & Dewar, 2014; Boardley, Grix, &
Harkin, 2015) and aggression (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010).

The rationale for the current research is that there is a gap in the literature explaining why
the public continue to support SMEs despite the widespread concerns connected with them and
that MD can provide this explanation. Examples are present in the literature which support this
argument. The public have been reported to use phraseology and themes entwined with the
rhetoric commonly espoused by organisers and sponsors (Lenskyj, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2012; Schausteck de Almeida et al., 2015) which may suggest moral justification. Infrastructure developments associated with SMEs, requiring the displacement of local people, are almost universally described as “regeneration” (Olds, 1996). This suggests euphemistic labelling that could be for the benefit of organisers, workers or the public. Waitt (2003) investigated public opinion of the Sydney Olympics. Numerous controversies were reported, including inaccurate public expenditure budgeting (Booth & Tatz, 1996), exorbitant costs (US$1.3 billion), widely reported corruption (Burroughs, 1999) and HR violations (Beder, 2000). Marketing themes including international recognition, business opportunities and community spirit (Gratton & Henry, 2001) were regarded as the biggest positives; however, expressions of what they were exactly or how they manifest themselves were vague. Despite this, the Games were widely supported and viewed as having both social and financial benefits, being seen as “fair” and “inexpensive” (Waitt, 2003). Literature on the management of SMEs aligns with such findings; Smith (2014) notes that the “leveraging” of such events through tied-in initiatives based on political strategies including increasing employment, sport participation, tourism and urban development can create a concept of legacy without any real tangible benefit. These examples suggest both moral justification and distortion of consequences are at play when considering the effects of SMEs.

Furthermore, the former FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who when probed on the poor working conditions for those building stadia for the World Cup in Qatar, which has claimed lives, suggested FIFA held no responsibility for this, instead simply saying of the companies carrying out the work, “they are responsible for their workers” (Associated Press, 2014). This
displacement of responsibility from the head of such a global sport, demonstrates MD that could be reflected on a broader scale.

Recently, Greenhalgh, Watt and Schutte (2015) found MD applicable in a HR context, in their study on endorsement for Australian asylum seeker policies. Pertinently, this work was the first to find MD amongst people who did not personally carry out the actions but instead supported the policies through their political standpoint or voting patterns. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that it could occur in the public who support SMEs through watching, attending or purchasing associated merchandise, which would provide further evidence for this initial finding and in a different context.

The literature highlights the number and variety of HR issues connected to SMEs and the importance of public backing for those organising the event. Despite the extensive research pertaining to these HR concerns, there is a lack of investigation as to why the public continue to make these events sustainable through their support despite the associated consequences, leading to a perpetuation of these issues. This study aims to add an important new dimension to the large body of literature detailing HR issues and SMEs by offering an explanation for the continued public support they, and consequently their organisers, receive in the face of evidence to suggest this is unwarranted (Adams & Piekarz, 2015).

**Research Question**

It has been demonstrated that Bandura’s (1991) social cognitive theory of moral agency could provide an account for the backing of SMEs by the general population; therefore this study, based upon the five HR themes drawn up by Adams and Piekarz (2015), investigated whether there was evidence of the presence of MD in members of the public who support SMEs.
Method

Participants
Participants were selected based on the relevance of the topic, public support of SMEs, and homogeneity eliciting the richest data (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Krueger, 1994; Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). Consequently, to participate, individuals were required to have attended a SME and at the time of that SME have been a London resident, in full-time employment and aged between 18 and 30. Although divergent samples allow greater generalisability (Mason, 2002), the novel nature of this study requires uniformity so findings can be drawn more confidently relating to the population before comparisons are made to other samples (Jones, Brown, & Holloway, 2012). This methodological approach was also utilised by Waitt (2003) in a study that included Sydney residents. The participants in Wiatt’s (2003) study were recruited through snowball sampling, an approach that supports increased homogeneity (Browne, 2005). The use of social networks encourages pre-acquainted groups, which helps foster an atmosphere where sensitive topics are discussed more readily (Browne, 2005; Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Consequently, 18 individuals were recruited (12 male, 6 female), aged between 27 and 33 ($M = 30.1, \ SD = 1.8$), of whom, 14 had attended one SME, three had attended two SMEs and one had attended four SMEs. The events experienced by those taking part were the London 2012 Olympics and/or Paralympics (17 participants), a World Cup abroad (four participants), the Glasgow Commonwealth Games (one participant) and a European Football Championships abroad (one participant).

