

## AUTONOMY AND SPORTSPERSONSHIP ORIENTATION IN THE MORAL BEHAVIOR OF ATHLETES

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**ABSTRACT:** This study proposes an Explanatory Moral Model in sport, verifying the perception of autonomy and its influence on pro and antisocial behavior in athletes, mediated by sportspersonship orientation. 180 athletes from the southern region of Brazil of both genders participating in national and international competitions were evaluated. The instruments used were: Basic Sport Needs Satisfaction Scale (BNSSS); Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale (MSOS); and Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior in Sport Scale (PABSS). Data were analyzed using a Structural Equation Model. The athletes showed high values of autonomy, independent judgment, respect for the rules, social conventions and prosocial behaviors, with low values of antisocial behaviors. The tested structural equation model demonstrates that sportspersonship orientation can be a mediating variable between the relationship of autonomy and especially prosocial behaviors. It is concluded that a postconventional morality in sport associated with an autonomic movement goes through a positive orientation of sports practice.

**KEY WORDS:** Athletic performance; Autonomy; Morale.

## AUTONOMIA E ORIENTAÇÃO ESPORTIVA NO COMPORTAMENTO MORAL DE ATLETAS DE RENDIMENTO

**RESUMO:** Este estudo propõe um Modelo Explicativo de Moral no esporte verificando a percepção de autonomia e sua influência no comportamento pró e antissocial nos atletas, mediados pela orientação esportiva. Foram avaliados 180 atletas da Região Sul do Brasil de ambos os sexos participantes em competições nacionais ou internacionais. Os instrumentos utilizados foram: Escala de Satisfação de Necessidades Básicas no Esporte (BNSSS); Escala Multidimensional de Orientação Esportiva (MSOS); e Escala de Comportamento Pró-social e Antissocial no Esporte (PABSS). Os dados foram analisados por meio de um Modelo de Equações Estruturais. Os atletas apresentaram valores elevados de autonomia, julgamento independente, respeito às regras, convenções sociais e comportamentos pró-sociais, com baixos valores de comportamentos antissociais. O modelo de equações estruturais testado demonstra que a orientação esportiva pode ser uma variável mediadora entre a relação da autonomia e principalmente os comportamentos pró-sociais. Conclui-se que uma moral pós-convencional no esporte associada a um movimento autônomo perpassa uma orientação positiva da prática esportiva.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Autonomia; Desempenho atlético; Moral.

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## INTRODUCTION

An athlete's career is pervaded by several situations that become a striking points, whether positive or negative. Everyone will have their story and deal with it in a particular way. With each change that occurs in his life, new elements are added to his repertory and those causes the same subject to experience different representative situations on his historical path. In this process, changes occur that are capable of generating constant emancipatory metamorphoses<sup>1</sup>.

Athletes who spend a good part of their life in the performance sports's context goes into a learning aspect about the competitive social process, influenced by the environment that surrounds them and by the people with whom they relate, thereby, the competition itself does not inherently good or bad, but a process that manifests itself in a conventionalized structure, in which the restricted norms of daily life are set aside in favor of typical moral norms. Thus, the athlete's own behavior is in favor of the rules in the sports environment, which is often considered inappropriate for life in society because they are at odds with moral rules<sup>2</sup>.

The existing rules in every context work to keep the organization within standards established by the context itself, resulting in sports with different rules, different values, even if all aim at the same goal, which is victory. An example of this is the discussions about how some sports are more "mild" and others more "violent" or "aggressive", very common in the current days on fighting sports, in which aggressive behavior is necessary to achieve victory against the opponent. The body control itself, the use of physical force and aggression, are present in this kind of sport, but are considered immoral behaviors when used outside it. However, at the competition time, they work to preserve the athlete's body and they are essential for their identification with the group to which they belong<sup>3</sup>.

These contradictions regarding the human beings's behavior in different environments draws the attention, because, in order to understand this being, it is not enough to study his body or its origin, it is necessary to understand how it is constituted in a socio-cultural context. The explanation for this is given by the fact that, during

its development, innate behaviors (which are linked to its biological structure) are shaped by the cultural activity of others with whom it relates<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, the individual is born and becomes a member of society, that is, he is a social being, who lives in a group<sup>5</sup>.

