

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Athletes' Interpersonal Destructive Relationships: Links between Forms of Aggression and Bullying Episodes in Sport Settings

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Submitted December 22, 2020; Accepted in final form December 29, 2021.

ABSTRACT

Background. It is acknowledged that aggressive behavior and bullying in sports are destructive aspects of interpersonal relationships. **Objectives.** The purpose of the study was to determine the prevalence of bullying and various forms of aggression in the aspects of athletes' gender and different types of sports and to reveal links between bullying and aggression in sports settings. **Methods.** The study involved 1440 athletes representing individual, combat, and team sports. The survey was conducted employing scales of the Bullying and harassment in sport questionnaire (BHISQ): the scale of Types of aggression during training and competitions (TATC) and the scale of Victim, bystander, and bully among insiders and against opponents (VIBB). **Results.** The results of the study show that the prevalence of aggressive behavior in the total sample is 12.5 percent. Statistically significant differences in aggressive behavior by gender were identified only in the area of physical and indirect aggression. The verbal form of aggression does not depend on gender but is most commonly used among combat sports athletes. Physical aggression is more common in team sports. After analyzing the prevalence of bullying, it was found that it constituted 46.9 percent of the total sample and the gender factor strongly shows up. Athletes who use aggression engage in bullying episodes more frequently. **Conclusion.** The analysis of the relationship between forms of aggression and bullying in sports revealed that in the presence of higher aggression in athletes the risk of bullying in interpersonal relationships increases.

KEYWORDS: *Aggressive Behavior, Bullying, Athletes, Interpersonal Relationships, Destructive Behavior, Gender.*

INTRODUCTION

In sports, several complex challenges are encountered while creating a positive environment that can determine athletes' success in sports performance and ensure their well-being. One such challenge is the interpersonal destructive relationships manifesting themselves in athletes' aggressive behavior observed at all levels and types of sport, demonstrated by athletes of all age groups and genders (1-4). Because intense physical contact is often an integral part of the sport, aggressive behavior can be used not only as an action directed against another person to injure him/her but also as an instrumental

action to attain the goal; i.e., to achieve the results. All of it forms the approach that sport is the only setting where aggressive behavior becomes acceptable and has a positive effect on sports performance and results (5, 6). Although such behavior in sports may help to win, it does not always bring positive outcomes and is tolerated. However, in practice, it is not easy to distinguish between a behavior that is constructive and one that is destructive. This issue can be addressed by separating the specific dimensions of aggression in sports and understanding what aggressive behavior is harmful and has nothing to do with the

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goals of sports performance within or between competitions. Analyzing the aspects related to a certain function that the aggressive behavior serves, it has recently been proposed that in sports, aggression can be divided not only into instrumental and hostile or reactive (7-9), but it is suggested to focus more attention to sanctioned and unsanctioned aggression in sport (3, 10, 11). While sanctioned aggression in sports is related to rules and is not based on anger and direct harm to another person, unsanctioned aggression that occurs outside of the rules of the sport may be associated with frustration and anger and directed toward causing pain or injuring another person. Behavior manifesting itself as unsanctioned aggression can encompass both instrumental aggression (i.e., a non-provoking situation) and reactive/hostile aggression (i.e., a provoking situation), but a prerequisite for this is non-compliance with sports rules (3).

Aggressive behavior can manifest itself in various forms: physical, verbal, or indirect, and coincides with bullying, which is sometimes identified as one of the subtypes of aggression (12, 13). Although bullying in sports receives increasingly more attention from scientists (12, 14-19), there are not many insights proposing how to distinguish between these two phenomena. Even though it is proposed to treat bullying in sports as one of the subsets of social aggression, distinguishing itself by such aspects of manifestation as repetitiveness, power imbalance, and intentional nature (20), often the terms describing aggressive and bullying behavior are used interchangeably (18), and the forms of manifestation are tightly intertwined (21), which means that traditional bullying, just like aggressive behavior, can manifest itself in actions of the same type, including physical, verbal, and indirect or relational bullying (22). Many problems are also encountered at the methodological level, as bullying in sports is often assessed by employing instruments measuring aggressive behavior (23, 24).

