Sportspersonship and Perceptions of Leadership: An Investigation of Adolescent Handball Players’ Perceptions of Sportspersonship and Associations With Perceived Leadership

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In contemporary society, there is a concern about the excessive importance placed on winning in sport. Research suggests that an overemphasis on competitive outcomes generates moral problems that reduces pro-social behavior and even promotes antisocial behavior. In order to promote fair play and socio-moral attitudes, coaches and their leadership may be of significant importance. The aim of this investigation was to assess sportspersonship among adolescent handball players in Norway (N = 440) and investigate how the players’ perceptions of coaches’ leadership were associated with such behavior.

Results showed that the players in general perceived themselves to behave pro-socially. However, the players also reported instrumental aggressive behavior and low respect for opponents. Associations of perceived leadership with sportspersonship were found primarily for individual perceptions compared to teammates’ perceptions. This may indicate that it is the personalized leadership in dyadic relations that influences sportspersonship. Players’ perceptions of supportive leadership dimensions were found to be associated with sportspersonship. More research incorporating designs better suited to test the causality between personal perceptions of coaches’ leadership and sportspersonship is needed.

Key Words: handball, sportspersonship, leadership, adolescents, instrumental aggression

Key Points:

1. Perceptions of sportspersonship indicated a general pro-social orientation that did not prohibit players from accepting more unsporting behavior, like instrumental aggression.
2. Results seem to suggest that it is the personalized leadership in dyadic relations that influences sportspersonship.
3. Players’ perceptions of supportive leadership dimensions were found to be associated with sportspersonship.

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In contemporary society, there is a concern about the excessive importance of sportspersonship. "Sport builds character" has been a popular adage among adults for many years. In particular, this belief has been related to the development of socio-moral attitudes and behavior. Sport is believed to provide a context in which children learn about basic values in society such as fairness, tolerance, cooperation, persistence, and respect (23). However, empirical research neither confirms nor contradicts such a claim. Even though there may be nothing intrinsically character building in sports participation in itself, the attendant social interaction may, however, represent a potential for character building.

Research studies conducted in recent years have documented a decline in sportspersonship in competitive sport (23). A recent longitudinal study of sportspersonship in elite handball conducted by Stornes (25) revealed fairly negative attitudes towards socio-moral behavior and an inclination to include aggressive characteristics as socially acceptable and justified. In general, sport as a builder of character has not always been a major topic of research. This is changing, and there is today a growing interest among social scientists and sports educators to examine pro-social and moral functioning in sports (see 23, 27).

In line with this increasing interest in investigating the social and moral impact of sports, the present study investigated sportspersonship among 14- to 16-year-old male handball players. The main focus of the present study was to assess sportspersonship in this sport and investigate to what extent perceptions of sportspersonship were related to perceptions of coaches’ leadership.

**Sportspersonship**

A common understanding of the concept of sportspersonship usually deals with normative standards regarding socio-moral interaction in sports. Normally sportspersonship refers to virtuous or normative behavioral dispositions prescribing how to behave according to the spirit of sport. Different writers have taken this view: Feezell (11) states that sportspersonship involves playing well, striving for victory, avoiding taking an unfair advantage over the opponent, and acting graciously following victory or defeat. For Arnold (1) sportspersonship is characterized by magnanimity, good humor, respect, politeness, affability, compassion, altruism, and generosity.

There has been some criticism that perceptions of sportspersonship have suffered from a lack of a precise definition and an over-reliance on broad theoretical approaches (26). Recently, however, Vallerand and colleagues (28, 30) have proposed a social psychological approach to sportspersonship. Vallerand et al. suggest that sportspersonship can be differentiated into five dimensions: (a) respect for rules and officials, (b) respect for opponents, (c) respect for social conventions, (d) respect for one’s full commitment toward sport, and (e) a negative approach such as being a bad looser and competing only for prizes and trophies. One contribution made by this multidimensional definition is that it points to significant aspects of sportspersonship and has enabled the content of the construct to be operationalized through the development of The Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale (MSOS; 30).

