

# Toward an understanding of transgressive behavior in sport

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# Accepted Manuscript

Understanding athletes' transgressive behavior: Progress and prospects

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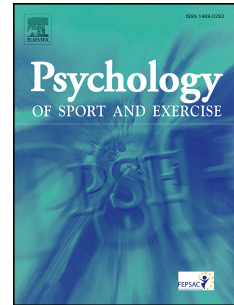
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Running Head: DARK SIDE

SECOND REVISION

Understanding athletes' transgressive behavior: Progress and prospects

Second Revision Submitted: January 9, 2019

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## Abstract

In this article, research investigating athletes' transgressive behaviour in the last ten years is reviewed. The focus is on behaviours that have adverse interpersonal consequences or violate the ideal of fair play, such as aggression, cheating, doping, and antisocial behaviour toward opponents and teammates. First, anticipated guilt and moral disengagement are discussed as proximal predictors of these behaviours. Second, personality variables that facilitate or inhibit transgressive behaviours are considered, followed by a review of motivational and moral features of the social environment within which these behaviours take place. The article ends with critical considerations of some key issues and directions for future research.

1 Running Head: TRANSGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

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## 1 Understanding athletes' transgressive behaviour: Progress and prospects

2 Sport has been heralded as building character for centuries, yet few would argue that  
3 negative social behaviours, with adverse consequences for others, are also common in sport.  
4 Some publicized examples are the rugby player Tom Williams faking an injury to his mouth  
5 by biting on a fake blood capsule in a U.K premiership rugby-union game, the boxer Mike  
6 Tyson biting off part of Evander Holyfield's ear in response to repeated head butting in a  
7 heavyweight world title fight, the Australian cricket team player Cameron Bancroft,  
8 tampering with the ball, and the state-sponsored doping in Russia. Behaviours of this kind  
9 have negative interpersonal consequences and violate the ideal of fair play, which involves  
10 abiding by the rules when taking part in sport.

11 Although positive social behaviors also occur in sport, the present article focuses on  
12 negative social acts that have aversive consequences for others, or violate the ideal of fair  
13 play. In the sport literature, a variety of terms have been used to refer to such acts. For  
14 example, aggression refers to overt behavior (verbal or physical) that is purposeful (i.e., non-  
15 accidental), chosen with the intent of causing injury, and has the capacity to cause  
16 psychological or physical injury to another (Husman & Silva, 1984). Cheating, involves  
17 intentionally breaking the rules of the game to gain an unfair advantage over others. A  
18 cheating behavior widely investigated in recent years (see Ntoumanis, Ng, Barkoukis, &  
19 Backhouse, 2014) is doping, which refers to the use of banned substances or methods to  
20 enhance sport performance. Finally, the term antisocial behavior has been used to refer to  
21 sport behaviors intended to harm or disadvantage another, and antisocial behaviors directed  
22 toward opponents and teammates have been described and received extensive research  
23 attention (see Kavussanu, 2012; Kavussanu & Stanger, 2017).

24 In this article, the term transgressive behavior is used to collectively refer to acts that  
25 can have negative interpersonal consequences or violate the ideal of fair play. However,

1 when researchers have measured a specific form of transgressive behavior<sup>1</sup> (i.e., aggression,  
2 cheating, doping, antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents) the precise term  
3 referring to the specific transgressive behavior is used. The term aggression (or likelihood to  
4 aggress) is used when studies have examined a *specific* aggressive behavior (i.e.,  
5 intentionally injuring an opponent), while antisocial behavior is used when studies have  
6 investigated a variety of antisocial acts toward opponents and teammates, typically utilizing  
7 the Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior in Sport Scale (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009). There  
8 are other forms of transgressive behaviors in sport, such as match fixing, athlete abuse, and  
9 harassment. The present article will not deal with the latter behaviors.

10 Given the amount of research on transgressive behaviour in sport, this review is not  
11 exhaustive. Rather, its purpose is to provide an overview of research on the variables that  
12 have been most consistently associated with transgressive behaviour in sport in the last ten  
13 years. The article starts by discussing proximal predictors of transgressive behaviour,  
14 followed by personality variables and social factors as antecedents of this behavior in sport. It  
15 concludes by offering some critical reflections and directions for future research.

### 16 **Proximal Predictors of Transgressive Behaviour**

17 Researchers have proposed a variety of models in their effort to understand  
18 transgressive behavior in sport (e.g., Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015; Kavussanu & Ring, 2017;  
19 Lazuras, Barkoukis, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2015). These models incorporate explanatory variables  
20 or proximal predictors of transgressive behavior, which are assumed to “carry” or explain the  
21 effects of more distal personal and social antecedents on behavior. The two most reliable  
22 proximal predictors of transgressive behavior in sport, discussed in this section, are  
23 anticipated guilt and moral disengagement. These are hypothesized to act in opposite ways,  
24 by decreasing and increasing transgressive behavior, respectively; they are also inversely  
25 associated with each other.

