



## When winning is everything: On passion, identity, and aggression in sport<sup>☆</sup>

Eric G. Donahue\*, Blanka Rip, Robert J. Vallerand

Laboratoire de Recherche sur le Comportement Social, Département de Psychologie, Université du Québec à Montréal, Box 8888, Succursale Centre-Ville, Montréal, Québec H3C 3P8, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To examine the interplay between harmonious and obsessive passion and aggressive behavior in sports. It was hypothesized that players who are obsessively-passionate about basketball should report higher levels of aggressive behaviors than harmoniously-passionate players in general, and especially under self threat.

**Methods:** Using the Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand et al. (2003), *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 756–767) as a guiding framework, basketball players indicated their level of passion and aggression during typical basketball situations using a self-reported questionnaire.

**Results:** In Study 1, results demonstrated that athletes with a predominant obsessive passion for basketball reported higher levels of aggression on an aggression scale than athletes with a harmonious passion. In Study 2, harmoniously-passionate and obsessively-passionate athletes were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: self-threat and self-affirmation. We predicted that under self-threat, obsessively-passionate players should report higher levels of aggressive behavior than harmoniously-passionate players. However, no differences were expected between obsessively and harmoniously-passionate players in the self-affirmation condition. These hypotheses were supported.

**Conclusions:** The present findings reveal that having an obsessive passion is associated with aggressive behavior, especially under identity threat. Thus, the love for one's sport may lead to some maladaptive interpersonal behavior, especially if such love is rooted in a sense of identity that is contingent on doing well in that sport.

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Aggression is perhaps one of the most important problems in sports today (Sacks, Petscher, Stanley, & Tenenbaum, 2003). Much research has looked at aggressive behaviors in sport, trying to understand the processes underlying such an unethical behavior (see Kirker, Tenenbaum, & Mattson, 2000; Stephens, 2001; Tenenbaum, Stewart, Singer, & Duda, 1997). However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has empirically studied the role of passion in aggressive behaviors among passionate players. We believe that the concept of passion should allow us to uncover some of the processes underlying aggressive behavior in sports. Indeed, passionate athletes may be so involved in their sport that they are likely to be aggressive if victory is on the line. But is it the case? Are all passionate athletes likely to be aggressive? And, furthermore, are some

conditions more likely than others to trigger aggressive behavior in passionate athletes? The purpose of the present research was to address these questions.

### A Dualistic Model of Passion

Vallerand et al. (Vallerand, 2008; Vallerand et al., 2003; Vallerand & Houliort, 2003; Vallerand & Miquelon, 2007) have recently proposed a psychological model of passion toward activities. They define passion as a strong inclination toward an activity that one likes, finds important, and in which one invests a significant amount of time and energy. In line with Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), the model posits that people engage in different activities in order to satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy (a desire to feel a sense of personal initiative), competence (a desire to interact effectively with the environment), and relatedness (a desire to feel connected to significant others). Additionally, a person or an activity can be internalized into a person's identity when the person or the activity in question is highly valued and meaningful (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). Thus, it seems that an

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 514 987 3000x1841; fax: +1 514 987 7953.

E-mail addresses: [donahue.eric@courrier.uqam.ca](mailto:donahue.eric@courrier.uqam.ca) (E.G. Donahue), [vallerand.robert\\_j@uqam.ca](mailto:vallerand.robert_j@uqam.ca) (R.J. Vallerand).

activity that is important and valued can help people develop a sense of identity because it makes them feel competent and self-efficacious during activity engagement. Therefore, in line with past studies, Vallerand et al. (2003) propose that when a person likes and engages in an activity on a regular basis, the representation of this activity will be integrated in the person's identity, consequently leading to a passion toward this activity. The activity has become so integrated into the person's identity that it represents a central feature of one's identity. For example, those who have a passion for playing basketball see themselves as "basketball players".

The Dualistic Model of Passion posits that different internalization processes are associated with the development of two types of passion toward an activity, namely harmonious and obsessive passion (Mageau et al., *in press*; Vallerand et al., 2003). Previous research has found that harmonious passion is the result of an activity that has been internalized in an autonomous way into identity (Vallerand et al., 2003). An autonomous internalization takes place when the person sees the activity as being important for itself without any contingencies attached to it. A harmonious passion occupies an important, but not overpowering, space in identity and is in harmony with other aspects of the person's life. Such internalization allows the person to freely engage in the passionate activity. In other words, with harmonious passion the authentic integrating self (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is at play allowing the person to fully partake in the passionate activity with an openness and mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003) that lead to authentic attempts of positive and negative information integration without any defensiveness (Hodgins, Yacko, & Gottlieb, 2006). In addition, such an open perspective should prevent conflict to take place between the passionate activity and other life activities. Research has substantiated the above hypotheses. Therefore, people with a harmonious passion have been found to experience greater positive emotions both during and after engagement in the passionate activity (Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1; Vallerand, Rousseau, Grouzet, Dumais, & Grenier, 2006, Studies 2 and 3), better concentration, absorption, and flow during activity engagement (Mageau, Vallerand, Rousseau, Ratelle, & Provencher, 2005; Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1), as well as subjective well-being (Rousseau & Vallerand, 2003, 2008; Vallerand et al., 2008, Study 2; Vallerand et al., 2007, Studies 1 and 2). Additionally, harmonious passion has been negatively associated with feelings of guilt, feelings of being judged by others (Mageau et al., 2005), and with conflict with other activities (Séguin-Levesque, Laliberté, Pelletier, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2003; Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1).

