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3 Aggression in Soccer: An Exploratory Study of Accounts Preference

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1 Aggression in Soccer: An Exploratory Study of Accounts Preference

2 Most researchers have defined aggression in sport as overt acts violating the formal
3 rules and intentionally causing harm (Widmeyer, Dorsch, Bray, & McGuire, 2002). Such
4 conduct in team sports may also be conceptualized as a kind of *social interaction*
5 (Mummendey & Mummendey, 1983), which would suggest that aggression is not judged as
6 an isolated act but as a set of actions and reactions between individuals. In many contexts
7 including sport, individuals who transgress social norms and/or cause harm to another are
8 confronted with the others' negative reactions, and are frequently called upon to account or
9 give a verbal explanation for that violation (Ohbuchi, 1999; Petrucci, 2002; Weiner, 1995). In
10 this sense, the account episode may constitute an integral part of the aggressive situation and
11 may partially determine the course of the interaction (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989).
12 For instance, an account that is successful by an athlete in sport might mitigate the negative
13 reactions from others (e.g., opponents or referees), whereas an unsatisfactory response might
14 lead to social reproaches or penalization.

15 An important issue to be considered in research examining accounts episodes in sport
16 is the equivocal relationship that exists between sport and aggression. Although the idea that
17 sport builds moral values is a strong belief, competitive team sports are often counter to
18 development of ethic, sportsmanship, or fair-play (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). Empirical
19 research conducted on attitudes of coaches and athletes has revealed that aggression is
20 considered as a salient and appropriate dimension in sport. For instance, Stephens (2000) and
21 Stephens and Bredemeier (1996) expressed that a team's pro-aggression norms predicted self-
22 aggressive tendencies, even though these are contrary to ideological conventions. There is
23 also evidence that team sport athletes displayed less mature moral reasoning and had a
24 tendency to consider aggression as more legitimate than non-athletes (Bredemeier, 1985,
25 Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). Lastly, athletes approved aggression under some circumstances

1 as close games or retaliation (Conroy, Silva, Newcomer, Walker, & Johnson, 2001). Although
2 a growing number of studies have investigated the endorsement or rejection of aggressive
3 behaviors in sport, to date, little is known about how athletes explain their aggressive
4 behaviors. The fact that many athletes accept a certain amount of aggression as part of the
5 game raises the question about whether and what accounts are really made by players. The
6 answer to these questions may increase our understanding of a complete portrait of aggressive
7 situations in sport and may broaden a complementary knowledge base for account and sport
8 research working on aggression. Thus, the central purpose of this study was to explore the
9 athletes' perception of accounts given for aggression in soccer.

10 Social psychologists have differentiated several accounts on the basis of rejection or
11 acceptance of personal responsibility (Ohbuchi, 1999; Schönbach, 1990). Apology expresses
12 the acceptance of personal responsibility, whereas excuse and justification attempt to
13 minimize this responsibility in terms of (uncontrollable) causes and reasons, respectively.
14 Lastly, denials fully reject personal responsibility. All verbal explanations are also made by
15 different combinations of acknowledgement of association and harmfulness (Itoi, Ohbuchi, &
16 Fukuno, 1996). Accounts selection usually has been studied for interpersonal transgressions,
17 such as turning down a date or breaking another person's teacup (Itoi et al., 1996; Ohbuchi,
18 Suzuki, & Takaku, 2003). Predominance of apology was found when the action was
19 accidental, while excuse was favored when the action was intentional (Ohbuchi & Sato,
20 1994). Felson and Ribner (1981) also indicated that when criminal offenders explain their
21 felonious aggression, they provided excuses and justifications to justice officials more
22 frequently than apologies. Because the others' negative reactions may become more severe
23 for perceived intentional harm in the justice system, aggressors may attempt to convince the
24 officials and judges that the act was unintentional or uncontrollable to shift their responsibility
25 (Weiner, 1995). This gives a clue to the study of aggression in team sports. Indeed, referees

1 *Participants*

2 Participants in the study were 119 French soccer players, aged between 18 to 24 years old
3 ($M = 21$ years, $SD = 1.66$), and living in the western of France. They were all male members
4 of 15 departmental soccer teams (i.e., the lower French soccer competitive level), with an
5 average experience of 8 seasons in soccer ($SD = 2.9$).

