

# **“You have 60 minutes to do what you can’t do in real life. You can be violent”: young athletes’ perceptions of violence in sport**

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young athletes' perceptions of violence in sport**

**Abstract**

Various forms of violence against youth are documented in sport. To date, young athletes' perceptions of violence in sport remain relatively unstudied. The objective of this study was to examine how violence and its various manifestations in sport have been understood by young athletes. In total, 60 athletes from a variety of sports and ages (12 to 17 years old) participated in nine semi-structured focus groups. The interview data were submitted to a thematic analysis using NVivo. Results obtained showed that various motivations for participating in sport influenced the ways in which young athletes addressed violence in this context. Additionally, the findings showed that violence in sport is a concept that young athletes partially understand. Even if most of them described various forms of violence in sport, some forms were misunderstood or have not been addressed at all. Finally, young athletes provided their own explanations of this issue in sport. From their perspective, violence in sport can be seen as part of the sport, a strategy to achieve competitive success on the field, a protective mechanism or a result of the valorisation of violence in sport by peers, parents, coaches and sport organizations. Considering that some young athletes normalized violence in sport, it seems crucial to make prevention efforts targeting social norms in sport.

**Keywords:** sport; youth; violence; perception

## **Introduction**

Although a majority of young athletes practice their sport in a safe and healthy environment, resulting in a positive impact on their development (Holt, 2016), some sporting experiences show a much more nuanced reality. Indeed, research has indicated that sport can also expose children and youth under the age of 18 years old to some negative experiences that may have adverse effects on their health, safety and well-being (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Violence against children and adolescents in sport is, furthermore, a serious social problem that has been documented over the past decades. Current understanding reveals that youth experience various forms of violence in a variety of sports, levels and countries (Alexander, Stafford, & Lewis, 2011; Parent, Lavoie, Thibodeau, Hébert, & Blais, 2016; Vertommen et al., 2016). Some studies addressing violence against youth in sport have reported disturbing prevalence rates. In United Kingdom, Alexander and colleagues (2011) questioned 6,124 adults (aged between 18 and 22) on their sporting experiences before the age of 16. More than 74% reported experiencing emotional harm, 24% reported physical harm, and 3% reported sexual harm. In this survey, 10% also reported acts of self-harm in sport. An Australian study also revealed that 23.4% of the 107 adult respondents had already experienced physical abuse by their coach before the age of 18 in sport (McPherson et al., 2016). Likewise, a Quebec study revealed that among the 6560 adolescents surveyed aged between 14 and 17 years old, 0.5% have been sexually assaulted by a coach during their lifetime (Parent et al., 2016). Finally, in a recent survey of over 4000 adults (aged between 18 and 50) in Belgium and the Netherlands, 38% of participants reported having experienced psychological violence as a child within the context of youth sport whereas 11% reported physical violence, and 14% reported sexual violence (Vertommen et al., 2016). When only severe forms of emotional violence (e.g.,

regularly humiliated, constantly threatened), physical (e.g., beaten) and sexual (e.g., rape, sexual assault) were considered, the prevalence is 9%, 8% and 5% respectively among respondents. 44% reported at least one experience with one of the three types of interpersonal violence, and 4% had experienced all three types.

Violence in sport has also been studied using qualitative methods. Most of the focus has surrounded athletes' experience with sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and physical abuse from a coach when they were young (Fasting, 2002; Owton & Sparkes, 2015; Pinheiro, Pimenta, Resende, & Malcolm, 2014; Smits, Jacobs, & Knoppers, 2016; Stirling & Kerr, 2008, 2009; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). These studies suggested that athletes tend to normalize some inappropriate behaviors experienced in sport when they were young, especially in regard to sexual and emotional violence (Hoover, 1999; Kerr, Stirling, & Bandealy, 2016; Parent et al., 2016; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). For example, a recent study showed that some athletes aged between 14 and 17 years old reported having had consensual sexual contact with a coach (Parent et al., 2016). Though this kind of relationship is considered as sexual abuse in Canada (Canadian Criminal Code, 2019) and from a conceptual standpoint (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2017) the young athletes did not perceive it as such. Another study also suggested that athletes do not recognize the abusive emotional practices of the coach when they are practicing their sport (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). They consider these behaviors as a part of the sport, especially at the competitive level. However, after leaving the sport, their perceptions evolve as they tend to abandon the normalization of these practices.