However, although conceptually it seems that aggressive behavior and bullying in sports have many similarities (both phenomena can be described as forms of destructive behavior, which were learned in a social environment and during interactions with others; both of them are often referred to by social psychologists as any behavior directed toward another individual to

cause harm), certain challenges are encountered while analyzing them and attempting to reveal how these constructs are interrelated. If research conducted in school settings establishes a link between forms of aggressive behavior and the person's treatment as a bully (25), employees do not equate various forms of bullying in the work environment with aggressive actions but perceive them as a self-existent phenomenon (26). In addition, research results in quite contradictory outcomes concerning the manifestation of forms of aggression and links with demographic factors (27, 28). It is maintained that this can be related not only to the intensity of the physical activity (29) but also to difficulties in trying to understand and explain destructive behavior in sports uniformly (3). Therefore, this study aims to determine the prevalence of bullying and various forms of aggression in the aspects of athletes' gender and different types of sport and to reveal links between bullying and aggression in sport settings. Based on the results of studies conducted in different cultures (30-33), we generate the hypothesis (H1) that men will use forms of direct aggression (physical and verbal aggression) more than women, while women will prefer indirect aggression (i.e., social exclusion). In addition, considering the findings of the studies examining bullying in the context of aggression (12, 15, 18), the second hypothesis (H2) states that athletes demonstrating aggressive behaviour, regardless of forms of its manifestation, will also be more often engaged in the episodes of bullying.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants. The sample consisted of 1440 Lithuanian amateur sports athletes, whose ages varied from 16 to 29 years. The investigated persons included 69.5 percent (N=1001) of males and 30.5 percent (N=439) of females representing various types of sports, which corresponds to the total percentage distribution of athletes in Lithuania; i.e., the subjects represented 31 different types of sport, including team (N=1038, i.e. 72.1 percent), combat (N=59, i.e. 4.1 percent), and individual (N=343, i.e. 23.8 percent) sports (Table 1).

The sample of the survey is non-probabilistic and convenient. The selection of subjects was based on the key criteria: their age and representation of the organized amateur sport for at least 6 months in the chosen sports branch.

Table 1. Distribution of Athletes Involved in the Study by Types of Sports and Gender

Types of Sports	Males		Females		Total, N=1440	
	Frequencies	%	Frequencies	%	Frequencies	%
Individual sports	134	39.1	209	60.9	343	23.8
Combat sports	39	66.1	20	33.9	59	4.1
Team sports	828	79.8	210	20.2	1038	72.1
Total	1001	69.5	439	30.5	1440	100

Measures. The survey was conducted employing scales of the Bullying and harassment in sport questionnaire (BHISQ) (34): the scale Types of aggression during training and competitions (TATC) and the scale Victim, bystander and bully among insiders and against opponents (VIBB).

Manifestation of aggression was measured using TATC scale consisting of 23 items adapted to the sports context. TATC consists of the Physical aggression-PA subscale, encompassing 7 items (factor loading (L) min. = 0.50, max. = 0.83; dispersion 55.01 %; α = 0.86); Verbal aggression-VA subscale, encompassing 8 items (factor loading (L) min. = 0.59, max. = 0.78; dispersion 49.03 %; α = 0.85); and Indirect aggression-IA subscale, encompassing 8 items (factor loading (L) min. = 0.60, max. = 0.80; dispersion 52.69 %; α = 0.87). These items are prepared based on the Five Point Likert Scale with response variants ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

Bullying experiences in sports were measured using 6 yes/no items in the VIBB scale consisting of 3 subscales, which identify different roles of participation in bullying episodes: Victim subscale – 2 items (factor loading (L) mean = 0.80; dispersion 64.17 %), Bystander subscale – 2 items (factor loading (L) mean = 0.89; dispersion 79.07 %), and Bully subscale – 2 items (factor loading (L) mean = 0.86; dispersion 73.13 %).

