

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF CONTEST ORIENTATION, PEER  
MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE, AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN YOUTH SPORT

A Thesis by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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December 2020

Major Subject: Recreation, Park, & Tourism Science

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## ABSTRACT

Sport is the most prevalent out-of-school time activity for adolescents (Sabo & Veliz, 2008) and is often touted as a context to promote positive youth development. However, the evidence for whether sport promotes character is mixed. Theory suggests that character development occurs through exchanges between individuals and contexts and, more specifically, through individual's exchanges with other individuals (Lerner & Callina, 2014). Moreover, development can only be understood through the specificity principle (Bornstein, 2017), which asks: which contexts, promote which outcomes, for which individuals, at which points in time? This thesis examined associations between individual attributes (e.g., contest orientation) and contextual features (e.g., peer motivational climate) that are important factors for determining whether sport promotes adolescents' character. That is, the primary goal was to examine the main effects of athletes' contest orientation and their perceptions of the peer motivational climate of their sport team on the athletes' moral disengagement in sport. The secondary goal was to examine the interaction effect between the individual factors and the contextual factors. The tertiary goal was to examine if the relation between the individual factors, the contextual factors, and the individual by contextual factors and moral disengagement further vary by sport classification, namely sport level (i.e., varsity versus junior varsity), athletes' gender, and sport type (i.e., football versus soccer).

This thesis used secondary data derived from an evaluation study of Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), which yielded a sample that included 239 athletes (23.8% female; 33.9% white; mean age = 16.5) participating in sports who completed self-report surveys comprised of several quantitative measures of character. Hypotheses were tested through the use of hierarchical linear

regressions. Moderators were tested through interaction terms and interpreted using simple slopes. Overall findings showed that, in contrast with theoretical foundations, interactions between the context and the individual may not matter as much for youth character development as previously thought, but instead the context, in this case peer motivational climate, may be the most important factor in youth character development.

## DEDICATION

In the hopes that this work may in some way contribute to the overall experience of all youth athletes, this is dedicated to all the little girls and boys working every day to achieve their dreams. May you find your purpose, whatever that may be, and never lose sight of it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Andrea Ettekal, and my committee members, Dr. Idean Ettekal, and Dr. Jan Wang for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research, and for supporting my continued progress during such an uncertain time. I have learned immensely from their various backgrounds and expertise, and have grown as a person and a professional.

I feel as though a big thank you is also in order for my friends, colleagues, and department faculty and staff for welcoming me with open arms into the RPTS family. I have met so many wonderful people and have made friendships that will last a lifetime.

Finally, I cannot say enough about my wife, Jai. When we met, she knew I would be able to achieve much more than I thought for myself. When I have pushed back, she has pushed harder, and without her persistence, this would have never been possible. There is no way to thank her enough for her patience and support while I embarked on this journey.

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

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This work was supervised by a thesis committee consisting of Professor Dr. Andrea Ettekal of the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Science and Professor Dr. Jan Wang of the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Science and Professor Dr. Idean Ettekal of the Department of Educational Psychology.

The data analyzed for Chapter 4 was provided by Professor Dr. Andrea Ettekal. The analyses depicted in Chapter 4 were conducted in part by Dr. Andrea Ettekal of the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Science.

All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

### **Funding Sources**

Graduate study was supported by an assistantship from Texas A&M University.

## NOMENCLATURE

RDS	Relational Developmental Systems Model
FFT	Five Factor Theory
PYD	Positive Youth Development
↔	Bidirectional Arrow
OST	Out-of-School-Time
PMC	Peer Motivational Climate
PCA	Positive Coaching Alliance
PeerMCYSQ	Peer Motivational Climate in Youth Sport Questionnaire
COS	Contesting Orientation Scale
MDSS	Moral Disengagement in Sport Scale

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sport is a highly prevalent youth out-of-school time activity (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). However, the evidence for whether and how sport promotes character is mixed (Agans & Ettekal, 2018; Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Bredemeier, 1985; Duda, 1989; Greblo, et al., 2016; Kreager, 2007). Character is defined as a multi-faceted developmental system involving attributes of moral wellness that are necessary for a fair and just world (Nucci, 2017). Morality is concerned with enacting behaviors that are deemed appropriate (i.e., “right” versus “wrong”) for the given context, and is critical for a society to be just. In the context of sport, morality is the basis for whether the game is played with integrity. Moral disengagement in sport, or detaching oneself from morality to justify immoral acts, leads to cheating, negative peer interactions, and poor sportspersonship, which undermines positive youth development (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007). Perhaps more importantly, moral disengagement in sport can transfer beyond the specific context of sport to compromise moral standards in other contexts as well, due to the negative implications of high performance goal setting (Welsh, et al., 2020). Understanding the factors that explain moral disengagement in sport can help researchers and practitioners address the growing concerns about character development in youth sport in America.

Theoretically, development occurs through coactions between individuals and contexts, termed individual⇌context relations (Overton, 1973). Thus, factors related to the individual and the context should be simultaneously considered to understand development. Character is a specific instance of development that prioritizes individual⇌individual relations in its process (Lerner & Callina, 2014). That is, character is inherently relationally and is comprised based on how individuals interact with others. Thus, character in sport involves factors related to the ways

in which the individual interacts with the context, as well as the ways in which the individual interacts with other individuals within the context.

The way in which athletes interact with the context of sport can be conceptualized through their approach to the competition or, more specifically, their contest orientation. Contest orientation is how athletes visualize competition, namely through the use of two metaphors: “contest is war” or “contest is partnership” (Bredemeier & Shields, 2011). War orientation is a “win-at-all-cost” mentality in which “search and destroy” tactics are used to “eliminate or destroy” the opponent. Partnership orientation is a collaborative approach to competition in which the game is perceived as a mutually beneficial opportunity for self-improvement. Preliminary studies suggest that contest orientation explains college athletes’ moral disengagement, such that character attributes such as sportspersonship, perseverance, and consistency are all predicted by contest orientation (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2016; Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2018). This thesis, however, is among the first empirical tests, to our knowledge, of relations between contest orientation and moral disengagement among high school athletes.

The way in which athletes interact with each other in the context of sport can be conceptualized through the peer motivational climate. The motivational climate comprises the norms and expectations surrounding reasons for participating and has two dimensions; ego orientation describes the extent of performance-focused reasons for participating (e.g., winning) and task orientation describes the extent of mastery-focused reasons for participating (e.g., self-improvement). How athletes perceive the motivational climate of their teammates is referred to as the peer motivational climate. The peer motivational climate has been studied extensively in

youth sport, revealing clear links with character across a variety of different attributes. That is, ego-oriented peer motivational climates have been shown to hinder character, whereas task-oriented climates have been shown to promote character (e.g., Agans & Ettekal, 2018; Allen, 2003; Breiger, et al., 2015; Ettekal, et al., 2016; Miller, et al., 2005; Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005).

The peer motivational climate may also play an important moderating role. That is, the peer motivational climate may also explain whether and how athletes' contest orientation and moral disengagement are related. Preliminary empirical evidence suggests that contest orientation is related to moral disengagement (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2015). However, the role of contest orientation for moral disengagement may vary depending on the peer motivational climate. Relations between cognitions (i.e., contest orientation) and behaviors (i.e., moral disengagement) are likely to be strongest when the context (i.e., peer motivational climate) *aligns* with the athlete (i.e., contest orientation). Alignment occurs when character-promoting facets of the peer motivational climate (e.g., peers' task orientation) coalesce with character-promoting facets of contest orientation (e.g., partnership).

In sum, the evidence for whether sport promotes character is mixed. Moral disengagement warrants particular attention, given its links with a variety of indicators that diminish the character-promoting nature of sport – cheating, poor sportpersonship, etc. This thesis examines individual and contextual factors that are theorized to explain youth athletes' moral disengagement in sport, namely contest orientation and peer motivational climate, respectively. The overarching research question concerns the extent to which contest orientation and peer motivational climate each explain moral disengagement. A secondary question concerns whether relations between contest orientation and moral disengagement vary by peer

motivational climate. A third question was exploratory, in that it concerns if specific sport classifications interact with contest orientation and the peer motivational climate to explain moral disengagement among youth athletes.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF YOUTH CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1 Relational Developmental Systems Metatheory

Human development has historically been viewed through a reductionistic lens and explained by reducing variance into either nature (biology) or nurture (environment). A classic example of the reductionist approach to human development is the Five Factor Theory (FFT) (Costa, McCrae et al., 1980). The FFT posited that there were personality traits that were biologically predetermined. McCrae et al. (2000, pp. 175-176) asserted that “personality traits are more or less immune to environmental influences ... significant variations in life experiences have little or no effect on measured personality traits.” However, decades of research on the FFT has shown that personality traits can change well into adulthood (Horn & Weiss, 1991). In short, the FFT was theoretically misaligned with contemporary theories of human development.

In contrast to reductionist approaches, RDS metatheory explains the process of human development as systematic changes throughout the developmental system involving individuals and environments (Overton, 1973). In other words, development involves nature and nurture, which cannot be separated. From the RDS perspective, development occurs through coactions between an individuals and their multiple, nested contexts, represented as individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  context relations. The bidirectional arrow represents developmental regulations, the key process of development. RDS metatheory suggests that individuals and contexts are mutually influential, but not does not distinguish when individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  context relations promote positive youth development.

The PYD perspective suggests that positive development occurs when individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  context relations are mutually beneficial (i.e., the individual benefits the context and the context



supports the individual). Mutually beneficial individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  context relations are known as adaptive developmental regulations. Understanding adaptive developmental regulations is crucial during adolescence, a period of growth that comprises a myriad developmental changes. This thesis examines attributes of the individuals (e.g., athletes) and of the context (i.e., sport) that explain a character-related outcome in youth sport, namely moral disengagement.

## **2.2 Youth Character Development**

Several definitions of character have been put forth that differ in terms of their theoretical bases. From an RDS perspective, character is defined as “a specific set of mutually beneficial relations, that vary across ontogenetic time and contextual location (place), between person and context and, in particular, between the individual and other individuals that comprise his/her context” (Lerner & Callina, 2014, pp. 323-333). Thus, character is not only mutually beneficial individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  context relations, but also mutually beneficial individual  $\Leftrightarrow$  individual relations. As a developmental process, character involves individual’s (mutually beneficial) interactions with the context, as well as their interactions with the other individuals within the context.

Inherent in the concept of character and its theoretical roots is the notion of morality. Nucci (2017) presented a theoretical framework for character, derived from an RDS perspective, that expanded on the multifaceted nature of character. Nucci explained character as a multifaceted developmental system comprised of various facets of moral wellness. He defined moral wellness as the capacities necessary to contribute to a just world, which included attributes of moral engagement. Moral engagement is the capacity to enact behaviors on the basis of what is “right” or “wrong” *in a given context*. An important distinction between definitions of character derived from RDS metatheory versus other theories is the idea that character depends

on context. For example, other common perspectives, such as virtue theory (Carr, 2008), position character as a set of attributes that when enacted result in goodness regardless of context (e.g., honesty, fairness, etc.). RDS metatheory suggests that development varies by context and, thus, moral character is defined as the mutually beneficial ways in which individuals and contexts (and other individuals) coalesce to support the greater good.