Procedure
Ethical approval was gained from the University’s Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Suggestions for the ideal focus group size range from three to twenty members (Krueger, 1994;
Morgan, 1997; Tang & Davis, 1995). Given the sensitive nature of the topics and the possibility of larger groups becoming aggressive and inconsiderate (Tang & Davis, 1995), it was decided that the groups would fall towards the lower end of the scale, numbering between three and six participants. Consistent with Krueger’s (1994) guidelines, after a pilot study was carried out, further sessions were run until clear patterns in the data emerged and saturation occurred. Following assessment and feedback, the pilot study resulted in a slight adaptation of the interview guide to include further examples of HR issues and greater probing of individual’s views of their roles in the support of SMEs. Overall the feedback resulted in a smaller number of interview questions. The process resulted in four focus groups being held, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes.

Each individual taking part received an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the topics to be covered, their right to withdraw, the availability of their scripts after the session and their confidentiality. Subsequently any questions were answered and each signed a consent form.

Locations were chosen for their convenience for participants, with the majority taking place in the home of one of those taking part. Attendees were informed of the location, together with directions and timings. Each location provided a comfortable, quiet and private setting free from interruption and distraction, as recommended by Kitzinger and Barbour (1995), with seating arranged appropriately and light refreshments supplied.

The groups convened fifteen to twenty minutes ahead of the scheduled start time, allowing group members who were unacquainted a chance to meet and talk ahead of the session. Through conveying that the lead researcher himself had attended an SME on more than one occasion and with understanding, positive body language and eye contact (Krueger & Casey,
the aim was that participants would feel comfortable in relating how they felt regarding support for SMEs and the associated sensitive topics. Conversely, it was also recognised that although the lead researcher’s personal experience with SMEs would enable the participants to feel at ease, it should not allow a presumption of parallels between himself and others that could create a bias or leading questions, in line with the self-awareness and reflection that increases credence in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Given that focus group members conveyed their views unprompted and freely it was felt that an environment aligning with these criteria was created.

Focus group sessions were recorded using the Smart Voice Recorder mobile application (SmartMob, 2015) and followed a semi-structured format, allowing the lead researcher to cover each area but with enough flexibility to probe lines of enquiry deemed important and produce rich data (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1995; Mason, 2002). A debrief followed each session, ensuring all questions were answered and any comments regarding the data collection process were noted.

**Instruments**

The interview guide followed the five themes of HR issues connected with SMEs as described by Adams and Piekarz (2015): freedom, protection, access, equality and ability, with each defined for clarity. In order to aid discussion, examples were given for each and views were sought; for example, under the access theme it was asked, “Ahead of the 2014 World Cup, Brazilian authorities bypassed the legal system and used extreme force to ‘pacify’ some favelas (shanty towns) and drug gangs around numerous cities. Is this acceptable? Why / Why not?”

**Data Analysis**
Each session was transcribed verbatim with participants’ names pseudonymised. This was done at the first opportunity to maximise accuracy and closeness to the data, ensuring an audit trail could be formed (Boyatzis, 1998). Participants were also given the opportunity to assess the data for its accuracy with regards to wording as well as context (Holloway & Brown, 2012). After reading and re-reading the transcripts, the social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura, 1991) formed the framework of the deductive content analysis; previous theoretical research dictates that this method is appropriate (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Initially, the transcripts were reviewed separately by the authors, allowing any discrepancies in thematic interpretation to be highlighted, discussed and addressed. Following procedures advised by Polit and Beck (2004) after this immersion in the data it was then coded by the lead author on a line-by-line basis according to applicability, or otherwise, to the categories (the eight detailed in the Manual for Coding Modes of Moral Disengagement by Bandura (2006)) and a model was created. In order to maintain consistency and reliability throughout the process of analysis, further meetings between the authors were held allowing for collaboration of ideas as well as detection and prevention of any potential bias (Shenton, 2004). Throughout the process a reflective diary was kept by the lead researcher noting thoughts on the focus group sessions, emerging themes and the overall procedure, heightening self-awareness and credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Results

Evidence was found for the use of seven of the eight mechanisms of MD in members of the public who had supported SMEs: moral justification, advantageous comparison, distortion of consequences, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility and attribution of blame. These manifested themselves in various ways as displayed in Table 2.
Moral Justification

The most common mechanism, moral justification, was used in two contexts. Firstly, in an overall sense, to offer ways in which SMEs as a whole create benefits for populations, justifying support for them and secondly, to justify HR issues connected with SMEs. The former was often conveyed in a general manner, both for SMEs held locally and abroad. P7 said this of London: “…a lot of people probably got something out of the Olympics that hopefully they’ll be able to take on and pass on.” and P4 detailed:

I think people should want to have the Olympics or the World Cup in their country because I think they can be a force for good and it can be quite inspiring to have it happening in your country and it’s a showcase for the country as well.

