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## Rationalization of self-reported aggression among male and female university soccer players

**Joseph Kwame Mintah**

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out the type of aggression used by university male and female soccer players and the rationalizations they give for the use of each type of aggression. Sixty-four university soccer players, 26 males and 38 females, participated in this study. Participants responded to the Bredemeier Athletic Aggression Inventory short form and the Mintah-Huddleston Aggression Justification Inventory. Overall, participants disagreed with the use of both hostile and instrumental aggression. But, female soccer players disagreed more with the use of hostile and instrumental aggression than their male counterparts.

Female soccer players agreed more with the use of instrumental rationalization than males. Thus, it could be concluded that university soccer players disagree with the use of hostile and instrumental aggression in sport.

**Keywords:** Aggression, rationalization, male and female, university, soccer players

### 1. Introduction

Sport is a miniature world. Behaviours that get punished in real life situations go free in sports without much sanction. For example, a soccer player whose elbow breaks an opponent's nose in an aerial ball challenge gets cautioned for the act or at worse sent off; whereas the same incident happening outside sport could lead to an arrest and prosecution of the culprit. One of such behaviours that commonly occur in sport is aggression. Aggression is any verbal or physical act that can hurt an individual physically or psychologically (Baron, & Richardson, 1994). It is an intentional behaviour aimed at doing harm or causing pain to another person.

Aggression is the infliction of an adverse stimulus, physical, verbal, or gestural, upon one person by another (Weinberg, & Gould, 2011) [27]. It is often accompanied by strong negative emotions. For a behaviour to be judged aggressive, it must be directed at another living being with the goal of causing some form of physical or psychological harm (Gill, 2000) [16], and it must show a reasonable expectation that the attempt to inflict harm will be successful (Berkowitz, 1993; Gill, & Williams, 2008) [5, 17].

Aggression can be categorized into instrumental and hostile (Grange, & Kerr, 2010; Husman, & Silva, 1984) [18, 19]. Hostile aggression is an act of aggression stemming from feelings of anger and aimed at inflicting pain or injury (Silva, 1980) [27]. An example is a soccer player paying an opponent back for injuring or hurting him/her in a previously contested game. The main goal of hostile aggression is to see the victim suffer pain (Wood, 2001) [28]. Hostile aggression find reinforcement to their behaviour in the pain, suffering and injuries caused (Weinberg, & Gould, 2011) [27]. Instrumental aggression involves an intention to hurt another person as a means to some goal other than causing harm. Hurting an opposing key player to give your team an added advantage is an example of instrumental aggression (Weinberg, & Gould, 2011) [27]. Thus, the intent of instrumental aggression is to achieve a team goal in terms of fame, money or victory in performance (Jones, Bray, & Oliver, 2005) [20].

Over the years, four key theories (instinct, frustration-aggression, social learning, and moral reasoning) have been proposed to explain sport aggression. The first is the Instinct theory. Instinct theory especially Freudian psychologist suggests that aggressive behaviour is an innate characteristic of all individuals (Lorenz, 1996) [21]. This theory explains that human beings are born with aggressive instinct which continues to build up until it is released through an

aggressive act (Gill, 2000) [16]. The theory also suggests that individuals who participate in competitive aggressive sports such as rugby, basketball and soccer have the most opportunities to release their innate feelings of aggression. Although, aggressive behaviours may sometimes provide catharsis or pent-up emotions, a contrary view is that participating in or viewing aggressive behaviours is more likely to elicit greater amounts of aggression than to result in aggressive acts. For instance, Gelfand and Hartman (1982) [15] found that participation in competitive games raised boys' and girls' levels of aggression regardless of competition outcome. Spectators also became more aggressive after observing the event. Likewise, vigorous physical exercise using a bicycle ergometer could enhance aggressive tendencies. Thus, aggression is not necessarily innate or inborn. This divergent view led to the development of the Frustration-Aggression theory.

