



## Physical aggression in Australian football: A qualitative study of elite athletes

Pippa Grange<sup>a</sup>, John H. Kerr<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Australian Football League Players' Association, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Sport Education, Culture and Technology, Tooin University, 1614 Kurogane, Aoba, Yokohama 225 8502, Japan

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and purpose:** There is disagreement in sport psychology about the nature of physical aggression in sport. This is reflected in discussions about definitions of aggression and the different types of aggression that are found in the sports context. Kerr [Kerr, J. H. (2005). *Rethinking aggression and violence in sport*. London: Routledge.] postulated that there were four different types of aggression in sport (play, anger, power, and thrill aggression). This paper reports the findings of an exploratory study that examined aspects of these different types of sanctioned and unsanctioned aggression in Australian football.

**Method:** Participants were eight of the most aggressive male Australian football athletes, playing at the top level in the Australian Football League. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The concepts of play, anger, power and thrill aggression and reversal theory motivational states were used as a framework for interpreting the interview data.

**Results and discussion:** Deductive analyses revealed numerous descriptions of aggression which could be categorized as examples of play, power, and anger aggression, but only two examples of thrill aggression were identified. Differences in the perception and experience of participants between sanctioned (play) and unsanctioned (power, anger, and thrill) aggression, including acts of intimidation and retaliation, were identified. Additional findings concerning intent to injure in sanctioned aggression, the enjoyment of unsanctioned aggression, and the impact of recent changes in Australian football on unsanctioned aggression are reported.

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Traditionally, sport psychologists studying aggression have generally adopted theoretical frameworks from mainstream psychology<sup>1</sup> and applied them directly to sport (e.g., Husman & Silva, 1984; LeUnes & Nation, 1989; Stephens, 1998; Terry & Jackson, 1985). Some examples include the frustration–aggression hypothesis proposed by Berkowitz (1989), social learning theory put forward by Bandura (1962) and notions of “instrumental” and “hostile” aggression originally outlined by Buss (1961). In some cases, these theoretical frameworks have been used in research studies investigating aggression in sport (e.g., Gee & Leith, 2007; Kirker, Tenenbaum, & Mattson, 2000; Mintah, Huddleston, & Doody, 1999). Although the results of these and other studies have been of some value, it has been argued that the theoretical models on which they are based are of limited use for studying aggression

in sport because they fail to take account of the special status of aggression within the unique context of sport and especially in those sports involving antagonistic physical interaction (Kerr, 2005; Russell, 2008; Smith, 1983).

In a similar way, definitions of aggression in sport have tended to reflect the definitions of aggression used in mainstream psychology. For example, aggression has been defined as: “an overt verbal or physical act that can psychologically or physically injure another person or oneself” (Husman & Silva, 1984, p. 247), and “the infliction of an aversive stimulus upon one person by another, an act committed with intent to harm, one perpetrated against an unwilling victim, and done with the expectancy that the behaviour will be successful” (LeUnes & Nation, 1989, p. 193). Several authors have argued that intent to injure is the most crucial element in defining aggressive acts in sport (e.g., Husman & Silva, 1984; Tenenbaum, Stewart, Singer, & Duda, 1997). However, other authors have pointed out the difficulties of incorporating the notion of intent to harm or injure into definitions of aggression in sport (Kerr, 1999, 2002; Russell, 2008; Smith, 1983).

Carefully examining these definitions from mainstream psychology, it is apparent that they are not really applicable to

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [kerr@cc.tooin.ac.jp](mailto:kerr@cc.tooin.ac.jp) (J.H. Kerr).

<sup>1</sup> There have been a few other theoretical approaches, including Bredemier's (e.g., 1985) philosophically based moral reasoning approach concerning fair play and sportspersonship and Guilbert's (2004) sociologically based typological analysis of violence in sport.

sports in which physical contact and sanctioned physical aggression (within the written rules or laws of sports and any unwritten rules or informal player norms) are an intrinsic characteristic of competition (e.g., combat sports: judo, karate, wrestling; team contact sports: rugby, ice hockey, American, Australian and Gaelic football, lacrosse, water polo). Acts involving high levels of aggression and vigorous physical contact which might be illegal outside sport are not only condoned, but enthusiastically encouraged in these kinds of sports (Atyeo, 1979; Terry & Jackson, 1985) and generally the sanctioned aggressive acts are not intended to injure or harm opponents.

Kerr (1997) took account of this unique context and the special nature of sanctioned aggression in sport in his sport-specific definition<sup>2</sup> and this is the definition of aggression in sport adopted in the present paper. In general, aggression can be seen as unprovoked hostility or attacks on another person which are not sanctioned by society. However, in the sports context, the aggression is provoked in the sense that two opposing teams have willingly agreed to compete against each other. Aggression in team contact sports is intrinsic and sanctioned, provided the plays remain permissible within the boundaries of certain rules, which act as a kind of contract in the pursuit of aggression (and violence) between consenting adults (Kerr, 1997, pp. 115–116).

