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# Investigation of the Relationship between Attitudes to Moral Decision Making and Moral Disengagement in Youth Student Basketball Players

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the predictive relationships between the attitudes to moral decision-making and the moral disengagement of youth student basketball players doing school sport. Participants were composed of 98 girls (%43,4) and 128 boys (%56,6) totally 223 high school student athletes who compete in the Inter-School Basketball Group Championship. Their average age was 16,16 and their average sport experience was 6,15 years. Both 2 scales used as data collection tool indicated acceptable fit to the data. Correlation analysis showed that moral disengagement was positively associated with cheating (r = 0.47) and gamesmanship (r = 0.47). Regression analyses showed that cheating, gamesmanship and keep winning in proportion (KWIP) variables explain approximately 31% of the total variance of moral disengagement in sports (R=0.554, R^2=0.307, p=0.000). In line with the evidence obtained from the research showed that cheating and gamesmanship attitudes are significant predictors of the moral disengagement but KWIP not. It can be said that student athletes who accept cheating and gamesmanship can use moral disengagement mechanisms more. In addition, there is no evidence that having positive social attitudes reduces moral disengagement in student athletes.

**Keywords:** Moral disengagement, Cheating, Gamesmanship, Keep winning in proportion, Morality in sport, School sport

## 1.INTRODUCTION

In a competitive physical education and sport environment where universal moral principles are adopted, students and athletes are expected to act with the principles of sportsmanship and sports ethics rather than the idea of "win at all costs". However, at every level of competition, people faced with behaviors that do not comply with sports ethics. Shields and Bredemeier (2007) stated that athletes adopt different types of moral frameworks during the competition. The most important aim of coaches, teachers and experienced managers should be to use sports as a tool in the regulation of the social and psychological states of young athletes. In recent years, researchers have focused on personal and social factors that prevent or facilitate the congruous behavior and feelings of youngsters (Balaguer et al., 2016). From this point of view, it is thought that there may be various motivations and attitudes that can lead students and athletes to behave moral or immoral.

Attitude is defined as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Attitudes express the more general principles embodied in values in relation to specific target objects or issues. Evaluating youth's attitudes towards sports has been an important area of interest for the past 20 years. However, there were some problems related to difficulties in explaining the conceptual framework, as well as lack of a suitable scale to measure the targets in the researches. Conceptual complexity of issues made it difficult to measure such situations. Attitudes to moral decision making in youth sport questionnaire developed by Lee et al. (2007) has become one of the existing scales in sport contexts that measure the specific attitudes of accepting cheating, accepting gamesmanship and keep winning in proportion (KWIP). There are conceptual and functional differences between the terms of cheating and gamesmanship. Cheating means "breaking the rules without getting caught or noticed in order to gain an unfair advantage" (Loland, 1998). The concept of gamesmanship (the art of winning games without actually cheating), which was first used by Potter (1947), was described as "using suspicious and possible methods to reach the desired goal without being caught and pushing the limits of the rules" (Lumpkin et al., 2003). Gamesmanship involves actions such as slangy talk and/or slowing down the game to disadvantage the opponent and tactical fouls to prevent points or goals; whereas cheating includes movements such as try to get an unfair penalty and try to make a goal without showing it to the referee. KWIP is a concept that emphasizes the importance of winning properly and emphasizes that winning and losing is part of life (Lee et al., 2007). When the researches conducted to date is examined, attitudes to moral decision-making have been stated to be related with prosocial and antisocial behaviors (Alemdağ, 2019), goal orientations (Mallia et al, 2018), moral attitudes (Lucidi et al., 2017), moral disengagement (Šukys, 2013), motivational climate (Palou et al., 2013), values (Lee et al., 2008).

