

On- and off-field antisocial and prosocial behavior in adolescent soccer players: A multilevel study

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Abstract

This study investigated to what extent team membership predicts on- and off-field antisocial and prosocial behavior in (pre)adolescent athletes. Effects of team-membership were related to characteristics of the team environment, such as relational support from the coach towards team members, fair play attitude and sociomoral reasoning within the team, and sociomoral climate. The sample consisted of $N = 331$ male soccer players. Multilevel analyses revealed that 21% of the variance in off-field antisocial behavior, and 8% and 14% of the variance in on-field antisocial and prosocial behavior, respectively, could be attributed to characteristics of the sporting environment, including relational support from the coach, exposure to high levels of sociomoral reasoning about sports dilemmas, and positive team attitude toward fair play. The results highlight the importance of contextual factors in explaining both antisocial

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and prosocial behavior in adolescent athletes and emphasize the role of organized youth sports as a socialization context.

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Compared to family and school, the context of organized leisure activities has received scant attention with respect to its socializing potential and its influences on adolescent development (e.g., Duncan, Duncan, Stryker, & Chaumeton, 2002; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001). Yet, sports represent one of the most important organized leisure activities for school-aged children and adolescents. No less than 68% of Dutch (pre)adolescents participate in organized youth sports (CBS, 1999), a percentage that is comparable to percentages of youth sports participation in North America (NCYS, 2001). Participation in organized youth sports yields specific experiences for children and provides them with new opportunities. Young athletes not only get opportunities to acquire the specific skills and knowledge they need to perform their sports; they are also exposed to the moral values that are the foundation of sports-related rules and norms (Simon, 2000).

Studies examining the degree to which sport exerts an influence on (pre)adolescent development have largely focused on athletes' antisocial behavior (e.g., norm trespassing and externalizing behavior, such as aggression) and prosocial behavior (e.g., helping, sharing, and supporting others). These studies, however, have yielded mixed results. For example, Bartko and Eccles (2003) reported that adolescents highly involved in sports were rated low on externalizing behavior by their parents. Similarly, sport was associated with less antisocial behavior in a study conducted by McMahon (1990). On the other hand, Endresen and Olweus (2005) reported negative effects resulting from participating in power sports. In their longitudinal study, they found an increase of antisocial involvement outside the sports situation, which they attributed to both practicing power sports itself and repeated contact with 'macho' attitudes, norms, and ideals. Negative outcomes were also found in studies conducted by Barber, Eccles, and Stone (2001), Begg, Langley, Moffitt, and Marshall (1996) and Mutrie and Parfitt (1998). Rees, Howell, and Miracle (1990) found mixed results in their study of high school sports. They reported small positive effects not only on prosocial but also on antisocial behavior (e.g., aggression).

Most studies have focused on athletes' antisocial and prosocial behavior either within the sports context or in general. Our previous study of adolescent sports participation focused on antisocial and prosocial behavior in general (Rutten et al., 2007). In order to reach a better understanding of organized youth sports' possible influences on antisocial and prosocial behavior, a distinction between on- and off-field behaviors in athletes within the sports context should be made. The aim of the present study is to examine factors contributing to adolescent athletes' antisocial and prosocial behavior, both on-field (during the match or training, when there are sports-related rules and supervision from the coach and eventually the referee) and off-field (before or after the match or training, when there are no sports-related rules and less supervision from the coach and the referee).

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