Living in a group is not a simple task, however, living with groups that have different rules and moral aspects is even more questionable. Becoming a member of a society or group means being part of a reality that is both objective and subjective. These aspects are recognized if "society is understood in terms of an ongoing, dialectical process, composed of three moments, exteriorization, objectification and interiorization"<sup>5</sup>. However, these moments do not occur in a temporal sequence, but, simultaneously, moreover, the identity of the Self is only formed in the circle of the identity of a group, and each group has characteristics of their own<sup>6</sup>.

It is noticed in this context that environment, or culture which the subject is educated, influences their willingness to assume specific attitudes. In attempt to understand these influences, it is necessary to describe the socialization strategies to which this subject was exposed. Every social context is made up of rules, and the subject, in addition to knowing, accepting and being able to give a judgment on such rules, it needs to know its real disposition to act in accordance with them. But these rules are not always regulated<sup>7</sup>.

In this context, the term pro-social behavior<sup>8</sup> is used to discuss the issue of the ability to act according to moral precepts. This behavior is characterized by being one that represents a positive influence on other people, not meaning a benefit to oneself. Within this context, altruism, sharing, cooperation, among others, are included as pro-social behaviors. Thus, an individual's prosocial moral development concerns the process of acquiring and changing the judgments and behaviors that would help or benefit other individuals or groups<sup>9</sup>.

From a theoretical point of view<sup>10</sup> the moral theme can be understood from a social perspective of its insertion within the sports context. The theory based on levels of development of moral conscience is expressed in judgments about conflicts of morally relevant action. In sports, much is discussed about how sports practice leads to the children and adolescents' attitudes that are consistent with social morality, and from this they

develop, for example, the ability to respect others, respect the rules, and cope better with the authority figure. But some sports end up being criticized regarding the way they are conducted, because when they are considered violent sports, in which aggressiveness is synonymous with success, parents and guardians would believe that this same behavior could be taken out of the sports environment.

Thus, in order to complement the understanding of morality in sport, considered here as pro and antisocial behaviors, an explanatory model was developed with the presenting to professionals in the field objective on how athletes reason and behave cognitively, verifying the perception of autonomy and its influence on pro and antisocial behavior in athletes, mediated by sportpersonship orientation. This study starts from scientific research to understand how the perception of autonomy influences the ability to act in a social way when mediated by sportpersonship orientation.

Thereby, this study's central hypothesis is that

post-conventional morality<sup>10,11</sup> in the sports context, when associated with an autonomic movement, permeates a positive orientation of sports practice. One of the ways to investigate this hypothesis is to consider that the concept of morality needs to be understood in a multifaceted perspective, identifying individual and social elements that lead the athlete to develop autonomy.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology described below is related to the study's objective, which is to propose a sports's Explanatory Moral Model, verifying the perception of autonomy and its influence on pro and antisocial athletes' behavior, mediated by sportpersonship orientation. This model was tested based on the moral competence definition: "the ability to make decisions and give moral judgments (based on internal principles) and act in accordance with such judgments" (p. 425)<sup>11</sup>.