Despite the growing interest of researching violence against youth in sport, young athletes' representations of violence in sport have seldom been explored so far. Most

studies obtain results by questioning adults on their experiences in sport before the age of 18. Few young people (aged 18 and under) are directly questioned about their understanding of violence in sport. The present study aimed to explore young athletes' perceptions of the concept of violence and its various manifestations in sport. This research therefore will hopefully help to elucidate this problem as seen and perceived by the young athletes themselves in order to develop relevant and useful tools that are specific to them.

### **Method**

This study was conducted as part of an extensive research program aiming to validate a questionnaire about violence against youth in sport (Parent et al., 2018). A qualitative research design was adopted for this study. More specifically, focus groups were employed to capture the perceptions of young athletes involved in different sports in Canada.

### **Participants**

Participants in the study included 60 young athletes (35 girls; 25 boys) aged 12 to 17 with an average age of 14.8 years. At the time of the study, all participants were involved in organized sport in a variety of clubs in Quebec City and had competed previously at a local, regional, provincial, national or international level. A wide diversity of sports was represented in the sample (team, individual, aesthetic or combat sport). To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, the nature of the sports practiced was not mentioned in this article.

### **Recruitment**

Following approval of the study by the ethics committee of the institution where the

study was conducted (approval number 2014-131 / 09-01-2015), snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. First, the study was presented to coaches from various sports in Quebec City whose athletes met the selection criteria of the study (involved in organized sport, girl or boy, aged between 12 and 17 years old). Efforts were made to recruit from several different sport clubs. Second, with the agreement of the coaches, general and specific objectives of the research project were explained to the athletes at the end of a training session as soon as the coaches had left the training venue. Subsequently, athletes interested in participating were invited to a focus group session at a mutually convenient location. Ethical precautions were taken throughout the process to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Among these measures, the coaches did not know the identity of the participants because they were absent during the recruitment phase and focus groups. Before participating in the study, participants were required to obtain a parental consent form and bring it on the day of the interview. Then, before the beginning of the focus groups, the objectives of the study and subsequent use of the data were explained again by the researcher. All the participants signed a letter of consent and gave permission for the focus groups to be digitally recorded.

### **Data Collection**

Nine focus groups were conducted between March 2015 and May 2015. The size of each focus group ranged from four to nine participants. We choose to make different groups of athletes based on their gender (female, male), age (12–14 years, 15–17 years) and type of sport (team sports or other sports such as individual, aesthetic and combat sports) to facilitate conversation and sharing between athletes with same kind of profile and realities. A research team member conducted the focus groups in a quiet meeting room during lunch time or at the end of a sport training session. A socio-demographic

fact sheet also provided information on the personal life and sporting career of each participant. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the well-recognized World Health Organization (WHO) definition of violence: “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Krug et al., 2002, p. 5). The interview guide was also created based on previously documented manifestations of violence in sport (Mountjoy, Rhind, Tiivas, & Leglise, 2015; Stirling, 2009) and the typology of violence proposed by the World Health Organization (Krug, 2002). The interview guide was revised by different experts in the field regarding the objectives of the study and the characteristics of the target population (youth). Examples of questions used in the interviews were: «For me sport is...», «For you, what is violence?», and «In your opinion, does adults could be violent towards athletes in sport? Explain your answer. If yes, how? ». We also ask the previous question but with different authors of violence (peers, spectators, themselves). Each focus group lasted between 35 and 65 minutes and was audio tape-recorded.

