

## The Role of Community in Athlete Transgressive Behavior

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*The relationships among athletes can result in an environment that supports transgressive behavior. Sport has often been praised for the positive consequences of the community it fosters, but few researchers have discussed how community can foster antisocial behavior. This study explored the impact college athletes' sense of community has on transgressive behavior. Three hundred and eighty-nine intercollegiate NCAA Division I and recreational (i.e., club and intramural) athletes were asked about their transgressive behaviors and perceptions of sense of community. The results demonstrated that males scored higher for all transgressive behaviors as well as reported a stronger sense of community. There was a significant relationship between sense of community and general deviance, violence towards partners, and doping attitudes. Recreational athletes showed higher sense of community and intercollegiate athletes demonstrated higher scores for moral disengagement, violence towards partners, and doping attitudes than recreational athletes.*

*Keywords: sense of community, transgressive behavior, athlete behavior*

**D**espite the growing evidence that developing a sense of community within sport programs leads to benefits of improved life quality, well-being, and retention in sport (Warner & Dixon, 2011; 2013), there is a negative side of sport that can foster transgressive behavior. Popular beliefs about sport participation tend to emphasize the positive consequences of sport. However, the presence of sport headlines highlighting transgressive behavior continues to disappoint the sport community. As issues involving athlete doping, unsportsmanlike conduct, domestic violence, and sexual assault continue to capture media attention, little research exists specifically on the role that sport managers can play in preventing or addressing such behavior. Some have called for policy changes or better standards/consequences for those that partake in transgressive behavior, but transgressive behavior is far too complex to implement such changes, especially in the context of sport (Atkinson & Young, 2008). Athletes adhere to ideas such as “win at all costs” and “second place is the first to lose,” which often results in unnecessary risks being taken by athletes that can be harmful to themselves and others (Coakley, 2016). Whether it is on-the-field concerns, like performance enhancing drugs or tactics that physically harm the other team, or off-the-field violence or hazing, it is important for sport managers, coaches, and administrators to better understand the role that the community formed via sport contributes to or detracts from such transgressions.

Popular beliefs, as well as some current research, tend to focus on the positive outcomes of sports and often assume a sport evangelist perspective (Coakley, 2011; Depta, 2015; Nikpour, 2011). A nascent line of research has focused on how a sense of community develops in a various sport setting, a trend which has been supported by the position that sense of community is a positive outcome of sport (Warner, 2016; Warner et al., 2012; Yin et al., 2016). Work in the community psychology realm also has reinforced that increased sense of community should lead to improved well-being along with less drug use and delinquent behaviors (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Prati et al., 2018). And further, a lack of community should lead to transgressive behaviors (Hirsch, 1969; Irwin, 1973). While sport is frequently cited as an arena that bonds people together and fosters community (e.g., Chalip, 2006), critics also have cited this same arena as one that promotes transgressive behaviors (Coakley, 2001; Hartman & Massoglia, 2007; Irwin, 1973; Kleiber, 1983). The norms and culture of a sport team seemingly support transgressive behavior as part of their community, rather than the individual alone (Terman, 2020). For example, “Bounty Gate” was a tactic the New Orleans Saints implemented starting in 2009 where team members could earn bonuses for intentionally injuring opposing players (Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2019). As more scandals about transgressive behavior surface, it is important to understand the role sense of community developed in sport can play in contributing to or mitigating transgressive behavior. Because the outcomes of sport are clearly dependent on multiple factors including type of sport and context (Chalip, 2006; Coakley, 2011), it is also important to explore this and consider competitive level of athletes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of sense of community (SOC) plays in transgressive behavior, specifically in college athletes.

## Theoretical Framework

The current study uses Warner et al. (2013) as a theoretical basis, building on prior research to account for the role sense of community plays in transgressive behavior. The SOC

outlines several areas that explain why people feel connected through sport. However, a strong sense of community does not and should not assume only positive outcomes. This phenomenon of SOC and transgressive behavior was explored through the context of college sport because this is a significant point in a young athlete's life where self-identity, and social bonds are formed and strengthened (Chen et al., 2010). The values of the coach, administrators, and broader athletic community can have a strong influence during a critical developmental moment in a young person's life (Kavussanu, 2008; Šukys & Jansonienė, 2012). Therefore, this study will seek to understand the role of SOC in relation to transgressive behavior as well as the influence of moral disengagement. The following sections review the literature in these areas.

### *Sense of Community in Sport*

Established in the field of community psychology, sense of community can be generally defined as an environmental characteristic that contributes to a sense of belonging and/or social support at the group level (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Sarason, 1974; Warner et al., 2013). Community can be interpreted in two distinct ways through this lens. One way to interpret community is in a geographical sense, where community can be built in locales where people bond by being in close proximity with each other. The other, which has garnered more consideration in widespread academic research and is more relevant to this study, is in a functional sense. By examining the functionality of community, an individual can experience a sense of community in areas such as the workplace, in a support group, on a sports team, and more. Further, Hill (1996) suggested that social structures fostering community are likely to lead to healthier positive outcomes. An idea that has also been supported with the sport literature (Warner 2019; Warner et al., 2017).