1           *Guilt* is a self-conscious moral emotion arising from moral transgressions and is a key  
2 regulator of moral action (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). It involves unpleasant  
3 feelings accompanied by tension and regret, plays a central role in regulating transgressive  
4 behaviour, and is an adaptive emotion characterised by reparative action tendencies (i.e.,  
5 making amends) following a transgression (Tangney et al., 2007). The central role of emotion  
6 in regulating moral action has also been highlighted by Bandura (1991) in his social cognitive  
7 theory of moral thought and action. He stated that people tend to behave in ways that are in  
8 line with their moral standards to avoid experiencing negative emotions such as guilt and  
9 shame, which result from behaviour that violates these moral standards (Bandura, 1991).

10           The role of anticipated guilt in transgressive behavior in sport has been examined in  
11 previous research. In two studies investigating aggression in sport (e.g., Kavussanu, Stanger,  
12 & Ring, 2015; Stanger, Kavussanu, Boardley, & Ring, 2013), university student-athletes  
13 from a variety of team sports imagined themselves in a hypothetical situation, where they had  
14 to decide whether they would foul their opponent, resulting in the opponent being seriously  
15 injured. Participants indicated their likelihood to act aggressively, as well as the extent to  
16 which they anticipated feeling guilt, after they had engaged in the aggressive act. In both  
17 studies, anticipated guilt was inversely and positively associated with aggression likelihood.

18           Anticipated guilt has also been consistently and negatively associated with doping  
19 intentions in athletes from a variety of individual and team sports (e.g., Boardley, Smith,  
20 Mills, Grix, & Wynne, 2017; Kavussanu & Ring, 2017; Ring & Kavussanu, 2017).

21           Anticipated regret, a variable conceptually similar to anticipated guilt has also been inversely  
22 linked to doping intentions. For example, anticipated regret from using banned substances  
23 emerged as a strong negative predictor of doping intentions in several studies of Greek elite  
24 athletes recruited from a variety of individual and team sports (Lazuras, Barkoukis, Mallia,  
25 Lucidi, & Brand, 2017; Lazuras, Barkoukis, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2015). Thus, there is consistent



1 evidence from several studies that the stronger the guilt or regret athletes expect to  
2 experience, the less likely they are to transgress in sport.

3       The second proximal predictor of transgressive behavior in sport is *moral*  
4 *disengagement*, which refers to eight psychological mechanisms, assumed to reduce the guilt  
5 and other negative emotions that inhibit transgressive behavior, thereby facilitating such  
6 behavior (Bandura, 1991). These mechanisms operate by cognitively restructuring  
7 transgressive behavior and its consequences, minimizing or obscuring one's role in the harm  
8 one causes, disregarding or distorting the detrimental consequences of one's behavior, and  
9 dehumanizing or blaming one's victim. For example, cheating could be justified as a way of  
10 helping one's team (moral justification); athletes may talk about "bending the rules" rather  
11 than breaking them (euphemistic labelling); they could compare transgressive behaviour with  
12 more harmful acts, making bad behaviour appear relatively benign (advantageous  
13 comparison); displace responsibility for their actions on the coach or support staff  
14 (displacement of responsibility); downplay the harm they cause (distortion of consequences);  
15 and blame their victim for their own behaviour (attribution of blame).

16       Numerous studies have consistently revealed strong positive relationships between  
17 moral disengagement and antisocial behaviour, particularly toward opponents in British and  
18 New Zealand athletes (e.g., Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010; Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015; Hodge  
19 & Lonsdale, 2011; Stanger, Backhouse, Jennings, & McKenna, 2018). Several studies have  
20 also reported strong positive links between this variable and doping intentions in Italian  
21 (Lucidi et al., 2008), French (Corrion, Scoffier-Merriault, & d'Arripe-Longueville, 2017),  
22 British (Boardley et al., 2017; Kavussanu & Ring, 2017) and Greek athletes (Ntoumanis,  
23 Barkoukis, Gucciardi, & Chan, 2017); in most of these studies, participants were elite  
24 athletes. That moral disengagement is a strong predictor of transgressive behavior is so many

1 studies from different countries, attests to the important role of this variable in explaining  
2 transgressive behavior in sport.

3 Bandura (1991) argued that people are able to circumvent the negative emotions that  
4 arise from moral transgressions, via the use of moral disengagement, that is, moral  
5 disengagement allows individuals to act badly without experiencing guilt. Bandura and  
6 colleagues (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996) found that moral  
7 disengagement was a negative predictor of anticipated guilt, which in turn negatively  
8 predicted aggressive behavior in school children. In the context of sport, moral  
9 disengagement predicted athletes' antisocial behavior (Stanger et al., 2013) and doping  
10 likelihood (Kavussanu & Ring, 2017) and behavior (Boardley et al., 2017) via reduced  
11 anticipated guilt. In all studies, moral disengagement had additional *direct* positive effects on  
12 transgressive behaviour, suggesting that this variable may regulate transgressive behaviour  
13 via other mechanisms besides anticipated guilt, and is itself a proximal predictor of  
14 transgressive behavior.

