

Original Article

Sportspersonship Orientation and Empathy: a Study of Professional Football Players

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between sportspersonship orientation and empathy on Turkish male professional footballers. Using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and the Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientations Scale, the study found out that there was a positive correlation between the levels of “respect for social convention” and “fantasy”, between “empathic concern” and “respect for social convention”, “respect for rules and officials”, “respect for one’s full commitment”, “respect for opponents”. Moreover, “perspective taking” was positively associated with “respect for social convention”, “respect for rules and officials” and “respect for opponents”, which revealed that being empathic had a significant effect on sportspersonship.

Key Words: Sportspersonship , Empathy, Professional Football, Professional Football Players.

Introduction

There has been an increasing attention to studies on sports ethics and empathy in recent years. The studies on issues such as moral reasoning in sport and daily life, aggressive tendencies (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986; Bredemeier, 1994), the personal and environmental factors on the display of sportspersonship (Stornes, 2001), moral growth among athletes and nonathletes (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986), prosocial and antisocial behavior in sport (Kavussanu, Seal, & Phillips, 2006; Kavussanu, 2006), moral reasoning, moral action and the moral atmosphere of sport (Jones & McNamee, 2000), motivational climate and sportspersonship (Lemyre, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2002; Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004; Gano-Overway, Guivernau, Magyar, Waldron, & Ewing, 2005), sportspersonship orientations (Vallerand et al., 1997) have called for a new understanding of sports ethics. 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 (Stornes & Bru, 2002). According to Feezzell (1986), sportspersonship is a mean between excessive seriousness, which misunderstands the importance of the play-spirit, and an excessive sense of playfulness, which might be called frivolity and which misunderstands the importance of victory and achievement when the play is competitive (Feezzell, 1986). For Arnold (1984), sportspersonship is characterized by magnanimity, good humor, respect, politeness, affability, compassion, altruism and generosity. The good sportsperson keeps to the letter and the spirit of the game and never detracts from the virtues listed. The significance of sportspersonship as virtues or attitudes rests in the belief that cognition is motivational, meaning that athletes who express pro-social intentions also act in accordance with their perceptions (Stornes & Ommundsen, 2004). There are three basic theoretical views as to how sportspersonship should be perceived. These theoretical views have made seminal contributions to our understanding of sportspersonship orientations. First, the social cognitive theory posits that models and reinforcement determine athletes' beliefs about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in competitive settings. The second approach draws concepts from the structural developmental model and, most notably, from moral reasoning. Specifically, one's capacity to instill conciliation through moral dialogue has been shown to impinge on aggression thereby suggesting behavioral propensities akin to those associated with sportspersonship. (Chantal & Bernache-Assollant, 2003).

The social-psychological perspective is the third one proposing that it is important to make a clear distinction between three key elements; sportspersonship orientations, the development sportspersonship orientations, and the display of sportspersonship behavior (Vallerand & Losie, 1994; Vallerand, Brière, Blanchard, & Provencher, 1997; Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier, Brière, & Pelletier, 1996). Vallerand and Losier (1994) have adopted a social-psychological view of sportspersonship that separates the latter from aggression. The multidimensional definition of sportspersonship underlines the content of the sportspersonship behavior and orientations. According to Vallerand et al. (1997), the multidimensional construct of sportspersonship consists of five clear and practical dimensions: 1) Full commitment toward sport participation; 2) Respect for social conventions; 3) Respect and concern for the rules and officials; 4) True respect and concern for the opponent; 5) Negative approach toward sportspersonship.

Like in the sportspersonship literature, different approaches of empathy have been offered in the literature. While some researchers focus mostly on the cognitive side of empathy (Eisenberg, Holmgren, & Fabes, 1998), others are more concerned with affective factors (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). The common point, however, is that empathy contains a multiple structure (Davis, 1980; Davis, 1983). Hoffman defines empathy as “an effective response more appropriate to someone else’s situation than to one’s own” (Hoffman, 1990, p. 48). According to Davis, empathy in the broadest sense refers to “the reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another” (Davis, 1983, p. 113). Eisenberg and Strayer define empathy as “an emotional response that stems from another’s emotional state or condition and that is congruent with the other’s emotional state or condition” (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1990, p. 5). Studies on empathy reveal the importance of empathy training for individuals. For instance, Kavussanu et al. (2009) found that football players who had lower empathic skills tended to show more antisocial behaviors. Furthermore, empathic concern and perspective taking are known to facilitate prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg, Holmgren, & Fabes, 1998; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988).