The second context revealed perceived benefits of specific HR issues; for example it was used to combat conflict regarding the human displacement. P9 demonstrated this when talking about those affected by it: “…they would be in places with new housing, which is better than where they were before, so you kind of hope that there’s always a benefit.” Similarly P17 noted “…the joys of organising an Olympics in a Western democracy is that everyone who would have lost their house to compulsory purchase would have been wonderfully compensated, you know, recompensed in accordance with…fairness and justice.” It was also found in relation to the bypassing of legal procedures in pacifying the Brazilian favelas, P13 argued: “I think there was a positive side for a hell of a lot of people in the favelas…who had their lives controlled or blighted by the…by the drugs gangs.” These cases illustrate how this mechanism allows individuals to highlight real or perceived positives resulting from SMEs that enable acceptance
of other detrimental consequences. This was summed up through P7 discussing their support for SMEs, admitting: “You paint a better picture in your head than reality.”

**Advantageous Comparison**

Support for the use of advantageous comparison was found in two circumstances; primarily in relation to participants’ support of the 2012 Olympics through comparison with other SMEs and secondarily to provide beneficial contrasts for SME related HR issues. For the first of these, contrasts were typically drawn between the Games held in England and events held in China, Brazil or Russia, with examples covering broad views, such as P14 contending: “do I know that the London Olympics was….the benefits outweigh the costs? No, but I’m pretty sure that erm, the ratio is better than somewhere, somewhere, like Sochi” and P7 explaining: “in Brazil there were riots and things, literally…about why it shouldn’t be held there….there wasn’t the depravity in the UK that Brazil had.” This included views on how they would deal with specific HR issues; for instance, on the right to protest, P5 commented: “I tend to think that the country are going to take harder lines, in terms of the way they police them…and I imagine China was a lot worse than it was for ….the UK.” It is worth noting that although this context frequently arose, it was not accompanied by a tendency to boycott support for events held in other countries.

The second manifestation of advantageous comparison saw rationalisation for the consequences of HR concerns. This was exemplified by P8, when commenting on displacement caused by development around the London Olympic Park: “…can’t believe that there are too many infrastructure projects that…err…cause absolutely no chaos to anyone anywhere.” This demonstrates how participants justified their actions by creating positive comparisons making them appear more benign.
Minimising, Denying or Distorting of Consequences

The third mechanism found in explaining support for SMEs was minimising, denying or distorting of consequences, which was common in two contexts, when discussing the HR effects of hosting SMEs and when justifying the costs of such events. The first manifestation often concerned development in Olympic areas, including human displacement and the subsequent effect that higher rents and desirability have on locals with lower incomes. Again, this arose regularly when discussing London 2012, primarily through viewing these issues as part of something that was already taking place. This was exemplified by P12: “it was certainly something that was happening anyway and is happening in other areas of London that aren’t Stratford”, P2: “I mean it would have happened anyway, given the overall picture in London” and P4 also commented:

…gentrification means that poor people who live in the area will struggle to afford to live there and the Olympics is a vehicle that has increased all of those things in a short space of time than would otherwise have been the case but…yeah…the underlying problems….problem still exists whether the Olympics happen or not…

The second manifestation was again found mainly in connection with the London Olympics, with financial consequences of hosting the Games seen as minimal as the money would not have been used constructively. Regardless, P7 commented: “I mean what else would they have done with that money….frittered it away probably on something else” and P3 voiced similar beliefs about cost: “…wasn’t so much of an issue because, I mean this country has a bit of a history of…of chucking money away on things.” P1 also demonstrated the belief that the Olympic expenditure would have had little difference on core social issues:
nine billion pounds sounds like a huge amount of money, the government’s total budget is absolutely massive… like I said earlier, it could easily have gone on any number of things…I don’t think, in…in all the things they’re committed to doing in terms of education and health just had to carry on and y’know, that’s dependent on a lot of different things…I wouldn’t have said here that it would have actively affected those things.