Procedure. The research was conducted in 2019 upon the receipt of ethical approval from the author's institution (the permission of the Ethics Supervision Committee of Research in Social Sciences of Lithuanian Sports University - No. SMTEK-3). The data for the study were collected using paper and online questionnaires. The participants were notified that they could participate in the study voluntarily and had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Research participants were also informed that all

answers would be accepted and were urged to be honest in their responses as their confidentiality was ensured. The survey was performed employing paper questionnaires as well as sending the electronic link to the online questionnaire to respondents after the agreement of the coaches and top management of Lithuanian sports schools and clubs was obtained.

Data Analysis. The research data were processed by performing the statistical analysis using SPSS (Statistical Package of the Social Science) version 24.0. Descriptive statistical results (average, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) were calculated and their correspondence was tested for a normal distribution. After the identification of normal distribution, parametric tests were applied. Analyses were conducted using the Independent Samples t-test and One-Way ANOVA.

RESULTS

The results of the study show that the percentage of the prevalence of aggression during training and competitions is 12.5 percent of the total sample. 18.5 percent of subjects reveal verbal aggression in their behavior. Physical aggression is reported by 10.3 percent of athletes. However, the indirect form of aggression (8.7 percent) is less common in athletes' behavior, compared with VA and PA. In the aspect of gender, manifestations of aggression prevail as follows: 13.3 percent of men and 10.7 percent of women are aggressive in sports activities (Table 2).

Statistically significant differences in aggressive behaviour by gender were identified only in the area of physical and indirect aggression. A comparison of manifestation of male and female forms of aggression revealed that physical aggression and indirect aggression in sport were more common in men than in women, while the level of manifestation of verbal

aggression did not depend on athletes' gender. Thus, the first hypothesis was not confirmed (Table 3).

The results of the study show that the nature of aggression depends on the types of sports, while the established differences are statistically reliable and significant. Both verbal and indirect

aggression was most pronounced in combat sports, while physical aggression was most expressed in team sports. It should be noted, however, that the standard deviation is high enough in all cases, which indicates that in this case, the values of the measured feature are sufficiently scattered concerning the mean (Table 4).

Table 2. Forms of Aggression in the Aspects of Gender and Types of Sports, %

Subscales	Gender						Types of Sports											
	Males, N = 1001			Females, N = 439			Individual sports group, N = 343			Combat sports group, N = 59			Team sports group, N = 1038			Total, N=1440		
%	DI	NA	AP	DI	NA	AP	DI	NA	AP	DI	NA	AP	DI	NA	AP	DI	NA	AP
Physical aggression	73.8	14.5	11.7	82.7	10.1	7.2	82.7	9.8	7.5	76.8	10.9	12.3	74.5	14.4	11.1	76.5	13.2	10.3
Verbal aggression	64.9	16.0	19.1	65.6	17.3	17.1	69.4	15.7	14.8	60	22.7	17.4	63.9	16.3	19.8	65.1	16.4	18.5
Indirect aggression	80.1	10.8	9.1	81.6	10.5	7.9	81.6	11.3	7	75.8	13.6	10.6	80.5	10.3	9.2	80.6	10.7	8.7
Average	72.9	13.8	13.3	76.7	12.6	10.7	77.7	12.4	9.9	70.6	15.9	13.5	72.9	13.6	13.4	74.1	13.4	12.5

DI, percentage of disapproval; NA, percentage of neutral assessment; A P, percentage of approval

Table 3. Aggression in Sport by Gender

Subscales	Males, N = 1001		Females, N = 439		T-Test Results	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	p
Physical aggression	1.89	0.81	1.63	0.70	5.830	0.0001**
Verbal aggression	2.19	0.82	2.11	0.82	1.655	0.098
Indirect aggression	1.74	0.71	1.64	0.68	2.637	0.008**

* statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.01$.

Table 4. The Manifestation of Aggression by Types of Sports

Subscales	Individual Sports Group, N = 343		Combat Sports Group, N = 59		Team Sports Group, N = 1038		ANOVA Test Results	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
Physical aggression	1.63	0.74	1.81	0.86	1.87	0.78	12.716	0.0001**
Verbal aggression	2.00	0.83	2.22	0.82	2.21	0.81	9.204	0.0001**
Indirect aggression	1.62	0.69	1.81	0.83	1.74	0.70	4.166	0.016*

* statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.01$.

