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DOES ATHLETES' MORAL DISENGAGEMENT PLAY A DEFINITIVE ROLE IN THEIR INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIORS?

DESEMPENHA O DESCOMPROMISSO MORAL DOS ATLETAS UM PAPEL DEFINITIVO EM SEUS COMPORTAMENTOS INTERPESSOAIS?

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine athletes' moral values and interpersonal behaviors and demonstrate their interrelationships. A total of 174 individual and team athletes, 137 male, and 37 female, voluntarily participated in the study. The data were collected using "*The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale (MDSS)*" and "*The Interpersonal Behaviors Questionnaire in Sport (IBQ)*." Descriptive statistics, Spearman correlation analysis, Mann-Whitney U-test, and Kruskal Wallis tests were also used to analyze the data. The statistical significance was set at $p<0.05$. There was a positive and low-level significant relationship between moral disengagement and the sub-dimensions of "autonomy-thwarting" and "competence-thwarting" ($p<0.05$). Statistically significant difference was found in the MDSS by age ($p<0.05$). In terms of being a national or non-national athlete factor, a significant difference was observed in moral disengagement and the "competence-thwarting" sub-dimension ($p<0.05$). It was concluded that the more immoral behaviors athletes displayed, the worse interpersonal relationships they experienced. It was observed that moral values were more prevalent in older and national athletes who also built better communication with others.

Keywords: Moral disengagement. Interpersonal behavior. Communication. Sport. Moral values.

Resumo: O objetivo deste estudo foi determinar os valores morais e os comportamentos interpessoais dos atletas e demonstrar suas inter-relações. Um total de 174 atletas individuais e de equipe, 137 homens e 37 mulheres, participaram voluntariamente do estudo. Os dados foram coletados usando a "Escala de Descompromisso Moral no Esporte (MDSS)" e o "Questionário de Comportamentos Interpessoais no Esporte (IBQ)". Estatísticas descritivas, análise de correlação de Spearman, teste U de Mann-Whitney e testes de Kruskal Wallis também foram usados para analisar os dados. A significância estatística foi definida como $p<0,05$. Houve uma relação positiva e de baixo nível de significância entre a desvinculação moral e as subdimensões de "autonomia-incômodo" e "competência-incômodo" ($p<0,05$). Foi encontrada uma diferença estatisticamente significativa no MDSS por idade ($p<0,05$). Em termos do fator ser um atleta nacional ou não nacional, foi observada uma diferença significativa no desengajamento moral e na subdimensão "competence-thwarting" ($p<0,05$). Concluiu-se que quanto mais comportamentos imorais os atletas apresentavam, piores eram seus relacionamentos interpessoais. Observou-se que os valores morais eram mais prevalentes em atletas mais velhos e nacionais, que também se comunicavam melhor com os outros.

Palavras-chave: Descompromisso moral. Comportamento interpessoal. Comunicação. Esporte. Valores morais.

1. Introduction

Self-determination theory is a popular motivational theory in exercise and sports psychology (Roberts, 2001). It focuses on intrinsic motivation and the ability to manage the self and is shaped within the framework of autonomy, competence, and commitment/relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In terms of the roles of those concepts, autonomy is necessary for athletes to act and treat considering their branch and values, competence is necessary for athletes to improve their skills, and relatedness/commitment refers to the environment in which athletes can act and treat as the mentioned above (Vallerand, 2001). It is well-known that motivation contributes positively to athlete performance and promotes autonomy, relatedness, and competence behaviors, which fosters motivation and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Mutlu & Algül, 2019; Yıldız & Şenel, 2018). Thus, thwarting or supportive behaviors and interpersonal relationships between athletes and coaches play critical roles in sport achievement (Yıldız & Şenel, 2018). Apart from coaches, social factors such as the relationship with parents and peers or stressors in the team play a role in supporting or thwarting athletes' basic psychological needs (Kaye et al., 2019; Jõesaar et al., 2011; Bartholomew et al., 2017). This communication and interaction affect an athlete's sports life. For instance, as a result of the pressure of their coaches, sports manager, or supporters, or the ambition to win, athletes may break the rules and engage in immoral behaviors (Orhan & Salman, 2021). Today, the understanding of "anything is allowed for winning," of which roots can be traced in the desire to make much money, gain power and popularity, causes athletes, managers, and supporters to harm others deliberately and to exhibit morally inappropriate behaviors (Yapan, 1992; Çağlayan et al., 2018; Atalay, 2016; Orhan and Salman, 2021; Özdilek et al., 2002; Şahin, 1998). At this point, morality in sports requires attention as the sport is considered a field that underlines the requirement of ethical behaviors and attitudes (Shogon, 2007).