**Euphemistic Language**

There was also evidence found of euphemistic language. In line with the work of Olds (1998) this was connected to the building of SME infrastructure, often happening at the cost of human displacement. On this theme, P18 noted: “…London is a better place for it and I think the rejuvenation and that, was a good thing” and P16 used the phrase “You clear out the old for the new…”. Encapsulating the most frequently used term, P7 pointed out the Games “…regenerated East London massively so…” The phrase “regeneration” was widely expressed by participants in relation to the displacement issues connected to SMEs.

**Displacement of Responsibility**

Displacement of responsibility was a further mechanism that commonly arose. In the case of public support this was done in three ways, firstly by placing responsibility for HR concerns related to SMEs with governments rather than the sport, secondly by placing responsibility for changing and supporting SMEs and their organising bodies with other agents and thirdly by maintaining intentional ignorance. The initial context arose with various HR issues; for example, the right to protest, with P8 noting: “I don’t know if I would hold the Games accountable….things like that….like that’s going to be a government thing….maybe it is a…slightly ignorant, head in the sand kind of approach” and P10 suggesting: “…I tend to hold
the Chinese government more to account for that than the Olympics...in my head...whether that’s...whether I’m right to do that, I don’t know.”

With regards to the second form of displacement of responsibility, concerning support for organisations such as FIFA and the IOC and their SMEs, displacement often occurred through placing accountability for this with other bodies and governments. P14 commented: “I think really it’s up to countries and big sporting organisations to make a stand before the event...rather than you know going to English, German, French fans and saying, ‘well, are you going to watch the World Cup’?” The third theme of this mechanism, the concept of wilful ignorance, allows individuals to minimise cognitive dissonance relating to support for SMEs; P13 acknowledged this:

they have extremely popular products in the Olympics and the World Cup and so people probably, to an extent, are willing to, maybe, not find out as much as they would if they were less popular or they just ignore it and that’s why it keeps going on.

Furthermore, when discussing the possibility of a World Cup being hosted in England in the near future, these feelings were conveyed by P7: “I think I would just bury my head in the sand and hope it was going to get reformed in a few years and go to the (World Cup) games.” This process demonstrates the workings of this mechanism and how it absolves the individual of responsibility.

Diffusion of Responsibility

When participants considered their own role in supporting SMEs they demonstrated evidence of diffusion of responsibility. P14’s views display the perceived lack of personal accountability concerning this subject: “…there’s not much you can do as an individual, I mean you can
boycott it but is it really going to make any difference?” Similarly, the option of inaction was explained by P8: “if I felt it would do anything I would happily not watch any of the events happening on TV” and P6:

something as big as the Olympics, I know it’s really pessimistic but it’s gonna go ahead regardless, well you know, unless there’s a huge mass…or…maybe that is pessimistic…but with something as big as that, the government make so much money, what sort of say does you or a small group of you have?

This demonstrates the nature of the diffusion of responsibility felt amongst a significant number of the participants, in particular with regards to SMEs held in foreign countries where HR concerns were seen as greater, as noted in the advantageous comparison category.

**Distribution of Blame**

Support was also found for attribution of blame, which centred around individuals’ behaviour being blamed for harmful effects that occur for them; for example, P2 considered the pacification of the Brazilian favelas: “I don’t know how else they could do it, if not…if not to instil fear…cos, otherwise it’s not gonna get…be respected and then the rules aren’t gonna be followed.” Similarly, restrictions on protests were justified by P17: “I feel slightly like, you know, if, suddenly, the London Olympics became a series of minor protest groups trying to crash on TV and interrupt things, I just think it would be an embarrassment.”

**Discussion**

This study, based upon the five HR themes drawn up by Adams and Piekarz (2015), found evidence of MD in members of the public who support SMEs. These findings lend support to the applicability of Bandura’s (1991) Socio-Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency in this
context. This is the first study to find empirical support for the concept of moral disengagement as an explanation for the persistence of HR issues associated with SMEs.