This conceptualization of sportspersonship has been used in several studies in recent years (16, 18, 28, 29). The MSOS has yielded interesting results and seems to
lend itself well to investigations of socio-moral behavior in sports (29). There has been, however, some criticism that there is a positive bias in the present conceptualization of sportspersonship, since the definition underlying the MSOS contains four positive dimensions yet only one negative one. Shields and Bredemeier (23) address this issue when maintaining that the scale does not sufficiently embrace the prominent perspective of “winning at all costs”, a crucial issue in the debate regarding, and evaluation of, socio-moral conduct among athletes today. Our previous research into sportspersonship in elite handball (25) has provided evidence that predominantly anti-social behavior such as instrumental aggression, especially in the form of intimidation, was perceived by many athletes as an easily justifiable and accepted behavior. This seems to indicate that perceptions of sportspersonship in the context of handball are likely to represent different behavioral orientations extending from pro-social behavior to more anti-social behavior. There would therefore seem to be a need to more fully embrace anti-social behavior or negative sportspersonship as a relevant measurement of sportspersonship. A new dimension assessing instrumental aggression was therefore included in the original MSOS that could both capture a significant behavioral aspect of socio-moral consequences in sport and create a balance in the existing dimensions of the MSOS.

**Leadership and Sportspersonship**

Leadership has been defined by Barrow (3) as “the behavioral process of influencing individuals and groups toward set goals” (p. 232). In contemporary sport, the coach is usually assigned great importance and credited with victories just as much as being considered responsible for a lack of results (e.g., 12). However, the efforts made to understand leadership in athletic contexts have been few, and not many researchers have elaborated on theoretical frameworks to advance studies in this field (20). Accordingly, relatively few studies have provided empirical evidence of significant relationships between leadership and socio-moral behavior in sport.

The potential impact of leadership in a learning context may adopt different theoretical perspectives. According to social learning theory, the process of modeling is essential. Modeling implies that individuals are likely to adopt leaders’ ways of acting towards them and treat others in a similar way. Social learning theorists have, for example, demonstrated that individuals who observe someone acting in a pro-social way are more likely to act in the same way themselves, particularly if the person is important and of high status (21). Consequently, in sports contexts one could expect that a supportive and democratic coach who addresses athletes with respect and fairness is likely to influence them towards showing the same sort of concern for others in sports competitions. Social learning theory also maintains that, if desirable behavior is rewarded by significant people, this will reinforce and strengthen the tendency to such action even further (2). Such a relationship was underscored by Stornes (25) who showed that the social expectations of significant others, the coach in particular, could occasionally be so strong that handball players tended to compromise their own views and beliefs in accordance with the coach’s expectations.

Moreover, theorists within other traditions such as Hirschi (13) underline the significance of building close relationships by maintaining that attachment to a person or to a system makes an individual receptive to appropriate norms, thereby increasing the likelihood of compliance. Hirschi considers attachment to conven-
tional persons as a major deterrent against norm-breaking behavior. The stronger the tie, the more likely the person will consider acting in a compliant manner, a potentially strong preventative to deviant behavior. Through building attachments and conveying pro-social norms in sport, coaches could thus enhance fairness and concern for opponents.

The importance of relationships in enhancing intrinsic motivation and moral behavior are also emphasized in the theory of self-determination (8, 9). Deci and Ryan comprehend motivation in terms of varying degrees of self-determination, where motivation is closely related to the fulfillment of the needs, relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The degree or level of fulfillment of such needs is expected to be an important determinant of socio-moral behavior. High levels of self-determination are believed to promote intrinsic motivation that, in sport, is likely to take the form of competing for fun, competing for the activity itself, and improvement of one’s own capabilities. Low levels of self-determination, however, are expected to be associated with more extrinsic motivation expressed through competing for external rewards like prizes, trophies, and recognition. It seems likely that athletes who play for fun (high self-determination) should be more likely to involve themselves in fair competition and be less likely to cheat than players who play for medals at all costs (a non-self-determined motivation).

Research has presented evidence of such relationships. In the education domain it has been found, for instance, that students who displayed a highly self-determined motivational profile cheated less than students who had a non-self-determined motivational profile (29). In sport Vallerand and Losier (29) used a longitudinal design to find a positive bi-directional relationship between self-determined motivation and sportpersonship. In all, research shows that self-determined motivational profiles are associated with enhanced psychological functioning and positive behavioral outcomes (29).