Although almost half of all athletes have been involved in bullying episodes, the gender factor strongly shows up. On the one hand, male athletes were significantly more inclined to get involved in bullying episodes than females, on the other hand, athletes' involvement generally depends on the types of sports. Such episodes were most often identified in team sports (more than half of the respondents participated in them), while involvement in combat sports was half less (Table 5).

However, the results show that regardless of the manifested form of aggression, athletes who use it engage in bullying episodes more

frequently. The analysis of the relationship/links between individual forms of aggression and bullying in sports revealed that those athletes whose aggressive behavior in sports was more frequent stated that they often participated in the bullying process. Involvement or non-involvement in bullying episodes according to all three types of aggression, as shown by t-test results, is statistically significant and reliable, although the statistical deviation is again high enough. In addition, the verbal aggression form distinguishes itself, clearly manifesting even among athletes who claimed that were not involved in bullying episodes. Thus, the second hypothesis was confirmed (Table 6).

Table 5. Prevalence of Bullying in the Aspects of Gender and Types of Sports, %

Participation Role	Gender		Types of Sports			
	Males, N = 1001	Females, N = 439	Individual Sports, Group, N = 343	Combat Sports Group, N = 59	Team Sports Group, N = 1038	Total, N=1440
Not participated in bullying episodes	47.65	65.60	69.39	74.58	46.53	53.13
Participated in bullying episodes	52.35	34.40	30.61	25.42	53.47	46.88

Table 6. Links between the Forms of Aggression and Participation in Bullying

Subscales	Not Participated in Bullying Episodes N = 765		Participated in Bullying Episode N = 675		T-Test Results	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	p
	Physical aggression	1.66	0.74	1.98	0.80	-7.802
Verbal aggression	1.95	0.78	2.41	0.80	-11.131	0.0001**
Indirect aggression	1.54	0.64	1.91	0.71	-10.293	0.0001**

* statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.01$.

DISCUSSION

This study shows the prevalence of forms of aggression in the aspects of athletes' gender and different types of sport and also reveals certain links between bullying and aggression in sports settings. That is, although the results obtained within the scope of this study confirm that male athletes behave more aggressively than women, they also show that indirect negative effects, figuratively speaking, can also be described as a "male" way of aggression. However, it must also be considered that different forms of aggression manifest themselves differently depending on the kind of sport too.

The research participants also noted that most often aggressive behavior of theirs manifested itself verbally. This shows that in sports activities in relationships with other persons an exchange of messages takes place where at least one person in the dyad attacks the self-concept of the other person to hurt the other person psychologically and it may be expressed as teasing, swearing, threats, profanity (directed at someone), or ridicule (35) (p.1). The verbal form of aggression as the one that most often manifests itself in athletes' behavior was also found in another study conducted in Lithuania, relating this to the person's negativity and the manifestation of injustice (14). Verbal aggression as the most common form of aggressive behavior in athletes' interpersonal relationships has been identified in other studies as well (36, 37). However, this is unlikely to be influenced by gender, as this study, like other studies in the sports context (38), did

not find a significant difference between the manifestation of verbal aggression and gender. However, the results of laboratory studies analyzing the impact of gender on the person's overall level of aggressive behavior provide strong evidence-based proofs that women are less aggressive than men, and several studies conducted in various contexts reveal a trend showing that men are more subject to showing physical aggression, while women are more likely to behave verbally aggressively and usually explain such behavior from evolutionary or sociocultural perspectives (39). In our opinion, such a trend of gender and aggressive behavior manifesting itself verbally, revealed in the sports context, can be related not so much to theories of the emergence of aggressive behavior, but to the unique context of sport and athletic identity. In other words, aggressive behavior manifesting itself by verbal means is considered a product of sports socialization (40). After all, athletes, regardless of their age, gender, level of mastery, or types of sports, are associated with high expectations for both their performance and victories, and all of it must be pursued by any behavior, even aggressive. The latter is determined by the masculine social norms prevailing in sports, which promote competition and dominance among athletes and which must be observed by all athletes (41-43).