As explained by Fiske (2004), MD concerns the process through which individuals convince themselves that ethical standards do not apply to them. The present study reports evidence of MD with respect to SMEs. The social cognitive theory of moral agency (Bandura, 1991) helps to explain these findings. This theoretical approach would suggest that these supporters of SMEs’ behaviour is directed by the affectations that engagement with SMEs will bring. Actions that induce feelings of self-worth and satisfaction are preferred to those that bring self-reproach, such as perceiving SMEs to involve or enable immoral behaviour. These emotional responses are governed by the personal standards of right and wrong that have been developed by the individual. Engagement with SMEs will therefore be based on the situational circumstances and the individual’s values and regulated accordingly. As suggested by Bandura (1999), such sanctions are only applied if they are activated and then separate moral reactions from inhumane conduct and disabling the mechanism of self-condemnation. The HR issues discussed in this study were found to represent the inhumane conduct. The ‘moral’ reaction would be to not support such events. This theory would propose that, for these participants who did wish to engage with SMEs, self-condemnation needed to be disabled through the activation of one of the mechanisms of MD. This then enables engagement with SMEs without experiencing self-condemnation. The Socio-Cognitive Theory of Moral Agency therefore provides an approach which facilitates the interpretation and explanation of these findings which demonstrates the applicability of this theory in this context.

This study also adds further evidence to the limited pool of research that has shown the mechanisms of MD to be present in individuals who support harmful actions without having
performed them personally. This may explain why dehumanisation was not found in this study.

Support for SMEs harms innocent parties as a side-effect of their taking place, thus it is an indirect connection and as Bandura (2002) asserts, this mechanism is most commonly found in direct situations, at the point of the victim, explaining its omission here. This also explains the difference in outcome between this research and Greenhalgh et al.’s (2015) investigation into support for asylum seeker policies that found all eight mechanisms as their topic of study directly and solely concerned the victims, making dehumanisation more likely. Furthermore, in contrast to this work, Greenhalgh et al. (2015) consider a subject where the victim is perceived to impact upon the perpetrator, for example, through the allocation of public funds, alteration of culture and eventual decreased standard of living. This provides an additional explanation as to why these studies differ in their findings.

Investigating public support for different SMEs held locally as well as abroad has allowed consideration of this behaviour to be moved beyond the social exchange theory framework that formed Waitt’s (2003) study on enthusiasm for the Sydney Olympics towards one of MD. That is not to suggest social exchange theory is redundant in this research area, indeed, the cost to benefit theme of the theory holds similarities to the moral justification mechanism of Bandura’s (1991) social cognitive theory of moral agency which has been found to be salient in this work. Given these new findings, however, it appears valid to consider future research in this area from a MD perspective.

A further alternative view generated from the findings of this study could be selective perception (as part of selective exposure theory, Klapper, 1960) where individuals confronted with material that is inconsistent with their attitudes, disregard or reinterpret the material to reduce cognitive dissonance. In this case, participants supporting SMEs and being presented with
information that questions the morality of this attitude. With regards to this view, it is important
to note that participants not only engaged with SMEs but were aware of the connected ethical
issues, rather than ignoring or adjusting the information surrounding them. Subsequently, as was
particularly evident in the positive comparison, displacement of responsibility and dissolution of
responsibility mechanisms, MD was required to reduce cognitive dissonance in support for
SMEs, whether that was through attendance, viewing or other means. A key example was that
conveyed by P7 who suggested that ethical issues would not prevent support, including
attendance, at future events, with similar feelings demonstrated by P8, P16 and P17. Once more,
this is not to suggest that selective perception may not play a part in this area and indeed a
complex interaction between related but contrasting theories may explain the relevant thoughts
and behaviours at work.

One such example may be potential influences on disengagement, which would be a
further investigatory route worth exploring, perhaps including the effect of the local
environment. The description of the “Olympic Bubble” given by Horne (2007, p. 87) is that of an
environment filled with positive pro-games rhetoric surrounding the Games, where attempts are
made to marginalise dissenting or negative voice in a manner akin to censorship. He asserts that
as SMEs are not only opportunities for sponsors to advertise their products to huge audiences but
also a chance for countries to sell themselves to tourists and investors, during the bidding process
and build-up to SMEs public support is vital. It is during these periods that governments will
attempt to sway, in particular, local residents into consenting to the games (Lenskyj, 1996, 2004,
2008, 2012) with benefits (social, economic and cultural) being exaggerated and costs
understated. Selective exposure theory (Klapper, 1960) would explain how this material is
readily accepted and would also explain the subsequent strength of moral justification and
advantageous comparison in connection with London 2012, with the rhetoric leading to disengagement. Again, it is important to note at this juncture that participants displayed a broad knowledge of HR issues connected to SMEs both in London and in other countries so this on-message atmosphere did not lead participants to become oblivious of concerns related to the Games. This is an important factor as in order to morally disengage, there must be an awareness of something to disengage from which raises two considerations. Firstly, could this rhetoric have influenced tendency to, and method of, engagement? Participants brought up topics concerned with the positives of the London Games on a regular basis, such as economic benefits and legacy. Indeed, a tagline from the Games, the potential for the London Olympics to, “…inspire a generation…” was offered as justification for public support by P16. This may be interpreted as an example of the pervasiveness of these messages and their influence on disengagement. For these reasons it is important to further investigate populations that are supportive of SMEs both in their home country as well as abroad. Similarly further work could also target the effect and prevalence of government and sponsor rhetoric in those who display MD and the role of selective exposure theory. This investigatory path would help highlight the roles and responsibilities held by those in positions of power, be that political or sporting as well as how they may influence apparent mass acceptance of situations that may cross moral boundaries. In addition to general social and political impact, such knowledge could help find a way to end the issues mentioned in this study; for example ensuring responsibility is taken for the welfare of the workers in Qatar.