15 In sum, both anticipated guilt and moral disengagement are proximal predictors of  
16 transgressive behavior in sport. Both variables have also been examined as mediators  
17 between personal and social variables and transgressive behavior. Numerous studies have  
18 consistently revealed strong positive relationships between moral disengagement and  
19 antisocial behaviour toward opponents and teammates, aggression, and doping. Some of this  
20 research is discussed in the next section.

### 21 **Personal Variables as Distal Predictors of Transgressive Behavior in Sport**

22 A great deal of research has attempted to identify factors that facilitate or inhibit  
23 transgressive behaviour in sport. The focus of this section is on those variables that have  
24 evidenced the strongest and most consistent associations with this behaviour, and those that  
25 have received attention in recent research. Variables that are likely to facilitate transgressive

1 behaviour (i.e., positive predictors) are discussed first, followed by variables that are likely to  
2 inhibit such behaviour (i.e., negative predictors).

### 3 **Positive Predictors of Transgressive Behaviour**

4 Sport is an achievement context, and individuals take part in sport in order to achieve,  
5 thus, competence in this context is important. However, the way competence is construed  
6 varies based upon individuals' goal orientation, a construct described in achievement goal  
7 theory (Nicholls, 1989). The goal orientation most relevant to transgressive behavior is *ego*  
8 *orientation*, which refers to the tendency to evaluate competence using other-referenced  
9 criteria and equating success with normative superiority. Athletes high in ego orientation are  
10 more likely to act transgressively, in the pursuit of their ego-oriented goals. They need to win  
11 in order to feel competent, thus, they will do anything they can to achieve this goal. Empirical  
12 research has consistently revealed strong positive links between ego orientation and antisocial  
13 behaviour, particularly toward opponents (e.g., Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010).

14 A second variable relevant to transgressive sport behaviour, is *controlled motivation*, a  
15 construct of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Controlled motivation is evident  
16 when athletes take part in sport for extrinsic reasons, for instance, to obtain rewards and  
17 prizes, to show others how good they are, or to avoid feelings of guilt and shame. Athletes  
18 with controlled motivation would focus on the outcome of the game or race, and they are  
19 more likely to engage in transgressive behaviors to achieve their extrinsic goals. Controlled  
20 motivation has been positively associated with antisocial behavior toward both teammates  
21 and opponents in several studies (e.g., Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015;  
22 Sheehy & Hodge, 2015).

23 *Narcissism* is a complex personality construct that has been examined in one study in  
24 relation to antisocial sport behavior (Jones, Woodman, Barlow, & Roberts, 2017). Among  
25 other characteristics, narcissists have an inflated sense of self-worth, like to attract attention

1 to the self, overestimate their abilities, exploit others to get what they want, have  
2 unreasonable expectations of others, and provided that the task at hand presents an  
3 opportunity for glory, they will try to take full credit for themselves. Jones et al (2017) found  
4 that narcissism was positively associated with antisocial sport behavior.

5 Researchers have also tried to understand the process through which ego orientation,  
6 controlled motivation, and narcissism influence antisocial behavior. In the studies discussed  
7 above, ego orientation, controlled motivation and narcissism predicted antisocial behavior  
8 toward teammates and opponents not only directly, but also indirectly through moral  
9 disengagement (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; Jones et al., 2017).  
10 These findings suggest that athletes, who are preoccupied with winning, take part in sport for  
11 controlled reasons, or are narcissists, are more likely not only to display antisocial behavior,  
12 but also to morally disengage, and this process may facilitate such behavior.

13 Two other variables that have been positively associated with antisocial sport behavior  
14 are fear of failure and obsessive passion. *Fear of failure* is the motive to avoid failure in  
15 achievement contexts. Individuals high in fear of failure have learned to associate failure with  
16 aversive consequences and typically perceive failure in evaluative situations as threatening.  
17 Sagar, Boardley, and Kavussanu (2011) found that university team sport athletes, who  
18 reported high fear of failure were more likely to also report engaging in antisocial behavior  
19 not only toward their teammates and opponents while playing their sport but also toward their  
20 fellow students during the academic year. *Passion* is a strong inclination toward an activity  
21 that one likes, finds important, and in which one invests a significant amount of time and  
22 energy (Vallerand et al., 2003). In obsessive passion, one feels compelled to engage in the  
23 activity, experiences conflict, and the activity takes a lot of space in the person's self  
24 (Vallerand et al., 2003). Donahue, Rip, and Vallerand (2009) examined the relationship  
25 between passion and reactive aggression (e.g., "At times I cannot control my urge to harm an

1 opponent”) in basketball players. Obsessive passion for basketball corresponded to higher  
2 levels of reactive aggression. This suggests that how athletes approach the activity has  
3 implications for their aggressive behavior.