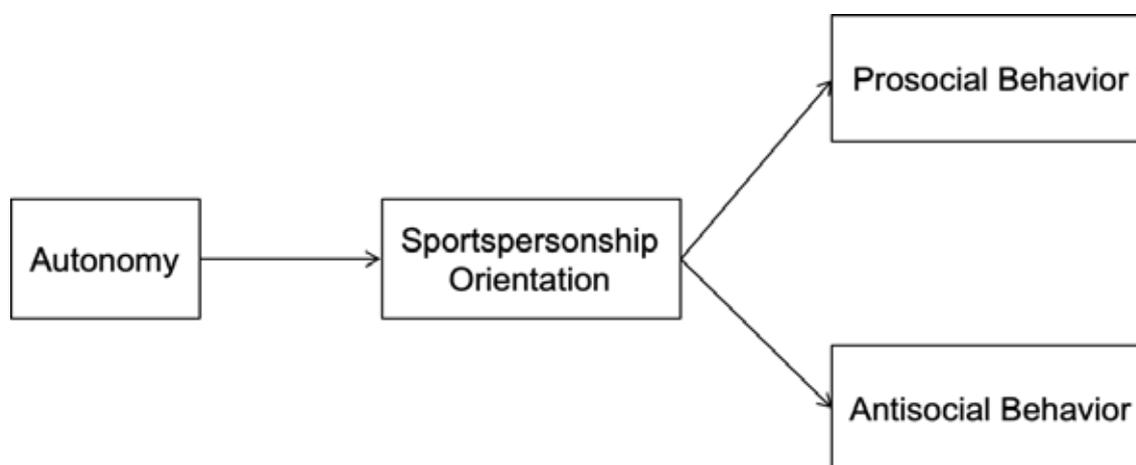


Figure 1. Shows the hypothetical-predictive relationships model to be tested.

This Hypothetical Model development occurred from concept of moral competence understanding. Therefore, it was decided to select some psychological measures instruments that could cover all the characteristics of this concept.

The Ability to Make Decisions was evaluated based on an instrument that provides us the Autonomy (AUT) dimension, described as the subject's ability to weigh acts based on his own criteria. The Ability to Give Moral Judgments was assessed based on a variable called Guidance for Sports Practice (OR) that corresponds to

the athlete's ability to make their judgments in relation to specific situations in sporting context that concern rules and relationships with teammates and opponents. The ability to act in relation to these judgments, on the other hand, was assessed by the dimensions Pro and Antisocial Behaviors (PRO, ANTI) directed at teammates and sporting opponents, behaviors that can collaborate or harm each of those involved in the process.

This study is classified as a quantitative research, and the Structural Equations Model (SEM) is an advanced multivariate statistical method that allows empirically

testing complex theoretical models. More specifically, from a theoretical model, the researcher will be able to test, thanks to the SEM, how a set of variables define the constructs or concepts, and how these variables and concepts are related to each other<sup>12</sup>.

## PARTICIPANTS

This study included 180 athletes from different sports who have participated in national and/or international competitions throughout their career. Some teams were contacted to request the athlete's participation in the research. The sports covered were: basketball, volleyball, jiu-jitsu, muay thai, taekwondo, swimming, handball, baseball.

## INSTRUMENTS

Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale in Sports<sup>13</sup>. Instrument validated for Brazil by Nascimento Junior (2018) that assesses the athlete's perceptions about his competence, autonomy and relationship in the sports context. It consists of 12 items distributed in 3 dimensions: a) Competence (Items 5, 6, 7 and 10); b) Autonomy (Items 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9); and c) Relationship (Items 4, 11 and 12). Of this Instrument, only the Autonomy (AUT) dimension was used. According to the authors of the study's validation for the Portuguese-Brazil language, the adjustment the tested model indexes showed values close to the recommended levels, which supports the adequacy of the model.

Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale<sup>14</sup>. This instrument is in the process of validation for Brazil concurrently with this research. It assesses the athlete's orientation to sports-related issues. It consists of 25 items on a 5-point Likert scale, divided into 5 dimensions: a) Respect for social conventions in sport (items 1, 6, 11, 16 and 21); b) Respect for the rules and judges (items 2, 7, 12, 17 and 22); c) Respect for the commitment directed to sports participation (items 3, 8, 13, 18 and 23); d) Respect for the opponent (items 4, 9, 14, 19 and 24); e) Negative approach to sports (items 5, 10, 15, 20 and 25). From the dimensions considered positive (a, b, c, d), a latent variable called Orientation for Sports practice (OR) was established.

Scale of Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior in Sport<sup>15</sup>. This instrument is in the process of validation for Brazil concurrently with this research. It consists on 20 items that assess pro and antisocial behaviors in sport, they are answered on a 5-point Likert scale, divided into 4 dimensions: a) Pro-social behavior directed at teammates (items 1, 8, 12 and 15); b) Prosocial behavior directed at opponents (items 4, 6 and 10); c) Anti-social behavior directed at teammates (items 3, 7, 11, 14 and 18); d) Anti-social behavior directed at opponents (items 2, 5, 9, 13, 16, 17, 19 and 20). Each dimension is evaluated according to the average of responses to the items that compose it; higher values on dimensions mean a higher frequency of the corresponding behaviors. From these dimensions, two latent variables were created, one corresponding to Prosocial Behavior (PRO) and one to Antisocial Behavior (ANTI).