A principal concept in the study of sense of community is its link to subjective well-being (Davidson & Cotter, 1991), as factors that tend to address the subject's levels of group satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and perceived efficacy are examined. Researchers have observed that sense of community grows when people feel like they belong in a group, their needs are met by the group, they feel a strong emotional attachment to the group, and they can exert some control in the group while being able to be influenced by the group as well (Davidson & Cotter, 1991). Studies have shown that people who have a greater sense of community in their environment, like sport teams, are engaged in a more fulfilling experience in their respective group than those who rate lower in this metric (Berg et al., 2015; Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Warner et al., 2017; Warner & Dixon, 2011). Sense of community can affect the performance and well-being of a group as well as the individual (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Danioni et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2017). This can lead to several transgressive behaviors, such as drug use and physical harm, committed by those who do not feel fulfilled in the group (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Prati et al., 2017), or who are inspired by the antisocial behavior of the collective (Danioni et al., 2021).

When one is consumed in competitive sport, this can serve as a catalyst for a feeling of urgency and desire to succeed, which can transcend the game itself and bring about a distinct aura that has been referred to as "communitas" (Chalip, 2006, p. 111). Sport serves as the setting for liminoid zones, where those who have a personal stake in the performance of a team have heightened senses of community, excitement, and commonality (Chalip, 2006). This can apply to sport teams whose team norms, performance/success, and shared time bring people together. However, the feelings associated with community are not automatically heightened because of

the mere presence of sport. For sport teams and athletes, there are several elements that must be met to establish a strong sense of community (Warner & Dixon, 2011), which are based on factors that can either enhance or diminish its influence (Warner et al., 2012).

*Positive Impacts of Sense of Community.* The use of sport for positive youth development has been well documented (e.g., Coakley, 2011; Danish et al., 2004; Holt et al., 2020; Holt & Neely, 2011). Because of this, public institutions have allocated a hefty sum of resources to organize sport programs that develop civic-minded individuals who contribute to society (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2005). Adults encourage youth to participate in sport programs because they can develop the requisite skills to serve them later in life, improve health and fitness, increase self-confidence and self-esteem, and build character through discipline and teamwork while taking on responsibility, among other factors (Berg et al., 2015; Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2015). Known as the *fertilizer effect*, it is believed that the positive values that arise from participating in youth sport allows the individual's character will grow in ways that are socially desirable (Coakley, 2011). Whether it is developing leadership capabilities through formal roles (e.g., team captain) or informal action (e.g., to lead by example), it is believed the team community provides a fertile ground to build such skill (Berg & Warner, 2019; Coalter, 2015; Warner & Dixon, 2011). Athletes are also brought together to participate based on their common interest in the game. For teams that are constructed well and have matured together, their common interest leads to more of a willingness to cooperate with and assist other members of their group through membership in their social spaces (Warner et al, 2013).

Not only can a sense of community in sport aid in developing valuable life skills, but it can also deter people heading on a dangerous trajectory in life from committing destructive acts and developing undesirable habits and tendencies (Coakley, 2011; Hartman & Massoglia, 2007; Warner et al., 2017). Many researchers have noted that for at-risk individuals, sport provides a structure that is easily identifiable and relatable in society, assigns participants to environments controlled by responsible adults who can serve as role models, and further enforces conformity and obedience to rules as well as self-control (Coakley, 2011; Ewing et al., 2002). Known as the *car wash effect*, sport can not only lead to the development of beneficial attributes in life but also can serve as a beacon of hope for those who find themselves in unfortunate situations (Coakley, 2011).

## Hypothesis Development

Sport can be an integral part of an adolescent's life, meaning that in it contains a set of patterns related to a major component of one's identity (Chen et al., 2010). Children and teenagers struggling to find their identity in life can sometimes find one through sport participation (Chen et al., 2010); however, it can also lead to overconformity (Coker-Cranney et al., 2018). Given the importance society has placed on sport as a vehicle for positive social change, it is important to examine the role of sense of community in influencing transgressive behavior in athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the effect of sense of community on collegiate athletes' transgressive behavior. The following sections outline the hypothesis development based on these behaviors.

### *Transgressive Behaviors*

**General Deviance.** General deviance was explored using a scale adapted from Dahlberg et al.'s (2005) assessment tools for measuring violence-related attitudes and behaviors. The scale chosen for this study focused on behaviors like hazing, fighting outside of sport, driving drunk, using recreational drugs, risk-taking, defending teammates in a fight, and cowardice (if they refused to fight). All items were worded to include teammates as part of the question. For example, one item proposed, "I am likely to drive drunk when with my teammates." Therefore, for general deviance, the following hypothesis guided this study:

Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>1</sub>): There will be a significant relationship between sense of community and general deviance.

**Doping Attitudes.** Doping attitudes was examined using the *Performance Enhancing Attitudes in Sport* scale (Petróczi & Aidman, 2009). This scale asked athletes whether performance enhancing drug (PED) legalization would benefit sport, if doping is necessary and/or unavoidable to be competitive, whether risks of PEDs are exaggerated, and if injuries and training are just as bad as PEDs. For doping attitudes, the following hypothesis guided this study:

Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>2</sub>): There will be a significant relationship between sense of community and doping attitude.

**Violence Against Partner.** The final transgressive behavior explored in this study was violence against partner, also adapted from Dalberg et al.'s (2005) assessment tools for measuring violence related attitudes and behaviors. This scale focused on violence against women in sport as well as within relationships. For sport, athletes were asked whether women deserved to get hurt if they play with men. Relationship violence focused on violence between partners, violence if the partner purposely made the other angry, consensual sex-related questions, and jealousy. For violence against partner, the following hypothesis guided this study:

Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>3</sub>): There will be a significant relationship between sense of community and violence towards partners.