#### 4 **Negative Predictors of Transgressive Behaviour**

5 Another line of research has focused on identifying factors that *inhibit* transgressive  
6 behaviour. Moral identity, empathy, and regulatory self-efficacy are the variables that have  
7 received most research attention and will be discussed in this section. These variables have  
8 been associated with aggression, antisocial behavior toward opponents and teammates, and  
9 doping intentions.

10 *Moral identity* refers to the cognitive schema that people hold about their moral  
11 character and is a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits, such as being fair,  
12 honest, caring, and hard-working (Aquino & Reed, 2002); people who have a strong moral  
13 identity, consider being moral a central part of who they are. This construct originated from  
14 the work of Blasi (1984), who proposed that a common set of moral traits are likely to be  
15 central to most people’s moral self-definitions and that being a moral person may occupy  
16 different levels of importance in each person’s self-concept. Aquino and Reed (2002)  
17 identified nine traits (i.e., caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful,  
18 hardworking, honest, and kind) as being characteristic of a moral person and found variation  
19 in the degree to which these traits were central to one’s self-concept. The extent to which the  
20 moral self-schema is experienced as being central to one’s self-definition has been referred to  
21 as the internalization dimension of moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and has been the  
22 main focus of empirical research.

23 Moral identity has been inversely associated with antisocial sport behavior in both  
24 cross-sectional and experimental research (e.g., Kavussanu et al., 2015; Kavussanu, Stanger,  
25 & Boardley, 2013). In one experiment (Kavussanu et al., 2015), participants were presented

1 with a hypothetical situation, where they had the opportunity to act aggressively (i.e., foul  
2 play). Compared to the control group, the moral identity group (whose moral identity was  
3 activated via a priming procedure; Aquino & Reed, 2002) indicated lower likelihood to  
4 aggress, judged such behaviour morally wrong, and anticipated experiencing more guilt, if  
5 they were to engage in the behaviour. In a more recent study of adult team-sport athletes,  
6 moral identity predicted doping likelihood indirectly via both moral disengagement and  
7 anticipated guilt (Kavussanu & Ring, 2017). Athletes who have a strong moral identity tend  
8 to adhere to their moral standards by not using banned substances. Thus, they seem to have  
9 less need to morally disengage and are more likely feel guilt, if they use banned substances.

10 *Empathy* involves the sharing of someone else's emotional experience; people who are  
11 high in empathy are able to take another person's perspective and tend to experience concern  
12 for unfortunate others (Davis, 1983). Empathy is an other-oriented response, which is  
13 congruent with another person's situation or perceived welfare. Empathy has been inversely  
14 associated with antisocial behaviour in cross-sectional research (e.g., Kavussanu & Boardley,  
15 2009). In one experiment (Stanger, Kavussanu, & Ring, 2012), male athletes, who were  
16 assigned to a high-empathy group (i.e., empathy was manipulated via perspective taking  
17 instructions) reported less likelihood to behave aggressively towards an opponent in a  
18 hypothetical situation than those assigned to a low-empathy group. The inhibiting effects of  
19 empathy on aggression were partially mediated by anticipated guilt. In another study,  
20 dispositional empathy predicted reported doping indirectly via moral disengagement and  
21 anticipated guilt (Boardley et al., 2017).

22 It is worth noting that the effects of empathy on aggression are not universal and do not  
23 occur similarly across gender: They are moderated (in men) by provocation. In an experiment  
24 that manipulated provocation, Stanger et al (2016) examined the effects of empathy on  
25 aggression, operationalized as the electric shock intensity administered to a (fictitious)

1 opponent, when the participants “lost” a trial in a competitive reaction-time task. Provocation  
2 was manipulated by administering low or high intensities of electric shock to the participant,  
3 when he/she “lost” a trial. Although empathy suppressed aggression, in both men and  
4 women, at low provocation, this effect was evident only in women at high provocation.  
5 These findings highlight the important moderating role of gender and provocation on the  
6 empathy-aggression relationship. Men appear to react to provocation differently to women,  
7 such that the reaction may be so strong, that the typical effect of empathy on aggression is  
8 overridden. Therefore, strategies aimed to reduce aggression by enhancing empathy need to  
9 be tailored specifically for men and women.