### **2.3 Sports and Youth Character**

Youth sport is an instrumental context of youth character development (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). Sport is a particularly salient context for moral character because it is enacted in the context of a game where there are winners and losers. Game reasoning theory suggests that being in the context of a game causes some individuals to suspend moral standards for the sake of victory. The suspension of moral standards in games is often justified by the idea that “it’s just a game” and does not matter for everyday life. Bredemeier and Shields (1986) term the separation of sport from everyday life as “bracketed morality,” which is the justifiable, temporary release of moral obligation to consider the needs of others. Of course, all athletes do not enact bracketed morality. Game reasoning relies on the fact that there are several implicit moral agreements within sport, such that participants make the choice to take part in competition, the competition is within fair and equal conditions, each participant is striving to win, strategy will not conflict with other agreements, and there are spatial and temporal boundaries, and, outside of those boundaries, life will continue on as before. Thus, there are likely conditions that explain which athletes are more or less likely to enact bracketed morality and in which contexts.

Bracketed morality results in moral disengagement in sport, which is when athletes enact what they know and understand to be immoral behaviors (e.g., cheating, unfair play, poor sportsmanship), often for the purpose of winning. Justifying moral disengagement occurs through a variety of processes (Bandura, 1999), such as positioning one's self as privileged (e.g., "I deserved it"), shifting responsibility to others (e.g., "they made me"), causing minimal consequence (e.g., "nothing changed"), or blaming/dehumanizing the victim (e.g., "they deserved it"). Nevertheless, athletes who morally disengage maintain their self-regard through such game justifications (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007).

Game reasoning theory suggests that bracketed morality increases as competition increases, either as it relates to the athlete or the game. In highly competitive sports, athletes may adopt a "win-at-all-cost" mentality that causes them to focus narrowly on winning, even if it means violating the rules and regulations that govern the competition. Moreover, athletes who are focused on performance outcomes (e.g., winning) are more likely to use bracketed morality than athletes who are focused on mastery outcomes (e.g., self-improvement). Bracketed morality is a concern given the widespread "win-at-all-cost" culture that permeates youth sport into other contexts. The negative implications of high performance goal setting, or the "win-at-all-cost" mentality, may transcend sport into other aspects of American culture (Welsh, et al., 2020). This thesis examines individual and context factors that are theorized to matter for moral disengagement in sport.

### 3. CONTEST ORIENTATION AND PEER MOTIVATIONAL CLIMATE: ASSOCIATION AMONG YOUTH ATHLETES

#### 3.1 Contest Orientation

Contest orientation, which defines the way in which athletes conceptualize competitions, may be a central individual factor that explains moral disengagement. A competition is a contest, which is defined as “a specified task that allows for a winner to be determined based on luck, superior performance, or a combination of extrinsic factors and performance” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011, pg. 27). Athletes’ orientations toward contests can be visualized through two opposing metaphors: war vs. partnership. War orientation is the application of conceptualizing contest as war, meaning the contest embodies conflict that renders some winners and other losers. Partnership orientation is defined through the etymology of the word “competition”, meaning to “seek *with*” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). When an athlete enters into a contest using the partnership metaphor, her/she aims to help others to achieve shared goals whilst others help him/her achieve shared goals. Thus, each contest is an interdependent activity in which participants can benefit mutually through shared challenges. Phrases such as “they brought out the best in each other” and “they turn defeat into victory” highlight the partnership metaphor (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Through the use of the partnership metaphor, competition occurs in its intended nature (i.e., opponents strive together). Conversely, when athletes engage in contest with war mentalities, decompetition occurs (i.e., opponents strive against one another). The theoretical model underlying contest orientation (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011) does not offer propositions about the extent to which athletes vacillate between war and partnership orientations or whether they can simultaneously be oriented to both.

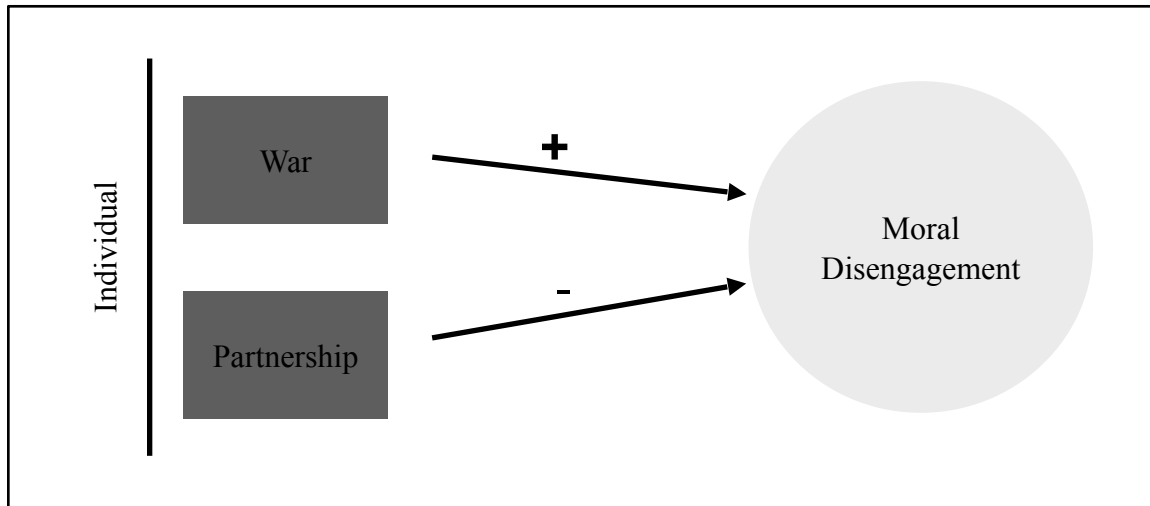
From a historical perspective, the war and partnership metaphors are prevalent in sport. On the one hand, many sports were derived from war and fighting. For example, the Egyptians used sport for military purposes. That is, sport was intended to preserve the fitness of the dominant classes and serve as propaganda to proclaim their power (Mandell, 1999). The “contest is war” metaphor is also prevalent throughout sport language and commentary, such as through phrases like “they drew first blood” or “this game is being won in the trenches” (Bredemeier & Shields, 2011). On the other hand, the Greeks used sport as a way to pay tribute to their fallen friends. As seen in Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles organizes an athletic contest to honor Patroclus, which exemplified cooperative play (Mandell, 1999). Theoretically, both the war metaphor and the partnership metaphor should matter for athletes’ moral disengagement (Shields et al., 2016).

The associations between contest orientation and moral disengagement have not been empirically tested, to our knowledge. However, associations between contest orientation and other, related attributes of moral character have been tested. For example, in a study of college athletes, contest orientation was a significant predictor of sportspersonship, controlling for moral disengagement. Findings suggested that partnership orientation positively predicted sportspersonship and war orientation negatively predicted sportspersonship (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2016). In another study of college athletes, contest orientation was associated with ethical judgements in sport competition, such that partnership orientation was associated with formalist thinking, emphasizing rules and principles of conduct, while war orientation was associated with consequentialist thinking, emphasizing the idea that the “ends justify the means” (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2016). In previous research, war orientation has aligned with lower levels of moral development, where as partnership orientation has aligned with higher

levels of moral development (Shields, Funk, & Bredemeier, 2016). As shown in Figure 1, we anticipate that war orientation will be associated with higher levels of moral disengagement, and partnership orientation will be associated with lower levels of moral disengagement.

**Figure 1.**

*Associations between Contest Orientation and Moral Disengagement.*



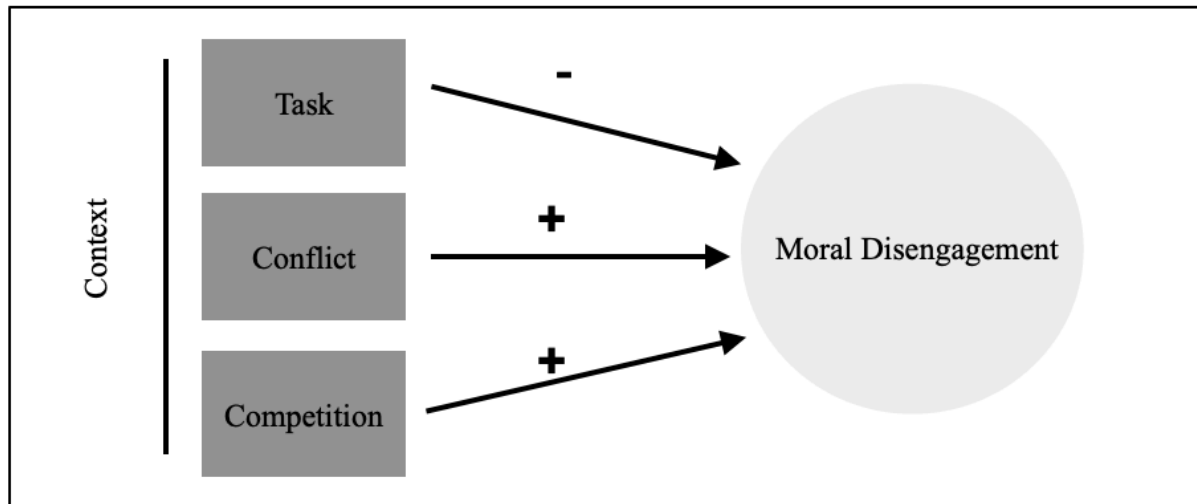
### 3.2 Peer Motivational Climate

The peer motivational climate of sport matters substantially for whether sport is a character-promoting or hindering context (Agans & Ettekal, 2018; Allen, 2003; Breiger, Cumming, Smith & Smoll, 2015; Ettekal, Ferris, Batanova, Syer, 2016; Miller, Roberts & Ommundsen, 2005; Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). Peer motivational climate refers to the “perceptions of situational motivational cues and expectations that encourage a particular goal orientation and, at a given point in time, induce a certain goal involvement state” (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005, pg. 433). The peer motivational climate is particularly important during

adolescence, a time when peers become progressively more important in regards to competence feedback (Horn & Weiss, 1991).

The peer motivational climate is comprised of two dimensions, task orientation and ego orientation (Vazou, et al., 2005). Ego-oriented climates emphasize performance (e.g., winning) and encourage social comparison, whereas task-oriented climates emphasize mastery (e.g., self-improvement). In previous research, task-oriented climates have been linked with more positive character outcomes than ego-oriented climates (Agans & Ettekal, 2018; Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Ettekal et al., 2016). Studies on moral character constructs suggest the same pattern. For example, ego-oriented peer climates were associated with a greater likelihood of athletes' intentionally injuring opponents than task-oriented climates (Miller, et al., 2003). Similarly, Boardley and Kavussanu (2009) found that task-oriented climates were associated with increased prosocial behavior and ego-oriented climates were associated with increased antisocial behavior. Our hypotheses, as shown in Figure 2, were guided by theory and previous empirical evidence. We expected that character-promoting facets of the peer motivational climate (i.e., peers' task orientation) will be negatively associated with moral disengagement and character-inhibiting facets of the peer motivational climate (i.e., intra-team conflict, intra-team competition) will be positively associated with moral disengagement.