In contrast, when the activity is internalized in a controlled way in a person's identity, an obsessive passion is formed. A controlled internalization originates from intrapersonal and/or interpersonal pressure and contingencies that are attached to the activity, such as social acceptance and self-esteem, or because the sense of excitement derived from activity engagement becomes uncontrollable. When the passionate activity comes to mind, people feel like they can't help but to engage in the activity they love due to internal forces that control them. Eventually, the passionate activity takes disproportionate importance in the person's identity and creates conflict with other aspects of the person or other activities in the person's life (Séguin-Levesque et al., 2003). This occurs because with obsessive passion, ego-invested rather than integrative self-processes (Hodgins & Knee, 2002) are at play. Such ego-invested processes lead the person to react defensively (Hodgins et al., 2006) to self-relevant threatening information. As a consequence, obsessive passion has been positively related to negative emotions and feelings of guilt (Mageau et al., 2005; Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1),

poor concentration (Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1), increased rumination with the activity (Ratelle, Vallerand, Mageau, Rousseau, & Provencher, 2004; Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1), and a rigid task engagement (Rip, Fortin, & Vallerand, 2006; Vallerand et al., 2003, Studies 3 and 4). Additionally, when prevented from engaging in the passionate activity, obsessive passion has been associated with negative affect (Ratelle et al., 2004; Vallerand et al., 2003, Study 1).

## The present research

According to a number of theorists (Bredemeier, 1985; Silva, 1980), aggression is divided between instrumental and reactive aggression. Instrumental aggression consists in causing a strategic nuisance to an opponent in a desire to hinder one's performance, such as a box out in basketball or a legal body check in hockey. Contrary, reactive aggression usually involves frustration or anger along with the intent to harm or injure another. The primary goal is the resultant pain or suffering of the victim. Therefore, the focus of reactive aggression is to hurt one's opponent even to the point where the injured athlete must be removed from the game. A similar definition was adopted by Baron and Richardson (1994) who operationally defined aggression in sport as "... any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment (p0.7)". According to this definition, behavior may be verbal or physical and must be directed at another person rather than an inanimate object, for example throwing one's racket to the floor or kicking one's chair on his way to the bench would not be categorized as aggressive behavior, rather, they would be signs of frustration and anger. While there is an important debate on the definition of aggression in the literature (Kerr, 1999, 2002; Tenenbaum, Sacks, Miller, Golden, & Doolin, 2000), it was not the purpose of this research to focus on such a debate. For the sake of this research, we were interested in understanding the processes evolved between passion and reactive aggression only, as defined by Baron and Richardson (1994).

One outcome that has received no attention so far with respect to passion is aggression in sport. However, two studies have looked at the aggressive consequence of being passionate for an important political cause (Rip & Vallerand, 2007) and for driving (Philippe, Vallerand, Richer, Vallières, & Bergeron, *in press*). More specifically, in the study involving passionate individuals for a political cause, it was found that harmonious passion predicts the use of appropriate actions, such as making financial contributions to a political party, while obsessive passion was associated with the endorsement of radical and potentially violent actions such as subversive and sabotage behaviors (Rip & Vallerand, 2007). Therefore, it seems that being obsessively-passionate toward an important goal (or cause) can lead people to use violent behaviors to reach one's goal or cause.

Philippe et al. (*in press*) were interested in examining the relationship between passion and aggressive driving behavior in a series of three studies. First, results from all three studies revealed that an obsessive passion for driving was associated with aggressive behavior, while a harmonious passion for driving was unrelated to it. Second, findings also uncovered that these relationships held true in three types of context; in general (through the Driving Anger Expression Inventory, Studies 1 and 2), in the report of a recent real-life frustrating driving event (Study 2), and when frustrating events were induced under controlled laboratory conditions (Study 3). Finally, the results of Study 3 showed that when faced with frustrating events, anger mediated the relationship between obsessive passion and aggressive driving behavior. It is interesting to note that this latter result was obtained with both self-report and objective measures of aggression.

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