Frustration-Aggression theory maintains that aggression is caused by frustration. This theory postulates that an individual's perception that she/he is being prevented from obtaining a goal will increase the probability of an aggressive response (Bird, & Cripe, 1986; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939; Gill, 2000) [6, 13, 16]. This means that, the greater the closeness to the goal, the greater the frustration when it is thwarted and the higher the tendency to behave aggressively (Husman, & Silva, 1984) [19]. The idea that frustration leads to aggression makes sense, and it fits into many observations in contact sport such as rugby, basketball and soccer. However, there are far more instances where frustrated players did not commit aggressive acts but responded with non-aggressive act (Abrahams, 2010; Nucci, & Young-Shim, 2005) [1, 23]. This implies that the Frustration-Aggression relationship may not be as inevitable as the theory suggests as frustration does not always lead to aggression. Instead, it heightens the tendency or predisposition to behave aggressive especially when frustration is not expected (Weinberg, & Gould, 2011) [27]. This makes the Frustration-Aggression hypothesis not fully supported in the literature (Gill, & Williams, 2008) [17].

Bandura (1973) [3] Social Learning theory proposes that aggression is a learned social behaviour acquired from one another via observation, imitation, modeling, demonstration and reinforcement. For example, young players perceive sports heroes as role models and as a result, they imitate their behaviours (Arehart, 2002) [2]. At the same time, coaches, team mates, and parents' may also be taken to be role models and may depict support for aggressive playing styles. Hence, aggression in sports can occur due to young players imitating the behaviours of their role models. Therefore, players will imitate the virtues or the vices as they are executed by coaches, role models or parents (Gee, & Leith, 2007) [14]. And, in situations where aggression is portrayed by coaches or role models, then the propensity of aggression in sport is enhanced (Bloom, Stevens, & Wickwire, 2003) [7].

Social Learning theory is the most optimistic approach to the study of sport aggression. Participation in sports may teach and/or reinforce either aggression or sportsmanship. This is because if players can learn aggressive responses to certain situations and cues, then they can just easily learn non-aggressive responses to the same situations. It is obvious that Social Learning theory debunk the notion that individuals are born to behave aggressively and hence, provocation or frustration should lead to aggression.

Moral Reasoning theory purports that athletes' willingness to engage in aggression is related to their stage of moral

reasoning (Bredemeier, & Shield, 1984a, 1984b) [11, 12]. Since human aggression is unethical, a relationship should exist between the level of moral reasoning and overt acts of sports aggression. Therefore, for an individual to behave aggressively in sports, the player might have downplayed on his/her moral or ethical values learned in society (Bredemeier, & Shield, 1986) [10].

Despite the numerous theories that have been propounded to help aggression researchers to study, understand and curb aggressive behaviours in sports, athletes in competitive sports continue to behave aggressively. What is of greater concern is the transformation that these competitive sports performers go through from their usual human behaviours in society to behaving aggressively in competitions, and the rationale these competitive sports athletes give for their choice of aggressive acts in competition. Already, Bredemeier and Shields (1984a) [11] had found that the moral reasoning athletes give for behaving aggressively in sports is lower than that used for everyday situation and that low moral reasoning is typically seen with a higher occurrence of hostile and instrumental aggression (Bredemeier, & Shields, 1984b) [12]. Besides, sports involving any degree of contact may alter moral reasoning without necessarily finding the need to rationalize or justify the use of such behaviour (Mintah, Huddleston, & Doody, 1999) [22].

The purpose of this study was to find out the type of aggression used by university male and female soccer players and the rationalizations they give for the use of each type of aggression.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Participants

Voluntary participation was solicited from sixty-four ( $N = 64$ ) university soccer players. There were 26 (40.6%) males and 38 (59.4%) females. Participants playing experience ranged from one to twenty years ( $M = 9.06$ ,  $SD = 5.79$ ) and the number of years played on the University soccer team vary from one year to six years ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). The youngest player in the soccer team was 18 years old and the oldest was 29 years ( $M = 23.17$ ,  $SD = 2.35$ ). Among these volunteers were 25 (21.9%) midfielders, 18 (28.1%) defenders, 14 (21.9%) forwards and 7 (10.9%) goalkeepers.