Moral behavior is characterized by following social rules, typical norms and values, and environmental expectations (Greif, Hogan 1973). Morality in sports refers to an athlete's adopting the moral values of respect for the opponent, fairness, honesty, solidarity, and tolerance (Tanriverdi, 2012). Moral disengagement in sports involves any negative behaviors depending on the above understanding of "anything is allowed for winning" (Kavussanu, 2008). According to Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement mechanism, individuals find various reasons to excuse their negative behaviors and tend to feel less guilty and repeat that action, which leads to perpetuating this behavior. Athletes may observe unethical behaviors in coaches and social environments such

as teams (Bandura, 1977). For example, according to Çağlayan et al. (2018), tactile interactions trigger physical struggle in sports, leading to unethical behaviors. Gürpınar (2015) reached similar results as well. Studies on doping use have shown that using such products increases in parallel to the increasing moral disengagement in athletes (Hodge et al., 2013). For instance, research by Lucidi et al. (2008) on 1232 teenagers who regularly did sports revealed that moral disengagement was positively correlated to doping use. Moral disengagement in athletes can be observed in various behavior patterns that are socially unacceptable. It can also be seen in interpersonal communication among athletes. In this regard, this study aimed to determine athletes' moral values and interpersonal behaviors and evaluate the interrelations between both. The findings would contribute to the literature and athlete training programs and practices by identifying the behavioral models that can be correlated with moral disengagement.

2. Materials and Methods

Participants

The study sample comprised 137 male, and 37 female, with a mean age of 18.71±5.40 age and a mean sports experience of 8.98±5.52 years. The study was conducted on individual and team athletes in Turkey. A total of 174 athletes were included in the study. Participants were included in the study on a voluntary basis.

Table 1. Findings on Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

	Groups	N	%
Gender	Female	37	21,3
	Male	137	78,7
Branch	Individual	61	35,1
	Team	113	64,9
National	National athlete	31	17,8
	Non-national athlete	143	82,2
Age	15-16 age	83	47,7
	17-18 age	43	24,7
	19 age and older	48	27,6

Data Collection Tools

"The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale" (MDSS; Boardley & Kavussanu, 2008; Turkish version of Gürpınar, 2015). The instrument was developed to measure athletes' moral disengagement mechanisms. The 7-point Likert scale has 8 items, and a single factor scored as

strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), somewhat disagree (3), neutral (4), somewhat agree (5), agree (6), and strongly agree (7). All items have a negative meaning. High scores on the scale refer to general moral disengagement in athletes.

"The Interpersonal Behaviors Questionnaire in Sport" (IBQ; Rocchi et al., 2016; Turkish version of Yıldız and Şenel, 2018). The scale, which was developed to determine athletes' perceptions of coach behaviors. The scale consists of 24 items and six sub-dimensions: "autonomy-supportive," "autonomy-thwarting," "competence-supportive," "competence-thwarting," "relatedness-supportive," and "relatedness-thwarting." Athletes answered the 24 items beginning with "My coach..." and stated their coaches' interpersonal relationship behaviors. Each item is scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Table 2. Reliability Coefficients of Scale Subscales.

Scales		Number of Items	Reliability (α)
The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale		8	.067
The Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport	Autonomy-supportive	4	.087
	Autonomy-thwarting	4	.062
	Competence-supportive	4	.088
	Competence-thwarting	4	.075
	Relatedness-supportive	4	.089
	Relatedness-thwarting	4	.082

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 20 package program. Skewness, kurtosis, and Kolmogorov-Smirnov values were measured to determine data homogeneity, and it was found that the data did not have a normal distribution ($p<0.05$). Therefore, descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency, arithmetic mean, standard deviation), Spearman correlation analysis, Mann-Whitney U-test, and Kruskal Wallis test were performed.

3. Results

The mean scores shown in Table 1 point out the athletes' indecision about whether to display moral disengagement. It was also found that the mean scores from the "autonomy-supportive," "competence-supportive," and "relatedness-supportive" sub-dimensions of the IBQ were higher than the others.

