



## The impact of achievement goals on cheating in sport

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of achievement goals on cheating in sport.  
**Designs:** We used cross-sectional (Study 1, Study 3) and experimental (Study 2) designs.

**Method:** In Study 1 ( $N = 144$ ) we measured athletes' dispositional goal orientation and attitudes towards cheating. In Study 2 ( $N = 125$ ) we manipulated goal involvement and measured cheating in hypothetical situations. In Study 3 ( $N = 60$ ) we examined the link between goal orientations and cheating in running races.  
**Results:** In Study 1, acceptance of cheating was positively related to ego orientation and negatively related to task orientation. In Study 2, cheating in hypothetical sport situations was more likely for ego-involved and task-involved than control participants. In Study 3, athletes who illegitimately improved their race times to enhance their chances of winning scored higher in ego orientation and lower in task orientation than those who did not illegitimately improve their race times.

**Conclusions:** The findings provide evidence for the motivation-cheating relationship thereby supporting predictions of achievement goal theory in the context of sport, particularly with respect to ego goals. Our findings suggest that interventions aimed to promote fair play in sport could focus on influencing the goals of the athletes.

Understanding the factors that lead athletes to cheat while participating in sport is important to individuals and organizations wishing to help create a sport environment characterized by fair play and respect for the rules. Cheating, defined as deceptive behavior intended to break the rules and make illegitimate gains (Reddiford, 1998), has been of interest to sport psychologists for many years. Recently, it has attracted more research attention due to concerns about the increased incidents of high profile cheating scandals over match fixing, illegal betting, equipment tampering, spying, and doping in professional sport (e.g., Kavussanu, 2014; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). In the current research, we aimed to understand why athletes cheat in the context of sport. For the sake of simplicity, we use the term cheating to refer to the different cheating-related variables that we assessed in our three studies.

Our research was grounded on Nicholls' (1989) achievement goal theory. One of the main tenets of this theory is that individuals participate in achievement contexts, such as sport, to demonstrate competence. The theory contends that there are two major ways that success is defined and competence evaluated, and these are embedded within two achievement goals: task orientation and ego orientation. Task-oriented individuals tend to evaluate competence using self-referenced criteria and feel successful when they master a task, work hard to accomplish a personal goal, or show personal improvement. In contrast, ego-oriented individuals tend to use other-referenced criteria to evaluate their competence and define success as superiority over others. Competence

corresponds to effortful accomplishment for high task individuals and superiority over others for high ego individuals.

Achievement goals are hypothesized to differentially influence moral variables. Athletes high in ego orientation should be more likely to engage in behaviors, such as cheating, that help them accomplish their ultimate goal of winning. As Nicholls (1989, p. 133) stated, "a preoccupation with winning may well be accompanied by a lack of concern about justice and fairness," and "when winning is everything it is worth doing anything to win". In contrast, task-oriented athletes should be less likely to cheat, as this would interfere with their goal of achieving a personal best performance; these athletes are more likely to play by the rules and compete fairly (Duda, Olson, & Templin, 1991).

Past research has identified consistent links between goal orientations and a variety of moral variables in sport. Specifically, ego orientation has been associated with endorsement of harmful conduct (Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001), cheating (Gonçalves, Silva, Cruz, Torregrosa, & Cumming, 2010; Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001), doping (Ntoumanis, Ng, Barkoukis, & Backhouse, 2014), antisocial behavior (Kavussanu, Seal, & Phillips, 2006; Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006) and aggression (Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996), while task orientation has corresponded to high moral functioning (Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003) and prosocial behavior (Kavussanu, 2006). In a recent meta-analysis (Lochbaum, Zazo, Kazak Çetinkalp, Graham, Wright, & Kontinen, 2016), undesirable

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behaviors (e.g., doping, aggression) were positively correlated ( $r_w = 0.23$ ) with ego goal orientation, and negatively, albeit weakly, correlated ( $r_w = -0.06$ ) with task goal orientation.

An important limitation of most studies in this area of research is that they have used a cross-sectional design. Although this design can reveal relationships between variables, it does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the direction of causality in the observed relationships. Thus, we do not know whether higher ego and/or lower task goals have led to cheating, or vice versa. To address this limitation, studies employing designs that manipulate achievement goals are needed. The advantage of such designs is that they allow researchers to draw conclusions about the direction of causality. Another limitation of most studies is that cheating was assessed as a disposition or trait using a questionnaire. Thus, we do not know how athletes would act when competing in sport. This limitation can be addressed using behavioral measures of cheating in sporting competitions.

The purpose of the current research was to examine the role of achievement goals on cheating in sport. To this end, we conducted a survey, an experiment, and a field study, and we assessed cheating using questionnaires, scenarios, and head-to-head competitions on the running track. We have described these studies in detail below.