Sports, ethics and empathy are inextricably linked to each other. According to Hogan, moral development can be conceptualized and moral conduct explained in terms of five dimensions (moral knowledge, socialization, empathy, autonomy, and a dimension of moral judgment), each defined by a separate measure (cited in Greif & Hogan, 1973, p. 281). Hoffman, on the other hand, claims that there is congruence between empathy and the moral principles of caring and justice. After the construction of moral principles, it is obvious that empathic skills play a significant role in decision-making. Because empathy is related to moral principles, “the arousal of empathy should activate moral principles, and thus –directly, and indirectly through these principles- have an effect on moral judgment and reasoning” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 66). In the research of decision-making and moral judgment, “subjects are typically asked how someone facing a particular moral dilemma should act” (Hoffman, 1990, p. 65). Because moral dilemmas include victims, it is quite often that individuals adopt an empathic perspective (Goleman, 1998). One’s moral precepts are apt to be activated when one encounters someone in danger or distress and feels a conflict between the desire to help that individual and the desire to continue to pursue one’s own goals of the moment (Hoffman, 1990). Moral dilemmas are present in the context of sports. It is unfortunate that athletes mostly have a tendency to act unsportspersonlike ways in those moral dilemmas. This is especially pronounced in team sports like football, basketball and handball. Of all sports branches, it is the football that includes most unsportspersonlike acts.

This situation raises an issue of what to do in order to promote sportspersonship in the context of football. What are the qualities an athlete should have in order to act in accordance with generally accepted principles of fair play? What are the skills that help foster fair play in football? In light of these and more questions, the relationship between fair play and empathy needs to be studied. However, little is known about the relationship between fair play and empathy in the context of sports in the literature (Bredemeier, 1994; Kavussanu, Stamp, Slade, & Ring, 2009). In Turkey, though, there is no single study for this relationship. In this regard, it is the intent of this investigation to contribute to that end by exploring the relationship between empathic dispositions and sportspersonship orientation in a sample of Turkish male professional football players.

Material and Method

Participants

The subjects of this study consist of 130 professional football players from seven clubs in the 2007-2008 football season. There were 515 football players from 18 football clubs, 130 of whom were randomly chosen as the subjects. Their ages ranged from 17 to 31.

Measurements

Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientations Scale-MSOS developed by Vallerand, Briere, Blanchard and Provencher (1997) and translated into Turkish by the researcher herself (Sezen-Balcikanli, 2010) and Interpersonal Reactivity Index-IRI developed by Davis (1983) and translated into Turkish by Engeler (2005) were employed to explore the level of sportspersonship orientation and of empathy.

Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientations Scale-MSOS

Sportspersonship was assessed by a Turkish version of Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientations Scale-MSOS. The original MSOS is based on Vallerand's et al. (1997) conceptualization of sportsmanship. As indicated previously, this approach posits the existence of five sportsmanship orientations, including concern and respect for 1) one’s commitment toward sport participation, 2) social conventions in sport, 3) rules and officials, and 4) the opponent. The fifth dimension is a negative approach toward one's participation in sport. The MSOS thus contains five subscales with five items in each. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 (*does not correspond at all to me*) and 5 (*corresponds exactly to me*) serving as extreme points, and 3 (*partially corresponds to me*) as the midpoint (Vallerand et al., 1997).

Translation-back-translation technique was employed during the process of Turkish translation of MSOS. In order to test the understandability of cultural differences and of the items, the scale was administered to randomly selected 300 students from the School of Physical Education and Sports, a state university in Turkey.

In light of the results emanating from the statistical analysis, the unapparent items were revised and the scale was administered to the same group once again. Following this process, reliability and validity studies were carried out with randomly selected 110 football players from various football clubs in Ankara. On the basis of the first factor analysis related to 25 items (5 subscales) of Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale-MSOS, it was recognized that 5 items of negative approach towards sportspersonship (items 5, 10, 15, 20, 25) had unacceptably low reliability. This subscale was not included in the second factor analysis. The Turkish version of Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale-MSOS had 4 factors and 20 items. Cronbach Alpha values were respectively 0.86 for factor 1 (respect for social convention), 0.83 for Factor 2 (respect for rules and officials), 0.91 for Factor 3 (respect for one's full commitment) and 0.82 for Factor 4 (respect for opponents). It can be concluded that The Turkish version of Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale-MSOS has a reliable and valid structure (Sezen-Balcikanli, 2010).