## DATA ANALYSIS

At first, the data were analyzed and the variables presented in this study were evaluated using descriptive statistics (measures of central tendency and dispersion). Since these were characterized as non-parametric data, from the analysis of normality performed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with Lilliefors correction. Then Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to verify how much the selected variables were related to each other.

To verify the hypothetical model adequacy, the data analysis occurred by verifying the model tested by the Structural Equation Modeling - SEM, more specifically Path Analysis (Path Analysis). The SEM was chosen for a number of reasons: 1) it allows a series of multiple regression analyzes to be performed; 2) allows you to test models globally instead of just individual coefficients; 3) it allows testing models with mediating variables<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, the SEM was used to test the hypotheses described by the conceptual model (Figure 1). The structural model quality of adjustment was assessed through the direct significance, indirect and total effects<sup>17</sup> using the  $\chi^2$  tests. Statistical analyzes were performed with the aid of the language program R (R-Project) version 3.0.2, and we considered the effects with  $p < 0.05$  to be statistically significant.

PROCEDURES

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Centro Universitário de Maringá- UniCesumar under opinion No. 1,009,268. All athletes signed a Free and Informed Consent Term (ICF) when participating on this research, authorizing the use of data for academic and scientific purposes.

RESULTS

To understand the perception of autonomy role in sports on the elements that constitute moral competence in athletes, a structural equations model was derived. The results will be presented in 2 moments: 1) descriptive analysis and correlation between the variables, and 2) structural equation model.

The athletes who participated in the study had high values of autonomy (Md = 6.6; Q1 = 6.2; Q3 = 7.0), suggesting a high perception of satisfaction with the need to weigh the acts according to their own criteria, forming their judgment independently on opinion or pressure from the group<sup>18</sup>. The orientation characteristics for the sport practice showed athletes with behaviors directed to the respect for the rules and judges of the sport (Md = 4.2; Q1 = 3.6; Q3 = 4.6), respect for the opponent (Md = 3.4;

Q1 = 2.8; Q3 = 4.0), commitment to sports participation (training, dedication and competitiveness) (Md = 4.2; Q1 = 3.8; Q3 = 4.4), and respect for the social conventions of sport (Md = 3.8; Q1 = 3.4; Q3 = 4.6).

Finally, regarding moral behavior in sport, athletes reported predominantly prosocial behaviors to teammates (Md = 4.5; Q1 = 3.7; Q3 = 4.7) and opponents (Md = 3.3; Q1 = 2.3; Q3 = 3.7), referring to judgments and behaviors that are aimed at helping or benefiting other individuals or groups<sup>9</sup>. Antisocial behaviors were less intense both for companions (Md = 2.0; Q1 = 1.4; Q3 = 2.6) and for opponents (Md = 1.8; Q1 = 1.5; Q3 = 2.50), in the athletes' perception. The moral competence values were low (Md = 8.5; Q1 = 4.9; Q3 = 14.4).

The patterns of association between autonomy indicators, orientation towards sports practice and prosocial and antisocial behavior are shown in Figure 2. The network of variables graphically demonstrates the correlation between the indicators represented in nodes (circles). The size of the circles indicates the intensity of the variable and the lines connecting the nodes (rods) indicate the correlation coefficient (rod intensity). Closer nodes are more closely associated with more distant nodes. Green stems indicate a positive association and red, negative.