**Figure 2.**  
*Associations between Peer Motivational Climate and Moral Disengagement.*



### 3.3 Peer Motivational Climate as a Moderator

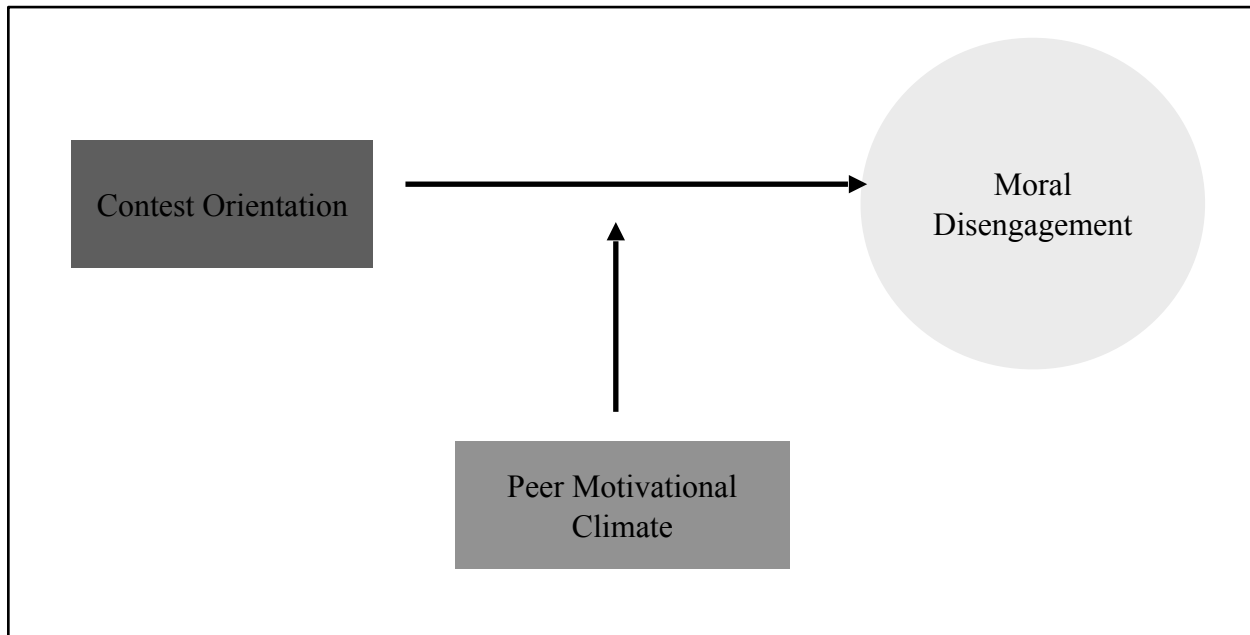
The peer motivational climate may also act as a moderator. That is, the association between athlete's contest orientation and moral disengagement may vary by the peer motivational climate. There is preliminary empirical evidence to suggest that contest orientation and moral disengagement are associated. However, whether those associations transcend context is an open question. Theoretically, relations between the individual (i.e., contest orientation) and the context (i.e., peer motivational climate) are strongest when the context and individual align. That is, when character-promoting facets of the peer motivational climate (e.g., peers' task orientation) coalesce with character-promoting facets of contest orientation (e.g., partnership) the associations with moral disengagement will be strongest. Similarly, when character-inhibiting facets of the peer motivational climate (e.g., intra-team competition, intra-team conflict) coalesce



with character-inhibiting facets of the individual (e.g., war), the associations with moral disengagement will be strongest.

**Figure 3.**

*Anticipated Interaction between Contest Orientation and Moral Disengagement Moderated by Peer Motivational Climate.*



### 3.4 Sport Classification

With the understanding that character development through sport is determined by a unique set of individual⇌context relations, it can be understood that these relations vary based on the nature of the context itself. The specificity principle states that a specific context with specific individuals at specific times moderate the domains of specific (developmental) processes (Bornstein, 2017). In accord with the specificity principle, the relationship between contest orientation and peer motivational climate likely depends on, or is moderated by, a number of factors, including the sport level (e.g., varsity vs. junior varsity), athlete’s gender, or the type of

sport (e.g., American football vs. soccer). These are included as an exploratory goal to further understand how these factors contribute to moral disengagement. There was not enough empirical evidence to support specific hypotheses related to these classifications, however, there is substantial evidence in the sport literature that these factors matter for athletes' sport experiences. Therefore, we pursue these factors as exploratory questions.

*Sport level.* As athletes progress up the competitive ladder, a more intense focus on individual achievement develops. At more competitive levels, the stakes for athletes to succeed and move on to the next level (i.e. college, professional, etc.) increase and, thus, peer motivational climate becomes less salient. Indeed, perfectionism is often salient in high stakes competitions, leading to more negative peer motivational climates. For example, in one empirical study, negative reactions to imperfection were associated with higher perceptions of intra-team conflict (Greblo, Barić, & Erpič, 2016). The competitive nature of the context likely affects the association between contest orientation and peer motivational climate.

*Athlete's gender.* It is often assumed that female athletes are a fairly new phenomenon. However, women have been participating in organized sport since as early as 1500 BC. It wasn't until 440 BC that men devised the first sex test to keep women out of the Olympic Games (Jarvie, 2006). Both male and female athletes are affected by peer motivational climates, but in different ways. As explained by Breiger, Cumming, Smith, and Smoll (2015), male and female youth athletes both respond positively to a mastery climate. However, males are more compatible with an ego orientation. Male youth athletes emphasize superiority and outdoing their teammates, whereas, female youth athletes emphasize positive and supportive relationships. Empirical research also suggests that male athletes justified cheating as a means to win more

than female athletes (Sheilds, Bredemeier, Gardner, & Bostrom, 1995; Gardner & Janelle, 2002; Guivernau & Duda, 2002).

*Sport type.* There are many different sports available in which youth can participate. The type of sport that youth participate in matters substantially as sports differ in the extent to which they teach and reinforce negative interpersonal attributes. For example, in the world of sport, there are several different levels of what is considered appropriate in terms of aggression. Aggression in sport has been defined as the intent to harm an opponent, either physically or mentally (Bandura, 1973, 1978; Bredemeier, 1985; Silva, 1983). In fact, there are several sports in which aggression is celebrated. In boxing, the most impressive victories are those in which the loser is rendered unconscious, and ice hockey designates players as “enforcers,” tasking them with aggressive play meant to intimidate their opponents (Parks & Tucker, 2001). Silva (1983) rendered sports into four categories: collision sports (e.g., American football, ice hockey, men’s lacrosse, and men’s and women’s rugby), contact sports (e.g., basketball, field hockey, soccer, wrestling, and women’s lacrosse), non-contact sports (e.g., baseball, softball, swimming, track and field, and volleyball), or a combination of two or more of these categories. In this thesis, we examine a collision sport (i.e., American football) and a contact sport (i.e., soccer) because that was what was available in the data.

### **3.5 Study Summary and Hypotheses**

Sports are the most prevalent out-of-school time activity for children and adolescents (Sabo & Veliz, 2008), although it could be seen as a controversial setting for character development. A character attribute particularly important in sport is moral disengagement. Perhaps even more so important is understanding the factors that explain athletes’ moral

disengagement. Theoretically, individual factors, as well as context factors matter for an athlete's character development. More importantly, RDS says that individual by context factors should matter most, in accordance with the specificity principle. We examine an individual factor (i.e., contest orientation) and a contextual factor (i.e., peer motivational climate) that matter for athletes' moral disengagement. More specifically, we examine how the association between the individual factor (i.e., contest orientation) and moral disengagement is moderated by the contextual factor (i.e., peer motivational climate). Each of these factors are multi-dimensional and have dimensions related to promoting character and related to inhibiting character in sport. In general, we expect that character-promoting factors (i.e., partnership orientation and peers' task orientation) should work together to diminish moral disengagement, where as character-inhibiting factors should work against character-promoting factors to increase moral disengagement in sport. More specifically, we test the following hypotheses:

### **Research Question 1**

Is there a main effect of athletes' contest orientation and athletes' perceptions of the peer motivational climate on athletes' moral disengagement in sport?

H<sub>1</sub>: There will be a main effect of contest orientation on moral disengagement, such that:

H<sub>1a</sub>: Partnership orientation will be negatively related to moral disengagement.

H<sub>1b</sub>: War orientation will be positively related to moral disengagement.

H<sub>2</sub>: There will be a main effect of peer motivational climate on moral disengagement, such that:

H<sub>2a</sub>: Task-oriented peer motivational climates will be negatively related to moral disengagement.

H<sub>2b</sub>: Intra-team competition will be positively related to moral disengagement.

H<sub>2c</sub>: Intra-team conflict will be positively related to moral disengagement.

## **Research Question 2**

Is there an interaction effect between athletes' contest orientations and athletes' perceptions of the peer motivational climate on athletes' moral disengagement in sport?

H<sub>3</sub>: There will be an interaction between contest orientation and peer motivational climate, such that:

H<sub>3a</sub>: The (negative) relations between partnership orientation and moral disengagement will become stronger as peers' task orientations increase.

H<sub>3b</sub>: The (negative) relations between partnership orientation and moral disengagement will become weaker as intra-team conflict and intra-team competition increase.

H<sub>3c</sub>: The (positive) relations between war orientation and moral disengagement will become weaker as peers' task orientations increase.

H<sub>3d</sub>: The (positive) relations between war orientation and moral disengagement will become stronger as intra-team conflict and intra-team competition increase.

## **Research Question 3**

Do the relations between contest orientation, peer motivational climate, and the interaction between contest orientation and peer motivational climate, with moral disengagement further vary by sport classification (i.e., gender, sport level, sport type)?

Hypotheses are not presented for sport classifications as this question was exploratory.

## 4. METHOD AND RESULTS

### 4.1 Method

The data for this study are derived from a larger evaluation study of Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a national nonprofit whose mission is to create positive, character-building youth sport contexts that result in “Better Athletes, Better People®” (Positive Coaching Alliance, 2020). PCA provides character development programming for coaches, parents, and youth athletes. The larger evaluation study was a three-year, longitudinal waitlist control design which tested the effectiveness of PCA programming. Within each year, three cohorts of athletes and coaches in specific sports were enrolled in the study across the fall (i.e., football, soccer), winter (i.e., indoor track, basketball), and spring (i.e., baseball/softball, tennis) sport seasons, respectively. Athletes and coaches were recruited from four schools in a large metropolitan area of the northeastern US. All four schools were selected based on their interest in PCA programming, but each school had no previous experience engaging with PCA. Two schools were assigned to receive PCA programming in the first year of the study, whereas two schools were assigned to wait until the second year of the study to receive PCA programming (i.e., control schools). In the third and final year of the study, all four schools received PCA programming and data were only collected in the fall sport season (due to funding limitations).

Athletes and coaches completed surveys at three time points: pre-season (within one week of team formation), post-season (within the final two weeks of the season and after any major competitions, such as regional tournaments), and follow-up (i.e., about three months after the season ended). The surveys included both quantitative (i.e., Likert-type items) and qualitative (i.e., open-ended questions) measures. Sport teams were convened in-person at pre- and post-

season to complete paper surveys at a central location (e.g., school cafeteria). Follow-up surveys were administered through a link to an electronic survey sent to athletes' email accounts.

This study uses data from the third year of the study because the primary constructs of interest were only included in the final year. Moreover, this study uses only quantitative data at pre-season because the primary research question did not concern the PCA intervention and there were limitations with the longitudinal data due to low participant retention. Constructs of interest (i.e., contest orientation, peer motivational climate) were only available in Fall of year three, resulting in a sample of 239 youth athletes.