In addition to the relationships outlined above, we predict there will be significant group differences between both sense of community and transgressive behaviors based on gender and athlete type.

Hypothesis 4 (H<sub>4</sub>): There will be group differences in sense of community by gender and athlete type (intercollegiate or recreational).

Hypothesis 5 (H<sub>5</sub>): There will be group differences in transgressive behaviors by gender and athlete type (intercollegiate or recreational).

### *Moral Disengagement in Sport*

Although sports evangelists argue that participation in sport has a substantial effect in character growth and realizing potential (Coalter, 2015), there are many contemporary examples that contradict these beliefs. Further, the influence of those in their community can lead to committing transgressive acts if the culture supports such behavior (Carter & Carter, 2007; Terman, 2020). For example, in November 2020, Louisiana State University (LSU) mishandled the sexual assault allegations against its star running back, Derrius Guice (Jacoby et al., 2020). According to Jacoby et al. (2020), LSU failed to take the women who brought allegations forward seriously, investigate, call law enforcement, or follow the procedures for reporting as outlined by Title IX. The norms of the LSU football program and administration were to protect the athlete (and coaches), thereby condoning transgressive behavior (Nite & Nauright, 2020; Roberts et al., 2020; Rutter et al., 2011).

The moral code of an individual can be highly malleable in that how one chooses to internally vindicate their actions can depend on the people around them (Bandura, 1991, 1999). Humans are inherently more inclined to carry out violent actions when the group they associate with supports destructive activities (Bandura, 1999). In social settings, individuals assert their identity and value system as an expression of the self, but this is constrained by the limitations of the group (Kleiber, 1983; Prati et al., 2017). This juxtaposition gives a person reason to selectively deactivate their morality as an excuse to perpetrate transgressive behaviors (Bandura, 1999; Terman, 2020). Known as moral disengagement, these actions can be rationalized through advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, disregard of consequences, or through a dehumanization of the victim (Bandura, 1999; Moore, 2015), especially if the malefactor can justify that the action did not violate their moral standards (Bandura, 1986; Šukys & Jansonienė, 2012).

Such moral disengagement can lead to a significant problem for groups of troubled athletes known as *anomia*, which translates from French to “lawless” (Carter & Carter, 2007). Because of devious influences in their community, there is a lack of social and ethical standards present in these groups of athletes that would otherwise be expected from other sectors of society (Bandura, 1999; Carter & Carter, 2007; Kavussanu & Ring, 2021). For example, the heightened aggression and, at times, brutal fights that occur in hockey would be classified as assault and battery in other social settings. However, because the “culture” of hockey supports such behavior, it not only thrives, but is revered in the sport. Theorists assert that transgressive behaviors arise due to the deterioration of relationships or empathy toward others (Carter & Carter, 2007; Kavussanu & Ring, 2021) and a lack or displacement of guilt by shifting responsibility to others (Bandura, 1999; Stanger et al., 2013).

Sport is far from a conventional institution, and if anything, could very well be its antithesis. Sport is commonly praised as an escape from everyday life, a setting where one can escape from daily life (Chalip, 2006; Kleiber, 1983) and also build prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Kavussanu, 2008). The crucial difference between the nature of sport and that of most other aspects of everyday life is that sport lacks the ambiguity that defines everyday life (Kleiber, 1983). The actions someone takes while playing sport could be indicative of their personal values across other walks of life. A powerful example of when on-field conduct influences at-home behavior is athletes’ treatment of partners, specifically violent relationships (Messner, 1990, 1992). Behavior is condoned or normalized in a competitive context according to a set of values shaped by athletes’ relationships with coaches and teammates (Rutter et al.,

2011). Further, opponents are objectified to the point that severe physical harm can be inflicted and admired, such as with “Bounty Gate” (Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2019). The regulation of behavior in sport can have a tremendous impact on the expectations of athlete conduct off the field, as the demands placed on athletes during play are as influential in molding one’s moral values as the demands required on them in home or school environments (Rutter et al., 2011).

The liminality of sport can make it seem as if it is a world of its own, and those interacting within such a community can and do act differently (Chalip, 2006). In a sport environment, behavior can be “bracketed,” meaning athletes display less mature moral reasoning in sport over daily life contexts (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984, 1986). Not regulated by the conventional individuals and institutions of everyday life, athletes can find themselves supporting each other in committing transgressive behaviors (Carter & Carter, 2007). One such example is the use of performance enhancing drugs. Motives for engaging in such activities can be physiological, such as the need to increase strength and endurance or to recover from a serious injury, or psychosociological, including an intense desire to succeed and the looming societal expectations for athletes to be in premier physical condition (Hodge et al., 2013; Laure, 1997).

Given the review of the literature on this subject, we predict moral disengagement will moderate the relationships between sense of community and all three transgressive behaviors. The following hypotheses guided this study:

- Hypothesis 6 (H<sub>6</sub>): Moral disengagement will moderate the relationship between sense of community and general deviance.
- Hypothesis 7 (H<sub>7</sub>): Moral disengagement will moderate the relationship between sense of community and doping attitudes.
- Hypothesis 8 (H<sub>8</sub>): Moral disengagement will moderate the relationship between sense of community SOC and violence towards partners.

