

Towards recognition of peer violence in youth sports – the case of Vojvodina

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Abstract

The paper contains the results of the field research that the authors used in order to determine the existence and manifesting forms of peer pressure in youth sports. The sample consists of young people aged 11 to 18, who practice sport (N=536). The research was conducted in the second half of 2019 in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The research results indicate that there are various forms of aggressive and violent behavior among youth, among which psychological violence predominates. The most common place for violence is the dressing room, after training or a competition. In terms of age, high-school-age children report higher level of violence victimization compared to older primary school children. The research results testify to the fact that sport shares “the fate” of the society in which it exists and that policy makers in youth sports should take into consideration this social phenomenon as well.

Keywords children • youth • aggression • peer violence • sport • Vojvodina.

Introduction

The aggression and violence are global social phenomena, which have been researched in the past three decades. By examining many definitions of aggression it can be concluded that it is any “behavior that is intended to harm another person who is motivated to avoid that harm” (Allen & Anderson, 2017: 2; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011); whereas violence is, among other things, described as an “extreme form of aggression that has severe physical harm (e.g., serious injury or death) as its goal” (Allen & Anderson, 2017: 3; Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010; Huesmann & Taylor, 2006).

Taking into consideration that aggression and violence in scientific and research terms belong to the domains of sociology, psychology, political sciences, legal sciences, criminology and other related sciences, it becomes clearer that there are numerous definitions and classifications of violence, among which we distinguish: physical and psychological, rational and irrational, direct and indirect, individual and social, current and long-term, group and individual, manifest and latent, etc. (Tripković, 2007; Radenović, 2012; Milovanović, Milošević, Maksimović, Korovljev & Drid, 2019). However, the focus of the researchers was primarily direct or interpersonal violence, which is the case with this research paper as well.

The phenomenon of peer violence has also been extensively investigated in recent decades. The primary focus was on school violence, especially since children spend a third of their time

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in school. Among the numerous studies conducted on the topic of peer violence, one research stands out for its large sample size of over 100,000 school-age children, the results of which show that almost 50% of boys and about 42% of girls experienced some type of peer violence (Popadić, Plut, & Pavlović, 2014). School is undoubtedly the place where children spend most of their time, and sport is one of the most fun extracurricular activities. While engaged in sports, children interact with each other, and in those interactions group dynamics is developed. There are numerous claims in the relevant literature about the benefits of playing sports, especially during childhood and adolescence (Bailey, 2006; Bojanić, Šakan, & Nedeljković, 2018; Collins, Cromartie, Butler, & Bae, 2018; Koo & Lee, 2014; Park, Chiu, & Won, 2017; Richman & Schaffer, 2000; Steptoe & Butler, 1996; Wankel & Berger, 1990; Milovanović, Rolicer & Drid, 2019). Playing sports in childhood represents a good foundation for the development of healthy lifestyles, and at the same time it has a positive effect on the psycho-physical health of children and young people (Djordjić & Matić, 2008; Milovanović, Roklicer, & Drid, 2019). However, it turns out that sport is not free from aggression and violence despite its many positive characteristics. Even the researchers do not have a consistent view on that subject. There are authors who argue that the level of aggression and violence in sports is lower, because children and young people “filter out” aggression through sport/physical activity (Biddle, 1995). Contrary to such claims, there are researchers who state that athletes are exposed to stress precisely due to the nature of sport (competition and the imperative to win even at a younger age), which is why the manifestation of violence in sport is inevitable (Ciairano et al., 2007; Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 1977; Milovanović et. al, 2019a). There are also claims that pro-social behavior and group cohesion are protective factors against peer aggression and victimization (Wang, Zhang, Li, Yu, Zhen, & Huang, 2015; Gentile, Milovanovic, Valantine, Kreivyte, Tilindiene, Mujkic, Ajdinovic, Kesic, Drid, Obradovic, Korovljevic, Bianco, Boca, 2019), leading to a sense of belonging to a peer group (Wang et al., 2015; Gentile et. al., 2019).