Interpersonal Reactivity Index-IRI

Empathy was assessed by a Turkish version of Interpersonal Reactivity Index-IRI. The original IRI takes as its starting point from the notion that empathy consists of a set of separate but related constructs, and seeks to provide measures of dispositional tendencies in several areas. The instrument contains four (seven-items) subscales, each tapping a separate facet of empathy. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with 0 (*does not correspond at all to me*) and 4 (*corresponds exactly to me*) serving as extreme points. The Perspective taking (PT) scale measures the reported tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others in everyday life (I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.). The empathic concern (EC) scale assesses the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for unfortunate others (I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.). The personal distress (PD) scale taps the tendency to experience distress and discomfort in response to extreme distress in others (Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.). The fantasy scale (FS) measures the tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into a fictional situation (When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.) (Davis, 1980).

Interpersonal Reactivity Index-IRI was translated into Turkish by Engeler Undergraduate students from two universities completed Interpersonal Reactivity Index for the pilot studies. After pilot studies, Interpersonal reactivity Index was given to 214 volunteered undergraduate students (95 male, 116 women, 7 neglected their gender). Majority of them were single (%98.1) and their ages ranged from 18 to 27 ($M= 20.96$, $SD= 1.52$). Mean inter-item correlations and internal consistencies (Standardized item alphas) of subscales of Interpersonal Reactivity Index were computed. Corrected item total correlations were reported as a result of item analysis. Intercorrelations of subscales and their correlations with gender were reported to evaluate their preliminary validity. In order to assess test-retest reliabilities of the four subscales, an independent sample of undergraduate students ($N=40$) completed Interpersonal reactivity Index twice with the interval of 20-24 days and test-retest reliabilities were computed. Internal consistencies of all four subscales were satisfactory (.60-.76). Mean inter-item correlations showed that subscales had a homogenous content (.17-.32). In item analysis, three items revealed relatively a poor performance. However, the means of corrected item-total correlations were high for all the subscales (.32-.49). Intercorrelations of subscales were consistent with the relevant literature. Test retest correlations were in an acceptable range (.66-.80). Subscales of Interpersonal Reactivity Index had excellent psychometric properties. Although three items performed relatively poorly, these items contributed to the whole subscales. In addition, intercorrelations of subscales and their correlations with gender were consistent with expectancies and the literature. The results of the statistical analyses showed that only three subscales of the IRI (perspective taking, empathic concern and fantasy) were considered to be suitable for this study. Thus, personal distress subscale was not included in the study (Engeler, 2005).

Procedure

Before the administration process, we had arranged a meeting with coaches and gave them specific information about how to carry out the investigation in line with certain procedures. Interpersonal Reactivity Index-IRI and Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientations Scale-MSOS were administered to professional players at the very beginning of 2007-2008 football season. The coaches were used as survey administrators.

The findings were checked by the researcher. Those that were considered to be valid were included in the study. The remaining findings were computed with SPSS statistical packet programme. Statistical analysis included descriptive statistic (Alphas, Means, Standard Deviations) and Pearson Product Moment Correlations with centered scores for empathy and sportspersonship orientations.

Results

Table 1 Descriptive Statistic (Alphas, Means, Standard Deviations)

Variable	M	StD	α
Respect for Social Conventions	3.56	4.785	.86
Respect for Rules and Officials	3.74	4.090	.83

Respect for Commitment	4.23	4.962	.91
Respect for Opponents	3.29	4.727	.82
Fantasy	1.89	4.129	.70
Empathic Concern	2.54	4.476	.75
Perspective Taking	2.22	4.021	.70

Note: IRI scale with 0 (*does not correspond at all to me*) and 4 (*corresponds exactly to me*).

MSOS scale with 1 (*does not correspond at all to me*) and 5 (*corresponds exactly to me*).