A further related point is that as the participants were universally London-based it allows explanations to be considered for the differing patterns of mechanisms used in connection with locally held SMEs in contrast to those held abroad. Moral justification, advantageous comparison
and distortion of consequences were particularly prominent when discussing support for SMEs held locally, whereas examples from SMEs held abroad appeared to draw a broader mechanistic range. In addition to the influence of the “Olympic Bubble” this may be due to increased proximity increasing responsibility (akin to helping behaviour, Staub & Baer (1974) or fewer perceived causal mediators between perpetrator and outcome (Sloman, Fernbach, & Ewing, 2009). Paying to attend may be seen as being more directly affecting the issues than watching on television thus moral justification, advantageous comparison and distortion of consequences may have been more applicable in this circumstance. This requires particular consideration and further work with a population that have attended a greater diversity of SMEs.

With regards to limitations, the sample in this study was homogenous in terms of age, employment status and living area and was too small to consider any differences due to any other demographic, such as gender. Therefore, although the nature of this sample helps us draw conclusions from this specific population, future studies should aim to replicate these outcomes in more diverse populations. This would allow greater understanding of differences between those of contrasting generations and locations who are affected by SMEs and also allow consideration of cultural differences in relation to morals. This is pertinent in MD research as it relies on individuals contravening their moral code, which may or may not be uniform (Bandura, 1991). In this case the UDHR was used as a basis for the research and although this is an internationally recognised guideline it does not preclude individuals from having a different perspective. A common issue in this area is identifying precisely when one has morally disengaged rather than simply acted in a manner he/she believed to be moral or perhaps fulfilled a social desirability bias. However this is not to suggest there is no evidence of this behaviour. As previously noted this research investigates MD from past, present and future viewpoints,
which is a strength that is unusual in MD work and allows a rounded perspective looking at
previous attendance and support combined with present attitudes and future intentions. It should
be considered, however, that despite this, such an approach does rely upon accurate recall and
predictions of feelings and behaviour. The use of focus groups in this study has allowed initial
exploration into this area; however future research could employ individual interviews to allow a
deeper understanding of how MD comes about in this context.

Conclusion

This study has found evidence of MD in members of the public with regards to support
for SMEs. It was demonstrated that in the face of widespread HR concerns that are connected to
such events, seven of the eight mechanisms of MD as proposed by Bandura (1991) were present
in participants’ support of SMEs. Such indicators reveal how SMEs and their impact on wide-
ranging HR issues have been allowed to happen and continue to happen, at least in part, due to
their being afforded municipal backing despite broad acknowledgement of these associated
consequences. These findings open up a new area of research into a subject that has accrued a
great deal of political, public and media interest over recent years and one that provokes a great
deal of passion and debate yet has had drawn little explanation.

Contextually, it has also been suggested that these mechanisms may differ, depending on
the individual’s connection with the tournament. Provisionally, this could include location of,
and attendance at, the tournament. Further research should now look to replicate the pattern of
disengagement in SME support amongst a wider sample and subsequently extend the
consideration of the circumstances that affect the differing mechanisms.

Importantly this study also adds to the minimal amount of research into MD with those
who do not carry out the actions upon the victim themselves, but support those actions through
indirect behaviour. This new direction in the literature illustrates the potential relevance of MD, given the importance of public support in an array of high impacting contexts, including political policy (as investigated by, Greenhalgh et al., 2015) and on international organisations such as FIFA. The salience of MD within this context ensures that these findings have practical implications. In particular, an approach which focuses on enhancing awareness of these HR issues may be less effective in changing behaviour relative to strategies which challenge moral disengagement and hence promote moral engagement.

References


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