## Method

### *Procedure*

After ethics approval was received, an electronic survey was distributed via email to athletes on behalf of university recreation and athletic departments. The email invited the athletes to participate in the study if they were a current university intercollegiate, club sport, or intramural sport athlete. If the participant met the criteria of sport participation, they were asked to complete an online survey taking no more than 15 minutes of their time. All participants were informed that the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous.

### *Instrumentation*

The questionnaire contained three parts. First, athletes answered the 21-item Sense of Community in Sport Scale (Warner et al., 2013), which was later updated by Kerwin et al. (2015). Then, athletes answered 31 items related to transgressive behavior and moral disengagement. The 23 transgressive behavior items were comprised of eight items from the

Performance Enhancing Attitude Scale (PEAS; Petróczy & Aidman, 2009), eight items measuring general deviance (GD; Dahlberg et al., 2005) and seven items measuring violence toward partners (VP; Dahlberg et al., 2005). The moderator, Moral Disengagement Sport Scale (MDSS; Boardley & Kavussanu, 2008) was measured with eight items. Finally, athletes responded to demographic questions that asked about age, gender, race, sport type (intercollegiate, club, intramural), and scholarship type (athletic, academic, combo, none). Club and intramural athletes were combined after data collection to “recreational athletes” due to the fewer responses from these two categories.

### *Participants*

To determine the relationship between athletes’ sense of community and transgressive behavior, the surveys were sent to approximately 2,000 NCAA Division I FBS and FCS intercollegiate and recreational athletes (i.e., club sport and intramurals) across a variety of universities along the east coast. All athletes were solicited to examine differences in transgressive behavior by sport level. Although both intercollegiate and recreational sports fall under the purview of U.S. colleges, intercollegiate athletes participate at a higher competitive level with more resources and a highly formalized sport structure. This greatly differs from recreational athletes, who are involved in a less competitive and more informal sport structure that is often organized and led by the students themselves (Warner & Dixon, 2013).

Of the 562 returned surveys, 389 were fully completed and available for analysis (the response rate was 19.5%). The sample was 63.8% female, 83.1% white, 50.6% NCAA Division I athletes of which 30.8% were on athletic scholarship, and 84.1% participating on team sports. Table 1 illustrates the full scope of the demographic details.

Table 1  
*Demographic Details of Participants*

Category	N (%)
Gender	
Male	141 (36.2)
Female	248 (63.8)
Age	
18-19	184 (47.3)
20-22	205 (52.7)
Level of Play	
Intercollegiate athletics	197 (50.6)
Recreational athletes (club or intramural)	192 (49.4)
Scholarship	
Athletic	120 (30.8)
Academic	83 (21.3)
Combination of athletic/academic	20 (5.1)
None	166 (42.7)
Race	
White	315 (81)
Black	33 (8.5)
Asian	11 (2.8)
Latinx	19 (4.9)
Other	11 (2.8)



## Analysis

All the scales in the questionnaire were checked for internal consistency (DeVellis, 2003) and are presented in Table 2. To test the hypothesis that moral disengagement moderates the relationship between sense of community (SOC) and transgressive behavior, we ran three partial models using PROCESS 3.5 for SPSS (SOC x PEAS, SOC x VP, and SOC x GD). We ran three tests of a full model that included control variables of gender, age, and level (intercollegiate or recreational). Finally, a two-way multivariate analysis (MANOVA) was run to explore differences in gender and sport type on the dependent variables.

Table 2

### Reliability Results

Item	Cronbach's Alpha
SOC Global	.94
SOC – Leadership Opportunities	.90
SOC - Administrative Considerations	.79
SOC – Social Spaces	.91
SOC – Equality	.90
SOC – Common Interest	.85
SOC – Competition	.78
MDSS	.87
PEAS	.81
GD	.81
VP	.82
GAM	.90

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

In addition to the demographic results presented in Table 1, participants were asked about their common friend groups. When asked if they only spent time with “sport” friends, 74.5% of the participants reported that they socialized with friends outside of sport. This sample was also highly risk averse, with 86.6% stating they were not the kind of person who would try dangerous activities. The majority of the participants played baseball or softball (22.7%), soccer (12.6%), and track (10.6%), with 84% reporting team sport participation.

We ran tests for reliability on all scales, which were presented in Table 2 above. Please see Table 3 for the results of the three regressions run to test the direct and moderating effects. First, we ran partial models without the control variables (gender, age, level), then ran the three full regression models that included them. For  $H_1$ , we ran a partial regression model testing whether moral disengagement moderates the relationship between sense of community (SOC) and general deviance (GD). The overall partial model was found to be statistically significant,  $F(3, 384) = 79.962, p < .001, R^2 = .385$ . We accept  $H_1$ ; sense of community predicted general deviance, accounting for 38.5% of the variability. Next, the control variables were loaded into the model and that, too, was found to be significant,  $F(7, 380) = 39.68, p < .001, R^2 = .422$ . Given the  $F$ -statistic was reduced by nearly half and we did not gain much in the variance explained,

the decision was made to move forward with the partial model (see Table 3 for more detail). Of note, the only control variable that was significant in the full model was gender, indicating that females have lower delinquency scores than males ( $b = -.2312$ ,  $t(380) = -4.814$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 3  
*Regression Results*

