The purpose of this research was to review, revisit, and expand Talamini’s social problems within Major League Baseball (MLB) in such a way that it leads to theory-based recommendations regarding how to address those problems. Talamini’s categories, which include gambling, player/managerial violence, spectator violence, cheating, crime, and greed, are reviewed and applied to social problems in MLB since the original publication in 1987. To better understand social problems and deviant behavior within MLB, the original categories are connected to specific deviance theories to better understand causation of deviance. Theories are then organized according to Shoemaker’s proposed integrated model, which classifies causes of deviance on the structural, social-psychological, and psychological levels. Relating Talamini’s social problems categories to sociology of deviance theories, then organizing them according to Shoemaker’s proposed integrated model aids in better explaining MLB deviance. Recommendations are made, based upon the model, to sport management practitioners, students, and scholars regarding how to ameliorate the aforementioned social problems.

Issues

In 1987, John T. Talamini penned an article in the May issue of the journal Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology. Using a self-developed social problems framework, Talamini (1987) addressed socially-relevant issues within Major League Baseball (MLB) illustrating that “baseball … like other human activities is Janus-faced” (p. 65). Talamini (1987) argued his analysis was sociologically relevant because, up to that point, baseball was lauded for its structural aspects, and few discussions were entertained outside of the popular press regarding the negative attributes of MLB. Talamini’s (1987) original research advocated identifying social problems within MLB utilizing a traditional social problems framework. The social problems framework was useful for developing the categories of deviant behavior within MLB. These typological categories included: gambling, player, managerial, and spectator violence, cheating by players and officials, crime by athletes, and the greed of owners and players.

Gambling has been an issue of concern to MLB for many years. Talamini (1987) noted gamblers’ interest in baseball pre-dated the Civil War, and more bets were placed on MLB games than any other sport. More recently, statistics show that over $12 billion is placed in online wagers each year (Ahrens, 2006). While MLB does not condone gambling, it still accepts advertising dollars from casinos and has even considered placing a franchise in Las Vegas. A 2008 case involving a Baltimore Orioles scout that was tied to a gambling ring has brought baseball’s gambling problem back to the forefront.
Talamini (1987) also addressed player and managerial violence. He stated baseball is a sport that attempts to govern itself with unwritten rules of the game that often contradict fair play and sportsmanship. Examples of player or managerial violence include a variety of violent actions, such as hard slides into bases and the perpetuation of bean ball or other forms of retaliation. An extreme recent case happened in 2008 when a minor league player throwing a baseball at the opposing team’s dugout missed and hit a fan in the face (“Minor league pitcher,” 2008).

Spectator violence was also an area of concern for Talamini (1987). Talamini (1987) stated that despite the gentleman’s sport ideal, baseball was largely contributing to public disorder. Since 1987, MLB has seen several high-profile violent incidents involving fans fighting with each other and with baseball players, managers, or coaches. For example, Tom Gamboa, third base coach for the Kansas City Royals, was attacked in 2002 at a game in Chicago by a 34-year-old fan and his 15-year-old son (“I was stunned,” 2002).

Cheating is part of MLB and another one of the important categories to a social problems analysis of MLB (Talamini, 1987). Talamini (1987) noted a number of deceptive and illegal activities that some baseball players use to gain an advantage, such as corking bats, and scuffing or altering the baseball by pitchers. Cheating appears to still be part of the MLB landscape, whether it involves performance-enhancing substance use (Nightengale, 2006) or more traditional forms of cheating. Regarding more traditional forms of in-game cheating, for example, in 2003, Cleveland, Ohio, newspaper The Plain Dealer published a story in which the subject of cheating in baseball was discussed with 19 hitters and 13 pitchers in MLB. Forty-two percent of the hitters said they would use a corked bat to hit the winning run in the World Series, while 17% of pitchers said they would alter (doctor) a baseball to get the final out in the World Series. As one anonymous player stated, “It’s always been part of the game” (Manoloff, 2003, p. D2).

Criminal activity against persons has continued to be an area of concern for the MLB since 1987. Leonard (1998) notes many athletes are accused of domestic violence or some form of battering every year in the United States and cites MLB players Barry Bonds, Jose Canseco, and Darryl Strawberry as examples from the late 1990s. Parrish (2000) notes even more examples of MLB players who were accused of assault, battery, or rape, including Wil Cordero, Dwight Gooden, David Cone, Bobby Chouinard, Albert Belle, Ricky Henderson, and Vince Coleman.

Regarding greed, Talamini (1987) indicted MLB owners and players for their increasing willingness to leverage fan loyalty for their own financial gain. In the past 20 years, MLB owners and players have become even more adept at garnering revenue gains. Only one MLB franchise has relocated in the last 20 years when the Montreal Expos were purchased by MLB and moved to Washington, D.C. and became the Washington Nationals in 2005 (Bloom, 2004). Despite that, MLB owners have successfully secured 20 new stadiums since 1987, the vast majority of which have been funded at least partially by public monies (Howard & Crompton, 2004). MLB’s players have also fared well since Talamini’s analysis, with the average annual MLB player salary increasing from $513,000 in 1989 to $2.9 million in 2006 (Fort, 2007c), an increase of 465%. By contrast, mean household income in the United States was $37,000 in 1989 and $63,000 in 2005 (United States Census Bureau, 2007), an increase of 70%.

