Moral decision-making attitude and psychological well-being: reflections from various sports branches

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Abstract

Background and Study Aim

This study aimed to investigate the impact of moral decision-making attitudes among athletes in various sports on their psychological well-being.

Material and Methods

A total of 345 active, licensed athletes (also students) participated in this study, with a mean age of 19.62 years (215 females and 130 males). The sports represented included athletics, badminton, basketball, boxing, fencing, football, wrestling, handball, hockey, judo, kickboxing, table tennis, taekwondo, wheelchair basketball, volleyball, and swimming. In addition to descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analyses were conducted within the framework of a relational model.

Results

The study revealed significant relationships between different sub-dimensions of the moral decision-making attitude scale and psychological well-being. Specifically, a significant negative relationship (r = -0.162, p < 0.001) was observed between adopting cheating, a sub-dimension of the moral decision-making attitude scale, and psychological well-being. Conversely, a significant positive relationship (r = 0.158, p < 0.001) was found between protecting fair competition, another sub-dimension of the moral decision-making attitude scale, and psychological well-being. It was determined that adopting cheating had a significantly negative effect on psychological well-being (β = -0.188, p < 0.001), while protecting fair competition had a positive effect (β = 0.183, p < 0.001).

Conclusions

This study suggests that athletes experience a negative impact on their psychological well-being when they engage in cheating as part of their moral decision-making attitudes. Conversely, their psychological well-being benefits from their commitment to fair competition. It can be argued that athletes' moral responsibilities contribute to their psychological resilience and well-being.

Keywords: moral, decision-making, attitude, psychological, well-being, athletes

Introduction

Morality refers to the value judgments that we call “good,” “right,” “bad,” or “wrong” in human relations [1]. Morality is primarily based on adherence to duties and rules [2]. It is formed by integrating moral and identity development processes during adolescence and emerging adulthood [3]. The concept of morality encompasses general universal principles such as justice, fairness, and care [4]. Researchers generally argue that personality traits and psychological factors are effective in moral decision-making [5]. There are various theories related to moral development in the relevant literature. These theories are briefly mentioned below.

Moral Development According to Psychoanalytic Theory

The starting point of psychoanalytic theory is based on the concept of “causality” put forward by Spinoza [6]. The concept of causality describes the view that the behaviors exhibited do not occur randomly and that every behavior has an underlying reason. The concept of causality, which describes that behaviors cannot always occur in the context of the environment and that sometimes the cause of behavior may be in the inner world of the person, has a very important place in the emergence of psychoanalytic theory [6]. According to Freud, the pioneer of psychoanalytic theory, human behavior emerges due to the mutual interaction of the id, ego, and superego [7]. The personality’s mental health, harmony, and balance depend on the healthy and balanced relationships between these three elements [8]. Freud considered moral development as an emotional-impulsive process like personality development. One of the layers of the human being, which Freud considered as multi-layered (Id, Ego, Superego) being, the superego is a structure that develops as a child and is the first source of the sense of morality in human beings [9]. Freud argues that morality emerges as a result of the adoption of the rules that must be followed in society by the “superego” [10].

Moral Development According to Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory adopts a cognitive interactionist perspective on moral phenomena. Within this conceptual framework, moral thinking...
and personal factors in the form of emotional self-reactions, moral behavior, and environmental factors all function as interactive determinants influencing each other bidirectionally. Moral behavior is motivated and regulated mainly through the ongoing practice of self-reactive influence [11, 12].

**Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory**

Piaget considered moral development as a process showing developmental characteristics related to cognitive development in individuals. He also stated that individuals’ cognitive development and moral development, and judgments are interrelated. Cognitive theories focus on how our mental processes or cognitions change over time. Cognitive theories describe the interaction between the individual and the environment, which occurs through constant back and forth between the individual and the environment [13].

**Kohlberg’s Moral Development Theory**

Kohlberg discussed the stages of moral development in three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. At the pre-conventional level, the individual is sensitive to cultural rules and the concepts of good and bad, right and wrong, but interprets these rules in terms of either physical or hedonistic consequences. At the traditional level, upholding the expectations of one’s family, group, or nation, regardless of the immediate and obvious consequences, is perceived as valuable in itself. At the post-traditional level, on the other hand, there is an effort to define moral values and principles as principles with validity and application, separate from the authority of the groups or individuals who hold these principles and the individual’s own identification with these groups [14].