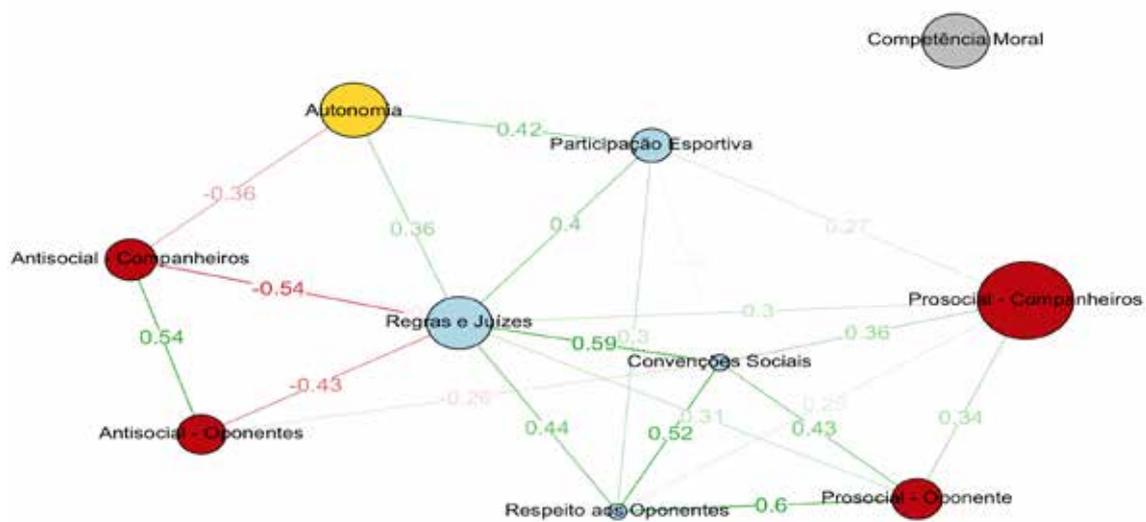


Figure 2. Correlation network between the study variables. Size of N = nodes (circles) indicate the median of the variable score. Stem colors indicate the magnitude (color intensity) and direction (green = positive, red = negative) of the associations

Note: Autonomy; Sport participation; Rules and Officials; Social Conventions; Respect for the Opponent; Antisocial - Teammates; Antisocial Opponent; Prosocial - Teammates; Prosocial - Opponent.

After verifying the correlation between the variables, an analysis based on the Structural Equations Model was performed. Initially, the observed variables to the latent variables' adjustment was verified through sequential factor analysis. The latent variables measurement model showed an adequate adjustment, confirming the local reliability indicators with significant trajectories and on adequate magnitude. This step provided sufficient evidence to conduct the structural equation modeling analysis<sup>16</sup>. The analysis was conducted based on the assumption in the hypothetical model shown in Figure 1.

For each instrument used in the model, specific variables were established to be tested together. The first variable established is that derived from the Autonomy (AUT) dimension, present in the Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale in sport<sup>13</sup>. The model's mediating variable was called (a) Orientation for Sports Practice (OR) and is formed by the joint variance of the positive dimensions scores on the Multidimensional Sportpersonship Orientation Scale<sup>14</sup>. This variable refers to the moral postures adopted by athletes in relation to social conventions, rules, judges and sports opponents. The other variables were established from the Prosocial and Antisocial Behavior Scale in Sport (b) Prosocial Behavior (PRO) - formed by the joint variance of the scores of the dimensions on Prosocial behavior directed at teammates and sports opponents; (c) Antisocial Behavior (ANTI) - formed by the joint variance of the dimensions of antisocial behavior scores directed at teammates and sports opponents.

Different model structure patterns were tested until a model with significant trajectories ( $p < 0.05$ ), few errors, adequate adjustment indicators and theoretical consistency were found. We initially tested the Model 1 with significant trajectories and moderate magnitude ( $FL > 0.40$ ). This model verified the impact of AUT and OR on PRO and ANTI, without adding indirect mediation effects, configuring an exploratory approach to predictive relationships between variables. However, analyzing the suggestions of the modification indices, it was found that AUT had a role in explaining the OR variance, improving the model's behavior (model adjustment indices:  $X^2 = 32.567$ ;  $X^2$  scaled = 0.19; CFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.05 (95% 0.00-0.10); SRMR = 0.12; GFI = 0.99; AGFI = 0.99).