Discussion, Integration, & Recommendations

A previously mentioned, the purpose of this research is to organize and extend Talamini’s (1987) original social problems framework by integrating it with traditional criminological (i.e., juvenile delinquency explanations) and sociology of deviance theories in order to provide greater clarity of the types of deviant behavior in which MLB employees (i.e., players, administrators, managers) and team owners engage. Shoemaker’s (2000) proposed integrated model of deviance establishes links between differing analytical levels of the deviance theories and provides a framework with greater utility. Once this focus is provided, then sport managers, academics, and students are better able to: 1) identify the types of problems facing MLB and sport in general, 2) develop a deeper understanding of the types of problems, and 3) find ways of ameliorating these social problems within MLB.
Criminological and Sociology of Deviance Theories

Integrating the varied social problems associated with deviant behavior within one theoretical framework is challenging. However, Shoemaker (2000) proposed an integrated model explaining delinquency and deviance that incorporates “three levels of conceptualization, structural (that is, pertaining to societal conditions), individual (biological and psychological), and social-psychological (social controls, self-esteem, and peer associations)” (p. 268). Shoemaker (2000) notes that the analytical levels within the proposed model (i.e. structural, individual, social-psychological) often coordinate with specific theories of delinquency or deviance. Table 1 illustrates the relationships between the proposed model’s analytical level and the corresponding delinquency theory.

The structural level involves institutional arrangements and society-wide processes. The associated delinquency theories of anomie and social disorganization focus on larger normative structures, such as disruptions or decreased access to legitimate (e.g. economic, status, expectations) activities (Shoemaker, 2000, p. 92). According to these theories, deviant behavior by athletes or other sport organization personnel (e.g. administrative staffs, scouts, officials, umpires) occurs because the influence of society or sport over individuals is not strong enough to constrain their behavior. Radical and neo-Marxist theories, which more explicitly focus on economic factors, explain deviant behavior as the result of conflicting group interests (p. 216). The distribution of wealth and power within sport is inequitable, and, accordingly, the conflicting interests of differing groups (e.g. athletes vs. franchise owners) influences the definition of what is considered as deviant behavior.

The social-psychological level includes cultural and social control mechanisms, and it focuses on social factors and their influences upon individuals. Of specific importance are the role of culture (or sub-cultures) and social connections (such as peer groups or agents of social control). Social bond theory focuses on why individuals conform to social norms (as compare to violating them) and is analyzed based on their attachment, involvement, commitment, and beliefs toward rules and norms. The four aforementioned social bond components influence how much control society’s rules have upon individuals and can be used to explain certain situations, e.g., if sport participation promotes or inhibits delinquency (Vermillion, 2007). Containment theory is very similar and explicates the role of individual self-concept on delinquency.

Differential Association and Drift theory are interpersonal explanations that focus on the power of context and groups. Differential Association identifies the importance of learning deviant behavior from close-knit peer groups, while Drift theory emphasizes individuals’ choices to engage in deviance, which depends largely upon social context (or situation). Since baseball takes place in a social setting (which includes opponents, teammates, and organizational personnel), understanding the influence of other actors becomes crucial for understanding and controlling deviant behavior within MLB.

Finally, the individual level of deviant behavior includes a wide variety of biological or environmental factors, which, when combined with specific psychological states, can influence deviant behavior. While psychological abnormalities exist and are prevalent, for our purposes, personality configurations become the focus of the individual level. Specifically, if deviant behavior presents itself, then this negative behavior is preceded by a negative trait, which influences the deviant’s overall outlook and disposition (Shoemaker, 2000, p. 59). While this analysis primarily focuses on the social foundations of sport-based deviance, understanding of individual traits such as core personality and the influences that these traits have on behaviors and relationships with other people becomes critical.
Recommendations

The Shoemaker (2000) model is particularly useful for understanding the variety of social problems and deviant behaviors that have been identified within MLB. Based on the social problems in MLB as identified by Talamini (1987) and the relevant associated analysis proposed by Shoemaker (2000), the authors offer the following recommendations regarding how MLB may best address the social problems affecting the game today.

1) Gambling: Since gambling behavior is fundamentally affected by perceptions of norms within the larger society and MLB in particular, the league should move to further distance itself from associations with gambling enterprises. This would mean refusing to accept advertising from casinos and refusing to partner with state lotteries. Further, MLB should move to aggressively investigate and, when appropriate, punish anyone within the game who has violated rules pertaining to betting on baseball.

2) On-field Violence: Since on-field violence is a learned activity, the socialization process of players at all levels becomes crucial for eliminating violent behaviors. MLB could institute a strict and punitive policy similar to the NBA's bench rule involving automatic suspensions for individuals who leave the bench area to involve themselves in fights.

3) Spectator Violence: Identifying individual disruptions before crowd disturbances erupt becomes crucial to maintaining order within stadiums. Developing event management strategies aimed at individual fans aids in preventing larger, collective disruptions. Examples include limiting alcohol sales and having hotlines for fans to call to report unruly fan behavior.

4) Cheating: Cheating occurs on many levels, from trying to influence umpires' decisions to using performance-enhancing substances. MLB must set a standard for monitoring and sanctioning all forms of cheating. MLB, working in conjunction with MLB Players Association, should respond to circumstances of cheating by aggressively monitoring and severely penalizing the most egregious forms of cheating such as performance-enhancing drugs.

5) Crime: Some individuals (such as athletes, managers, coaches, etc.) engage in criminal behavior as a result of disregard for normative standards or laws. Understanding the contexts or situations these athletes or MLB personnel is important for ameliorating criminal activity. MLB officials need to make sure that athletes and all MLB employees recognize that their preferred/elevated status in society comes with minimal obligations to comply with society's laws. MLB must provide additional educational opportunities that inform major league (and minor league) players of their unique lifestyle challenges, which result from their status and wealth.

6) Greed: MLB must continue to make its product more fan-friendly. Measures that reflect sensitivity to economic hardships facing fans, such as lowering ticket prices in select sections, containing food/beverage prices, and working equitably with city officials when building newer facilities, will become important ways for MLB to remain profitable while avoiding any alienation of its fan base in the process.