

Operationalization and Domain Specification of Antisocial Behavior among Pakistani Athletes: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The present research is planned to operationalize and domain specification of antisocial behavior among Pakistan athletes. Sixteen eligible participants from Punjab, Pakistan were enlisted for two homogeneous focus group discussions using purpose sampling technique. All the steps in design and protocol of focus groups were followed. The question was posed: Can you briefly define, what antisocial behavior means to you? The data were analyzed according assertions content analysis in terms of three units; sampling units, recording units, and context units. Conclusively, a newfangled definition is formulated "Antisocial behavior among athletes defines as actions or conduct that deviate from accepted societal values, norms, and the principles of sportsmanship. It encompasses behaviors that are disruptive, harmful, or go against established rules and expectations within the sporting community. This includes displaying aggression, causing harm to others, engaging in negative communication, and exhibiting a lack of respect or cooperation with teammates, coaches, rivals, or the broader sporting environment. Antisocial behavior in sports undermines team unity, breaches ethical standards, and compromises the fairness of competition, leading to negative consequences for individuals and the overall positive atmosphere within the sporting community". This research also concluded that antisocial behavior among athletes cover four domains; (1) aggression and harmful conduct, (2) negative communication, (3) lack of respect and cooperation, and (4) rule violations and unethical behavior.

Keywords: Antisocial Behavior, Aggression and Harmful Conduct, Negative Communication, Lack of Respect and Cooperation, Rule Violations and Unethical Behavior.

Introduction

Sport has traditionally been recognized as a significant platform for instilling life skills and promoting positive youth development (Bopp et al., 2023). However, the escalating media

focus on aggression and various forms of cheating in sports has prompted inquiries into whether elite athletes serve as appropriate role models for youth. Recently, sports psychology researchers have shown an increased interest in athletes' moral considerations (Barkoukis & Elbe, 2021; Ring et al., 2022; Wang & Zhong, 2024). Since the exercise of moral agency has two facets (Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2021), moral behavior in sports can be categorized into prosocial behavior, encompassing voluntary actions aimed at supporting or benefiting others, such as assisting an injured opponent (Belov et al., 2023; Stanger et al., 2024; Urfa & Acsci, 2023), and antisocial behavior, involving voluntary actions intended to harm or disadvantage others, like cheating, verbal criticism, or intentionally causing harm to an opponent (Bovolon et al., 2024; Fazilah et al., 2023).

The competitive sports environment provides a platform where various forms of antisocial behavior can manifest, including verbal abuse, intentional fouls or injuries to opponents, and purposeful rule-breaking for unfair advantages. These actions may be directed towards teammates, opponents, or both (Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2021). Antisocial behavior in sports can have adverse effects on athletes' performance, mental well-being, and the overall task and social cohesion among athletes and their teams. However, existing research on predictors of such behavior has predominantly concentrated on moral aspects (e.g., moral identity) and motivational factors (e.g., motivational climate), rather than exploring dispositional characteristics (Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2021). Moreover, there is a scarcity of longitudinal evidence concerning factors that either encourage or inhibit antisocial behavior in the sporting context (Boardley et al., 2020). The above discussed definitions of antisocial are old (almost 2 decades) and also in context of western culture, which is different from Pakistan. Therefore the present research is planned to operationalize and domain specifications of antisocial behavior among Pakistan athletes.

Method

Sample and Recruitment

Sixteen eligible participants were enlisted for two homogeneous focus group discussions, maintaining an equal ratio of 8:8, irrespective of gender and participants participate in Cricket, Football, and Badminton. The chosen size aligns with the commonly recommended range of eight to 12 respondents in a focus group, as suggested by Caroline Tynan and Drayton (1988). All participants are residents of three districts: Faisalabad, Lahore, and Bahawalpur, encompassing both rural and urban areas in the Punjab region of Pakistan. Further details regarding the characteristics of the participants will be outlined below:

1. Participants who are living in Faisalabad, Lahore and Bahawalpur district will be included.
2. Participants falling in the age bracket of 18-45 years will be included.
3. Participants affiliated with club, university institute, and national players (participated in Pakistani National Games 2023) will be selected in this research.