However, this study confirms the statement that men, compared with women, are more likely to demonstrate physical aggression. The results of the study reveal that male athletes, more often

than female athletes, hit another person if the latter hit him first, and are convinced that when someone keeps insulting a member of his team/group, that person is asking to be beaten. Jančiauskas (44) states that a more typical form of physical aggression, manifesting itself by involvement in fights, is more characteristic of males. Such negative behavior of athletes as predominant is also confirmed by other studies (45, 46), which could be related to the fact that men who do sports are more inclined to follow traditional norms of masculinity and demonstrate them in sports activities (41).

Studies analyzing the level of aggression in sports have also pointed out that the type of sport may strongly influence sport aggression (47). In those sports that are attributed to the high-contact sports group such as football, and wrestling the physical aggression level is higher (48, 49). It is also higher in team sports such as basketball (36). This study also revealed similar trends showing that physical and verbal aggression are more pronounced in the behavior of representatives of combat and team sports, compared with individual sports. This can be related to the approach valid in the sport that in contact and combat sport, to perform successfully, certain forms of aggression are both sanctioned and tolerated (50).

Athletes most rarely use indirect aggression actions in their behavior, which can result in both hostile emotional outbursts and social manipulations such as spreading rumors or purposely not speaking to someone. Respectively, 7 percent of persons participating in individual sports; 9.2 percent, in team sports; and 10.6 percent, in combat sports approve of it, and the level of its manifestation is the lowest and similar in all groups. The lowest level of indirect aggression in sports was also identified in the study conducted in six European countries on a sample of children aged 6 to 16 years (38). This is most likely a problem of a sports nature. After all, where dynamic and expressive activity prevails, the aim is to immediately put the opponent at a competitive disadvantage. Unfortunately, this will not be achieved through indirect aggression (51).

These research results reveal the manifestation of various forms of aggression in sports activities, which, according to Bekiari (52), in the long run, may lead to a decrease in the abilities and efforts of athletes who have experienced them and reduce their satisfaction with sports activities.

Based on the research conducted in the school context (53), the aggressive behavior of athletes stated in this study may also predict their greater involvement in bullying episodes, all the more so as studies in the sports context reveal athletes' involvement in various types of aggression, including bullying too (42). After analyzing the prevalence of bullying in sports activities, it was found that more than 46 percent of athletes stated that bullying existed in sports because they reported having participated in bullying episodes in various roles. More than a quarter of athletes reported having been victims of bullying, nearly 40 percent of athletes stated having participated in bullying episodes as bystanders, and 13.3 percent of athletes identified themselves as bullies. It would be difficult and inappropriate to compare these results with the results of all studies conducted in the context of the sport due to the different instruments used in the studies and the different roles of the participants of the bullying process measured in them (34). Quite a significant share of studies stating relatively low prevalence of bullying in sports reveal it through the prism of victimization; i.e., refer to data of only those persons who identify themselves as victims or instigators of bullying (14, 42). The approach that there is no bullying in sports remains, and only "weak" athletes can admit it and complain about it (19). All of it creates a situation in which the identification of the prevalence of bullying is still particularly complicated. This is also confirmed by the study conducted by Nery et al. (12), the results of which show that the distribution of athletes in bullying episodes in the aspect of roles is very unequal: about 10 percent of athletes reported having been victimized, 11 percent participated in bullying episodes as bullies; and 35 percent, as bystanders. Even greater distributions in bullying episodes in the aspect of roles are noted in the study conducted by Mishna et al. (16), in which 122 student-athletes self-reported 48 percent of victimization; 31 percent, of perpetration; and 62%, of witnessing bullying. Nevertheless, regardless of the prevalence of bullying, this study found that more male athletes and those athletes who represented team sports participated in bullying episodes. Besides, the results of the prevalence of bullying in sports activities are significantly higher, compared with the prevalence of aggressive behaviour stated by athletes. This situation confirms the insights of

Notelaers et al. (34) that bullying and aggressive behaviour should be treated as separate constructs despite the conception of bullying as a subtype of aggressive behaviour.