### **Participants**

The sample was comprised of a total of 239 youth athletes. However, there were 2 incomplete questionnaires, resulting in missing data. For the purpose of this thesis, these two respondents were excluded from the data analysis. Of these 239 youth athletes, 180 were male and 57 were female. Of the 180 males, 30.6% of them were white, 28.9% were black/African American, 27.2% were Latinx/Hispanic, and 13.3% were other races. Of the 57 females, 45.6% of them were white, 14.0% were black/African American, 26.3% were Latinx/Hispanic, and 14.0% were other races. There were a total of 92 football players (all male) and 145 soccer players. Football players were primarily black/African American (52.1%) and soccer players were primarily white (42.1%) and Latinx/Hispanic (35.9%). There were a total of 67 junior varsity athletes and 142 varsity athletes.

### **4.2 Measures**

Athletes reported on several demographic variables, including their gender, race/ethnicity, and parents' education (i.e., high school degree or less, some college or bachelor's degree,

graduate degree), as well as descriptive information about their sport team (e.g., sport, level).

Athletes completed self-report surveys which included existing measures with established reliability and validity in other youth athlete samples. The measures, scales and subscales, and reliability information for the current study are presented below. Each measure was reported by athletes at pre-season.

The Moral Disengagement in Sports Scale (MDSS) was developed to bridge the gap between moral disengagement research in past contexts such as society, prisons, and schools, and sport research (Boardley, 2007). Using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the MDSS is best conceptualized as having six dimensions. These first-order factors include conduct reconstrual (8 items), advantageous comparison (4 items), nonresponsibility (8 items), distortion of consequences (4 items), dehumanization (4 items), and attribution of blame (4 items). This study only used the conduct reconstrual sub scale, resulting in a total of 8 items (e.g., “it is okay to be hostile to an opponent who has insulted your teammate/s”;  $\alpha = .65$ ; “it is okay for players to like to officials if it helps their team”;  $\alpha = .60$ ; “fouling an opponent is okay if it discourages him/her from injuring your teammates;  $\alpha = .74$ ; fighting is okay if it is done to protect a teammate”;  $\alpha = .68$ ; “injuring an opponent is a way of teaching him/her a lesson;  $\alpha = .69$ ; “bending the rules is a way of evening things up;  $\alpha = .68$ ; “acting aggressively is just a way of showing you are a tough opponent;  $\alpha = .69$ ; and “arguing with officials is a way of keeping them on their toes”;  $\alpha = .67$ ).

The Contesting Orientation Scale (COS) was designed to “assess individuals’ tendencies to use contest-is-partnership and contest-is-war conceptual metaphors (i.e., contesting orientations) when competing” (Shields, Funk & Bredemeier, 2015, pg 1). Contesting theory, the basis of COS, focuses on the cognitive framing in which the athlete finds meaning, purpose, and



value in competing. The COS contained 12 items which measured the extent to which athletes were oriented toward contests with the war and partnership metaphor. Partnership orientation measures whether an athlete enters into a contest with a goal orientation, or to better him/herself, team, or opponent (6 items; e.g., “when my opponents try hard to win, they are giving me something of value”;  $\alpha = .75$ ) Athletes with war orientations enter into a contest with the sole purpose of defeating their competition (6 items; e.g., “in sports, like in war, opponents stand between you and success”;  $\alpha = .71$ ).

Athletes reported on their perceptions of the peer motivational climate of their sport team using the Peer Motivational Climate in Youth Sport Questionnaire (PeerMCYSQ; Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). The PeerMCYSQ has five subscales, three of which comprise elements of task-oriented climates (i.e., improvement, relatedness support, effort) and two of which comprise elements of ego-oriented climates (i.e., intra-team competition, intra-team conflict). Prior studies using these data have established that the three task-orientation subscales loaded onto a single higher-order factor for peers’ task orientation, whereas the two ego-orientation subscales did not load onto a higher-order factor for ego orientation (Ettekal, Ferris, Batanova, & Syer, 2016). Therefore, three subscales were used in the current study and all items were reported on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). First, peers’ task orientation measured athlete’s perceptions of his/her teammates’ mastery focus, or their emphasis on self-improvement and personal skill development (12 items; e.g., “peers on this team help each other improve,” “peers on this team make their teammates feel valued,” “peers on this team encourage their teammates to try their hardest”;  $\alpha = .90$ ). Next, intra-team competition measured the degree to which athletes perceived his/her teammates’ focus on outperforming one another (5 items;

e.g., “peers on this team try to do better than their teammates”;  $\alpha=.78$ ). Finally, intra-team conflict measured athletes’ perceptions of negative interpersonal communication among his/her teammates (4 items; e.g., “peers on this team criticize their teammates when they make mistakes”;  $\alpha=.83$ ).

*Sport Classification.* Three variables were used in this study to classify sports, which were each reported by athletes in the demographic section of the survey: gender (female = 1, male = 0), sport level (varsity = 1, junior varsity = 0), and sport type (football =1, soccer = 0).

### **4.3 Analysis Plan**

Descriptive statistics were computed for all study measures to examine distributional properties. Bivariate correlations between all study measures were also examined. All analyses were conducted in SPSS v.23. Research questions were tested using hierarchical linear regression in multiple steps to examine variance explained in the outcome (i.e., moral disengagement) for each predictor (or set of predictors), above and beyond the predictor (or set of predictors) entered in the previous step. In each model, control variables were entered in Step 1, including gender, sport type, and sport level. Race/ethnicity was dropped as a control variable because it was small and non-significant in nearly all models. Age and/or grade was not included due to high multicollinearity with sport level (i.e., junior varsity athletes were almost exclusive 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, whereas varsity athletes were almost exclusively 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders); in the context of sport, the level (i.e., junior varsity or varsity) captures more developmental differences than age and/or grade. Main effects were entered in Steps 2 and 3 (i.e., contest orientation and peer motivational climate, respectively), and interactions were entered in Step 4. For parsimony, non-significant interaction terms were dropped from the models. Regressions were estimated

separately for each dimension of contest orientation (i.e., war and partnership) due to high multicollinearity. In all models, we included the sport classification variables as controls. Model specifications are described below for each research question.

### **Research Questions 1 and 2**

Research question 1 concerned main effects for two dimensions of contest orientation (i.e., war and partnership) and three dimensions of peer motivational climate (i.e., peers' task orientation, intra-team competition, intra-team conflict) and research question 2 concerned the interactions among them. Main effects and interactions were tested in the same model. Model 1a tested partnership orientation and Model 1b tested war orientation. In each model, 4 steps were included: Control variables (i.e., gender, sport type, sport level) were entered in Step 1, contest orientation (i.e., either partnership or war) was entered in Step 2, followed by peer motivational climate (i.e., peers' task orientation, intra-team competition, and intra-team conflict) in Step 3. Interaction terms (i.e., either partnership or war, with each dimension of peer motivational climate, for a total of 3 interaction terms in each model) were entered in Step 4. Predictors were centered prior to creating interaction terms. Significant interactions were probed using the SPSS Process Module (Hayes, 2017). The Process Module created centered interactions terms and then tested whether the association between the individual variable (i.e., war or partnership) and the context variable (i.e., task, intra-team conflict, or intra-team competition) varied at 1 standard deviation above the mean, at the mean, and at 1 standard deviation below the mean using simple slope tests.

### **Research Question 3**

Research question 3 concerned three-way interactions with the three sport classification variables (i.e., gender, sport type, sport level). Three-way interactions were tested by estimating the models described under research questions 1 and 2 (i.e., Models 1a and 1b) separately at each level of each dichotomous sport classification variable, for a total of 12 models: Model 2a (female); Model 2a (male); Model 2b (female); Model 2b (male); Model 3a (soccer); Model 3a (football); Model 3b (soccer); Model 3b (football); Model 4a (junior varsity); Model 4a (varsity); Model 4b (junior varsity); and Model 4b (varsity). In each model, the non-focal sport classification variables were retained as control variables, with one exception; gender and sport type were not included in the same models due to lack of variation within football players (i.e., they were all male). Due to testing interactions in separate models, results could be compared across groups.

### **4.4 Results**

Demographics and descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. As shown in Table 2, all correlations among study variables were in the expected direction, with one exception. That is, contrary to our expectations, there was a positive and statistically significant correlation between athletes' war orientations and their perceptions of their peers' task orientations. Next, we present the results which correspond to our three main research questions. Research questions 1 and 2 were tested in the same model and, thus, results of these two questions are presented in the same section. The final section presents results for research question 3.

## Research Questions 1 and 2

Research questions 1 and 2 tested whether contest orientation (i.e., partnership and war), peer motivational climate (i.e., peers' task orientations, intra-team competition, intra-team conflict), and the interactions among contest orientation and peer motivational climate, explained athletes' moral disengagement. We first present the results for Model 1a (i.e. partnership orientation) and then for Model 1b (i.e., war orientation).

**Model 1a.** A hierarchical linear regression with predictors entered in 4 steps (i.e. controls, partnership orientation, peer motivational climate factors, interaction terms, respectively) had good fit to the data ( $F(201) = 4.89, p < .001$ ). Above and beyond the control variables, partnership orientation explained an additional 0.1% of variance, peer motivational climate explained an additional 6.8%, and the interaction terms explained an additional 3.1% of variance in moral disengagement. Standardized regression coefficients are presented in Table 3 under Model 1a.

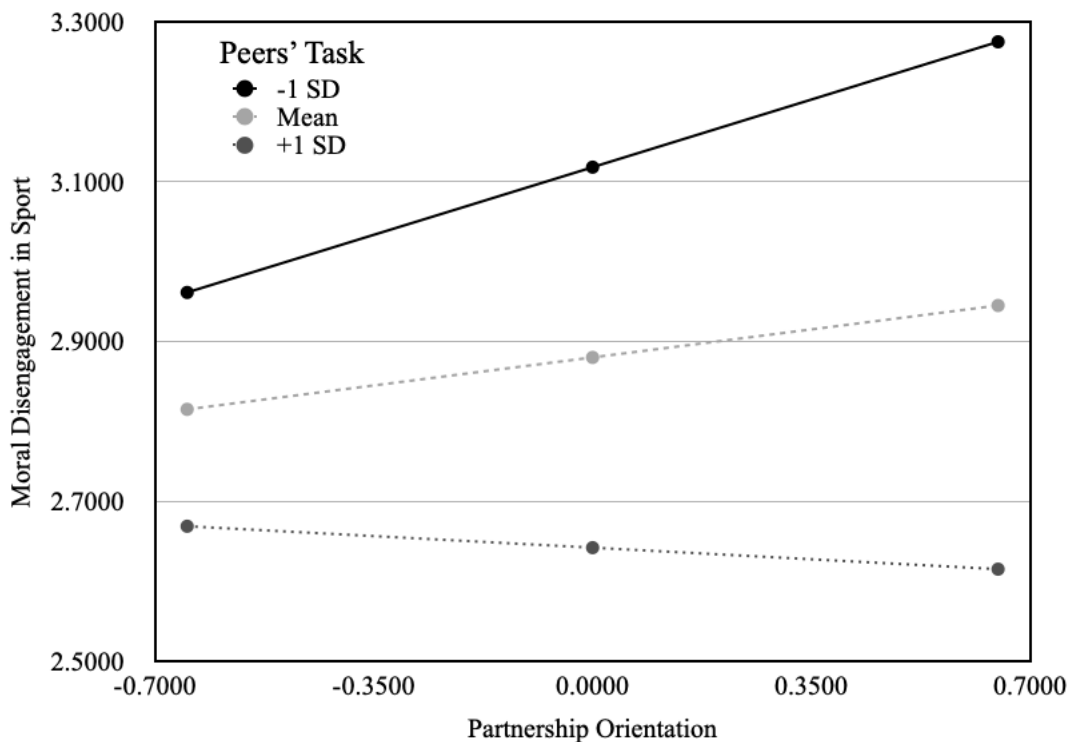
In terms of main effects (i.e., research question 1), partnership orientation had a positive, albeit small and non-significant, association with moral disengagement. Among the peer climate factors, peers' task orientation and intra-team conflict each had a small and statistically significant association with moral disengagement, but in opposite directions, as expected. That is, peers' task was negatively associated with moral disengagement, whereas intra-team conflict was positively associated with moral disengagement; intra-team competition did not have a statistically significant association with moral disengagement.