Self-determination theory maintains that intrinsic motivation is enhanced as a function of relatedness towards others. Positive relations most likely make the athlete more confident in himself and less anxious about negative responses—in cases of failure, for example. It is therefore likely that coaches may enhance intrinsic motivation by being supportive, and by building positive bonds between the coach and the players. Self-determination theory also maintains that the feeling of competence stimulates intrinsic motivation. Coaches who provide players with supportive feedback improving their own capabilities are thus likely to enhance intrinsic motivation for sports rather than competing exclusively for awards and trophies. Finally, self-determination theory asserts that autonomy increases intrinsic motivation. Flexible leadership that involves players in decision-making could therefore be assumed to more greatly encourage pro-social behavior, whereas inflexible autocratic leadership is thought to be more closely related to extrinsic motivation, and thereby possibly also to behavior in conflict with the intensions of fairness in sport.

In the present study, we employed the comprehensive work carried out by Chelladurai and Saleh (6, 7) when conceptualizing and operationalizing coaches’ leadership. They suggest that coaches vary in their emphasis in five leadership dimensions: (a) autocratic leadership, (b) democratic leadership, (c) training and instruction, (d) social support, and (e) positive feedback. Dimensions 1, 2, 4, and 5 were believed to be important for socially normative behavior and were therefore included in the present study.
This conceptualization was chosen, since those leadership dimensions defined by Chelladurai and Saleh could be closely linked to the theoretical framework presented above. The definitions of autocratic or democratic leadership represent coaching behavior that involves the aspect of flexibility (inflexible/flexible) in decision-making and should therefore be related to the need for autonomy. Social support usually involving welfare concerns, and close interpersonal relationships would be associated most likely with relatedness. Positive feedback involving behavior that reinforces an athlete by recognizing and rewarding good performance should accordingly be related to perceptions of competence.

In accordance with the theoretical considerations proposed, we hypothesized that autocratic leadership would be associated with negative sportspersonship dimensions, whereas democratic leadership and social support would be related to positive dimensions. With respect to positive feedback, we primarily expected associations with positive sportspersonship dimensions, since it was likely that such management would reflect a supportive coaching philosophy. However, positive feedback is likely also to be used by autocratic coaches in order to stimulate the behavior they expect. Any positive feedback used by these coaches could therefore be associated with unsporting behavior to the extent that autocratic leadership enhances anti-social behavior.

**Individual and Team Levels of Perception**

The association of perceptions of leadership with players’ behavior can arise at the team as well as the individual level. At the team level these relationships may reflect more general differences between coaches in their management styles. On the other hand, associations at the player level might indicate that coaches treat players on the same team differently. Such differential treatment might, in turn, generate different kinds of player behavior within the same team. Few studies have investigated such differences in sporting contexts. However, results from school settings indicate, for example, that teachers are likely to treat high and low achievers differently. Low achievers receive more negative feedback and are subject to more control than high achievers (31). It is not unlikely that the emphasis on achievement and outcome in sport could produce corresponding mechanisms. Moreover, single episodes may initiate the development of good or bad relations. For example, a dramatic showdown between a coach and a deviant player may make it difficult for the coach to adopt a caring and supportive approach after the traumatic episode.

Furthermore, according to the Person-Environment Fit Theory (see, e.g., 14) elaborated in school contexts, the effects of managers on individual behavior are likely to be influenced by the fit between management methods and the needs and orientations of the individual. The effects on behavior due to variations in the fit between management and personal characteristics will probably also appear as a variance at the personal level. The present study therefore explored relationships at both the individual and the team level.
Methods

Participants

In the present study, 440 14- to 16-year-old boys competing in handball participated. Fifty handball teams were randomly selected from different handball districts in the southern part of Norway. These were all players at age-level 15 in the Norwegian Handball League. Four teams did not respond, thus giving a total response rate of 46 teams (92%). So far as the response rate for each team is concerned, all players present at the completion of the questionnaire responded. This resulted in an average response rate of 83% for the total number of members in each team.