As Table 1 displays, mean scores were high “for one’s full commitment toward sport participation” (M=4,23), somewhat high for “respect for the rules and officials” (M=3,74), “respect for social convention” (M=3.56), whereas scores for “respect and concern for the opponents” (M=3,29) and “perspective taking” (M=2,22) and “fantasy” (M=1,89) were comparatively low.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and correlations of MSOS and of IRI

Variable	Respect for Social Conventions			Respect for Rules and Officials			Respect for Commitment			Respect for Opponents		
	p	r	r ²	p	r	r ²	p	r	r ²	p	r	r ²
Fantasy	.013	.217**	.05	.127	.134	.02	.867	-.015	.0002	.011	.223	.05
Empathic Concern	.000	.447***	.20	.000	.365***	.13	.000	.440***	.19	.023	.200**	.04
Perspective Taking	.004	.249***	.06	.024	.197**	.04	.286	.094	.009	.051	.171*	.03

* 0.01 **0.05 ***0.001

(N: 130)

As Table 2 indicates, there is a significant and positive relationship between “respect for social conventions” and “fantasy” ($r=0.217$; $p<0.05$). Moreover, it is obvious that 5% of the variance in “respect for social conventions” was accounted for by “fantasy”. Likewise, “respect for social conventions” was significantly related to “empathic concern” ($r=0.447$; $p<0.001$). 20% of the variance in “respect for social conventions” was due to variance in “empathic concern”. “Respect for social conventions” was also positively associated with “perspective taking” ($r=0.249$; $p<0.001$). The impact of “respect for social conventions” on “perspective taking” was 6%.

The table also shows that “respect for rules and officials” was found to be positively related to “empathic concern” ($r=0.365$; $p<0.001$). 13% of the variance in “respect for rules and officials” was accounted for by “empathic concern”. When the variance in “respect for rules and officials” and “perspective taking” is compared with one another, one can see that there is a positive correlation ($r=0.197$; $p<0.05$) between these two dimensions, and “perspective taking” has affected 5% “respect for social conventions” and “for rules and officials”. “Respect for commitment” was found to be positively associated with “empathic concern” ($r=0.440$; $p<0.001$). 19% of the variance in “respect for commitment” was accounted for by “empathic concern”. “Respect for opponents” was positively correlated with “fantasy” ($r=0.223$; $p<0.05$). 5% of the variance in “respect for opponents” was because of the variance in “empathic concern”. “Respect for opponents” was positively related to “empathic concern” of professional football players ($r=0.200$; $p<0.05$). The impact of “empathic concern” on “respect for opponents” was 4%. There is a positive correlation between “respect for opponents” and “perspective taking” ($r=0.171$; $p<0.01$).

Discussions

The current study investigating the relationship between sportpersonship orientation and empathy revealed that the subscales of fair play were positively correlated with those of sportpersonship orientation. “Respect for social conventions” and “fantasy” were found to be positively correlated with each other ($r=0.217$; $p<0.05$). This finding displays that the higher the level of “fantasy” of professional football players is, the higher the level of “respect for social conventions”. It is expected that the level of “respect for social conventions” is higher, specifically in team sports. Footballers should act by understanding their opponents’, coaches’ or teammates’ and referee’s ideas and feelings, which is of significance in term of sportpersonship orientation. A footballer with a high level of fantasy will not shake his opponent’s hands only if he wins the game. He will show a more consistent act rather than an act by understanding his opponent’s feelings, excitements or sorrows. Consistent acts are crucial because winning as well as losing the game are normal. Likewise, “empathic concern” was positively associated with “respect for social conventions” ($r=0.447$; $p<0.01$). Since “empathic concern” includes the feelings such as being sorry for people in need as well as pitying and protecting them, it is closely related to “respect for social conventions”. That is to say, the higher the level of football players’ emphatic concern, the more often their attitudes will change depending on winning and losing the game. Football players

will not only shake their opponents' hands when they win but also they will appreciate their opponents because they at least try to do their best. They will not show any inappropriate behaviors and not take advantage of their opponents' disadvantages. In relation to the impact of football players' behaviors on fans, empathic concern of football players is getting more and more important. There is a significant relationship between "respect for social conventions" and "perspective taking" ($r=0.249$; $p<0.01$). An athlete should guess what his teammates do in given situations, which requires different perspectives during the game. Games including strategy use increase gaining different perspectives. Despite the assumption that sports increases "perspective taking", it is believed that competition hinders "perspective taking" (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). In football where the competition is at a high level, the level of football players' "perspective taking" and "respect for social conventions" is not as desired as it should be, which is much of evidence in the failure of "perspective taking". Another important point is that trainers do not even try to change such inappropriate behaviors.