In terms of interactions (i.e., research question 2), 1 of 3 interactions between partnership orientation and the peer climate factors was statistically significant. That is, there was a

significant interaction between partnership orientation and peers' task orientation ( $\beta = -.19, p = .03$ ). Simple slopes suggested that the association between partnership orientation and peers' task orientations was significant at 1 SD below the mean of peers' task orientations ( $t = 2.24, p = .03$ ), but non-significant at the mean or 1 SD above the mean ( $t = .97, p = .33; t = -.34, p = .74$ , respectively). As shown in Figure 4, in the context of peers with higher than average task orientations, increases in partnership orientation were associated with increases in moral disengagement. In the context of peers with average or lower than average task orientations, partnership orientation was not associated with moral disengagement.

**Figure 4.**

*Interaction between Partnership Orientation and Peers' Task on Moral Disengagement*



In sum, results supported some hypotheses, did not support others, and produced contrary findings for one hypothesis. Among the main effect hypotheses (i.e., Hypothesis 1a, 2a, 2b, and

2c), two were supported, namely 2a (peers' task orientation was negatively associated with moral disengagement) and 2c (intra-team conflict was positively associated with moral disengagement). Among the interaction hypotheses (i.e., Hypothesis 3a and 3b), there was a significant interaction, but in the opposite direction than we expected (partnership orientation was *positively* associated with moral disengagement when peers' task orientation was below average).

**Model 1b.** A hierarchical linear regression with predictors entered in 4 steps (i.e. controls, war orientation, peer motivational climate factors, interaction terms, respectively) had good fit to the data ( $F(201) = 5.43, p < .001$ ). Above and beyond the control variables, war orientation explained an additional 1.6% of variance, peer motivational climate explained an additional 9.1%, and the interaction terms explained an additional 1.7% of variance in moral disengagement. Standardized regression coefficients are presented in Table 3 under Model 1b.

In terms of main effects (i.e., research question 1), war orientation had a positive and significant association with moral disengagement, albeit the effect was small in size. Among the peer motivational climate factors, peers' task orientation and intra-team competition each had a negative association with moral disengagement, but only the former was statistically significant (albeit small in size). Intra-team conflict had a negative association with moral disengagement that was non-significant and small in size.

In terms of interactions (i.e., research question 2), 0 of 3 interactions between war orientation and the peer motivational climate factors were statistically significant. That is, the association between war orientation and moral disengagement did not vary by the peer motivational climate.

In sum, results supported 2 of 6 hypotheses related to war orientation. Among the main effect hypotheses (i.e., Hypothesis 1b, 2a, 2b, and 2c), two were supported, namely 1b (war orientation was positively associated with moral disengagement) and 2a (peers' task orientation was negatively associated with moral disengagement). None of the interaction hypotheses (i.e., Hypothesis 3c and 3d) were supported.

### **Research Question 3**

An exploratory goal was to test whether there was a three-way interaction between contest orientation, peer motivational climate, and three sport classification variables that have been linked to youth character, namely gender, sport type (i.e., football versus soccer), and sport level (i.e., junior varsity versus varsity). Tests were exploratory to help understand group differences on the associations between variables (i.e., via interaction terms and models estimated separately by group).

For each sport classification variable, we explain the regression models testing three-way interactions. We focus our presentation of the three-way interactions on results that differed from the overall models presented in the preceding section. The hierarchical linear regressions are presented in Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3, for gender, sport type, and sport level, respectively.

**Gender.** Four regression models, estimating the partnership and war orientation models separately for males and females, tested three way interactions (i.e., Models 2a and 2b in Table 5.1). The female-only models did not fit the data well (see bottom row of Table 4.1) and, thus, we did not interpret the coefficients in these two models. This means that the variables tested in this mode (contest orientation and peer motivational climate) did not appropriately explain variance among moral disengagement in female youth athletes. Of note, because the female



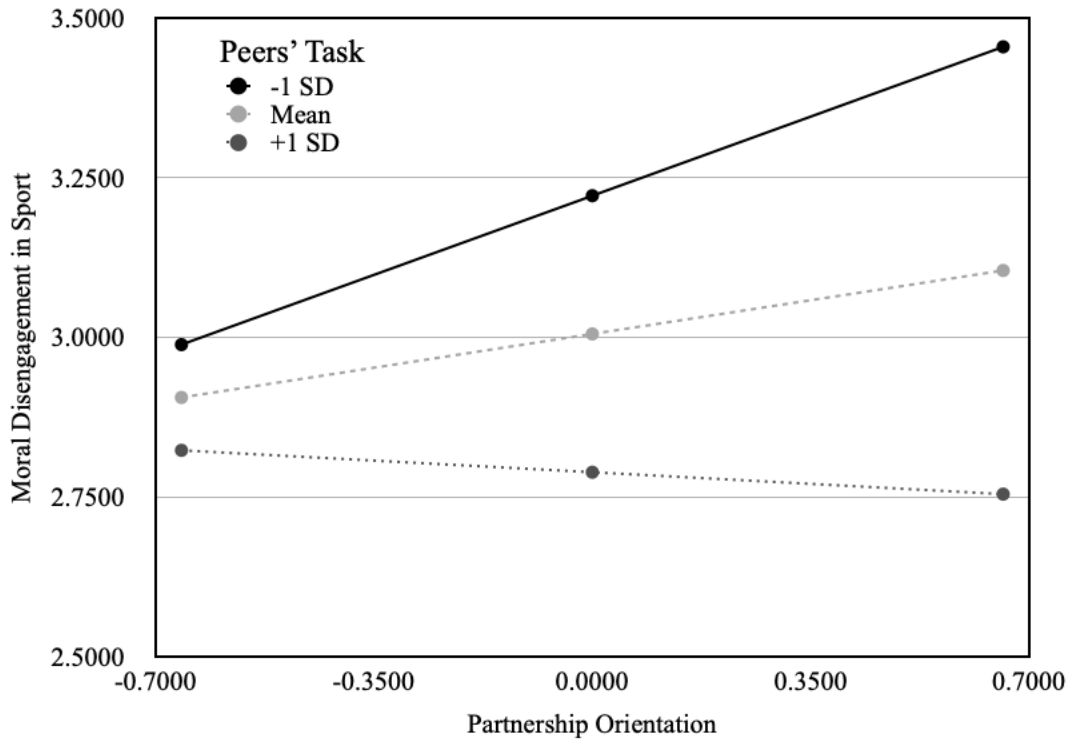
models did not fit the data well, we could not test for three-way interactions among contest orientation, peer motivational climate, and gender. We did, however, interpret the male-only models because they had good fit to the data; we focus on differences between the male-only model and the overall model, which might suggest whether effects are pronounced (or faint) among the sub-population of males.

The male-only models produced coefficients that had similar directions, sizes, and significance levels as the overall models, with one exception. The association between intra-team conflict and moral disengagement was positive and significant in the overall models, but became statistically non-significant in the male-only models.

The results for the interactions were similar across the overall model and the male-only model, such that 1 of 3 interactions was significant, namely between partnership orientation and peers' task orientation ( $\beta = -.26, p = .001$ ). Simple slopes suggested that the pattern of the interaction was similar across the overall and the male-only model: the relation between partnership orientation and moral disengagement was significant at 1 SD below the mean of peers' task orientation ( $t = 2.83, p = .01$ ), but non-significant at the mean or at 1 SD above the mean ( $t = 1.30, p = .19; t = -.37, p = .71$ ). As shown in Figure 5, in the context of peers with lower than average task orientations, increases in partnership orientation were associated with increases in moral disengagement. In the context of peers with average or higher than average task orientations, partnership orientation was not associated with moral disengagement. The only notable difference between the overall model and the male-only model was the strength of the coefficient, which suggested that the interaction between partnership orientation and peers' task orientation was pronounced for males.

**Figure 5.**

*Interaction between Partnership Orientation and Peers' Task on Moral Disengagement for Male Athletes.*



**Sport Type.** Four regression models, estimating the partnership and war orientation models separately for football and soccer players, tested three way interactions (i.e., Models 3a and 3b in Table 5.2). The football-only models had good fit to the data, however, the soccer-only models did not fit the data well (see bottom row of Table 5.2). This means that the variables tested in this mode (contest orientation and peer motivational climate) did not appropriately explain variance among moral disengagement in youth soccer players. Similar to the models described above regarding gender, we interpret the football-only models, but could not test for three-way interactions among contest orientation, peer motivational climate, and sport type.

Results of the football-only models were similar to the overall model with three notable exceptions. First, the association between war orientation and moral disengagement became very small and non-significant in the football-only model (compared to a nearly medium-sized effect that was statistically significant in the overall model). Second, the association between peers' task orientation and moral disengagement was similar in direction (negative) and size (nearly medium) in the football-only and overall models, except the coefficients were not statistically significant in the football-only model (perhaps suggesting there was limited power to detect the effect). Third, the association between intra-team conflict and moral disengagement was similar in direction (positive) and size (small) in the football-only and overall models, except the coefficients were not statistically significant in the football-only model. There were no significant interaction terms (i.e., the interaction between partnership orientation and peers' task orientation that emerged in the overall model was non-significant in the football-only model).

***Sport Level.*** Four regression models, estimating the partnership and war orientation models separately for varsity and junior varsity athletes, tested three way interactions (i.e., Models 4a and 4b in Table 5.3). All models fit the data well (see bottom row of Table 4.3). The pattern of coefficients was largely similar across junior varsity and varsity models, but there were two notable differences. First, the association between war orientation and moral disengagement varied across sport level, such that the positive association was stronger (and statistically significant) for junior varsity compared to varsity athletes (for which the effect was small and non-significant). Second, the association between peers' task orientation and moral disengagement varied across sport level, such that the negative association was stronger (and statistically significant) for junior varsity compared to varsity athletes (for which the effect was

small and non-significant); the association was also notably large in size for junior varsity athletes (i.e.,  $-.74$  and  $-.64$  for the partnership and war orientation models, respectively). Taken together, these findings suggest that the role of war orientation and peers' task orientation for moral disengagement was more pronounced for younger athletes who participated in less competitive leagues compared to their older peers who participated in more competitive leagues.