10 In his social cognitive theory, Bandura (2001) highlighted the importance of *self-*  
11 *efficacy* as a self-regulatory mechanism for behavior. Regulatory self-efficacy refers to the  
12 confidence in one’s ability to resist temptations and pressure from others, and its role in  
13 transgressive behavior in sport has been investigated in several studies, which have also  
14 examined moral disengagement and anticipated guilt as mediators. In these studies,  
15 regulatory self-efficacy has been inversely associated with doping likelihood or use via moral  
16 disengagement alone (Ring & Kavussanu, 2018) or via both moral disengagement and  
17 anticipated guilt (Boardley et al., 2017); in some cases, regulatory self-efficacy also predicted  
18 doping likelihood directly (e.g., Ring & Kavussanu, 2018). In another line of research (e.g.,  
19 Mallia et al., 2016), regulatory self-efficacy of the team has been investigated and this  
20 variable has also negatively predicted doping intention.

21 Affective self-regulatory efficacy (i.e., the ability to regulate affect) has also been  
22 investigated in relation to transgressive behavior in sport. In the first study to examine this  
23 relationship, d’Arripe- Longueville et al (2010) asked adolescent students to respond to  
24 scenarios describing hypothetical situations in team sports in which they may be tempted to  
25 cheat (i.e., break a rule in basketball); participants indicated whether they thought it was okay

1 to cheat and how likely they would be to cheat if put into the protagonist's position. Affective  
2 self-regulatory efficacy had a negative effect on moral disengagement, which in turn  
3 predicted acceptability and likelihood of cheating. This variable also appears to play a role in  
4 explaining doping intentions. In a study of French elite athletes, it was a positive predictor of  
5 resistive self-regulatory efficacy (i.e., the ability to resist social pressure to use banned  
6 substances), which in turn negatively predicted doping intentions indirectly via moral  
7 disengagement (Corrion et al., 2017).

8 In sum, moral identity, empathy, and regulatory self-efficacy, inhibit transgressive  
9 behaviour in sport directly or indirectly via their effects on moral disengagement and  
10 anticipated guilt. These findings point to the important role both guilt and moral  
11 disengagement play on transgressive behavior in sport, and enhance our understanding of the  
12 factors and the process through which such behaviour could be inhibited or facilitated. That  
13 these variables predict doping intentions in a similar manner they predict other forms of  
14 transgressive behavior, underlines the importance of considering moral variables in our  
15 understanding of doping.

### 16 **The Social Environment**

17 Transgressive behaviour takes place in a social context, and this context can have a  
18 profound influence on that behaviour. Coaches and teammates are the most significant  
19 individuals within the athletes' social environment. Through their behaviour, coaches  
20 communicate to athletes what is important in that context, while teammates could influence  
21 athletes via a contagious effect. In addition, the wider social environment, consisting of  
22 significant others' behaviours also plays an important role on athletes' behaviour. The  
23 context has "motivational" and "moral" features. These features are discussed in this section.

### 24 **Motivational Features**



1           One motivational feature of the sport context is the motivational climate, which  
2 involves the criteria of success communicated to athletes by significant others such as  
3 coaches; these individuals determine the evaluation procedures and distribution of rewards,  
4 and, via their behaviour, convey to the athletes what is valued in that context (Ames, 1992).  
5 For example, coaches can create a performance motivational climate – where normative  
6 ability is valued - by rewarding only the top athletes and giving primarily normative  
7 feedback, or a mastery climate – where personal progress is valued - by rewarding individual  
8 effort and improvement and creating opportunities for everyone to succeed. Several studies  
9 have shown that when athletes perceive a performance motivational climate in their team,  
10 they tend to report more frequent antisocial behaviour (e.g., Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009;  
11 Stanger et al., 2018; van de Pol, Kavussanu, & Claessens, 2018), whereas mastery climate  
12 has been inversely – and less strongly - associated with this behaviour (Boardley &  
13 Kavussanu, 2009).

14           Another motivational feature of the sport context is the interpersonal coaching style or  
15 coaching climate. This is a construct derived from self-determination theory (SDT; Deci &  
16 Ryan, 1985), which has distinguished between controlling and autonomy-supportive  
17 interpersonal coaching styles, that are evident in coach behaviour. In a controlling climate,  
18 coaches use coercive practices and pressure participants, for example, by using controlling  
19 language and extrinsic rewards for performance. They behave in a coercive, pressuring, and  
20 authoritarian way, and employ strategies such as manipulation, obedience, guilt induction,  
21 controlling competence feedback, and conditional regard to impose a specific and  
22 preconceived way of thinking and behaving on their athletes (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, &  
23 Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). Perceived controlling coach and teammate behaviours in  
24 university athletes positively predicted moral disengagement, which in turn positively  
25 predicted antisocial behaviour toward opponents and teammates (Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015).