Data Collection Technique (Focus Group Discussion)

To select a sample of Pakistani athletes existed in Punjab, Pakistan, purpose sampling technique was used. All the steps in design and protocol of focus groups were followed according to the guidelines of (Stewart et al., 2015). The question was posed: *Can you briefly define, what antisocial behavior means to you?* First, a sampling frame was established, later, the veteran moderator and observer with ten years research experience were selected to conduct the sessions. As an incentive, the meal had been served to them after the

session. The necessary arrangement were made one day before the sessions conducted. All the recruited participants were briefed about the nature and scope of discussion, they were also be given a plenty of time to express on the topic.

Data were audio tapped along with field notes (memos) and Urdu language were considered during FGD for communication. On the same day after the session, initial data of moderator and observer were discussed and reported. The participants were recruited voluntarily with their consent and aim of the research was briefed to them. Participation was solely for research purpose, and especially informed content and debriefing will be ascertained before audio recording of the respondents. Due to it, their anonymity and confidentiality was maintained by assigning them a participant number and the names of the participants were disclosed anywhere; even participants were not disclose their identity while audio recordings. Formal permission was also taken from ethical review committee of UPSI before collection of data.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Before the start of transcription, one training session was conducted with all coders to familiarize with defined coding plan and rules for placing units. The panel of trained coders (familiar with the subject matter) were checked all audio data carefully and transcribed to arrive at reliable results. The audio was not accessible for any external source except the research team to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity. Nonverbal communication, behavioral responses, and gestures (as a sign-vehicle) were taken care during the whole process of transcription. Following the guidelines of Krippendorff (2018, pp. 98-111), data were analyzed in terms of three units; sampling units, recording units, and context units which are collaboratively called assertions content analysis. The two qualitative research experts were involved to examine the reliability and sources of disagreement; their sole job was to identify and correct the discrepancy so that high degree of inter-rater reliability was maintained.

Findings

The data were analyzed using assertions content analysis in terms of three units; sampling units, recording units, and context units.

Operationalization of Antisocial Behavior

To account for the multifaceted nature of athletes' concerns regarding antisocial behavior and to ensure broad applicability, the proposed definition is formulated as follows.

“Antisocial behavior among athletes defines as actions or conduct that deviate from accepted societal values, norms, and the principles of sportsmanship. It encompasses behaviors that are disruptive, harmful, or go against established rules and expectations within the sporting community. This includes displaying aggression, causing harm to others, engaging in negative communication, and exhibiting a lack of respect or cooperation with teammates, coaches, rivals, or the broader sporting environment. Antisocial behavior in sports undermines team unity, breaches ethical standards, and compromises the fairness of competition, leading to negative consequences for individuals and the overall positive atmosphere within the sporting community”.

Domains Specification

Based on the operational definition of antisocial behavior among athletes, these domains are specified;

Aggression and Harmful Conduct

Athletes reported that aggression and harmful conduct is part of antisocial behavior, they act aggressively and harm other athletes. Aggression is linked with antisocial behavior which includes actions such as verbal aggression, physical harm, deliberate fouls, and violations of rules with the intention of harming opponents. As per Nergiz (2018), aggression is characterized as a deliberate and sustained pattern with emotional and tangible objectives, involving the conscious intent to harm the social environment, assert control over it, and exert pressure upon it., which is related to antisocial behavior. A participant said that:

“As an athlete, in my perspective, antisocial behavior refers to adopting or exhibiting conduct that is socially unacceptable within our society. This could include displaying aggression, causing harm to others, or communicating in a negative manner that aims to emotionally harm others, affecting all aspects of sports, both during and outside of sporting activities”.

It is imperative to comprehend and address these behaviors not only for the well-being of individual athletes but also to uphold the integrity and sportsmanship within the competitive sports environment (Ayyildiz & Gokyurek, 2017; Jha, 2023). Another participant also said that:

“Antisocial behavior engaging in rebellious conduct. In the context of sports, it entails a disregard for sports norms, rules, and ethical standards. This may involve the use of abusive language, expressions of anger, attempts to provoke quarrels with opposing athletes, and harboring intentions to cause harm or injury to others during sports activities”.