Variable	GD Partial <i>b</i> [ <i>t</i> ]	GD Full <i>b</i> [ <i>t</i> ]	PEAS Partial <i>b</i> [ <i>t</i> ]	PEAS Full <i>b</i> [ <i>t</i> ]	VP Partial <i>b</i> [ <i>t</i> ]	VP Full <i>b</i> [ <i>t</i> ]
SOC	-.043 [-1.186]	-.064 [-1.76]	-.046 [-1.179]	-.061 [-1.78]	-.069 [-2.47]	-.084 [-2.97]*
MDSS	.464 [14.415]*	.361[9.58]*	.495 [14.395]*	.364[9.14]**	.411 [16.20]**	.325 [11.26]**
Interaction	-.228 [-4.447]*	-.242[-4.84]*	-.216 [-3.927]*	-.235[-4.44]**	-.285 [-7.14]**	-.299[-7.72]**
Gender	--	-.219[-4.48]*	--	-.275[-5.33]**	--	-.195[-5.24]**
Age	--	.013[.317]	--	.024[.571]	--	.0004[-.012]
Level	--	-.017[-.426]	--	-.046[-1.09]	--	-.057[-1.86]
N	388	388	388	388	388	388
F-Statistic	79.962	39.678	77.975	41.346	116.344	67.530
<i>p</i>	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.385	.422	.379	.432	.476	.525

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$

The conditional effects of the partial model were then reviewed ( $H_6$ ) with an  $R_2$  change of 3.2%. We accept  $H_6$ ; MDSS accounted for an additional 3% of variability in general deviance. For low MDSS ( $b = .0784$ ,  $t(384) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .104$ ) and moderate MDSS, ( $b = .0363$ ,  $t(384) = -1.186$ ,  $p = .23$ ), there is no relationship between sense of community (SOC) and general deviance (GD). For high MDSS (MDSS, ( $b = -.185$ ,  $t(384) = -4.089$ ,  $p = .0001$ ), there is a significant relationship between SOC and GD. Those scoring high in GD tend to report very low SOC scores. However, as SOC increases, GD decreases, although the GD scores still remain higher than the other groups (see figure 1).

For  $H_2$ , we ran a partial regression model testing whether moral disengagement moderates the relationship between sense of community (SOC) and doping attitudes (PEAS). The overall partial model was found to be statistically significant,  $F(3, 384) = 77.975$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .378$ . We accept  $H_2$ ; sense of community predicted doping attitudes, accounting for 37.8% of the variability. To test  $H_7$ , the same control variables were loaded into the model as  $H_6$  and that, too, was found to be significant,  $F(7, 380) = 41.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .432$ . Given the  $F$ -statistic was reduced again, and we did not gain much in the variance explained, the decision was made to move forward with the partial model (review Table 3). Of note, the only control variable that was significant in the full model was gender indicating that females have lower doping attitude scores than males ( $b = -.275$ ,  $t(380) = -5.328$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The conditional effects of the partial model were then reviewed ( $H_7$ ) with an  $R_2$  change of 2.5%. We accept  $H_7$ ; MDSS accounted for an additional 2.5% of variability in doping attitudes. For low MDSS ( $b = .0689$ ,  $t(384) = 1.34$ ,  $p = .18$ ) and moderate MDSS, ( $b = -.0458$ ,  $t(384) = -1.18$ ,  $p = .24$ ), there is no relationship between SOC and PEAS. For high MDSS (MDSS, ( $b = -.180$ ,  $t(384) = -3.712$ ,  $p = .002$ ), there was a significant relationship between SOC and PEAS. As SOC increases, PEAS decreases, yet remains far higher than the other two groups (see figure 2).

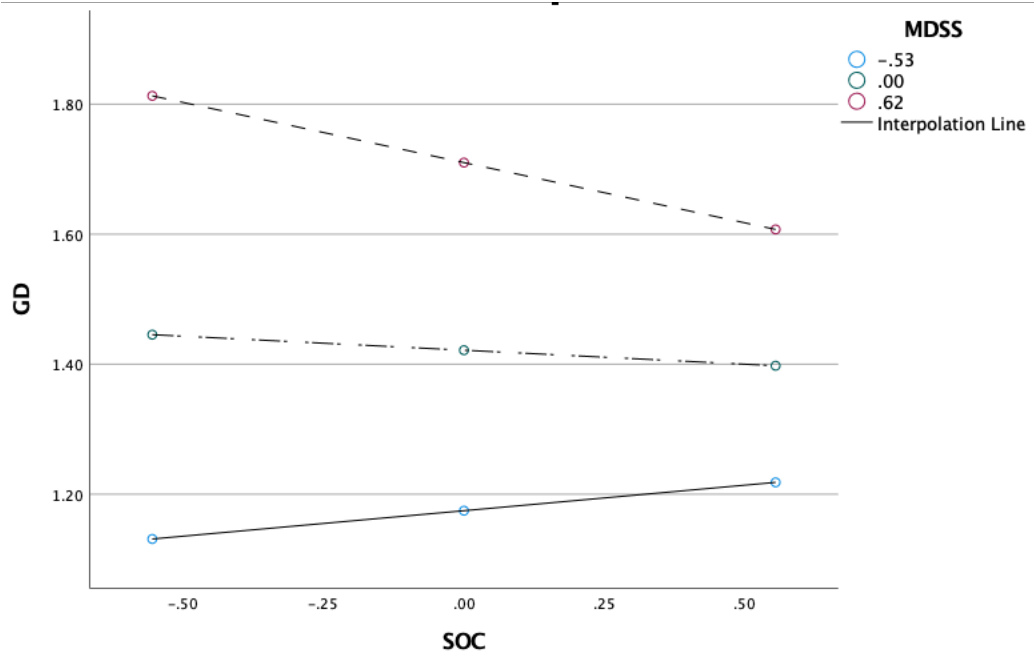


Figure 1. Moderating effect of moral disengagement on the relationship between sense of community (SOC) and general deviance (GD).

