



Contextual and individual influences on antisocial behaviour and psychobiosocial states of youth soccer players

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the effects of contextual and individual variables (perceived motivational climate and moral atmosphere, task/ego orientation and perceived competence) on antisocial behaviour and emotion-related psychobiosocial (PBS) states as conceptualised within the individual zones of optimal functioning model.

Participants: The study was conducted on a sample of 382 young male soccer players, aged from 14 to 16 years, drawn from 27 Italian teams.

Method: A cross-sectional design was used. Assessment included measures of reported antisocial behaviour, perceived moral atmosphere, perceived motivational climate, goal orientation, perceived competence, and PBS states. Data analysis involved confirmatory factor analysis of measures and path analysis of the hypothesized relationships.

Results: Results suggest that performance climate and a moral atmosphere, in which aggressive behaviours are encouraged, are likely to determine antisocial behaviour and a range of unpleasant PBS states in young sports participants.

Conclusions: Findings substantiate the importance of the situational factors on ethical aspects and emotional states in youngsters.

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Sport is often assumed to be a means for the social and moral development of children and adolescents. It transmits the importance of complying with norms and correctly interacting with opponents, and can provide a vehicle for learning to negotiate and find solutions to moral conflicts (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). The social nature of sport, while providing positive educational opportunities, quite often creates the potential for cheating, lying, intimidating, and injuring other participants, thereby inducing antisocial behaviour (Kavussanu, Seal, & Phillips, 2006). Evidence supports the occurrence of immoral thoughts and actions in sport (for a review, see Weiss & Smith, 2002).

Research on moral functioning in sport has been often informed by Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory in which the focus is on behaviour, and dual aspects of morality are recognized. The proactive aspect is expressed in the power to behave humanely (prosocial behaviour), whereas the inhibitive aspect is manifested

in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely (antisocial behaviour). Prosocial behaviour has been defined as voluntary behaviour intended to help or benefit another person, whereas antisocial behaviour has been defined as voluntary behaviour intended to harm or disadvantage the others (Kavussanu, 2008). While both forms of morality are important, only the inhibitive aspect of morality was considered in this study and antisocial behaviour was analysed. Bredemeier and Shields (1998) believe behaviour to be central to the concept of morality, because it directly involves other people. Judging injurious actions as legitimate or intending to injure an opponent may have no direct consequences on another person, whereas actually injuring another player has direct consequences for the player. Therefore, behaviours that have consequences for others' rights and well-being can be classified as morally relevant (Kavussanu, 2008). Antisocial behaviour includes behaviours such as trying to injure opponents, cheating, and intentionally breaking the rules of the game.

Moral issues in sport have recently been the subject of many studies involving young athletes and research has generally examined predictors of antisocial action, namely contextual and

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individual factors potentially influencing behaviour. Achievement goal theory has been often adopted to take into account the social context within which sport takes place (i.e., performance and mastery motivational climate; Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1989) and personal variables (i.e., ego and task goal orientation). In our study we also used the achievement goal theory as a main theoretical framework to examine the complex relationships among contextual factors, personal factors, antisocial behaviour, and emotional responses (i.e., psychobiosocial reactions) in young soccer players. The relevant notions are briefly described hereafter.

Contextual factors

A fundamental assumption of achievement goal theory is the crucial role the situation plays in the motivation process. Motivational climate is created by significant others, particularly parents, teachers, and coaches. In a mastery-involving climate, success is defined as individual progress and the focus is on skill improvement; in a team every player has an important role to play and is encouraged to cooperate with others. In a performance-involving climate, social comparison, normative-based evaluation, and competition are emphasized; winning at all costs becomes the most important aim (for a review, see Roberts, Treasure, & Conroy, 2007). Empirical evidence suggests that perceptions of mastery or performance motivational climates have different impact on moral functioning in sport. Mastery climate has been positively linked to high levels of moral functioning and prosocial behaviour (Kavussanu, 2006; Kavussanu et al., 2006; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Treasure, 2003) and inversely linked to antisocial behaviour (Kavussanu, 2006). Performance climate has resulted positively related to antisocial behaviour (Kavussanu, 2006; Kavussanu et al., 2006; Ommundsen et al., 2003).