Table 3. The Mean Scores from the MDSS and IBQ (N=174)

Scales		N	Mean ± Std.
The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale		174	3.09±987
The Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport	Autonomy-supportive	174	5.86±1.08
	Autonomy-thwarting	174	2.98±1.22
	Competence-supportive	174	6.06±1.08
	Competence-thwarting	174	2.05±1.82
	Relatedness-supportive	174	5.50±1.33
	Relatedness-thwarting	174	2.16±1.24

Table 4. The Correlation Analysis Results of the MDSS and IBQ

Scales		The Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport					
		Autonomy-supportive	Autonomy-thwarting	Competence-supportive	Competence-thwarting	Relatedness-supportive	Relatedness-thwarting
The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale Total	r	-.028	.252	-.089	.160	-.103	.133
	p	.710	.001*	.242	.035*	.178	.080
	N	174	174	174	174	174	174

Note. *p< .05.

As seen in Table 4, there was a positive and low-level significant relationship between the IBQ sub-dimensions "autonomy-thwarting" and "competence-thwarting" and the MDSS ($p<0.05$).

Table 5. Mann Whitney-U Test Results of the MDSS and IBQ by Gender

	Scales	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Mean Total	U	p
	The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale	Female	37	77.66	2873.50	2170.500	.180
		Male	137	90.16	12351.50		
The Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport	Autonomy-supportive	Female	37	89.61	3315.50	2456.500	.771
		Male	137	86.93	11909.50		
	Autonomy-thwarting	Female	37	73.80	2730.50	2027.500	.061
		Male	137	91.20	12494.50		
	Competence-supportive	Female	37	97.18	3595.50	2176.500	.181
		Male	137	84.89	11629.50		
	Competence-thwarting	Female	37	78.22	2894.00	2191.000	.199
		Male	137	90.01	12331.00		
	Relatedness-supportive	Female	37	89.03	3294.00	2478.000	.834
		Male	137	87.09	11931.00		
	Relatedness-thwarting	Female	37	83.99	3107.50	2404.500	.628
		Male	137	88.45	12117.50		

Table 5 presents no statistically significant difference in the sub-dimensions of IBQ and the MDSS by gender ($p>0.05$).

Table 6. Mann Whitney-U Test Results of the MDSS and IBQ by Branch

	Scales	Branch	N	Mean Rank	Mean Total	U	p
	The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale	Individual	61	83.78	5110.50	3219.500	.474
		Team	113	89.51	10114.50		
The Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport	Autonomy-supportive	Individual	61	83.20	5075.00	3184.000	.402
		Team	113	89.82	10150.00		
	Autonomy-thwarting	Individual	61	81.89	4995.00	3104.000	.279
		Team	113	90.53	10230.00		
	Competence-supportive	Individual	61	86.98	5306.00	3415.000	.920
		Team	113	87.78	9919.00		
	Competence-thwarting	Individual	61	89.00	5429.00	3355.000	.769
		Team	113	86.69	9796.00		
	Relatedness-supportive	Individual	61	84.83	5174.50	3283.500	.605
		Team	113	88.94	10050.50		
	Relatedness-thwarting	Individual	61	93.43	5699.00	3085.000	.248
		Team	113	84.30	9526.00		

As seen in Table 6, there was no statistically significant difference in the sub-dimensions of the IBQ and the MDSS by sports branch ($p>0.05$).

Table 7. The Kruskal Wallis Test Results of the MDSS and IBQ by National Athlete Status

	Scales	National athlete status	N	Mean Rank	Mean Total	U	p
	The moral disengagement in sport scale	National athlete	31	70.53	2186.50	1690.500	.038*
		Non-national athlete	143	91.18	13038.50		
The Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport	Autonomy-supportive	National athlete	31	83.27	2581.50	2085.500	.602
		Non-national athlete	143	88.42	12643.50		
	Autonomy-thwarting	National athlete	31	75.58	2343.00	1847.000	.145
		Non-national athlete	143	90.08	12882.00		
	Competence-supportive	National athlete	31	94.89	2941.50	1987.500	.361
		Non-national athlete	143	85.90	12283.50		
	Competence-thwarting	National athlete	31	63.02	1953.50	1457.500	.002*
		Non-national athlete	143	92.81	13271.50		
	Relatedness-supportive	National athlete	31	103.15	3197.50	1731.500	.055
		Non-national athlete	143	84.11	12027.50		
	Relatedness-thwarting	National athlete	31	83.85	2599.50	2103.500	.653
		Non-national athlete	143	88.29	12625.50		

Note: *$p< .05$.