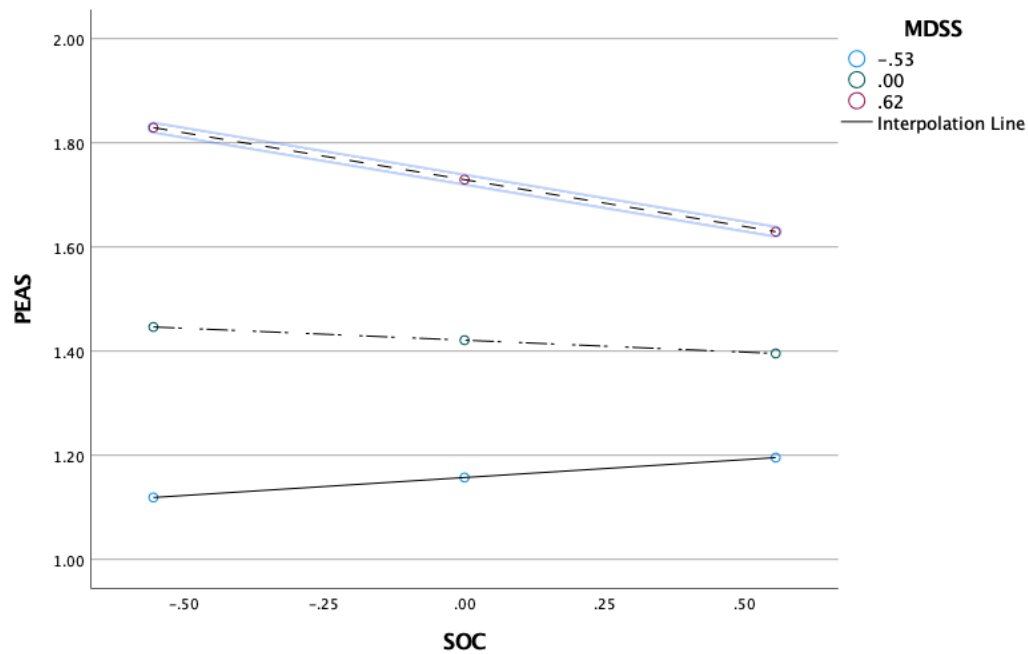


Figure 2. Moderating effect of moral disengagement on the relationship between sense of community (SOC) and doping attitudes (PEAS).

For H<sub>3</sub>, we ran a partial regression model testing whether moral disengagement moderates the relationship between sense of community (SOC) and violence towards partners (VP). The overall partial model was found to be statistically significant,  $F(3, 384) = 116.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .476$ . Meaning sense of community predicted violence against partners, accounting for 47.6% of the variability. Similar to H<sub>6</sub> and H<sub>7</sub>, the control variables were loaded into the model and that, too, was found to be significant,  $F(7, 380) = 67.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .515$ . Given the  $F$ -statistic was reduced again, and we did not gain much in the variance explained, the decision was made to move forward with the partial model (review Table 3). Once again, the only control variable that was significant in the full model was gender indicating that females have lower violence against partner scores than males ( $b = -.195$ ,  $t(380) = -5.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The conditional effects of the partial model were then reviewed, (H<sub>8</sub>) with an  $R^2$  change of 6.96%. We accept H<sub>8</sub>; MDSS accounted for an additional ~7% of variability in violence against partner. For low MDSS ( $b = .0821$ ,  $t(384) = 2.19$ ,  $p = .03$ ), moderate MDSS ( $b = -.069$ ,  $t(384) = -2.47$ ,  $p = .014$ ), and high MDSS, (MDSS, ( $b = -.248$ ,  $t(384) = -7.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), there is a significant relationship between SOC and VP. For the high and moderate MDSS scores, VP decreases. However, for low MDSS, VP increases as SOC increases (see figure 3).