There were no significant interaction terms (i.e., the interaction between partnership orientation and peers' task orientation that emerged in the overall model was non-significant in the junior varsity or varsity models), suggesting that there were no three-way interactions among contest orientation, peer motivational climate and sport level.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Although sport is one of the most prevalent OST activities for adolescents (Sabo & Veliz, 2008), its role in promoting character development has been debated across disciplines, including developmental science (Agans & Ettekal, 2018; Kwan et al., 2014), sports psychology (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007; Bredemeier, 1985; Lee et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2005; Shields et al., 2016), and exercise science (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Pennington, 2017). From the RDS perspective, development is defined as coactions between individuals and contexts, and character, in particular, is extended to emphasize coactions between individuals with other individuals (Lerner & Callina, 2014; Nucci, 2017). Moral disengagement is one character attribute that is especially important in youth sport ecologies. This thesis examined context factors (i.e., dimensions of the peer motivational climate) and individual factors (i.e., dimensions of contest orientation) that were theorized to explain youth athletes' moral disengagement. Overall, findings suggested that some aspects of the peer motivational climate and some aspects of athletes' contest orientation each explained high school athletes' moral disengagement. However, contrary to expectations, the association between athletes' contest orientations and moral disengagement, largely did not vary by the peer motivational climate. In short, theory-informed individual and context factors explained athletes' moral disengagement, as hypothesized. However, tests of the specificity principle (Bornstein, 2017) were not supported: individual factors mattered the same for moral disengagement regardless of context.

### **5.1 Specificity in Athletes' Moral Disengagement**

Research questions were guided by the specificity principle (Bornstein, 2017), which suggests that development is explained by the specific individual, in the specific context, and at a

specific time (Lerner & Callina, 2014). In line with the specificity principle, analyses tested the extent to which main effects of contest orientation and peer motivational climate, as well as the interaction between them, explained moral disengagement. This section is organized by a discussion of the individual factors (i.e., contest orientation), followed by the context factors (i.e., peer motivational climate), and then the interaction between them, focusing on their roles in youth athletes' moral disengagement

**Contest orientation.** Contest orientation was introduced in the literature in recent years and is theorized to be a determining factor in whether sport promotes or inhibits athletes' moral development (Shields, et al., 2015). The contest orientation construct is multi-dimensional and includes war orientation, which is based on the idea that athletes enter into competition with the sole goal of defeating their opponents, and partnership orientation, which is based on the idea that athletes enter into competition with a shared goal of improving themselves, their opponents, and their sport. The theoretical model underlying contest orientation (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011) does not offer propositions about the extent to which athletes vacillate between war and partnership orientations or whether they can simultaneously be oriented to both. Shields and colleagues (2016) found a weak, but statistically significant, positive correlation ( $r = .22$ ) between war and partnership orientation; in the present study, the correlation between war and partnership orientation was also positive, but much stronger ( $r = .62$ ). An important difference between the present research and Shields' and colleagues' research is the developmental period under investigation. Shields' and colleagues research was among college athletes, whereas the present research concerned high school athletes. Thus, the differences in the covariation between war and partnership orientation may be developmental. Across the life span, development

becomes increasingly differentiated. Thus, one possible explanation is that older athletes invoke more differentiated metaphors about contests (e.g., clear distinctions between war and partnership metaphors) than younger athletes (e.g., who have blended conceptions of the war-partnership metaphors). Future research should include developmental studies that investigate questions concerning contest orientation within developmental periods, as well as differences across developmental periods.

How athletes approach competitions, and the metaphors they invoke, matter for their moral development (Shields et al., 2016). War orientation and partnership orientation were each hypothesized to matter for moral disengagement, but in different directions. Theoretically, increases in war orientation should be associated with increases in moral disengagement; conversely, increases in partnership orientation should be associated with *decreases* in moral disengagement. One explanation for the negative implications of invoking the war metaphor is that it dehumanizes and depersonalizes the opposition, which presents opportunity for bracketed morality. In other words, when athletes do not *care for* their opponents, it is easy to justify immoral acts for the sake of the game. Another explanation is that the war metaphor invokes a "win-at-all-cost" mentality. When the idea of war is invoked, victory (at any cost) tends to dominate an athlete's consciousness, which, again, presents opportunity for bracketed morality (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Contrary to war, the partnership metaphor has positive implications for moral development. The metaphor of a partnership invokes notions of caring, concern, and appreciation for the opponent. When the opponent is elevated to the level of partner, then moral engagement becomes imperative.

The present study had mixed findings, such that increases in war orientation were, indeed, associated with increases in moral disengagement. However, partnership orientation was not associated with moral disengagement. Findings support the idea that athletes' contest orientations explain their moral disengagement, *to some extent*. A possible interpretation concerns a distinguishing characteristics of the two dimensions of contest orientation: one is strengths-based (i.e., partnership) and the other is deficit-focused (i.e., war). In turn, findings suggest that focusing on deficit reduction might be warranted in sport, at least in terms of the metaphors youth athletes invoke about the competition.

**Peer Motivational Climate.** Peer motivational climate refers to the perceptions of the norms and expectations within a team to encourage a task or ego goal orientation (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). The peer motivational climate comprises multiple dimensions, one which has been linked with positive character outcomes (i.e., peers' task orientation) (Shields et al., 2015; Shields et al., 2016) and two which have been found to inhibit character (i.e., intra-team competition and conflict) (Shields et al., 2015; Shields et al., 2016). Findings from the present study suggested that two dimensions of the peer motivational climate were associated with moral disengagement: peers' task orientation and intra-team conflict.

As hypothesized, increases in peers' task orientation were associated with decreases in moral disengagement. This information is important for sport practitioners because it suggests that interventions can be implemented at the team level. According to Fry et al. (2012), adolescent athletes need to spend time in nurturing environments where they feel safe, respected, and supported by one another. Interventions to create more caring climates have been effective to promote character in youth sport (Brown & Fry, 2015; Newton et al., 2007). Similarly,



interventions focused on promoting the *team's* task orientation, may be effective to decrease athletes' moral disengagement.

Interestingly, intra-team conflict was also associated with moral disengagement, but only in models which also accounted for variance explained by partnership orientation. In the models which also accounted for variance explained by war orientation, the association between intra-team conflict and moral disengagement was non-significant. This mixed finding might be due to multi-collinearity between war orientation and intra-team conflict. Although the correlation between war orientation and intra-team conflict was not substantial in the present data ( $r = .27$ ), the potential for multi-collinearity makes conceptual sense. That is, the war metaphor dehumanizes the opponent, but it is plausible that those tendencies transfer within the team. In short, teammates may easily become part of the "war" which would inherently lead to conflict within the team. An interesting avenue for future research could be to explore causality between war orientation and intra-team conflict. Theoretically, war orientation is about destroying and dehumanizing your opponent, but is there something about that mentality that causes conflict within the team, as well? Conversely, is there something about being in a conflictual environment that causes athletes to view the opponent from a war metaphor?

An interesting finding was that intra-team competition was not associated with moral disengagement. We interpret this null finding with caution (i.e., recognizing that null findings do not prove the relation does not exist). However, in the context of theory and empirical evidence, there may be some credence to the idea that competition is not necessarily detrimental for character development. The Latin root of "competition" is "to strive *with*" or "to seek *together*" (Bredemeier & Shields, 2011). Thus, competition, if viewed strictly through its

etymology, is necessarily character-promoting. Empirically, links between competition and character have been mixed. For example, Greblo et al., (2016) found that intra-team competition increased some character-promoting attributes (e.g., perfectionism), but not others (e.g., negative reactions to imperfections). Findings from this study further complicate the research base, such that competition was non-consequential for character development. Future research is needed to examine how contest orientation extends beyond how athletes approach competition in regards to opponents to include how athletes approach competition in regards to their teammates (i.e., striving *against* or striving *with* their teammates).

**Testing the specificity principle.** Tests of the specificity principle helped to understand the extent to which individual factors and context factors, or interactions between them explained youth athletes' moral disengagement. Overall, findings largely supported that the interactions between the individual and context factors examined in this study did not explain a significant portion of variance in moral disengagement. However, individual and context factors had significant main effects, when lends practical insight for youth sport practitioners and interventions. These findings inform the level of specificity necessary for interventions. Findings suggest that tailoring interventions to specific individuals within specific contexts may not be necessary. Instead, interventions can target specific athletes (i.e., those with high war orientations) regardless of their teams, or specific teams (e.g., those with low task-oriented motivational climates) regardless of the athletes who comprise.

There was one instance in which the interaction of individual by context factors explained moral disengagement. The interaction should be interpreted with caution (given that it was one of six potential interaction tests), however, the findings are worth noting. Increases in

partnership orientation were associated with increases in moral disengagement (contrary to expectations), but only in the context of peers with lower than average task orientations. Although there was no significant main effect of partnership orientation, findings suggest that in certain contexts (i.e., low task-oriented motivational climates), it may be particularly important. Without a positive peer motivational climate (below average peers' task orientation), even seemingly positive individual attributes (partnership orientation) may inhibit moral development in sport, thus suggesting that peer motivational climates may act as risk factors. That is, if peer motivational climates are not positive, positive individual attributes diminish, leading to an increase in moral disengagement.

## **5.2 Sport Classifications: An Exploration of Specificity in Character**

Sport classifications provide further specificity by testing three-way interactions. We added a level of specificity by exploring the predominant ways in which sports are classified in American high schools: gender (i.e., male versus female), sport type (i.e., football versus soccer), and sport level (i.e., junior varsity versus varsity), all of which have been linked to adolescent character development. Using interaction terms, we tested whether and how these classifications mattered specifically for moral disengagement in sport. Exploratory analyses yielded findings that informed the potential specificity (e.g., tailoring) necessary for effective interventions. Although few three-way interactions were present, findings reveal the nuanced interrelations among contest orientation, peer motivational climate, and sport classification; different patterns which explain inter-individual differences in moral disengagement.

*Gender.* Given that sport has historically catered towards male athletes (Jarvie, 2006), the ways in which male and female athletes approach sport and team environments differs

immensely. Interestingly, the female-only models did not fit the data well. One explanation for the difference in model fit across genders might be the gender stereotyped, and particularly male-stereotyped, nature of sport (Plaza & Bioche, 2017). Contest orientation may be gender-stereotyped, as well, such that war metaphors are more relevant to males and partnership metaphors are more relevant to females. Moreover, adolescence is ripe with developmental differences in interpersonal processes: female adolescents are more susceptible to peers, tend to be more caring toward peers, and have closer relationships than males; male adolescents tend to be concerned with performance and place less emphasis on interpersonal relationships than females (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). More research is needed to test gender invariance on contest orientation, particularly among adolescent athletes.

Another line of future research might be to consider what constructs are more or less important for females versus males in explaining moral disengagement. Due to poor model fit, we were unable to interpret female findings. According to the gender intensification hypothesis, socialization of traditional gender roles intensifies across adolescence (Klaczynski, Felmban, & Kole, 2020). Especially in a highly gender stereotyped context, such as sport, then, it may be that the individual and context factors that explain adolescent athletes' moral development differ for males and females. Our data support that contest orientation is viable route to explore in explaining male athletes' moral development in sport. If contest orientation does not explain moral disengagement for female athletes, then other constructs must be explored. Possible constructs of interest for explaining female athlete character development might focus on relational or interpersonal attributes as females place emphasis on positive and supportive relationships (Brieger et al., 2015).

*Sport Type.* Youth sports are classified by type, including degree of contact among players, extent of physical impact among players (i.e., collision sports, such as football), or particular forms of physical contact, such as combat sports (e.g., martial arts). The varying levels of aggression within different sport types have been linked to character in the past, namely the two types (i.e., contact versus collision) used in this study. Two interesting findings emerged in the analyses examining sport type. First, the soccer-only models did not fit the data well, suggesting that these constructs (i.e., contest orientation and peer motivational climate) did not do well to explain soccer (a contact/non-collision sport) players' moral disengagement. Second, although the football-only models fit the data well, contest orientation and peer motivational climate explained a very small percentage of variance in moral disengagement. These findings should be interpreted with caution given the relatively low samples sizes of the groups, especially of football players. It is possible the null findings in the football-only models were due to lack of statistical power. Future research should explore multiple different sport types to determine if there are, in fact, associations between sport type and moral disengagement. Examples of varying sport types include martial arts (due to encouragement of physical contact and rooted in virtue), non-traditional sports such as polo, and sports that makeup a specific subculture, such as roller derby.