## **Data Analysis**

All focus groups were transcribed as verbatim and subjected to an inductive thematic analysis based on the Creswell (2013) analysis approach. More specifically, floating readings were carried out on all the verbatim to do a first exploration of the themes mentioned by young athletes. Then, the documents were imported into the qualitative analysis software NVivo to reduce and condense the data obtained in units of meaning. These units were subsequently analysed along the themes used to structure the focus group (i.e. the young athletes' conception of violence in sport and their perceptions of

manifestations of interpersonal and self-directed violence in sport). These themes incorporated several subcategories whilst other themes emerged within the focus group. The whole process of classification and interpretation of the data was carried out by two research assistants who worked together (in team work, simultaneously) to ensure the validity of the coding. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation occurred (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

## Results

Three main themes emerged from the focus groups that captured the young athlete's perceptions of violence in sport. The first theme is related to the young athlete's significance given to sport practice. The second theme illustrates the young athlete's conception of violence in sport and presents their understanding of interpersonal violence and self-directed violence in sport. Finally, the young athlete's explanation of violence in sport constituted the third theme.

### **Young Athletes' Significance Given to Sport Participation**

Analysis of focus groups revealed that reasons behind young athletes' sport participation were various. Several participants mentioned that they were doing sport for their love of competition, their desire to win and their wish to dominate others. Some even compared sport to life in general where the goal should be to do the best that they could. The following passage from a focus group demonstrates this comparison:

Boy : Why we are playing? To win.

Boy : Why we do sport? To be good. You don't play to be average. Normally, in life, you want to be the best. We always want to have the highest job possible, earn a lot of money, have a higher salary. It's life. That's being a human. We always want to be better than the others, and we always want the best things. Having the best car, the best house, the best family, the best life. Well, it's clearly

the same in sport. You want to be the best. You do not want to be the last one. If you want to be last, I personally think you have a problem. (Boys, 12–14 years old)

For some, sport is a place where you can play physically, externalize your aggressivity and blow off some steam. Some participants even argued that sport is a unique context where you can outlet your aggressiveness without any consequence, including this participant:

It's all the aggressivity that you cumulate, you can throw it back into sport whereas in real life, it's not allowed to punch someone just because you want to. It's all the aggressivity that you have inside that you throw back in sport. And then, afterwards, you feel better. (Boy, 15–17 years old)

For some, significance given to sport participation was oriented towards pleasure and enjoyment. Participants argued that fun was more important than victory in sport, as one participant said:

It's important to have fun, but it sure it is nice when you win. It's a benefit. But I think that basically we must have fun with our teammates and during the play. (Female, 15–17 years old)

Sport can also be seen as an opportunity to provide several affective and social benefits, such as friendship, confidence and discipline. In terms of significance given to sport participation, some differences were observed, especially between boys' and girls' discourses. Boys seemed to be looking more for winning, physical domination and aggressivity in sport, as mentioned by a participant:

You don't want to be soft with the guy. You're playing to beat the guy in front of you and prove to him that you're stronger. So, you're gonna get what you need to prove you're stronger than him when you're gonna hit him. You want him to hurt, you want him to feel it and that's it. Of course, we don't want the guy to get hurt, but if he does not get up after [a sporting gesture], well, I'll have a smile.

(Boy, 12–14 years old)

Girls seemed to be looking more for pleasure and social benefits in sport. Even if victory seemed important to them, fun remained their priority, as described by this female athlete:

We need to have fun and not be stressed to win, win and win. (Female, 12–14 years old)

### **Young Athletes' Conception of Violence in Sport**

When questioned about their understanding of what constitute violence in sport, they talked about the conditions under which violence in sport occurs and the manifestations of this problem in sport.

**Conditions under which violence in sport occurs.** It seems that for young athletes, there are three conditions that are necessary to say that there is violence in the context of sport. Those three conditions are 1) the presence of a perpetrator, 2) the intention to harm and 3) consequences for victims. According to their conception of violence, a perpetrator must be present. They identified coaches, parents, opponents, teammates and spectators as the main perpetrators in the sport context. Intention of the perpetrator to hurt someone also represents a key element of young athlete's conception of violence. For most of them, the intent to hurt must be present to define a violent behaviour in sport. Some participants even made a comparison between a violent sport and violence in sport:

Girl: The violence goes with the intention of hurting someone.