Seeking to identify links between aggressive behavior and bullying episodes in sports, it was found that athletes demonstrating a higher level of aggression stated that they participated in bullying episodes in sports more often. These results confirmed the second hypothesis. This can be explained by the fact that aggressive behavior can also be sustained, reinforced, and perpetuated when athletes use aggression as a means to win (5, 54), while bullying is accepted as a particular part of sports culture, in which certain traditions and competition and aggression inherent in sport interrelate (12, 15). However, the analysis of athletes' participation in bullying episodes and aggressive behaviors manifesting themselves in different forms of aggression has revealed that this is not related to a specific form of aggression manifestation. All these links should be analyzed border because the study in the school context, which analyzes bullying of 5th-grade students at school by gender and the differences in the forms of aggressive behavior, showed that children identified those boys who expressed aggression physically and those girls who expressed aggression verbally or relationally as bullies (33).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it can be stated that in the presence of higher aggression in athletes the risk of bullying in interpersonal relationships increases. It is therefore important to pay more attention to distinguishing between permissible acts in sports and unsanctioned forms of direct and indirect manifestation of aggression. At the same time, however, it is necessary to assess certain specificity that depends on the sports branch, as the forms of aggressive behavior diverge significantly. This shows that the preparation of bullying prevention programs and teaching to recognize bullying requires a differentiated approach that would consider peculiar trends in interpersonal relationships across groups of individual, combat, and team sports. In addition, knowledge of the forms of aggression, used by the representatives of different genders, should be carefully reconsidered before applying them in sports, considering the culture established in the sport of a specific country. Thus, this study may be useful

not only in continuing research into the manifestations of aggression and bullying in different sports branches but also beneficial for both coaches working directly with amateur athletes and sports organizations, as it reveals a range of factors relevant to creating a safer environment for athletes.

The limitations of this study indicate guidelines for further research to better understand bullying in sports. This study did not aim to examine how athletes perceived bullying in general, or what they treated as bullying; therefore, it cannot be ruled out that certain forms of aggression might have been left out unidentified as bullying; i.e., they might have been treated as "natural relationship" in sport. For example, Lenzi et al. (55) assumed that, in general, the decision to play sports could be related to the need to adapt to cultural stereotypes that portray a man as aggressive and a woman as gentle and humble; in addition, the problem of recognizing bullying in sport arises (56). In this case, it would make sense in the future to conduct more detailed research in different sports groups by applying in-depth interviews and focus group methods. Sufficiently high standard deviations point to a fairly large scattering, which indicates the existence of specific experiences. However, this study was not intended to determine how often athletes were involved or got involved in bullying episodes, and how long they lasted; therefore, the evaluation of this aspect in the future would allow a more accurate evaluation of the specificity of aggression and bullying in individual sports. Besides, of course, broader generalizations are limited by the fact that the study was conducted in only one country. Therefore, using the same instrument, the study should be repeated in several culturally similar countries and later, in countries with larger differences.

APPLICABLE REMARKS

- Athletes' aggression and bullying in the individual, team, and combat sports were investigated.
- Direct and physical aggression is more common in male athletes than in female athletes.
- Most involvement in bullying episodes takes place in team sports.
- Athletes who demonstrate any form of aggressive behavior gets involved in bullying episodes more often.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Study concept and design: Vveinhardt J, Fominiene VB. *Acquisition of data:* Fominiene VB, Vveinhardt J. *Analysis and interpretation of data:* Fominiene VB, Vveinhardt J. *Drafting the manuscript:* Fominiene VB, Vveinhardt J. *Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content:* Fominiene VB, Vveinhardt J. *Statistical analysis:* Vveinhardt J, Fominiene VB. *Administrative, technical, and material support:* Fominiene VB, Vveinhardt J. *Study supervision:* Fominiene VB, Vveinhardt J.

FUNDING

This study is part of a project which has received funding from the European Social Fund (project No 09.3.3-LMT-K-712-01-0190) under a grant agreement with the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT).

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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