1 An autonomy-supportive coaching style is one in which athletes are provided choice  
2 and a rationale for tasks, opportunities to show initiative and independent work, non-  
3 controlling competence feedback and acknowledgement of their feelings, combined with a  
4 lack of guilt-inducing criticism and overt control. In an important intervention study, Cheon,  
5 Reeve and Ntoumanis (2018) implemented an Autonomy-Supportive Intervention Program  
6 (ASIP) to help physical education (PE) teachers become more autonomy-supportive and less  
7 controlling toward their students and examined whether changes in teachers' teaching styles  
8 influence students' behaviours during PE. Teachers who took part in the program increased  
9 their autonomy support and became less controlling, and their students' antisocial behaviour  
10 decreased over time; these decreases were due to declines in psychological need frustration  
11 (Cheon et al., 2018).

12 An interesting study was conducted by Del Rue and colleagues (2017), who examined  
13 whether coach behavior fluctuates from game to game, across five soccer games. Players  
14 completed measures both prior to and following each game, assessing pre-game and on-game  
15 perceived coaching as well as athletes' antisocial behavior toward opponents and teammates.  
16 Variation in pre-game need-thwarting coaching behavior was positively linked to variation in  
17 objectifying stance (viewing others as objects), which was in turn positively related to  
18 variation in antisocial behavior towards opponents and teammates. Variation in perceived on-  
19 game need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching behavior was also related to antisocial  
20 teammate behavior in the expected direction. Finally, these effects held for number of yellow  
21 cards, an objective marker of moral functioning.

22 In the context of doping, Ntoumanis et al (2017) examined the role of coach  
23 interpersonal style on athlete doping intention and behavior using a prospective design. Male  
24 and female adolescent and adult Greek athletes completed questionnaires at the beginning  
25 and end of a sport season. Athletes who perceived their coach to be controlling reported more

1 thwarting of their psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. In turn,  
2 need thwarting corresponded to higher moral disengagement and acceptance of cheating, both  
3 of which positively predicted the intention to use banned substances. The indirect relationship  
4 between controlling coach interpersonal style and doping intentions via need thwarting, moral  
5 disengagement and acceptance of cheating was significant.

## 6 **Moral Features**

7 The sport context also has “moral” features, manifested via the coach and athlete  
8 behaviour. Coaches through their behaviour indicate their morally relevant values and  
9 priorities. They have choice points, and their behaviour reflects what is important to them  
10 when choices compete with each other, and they have to make a decision. Acting in an ethical  
11 manner is often in conflict with winning. Coaches who prioritize winning over sportsmanship  
12 (a concept with moral connotations) are more likely to lead athletes to display antisocial  
13 behaviour toward teammates and opponents, while modelling good sportsmanship could lead  
14 to fewer antisocial behaviours (Bolter & Kipp, 2018).

15 One moral feature of the social environment of sport is the *moral atmosphere* of the  
16 team, also known as team norms, defined as a set of collective norms regarding moral action  
17 on the part of group members (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). The concept of moral  
18 atmosphere was first described by Kohlberg and his associates (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg,  
19 1989), who investigated the influence of group norms on moral reasoning and behavior of the  
20 group members in school and prison environments. They showed that group members over  
21 time develop a shared understanding of what constitutes appropriate behavior in that context.  
22 This shared understanding of appropriate action is the defining characteristic of moral  
23 atmosphere (Power et al., 1989).

24 Moral atmosphere has been investigated in numerous studies in relation to transgressive  
25 behaviour (e.g., Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996). Although the construct refers to the “shared

1 understanding” of moral action, sport researchers have typically measured perceived  
2 teammate behaviour as an indicator of moral atmosphere. Studies have shown that athletes,  
3 who perceived that a large number of their teammates would behave aggressively in a  
4 hypothetical situation, also indicated greater likelihood to behave aggressively (e.g., Chow,  
5 Murray, & Feltz, 2009). Similar findings have been reported in other studies, which have  
6 examined not only perceived teammate but also perceived coach behaviour. Football players,  
7 who thought that their coach would encourage cheating and aggression in hypothetical  
8 situations, and that their teammates would engage in the described behaviours, if it was  
9 necessary for the team to win, also reported lower frequency of these behaviours (e.g.,  
10 Kavussanu & Spray, 2006). Thus, the moral atmosphere of sport teams is important in  
11 determining the moral functioning of its members.

12 The terms descriptive norms and practice norms have been used in recent research to  
13 refer to a construct similar to moral atmosphere. Benson and Bruner (2018) asked adolescent  
14 hockey players to complete over a 10-day period, daily diaries related to their experiences of  
15 their teammate behaviour and their own behaviours toward their teammates. Daily  
16 experienced antisocial behaviours from one’s teammates predicted self-reported antisocial  
17 behaviours toward teammates (Benson & Bruner, 2018). In another study, athletes who  
18 perceived that their teammates engaged in antisocial behaviours toward one another during  
19 practices, also reported antisocial behaviour toward their teammates (Benson, Bruner, & Eys,  
20 2017). It may be that features of the social environment that are undesirable and contribute to  
21 a negative sport experience also bring the worst in athletes by leading them to act in an  
22 antisocial manner.