### 2.2. Dependent Measures

Hostile and instrumental aggression were measured using a modified version of Wall and Gruber's (1986) [26] shortened version of Bredemeier (1975) [9] Athletic Aggression Inventory-Short (BAAGI-S) form. The BAAGI-S comprised of 30 items for the assessment of hostile, instrumental and overall aggression. Items 29 and 30 on the BAAGI-S which measure the overall aggression was deleted for the intent of this study. The resultant 28-item inventory assessed hostile and instrumental aggression on a 4-point Likert type scale. Scores for each subscale range from a low of 14 (strong agreement) to a high of 56 (strong disagreement). The midpoint (neutral) response for each subscale is 35. From Wall and Gruber (1986) [26], this instrument has a stability coefficient of .85 and .95 for the instrumental and hostile subscales.

Internal consistency coefficient reliability ranged from .09 to .57 for the instrumental aggression subscale and from .29 to .86 for the hostile aggression subscale items.

Mintah-Huddleston Aggression Justification Inventory (MHAJI) was used to assess players' rationalizations for aggressive behaviour in sport. The MHAJI is a 24-item

inventory that measures hostile and instrumental justifications for sport aggression on a 4-point Likert-type scale. Subscale scores range from a low of 12 (strong agreement) to a high of 48 (strong disagreement). The midpoint (neutral) response to each subscale is 30. High scores on both subscales reflect disagreement with hostile and instrumental justifications for aggressive sport behaviour (Mintah, Huddleston, & Doody, 1999)<sup>[22]</sup>.

**2.3 Procedure of Data Collection**

An institutional Human Subjects Review Board approved the research protocol, and permission to contact university soccer players was obtained from the coaches. A cover letter, the BAAGI-S, and the MHAJI were given to each coach for distribution among their players.

The cover letter briefly explained the purpose of the study and assured complete confidentiality of the players’ responses. No identifying information was requested of the players, and participation was strictly voluntary. Each participant was given one week to complete the questionnaire and return it to his/her coach.

**3. Results**

**3.1 Preliminary Analysis**

Pearson bivariate correlation procedure was calculated to determine the relatedness of the BAAGI-S and the MHAJI

subscales. As shown in Table 1, the BAAGI-S hostility subscale correlated low with the BAAGI-S Instrumental (.40) subscale. A moderate correlation was found between the BAAGI-S hostility subscale and the MHAJI hostile justification (.60). The data also revealed a high correlation between the BAAGI-S hostile subscale and the MHAJI instrumental justification (.70). All correlations were significant at *p*. 01. Therefore, the BAAGI-S and the MHAJI subscales are correlated.

A paired *t*-test was used to determine whether there was a difference in the extent to which soccer players, regardless of gender, agreed with the practice of hostile and instrumental aggression. Overall results revealed a statistical significant difference between the soccer players

use of instrumental (*M* = 40.27, *SD* = 5.60) and hostile (*M* = 30.95, *SD* = 5.75) aggression on the BAAGI-S, *t* (63) = 11.87, *p* = .00.

A second paired *t*-test was also employed to determine whether there was a difference in the agreement on the use of hostile and instrumental rationalizations for aggressive behaviour.

For all participants, results showed that the difference between hostile (*M* = 21.64, *SD* = 5.19) and instrumental (*M* = 22.78, *SD* = 5.94) rationalizations were not significant, *p* > .05.

**Table 1:** Paired Correlations between the BAAGI-S and MHAJI Subscales

Baagi-s			Mhaji		
Subscale	Hostility	Instrumental	Hostility	Instrumental	M (SD)
BAAGI-S					
Hostility 1.00	.39**	.60**	.70**	30.95	5.75
Instrumental	1.00	.15	.23	40.27	5.60
MHAJI					
Hostility		1.00	.75	21.64	5.19
Instrumental			1.00	22.78	5.94