6 *Instruments*

7 In accordance with the account research (Itoi et al., 1996; Ohbuchi et al., 2003), a role-
8 playing experiment was conducted. A group of departmental soccer players, coaches, and
9 chief referees ($N = 6$) were firstly asked to describe behaviors usually occurring in their
10 practice that they considered as aggressive, that is, intentional and rule-breaking behaviors.
11 Elbowing, kicking, tripping up, and holding were all mentioned by the panel of experts and
12 were retained for the study as the most representative of intentional rule-breaking acts.

13 Four video clips were then recorded to illustrate these aggressive acts and the accounts
14 given. In each clip, two soccer players were placed in a game scenario, in which one of them
15 attacks the other (including respectively elbowing, kicking, tripping up, and holding acts).
16 Each video clip also described what the deviant player may say among four propositions to
17 explain the actions: (1) apology (i.e., to recognize personal responsibility by saying « I'm
18 sorry, I apologize »), (2) excuse/justification (i.e., to give a pretext or to justify the behavior
19 by saying, "It was out of my control"), (3) denial (i.e., to reject personal responsibility and
20 harm by saying "I didn't do anything, I only touched the ball"), and (4) no-account (i.e., to
21 say nothing about the behavior and to return to his position). Two social scientists who had
22 previously published research on accounts selection watched the videotaped accounts and
23 determined which account was depicted according to the definition in the text. The selected
24 accounts exceeded the 90% interrater reliability score and were defined as being made to the
25 referee, who has the decision-making power and is responsible for penalizing aggressors.

1 Each clip lasted approximately thirty seconds. The order of the video clips as well as that of
2 the accounts given were counterbalanced, presenting each aggressive act and account in first,
3 second, third, and fourth place. No order effect was found ($ps > .05$).

4 *Procedure*

5 The study was introduced as a “research about competitive situations in soccer”.

6 Participants were individually interviewed during their training sessions by one of the two
7 first authors or by two graduate students familiar with the sport aggression literature.

8 Participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and they were
9 encouraged to provide honest responses. Following the signing of the consent forms, each
10 participant watched the four video clips assuming that they were the aggressor-account-maker
11 in the scenario. The four aggressive acts were verbally described to participants as either
12 instrumental (in order to gain the ball; $n = 62$) or hostile (in order to harm; $n = 57$).

13 Participants were able to replay all the video clips as many times as needed.

14 After watching each video clip, participants were asked to choose, among the four types
15 of accounts, the one they would prefer to give in the presented scenario (apology,
16 excuse/justification, denial, or no-account). This exclusive “forced choice” was used to
17 prevent potential multiple preference of accounts for each participant. One question was
18 added to determine if participants were able to imagine themselves in the actor’s position in
19 the clips. Two players answered that they were not able to think in such a position and their
20 responses were excluded from analyses. This resulted in a final sample size of 117 soccer
21 players. The experimental session took approximately five minutes for each participant.

22 *Data Analysis*

23 Because the response variable was categorical (apology vs. excuse/justification vs. denial
24 vs. no account), chi squares and logistic regressions were used to analyze such data. Chi
25 squares examined frequency differences of the four types of accounts chosen by participants

1 depending on the aggressive condition (instrumental vs. hostile). Moreover, logistic
2 regression analysis was used as an appropriate technique to predict a categorical dependent
3 variable from a set of continuous and/or dichotomous variables (Kleinbaum, 1994). In the
4 current study, when viewing each of the four aggressive acts, participants chose one of four
5 accounts. Hence, for each of the participants, the four choices were collapsed into one of these
6 four accounts. For instance, player number 1 chose 1 apology, 3 no-account, 0
7 excuse/justification, and 0 denials. Then we estimated the probability of giving an account (p)
8 vs. not giving this account ($1 - p$) and we used a series of binary logistic regressions (apology
9 vs. no apology as an outcome, no account vs. account as an outcome, excuse/justification vs.
10 no excuse/justification as an outcome, and denial vs. no denial as a outcome) to examine how
11 these probabilities varied due to differences in the predictive variable - aggressive condition -
12 with the odds ratio ($\exp(\beta)$). For instance, an odds ratio higher than 1 indicated that an
13 account was more likely to be used in the instrumental than in the hostile condition. The alpha
14 level was set at .05 for the analyses.