Girl: (Name of a coach) did he talk about that: violence in sport and a violent sport? Ice hockey is a violent sport, because there are physical contacts, but a

sport becomes violent when players remove their gloves and fight together. Do you understand?

Girls: Yeah.

Girl: Football is a violent sport, but there is no violence on the field.

Girl: They help themselves to stand up.

Girl: Yeah, that's it.

Girl: So (name of the sport) is violent, but there is no intention to hurt someone because you just want to hurt. (Girls, 15–17 years)

According to their view, a violent sport is a sport that allows and tolerates brutal physical contact between players whereas violence in sport represents an anti-sporting, unacceptable and violent act that is not tolerated by the rules of the sport. Finally, violence must be associated with consequences. Physical and emotional consequences of violent behaviours were discussed, ranging from wounds to fear. Some participants even argued that emotional consequences were more harmful than physical consequences, as this is clearly depicted in the following comment by one of the participants:

With words, you can hurt someone, as much as with a punch. Sometimes it can be even worse... Because it's in the head. An injury, it can be resolved, but the mental... The head, the mind, it can stay for a long time. (Girl, 12–14 years old)

One participant even said that an experience of violence in sport can lead to dropping out the sport:

Sometimes this emotional violence can lead to dropping out of the sport. There are also some people who are not competitive and who do not necessarily want to win. They just practice sport for fun. So, when violent people play with them, they're always insulting. So, it does not make them want to continue. (Girl, 15–17 years old)

**Manifestations of violence in sport according to young athletes.** When participants where questioned about the manifestations of violence in the sport context,

spontaneously they gave examples of manifestations of interpersonal violence. However, when they were questioned about self-directed violence, they generally agreed that athletes may be violent towards themselves. Next lines show results of their perceptions for interpersonal and self-directed violence.

**Interpersonal violence.** Many participants deplored the negative behavior of coaches and parents when talking about interpersonal violence. They mostly spoke about emotional violence such as embarrassing or humiliating an athlete, insulting an athlete or criticizing an athlete's performance. A participant provided the following:

Also, sometimes parents, some of them are really involved in the game. We, we are able to congratulate the other team: "Good job, you were good". But sometimes, parents can even go as far as booing or doing other things we would never do between ourselves. Sometimes parents are just not aware I think. It can hurt a child directly, I don't know, but if a parent of the other team came up to me and said: "You sucked!" it would hurt me. It's an adult, a grown-up. I don't know. If my teammate were telling me the same thing, I would find it less insulting than if it was her father I guess. (Girl, 12–14 years old)

Several participants also claimed that ignoring an athlete represents a form of emotional violence. According to these participants:

Girl: If we don't succeed, it doesn't go over well with her (coach). She'll yell at us, hard.

Girl: Or ignore us.

Girl: This, it hurts too, because she stops talking to you so you don't know what you did wrong, but you know you did something.

Girl: You know you did something wrong, but you don't know what it is, because she ignores you and she doesn't tell you... (Girls, 12–14 years old)

In addition, several participants suggested examples of physical violence towards an athlete perpetrated by a coach or a parent, such as pushing/shaking an athlete, hitting an athlete with or without an object or throwing things in an athlete's direction, as participants point out:

Girl : She (coach) became so angry that she was throwing things.

Girl : Yeah.

Girl : It happened to her, [...], she was really angry, and she shoved the stuff away and (name of the girl) was behind her, and she got hit. (Girls, 12–14 years)

Some participants also spoke about the fact that some adults in sport did not demonstrate an ability to ensure the well-being of athletes when it was their role to do so. They shared some examples related to allowing the practice of sport despite the presence of injury, pain or fatigue, proposing exercises that are too difficult for the capacities of the athlete, the lack of lifestyle advice (e.g., parents who provide inappropriate food to their child) or the inability to offer resources to help the athlete with some physical or mental problems. In a focus group, one young athlete reflected on a recent incident with her coach. For her, this situation was an example of violence in sport:

I was hurting, I was saying to our coach: “I just hurt [a part of her body].” She said: “Well, do I look like a doctor?” Call your parents and go to the dressing room. (Girl, 12–14 years old)