Measures of Sportspersonship

Sportspersonship was assessed by an extended Norwegian version of the Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale (MSOS; 30). The original MSOS is a 25-item self-report inventory containing five subscales according to Vallerand’s definition of sportspersonship. These are: Respect for One’s Full Commitment Toward Sport (e.g., “I do not give up even after making several mistakes”), Respect for Social Conventions (e.g., “After the game I always shake hands with the opponent”), Respect for the Opponent (e.g., “When the opponent injures himself I do not take advantage of the situation”), Respect for Rules and Officials (e.g., “I respect the rules even when the opponents cheats”), and A Negative Approach Toward Sportspersonship (e.g., “If I make a mistake during an important part of the game, I really get upset”). Each subscale consists of five items that were scored on a 5-point Likert scale with does not correspond to me (1) and corresponds exactly to me (5) serving as end points. Generally, evidence of satisfactory construct validity and reliability of the Norwegian version of the MSOS scale has been reported (16, 18), although in previous studies the negative approach scale has been shown to have unacceptably low reliability. However, in the present study Cronbach’s alphas generally indicated acceptable reliability. (See Table 1 for further statistical information on this scale.)

Moreover, the original MSOS was extended by five items on instrumental aggression, making a new scale for the present purpose labeled: The Extended Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale (EMSOS). The new subscale Instrumental Aggression was intended to assess aggressive acts towards an opponent player with the intention to gain some personal advantage like increasing the probability of winning the match (e.g., “I often use physical force to make opponents annoyed so that they make mistakes”). The EMSOS then consisted of 4 positive sportspersonship dimensions and 2 negative dimensions. (For a closer examination of the different items in the subscale Instrumental Aggression, see the appendix.)

Measures of Leadership

Leadership was measured by The Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS; 6, 7). This scale has been used to measure (a) athletes’ preferences for specific types of leadership behavior, (b) athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ leadership behavior, and/or (c) coaches’ perceptions of their own behavior. The LSS has shown high reliability and
validity rates in different studies in different countries (5). Lately, Johnsson (15) translated the original LSS into Norwegian in her study of relationships between leadership, and satisfaction and performance among youth soccer players. This version of the LSS confirmed the original factor structure of the LSS (15).

For the purposes of our study, we used the scale that measures athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ leadership behavior. Four out of five subscales from the Norwegian version of the LSS (6, 7, 15) were implemented. The four subscales included were: Democratic Behaviour (e.g., “my coach allows players to take part in decisions”; $\alpha = .80$), Autocratic Behaviour (e.g., “My coach speaks in a way that does not encourage players to ask questions”; $\alpha = .68$), Social Support (e.g., “My coach takes care that every player enjoys playing”; $\alpha = .77$), and Positive Feedback (e.g., “My coach rewards every player when it is deserved”; $\alpha = .82$). Responses to the LSS were given on a 5-point Likert scale with always (5) and never (1) serving as end points.

**Procedure**

Data collection took place during a specific training session using a self-completion questionnaire and a procedure ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The coaches were used as survey administrators. We had arranged a meeting beforehand with each coach and instructed him or her to carry out the investigation according to a set of standardized procedures. All parents were informed in advance about the investigation and asked to return a written consent form. After completing the questionnaire, the athletes handed them back to the coach in a sealed envelope that was then returned to the administrator of the survey.
Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson product moment correlations, and multiple regressions. The analysis of the data included variables based on players’ self-reporting of the coach’s leadership as well as on aggregated scores for teammates’ perceptions of these styles. This “teammates” score was computed by first aggregating a sum score for the team. The individual player’s score was then subtracted from the team sum score. The remainder was divided by the number of players on the team minus one \((n – 1)\) giving an average teammate score. A teammate score based on this procedure for the coach’s leadership was assigned to each of the 440 players.

Results

Sportspersonship

To analyze the players’ responses to the EMSOS, descriptive statistics were computed for the different subscales. The results are presented in Table 1.

Results showed that mean scores were relatively high for Respect for One’s Full Commitment Toward Sport, Instrumental Aggression, Respect for Rules and Officials, and Respect for Social Conventions, whereas scores for Respect for Opponents and A Negative Approach were relatively low. Results presented in Table 1 show that the four positive dimensions were all significant and positively correlated to each other. The two negative dimensions were positively, yet moderately and significantly, associated. So far as the relationship between the positive and negative sportspersonship dimensions is concerned, these proved to be mostly uncorrelated. However, Respect for Rules and Officials showed a significant negative relationship with Instrumental Aggression.