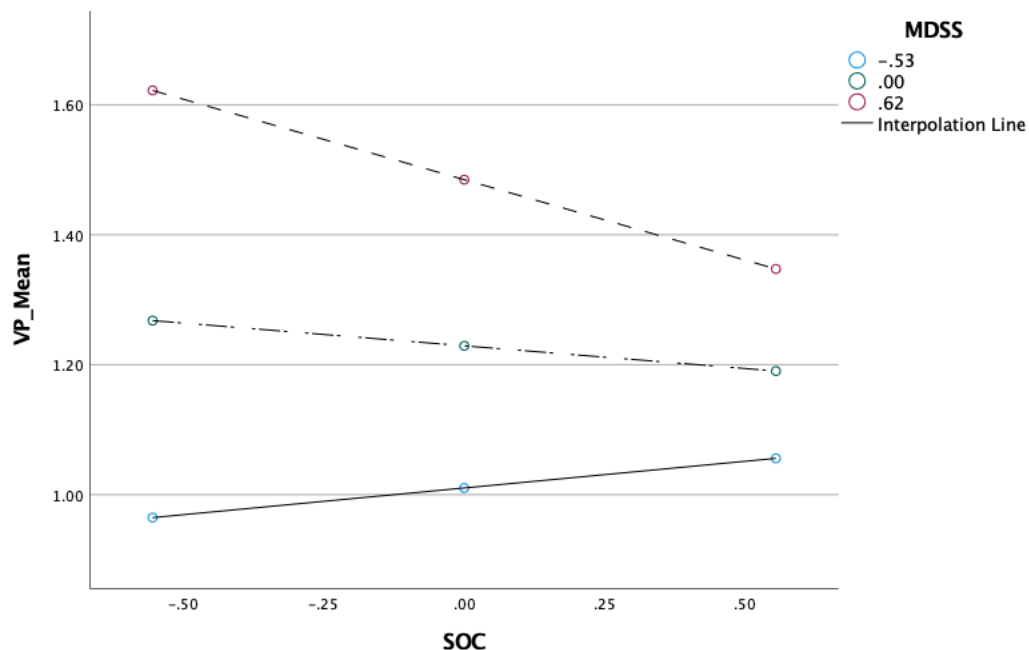


Figure 3. Moderating effect of moral disengagement on the relationship between sense of community (SOC) and violence towards partners (VP).

For H<sub>4</sub>, we conducted a MANOVA to test for group differences in sense of community (SOC) by gender and athlete type. There was no significant interaction effect between gender and SOC,  $F(6,379) = 1.63$ ;  $p = .137$ . However, there was a weak significant main effect for SOC,  $F(6,379) = 3.812$ ;  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .057$ . There were no significant differences for gender. Closer inspection of mean scores for SOC showed that recreational athletes scored higher on leadership opportunities ( $p = .038$ ), administrative consideration ( $p = .003$ ), social spaces ( $p = .047$ ), and equity

in administrative decisions ( $p=.013$ ). Therefore, we partially accept H<sub>4</sub>. See Table 4 for all the results.

For H<sub>5</sub>, we conducted a MANOVA to test for group differences in transgressive behavior (TB) measures by gender and athlete type. There was no significant interaction effect between gender and TB,  $F(4,381)=2.45$ ;  $p=.057$ . However, there was a weak significant main effect for TB measures,  $F(4,381)=3.87$ ;  $p=.005$ ,  $\eta^2=.039$  and a stronger significant main effect for gender,  $F(4,381)=46.35$ ;  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.327$ . Closer inspection of mean scores for TB showed that intercollegiate athletes scored higher on the MDSS ( $p=.004$ ) PEAS ( $p=.029$ ), and VP ( $p=.001$ ) measures. For gender, males scored higher than females on all four measures ( $p<.001$ ). See Table 4 for all the results for H<sub>5</sub>.

Table 4  
MANOVA Results

Variable	Males	Females	Intercollegiate	Recreational
	<i>M</i>   <i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>   <i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>   <i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>   <i>SD</i>
Leadership Opportunities	3.14 .785	2.99 .859	2.95 .787	3.15 .873*
Administrative Consideration	3.54 .604	3.39 .701	3.36 .747	3.56 .557*
Social Spaces	3.73 .458	3.68 .550	3.63 .550	3.75 .477*
Equity in Administrative Decisions	3.34 .712	3.24 .794	3.16 .865	3.39 .627*
Common Interest	3.47 .621	3.64 .667	3.39 .683	3.42 .619
Competition	3.68 .483	3.53 .609	3.53 .617	3.65 .513
MDSS	1.96 .608**	1.29 .481	1.62 .656*	1.44 .574
PEAS	1.76 .481**	1.23 .458	1.48 .577*	1.36 .473
GD	1.72 .485**	1.26 .422	1.47 .510	1.38 .484
VP	1.48 .464**	1.09 .314	1.30 .492**	1.16 .321

\*Significant at  $p<.05$ , \*\* $p<.001$

## Discussion

This study explored the influence of moral disengagement on sense of community and transgressive behavior in athletes. It should be noted that, while not significant, all athletes scored relatively high on sense of community measures, with men scoring higher than females across all sense of community factors. Recreational athletes also demonstrated significantly higher scores in four sense of community factors: leadership opportunities, administrative considerations, equity in administrative decisions, and social spaces. Given that recreational sports are typically organized and run by students, it is not surprising to see higher scores in these areas.

While it must be cautioned that, overall, transgressive behavior scores were generally low, the results indicate that male athletes are likely to have higher levels of transgressive behavior than females, which is supported by the literature (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984; Kavussanu et al., 2006). For H<sub>1</sub>, females demonstrated lower General Deviance (GD) scores. Given moral disengagement has the propensity to elicit antisocial behavior (e.g., Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2019), we hypothesized it would moderate the relationship (Moore, 2015) between sense of community and transgressive behaviors. As H<sub>1</sub>–H<sub>3</sub> indicate, moral disengagement did in fact moderate these relationships. While those with high Moral Disengagement (MDSS)

showed decreases in transgressive behavior as SOC increased, the scores for the antisocial behaviors did not decrease much and still remained far higher for this group over the moderate and low groups. This indicates that community within the group could be reinforcing these behaviors (see Danioni et al., 2021). Also concerning was that for those with low Moral Disengagement (MDSS), as SOC increased so did Violence towards Partners (VP). This increase can be explained by Danioni and her colleagues' (2021) work, which indicated that athletes could share beliefs that this violence toward partners is acceptable.