Previous definitions have included the concepts of *instrumental* and *hostile* (or *reactive*) aggression and these concepts have endured in sport psychology publications and sport aggression research (e.g., Coulomb & Pfister, 1998; Husman & Silva, 1984; Kirker et al., 2000; Tenenbaum et al., 1997). Instrumental aggression is premeditated, planned behaviour that is motivated by a desire to achieve some goal other than harming the recipient, while hostile aggression is impulsive angry behaviour, motivated by a desire to hurt an individual (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Buss, 1961). In spite of concern about their usefulness and relevance both to human behaviour in general (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001), and to behaviour in the sports context (e.g., Kerr, 2005; Russell, 2008; Smith, 1983), sport psychology appears reluctant to abandon the instrumental versus hostile aggression dichotomy. Over 25 years ago, Smith (1983) argued that, as all aggressive acts in sport are instrumental and carried out with some goal in mind, the distinction between instrumental and hostile aggression is not a useful one. He also argued that, where a particular aggressive act may have a variety of outcomes for the perpetrator, it makes the acts difficult to separate empirically. More recently, Bushman and Anderson (2001), in considering instrumental and hostile aggression, discussed the possibility of multiple motives for a single aggressive act and argued strongly that it is time to find alternative conceptual explanations, “pull the plug” and allow the hostile-instrumental aggression dichotomy a dignified death” (Bushman & Anderson, 2001, p. 273). One alternative explanation which does allow for multiple motives for acts of aggression is reversal theory (e.g., Apter, 2001).

Reversal theory's four different forms of aggression (i.e., *play*, *anger*, *power* and *thrill*) have been applied to sport (Kerr, 2005; see Table 1). Athletes engage in play aggression when they take part in team contact sports such as Australian football. Play aggression is sanctioned in the special context of sport where athletes feel safe and secure and acts of aggression take place within the written

rules or laws of sports and any unwritten rules or informal player norms. Power, anger, and thrill aggression are forms of aggression that generally fall outside the written and unwritten rules or laws and player norms (Kerr, 1999, 2002) and are therefore unsanctioned in the sports context and usually punished by sports officials. Power aggression in sport is a form of aggression aimed at dominating and subjugating a rival player or opposing team. It is serious, often cold, calculated intimidation that involves underhand violent acts, where the end is thought to justify the means. Anger aggression is retributive and usually takes the form of a sudden and immediate angry physical response to an action (often aggressive) from an opposing player. Finally, thrill aggression is a provocative form of aggression in sport. It is gratuitous and has no real purpose except that it is carried out just for its own sake and to provide the aggressor with immediate feelings of pleasure. Acts of thrill aggression usually occur only when the perpetrators have the confidence to engage in the acts and the feeling that they will go undetected.

These forms of aggression are not mutually exclusive and, depending on the circumstances, one form may develop into another (see below). Intent to injure per se is not a key concept in Kerr's (2005) four different types of aggression. This is because an athlete may commit an act of unsanctioned aggression (power, anger, or thrill aggression) without necessarily intending to injure an opponent. Conversely, a player may engage in an act of sanctioned aggression (e.g., a legitimate tackle within the laws of rugby union) with the intention of hurting an opponent. Indirect judgement about an individual's motivation is liable to be incorrect (Schachter & Singer, 1962) as only the athlete who carried out the action really knows whether he or she intended to injure the opponent (Kerr, 2002).

There may appear to be some similarity in the descriptions of the concepts of “power aggression” (Apter, 1997; Kerr, 2005) and “instrumental aggression” (Buss, 1961), and “anger aggression” (Apter, 1997; Kerr, 2005) and “hostile aggression” (Buss, 1961). Reversal theory concepts of aggression have the advantage of being part of a broader theoretical structure which can explain aggressive acts in terms of an athlete's motivation and emotion and how changes in motivational states can change the nature of the aggressive behaviour. For example, in reversal theory the motivation and emotion associated with play aggression may change into anger aggression if changes in motivational states occur during aggressive behaviour. Therefore, not only does reversal theory have additional categories of aggression based on a firm theoretical motivational framework, but their dynamic nature also goes beyond the relatively straightforward and inflexible concepts of instrumental and hostile aggression.

## The present study

The purpose of the present study was to explore, through the use of semi-structured interviews, athletes' perception and experience of: (a) aggressive play and players in the Australian Football League (AFL); (b) sanctioned and unsanctioned incidents of on-field physical aggression and the boundaries between them; (c) intimidation and retaliation during games; and (d) the possible influence of recent changes in Australian football, including the introduction of very severe punishments for certain unsanctioned acts of aggression. The rationale behind the study was to use reversal theory as an alternative theoretical approach to those traditionally used in sport aggression research. It was thought that reversal theory might provide a novel way of interpreting athletes' interview responses and provide new insights into the types of, and motivation underlying aggressive behaviour at elite levels in sport.

<sup>2</sup> Arriving at meaningful definitions of aggression in contact sports has not been helped by those who have argued (Husman & Silva, 1984; Tenenbaum et al., 1997; Thirer, 1994) that some acts of aggression in sport have been mislabelled as “aggressive” and should actually be called “assertive” (e.g., McGuire, Courneya, Widmeyer, & Carron, 1992; Jones et al., 2005). Such arguments indicate a lack of real understanding about the nature of physical contact in, for example, team contact sports (e.g., Kerr, 2005).

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