Thus, the second model (Model 2) was constructed, placing OR as a mediating variable between AUT and the PRO and ANTI outcomes. This model was developed based on the concept of moral competence<sup>11</sup>. This concept suggests that moral competence is defined as the ability to make decisions and make moral judgments (based on internal principles) and to act in accordance with such judgments. In such a way, AUT plays the role of perception of autonomy for decision making, OR is the ability to make moral judgments and PRO / ANTI are the behaviors that indicate the ability to act according to moral judgments<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, Model 2 represents the impact of each element of the moral competence process, assessing how it manifests itself in the sports context. Specifically, the objective of this model was to verify the perception of autonomy effect, or Political freedom<sup>19</sup>, for the ability to emit and indirectly act according to moral judgments in sport (Figure 3).

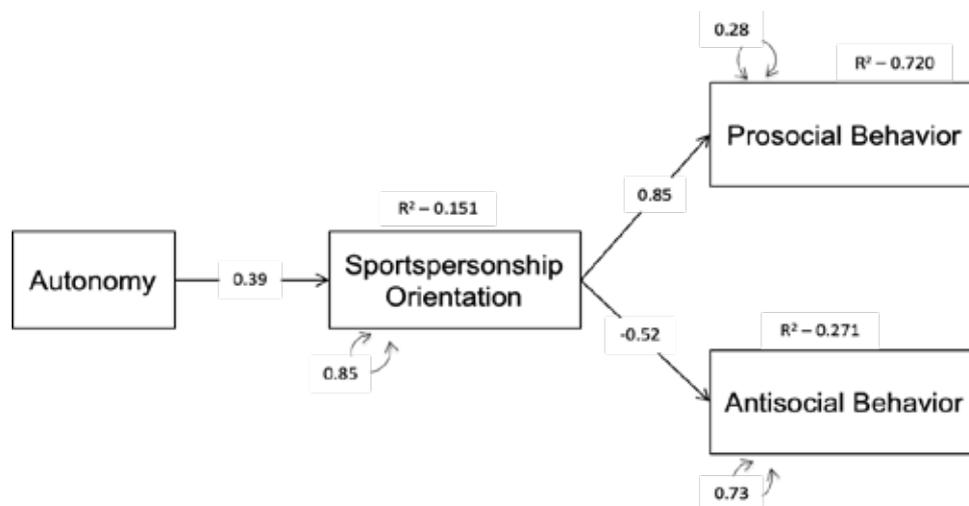


Figure 3. Model 2 - Sportspersonship orientation as a mediating variable between Autonomy and Pro and Antisocial Behaviors.

## DISCUSSION

Thus, it is evident that greater perceptions of autonomy satisfaction with sports practice facilitate the ability to issue positive moral orientations in relation to the practice, resulting in more pro-social behavior to teammates and opponents and less antisocial behavior. These results are innovative, no studies were found establishing a relationship between these variables or suggesting that greater individual self-determination reflects positive moral behaviors. However, it is necessary to consider research results<sup>20</sup> in which athletes showed a greater intrinsic motivation tendency, feeling stimulated mainly with the experiences related to the sports context, that is, the self-determined motivation was intrinsically a favorable factor for positive attitudes aimed at to sports conventions, rules and judges, influencing the concern and commitment to the opponent and the tendency to behave aggressively<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, this study was able to provide a data analysis structure that is broad and flexible, making it possible to evaluate complex theoretical phenomena. In this case, the objective was to verify how the chosen variables behaved in relation to each other, evaluating the relationships between observable variables and latent concepts.

Understanding how these variables are related within an Explanatory Model, makes it possible to qualitatively verify their presence throughout the life of a subject. Considering that moral development is part of the development of the subject's personality<sup>4</sup> and autonomy

itself is the result of a process of maturation and decentralization of the self and the group, carrying out the process of emancipation from the authority of the rule and the coercion of the group<sup>19</sup> becoming more self-determined. It is only possible to understand the moral actions (pro and antisocial) of a subject in search of autonomy, when mediated by the moral orientations involved in the context in which he is inserted.

The identity policies<sup>1,21</sup> present in the process of training an lead athlete to the understanding that respect for the rules and sports rules is important and can lead to the desired achievements, in contradiction to the fact that there is a demand and recognition from the systemic order search for victory at any cost. Sports success is not necessarily about the athlete reaching victory, being famous, and being considered the best in the world, but being able to assume a more autonomous role based on voluntary participation in the competitive context, feeling pleasure in carrying out the activity<sup>22</sup>.