Another concept is that explains the immoral attitudes, which emerge in the sports environment is moral disengagement. The Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action developed by Bandura (1991) describes a process in which moral behavior is regulated. In this theory, it is claimed that people experience emotions such as pride or guilt by looking at the positive or negative results of the actions. It is thought that when a person acts in a negative manner, the motivation of the person decreases, when a person acts in a positive manner, the motivation of the person increases and it is thought that individuals who experience these emotions will also regulate their behavior accordingly. Although these emotions are likely to regulate moral actions, people still continue to their immoral actions. Selection and use of eight psychosocial processes called "moral disengagement mechanisms" creates a ground for people to act immorally without negative effects, and thus, they reduce the pressure on their future negative behavior. Boardley and Kavussanu (2007) developed the Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale (MDSS) based on these moral mechanisms however, the fact that MDSS has 32 items

made it difficult to apply this scale with different scales within the same timeframe and made the scale unpractical (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2008). Instead, they developed a 8-item scale called Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale Short Form (MDSS-S), which measures the moral disengagement in general rather than the individual measurement of each moral mechanism (Boardley and Kavussanu, 2008). These 8 mechanisms are frequently encountered in sport context under different behaviors. An athlete's telling a lie about a position to the referee for the benefit of the team is called Moral Justification; an athlete's do not accept that they are breaking the rules but states only bend a little is called euphemistic labelling; an athlete's comparing violent behavior with slang speech and making slang speech legitimate is called advantageous comparison; an athlete's blame the coach because of his own unsportsmanlike behavior (stating that doing the relevant behavior because the coach wants) is called displacement of responsibility; athletes' make a team decision about a negative behavior and thus they think that their responsibilities regarding negative behavior are reduced due to team decision is called diffusion of responsibility; athletes' refraining from learning the extent of injury caused by them or deny the seriousness of a injury they are aware of is called distortion of consequences; athletes' describe their opponents, like an animal or state that they are lack human qualitiesis called dehumanization; athletes's retaliate against an injurious act against themselves or their teammate and thinking that the opponent deserves this is called attribution of blame (for detailed information and the Turkish scale, see Gürpınar, 2015).

There are also a lot of researches in the literature to understand the relationship between moral disengagement and different psychological structures in sports. In some studies conducted to date, it has been revealed that psychological structures such as doping likelihood (Ring & Hurst, 2019), moral attitudes and behaviors (Mallia et al., 2017), narcissism (Jones et al., 2017), gender, contesting orientations, moral identity an done form of moral attentiveness (Shields et al., 2015), performance enhancing drugs (Wilson, 2015), cheating (Šukys, 2013) and values (Šukys and Jansonienė, 2012) were related with moral disengagement. When the literature is analyzed, it is seen that there is limited study in the school sport context that reveals the relationship between moral disengagement and moral attitudes such as cheating, gamesmanship and KWIP. Based on the literature we first hypothesized that negative moral decision-making attitudes (cheating and gamesmanship) would have a positive relationship between moral disengagement, while positive moral decision-making attitude (KWIP) would have a negative relationship between moral disengagement. Second, we hypothesized that moral decision making attitudes predict moral disengagement. In line with this, the aim of this study is to determine the predictive relationships between the attitudes to moral decision-making and the moral disengagement of youth student basketball players.

## 2.METHOD

### Research Model

The research was carried out in correlational survey model. The predictive correlational survey model, which is the type of correlational survey model, determines the change between two or more variables and the degree of this change (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

### Participants

Participants were composed of 98 girls (%43,4) and 128 boys (%56,6) totally 223 high school student athletes who compete in the Inter-School Basketball Group Championship. Their average age was 16,16 and their average sport experience was 6,15 years. Fifty of the students (22.1%) were in the 9th grade; 57 (25.2%) of them were in the 10th grade; 89 (39.4%) of them were in the 11th grade and 30 (13.3%)

of them were in the 12th grade. They were informed about the study, participation was voluntary, honesty in responses was vital, and data would be confidential. Before the implementation of the scales, a consent form was given to the participants. Data were collected from participants who read the form and agreed to participate in the study. After consenting, they completed the measures a scale. The implementation of the scales took approximately 10 minutes. Ethical rules were followed while conducting this research.