Considering the general exposure of children and youth to violence in contemporary society, the authors wanted to investigate the extent to which the children in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina are exposed to aggressive behavior and violence in sport. The reason for such research is contained in the above-mentioned other authors’

contradictory claims, which emphasize the socializing character of sport, the development of pro-social behavior and group cohesion in sport, as well as numerous latent social functions of sport, among which competition and victories predominate, which, in turn, leads to stress and frustration among children and youth.

Method

The sample of the respondents in this research included secondary-school or older school-age children aged 11-18 years from the territory of Vojvodina (N = 536), 285 of whom were from primary school and 251 were high school students from the territory of Vojvodina. Data collection was conducted through coaches who surveyed children in sports clubs in individual and team sports just before or after the training. Before the survey, the respondents were acquainted with basic terminological instructions on the forms of aggressive behavior and peer violence that was being investigated in order to provide the most accurate answers.

The instrument itself contained two segments of questions: 1) the socio-demographic and 2) the segment that addressed the frequency and forms of peer violence.

The socio-demographic part contained the following variables: gender, age, place, parents’ education, number of children in the family, as well as the type of sport and the respondents’ previous sports experience.

The peer violence assessment included questions about: a) the place or location of the sports club, b) the time when violence among children occurred (before, during or after training; before, during or after the competition; during trips to sports camps or while staying in sports camps), c) the place where the violence occurs (sports hall, dressing room, training or toilet and bathroom areas), d) forms of violence (physical, psychological and sexual). The questionnaire which was used in the research has been created (compiled, constructed) by the authors of the research itself. Prior to use of the questionnaire, a pilot study has been performed with limited number of interviewees (N=60), showing satisfactory measurable results. All the respondents’ answers meant marking the attitude of the respondents on a scale of 1 to 5 (I completely disagree to I completely agree). On one hand, the respondents provided

answers about the forms of violence that they believed could occur in their environment, and on the other hand, they also gave the answers to the forms of violence that occurred most frequently.

Statistical data processing included presenting the descriptive statistics that assessed peer violence. In the same manner, using the Man Whitney statistical tests, an analysis of differences in subjects in the variables assessing peer violence by gender and age was performed. The overall analysis of the results was performed based on the statistical package SPSS 22.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, USA).

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, frequencies of respondents by sport, and their sports experience. Accordingly, it is evident that the gender structure of the respondents' sample consists of 338 boys and 197 girls. In relation to the place of residence, the sample included the following respondents: the ones from villages (18.9%), from suburban areas (6.0%), towns (60.1%) and cities (15%). Most of the respondents are involved in team sports (football, basketball, volleyball and handball) or martial arts.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for respondents' socio-demographic characteristics

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	338	63.2
Female	197	36.8
Age		
Primary school (11-14 years of age)	285	53.2
Secondary school (15 -18 years of age)	251	46.8
Location		
Village	101	18.9
Suburb	32	6.0
Town	321	60.1
City	80	15
Father's Education		
Primary education	19	3.7
Secondary education	234	45.9
College education	118	23.1
Higher education	139	27.3
Mother's Education		
Primary education	11	2.2
Secondary education	213	41.8
College education	135	26.5
Higher education	151	29.6
Number of Children in the Family		
1 child	86	16.2
2 children	316	59.5
3 children	100	18.8
4 children	24	5.5
5 children	5	1
Sport		
Football	64	12
Basketball	163	30.4
Handball	104	19.4
Volleyball	78	14.6

Table 1 (continued). Descriptive statistics for respondents' socio-demographic characteristics

Variable	N	%
Athletics	8	1.5
Gymnastics	15	2.8
Water polo	12	2.2
Ice hockey	2	0.4
Martial arts	61	13
Aerobics, ballet, Serbian folk dancing, dance	12	2.2
Tennis	2	0.4
Swimming	6	1.1
Sports Experience		
1 year	73	13.9
1-5 years	263	50.0
5-10 years	182	34.6
over 10 years	8	1.5

By analyzing the descriptive statistics of peer violence in Table 2, it can be concluded that 57.4% of the respondents believe that various forms of violence occur in their sport, compared to 42.6% who do not detect it. However, the respondents' answers to the

question about the frequency of violence in their sport indicate that its presence is lower and amounts to 7.4% (3.2% point out that violence occurs very often, while 4.2% state it occurs quite often).