*Sport Level.* We suspect there may be both a developmental effect of sport level, as well as an effect based on the level of competition in regards to moral disengagement among athletes. In settings with higher competition, athletes utilize bracketed morality to justify immoral acts (Bredemeier & Shields, 1985), lending us to believe that more competitive sport levels (varsity) will be linked with high moral disengagement than less competitive sport levels (junior varsity).

The models testing for differences across sport levels were the only models, among the sport classification tests, that had good model fit across both groups (i.e., junior varsity and varsity), thus enabling tests of three-way interactions. Although no three-way interactions emerged, there were several two-way interactions. Findings suggested that there were two instances in which the associations between contest orientation (i.e., war orientation) and peer motivational climate (i.e., peers' task orientation) with moral disengagement were stronger for junior varsity compared to varsity athletes. That is, the *detrimental* effect of war orientation and the *beneficial* effect of peers' task orientation on moral disengagement was pronounced among younger athletes.

We did not include age as a variable, as it covaried with sport level (i.e., varsity athletes were older and junior varsity athletes were younger). The findings on contest orientation, namely war, can be interpreted by differences in cognitive and emotional development (Steinberg, 2010). Findings suggest that junior varsity athletes may be more sensitive to individual and context factors than varsity athletes, meaning that war is more consequential (i.e., translate into moral disengagement) for young compared to older athletes. In regards to contest orientation, older athletes possess higher cognitive processing skills (Steinberg, 2010), and therefore may be able to have a war orientation without it translating to moral disengagement. Younger athletes' abstract thinking, however, is not as well developed, allowing war orientation to translate into moral disengagement. The findings on peer climate, however, can be interpreted as differences in social development, more specifically, younger athletes are more susceptible to peers than older athletes, therefore explaining the stronger association with peers' task for junior varsity athletes than for varsity athletes (Visconti, Ladd, & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2015).

### 5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study was among the first, to our knowledge, to examine youth athletes' contest orientations and how they mattered for moral disengagement. Findings from this study contributed to our understanding of character development in sport, particularly of the interplay of individual and contextual factors, however, there are a few limitations worth noting. First, there were limitations in the sample itself. This study was constrained to the fall sport season and included only football and soccer. Football is classified as a collision/contact/team sport and soccer is classified as a non-collision/contact/team sport. There was no representation from combat, non-contact or individual sports in these data. Second, gender was confounded with sport type, leaving female athletes only playing one sport (soccer), leaving very little representation of female athletes. Future research should expand on this study to include combat team sports (e.g., boxing, wrestling), non-contact team sports (e.g., baseball/softball, volleyball), as well as team sports where athletes compete as individuals (e.g., gymnastics, swimming). While these classifications have been linked with a variety of different outcomes in sports, they have not been examined extensively in terms of how they matter for character. Findings also are specific to only soccer players and football players, with limited female representation. Future research is needed to expand upon the current study in order to generalize findings across youth sports as a whole.

The research design also had important limitations. First, this study used cross-sectional data. Therefore, developmental changes over time could not be tested. Replication studies using longitudinal data would grant researchers a greater understanding of developmental changes from childhood (e.g., peewee, coach pitch, little league, etc.) to early/late adolescence, and so

forth. By being able to observe developmental changes across the lifespan, practitioners would be able to recognize what points in a youth's athletic career are most vulnerable for character development. Another future direction is to examine how athletes' contest orientations, as well as their perceptions of the peer motivational climate, change across the competitive season (i.e., pre-season, mid-season, post-season, after season). The second limitation is that we were unable to draw conclusions about causality. Therefore, we cannot determine whether contest orientation and peer motivational climate caused moral disengagement in sport, or vis versa. Additionally, data were only collected at one point in time in the season, namely pre-season. It is unclear at what point in the season these constructs are most salient or if and how they change during or after a sport season. More research is needed to understand the time scale of moral disengagement in sport and how it links with salient time points in the sport context. Lastly, due to very limited empirical evidence on the contest orientation measure, more measurement work is needed to test invariance across genders, sports, and developmental periods, to establish reliability and validity among different sport classifications.

Future research using advanced modeling is needed to further the findings from this study. One such limitation is that athletes are nested within groups. Future research should use multi-level modeling to account for variance at the team-level. Another future directions would be to expand upon three-way interactions to include multi-group modeling to allow for statistical comparisons across groups. Lastly, latent variance modeling should be used to better account for measurement error.



## **5.4 Conclusion**

Ultimately, this study led to a greater understanding of the degree of specificity needed to explain moral disengagement in youth sport. We learned that there are several instances in which specificities at the individual or the context level explains moral disengagement but only a few instances in which individual by context specificity explained moral disengagement. There weren't any instances in which individual by context by classification explained moral disengagement. This study is beneficial to youth sport practitioners in that it helps to understand the level of specificity and tailoring necessary in interventions.

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APPENDIX A

**Table 1**  
*Sample Demographics*

	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Sport</i>		<i>Level</i>		<i>Overall sample</i>
	<i>Males</i> ( <i>n</i> =180)	<i>Females</i> ( <i>n</i> =57)	<i>Football</i> ( <i>n</i> =92)	<i>Soccer</i> ( <i>n</i> =145)	<i>Junior Varsity</i> ( <i>n</i> =67)	<i>Varsity</i> ( <i>n</i> =142)	
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>							
White/European American (%)	30.6	45.6	21.7	42.1	17.9	44.4	33.9
Black/African American (%)	28.9	14.0	52.1	7.6	28.3	25.4	25.1
Latinx/Hispanic (%)	27.2	26.3	15.2	35.9	32.8	21.4	27.6
Other/multi-racial/multi-ethnic (%)	13.3	14.0	10.9	14.5	20.9	8.5	13.4
<i>Parents' education</i>							
High school degree or less (%)	41.0	35.1	37.8	42.1	46.2	34.5	40.1
Some college or bachelor's degree (%)	46.7	49.1	51.1	43.4	40.0	52.1	46.8
Graduate degree (%)	11.8	14.0	11.1	13.1	13.8	12.0	12.2
<i>Level</i>							
Junior varsity (%)	33.7	25.0	32.6	31.7	-	-	32.1
Varsity (%)	66.3	75.0	67.4	68.3	-	-	67.9
<i>Contest Orientation</i>							
War Orientation <i>M(SD)</i>	3.49 (.73)	3.26 (.68)	3.49 (.73)	3.40 (.71)	3.41 (.80)	3.44 (.66)	3.43 (.72)
Partnership Orientation <i>M(SD)</i>	3.57 (.66)	3.67 (.58)	3.58 (.67)	3.59 (.63)	3.59 (.66)	3.60 (.65)	3.59 (.64)
<i>Peer Motivational Climate</i>							
Peers' Task <i>M(SD)</i>	3.75 (.73)	3.94 (.71)	3.69 (.76)	3.85 (.71)	3.81 (.81)	3.76 (.73)	3.79 (.73)
Intra-team Competition <i>M(SD)</i>	3.71 (.74)	3.29 (.72)	3.67 (.74)	3.56 (.76)	3.68 (.86)	3.59 (.73)	3.61 (.75)
Intra-team Conflict <i>M(SD)</i>	3.13 (.95)	2.43 (.84)	3.23 (.99)	2.79 (.92)	2.76 (1.02)	3.07 (.96)	2.97 (.97)

**Table 2**  
*Correlations for Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Female	-								
2. Soccer	.45**	-							
3. Varsity	.08	.01	-						
4. Moral Disengagement	-.24**	-.33	.146*	-					
5. Peer Task	-.11	.11	-.03	-.21**	-				
6. Peer Intra-team Competition	-.23**	-.07	-.06	-.03	.52**	-			
7. Peer Intra-team Conflict	-.31**	-.22**	.14*	.25**	-.03	.32**	-		
8. Partnership	-.07	.01	.01	-.02	.56**	.39**	.06	-	
9. War	-.14*	-.05	.02	.22**	.37**	.42**	.27**	.62**	-
<i>M</i>				3.79	3.61	2.97	3.59	3.43	
<i>SD</i>				.73	.75	.97	.64	.72	

Notes: \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 3**

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary Relating Study Variables to Moral Disengagement in Sport*

	Moral Disengagement			
	Model 1a		Model 1b	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1 (controls)	.097***		.097***	
Female		-.25***		-.22**
Soccer		.14		.13
Varsity		.14*		.14*
Step 2 (CO)	.001		.016	
Partnership		.11		-
War		-		.25**
Step 3 (PMC)	.068**		.091***	
Task		-.23*		-.25**
Competition		-.06		-.10
Conflict		.16*		.13
Step 4	.031**		.017	
CO * PMC Task		-.19**		-
CO * PMC Competition		-		-
CO * PMC Conflict		-		-
Total $R^2$	.197**		.221	

*Note:* N= 234. Female = Gender; Soccer = Sport Type; Varsity = Sport Level; CO = Contest Orientation; PMC = Peer Motivational Climate; Model 1a = partnership orientation; Model 1b = war orientation; Non-significant interaction terms were dropped for parsimony  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 4.1**

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary Relating Study Variables to Moral Disengagement in Sport as Moderated by Gender*

	Moral Disengagement							
	Model 2a (Female)		Model 2a (Male)		Model 2b (Female)		Model 2b (Male)	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1 (controls)	.000		.045**		.000		.045**	
Varsity		.21		.19*		.171		.16*
Step 2 (CO)	.074		.001		.000		.028*	
Partnership		-.25		.09		-		-
War		-		-		.15		.29**
Step 3 (PMC)	.127		.049*		.207*		.113**	
Task		-.29		-.25*		-.44*		-.20
Competition		.04		-.04		.00		-.13
Conflict		.25		.07		.21		.09
Step 4	.043		.061**		.023		.039	
CO * PMC Task		-		-.26**		-		-
CO * PMC Competition		-		-		-		-
CO * PMC Conflict		-		-		-		-
Total $R^2$	.243		.156**		.230		.137	
Model Fit	$F = 1.49; p = .196$		$F = 3.37; p = .001$		$F = 1.38; p = .236$		$F = 4.06; p < .001$	

*Note:* N= 234. Varsity = Sport Level; CO = Contest Orientation; PMC = Peer Motivational Climate; Model 2a = partnership orientation; Model 2b = war orientation; Non-significant interaction terms were dropped for parsimony; The controls of gender and sport type were eliminated due to zero variation; Model fit is only presented for Step 4 which included all coefficients in the model

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 4.2**

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary Relating Study Variables to Moral Disengagement in Sport as Moderated by Sport Type*

	Moral Disengagement							
	Model 3a (Soccer)		Model 3a (Football)		Model 3b (Soccer)		Model 3b (Football)	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1 (controls)	.019		.027	.13	.019		.027	
Varsity		.09				.10		.13
Step 2 (CO)	.002		.024		.134** *		.006	
Partnership		.24*		-.07		-		-
War		-		-		.41** *		.05
Step 3 (PMC)	.210***		.031		.173** *		.047	
Task		-.26*		-.28		-.23*		-.33
Competition		-.08		.14		-.14		.11
Conflict		.38***		.02		.28**		.01
Step 4	.029		.089		.023		.068	
CO * PMC Task		-		-		-		-
CO * PMC Competition		-		-		-		-
CO * PMC Conflict		-		-		-		-
Total $R^2$	.207		.171		.350		.148	
Model Fit	$F = 1.89; p = .075$		$F = 4.92; p < .001$		$F = 1.59; p = .143$		$F = 7.53; p < .001$	