Relationships Between the Perceptions of Leadership and Sportspersonship (SP)

Correlation analysis showed that the different leadership dimensions were moderately intercorrelated. Correlation coefficients ranged from 0.03 (n.s.) for Autocratic Leadership With Positive Feedback to 0.29 \((p < .01)\) for Social Support With Democratic Leadership and Positive Feedback. In order to investigate the unique associations of the different leadership dimensions with SP for each of the following levels, Teammates Perceptions and Players’ Perceptions, leadership scores for these levels were regressed against sportspersonship variables for each dimension at a time. The results are presented in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2 the scores for players’ own perceptions of coaches’ leadership (part B), showed markedly stronger associations with player’s SP than the scores for teammates’ perception of these dimensions (part A). However, the scores for teammates’ perceptions of Autocratic Leadership showed moderate, although significant, relationships with scores for the SP-components: Respect for Opponents and A Negative Approach (part A).

The players’ individual perceptions of autocratic leadership were significantly associated with scores for the negative dimensions of SP and unrelated to the scores for the positive dimensions with the exception of a significant negative bivariate correlation between Autocratic Leadership and Respect for Opponents.
Table 2  Coefficients of Pearson Product Moment Correlations As Well As Results From Multiple Regressions, Where Scores for Sportspersonship Were Regressed On (A) Scores for Variables Assessing Teammates Perceptions of Leadership and (B) Scores for Players’ Own Perceptions of Leadership (N = 440)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Respect for Social Conventions</th>
<th>Respect for Rules and Officials</th>
<th>Respect for Commitment</th>
<th>Respect for Opponents</th>
<th>A Negative Approach</th>
<th>Instrumental Aggression</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( r )</td>
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<td>( r )</td>
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<tr>
<td>(A) Teammates’ Perceptions of:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Autocratic leadership</td>
<td>0.07 0.07</td>
<td>0.06 0.08</td>
<td>–0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.13&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.11&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic leadership</td>
<td>0.07 0.11</td>
<td>–0.02 0.07</td>
<td>–0.04</td>
<td>–0.08</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>0.03 –0.07</td>
<td>0.02 0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>–0.01</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Feedback</td>
<td>0.03 0.03</td>
<td>0.04 0.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>–0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squared mult. corr.</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>(B) Players’ perceptions of:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autocratic leadership</td>
<td>0.07 –0.01</td>
<td>0.04 –0.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>–0.03</td>
<td>–0.21&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>–0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic leadership</td>
<td>0.22&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt; –0.03</td>
<td>0.17&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; –0.07</td>
<td>0.17&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.33&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.13&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>0.48&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt; 0.36&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.65&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt; 0.62&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.45&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.19&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.65&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.57&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive feedback</td>
<td>0.55&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt; 0.45&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.39&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt; 0.23&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.81&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.47&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.31&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.11&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squared mult. corr.</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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</table>

Note. \( r \) = Pearson product moment coefficients; \( \beta \) = standardized regression coefficients.  
<sup>a</sup>p = .05; <sup>b</sup>p = .01; <sup>c</sup>p = .001.

Individual perceptions of Democratic Leadership showed significant bivariate correlations with the positive dimensions of SP but yielded only a relatively weak yet unique association with the SP-dimension Respect for Opponents. Further analysis showed, however, that this lack of significant relationships was due to an overlap in covariance of this leadership dimension and Social Support and Positive Feedback with SP.

Individual perceptions of Social Support were positively and significantly associated with the positive dimensions of SP. The relationships to Respect for Rules and Officials and Respect for Opponents were relatively strong. In addition,
Social Support showed a significantly negative relationship with Instrumental Aggression and a relative moderate negative association with A Negative Approach. Perceptions of Positive Feedback showed significant positive relationships to the positive dimensions of SP. An especially strong association was found for this leadership style with respect to the commitment dimension in the SP scale. On the other hand, Positive Feedback was negative and significantly related to A Negative Approach, while associations with Instrumental Aggression were positive and significant.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the characteristics of sportspersonship among adolescent male handball players and investigate the relationship between sportspersonship and the players’ perceptions of their coach’s leadership.