Table 2. Number and frequency of the respondents who believe there is violence in the sport they practice

Variable	N	%
Is there violence in the sport you practice?		
Yes	223	42.6
No	300	57.4
How often does violence in your sport occur among children?		
Very often	17	3.2
Quite often	22	4.2
Sometimes	99	18.8
Rarely	175	33.1
Almost never	215	40.7

Furthermore, by looking at Table 3, it can be observed that peer violence occurs somewhat more frequently after training (27.1% of those who agree with this statement) and after the competition (24.3% of the respondents). Also, every third respondent

identified the dressing room as the place where the most violence among children occurs.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of peer violence in respondents (%)

Variable	I completely disagree	I disagree	I am neutral	I agree	I completely agree
When does violence among children occur?					
Before training	44.5	16.0	22.1	13.5	4
During training	42.7	20.5	20.1	12.9	3.8
After training	38.4	15.9	18.6	21.3	5.8
Before competition	46.6	22.7	17.6	9.9	3.2
During competition	40.8	19.2	19.6	13.78	6.7
After competition	40.9	15.5	19.4	17.6	6.7
While travelling to competitions, sports camps, etc.	43.0	17.9	21.1	12.6	5.3
In sports camps	41.3	16.6	24.9	12.8	4.4
Where does violence among children occur?					
In the gym	41.4	23.5	19.2	13.3	2.7
In the dressing room	32.8	12.7	20.8	25.6	8.1
In the training area	42.5	22.9	20.6	9.1	5.0
In the bathroom/toilet area	51.6	16.8	16.8	8.2	6.7
Forms of violence that can occur					
Physical violence	27.6	13.5	18.8	26.8	13.3
Psychological violence	20.1	11.4	15.2	31.3	22.0
Sexual violence	58.2	16.9	13.9	5.8	5.3
Most common forms of violence that have occurred					
Physical violence	30.9	12.5	20.0	21.5	15.1
Psychological violence	22.5	11.0	17.6	28.0	21.0
Sexual violence	67.0	12.7	13.1	1.9	5.3

Based on the results obtained in Table 4, it can be concluded that gender differences were observed in psychological violence with a higher level being

observed in girls. In other forms of violence, no statistically significant gender differences were observed.

Table 4. Analysis of differences in forms of violence that may occur and which most frequently occurred to respondents based on gender

Form of violence	Forms of violence that can occur (Mean Rank)		Forms of violence that occurred most frequently (Mean Rank)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Physical violence	266.10	267.19	266.03	263.23
Psychological violence	249.30	295.99**	252.24	285.79*
Sexual violence	268.16	263.66	271.33	251.32

Also, it is noticeable that there are differences in the perception of higher levels of physical and psychological violence of older school-age children compared to secondary-school-age children (Table 5). In the same way, the results in the most commonly occurring forms of violence show that there are

statistically significant differences only in physical violence in the older school age children compared to primary school age children.

Table 5. Analysis of differences in forms of violence that can occur and the ones that have occurred most often based on the age

Form of violence	Forms of violence that can occur (Mean Rank)		Forms of violence that occurred most often (Mean Rank)	
	Younger school age	Older school age	Younger school age	Older school age
Physical violence	247.81	284.04**	250.72	277.50*
Psychological violence	248.39	283.40**	254.70	272.13
Sexual violence	261.41	268.98	259.50	265.79

Discussion

With this research we tried to determine the existence and manifesting forms of aggressive behavior and peer violence in youth sports in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The sample consists of 536 children and youth from Vojvodina villages, suburban and urban areas, whose sports experience ranges from one to more than ten years of practicing a certain sport. In terms of the respondents' age, these are the children of primary and secondary school age.