There were nevertheless contrasting views about the role of coaches and parents. While several participants gave many examples of negative coach behaviors in sport, some claimed that they can also promote enjoyment, provide an appropriate support and encourage them to do their best and recognize their limits, as one participant pointed out:

Of course, there are coaches who say: “No, you keep going, you keep going even if you are not able”. We have a coach who says: “If you are not OK, you must stop”. (Girl, 15–17 years old)

Participants also described several situations of violence committed by an opponent or a teammate towards an athlete in sport. On many occasions, they described bullying as

a deliberate action with the intention of harming the other physically or emotionally. To illustrate this, they mentioned several examples of physical bullying (e.g. pushing, punching) and emotional bullying (e.g. verbal assaults, insults, threats). In addition, some have described more subtle bullying behaviors, such as cyberbullying, speaking behind someone's back, stink eye, looks or not shaking hands at the end of the game, as forms of violence between athletes.

***Self-directed violence.*** When questioned about their perception of self-directed violence in sport, participants generally agreed that athletes may be violent towards themselves in sport. First, some have identified the use of doping products to improve athletic performance (e.g. growth hormone, EPO, creatine, caffeine) and the adoption of compensatory behaviors to achieve an ideal weight in sport (e.g. dehydration before weighing, restrictive diets, fasting, self-induced vomiting) as athletic practices that could be very dangerous for the health of an athlete. One of young participant claimed:

In a certain way, this person is violent because she outright destroys herself from the inside. Taking these drugs creates a new limit. When we talked about pushing back our limits, you know, when you get to your limit, taking these drugs allows you to have a higher limit, so you can train, you're less tired even if it's harmful. They see it in their own way, but it is still a kind of violence done to yourself. Because it's killing you by doing this. (Boy, 15–17 years old)

In addition to these behaviors, some participants cited that continuing to practice a sport despite the presence of an injury or pain may create several risks to the physical health of the athlete and thus represent a form of self-directed violence. This was illustrated by the following comment by one young athlete in a focus group:

Some athletes know they are really good at sports. When they are injured, they still want to play. They don't care if they are injured or not. All they want is to prove it. Because when you're really good, you always want to prove to yourself that you're still at the same level. (Girl, 15–17 years old)

Finally, some young athletes reported that the presence of destructive behaviors with

or without sport equipment (e.g. self-harm, hitting a box, helmet knocks in a locker) and the presence of negative thoughts related to performance represented violent athletic practices that could constitute self-directed violence. The following conversation from a focus group illustrates such a claim:

Girl: It's in your head. You belittle yourself: "Oh, you're not good."

Girl: You discourage yourself. You feel too much pressure.

Girl: A mental image that you do not need, it's not true but you made it up.

(Girls, 15–17 years old)

**Young athlete's explanation of violence in sport.** During the focus groups, it was sometimes difficult to establish the young athletes' position on violence in sport. Although the majority was aware of this serious issue in sport and complained about it, some participants justified it. Some claimed that violence is normal and even necessary in sport. For instance, participants who were practicing a sport where physical contacts were allowed seemed to normalize what is happening in their sport by mentioning that violence is a part of the game, as cited by a participant:

You want to play physically, you want to be violent. That's sport. It is the goal of sport to unwind and you have 60 minutes to do what you can't do in real life. You can be violent. You can give punches. That's it. (Boy, 15–17 years old)

Also, some young athletes considered violence as a strategy to achieve competitive success on the field, as one participant said:

Well, bullying in real life, you're going to realize that the person is not feeling well and maybe you'll say: "Okay, maybe I should stop.". While in sport, it's what you want to create for the other. (Boy, 15–17 years old)

Violence in sport is also viewed as normal because some participants were sometimes afraid to be a victim in sport. So, to protect themselves or their teammates, they argued

that they preferred becoming the aggressor. Violence as a protective mechanism in sport has been described by these participants:

Boy : Well I think that we have to be violent because ... because we don't have a choice. Because if you aren't, the other is going to be violent to you and you're going to hurt yourself. So, what's better: hurting the other or getting hurt by the other? I think it's better to hurt the other. At one point, I think you have no choice because otherwise it will fall on you.