15 Results

16 *Internal-Consistency Reliability*

17 The accounts given were counted and the internal-consistency reliability across
18 different aggressive behaviors yielded a satisfactory Kuder-Richardson coefficient of .90 for
19 the total score and from .86 to .89 if items were removed. Moreover, apology and no-account
20 were the two most common explanations, much more frequent than excuse/justification and
21 denial for the four aggressive acts, $\chi^2(3) = 31.13, 41.8, 41.6, \text{ and } 43.5, ps < .001$. This
22 indicated an acceptable degree of inter-relatedness and consistency in responses across the
23 aggressive behaviors. As a result, the responses provided to the aggressive behaviors were
24 grouped to assess the effects of the aggressive condition (instrumental vs. hostile) on the
25 accounts given.

1 *Analysis for Type of Accounts Given by Participants*

2 The 4 (Accounts) x 2 (Aggressive Condition) chi square was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 37.95$,
3 Phi = .28, $p < .001$, indicating that apology and excuse/justification varied as a function of the
4 aggressive condition (see Table 1). Thus, apology was (a) the most common account in the
5 instrumental condition (50.8%) but not in the hostile one (32.3%), and (b) more frequently
6 chosen in the instrumental than in the hostile condition ($p < .05$). In contrast, the choice of the
7 excuse/justification was reversed (6% in instrumental vs. 23.6% in hostile, $p < .05$).

8 The results of the binary logistic regressions indicated a significant relationship
9 between the aggressive condition (predictor) and the probability of apology, $\chi^2(1) = 5.13$, $\beta =$
10 $.92$, $\exp(\beta) = 2.53$, $p < .02$, with a significant change in deviance when the predictor was
11 removed from the model (6.08; $p < .01$). Participants in the instrumental condition were 2.53
12 times more likely to use apology than those in the hostile condition. When the probability of
13 excuse/justification was analyzed, binary logistic regression also indicated a significant
14 relationship between the predictor and this account, $\chi^2(1) = 6.61$, $\beta = -1.34$, $\exp(\beta) = .26$, $p <$
15 $.01$, with a significant change in deviance when the predictor was removed from the model
16 (7.70, $p < .006$). Participants in the instrumental condition were 3.8 times less likely (taking
17 the reciprocal of .26) to use excuses and justifications than those in the hostile condition.

18 Discussion

19 The findings of the present study show that saying nothing and apologies were the
20 most frequent categories chosen by soccer players, whereas denials and excuses/justifications
21 were relatively infrequent. A unique and interesting finding that has not been found in the
22 literature was the high percentage for no-account in soccer. Bredemeier (1985) and
23 Bredemeier and Shield (1986) outlined that sport appears to be an environment that
24 encourages the suspension of morality used in everyday life and decreases athletes' sense of
25 moral responsibility. Moreover, the moral exchange which does occur in sport is more

1 egocentric than everyday life morality. Clearly, the “bracketed morality” in sport also reflects
2 a diminution of the consideration about the needs of others and legitimate aggressive acts in
3 competitions. In this way, one can assume that no-account reflect an egocentric and habitual
4 attitude of team-sport aggressor that does not care about the consequences of his behavior.

5 The apology preference is similar to that found in the academic context for
6 interpersonal transgressions (Itoi et al., 1996; Ohbuchi et al., 2003). One possible explanation
7 refers to the social force of post-hoc accounts for aggression. First, we suspect that
8 responsibility-rejecting accounts may be dissonant with the causes of an intentional harm, and
9 become more challenging in creating some problems for harm-doers (Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994;
10 Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001). In fact, it is possible that such accounts are more
11 used and effective when there is no precision about the actor’s intention or when the action is
12 (perceived as) unclear (Gonzales, Manning, & Haugen, 1992). Secondly, account researchers
13 have often treated apology as a tactic selected and driven by specific concerns such as to
14 alleviate anger and/or avoid negative identity (Ohbuchi, 1999; Petrucci, 2002; Weiner, 1995).
15 Empirical research has also shown that apologies are the most efficient account to reduce
16 negative reactions and impressions toward aggressors (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Ohbuchi,
17 Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994). In the present study, participants could
18 view apologies as an integral part of the aggressive situation to stop the conflict and to
19 manage the others’ impressions and reactions. The fact that apologies were more preferred
20 accounts for the instrumental scenario suggests, as account theorists have asserted, that the
21 function and usage of apologies are developed by the social learning process (Itoi et al., 1996;
22 Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994). Indeed, instrumental aggression is governed by unwritten collective
23 norms and is often considered as a learned useful behavior in sport (Stephens, 1998).
24 Similarly, learning to cope with such conduct with apologies would also be an essential aspect
25 of the athletes’ socialization.