On the contrary, trainers encourage athletes to win at all costs without sticking to the principles of sportspersonship. This may be mostly due to the tension that football players taking into their opponents' feelings do not commit a harsh foul on their opponents or do not prefer to play so hard (Shields & Bredemeier, 1994). However, the acquisition of perspective taking skills is important in that football players develop various strategies by foreseeing their opponents' next moves or even their own teammates' actions. This situation requires players to develop various game strategies, which, in turn, causes different perspectives to emerge. Football players develop their cognitive skills, so interesting games will be available to watch. The impact of empathy on social conventions in relation to social behaviors has been also confirmed by other research (Staub, 1990; Hancer & Tanrisevdi, 2003). As a result, it can be seen that if footballers develop their own empathic skills, "respect for social conventions" towards the opponents will be higher. According to the results of another study, university students are given a Communication and Conflict Resolution Skill Training Program. The results of the study indicate that this program is very effective in developing social skills of university students (Karahan, 2008). The findings also display that empathic and social skills are interrelated to each other.

"Respect for officials and rules", another subscale of sportspersonship orientation scale, was found to be positively associated with "empathic concern" and "perspective taking" ($r=0.365$, $p<0.01$; $r=0.197$; $p<0.05$). This means that there will be a significant increase in "respect for officials and rules" as football players develop their "empathic concern" and "perspective taking" skills. If a football player judges things like a referee, it is highly believed that objections to the referee and the actions to deceive the referee are likely to decrease. It is widely known from referees that referees lost their faith in football players during the game. For instance, on the basis of a referee's comment on football players who tend to object to his decisions, insistent objections of famous football players, mostly known as "well-behaved" considerably damage mutual trust during a game (Uluc, 2006). There is a significant relationship between "respect for social conventions" and "empathic concern" ($r=0.440$, $p<0.01$). "Respect for opponents" was also positively associated with "perspective taking" and "empathic concern".

Conclusions

When the correlation between the subscale of IRI and of MSOS is examined, it has become clear that the more empathic skills of football players develop, the more their sportspersonship orientation increases. Empathy, in a way, helps individuals to perceive their own interests, needs, wishes and sensitivity to others. All of these are closely related to moral judgment and behaviors. Individuals with empathic skills are able to understand moral dimensions of events concerned (Miller, Bredemeier, & Shields, 1997).

Empathic ability, a very important component that determines behaviors in sports, is one of the qualities athletes that should have. If an athlete fosters his empathic ability, this will directly affect his sportspersonship orientation. This situation will, without a doubt, have a significant influence on players, fans as well as referees who always interact with one another. The studies clearly indicate that sports environments are closely related to each other. For example, studies on the fair play understanding of primary and secondary school students (Sezen & Yildiran, 2008), physical education teacher trainees (Yildiran & Sezen, 2006) and physical education teachers (Sezen & Yildiran, 2006) display a very negative picture, which is an indication of this close relationship. Working with younger children, Shields et al found out that fans and trainers play a key role in athletes' poor sportspersonship (Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2007).

In this context, empathy training for football players is of great significance. Studies indicating that empathic skills are developed through training are available in the literature. Kalliopuska and Tiitinen (1991) found out that empathy training accompanied by physical activities, drawing and music fostered children's empathic skills. Similarly, Yuksel's (2003) research indicated that empathy training had a great influence on empathic skills of primary school students. Various empathy-training programs are mostly found to have a significant effect on individuals from different occupations (Oz, 1998; Tutuk, 2002; Akyol, 2005). It is also known that Dokmen's (1988) psychodrama application greatly contributed to individuals' empathic skills. In this regard, an empathy-training program specifically designed for sports context is considered to foster athletes' empathic skills. On this basis, empathic training in early stages of life is believed to contribute to individuals'

moral judgment and reasoning. To Geishbrecht (1998), perspective taking is closely associated with moral decision-making. Individuals are likely to have moral perspectives through relationship with others if they develop their empathic skills. Studies of fair play on professional football players indicate that empathy training is more than an option (Sezen, 2003; Sezen & Yildiran, 2003; Sezen & Yildiran, 2004).

The findings indicate that empathy is an important skill for athletes to develop. In light of the findings, it is proposed that an empathy-training program should be developed in accordance with appropriate sports environments. More specifically, an empathy-training program at an early stage is of great significance in terms of athlete's moral behaviors and attitudes. It is also suggested that similar studies be conducted in other sports disciplines as well as on amateur athletes.

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