Researchers have approached the study of moral behavior in sports from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Two approaches in this field are Rest’s [15] four-component model of moral action and Bandura’s [11] social cognitive theory of moral thought and action. Research stemming from these approaches, followed by studies on good and bad sports behaviors, fair play, and aggression, are discussed [16]. Sport is an important tool for moral development [17, 18]. Athletes need to have the right attitudes and moral norms to help them develop their own self-moral value judgments that will not change in case of victory or defeat, along with universal moral values [19]. In recent years, moral action has become an important research focus on sports ethics [20]. Sport is a tool serving individuals’ physical, cognitive, affective, and social aspects [21]. Sports can develop moral values and pro-social behavior in young people [22]. It has always been stated that sports contribute to human character and moral development [23].

Sports participation and athletic orientations are critical in moral reasoning [24]. Suppose the morality concept in sports is evaluated based on good and bad behaviors in sports. In that case, good behaviors can be exemplified by behaviors such as protecting equality of opportunity, not seeing the opponent as an enemy, acting towards cooperation and teammates, not taking advantage of unfair advantages, and empathy [25].

Morality is important in a person’s psychological life [26]. It can be thought that people’s psychological states are reflected in their moral actions. The concept of psychological well-being is an important concept examining individuals’ emotional and cognitive actions and especially emphasizing their psychological well-being. Ryff [27] stated that there are few theoretical foundations for the psychological well-being concept. However, Ryff and Singer [28] stated that the extensive theoretical literature addresses the meanings of positive psychology concepts and referred to Maslow’s theory of self-actualization 1968, Roger’s 1961 view of the person using his/her full potential, Jung’s 1933 individualization formulation and Allport’s 1961 maturity concepts. According to Özden [29] Ryff developed a multidimensional model of psychological well-being by integrating the convergent points in the relevant theorists’ views on positive psychological functioning. These dimensions can be listed as self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, life purpose, and personal growth [27].

Psychological well-being can also be considered a spiritual/emotional-based variable [30]. According to Huppert [31], psychological well-being is a combination of feeling good and the effective functioning of the general emotional state. The main goal of psychological well-being is to discover one’s potential and to realize oneself in line with this potential [21]. Keyes et al., [32] stated that psychological well-being includes the perception of coping with the existential challenges in life. Psychological well-being can be explained as an individual’s feeling good regarding the combination of emotional health and functionality in general emotional states [33].

Psychological well-being can also be defined as the effort to realize one’s true potential [34]. When a person fulfills his/her desires without violating others’ rights, he/she will feel psychologically peaceful both because he/she has done what he/she wants and because he/she has not harmed others [10]. Sport is a social and physical need. It is the most valuable outlet for human beings, no matter what. Moreover, it is a manifestation of well-being that benefits individuals and society as it incorporates spiritual, cultural, moral, and educational aspects [35]. The athlete’s struggle concerning moral values also positively affects the moral maturity level of
the person [36]. Hence, sportive activities align with moral values and principles [37].

Sport is a special habitat and morality [38]. Achieving the expected efficiency in sports is possible by adhering to sports ethics and rules dating back to the past [39]. There are several indicators of moral maturity in sports. These include following the rules of the competition with moral maturity, seeing the opponent not as an enemy but as a part of the game, and congratulating the winner and the one who competes well [36]. On the other hand, if certain moral transgressions, which are based on the moral foundations of athletes and occur from time to time, are consistently tolerated in competitive sporting environments on the path to victory, the human impact of this situation needs to be questioned [40]. Indeed, it is essential that sports integrity is valued by society and that all sports actors (athletes, coaches, and officials) promote morality and fair play [41].

This study examines the effect of athletes’ moral decision-making attitudes on their psychological well-being in various sports branches. Since there are a limited number of studies in the relevant literature in which both variables are examined together, it is thought that the results of this research are important because of their contribution to the literature.

**Materials and Methods**

**Participants**

The research study group consists of 345 athletes (also students), 215 (62.3%) women and 130 men (37.7%), who volunteered to participate. The branch distributions are as follows: athletics 32 people (9.3%), badminton 19 people (5.5%), basketball 26 people (7.5%), boxing 13 people (3.8%), fencing 19 people (5.5%), football 47 people (13.6%), wrestling 17 people (4.9%), handball seven people (2.8%), hockey 25 people (7.2), judo 17 people (4.9%), kickboxing 19 people (5.5%), table tennis 14 people (4.1%), taekwondo 15 people (4.3%), wheelchair basketball ten people (2.9%), swimming seven people (2.8%) and volleyball 58 people (16.8%). The duration of the athletic experience was grouped as 1-3 years for 158 athletes (45.8%), 4-6 years for 81 athletes (23.5%), and seven and more years for 106 athletes (30.7%).