**3.2 Main Analysis**

The primary intent for conducting this study was to investigate the extent of agreement or disagreement with the use of intentional aggression and rationalizations for aggressive behaviour between male and female university soccer players. General Linear Model (GLM) Multivariate was employed to examine differences between male and females on the BAAGI-S and MHAJI subscales. The mean vectors for the four dependent variables treated simultaneously differed between the soccer players as indicated by a significant main effect by gender, Wilks’s Lambda = .64, *F* (4 59) = 8.20, *p* < .05. The male soccer

players scored slightly higher than the female players on both the BAAGI-S hostile (*M* = 33.35, *SD* = 5.88, and *M* = 29.32, *SD* = 5.11, respectively) and the MHAJI hostile (*M* = 22.23, *SD* = 5.46, and *M* = 21.24, *SD* = 5.03, respectively). Male soccer players scored higher than their female counterparts on both the BAAGI-S instrumental (*M* = 43.65, *SD* = 3.91, and *M* = 37.95, *SD* = 5.42, respectively) and the MHAJI instrumental (*M* = 25.12, *SD* = 6.44, and *M* = 21.18, *SD* = 5.06, respectively). All the differences were significant except with the MHAJI hostile justification which did not yield any significant difference between male and female university soccer players (see table 2 for data).

**Table 2:** Means and Standard Deviations of the BAAGI-S and MHAJI by Gender

		BAAGI-S		MHAJI	
		Hostility	Instrumental	Hostility	Instrumental
Male	M	33.35*	43.65**	22.23	25.12*
	SD	5.88	3.90	5.46	6.44
Female	M	29.32*	37.95**	21.24	21.18*
	SD	5.11	5.43	5.03	5.06

\**p* < .05      \*\* *p* = .00.

**4. Discussion**

Overall, male and female soccer players in this study disagree with the use of both hostile and instrumental aggression. However, an inspection of the means indicated that female

soccer players disagree more with the use of hostile and instrumental aggression than their male counterparts. A plausible reason for these soccer players’ disagreement with the use of hostile and instrumental aggression could be that

soccer as a sport has come of age in Ghana. Players who ply their trade within and outside the country have made it big financially and have also projected the image of the country. Looking at this from the moral perspective, these players might have perceived it wrong to use any form of aggression (an act which has the intent to hurt or harm) as a means to gain an urge over opposing team mate. Besides, these are university students whose main goal is to pursue academic laurels; Most of these players play soccer to showcase their talents and for fun. Along this line, using any form of aggression which could injure a colleague university graduate is frowned upon. Finally, soccer is considered a semi-contact sport and per the rules of the game any uncalled for contact is considered a penal offense. Due to the reasons above, soccer players in this study might have considered it unnecessary to agree with the use of either hostile or instrumental aggression. Already, Bredemeier and Shield (1986)<sup>[8]</sup>, and Mintah, Huddleston, and Doody (1999)<sup>[22]</sup> have found that players in contact sports (Rugby, American Football, Wrestling, and Ice Hockey) agreed more with the use of hostile and instrumental aggression in competition than soccer players. Overall, male and female soccer players in this study differ on the agreement for the rationalization of instrumental aggression. But, the females agreed more with its usage than the males. Perhaps the female soccer players consider any means within the confines of the rules to gain an edge over opponents as appropriate more than their male counterparts even if it implies hurting the opponent to gain an added advantage for her team to win. Female soccer in Ghana is still at its infantile stage; Few women get the opportunity to play and funding for female soccer is very limited even at the national level. The few females who play soccer would want to prove to their audience that they are competent and capable of doing what the men can do. Because of this, using any means to achieve success within the confinement of the laws of the game is mostly welcome regardless of the consequences and the harm that it could cause the opponent. No statistical significant difference was found between male and female soccer players on the agreement with the rationalization for the use of hostile aggression. In fact, both male and female soccer players in this study agreed with the use of hostile rationalization (see table 2). To them, they consider contact in soccer as part of the game. As such they think it is morally and ethically righteous to use it in competition to gain an added advantage over an opponent (Bedemeier, & Shields, 1986; Mintah, Huddleston, & Doody, 1999)<sup>[22, 8]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

On the whole, university soccer players disagreed more with the use of hostile and instrumental aggression considering the fact that both forms of aggression have the intent to hurt and harm. Female soccer players however, reasoned and agreed that it is appropriate to justify any form of contact as instrumental especially if it could give an added advantage to team.

More research is needed on female soccer players to fully understand their choice of aggression and the reasons for their choice of aggression.

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