**Instrument**

In the research, "Attitudes to Moral Decision-making in Youth Sport Questionnaire-AMDYSQ" which was developed by Lee, Whitehead and Ntoumanis (2007) to measure the moral decision-making attitudes of student athletes was used as data collection tool. Gürpınar (2014) adapted the scale to Turkish culture. The original scale is a 9-item scale with 3 sub-dimensions and scored with a 5-point Likert type grading system between strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). The sub-dimensions of the scale are accepting cheating (eg: I would cheat if I thought it would help me win), accepting gamesmanship (eg: I sometimes try to wind up the opposition) and KWIP (eg: winning and losing are a part of life). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.60 for accepting cheating, 0.62 for accepting gamesmanship and 0.64 for KWIP. The confirmatory factor analysis done for testing the validity of the scale was shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results of the AMDYSQ**

| | $\chi^2$ | df | $\chi^2/df$ | RMSEA | CFI | TLI | SRMR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Model** | 42.485 | 22 | 1.93 | 0.066 | 0.947 | 0.913 | 0.054 |

When the results are evaluated, it can be said that the value of $x^2/df$ is less than 3 and the model has a perfect fit. When other fit indexes are evaluated, it can be said that RMSEA's being below the value of 0.08 indicates perfect fit (Kline, 2005), CFI and TLI's being above the value of 0.90 indicates good fit (Byrne, 2010), SRMR's being below the value of 0.08 indicates perfect fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). In general, when the results of confirmatory factor analysis are evaluated, it is possible to say that the structure regarding moral decision-making attitudes is confirmed.

**Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis results of the MDSS-S**

| | $\chi^2$ | df | $\chi^2/df$ | RMSEA | CFI | TLI | SRMR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Model** | 33.963 | 18 | 1.88 | 0.064 | 0.927 | 0.887 | 0.050 |

According to the results, because the x2/df is less than 3, the model has a perfect fit. When other fit indexes are evaluated, it can be said that RMSEA's being below the value of 0.08 indicates perfect fit (Kline, 2005), CFI's being above the value of 0.90 indicates good fit and TLI has an acceptable fit (Byrne, 2010), SRMR's being below the value of 0.08 indicates perfect fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). In general, when confirmatory factor analysis results were evaluated, it was determined that the structure was confirmed.

**Data Analysis**

In the data set, missing values were checked and outliers were detected. The normality of the data was checked by the skewness-kurtosis coefficients. For the skewness-kurtosis coefficients, the interval of ±1 was accepted as the cut-off point. Since the values obtained for the skewness-kurtosis coefficients of the data are in the range of ±1, it is assumed that the data show normal distribution. Multiple regression analysis was carried out to determine the predictive relationships between variables.

## 3.RESULTS

Multiple regression analysis was carried out to determine whether cheating, gamesmanship and KWIP scores predict moral disengagement scores in sport and the results of the analysis are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Multiple regression analysis regarding predictive level of moral disengagement in sport**

| Variable | B | Std. Error$_B$ | β | T | p | Partial r | Part R |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Constant** | 1.243 | 0.308 | - | 4.038 | 0.000* | - | - |
| **Cheating** | 0.392 | 0.074 | 0.335 | 5.316 | 0.000* | 0.467 | 0.336 |
| **Gamesmanship** | 0.318 | 0.065 | 0.315 | 4.888 | 0.000* | 0.467 | 0.312 |
| **KWIP** | 0.047 | 0.067 | 0.041 | 0.698 | 0.486 | 0.084 | 0.047 |
| **R=0.554** | $R^2$=0.307 | | | | | | |
| $F_{(3.222)}$=32.758 | p=0.000 | | | | | | |

*p<0.001

When bilateral and partial correlations between predictor and predicted variable are examined, there is a positive moderate relationship between student athletes' moral disengagement levels and cheating scores (r = 0.47), when other variables are controlled, the correlation between moral disengagement and cheating scores is r = 0.34. It was observed that there was a positive moderate relationship between the student 'athletes' moral disengagement levels and their gamesmanship scores (r = 0.47), and when other variables were controlled this correlation was r = 0.31. It was seen that there was no significant relationship between student athletes' moral disengagement levels and KWIP scores (r = 0.08), and when other variables were controlled this correlation was r = 0.05.