Ethics committee approval was obtained for the research with the decision number 2022.01.01.05 and date 25.01.2022 of the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Osmaniye Korkut Ata University.

**Research Design**

Relational survey models aim to determine the existence or degree of change between two or more variables [42]. In this study, the correlational survey model was used. Figure 1 below presents the conceptual model of the research (Moral decision-making attitude - Psychological well-being) and the hypotheses.

**Data Collection Instrument**

*Moral Decision Making Attitudes Scale in Sports Infrastructure*

The scale was developed by Lee et al. [43] and adapted to Turkish culture by Gürpinar [23]. It has nine items and three sub-dimensions. These dimensions are adopting cheating (items 1, 5, 8), adopting competition-loving (2, 4, 6), and protecting winning fairly (3, 7, 9). For this study, the Cronbach’s Alpha (α) value of the scale was found to be .78.

**Psychological Well-Being Scale**

The scale developed by Diener et al. [44] and adapted into Turkish by Telef [45] consists of

![Figure 1](chart.png)

**Figure 1.** Moral decision-making attitudes:

H1: Adopting cheating, a sub-dimension of moral decision-making attitude, negatively affects psychological well-being.

H2: Adopting a competition-loving attitude, one of the sub-dimensions of moral decision-making attitude, positively affects psychological well-being.

H3: Protecting winning fairly, one of the sub-dimensions of moral decision-making attitude, positively affects psychological well-being.
one dimension and eight items. For this study, the Cronbach’s Alpha ($\alpha$) value of the scale was calculated as .79.

**Statistical Analysis**

Missing values and outliers were controlled in the study. In addition to descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis methods were used to test the relationships between the scales within the scope of the relational model.

**Results**

The correlation analysis between the moral decision-making attitudes scale and the psychological well-being scale in youth sports examined the direction of change and the relationship between these variables (tabl. 1). According to the results of the correlation analysis, a significant, negative, and weak correlation ($r= - .162; p<0.01$) was found between the sub-dimension of the moral decision-making attitude scale, adopting deception, and psychological well-being, and a significant positive and weak correlation ($r= .158; p<0.01$) was found between another sub-dimension of the moral decision-making attitude scale, protecting winning fairly, and psychological well-being.

Table 2 presents the regression analysis between the independent variable, moral decision-making attitude, and the dependent variable, psychological well-being. Durbin-Watson (D-W) values between 1.5 and 2.5 confirm no multicollinearity problem between the variables. In addition, VIF values are also within the range deemed appropriate in the literature. The multiple regression model was statistically significant ($F(3-341)=7.166; p<.001$). The $R^2$ value of the model was .059, and the adjusted $R^2$ value was .051. This finding indicates that the independent variable of moral decision-making attitude explains 5% of the dependent variable dimension of psychological well-being changes. Considering the power of the independent variable to affect the dependent variable in this relationship based on beta indicators, a significant and negative effect was observed in the dimension of adopting cheating ($\beta= -.188; p<0.01$). A significant and positive effect ($\beta= .183; p<0.01$) was found in protecting the winning fairly dimension. Among the moral decision-making attitudes, adopting deception was found to have a significant negative effect on psychological well-being, whereas protecting winning fairly was found to have a positive effect. In summary, it is possible to say that while athletes' psychology will be negatively affected due to adopting deception from moral decision-making attitudes, their psychological well-being will be positively affected due to protecting winning fairly from moral decision-making attitudes.

**Discussion**

This study aims to examine the effect of athletes’ moral decision-making attitudes on their psychological well-being in various branches. A total of 345 athletes in athletics, badminton, basketball, boxing, fencing, football, wrestling, handball, hockey, judo, kickboxing, table tennis, taekwondo, wheelchair basketball, swimming, and volleyball participated in the study.

Based on the correlation analysis findings of the study, a significant, negative relationship was found between adopting cheating, which is a sub-dimension of the moral decision-making attitude scale, and psychological well-being, while

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Correlation analysis results (n =345)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Adopting deception</td>
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<td>2. Adopting competition-loving</td>
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<td>3. Protecting winning fairly</td>
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<td>4. Psychological well-being</td>
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<td><strong>Note:</strong></td>
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<th>Table 2. Regression analysis results</th>
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<td><strong>Model</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adopting deception</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adopting competition-loving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protecting winning fairly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong>=.244</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong>(.3-341)=7.166</td>
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Dependent variable: Psychological well-being.
a significant, positive relationship was found between protecting fair gain, which is another sub-dimension of the moral decision-making attitude scale, and psychological well-being (Table 1). According to the regression analysis findings of the study, it was determined that adopting deception, one of the moral decision-making attitudes, had a significant negative effect on psychological well-being, whereas protecting winning fairly had a positive effect (Table 2). Related findings supported H1 and H3, which were formed within the scope of the research model.