23 Another social environmental construct examined in relation to transgressive behavior  
24 in sport is the construct of subjective norms, which refer to the perceived social pressure one  
25 experiences to perform a behavior. In doping research, this construct has been typically

1 measured by asking participants to indicate the extent to which important others in their  
2 environment would approve the use of banned substances to enhance their performance (e.g.,  
3 Barkoukis, Lazuras, Tsorbatzoudis, & Rodafinos, 2013; Lazuras et al., 2010, 2015; Lucidi et  
4 al., 2008). Given that doping is cheating, perceived approval of this behavior by significant  
5 others, can be viewed as a “moral feature” of the social context. Subjective norms have been  
6 found to positively predict doping intentions in several studies (e.g., Lazuras et al., 2010,  
7 2015; Lucidi et al., 2008). Thus, there is consistent link between perceptions that significant  
8 others would approve doping and reported intention to use banned substances. It would be  
9 interesting for future studies to unpack the relative role of various significant others on  
10 transgressive behavior in sport.

11 In sum, the social context of sport consists of both motivational and moral features that  
12 could facilitate or inhibit transgressive behavior. This kind of behavior is likely to occur in  
13 sport, when the coaches create a performance motivational climate, adopt a controlling  
14 interpersonal coaching style, prioritize winning over sportsmanship, and promote aggression.  
15 In contrast, mastery motivational climate, autonomy supportive coaching style and coaching  
16 behaviors that model sportsmanship are likely to reduce transgressive behavior in sport.

### 17 **Key Issues and Future Research Directions**

18 As the literature reviewed in the previous sections indicates, much progress has been  
19 made in our understanding of transgressive behaviour in sport in the last ten years. During  
20 this period, a few key issues have emerged and are worthy of future research attention. In this  
21 section, some of these issues are discussed, and future research directions are provided.

22 One issue is the distinction between different types of antisocial behaviour. Most  
23 studies assessing this behavior in sport have utilized the PABSS (Kavussanu & Boardley,  
24 2009) which measures behaviour toward opponents and teammates. However, antisocial  
25 opponent behaviour could be further subdivided into aggression, gamesmanship, and

1 cheating. Lee et al (2007) differentiated between cheating, which is behavior that is against  
2 the rules, and gamesmanship, which is behaviour that is within the rules but against the spirit  
3 of sport. Gamesmanship and mild aggression could be considered acceptable behaviours,  
4 whereas cheating is typically frowned upon. More research is needed, building upon the  
5 original work of Lee and colleagues, to better understand the different types of antisocial  
6 behavior, as well as their antecedents and consequences. Promising efforts toward this  
7 direction have already been made by some researchers (e.g., Kay & Hoar, 2015;  
8 Yukhemenko, 2015). Similarly, understanding the relationship between the different types of  
9 antisocial behavior is important (see Graupensperger, Jensen, & Evans, 2018).

10 A consistent finding in several studies is the strong link between self-reported behavior  
11 toward teammates and perceived transgressive behaviour from one's teammates (e.g., Bruner  
12 & Benson, 2018; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996; Kavussanu & Spray, 2006), referred to as  
13 team norms, moral atmosphere, descriptive and practice norms. Although the assumption is  
14 that teammate behavior influences individual athlete behavior, the direction of causality is not  
15 clear. It may be that athletes who transgress perceive their teammates in a similar way to  
16 them, that is, they may project their own transgressive behavior onto their teammates. People  
17 tend to perceive higher similarity between themselves and others, and social projection is one  
18 explanation for this similarity (Cho & Knowles, 2013). Longitudinal and experimental  
19 studies are needed to shed light on this issue.

20 It is evident from the studies reviewed in this article that moral disengagement is a  
21 popular mediator between personal and social variables and transgressive behavior in sport.  
22 This trend to investigate moral disengagement as mediator, follows the seminal work of  
23 Bandura and colleagues (Bandura et al., 1996), who first examined this variable as a  
24 mediator. However, it is equally plausible that moral disengagement is the outcome of  
25 transgressive behavior. That is, repeated engagement in antisocial conduct, driven by the

1 factors discussed in this article, could increase the need to justify such behaviour, to alleviate  
2 feelings of guilt, thereby leading to moral disengagement. Support for this argument comes  
3 from a three-wave study of academic cheating and moral disengagement (Fida et al., 2016).  
4 In this study, moral disengagement influenced cheating, when controlling for its prior levels,  
5 and cheating affected moral disengagement one year later, controlling for its prior levels.  
6 These findings suggest that resource to wrongdoing could gradually lead to further  
7 normalizing this behaviour and morally desensitizing individuals to misconduct. It would be  
8 interesting to determine whether the same process takes place in the context of sport,  
9 particularly in research that involves doping, where individuals engage in the behavior for  
10 extended periods.

