

SHORT REPORT

Dispositional Factors and Sportsmanship in Italian Athletes

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Abstract

The research focused on dispositional factors determining fair play is a matter of debate. In this vein, sportsmanship has been considered to be a multidimensional construct reflecting how athletes are inclined to play sport. Previous investigations found significant associations between motivational orientations and sportsmanship. To date, little attention has been paid to the construct of the trait of self-control in predicting sportsmanship and to the role of gender differences in this relationship. This study analysed not only the associations between task and ego orientation, trait self-control and sportsmanship in order to determine the best predictor of sportsmanship, but also to verify whether the linkages were confirmed in the gender subgroups. Competitive level athletes (N=674, 387 males and 287 female; M=27.23 years, SD=10.01) completed a questionnaire including the scales of goal orientation, self-control and sportsmanship. Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and regression analyses were applied to the data. The results indicated positive associations between task orientation, self-control and sportsmanship, and between task orientation and self-control. No significant association emerged between ego orientation and self-control in the total sample and in the gender subgroups. Sportsmanship was influenced positively by task orientation and age in all groups and negatively by ego orientation in the total sample and in the male group. A weak but significant relationship between trait self-control and sportsmanship was found only in the total sample. These findings suggested further analyses of the mediating/moderating role played by self-control in the indirect relationships between goal orientations and sportsmanship in relation to gender differences.

Key words: sportsmanship, task orientation, ego orientation, trait self-control, gender differences

Introduction

In light of the various forms of unethical behaviour, which continually increase on and around playing fields, psychologists are carefully reflecting on the dispositional factors that could reduce or eliminate such behaviours and promote prosocial conduct generally defined as sportsmanship. The construct has been analysed from a threefold perspective, referring to Bandura's social cognitive approach, to the structural developmental model based on moral reasoning, and to the social-psychological approach (Vallerand, Brière, Blanchard, & Provencher, 1997). The last perspective, adopted in this research, focuses on how athletes are inclined to play sport (their prosocial and antisocial behaviour) and includes a multidimensional factor: "concern and respect for the rules and officials, social conventions, the opponent, as well as

one's full commitment to one's sport and the relative absence of a negative approach to sport participation" (Vallerand et al., 1997).

Among the dispositional factors, sportsmanship has been examined in relation to the goal perspective based on the Achievement Goal Theory (AGT; Nicholls, 1989). This conceptual framework posits that individuals achieve competence-based aims in evaluating settings including sport (Duda & Nicholls, 1992). Competence (i.e., the perception of ability) is the core variable comprising two orthogonal goal orientations: task and ego. Task-oriented athletes are motivated by personal mastery to achieve specific performance standards/goals of higher ability: success and failure depend on the self-referenced perceptions of their own performance. Ego-oriented athletes are motivated by normative competence, such as demonstrating higher ability or beating



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opponents: success and failure are evaluated by comparing their own performance with the performance of competitors.

Past research showed consistent associations between athletes' achievement goals and socio-moral functioning: ego-oriented goals were generally linked to unsporting behaviours, whereas task-oriented goals were related to pro-social attitudes and behaviours (Bortoli, Bertollo, Hanin, & Robazza, 2012; Monacis, de Palo, & Sinatra, 2015).

Dispositional self-control, defined as the capacity to alter one's responses to achieve a desired state that otherwise would not arise naturally (e.g., Bauer & Baumeister, 2011), is a further factor considered in literature in association with positive outcomes (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004): when self-control is impaired, anti-social behaviours generally increase. In the specific sport context, recent empirical investigations have highlighted the main role of trait self-control in the regulation of maladaptive behaviours (Sofia & Cruz, 2016), as well as its mediating role in the relationships between motivational orientations and sportsmanship. Indeed, the construct was predicted positively by task orientation and negatively by ego orientation, and it indirectly influenced sportsmanship via aggressiveness (de Palo, Monacis, Carlucci, Tanucci, & Sinatra, 2019).

Consequently, the first aim of the current explorative research was to examine the associations between task and ego orientation, trait self-control and sportsmanship in order to determine the best predictor of sportsmanship in a sample of Italian athletes. The second aim was to verify whether the linkages were confirmed in the gender subgroups.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 674 competitive level athletes (387 males and 287 females; $M=27.23\pm10.01$). They competed in soccer and martial arts. Participants voluntarily completed a questionnaire on site and before the beginning of their performances. Anonymity and confidentiality were clearly stressed through verbal and written instructions. Informed consent was obtained

before collecting information. The study procedures were carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The study design was approved by the Research Committee of the University of Bari.

Instruments

Multidimensional Sport Orientation Scale (MSOS). The Italian version of the Multidimensional Sport Orientation Scale (de Palo et al., 2019) was used to measure the sportsmanship orientations according to Vallerand's approach. The scale includes 20 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (from "does not correspond at all to me" to "corresponds exactly to me"). The level of internal consistency of the total score was high with $\alpha=0.88$. High scores indicate athletes' fair play.

The Italian version of the Task- and Ego-Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ; Bortoli & Robazza, 2005) assesses individuals' tendency to judge their own competence in goal achievement. Task-oriented individuals tend to be self-referenced, whereas ego-oriented individuals tend to compare themselves to others. The scale measures the two orthogonal orientations with seven task-orientated items and six ego-orientated items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1=Totally disagree, 5=Totally agree). In the present study, $\alpha=0.83$ for Task-orientation and $\alpha=0.77$ for Ego-orientation.

The Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS; Tangney et al., 2004) consists of 13 items assessing dispositional self-regulatory behaviours. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale (1=Not like me at all, 5=Very much like me). In this study, $\alpha=0.85$ for the total score.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and regression analyses with SPSS20. P-values for statistical significance were set at <0.05 .