Despite numerous definitions of aggression and violence mentioned in the introductory part, the focus of this research was direct/interpersonal violence, and the results of the research also indicated the justification of the methodological focus of the researchers on this type of violence. Namely, previously conducted research indicates a high rate of peer aggression and violence, primarily in the school setting – an area where children spend much of their time (Popadić, Plut, & Pavlović, 2014). Contrary to the school environment, sport stands out as the favorite extracurricular activity among children. Sport has often been seen as a positive social phenomenon, where the possible existence of aggression is actually socially acceptable, precisely because it manifests itself in the sport context and within the rules of a particular sport (Biddle, 1995). Contrary to this view, some authors claim that children and young people who practice sport are more exposed to stress, precisely because of the competitiveness of the sport and the imperative to win, which is why the expression of aggressive and violent behavior is more common (Cairano et al., 2007; Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 1977).

This field research is in favor of both types of argumentation. Namely, the research shows that the majority of children (57.4%) do not consider that aggression and violence occur in the sport they practice. And those who confirm that there is

aggression and violence say that in most cases it is “rare” (33.1%) or it occurs “sometimes” (18.8%), as opposed to the ones who state it occurs “very often” (3.2%) and “quite often” (4.2%). It follows that the respondents witnessed aggressive and violent behavior, but that those were sporadic cases. Furthermore, in most cases the dressing room is indicated as the place of violence manifestation. There are two reasons for this: children/youth go to the dressing room alone after a training or sports event. It is a place where neither the coach nor the parents enter. Therefore, the dressing room is a place where the dynamics of the peer group come to the fore, combined with the cumulative negative emotions that these children/youth have experienced at a training or sports event, just before entering the dressing room. Emotions after training, especially when competition is present, can lead to conflict (Milovanovic et al. 2019b).

When it comes to manifesting forms of aggressive and violent behavior, it turns out that psychological violence is most prevalent. The most common manifesting forms of psychological violence are teasing, gossip, mockery, and they are more prevalent among girls than among boys. Children who are the “object” of ridicule either lag behind when it comes to expressing their talent in sports or are above average when it comes to their sports ability. The subject of ridicule may be their physical appearance, which in any way deviates from the “usual” or (non) talent for a given sport or socioeconomic status of the child's family. This result is in line with the results of the previous research (Milovanović et.al. 2019a; Milovanović et.al. 2019b). By looking at the gender differences, it is evident that there is a statistically significant difference in the forms of violence that can occur ($p < 0.01$), as well as in the forms of violence that occurred most frequently ($p < 0.05$). With regard to the age of the respondents, we note that aggressive and violent behavior is more common for older school age children in the domain of physical violence; whereas in the case of violence that could occur ($p < 0.01$) as well as in the case of violence that

occurs ($p < 0.05$) a statistically significant difference among school age children was determined. There is also a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$) in psychological forms of violence that may occur between groups of respondents of different school age, with psychological violence more likely to occur in older school age children. We are talking about adolescents (15-18 years of age) who are going through an intense developmental phase of their lives, which is also reflected in sports as an extracurricular activity. This phase, as the results of this research show, also involves the manifesting forms of some of the aggressive and violent behavior. Sexual violence is also present, but to a much lesser extent than physical or psychological violence.

Finally, the results of this research show that sport as a social phenomenon is not isolated from general social circumstances. Children and youth are exposed to aggression and violence on an almost daily basis, on the street, in schools, in the media, on social networks, in video games, and some children suffer violence in their families (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001). This “availability” of aggression and violence is thus also reflected in sports as the favorite extracurricular activity of many children, where this survey found that 36.6% of sports involved physical and 49.0% of sports involved psychological aggression and violence. Sport still has a socializing character, which also influences the development of pro-social behavior of children and youth; however, the above results testify to the need for more intensive realization of similar research on the latent characteristics of youth sports. The study also serves as a reminder that there is a need to carry out research among parents and coaches, as significant figures in the lives of children involved in sports. The results indicate the importance of talking and educating athletes and especially coaches/parents, which could reduce the frequency of such negative behaviors, while increasing understanding and promoting acceptance of diversity. In the long run, this can reduce negative behaviors and create a better work and life atmosphere in sports, work communities and communication in society.

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