

The role of achievement goals and moral disengagement in explaining moral attitudes and behaviours in sport.

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Introduction

Research on moral behaviour in sport has shown that some athletes engage in behaviours considered ethically inappropriate in sport context, such as injuring an opponent, cheating, retaliating to a foul, faking an injury, or engaging in behaviours that will psychologically distract or upset the opponents (e.g. Lee, Whitehead and Ntoumanis, 2007; Lee, Whitehead, Ntoumanis and Hatzigeorgiadis, 2008). One line of research has defined moral behavior in relation to sportspersonship, a concept that describes a range of honorable behaviors, including fair play, respecting the rules, respecting the opponents and officials, and accepting defeat and victory (Siedentop, Hastie and van der Mars, 2004; Vallerand, Briere, Blanchard and Provencher, 1997). According to this stream, conversely, cheating is considered a set of antisocial behaviours and it is characterized by explicit rule-violation acts (e.g., doping, professional fouls), gamesmanship, as well, is considered another set of antisocial behaviours representing more subtle, dishonourable behaviours that are at odds with sport ethics with the aim of gaining an advantage over the opponent but without a *de iure* violation of the rules.

Several studies focused on the psychological antecedents of moral behaviours in sport revealing the crucial role of task and ego orientation and attitudes toward anti-social and pro-social behaviors (e.g. Gonçalves, de Silva, Cruz, Torregrosa and Cumming, 2010; Lee et al. 2008; Lucidi, Zelli, Mallia, Nicolais, Lazuras and Hagger, 2017; Ring and Kavussanu, 2017). Unfortunately, despite few exceptions (e.g., Lucidi et al., 2017), existing literature does not explicitly address or provide data on the relationship between attitudes towards these social and antisocial behaviours and self-reported behaviour in non-elite athletes. Furthermore, despite several empirical evidences addressed the role of moral disengagement in predicting anti-social behaviors in sport (e.g. Boardly and Kavussanu, 2007, Lucidi, Zelli and Mallia, 2013), only few studies (e.g. d'Arripe-Longueville, Corrion, Scoffier, Rouse and Chalabaev, 2010) evaluated the influence of these mechanisms upon attitudes toward sportspersonship, cheating and gamesmanship.

The aim of the present study is to test, in a sample of young athletes, a model linking task and ego orientation, moral disengagement, self-reported cheating behaviors through the mediation of the moral attitudes (e.g. attitudes toward sportspersonship, cheating, gamesmanship).

that considers the relationship between moral attitudes and self-reported cheating behaviours and evaluates the role of moral disengagement as well as task and ego orientation as predictors of these attitudes.

Method

The study involved 409 young Italian athletes (69.3% male; M age = 19.16 years, SD = 3.04) practicing individual (33%) and team sport (67%). Participants were recruited through direct contact with sport clubs, which voluntarily gave permission to contact their athletes. All participating athletes completed the battery of questionnaires including measuring: a) Achievement goals through the Italian version of *Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire* (Bortoli and Robazza, 2005); b) *Moral Disengagement through the Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale* (Boardley and Kavussanu, 2008); c) Antisocial and prosocial attitudes through the “acceptance of cheating”, “acceptance of gamesmanship” and “keeping the winning in proportion” subscales of the Italian version of the *Attitudes to Moral Decision-Making in Youth Sport Questionnaire* (AMDYSQ; Lee et al., 2007); d) Self-reported past cheating behaviour assessed by the self-reported frequency of cheating behaviour occurred in the last six months using 4 different items representing four different situations in which cheating behaviours may occur.

The key analyses of the study relied on variance-based structural modelling (VB-SEM – also known as Partial Least Squares analysis), which were performed by means of the WARP PLS v.6.0 statistical software (Kock, 2017). In particular the analysis tested a model hypothesizing that athletes’ task and ego orientations, and moral disengagement influences both prosocial (i.e. keep winning in proportion) and antisocial (i.e. acceptance of cheating and acceptance of gamesmanship) attitudes, that in turn explain athletes’ self-reported past cheating behaviours.

Results

Overall, the hypothesized model exhibited good fit with the observed data in our sample (GoF = 0.469; APC = .251, $p < .001$; ARS = .369, $p < .001$; AFVIF = 1.118). With respect to the paths linking the key variables of the model, the results showed that task orientation resulted positively related to prosocial attitudes ($\beta = .24$; $p < .001$) and negatively related only to the attitudes toward cheating ($\beta = -.10$; $p = .021$). Ego orientation, instead, resulted positively related to the “acceptance of gamesmanship” ($\beta = .11$; $p = .011$), and negatively related to the prosocial attitudes (e.g. “keeping the winning in proportion”). Moral disengagement resulted positively related to both the antisocial attitudes, namely the “acceptance of cheating” ($\beta = .62$; $p < .001$) and “acceptance of gamesmanship” ($\beta = .62$; $p < .001$), while it resulted negatively related to the prosocial attitudes (e.g. keep winning in proportion) ($\beta = -.26$; $p < .001$). Finally, the results showed that both antisocial attitudes are significantly and positively related to athletes’ self-reported past cheating behaviours ($\beta = .52$; $p < .001$ and $\beta = .15$; $p < .001$, for “acceptance of cheating” and “acceptance of

gamesmanship”, respectively), while the prosocial attitudes are negatively related to the self-reported behaviours ($\beta = -.12$; $p = .008$).

Discussion

The study confirmed past evidences (e.g. Gonçalves et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2008; Lucidi et al., 2017), attesting the role of task and ego orientation in predicting moral attitudes in sport context. More specifically, the results confirmed the role of task and ego orientation in fostering both prosocial and antisocial attitudes. The study, furthermore, confirmed also the crucial role of moral disengagement in predicting positively attitudes toward antisocial behaviours such as cheating and gamesmanship, and its negative relationship with the prosocial attitudes. Finally, the study showed as both prosocial and antisocial attitudes are related to past cheating behaviour, with attitudes toward cheating being the most relevant attitudes.

The results of the present study revealed the importance of the athletes’ task and ego orientation in sport, as well as the role of moral disengagement mechanisms in contrasting or fostering prosocial and antisocial attitudes respectively. The study confirms the need of intervention based on psychological variables, considering their relationship in order to maximize their efficacy and reduce anti-social behaviours in all different sports’ contexts and level of competition.

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