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the total sample, males and females of the variables of interest.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the total sample (N=674) and of the male (N=387) and female groups (N=287)

	Total Sample		Males		Females	
	Min-Max	Mean \pm SD	Min-Max	Mean \pm SD	Min-Max	Mean \pm SD
Sportsmanship	41-100	80.114 \pm 11.232	41-100	80.768 \pm 11.4693	45-100	78.630 \pm 10.488
Task Orientation	7-35	30.35 \pm 4.110	7-35	30.42 \pm 4.032	13-35	30.42 \pm 4.032
Ego Orientation	6-30	12.39 \pm 4.069	6-30	12.55 \pm 4.065	6-27	12.03 \pm 4.062
Trait Self-control	15-65	45.62 \pm 8.554	15-65	45.61 \pm 8.638	19-62	45.62 \pm 8.736

Table 2 reports bivariate correlations coefficients among the variables in the total sample.

Table 2. Bivariate correlations among the variables of interest in the total sample

	Task Orientation	Ego Orientation	Trait Self-control
Sportsmanship	0.449**	-0.118**	0.177**
Task Orion	-	0.065	0.197**
Ego Orientation	0.065	-	-0.051
Trait Self-control	0.197**	-0.051	-

Legend: ** $p<0.01$

Table 3 and 4 shows associations in the males and females group.

Table 3. Bivariate correlations among the variables of interest among males

	Task Orientation	Ego Orientation	Trait Self-control
Sportsmanship	0.449**	-0.152**	0.162**
Task Orion	-	0.057	0.152**
Ego Orientation	0.057	-	-0.042
Trait Self-control	0.152**	-0.042	-

Legend: **p<0.01

The results indicated positive associations between sportsmanship, task orientation and self-control, and between task orientation and self-control in the total sample and in the gender subgroups. Negative associations between sportsmanship

and ego orientation emerged in the total sample and in the male group. No association between ego orientation and self-control was found in the three groups.

Table 4. Bivariate correlations among the variables of interest among females

	Task Orientation	Ego Orientation	Trait Self-control
Sportsmanship	0.450**	-0.054	0.220**
Task Orion	-	0.078	0.295**
Ego Orientation	0.078	-	-0.054
Trait Self-control	0.220**	-0.054	-

Legend: **p<0.01

Causal relationships were examined in each group by statistical regression analyses using sportsmanship as a dependent variable and the other constructs as independent variables. In the total sample, when sportsmanship was predicted, task orientation ($\beta=0.443$, $p<0.01$), age ($\beta=0.300$, $p<0.01$), ego orientation ($\beta=-0.111$, $p<0.01$), and self-control ($\beta=0.065$, $p<0.05$) were found to be significant predictors. The overall model fit was $R^2=0.318$ and accounted for 31% of the variance ($\text{Adj}R^2=0.315$). In the male group task orientation ($\beta=0.438$, $p<0.01$), age ($\beta=0.318$, $p<0.01$), and ego orientation ($\beta=-0.135$, $p<0.01$) emerged as significant predictors. The construct of self-control resulted in a non-significant predictor ($\beta=0.066$, $p=0.059$). The overall model fit was $R^2=0.341$ and accounted for 34% of variance ($\text{Adj}R^2=0.336$). In the female group task orientation ($\beta=0.451$, $p<0.01$) and age ($\beta=0.188$, $p<0.01$) were significant predictors. Two constructs were not significant, ego orientation ($\beta=-0.058$, $p=0.302$) and self-control ($\beta=0.073$, $p<0.215$). The overall model fit was $R^2=0.250$ and accounted for 24 % of variance ($\text{Adj}R^2=0.238$).

Discussion

The aims of this research were to examine the associations between task and ego orientation, trait self-control and sportsmanship in order to determine the best predictor of sportsmanship in a sample of Italian athletes and to verify whether these linkages were confirmed in the gender subgroups. Generally, findings supported the positive bivariate associations as well as the positive predictors of sportsmanship in the three groups. This means that task-oriented athletes with increasing age tend to play respecting rules, social conventions, opponents, and accepting defeat and victory. Conversely, ego-oriented athletes tend to evaluate their performance using other-referenced criteria and to display transgressive behaviours. These results are conceptually and empirically consistent with past investigations (Gonçalves, Silva, Cruz, Torregrosa, & Cumming, 2010; Lucidi, Zelli, Mallia, Nicolais, Lazuras, & Hagger, 2017; Monacis, de Palo, & Sinatra, 2014; Monacis et al., 2015). It is noteworthy that self-control seems to determine et-

hic sport behaviours, but only to a lesser extent. Consequently, future research should analyse more in-depth the mediating/moderating role of this trait in explaining the linkage between goal orientations and sportsmanship between genders.

Finally, the finding that sportsmanship was not predicted by ego orientation in females is consistent with previous studies reporting that more experienced athletes, particularly males, accept more aggressive and unsportsmanlike behaviours. This tendency has been explained by the observation that aggressive behaviours in sport are more socially acceptable for males than for females (Corrion et al., 2010). These findings may be ascribed to gender stereotypes that create different social expectations concerning males' and females' social behaviour: males are expected to be more aggressive than females who are more willing to value peer relationships, cooperate with others, and adhere to social rules and role expectations.

Despite the limitations of this study, at least three important implications can be derived. First, the findings provide further empirical evidence for predicting prosocial sport behaviours according to a dispositional perspective. Second, they show that the role of trait self-control should be better analysed in the indirect relationships between the two orientations and sportsmanship. Third, they provide some insights to implications for developing interventions and educational programmes to engender better moral functioning in male competitive athletes.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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