These points lead us to confirm one of the hypotheses of this study that post-conventional morality in sport, associated with an autonomic movement, permeates a positive orientation of sports practice. This positive orientation does imply respect for sports rules and conventions, respect for opponents, for referees and for sports participation itself.

The values indicated demonstrate that Friendship represents the search for understanding others in spite of differences. Respect includes fair play (fair play - respect

for the rules of the game), Honesty requires wisdom in relation to one's own limits, especially in relation to the non-corruption of one's own body, refusing to use doping. Finally, Excellence represents offering the maximum effort for the perfect execution of a task, both in sport and in life, participating and progressing according to your goals. These values suggest that the subject-athlete can present more autonomous and emancipated behaviors from the moment he has the freedom of choice and his actions are determined by internal forces towards a libertarian moral movement<sup>11</sup>.

This idea of positive orientation does not mean a moralism of discourse, as a negative orientation does not express going against conventions, but rather in favor of instrumental action<sup>19</sup> and maintenance of this athlete status quo of success and social, financial and bureaucratic recognition. Exemplifying this negative orientation, the use of doping, violence, breaking rules, the unscrupulous search for victory are actions that hinder the expression of a post-conventional identity and morality<sup>10</sup>.

Evidence in the literature has pointed out that athletes who are more self-determined or internally motivated to practice have behaviors that are more adjusted to the rules of the sport and the social conventions of the context<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, elements of external control, less self-determined, are more prevalent when the focus is not on sports success, but victory at any cost, being associated with behavior outside the rules, aggressiveness and use of illegal substances to improve performance<sup>20, 24</sup>.

The development of a post-conventional identity, that is, an identity capable of anticipating a way of life in the sense of autonomy, with values and norms not yet established<sup>4</sup> does not mean the subject's complete autonomy. Identity starts to be conceived as a search for emancipation, which can be achieved or not. The realization of emancipatory projects is hindered by an uncritical internalization of (heteronomic) norms<sup>6</sup>, because in this case the subject is only recognized through a project that is based on relations of domination, a fact that can be observed in the results of the model presented, since, Autonomy presented a strong correlation with pro-social behaviors when mediated by Sportspersonship Orientation.

The choice of the variables Autonomy, Sportspersonship Orientation and Pro and Antisocial Behaviors was

carried out following theoretical information and do not represent the only possible variables to be used for this purpose. However, they present elements that enabled a greater understanding of morals in the sports context, as high values of autonomy, independent judgment, respect for rules, social conventions and prosocial behaviors were identified among athletes. With low values of antisocial behaviors confirming the hypothesis that, a post-conventional morality in sport associated with an autonomic movement permeates a positive orientation of sports practice.

The study has some limitations that need to be defined. The first one concerns the research participants, considering that they are not athletes of the same modality. The environment in which they are inserted makes a difference, therefore, this model should be tested, in future research, with athletes of only one modality, also taking into account the level of athletic development in which the athletes find themselves.

Another point to be highlighted is the difficulty in finding reliable instruments that could faithfully represent the concept of moral competence. This reason motivated the verification of the model through the use of instruments that could generate variables with meaning close to what the concept requires. In addition, two of the instruments used are in the process of validation for the Brazilian Portuguese language.

## CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the Explanatory Model proposed in this study, having the sports context as a mediator of the relationship between the perception of autonomy and prosocial behaviors, presented satisfactory results when turned to reality.

Specifically for the sports context, it was found that autonomy has a positive influence on the athlete's sportspersonship orientation, leading him to a greater capacity to behave in a social way, that is, the more the athlete perceives himself as a subject directed towards the search for autonomy, the greater will be his ability to emit moral orientations considered positive in his practice,

which results in prosocial behaviors directed both at teammates and opponents.

Therefore, it appears that the athletes' search for autonomy was better understood when mediated by the moral guidelines present in the context which these subjects are inserted. The results are interesting, but do not exhaust the discussions on the subject. Few studies have been carried out in Brazil on this topic and individual sports have also been little explored, therefore, future studies are necessary for the best scientific coverage of this area of knowledge.

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