Hurst et al. [46] emphasized that cheating in sports can lead to negative interpersonal consequences as well as violate the ideal of fair play, which involves following the rules while competing. Similarly, Lancaster and Miller [47] reported that performing actions crossing moral boundaries can lead to permanent psychological, mental, and behavioral problems. On the other hand, according to Rastogi and Pandey [33], psychological well-being is strongly positively related to moral emotions. If we look at the research results in the relevant literature, it is determined that a positive relationship exists between moral maturity and psychological well-being [10, 48]. Okan [49] reported that moral integrity positively affects psychological well-being. Farhan et al. [50] found that psychological well-being increased as moral intelligence increased. Demir-Çelebi and Sezgin [51] reported a positive relationship between individuals’ moral maturity and well-being. Zawadzka and Zalewska [52] found a positive relationship between humility, which forms the basis of moral decision-making, and psychological well-being. Another research finding revealed that moral intelligence significantly predicts psychological well-being [53]. Considering the findings of the research and the results of relevant studies in the literature, it can be surmised that abiding by moral rules is associated with positive connotations, while disregarding them is linked to negative connotations.

Bore et al. [54] stated that moral orientation is significantly related to personality. Loland [55] reported that the values inherent in sports define the potential of sports to develop moral character. Sports can develop moral values and pro-social behaviors in young people [56]. Akandere et al. [57] and Uzun and Yılmaz [58] reported that students receiving sports education had better moral maturity levels than those not. It was observed that there was a positive and significant relationship between the moral maturity levels of the research group and sports attitudes, and therefore, it was stated that the moral maturity scores of individuals with high sports attitudes also increased [59, 60]. Sirin et al. [61] stated that the moral maturity levels of individuals participating in sporting activities increased as their sporting history increased. According to Kelinske et al. [62] the potential benefits of sports participation include moral reasoning, health, and fitness. A study conducted by Aldegeheiry [35] found that sports activities have a highly positive effect on individuals regarding psychological and moral aspects. It was concluded that regular sports participation of university students positively affected all parameters of psychological well-being [21]. Numerous related studies have echoed these findings, delving into the intricate relationship between sports and psychological well-being [63, 64, 65, 66, 67]. These studies cover a wide range of topics, including the psychological well-being of individuals based on their sporting status and the moral worth of sport and its contributions to life aspirations and psychological well-being [68, 69, 70, 71, 72]. Considering the importance of morality and values, especially among young athletes [73], it can be stated that participation in sports activities is important. When we evaluate the research results in the relevant literature both in terms of moral attitude and psychological well-being, it can be stated that participation in sporting activities improves moral attitude and provides psychological support to individuals.

Moral feelings are a fundamental element representing the link between moral standards and moral behavior [74]. Meanwhile, all moral behaviors of a person with moral integrity are consistent with each other [49]. Hertz and Krettenauer [75] argued that moral identity is an indicator of moral action and that moral identity strengthens individuals’ readiness to engage in pro-social and moral behavior and avoid antisocial behavior. According to Milanovic et al. [76] the maintenance of moral codes increases the moral impact of sports and the responsibility of all participants in sports for their behavior, as well as contributes to the development of the moral climate among individuals, thanks to the enormous attractiveness of sport for individuals. It can be said that individuals who are interested in sports develop their moral orientation not only in the sports environment but also in other environments. In this respect, it is recommended that sports, which are known to contribute positively to the upbringing of moral individuals, should be supported worldwide in every field [77]. On the other hand, rewarding athletes who exhibit positive moral behavior and encouraging such approaches can also be effective in developing a positive understanding of social morality [78].

Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings of this research are believed to hold both practical and theoretical significance. The main theoretical contribution lies in identifying the negative psychological impact on individuals actively involved in sports today, stemming from their adoption of deceptive practices
influenced by moral decision-making attitudes. Conversely, the research highlights the positive psychological effects associated with prioritizing fair play and protecting the integrity of winning. From a practical standpoint, the research suggests that athletes prioritizing moral values experience greater psychological well-being, whereas those who neglect moral principles may experience negative psychological states. Moreover, it can be argued that assuming moral responsibilities strengthens an individual’s psychological resilience.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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