*Note:* N= 234. Varsity = Sport Level; CO = Contest Orientation; PMC = Peer Motivational Climate; Model 3a = partnership orientation; Model 3b = war orientation; Non-significant interaction terms were dropped for parsimony; The controls of gender and sport type were eliminated due to zero variation

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 4.3**

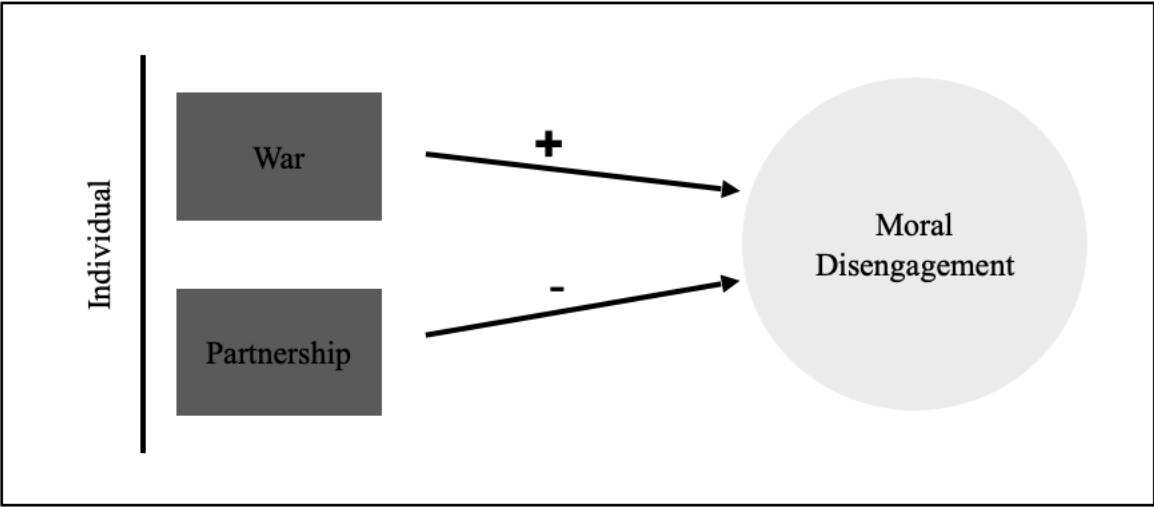
*Hierarchical Regression Analysis Summary Relating Study Variables to Moral Disengagement in Sport as Moderated by Sport Level*

	Moral Disengagement							
	Model 4a (JV)		Model 4a (Varsity)		Model 4b (JV)		Model 4b (Varsity)	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1 (controls)	.014		.111** *		.014		.111** *	
Female		-.30*		-.34**		-.24*		-.31**
Soccer		.10		.16		.11		.16
Step 2 (CO)	.024		.002		.062		.008	
Partnership		.13		.05		-		-
War		-		-		.39**		.11
Step 3 (PMC)	.406** *		.018		.462** *		.018	
Task		-.74***		-.01		-.64** *		-.04
Competition		.03		-.07		-.13		-.07
Conflict		.02		.16		.04		.15
Step 4	.049		.042		.018		.029	
CO * PMC Task		-		-		-		-
CO * PMC Competition		-		-		-		-
CO * PMC Conflict		-		-		-		-
Total $R^2$	.493		.173		.556		.166	
Model Fit	$F = 5.51; p < .001$		$F = 3.04; p = .002$		$F = 7.08; p < .001$		$F = 2.90; p = .004$	

Note: N= 234. Female = Gender; Soccer = Sport Type; CO = Contest Orientation; PMC = Peer Motivational Climate; Model 4a = partnership orientation; Model 4b = war orientation Non-significant interaction terms were dropped for parsimony

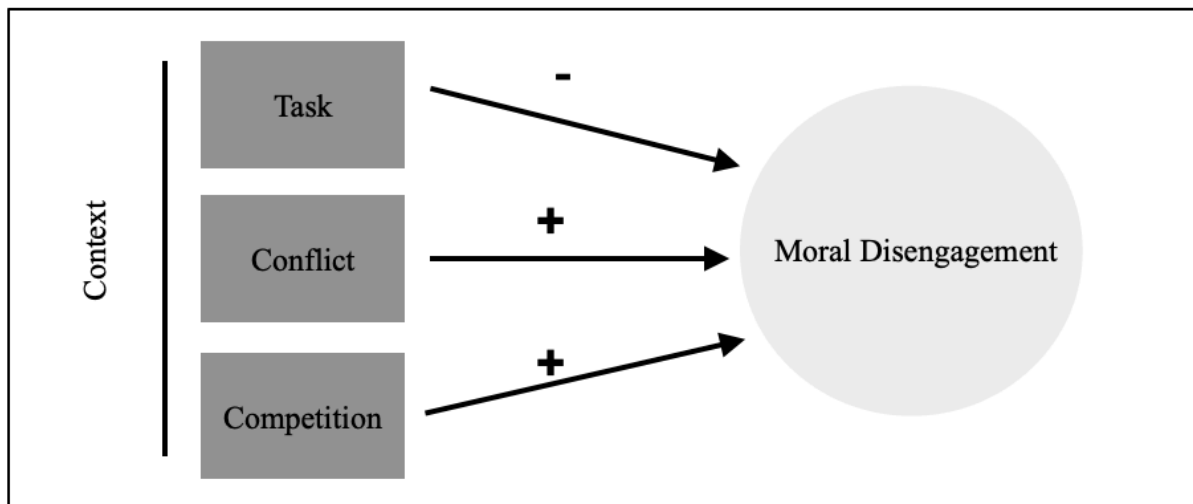
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Figure 1.**  
*Associations between Contest Orientation and Moral Disengagement.*



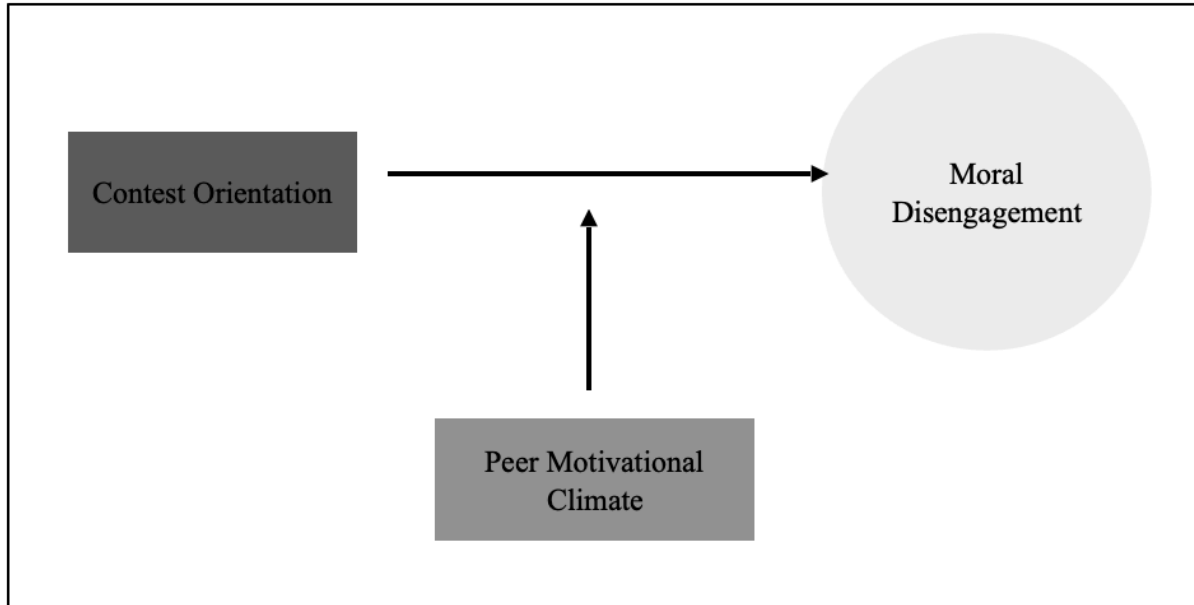


**Figure 2.**  
*Associations between Peer Motivational Climate and Moral Disengagement.*



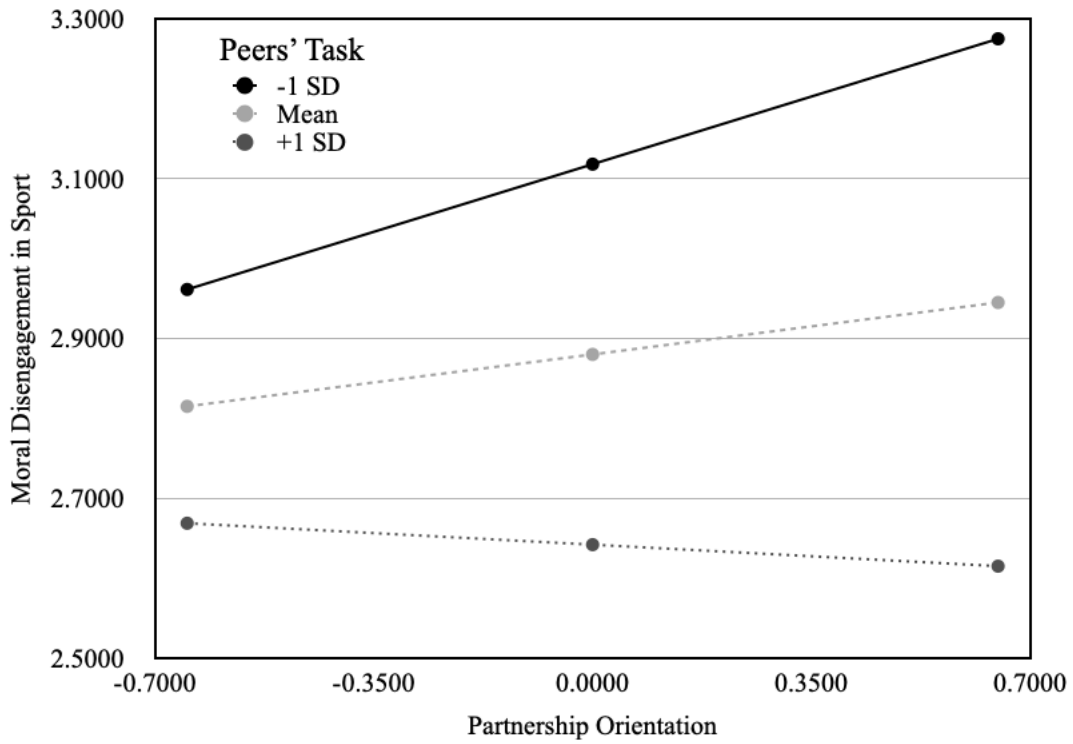
**Figure 3.**

*Anticipated Interaction between Contest Orientation and Moral Disengagement Moderated by Peer Motivational Climate.*



**Figure 4.**

*Interaction between Partnership Orientation and Peers' Task on Moral Disengagement*



**Figure 5.**

*Interaction between Partnership Orientation and Peers' Task on Moral Disengagement for Male Athletes*