According to the results in Table 7, there was a statistically significant difference in the "competence-thwarting" sub-dimension of the IBQ and the MDSS by national athlete status ($p<0.05$).

Table 8. Kruskal Wallis Test Results of the MDSS and IBQ by Age

Scales		Age	N	Mean Rank	X^2	p	U
The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale		15-16 age	83	92.16	8.159	.017*	1>3 2>3
		17-18 age	43	97.78			
		19 age and older	48	70.23			
The Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport	Autonomy-supportive	15-16 age	83	86.38	3.820	.148	
		17-18 age	43	99.17			
		19 age and older	48	78.98			
	Autonomy-thwarting	15-16 age	83	93.05	4.585	.101	
		17-18 age	43	91.48			
		19 age and older	48	74.33			
	Competence-supportive	15-16 age	83	83.65	3.769	.152	
		17-18 age	43	100.23			
		19 age and older	48	82.75			
	Competence-thwarting	15-16 age	83	93.19	2.443	.295	
		17-18 age	43	85.55			
		19 age and older	48	79.41			
	Relatedness-supportive	15-16 age	83	77.86	5.896	.052	
		17-18 age	43	95.80			
		19 age and older	48	96.74			
	Relatedness-thwarting	15-16 age	83	92.16	2.041	.360	
		17-18 age	43	78.81			
		19 age and older	48	87.22			

*Note: *p*< .05.

The results in Table 8 indicated no significant difference in the sub-dimensions of the IBQ by age ($p>0.05$), while a statistically significant difference was found in the MDSS ($p<0.05$).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The research was conducted to determine the moral disengagement and interpersonal behavioral patterns in sports of 174 individual and team-sport athletes doing sports for about 8.98±5.52 years. Accordingly, the participants were asked to complete "*The Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale*" and *"Interpersonal Behavior Questionnaire in Sport."* The findings indicated that the participants were doubtful about whether to display moral disengagement behaviors. Işım et al. (2018) similarly found that amateur league football players experienced indecision about exhibiting moral disengagement behaviors. Those findings suggest that athletes are sometimes likely to exhibit such immoral behaviors, depending on the feedback they receive from their surroundings.

It was found that the mean scores obtained from the IBQ sub-dimensions were higher than the others, which implies that athletes can build a secure relationship that promotes a supportive and committed environment. The athletes' constant communication with their environment also ensures positive interpersonal relations. Additionally, there was no statistically significant difference in the IBQ sub-dimensions by branch, which shows that regardless of being an individual or team-sport athlete, an athlete could build a healthy dialogue with others.

The results revealed a positive and significant relationship between the IBQ sub-dimensions of "autonomy-thwarting" and "competence-thwarting" and the Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale ($p<0.05$). Athletes who display such behaviors are expected to engage in moral disengagement. For instance, aggression is immoral behavior, and studies have shown that individuals with extreme aggression tend to have an egocentric, scornful, discouraging, and thwarting relationship with others (Hasta & Güler, 2013). Such thwarting relationships are characterized by engaging in verbal fights, ignoring others' opinions, and losing temper easily, all of which impair moral values (Şahin et al., 1994).

A study on kickboxers revealed a significant difference in the "autonomy-supportive," "autonomy-thwarting," "relatedness-supportive," and "relatedness-thwarting" sub-dimensions by gender. The reason underlying this difference was that the autonomy-thwarting and relatedness-thwarting behaviors were more prevalent in males, while the autonomy-supportive and relatedness-supportive behaviors were more prevalent in females (Mutlu & Algül, 2019). Nevertheless, we found no significant difference in the IBQ sub-dimensions by gender ($p>0.05$). The findings may be because the current study was conducted on athletes from various sports branches.