As argued previously from a methodological point of view, we believed that the additional subscale for Instrumental Aggression in the Extended Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale (EMSOS) could balance the positive bias in the original MSOS. The correlation pattern presented in Table 1 showed that Instrumental Aggression was moderately correlated with A Negative Approach and uncorrelated or moderately negatively correlated with the positive dimensions in the EMSOS. This indicates that the items included in the new subscale assessed a construct not included in the original MSOS and may therefore have strengthened the capability of the scale to capture negative dimensions of sportspersonship.

The Characteristics of Sportspersonship

With regard to the characteristics of sportspersonship (see Table 1), the results provided evidence of the players perceiving themselves as respectful of commitment, social conventions, rules, and officials and that only occasionally did they regard themselves as bad losers (A Negative Approach). From a socio-moral perspective, this is clearly promising. However, the players also perceived themselves to be relatively less respectful of their opponents and reported frequently displaying instrumental aggression (see Table 1). Together with the relatively low correlations between the positive and negative SP dimensions, this seems to indicate a general pro-social orientation that may not necessarily prohibit players from displaying unsporting behavior (e.g., being instrumentally aggressive). Usually one would expect that pro-social intentions would be associated with a low display of unsporting conduct and therefore negatively correlated. However, it is possible that some players do not perceive a conflict between the more positive and negative dimensions of sportspersonship as defined in this study. The crucial point here is how the players comprehend and interpret the negative sportspersonship dimensions. It may well be that such behavior is looked upon as more conventional behavior, the way the game is played, and therefore justified. In this sense, instrumental aggression may be perceived more as assertiveness than hostile behavior. According to Parens (19), assertiveness depicts non-destructive, goal achieving, and mastery behaviors that may readily have a place in sport. Different conduct that is usually considered as positive manifestations of sports participation may imply aggressive characteristics. In handball, for instance, no one would consider holding an opponent tight with both arms as unacceptable behavior (25). If one accepts Parens’s definition, it is
possible that players may consider instrumental aggressive behavior as a forceful, robust, and energetic play integrated in the competitive nature of sport. However, the fact that the players reported a relatively low score on Respect for Opponents may indicate that such perceptions may also involve a devaluation of one’s opponents. If so, it is debatable whether this is compatible with the spirit of community basic to the ideals of sport. More research is evidently needed to explore these relationships.

**Leadership Dimensions and Sportspersonship**

Several significant associations were detected between SP and players’ individual perceptions of coaches’ leadership (see Table 2). Teammates’ perceptions of the coaches’ leadership, however, yielded only weak or nonsignificant associations with SP, suggesting that general differences in leadership between coaches only accounts for a small proportion of the variation in SP.

The fact that relationships between perceived leadership and SP were found primarily for individual perceptions may indicate that such associations are spurious and therefore reflections of personal characteristics that influence both SP and perceptions of coaches’ leadership. However, the results may also reflect the fact that it is the personalized leadership in dyadic relations that influences behavior. In some cases, it may be the players’ personal characteristics and behavior that influence the coach’s management. Research shows that, for example, people who distinguish themselves as high achievers are likely to receive more attention and positive feedback than low achievers (31). On the other hand, maybe it is particularly in personal relations with single players that coaches influence the players’ behavior. It is somewhat conceivable that the distinctive character and quality of these relations can vary markedly within the same team. The fact that significant associations were found primarily on an individual level may indicate that the coach’s situational sensitivity and sensitivity in relation to particular players’ needs and characteristics might prove to be more important than generic team management skills.

It is conceivable that coaches manage players differently according to their particular tasks during a game. For example, in order to make the linesman in attack capable of coping with tough physical opposition, the coach may choose to stimulate a necessarily aggressive attitude by using firm autocratic management towards the player (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). This may be in total contrast to a player in the wing position in need of more technical and creative skills, all of which may make the coach more concerned with cooperation and dialogue.