Negative Communication

Negative communication within the realm of athletes' antisocial behavior takes shape through verbal or non-verbal expressions that are disrespectful or detrimental. This type of adverse communication involves behaviors like making derogatory remarks, hurling insults, or engaging in actions that erode the positive interactions within the sporting community. According to Kavussanu and Boardley (2009), within the competitive sports environment, athletes have opportunities to exhibit various forms of antisocial behavior. This includes verbally abusing others, deliberately causing harm to opponents through fouls or injuries, and intentionally breaking rules to gain unfair advantages. The manifestation of these acts can be directed towards one's teammates, opponents, or both. A participant said that

“I (participant) believe it spans a wide spectrum of behaviors (antisocial) that are often detrimental, disruptive, and disrespectful to teammates, coaches, or opposing players”.

So athletes with high antisocial behavior display negative communication in form of abusive language and disrespectful to others. Another participant also said that:

“It also includes being disrespectful towards others' decisions and suggestions, particularly towards co-players, and exhibiting a lack of trust in them when it comes to game-playing strategy”.

Lack of Respect and Cooperation

In the realm of athletes, antisocial behavior can be observed in the form of a lack of respect and cooperation, which is characterized by actions or attitudes reflecting a deficit in consideration for others and an inability to work collaboratively. This behavior encompasses actions like dismissing teammates' opinions, subverting group efforts, or exhibiting reluctance to cooperate within the sporting environment. A participant said that

“I (participant) believe antisocial behavior involves actions or behaviors that are unfriendly, withdrawn, or contrary to the spirit of team collaboration and socializing within the sporting community”.

With antisocial behavior, athletes display aggressive behavior and break ethical standard and sports rules, which harm other athletes. Another participant said that:

“As an athlete, I (participant) think that antisocial behavior is characterized by actions that disturb team unity, breach ethical standards or established rules, and encompass acts of aggression, disrespect, or harm directed towards teammates, rivals, or the broader sporting environment”.

Rule Violations and Unethical Behavior

Antisocial behavior among athletes can take the form the rule violations and unethical conduct, encompassing actions that contravene established rules and go against ethical standards in the sporting domain. This behavior comprises intentional rule-breaking, engaging in cheating practices, or participating in actions that undermine the fairness and integrity of competitive events. A participant said that

“Specifically, antisocial behavior involves disregarding sports norms, rules, and ethical standards, resorting to the use of abusive language, anger, attempting to provoke quarrels with opposing athletes, and harboring intentions to cause harm or injury to others during sports”.

Rule violations and unethical behavior among athletes can contribute to deviant behaviors in sports settings, including deliberately injuring opponents (Danioni et al., 2021), assigning blame to teammates (Leggat et al., 2020), and feigning injuries to gain an advantage in the game (Mumford, 2010). Such unethical conduct has traditionally been overlooked in sports environments, where an imbalanced emphasis on competitiveness over fairness is observed (Sherif, 1976). Many athletes may not view these immoral behaviors as significant in comparison to their athletic achievements (Smith, 1979), thus contradicting the principles of true sportsmanship. Agnew et al. (2017) provided a definition of sportsmanship, which goes beyond the rules of the sport and is closely tied to the character of athletes, but antisocial behavior is against the moral character of athletes. Another participant also said that:

“Antisocial behavior pertains to actions or behaviors that diverge from the principles of sportsmanship and fair play. This includes conduct that disrupts team unity, breaches ethical standards or rules, and encompasses acts of aggression, disrespect, or harm towards teammates or opponent, rivals, or the sporting setting”.

Conclusion

Antisocial behavior in sports refers to actions deviating from societal values, norms, and sportsmanship principles, encompassing disruptive, harmful behaviors contrary to established rules. Examples include aggression, causing harm, negative communication, and a lack of respect or cooperation. This conduct undermines team unity, breaches ethical standards, and compromises fair competition, resulting in negative consequences for individuals and the overall positive atmosphere in the sporting community. This research concluded that antisocial behavior among athletes cover four domains; (1) aggression and harmful conduct, (2) negative communication, (3) lack of respect and cooperation, and (4) rule violations and unethical behavior.

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