Exploring group differences in gender and sense of community revealed a weak relationship for sense of community and recreational athletes, who reported higher scores for leadership opportunities, administration considerations, equity in administrative decisions, and social spaces. Given that these opportunities are more available to students who participate in recreational sport, this finding is unsurprising. When exploring differences for transgressive behavior (TB), intercollegiate athletes demonstrated higher scores for moral disengagement, performance enhancing attitudes, and violence against partner than recreational athletes. This aligns with the previous literature on bracketed morality (Bredemeier & Shields, 1984, 1986; Kavussanu & Ring, 2021) and collective moral disengagement found among teams (Danioni et al., 2021). Higher instances of transgressive behavior in intercollegiate athletes could be due to the more formalized sport structures of NCAA sport where team values and attitudes are set within the system (Danioni et al., 2021; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Violence against partner could also be higher in NCAA athletes due to the environment supporting hegemonic masculinity and male athletic entitlement (Mordecai, 2017) whose transgressions are often excused (Atkinson & Young, 2008) or even protected by the institution (Nite & Nauright, 2019).

### *Practical Implications*

The findings of this study are helpful to practitioners working with college and recreational athletes. First, it is important to understand that sense of community often results in positive outcomes (Berg & Warner, 2019; Warner, 2016, 2019; Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013; Warner et al., 2017). However, this study indicates that a close community can also facilitate transgressive behavior. Therefore, it is important for coaches, administrators, and recreation supervisors to recognize these behaviors can negatively influence other team members (Danioni et al., 2021), and should closely monitor the behaviors of athletes in these contexts. Program values and rules, open discussion and communication around behavior expectations, and intolerance toward transgressive behavior are steps practitioners can help to mitigate such behaviors (Danioni et al., 2021).

### *Limitations and Future Research*

This current sample scored very high in sense of community and very low in transgressive behaviors overall. It is likely that social desirability bias played a role in these outcomes (Grimm, 2010). To account for this bias, questions could be revised to include statistics on these antisocial behaviors, so respondents do not feel ashamed or guilty for admitting such actions. While the researchers did stress that all responses will remain completely anonymous, stronger communication about anonymity to participants could help to further reduce the bias.

The primary purpose of the study was to conduct empirical research on the relationship between sense of community and transgressive behavior, and this was carried out with the intention to provide information that can be applicable throughout college sport. This study is hampered by the fact that the current sample was not proportionally as diverse as the entire population of intercollegiate and recreational athletes in America (Lapchick et al., 2010). An example of this in the current sample was the fact that more than four out of every five respondents to the survey were White. There were no discriminatory practices afoot in the distribution of the survey, but a sample that showed more diversity would be a more complete representation of the American intercollegiate and recreational athlete population and would thus allow for more accurate conclusions to be made about that population.

An area where this research could be taken further is garnering more data for participants in the sample who were considered either risk neutral or risk tolerant, which in this case was 13.4% of participants. This study was significant in that it displayed a correlation between the sense of community of athletes who were overwhelmingly risk averse and their tendencies to partake in transgression based on the presence of the fellow athletes around them. More research could be conducted to analyze whether people who are either risk neutral or risk tolerant have a greater likelihood to display transgressive behavior when testing for higher levels of sense of community. Determining whether sense of community augments or reduces an already willing risk-taker's propensity to commit transgressive acts would add another layer to the information obtained in the study, allowing researchers to paint a wider encompassing profile of intercollegiate athletes' thought process into taking risks when in the presence of like individuals.

This line of research could also potentially benefit from a more thorough examination of the relationship between sense of community and transgressive behavior for athletes who play individual sports. The data accumulated in this study mostly accounted for athletes who participated in team sports, with only 16% of respondents reporting participation in individual sports. Community in sport is not just limited to fellow teammates but can be extended to the intimate relationships formed between teammates and coaches (Rutter et al., 2011). It would be beneficial to research whether the community formed exclusively between teammates and coaches has a different impact on transgressive behavior than relationships formed between fellow athletes, which would be more efficiently achieved through an examination of sense of community for athletes of individual sports.

Lastly, a worthy inclusion for a potential follow-up to this study would be to explore the differences in sense of community and transgressive behaviors for athletes at other levels of NCAA competition, including Division II and Division III intercollegiate athletes. Although recreational athletes were already included in the study, it may prove to be worthwhile to compare sense of community and transgressive behaviors with other extents of intercollegiate play. It is recommended to expand this study to include multiple levels of NCAA competition to better understand whether Division I athletes are more likely to engage in transgressive behavior due to greater pressures than other intercollegiate athletes (Kroshus et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

In summation, the extant literature tends to focus on positive benefits of the sense of community surrounding sport (e.g., Warner, 2016, 2019). However, the results of this study highlighted the less discussed potential repercussions of such community. Although recreational athletes reported higher levels of sense of community and NCAA athletes demonstrated higher

scores for moral disengagement, violence against partner, and performance enhancing drugs; a significant relationship between sense of community and general deviance, violence towards partners, and doping attitudes were found. Thus, indicating it is important to continue to explore *both* the positive and negative outcomes regarding the community that surrounds sport. By doing so, a more complete picture of the role of sport in individuals' lives will likely be revealed and provide important insight on how sport can be managed in a way that improves athletes' well-being.

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