Second, the pattern of more explained variances in SP at the individual level compared to the team level may also be explained on the basis of the fit between the coach’s leadership and individual player’s needs and characteristics (see the Person-Environment Fit Theory; 14). It is likely that a good fit between the coach’s management style and a particular player’s personal characteristics will contribute to the establishment of a positive relation and interaction between the two. In such a circumstance of mutuality, it is reasonable that the player will develop positive sentiments toward the coach and perceive the coach as supportive and accommodating, a perception of leadership that we have assumed stimulates pro-social behavior. On the other hand, a poor ability by the coach to meet the needs of certain players may lead to frustration among these players that may show up as unsporting behavior. It is also likely that these players may feel little attachment to the coach. This
will, according to Hirschi’s theory, reduce the coach’s capability to influence players’ behavior. Assuming that coaches among adolescent sport players desire to enhance pro-social behavior, the poor attachment may thus inhibit his/her opportunity to do so.

As expected, perceptions of autocratic leadership were primarily associated with increased levels of unsporting behavior (see Table 2). These results seem to be in accordance with previous research (29) based on self-determination theory (8, 9), which suggests that lack of autonomy and low self-determination is closely related to anti-social behavior.

From the point of view of social learning theory, the learning process of modeling may also be of relevance here. An autocratic leadership style involving inflexibility in management may model a low emphasis on the need for considerate behavior that may be associated with the display of low empathy and a lack of consideration for others’ welfare. Moreover, an autocratic coach who shows inflexibility in decision-making may also model more ego-oriented attitudes. Research within social psychology proposes that an increased concern for oneself decreases concern for others (4), and self-centered attitudes and ego orientations that are often found to de-emphasize the importance of benevolent behavior (10, 24).

The results showed that the leadership dimensions Social Support and Positive Feedback were significant and positively linked to positive SP (see Table 2). The relatively strong association between supportive leadership dimensions (Social Support, Positive Feedback) and the positive dimensions of SP seems to underscore the significance of such management style in relation to socio-moral behavior. Social Support also yielded a negative and significant relationship with Instrumental Aggression that may indicate that this management style could also be effective in preventing unsporting behavior.

Democratic Leadership yielded only one significant association with the positive dimensions. However, this was due to a shared variance with Social Support and Positive Feedback, and the influence of democratic leadership was likely to be mediated by these two leadership dimensions.

Findings concerning supportive and democratic leadership seem to imply that management strategies that provide opportunities for players to develop their individual qualifications through close relationships and teamwork are linked to fairness and sportspersonship in sport. In this way findings seem to be in accordance with self-determinations theory (8, 9), claiming that intrinsic motivation and pro-social behavior are enhanced by positive relationships and self-determination (cf. 22, 27).

On the other hand, Positive Feedback showed also a positive association with Instrumental Aggression. One plausible explanation for this finding may be that instrumental aggression is considered by coaches to hold positive “aggressive” characteristic in the form of assertiveness (19). If coaches regard Instrumental Aggression as a manifestation of energetic involvement, such behavior may be considered to stimulate positive skills that may well be worthy of reward. It is, however, possible that players may have difficulty in drawing the line between assertiveness and aggression that may underlie breaking or bending the rules and other unsporting behaviors. As mentioned previously, the players reported a relatively low score on Respect for Opponents that makes it rather likely that in moments of decisive importance, boarders may be crossed. Striving hard and displaying physical energy to win the game is undoubtedly desirable. However, if this takes
place at the expense of friendship and fairness, it could easily be detrimental to basic ethics in sport. In order to explore such relationships in greater depth, there is a need for measurement instruments that to a larger extent separate and capture the effort and performance aspects of SP, especially in relation to the dimension Instrumental Aggression.

The fact that relationships between perceived leadership and SP were found primarily for individual perceptions renders it especially important to make reservations about the causal directions of associations. Additional research with designs better suited to examine the directions of causality and mechanisms that could underlie associations between coaches’ leadership and SP is warranted.

References

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Appendix

Items included in the subscale Instrumental Aggression.

1. I often play aggressively to win the game.
2. In defense I often play aggressively to prevent a score.
3. If an opponent on an even score rushes towards our goal in the last few seconds of the match, I will try to stop him even though I will have to break the rules.
4. I often tackle a skilful opponent extra hard to intimidate him.
5. I often use physical force to make opponents annoyed so that they make mistakes.

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