Beyond the perceived motivational climate, perception of the moral atmosphere of the team also should be considered as a contextual variable. Kohlberg et al. (Higgins, Power, & Kohlberg, 1984; Kohlberg, 1984) emphasized the role of the collective norms of a group, that is, the ensemble of specific behavioural expectations that share common values and help shape the moral actions of each group member. They identified the moral atmosphere as a critical influence on people's moral behaviour. Sport teams, like all groups, develop a shared culture of what is appropriate or inappropriate behaviour in the specific context (i.e., during games). Shared team moral norms develop over time through interactions between coach and team members and influence athletes' moral judgement and choices (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). The moral atmosphere involves athletes' perceptions of their coaches' and teammates' beliefs and behaviours. Frequent engagement in antisocial behaviours has been shown to be associated with the athletes' perceptions that their coach encourages these behaviours and that their teammates also would behave unethically (Kavussanu, Roberts, & Ntoumanis, 2002; Kavussanu & Spray, 2006). Particularly, coaches can be considered the most influential individuals in athletes' sport experience (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009) and were shown to be the most significant others in predicting athletes' decisions to engage in aggressive acts (Chow, Murray, & Feltz, 2009; Guivernau & Duda, 2002). These findings offer insight into how much coaches can influence youngsters' moral behaviour.

Personal factors

According to achievement goal theory, individuals are predisposed to behave in an ego- or task-involved manner. Ego-oriented people tend to focus on winning or demonstrating superior ability through performing better than others, whereas task-oriented

people tend to be more interested in the mastery of a task and self-improvement (see Roberts et al., 2007). Ego orientation has been found positively related to antisocial behaviour in university athletes participating in different sports (Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003), and young soccer and football players (Sage & Kavussanu, 2007, 2008). High ego-oriented athletes tend to use other-referenced criteria to define success and judge competence, and their major focus is on outperforming others, because winning is the most important aim. For them breaking the rules and behaving in an unsportsperson-like way may become acceptable to attain victory. Conversely, high task-oriented athletes judge competence with respect to self-referenced criteria, and they are primarily concerned with self-improvement and doing their very best. Findings about the relationship between task orientation and moral variables are mixed in that positive effects have been found in some studies (Kavussanu, 2006; Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003) and not in others (Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006). Considering both individual goal orientation and perceived motivational climate, Kavussanu (2006) found that ego orientation and performance climate were positive predictors of antisocial behaviour, task orientation was a negative predictor, whereas mastery climate was not predictive.

Also perception of their ability influences the way athletes interpret their environment and behaviour (Nicholls, 1989). Specifically, if high ego-oriented athletes perceive themselves as high in ability, they engage in adaptive achievement behaviours similar to high task-oriented people. Conversely, if the perception of ability is low, high ego-oriented persons tend to worry about their performance levels, and thus they can manifest maladaptive achievement behaviours. Maladaptive behaviours include avoiding the task, avoiding challenge, reducing persistence and, in sport, also engaging in cheating and other antisocial actions. For instance, perceived ability was found to have a significant moderating effect on ego orientation in predicting players' respect for rules and officials (Lemyre, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2002).

Psychobiosocial states

Research has so far generally examined predictors of antisocial action, namely contextual and individual factors potentially influencing behaviour. To our knowledge, no studies have examined the relation of moral atmosphere and antisocial behaviour to emotional responses in young athletes. Emotional experiences in sport are acknowledged by coaches and athletes as an inherent part of the competitive experience (Botterill & Brown, 2002). In particular, positive emotions, such as enjoyment and fun, have been recognized as related to sport motivation and commitment (Scanlan & Carpenter, 1994; Scanlan & Simons, 1992). In contrast, negative emotions, such as physical/emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and a reduced sense of accomplishment, are recognized as psychological correlates of athletes' burnout (Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, & Harwood, 2007). Regarding achievement goal theory, perceived mastery climate has been found associated with increased enjoyment of sport activities (Liukkonen, Telama, & Biddle, 1998; Weiss, Amorose, & Wilko, 2009) and satisfaction (Boixadós, Cruz, Miquel, & Valiente, 2004), while perceived performance climate has been shown related to worry (Walling, Duda, & Chi, 1993) and self-reported boredom (Treasure & Roberts, 1994). Moreover, task orientation has shown a moderate-to-large positive association with positive emotion and a small negative association with negative emotion (for a review, see Biddle, Wang, Kavussanu, & Spray, 2003).

In a preliminary study intended to develop a questionnaire on attitudes towards moral decision-making in youth sport, Lee, Whitehead, and Ntoumanis (2007) considered shame as a key

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