In the relevant literature, it has been shown that men tended to engage in moral disengagement and exhibited aggressive behaviors more than women, while women were more likely to adhere to the rules and prefer non-contact sports (Weiss & Bredemeier, 1990; Çağlayan et al., 2018; Eroğlu et al., 2020; Turan, 2020; Boardley and Kavussanu, 2007). No difference was found between men and women in a study examining whether aggression differed according to gender. However, the aggression rates of men were higher than women (Tutkun et al., 2010). Other studies have determined that male football and handball athletes displayed more norm-violative behaviors (such as aggression and antisocial attitudes) than female athletes (Coulomb-Cabagno and Rascle, 2006; Coulomb-Cabagno et al., 2005; Kavussanu et al., 2009). In this study, men's MDSS scores were higher than women's, but moral disengagement did not differ by gender. This finding parallels the fact that men's aggression is considered acceptable and tolerable by society,

that childraising is based on gender discrimination, and that women are expected to strictly adhere to rules in Turkey (Atalay, 2016; Rainey, 1984; Tutkun, 2010).

The research on moral decision-making has shown that contact sports reduce the level of moral decision-making compared to non-contact sports (Çağlayan et al., 2018; Gürpınar, 2015). On the contrary, in this study, there was no difference in moral disengagement behavior by sports branch ($p>0.05$), which might stem from the fact that sports branches were grouped as individual and team sports, not as contact and non-contact sports. In another study, no difference was found in amateur league football players' moral disengagement levels according to their positions (Işım et al., 2018), which overlaps with our finding.

The study findings indicated that non-national athletes had more moral disengagement than national athletes. An athlete's lifetime goal is to become a national team athlete. However, non-national athletes' constant efforts and strives to become national athletes, coaches' excessive pressures on athletes, and the inherently competitive environment in sports may lead athletes to display immoral behaviors (Stranger et al., 2018; Gutierrez & Ruiz, 2009; Miller et al., 2005; Sarı & Deryahanoğlu, 2019). These results support this finding.

Ego-oriented athletes tend to believe that they can perform better than others (Doğru, 2019). In a study by Gencer (2021) on wrestlers, the mean scores of ego-oriented non-national athletes were higher than national athletes, but there was no significant difference by national athlete status ($Mean_{national}=3.34 \pm 0.74$; $Mean_{non\text{-}national}= 3.62 \pm 0.63$; $p>0.05$). In the same study, a positive, moderately significant correlation was found between ego orientation and performance climate perception ($r=.44$; $p<.01$). As mentioned above, performance climate perception gives rise to moral disengagement in athletes. Accordingly, non-national athletes had more competence-thwarting behaviors than national athletes. Besides, ego-oriented athletes have problems in building a social environment due to their goal-oriented approaches and intensive effort to perform better than others (Genç et al., 2018). It can be inferred that the moral disengagement levels of non-national athletes are higher than national athletes, and they tend to display intimidating behaviors and make others feel inadequate.

In a study by Atalay (2016), moral decision-making attitudes varied depending on age and sports experience. Accordingly, the moral disengagement levels of the 15-16 and 16-17 age group athletes were higher than those over 19. As athletes get older and professional, they tend to adopt a lifestyle with morally and socially acceptable values. Athletes' adherence to sports rules and their respect and tolerance for the opponent is athletes' personal gains from sport (Turan, 2020). It can be said that the increase in sports experience with age leads to an improvement in moral values .

It was concluded that participants experienced indecision about whether to display moral disengagement and adopted the supportive interpersonal behavior model. When the relationship between moral disengagement and interpersonal behaviors in sports was examined, it was revealed that when the athletes engaged in moral disengagement, they adopted the thwarting behavior model in sports. Moral disengagement and interpersonal behavioral patterns in sports did not differ according to gender and being an individual or team-sport athlete. It was determined that moral attitudes and behaviors were more common in 19 and older athletes than those in lower age groups. It was also seen that national athletes had better interpersonal relations and moral values than others.

In addition to interpersonal relationships, empathy is essential for moral development in athletes (Balçıkanlı & Yıldıran, 2018). As a limitation of this study, the empathy levels of the participants were not examined. Describing the link between athletes' empathy skills and moral disengagement levels and its effect on interpersonal behaviors in sports may better explain the psychological factors. Thus, future studies can focus on athletes' empathy levels. We also recommend conducting similar studies with various sample groups and variables.

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Data Availability

The data that support the fndings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Code Availability

Not applicable.

Declarations

Confict of interest

The authors declare that they have no confict of interest.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

Ethical Approval

The study protocol has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Yalova University (No: 2021-61; date: 02.05.2021). The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its following updates.

Consent for Publication

The authors affirm that human research participants provided informed consent for publication of the tables and figures.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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