11 Researchers have started to investigate doping likelihood and intention as proxies for  
12 doping. Although some predictors of doping (e.g., moral identity, moral disengagement,  
13 guilt) are the same as those associated with antisocial behaviour, others are not consistently  
14 linked to doping variables. For example, ego orientation has been positively related to  
15 antisocial sport behavior in numerous studies (for reviews see Kavussanu, 2012; Kavussanu  
16 & Stanger, 2017), but the link to doping intention and behaviour is weak (see Ntoumanis et  
17 al., 2014). This suggests that doping is viewed by athletes as a more serious transgressive  
18 behaviour that is not equivalent to antisocial behaviour toward teammates and opponents. It  
19 may that moral variables (i.e., moral identity, anticipated guilt) play a significant role  
20 deterring athletes from using banned substances and gaining an unfair advantage over their  
21 opponents. Future research needs to better understand how predictors of doping vary from the  
22 predictors of antisocial behaviour that takes place during a game, or other cheating acts.

23 More work is needed to understand the moral dimensions of coaching behaviour. Bolter  
24 and Weiss (2012) developed an instrument that measures the different ways coaches promote  
25 sportsmanship, for example, by modelling, teaching, and reinforcing sportsmanship.

1 However, other aspects of coaching behaviour could be investigated, such as the degree to  
2 which coaches act in an ethical manner, are fair, and treat players with respect, that is, the  
3 degree to which coaches are ethical leaders. Displaying ethical behaviour in one's coaching  
4 interactions should influence athlete behaviour. Ethical leadership could shape athletes'  
5 moral decision making and subsequent behavior, in line with the findings of a recent study  
6 that ethical leaders reduced employees' deviant behavior via a reduction on their propensity  
7 to morally disengage (Moore et al., 2019).

8 We also need more studies that assess the moral dimensions of the sport experience in  
9 the real world of sport. Even though experimental studies reveal interesting findings and have  
10 high internal validity, like any laboratory study, they cannot capture the real-world sport  
11 experience and the dynamics that develop in teams over time. Field studies employing  
12 different methodologies are needed. Some nice examples are the daily diary study by Benson  
13 and Bruner (2018) and the studies by Delrue et al (2017) who have obtained repeated  
14 measures of coach behaviour before and after a game across a number of games. We also  
15 need more qualitative studies to help us better understand the moral dimensions of the sport  
16 experience from the perspective of the participants. For example, athletes may view minor  
17 aggressive acts as part of the game, and therefore acceptable, but they may consider doping  
18 or cheating unacceptable as these are more severe forms of transgressive behavior.

### 19 **Conclusion**

20 In conclusion, athletes from different sport types, competitive levels, and nationalities  
21 engage in transgressive behaviour, which is manifested in various ways, including aggression  
22 and cheating. Certain personality characteristics (e.g., ego orientation, controlled motivation,  
23 narcissism) are likely to facilitate transgressive behavior, whereas others (e.g., moral identity,  
24 empathy, regulatory self-efficacy) are likely to inhibit such behaviour. In addition, a social or  
25 team environment that puts emphasis on winning, is controlling, and explicitly promotes



- 1 transgressive behaviour could lead to more frequent such behaviour. These facilitating and
- 2 inhibiting effects tend to occur both directly and indirectly via moral disengagement and
- 3 anticipated guilt, highlighting the important role of both cognition and emotion on
- 4 transgressive behavior in sport.
- 5

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**Endnote**

<sup>1</sup>In most studies discussed in this article, researchers have measured behaviour by asking participants to indicate the frequency of their past behavior over a specific period of time (e.g., antisocial behaviour toward teammates and opponents during a season), or the likelihood or intention they would act in a certain way if they were in a hypothetical situation (e.g., aggression, doping likelihood, doping intention). Although these assessments represent proxies of behavior, in this article, the term behaviour is used for the sake of conciseness and simplicity. The reader is encouraged to consult specific studies to gain a better understanding of measures used in each study.

10

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- 7

### Highlights

- Several types of transgressive behaviour take place in sport including antisocial behaviour toward teammates and opponents, aggression, cheating and doping.
- Anticipated guilt and moral disengagement are the most commonly examined predictors, and they have opposite effects on transgressive behaviour.
- Certain personality characteristics have been linked to transgressive sport behaviour with some likely to facilitate (ego orientation, controlled motivation, narcissism) and others likely to inhibit (moral identity, empathy, regulatory self-efficacy) such behaviour.
- A team environment that emphasizes winning at all costs, is controlling, and explicitly promotes antisocial behaviour could result in more frequent antisocial behaviour.