1 This study also suggests that players sometimes reject their responsibility for certain
2 forms of aggression. Consistent with our hypothesis, excuses/justifications were more likely
3 in the hostile than in the instrumental scenario. In addition, this “no responsibility” category
4 was chosen in similar proportion as apologies in the scenarios involving hostile aggression.
5 Researchers have indicated that account selection is strongly influenced by situational
6 variables (Itoi et al., 1996; Ohbuchi et al., 2003). Especially, there may be some mitigating
7 (e.g., external pressures) or justifying circumstances (e.g., insults, provocations) in the
8 situation, which prompt actors to attribute their reprehensible behavior to external factors or
9 to judge it as justified, and to make responsibility-rejecting accounts (Ohbuchi et al., 2003).
10 This may also be the case in sport for certain hostile aggressions, which are considered as
11 emotional responses usually involving provocation, frustration, and/or anger (Stephens,
12 1998).

13 However, responsibility rejection may be also determined by motivational variables,
14 such as avoidance of punishments and economic costs (Itoi et al., 1996; Ohbuchi et al., 2003).
15 For instance, Itoi et al. (1996) found that when the harm is severe, the motive to avoid
16 punishment from others was intensely evoked, which induced subjects to use justifications. In
17 team sports, athletes may also consider the responses to their aggressive actions from the
18 referee, the other players, and the coaches, and this may cause variation in their motivation as
19 to how to respond. Thus, the need to justify or excuse the aggressive behavior may become
20 more important when it is perceived as totally unacceptable (Widmeyer et al., 2002). Hostile
21 aggression is highly considered as illegitimate and is often discouraged by both players and
22 coaches (Loughead & Leith, 2001). Perhaps athletes in the current study use
23 excuses/justifications more often in the hostile than in the instrumental scenario because they
24 believed such accounts avoid harsh players’ and coaches’ reproaches and punishments that
25 often followed hostile aggression. In other words, one can assume that account-making in

1 team sports may reflect different motivations depending on the type of aggression. Thus, the
2 tentative interpretations about the accounts-making for aggression should merit further
3 investigations about the players' motivational concerns.

4 We should, however, be duly cautious in interpretations and generalizations of our
5 results. The problem of social desirability is always present in the domain of aggressive sport
6 behavior and its legitimacy (Stephens, 1998). In the present study, athletes' reports of
7 apologies are unavoidably subjective and may be compromised by a social desirability effect,
8 wherein participants reported apology to sound civilized after aggressive acts. In addition, this
9 role-playing study did not reproduce or lacked several concrete situational contexts (e.g.,
10 communication with coaches) as well as some emotions (e.g., anger) that are commonly
11 experienced by hostile aggressive players. In fact, if these variables are not taken into account,
12 similar results may not be found. Research is needed to explore the contribution of a socially
13 desirable response bias favoring prescribed reactions to aggressive sport behavior and to give
14 meaningful conclusions on why actual aggressors say nothing, apologize, or justify the
15 transgression. This should help researchers and sport officials to understand the accounts
16 selection and its concrete implications in sport.

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 5
 6 Table 1
 7 Accounts Given by Soccer Players ($N = 117$) Across a Series of Aggressive Acts as a Function of
 8 the Aggressive Condition (hostile vs. instrumental)

AGGRESSIVE CONDITION		ACCOUNTS			
		Apology	Excuse/Justification	Denial	No account
Hostile ($n = 55$)	Observed	<i>71</i>	<i>52*</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>75</i>
	Expected	92,6	31,5	16,9	79
	% within Hostile	32,3	23,6	10	34,1
Instrumental ($n = 62$)	Observed	<i>126*</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>93</i>
	Expected	104,4	35,5	19,1	89
	% within Instrumental	50,8	6	5,60	37,5

9 Note. The number in italics for each account category included all the observed responses for the
 10 whole of four aggressive behaviors;
 11 * Differs from the other aggressive condition, $ps < .05$.
 12