In the regression analysis on whether the variables of cheating, gamesmanship and KWIP explain the moral disengagement in sports, it is seen that the model is significant (R=0.554, R^2=0.307, p=0.000). These three variables explain approximately 31% of the total variance of moral disengagement in sports. According to the standardized regression coefficients (β), the order of importance of the predictive variables among moral disengagement appears as cheating, gamesmanship and KWIP. According to the t-test results on the significance levels of the regression coefficients, cheating and gamesmanship are significant predictors of the moral disengagement. It has been determined that KWIP variable does not seem to have a significant effect.

## 4.DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

In this study, the predictive relationships between attitudes to moral decision-making and moral disengagement in sports were examined. With this research, it was tried to determine whether attitudes of cheating, gamesmanship and KWIP in young competitive basketball players predict moral disengagement in sports. In addition, it was determined which attitude was the most predictive attitude to moral disengagement. Accordingly, this study is one of the first studies to examine the relationship between some positive and negative attitudes in sports and moral disengagement.

According to the results of the research, while there was a positive moderate relationship between cheating and moral disengagement, a positive moderate relationship was also found between gamesmanship and moral disengagement. There was no relation between KWIP and moral disengagement. It is noteworthy that cheating and gamesmanship, which are negative attitudes, are similarly related to the moral disengagement, while KWIP, which is a positive attitude, is not related to moral disengagement. Mallia et al. (2017), in their study, found a positive moderate level relationship between cheating and gamesmanship and moral disengagement, while they found a negative low level relationship between KWIP and moral disengagement. While the research findings are similar to this study in terms of negative attitudes, they are not similar in terms of positive attitudes.

When the results of the regression analysis of this research are examined, it was seen that cheating and gamesmanship is an important predictor of the moral disengagement in sports, while KWIP has no effect in explaining the moral disengagement. In his study, Sukys (2013) also revealed that moral disengagement is a predictor of cheating. This literature finding shows that there is a relationship between cheating and moral disengagement. Sarı and Deryahanoğlu (2019) stated that performance climate is a significant determinant of moral disengagement in sports and performance climate is associated with many negative behaviors in sports. When the results of this research evaluated as a whole with the results of correlation and regression, it is possible to say that student athletes with negative attitudes such as cheating and gamesmanship use moral disengagement mechanisms and that student athletes with positive attitudes do not use moral disengagement. In addition, in the literature, moral disengagement is reported to be an important mediator of antisocial behavior in sports (Boardley et al., 2020; Hodge and Gucuardi, 2015; Stanger et al., 2013). Therefore, it is thought that attitudes such as cheating and gamesmanship may have important effects on antisocial behavior in school sport.

In this study, it was aimed to reveal the predictive relationships between negative and positive attitudes and moral disengagement, and new evidence was found. Cheating and gamesmanship are significant predictors of the moral disengagement but KWIP not. It can be said that student athletes who accept cheating and gamesmanship can use moral disengagement mechanisms more. In addition, there is no evidence that having positive social attitudes reduces moral disengagement mechanisms in athletes. The current findings provide new information about the positive links between negative attitudes in sports and moral disengagement. It will be beneficial for the trainers, physical educators and other sports trainers and they should be aware of the fact that their student athletes with negative attitudes could accept more moral disengagement mechanisms and should organize their educations and trainings accordingly.

Our findings should be interpreted in the light of potential research limitations. Firstly, in this research, the attitudes expressed by the student athletes themselves were measured. Considering that there may be differences between self-reported attitudes and behaviors, it is possible to say this situation as a limitation of this research. In addition, it is difficult to reach an opinion about causality since it is a cross-sectional study. Finally, these data were collected from Turkish student basketball players.

Collecting data from athletes from different cultures, different school types, different sports branches and different competition levels will increase the generalizability of the results. In future research, it will be useful to examine the relationship between moral decision-making attitudes and antisocial behavior.

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