## 1. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the relationship between goal orientations and acceptance of cheating and gamesmanship. Previous studies in adolescent athletes have reported that ego orientation was positively linked to antisocial attitudes (i.e., acceptance of cheating and gamesmanship) in British athletes (Lee, Whitehead, Ntoumanis, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2008), positively related to cheating and gamesmanship in Portuguese athletes (Gonçalves et al., 2010), and positively linked with acceptance of cheating and gamesmanship in Italian tennis players (Lucidi et al., 2017). Lucidi and colleagues also found that task orientation was inversely associated with these variables. In the current study, we investigated the relationship between goal orientations, on the one hand, and cheating and gamesmanship, on the other hand, in British college athletes.

### 1.1. Method

#### 1.1.1. Participants

Participants were male ( $n = 67$ ) and female ( $n = 74$ ) college athletes competing in individual ( $n = 51$ , 36%) and team ( $n = 90$ , 64%) sports at a British university. At the time of data collection, they ranged in age from 18 to 26 years and they had competed in their sport for an average of 7.40 ( $SD = 4.02$ ) years. Their highest competitive standard in their sport was club (35%), county (29%), regional (16%), national (11%), and international (9%).

#### 1.1.2. Measures

**Achievement goals.** The Perception of Success Questionnaire (Roberts, Treasure, & Balague, 1998) was used to measure task and ego goal orientations. The stem “In sport I feel most successful when ...” was followed by items measuring task (e.g., I work hard) and ego (e.g., I win) goal orientations. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. Roberts et al. (1998) reported evidence on the reliability of the task ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) and ego ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) subscales.

**Cheating.** The Attitudes to Moral Decision-making in Youth Sport Questionnaire (Lee, Whitehead, & Ntoumanis, 2007) was used to measure acceptance of cheating (e.g., “I would cheat if I thought it would help me win”) and gamesmanship (e.g., “I sometimes try to wind up the opposition”). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*. Lee et al. (2007) provided support for the reliability of the cheating ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ) and gamesmanship ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ) scales.

### 1.1.3. Procedure

After gaining approval for the study protocol from our university ethics committee, college athletes were recruited from undergraduate sport and exercise science classes. They were informed about the study aims, that participation in the study was voluntary, honesty in responses was vital, and data were confidential and would be used only for research purposes. After consenting, they completed the measures described above.

## 1.2. Results

The descriptive statistics for the variables indicate that, on average, the athletes were characterized by high ego goal orientation ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ), high task goal orientation ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ), low acceptance of cheating ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ), and moderate acceptance of gamesmanship ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) relative to previous studies (Lee et al., 2007; Lochbaum, Kazak Çetinkalp, Graham, Wright, & Zazo, 2016). All measures exhibited good ( $\alpha > 0.70$ ) internal consistency.

Pearson correlations revealed that acceptance of cheating was positively linked with ego orientation ( $r = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ) and negatively linked with task orientation ( $r = -0.21$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Moreover, acceptance of gamesmanship was positively linked with ego orientation ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ) but not significantly associated with task orientation ( $r = -0.13$ ,  $p = 0.13$ ). Correlation coefficients of 0.10, 0.30, and 0.50 correspond to small, medium and large effect sizes, respectively (Cohen, 1992).

### 1.3. Discussion

In line with our hypotheses, the current findings indicate that athletes with permissive attitudes towards cheating were characterized by higher ego and lower task goal orientations, and athletes who endorsed gamesmanship were characterized by higher ego orientation. Previous research has noted similar relations between attitudes towards cheating and task and ego goal orientations (e.g., Lucidi, et al., 2017). These findings are also in line with the results of other cross-sectional research demonstrating that relatively high ego and/or low task orientations correspond to actions such as faking an injury and breaking the rules (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009; Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Lochbaum, Zazo, et al., 2016).

## 2. Study 2

Goal orientations are dispositional tendencies to be task or ego involved in an achievement context. However, the direct regulators of behavior in any achievement context are the achievement goals that are pursued in that context (Nicholls, 1989), which are known as task and ego involvement; individuals high in task or ego orientation tend to be task or ego involved when engaged in achievement pursuits. To date, only two studies have experimentally examined the influence of task and ego achievement goals on cheating.

The first study investigated the effects of goal involvement on cheating in a competitive sport task. Specifically, Sage and Kavussanu (2007), experimentally manipulated task and ego involvement during a table-football competition and observed that participants in the ego-involving group cheated more (cheating was part of the antisocial behavior measure) than those in the task-involving or control groups. Goal involvement was manipulated by presenting participants with a series of slides of words, still images and videos to encourage learning and improving of three skills (task condition), or tips on how to outperform others emphasizing the importance of beating opponents (ego condition). In the control condition, participants were shown slides about the history of table football and associated equipment.

In the second study, Van Yperen, Hamstra, and van der Klauw (2011) manipulated performance (i.e., ego) and mastery (i.e., task)

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