Boy : You always have to be the hammer, not the nail (laughs).

Boy : Also, if you are not violent towards someone, the opponent can be violent towards you or towards one of your teammates. As the coach says: "If you don't do [a sporting gesture], he's going to go hit your guy.". So, I mean, there's a responsibility in there. You must protect yourself and you must protect others too.  
(Boys, 15–17 years old)

Finally, several young athletes mentioned that the presence of violence in sport is not independent of the culture in which it occurs. Indeed, they explained the violence in sport by the valorization of violence in this context by peers, coaches, parents, sport organizations and society in general. They argued that sometimes winning is seen as the only finality in sport and expectations about youth performance are very high. So, these elements can lead to a kind of pressure to use violent behaviors in sport. For example, here is what a participant said about a coach who encourages some acts of violence in order to win:

There is also unnecessary violence. Coaches sometimes encourage us to be violent in order to win. They put some kind of pressure [to be violent] on us.  
(Boy, 15–17 years old)

Moreover, some participants spoke about the importance of team spirit and the necessity to make sacrifices or take risks to be accepted in the team and to meet the expectations of the teammates. For example, an athlete described a situation where some athletes would be ready to put their lives in danger just for the team. They explained that even injured or extremely tired, some athletes can participate in a

competition or training to prove that they did not give up on their team. This is especially true when the outcome is important or significant (e.g. championships, medal, finals) as proposed by these participants:

Boy: There are also some players who, let's say, a player who is really good, that everyone wants. Like, you are an all-star, everyone relies on you to help win the game and everything. And then you're hurt. You know there's pressure on you, just to be able to win or anything. So with that pressure, you force yourself to play even if you know that you are not able to, without the coach or someone else asking you to. It could be just a general pressure that you feel, the pressure that the team absolutely needs you.

Boy: Often, it's during games mostly during finals.

Interviewer: when the outcome is important?

Boy: Yes. For example, when we have to win a banner or a medal.  
(Boys, 15–17 years old)

## **Discussion**

The research was designed to provide useful information on young athletes' perceptions of violence in sport. Results obtained showed that reasons related to sport participation were various and influenced the way in which young athletes addressed this issue in sport. Even if young athletes were attracted to sport for many different reasons, it seemed that athletes, who had a speech focused on victory, tended to endorse and normalize violence in sport. Addressing young athlete's significance given to sport participation was essential to better understand the way in which they conceptualized and addressed the issue of violence in sport.

Young athletes were also aware of the phenomenon of violence in sport. In general, they were able to explain their conception of violence without necessarily placing their own experience at the center of their statements. Indeed, during interviews, young people have alternated between positions of victims, aggressors and witness. Through these different perspectives, young athletes discussed many forms of violence,

such as physical violence and emotional violence. They identified various perpetrators of violence in sport, like coaches, parents, opponents, teammates, spectators and athletes themselves.

Even if young athletes were aware of this phenomenon in sport, results of the interviews showed that they had a partial understanding of this concept in comparison with the actual knowledge of the scientific community on the manifestations of violence in sport. Indeed, neglect was not a concept that young athletes easily understood even if they gave some examples of neglect as described by Stirling (2009) during focus groups. They often hesitated before speaking and they asked many times to repeat the question. This result is not surprising as researchers themselves have so far been divided on the question of neglect as a form of violence in sport. Several have not considered neglect in their conceptualization of violence in sport (Alexander et al., 2011; Raakman, Dorsch, & Rhind, 2010; Vertommen et al., 2016; Young, 2012). Also, some forms of violence were not addressed by participants during the focus groups while they are well documented in the sport literature, like sexual violence and hazing. Despite progress made in recent years for the education and prevention of sexual violence in the sporting context, it seems that this topic is still taboo. An additional difficulty is that some inappropriate actions of a sexual nature are tolerated in the sporting environment, whereas they would never be encouraged in other social contexts such as perceived consensual sexual relationships between minor athletes and coaches (Parent et al., 2016).

Concerning hazing, young athletes did not address this issue during interviews. Available research demonstrated that athletes tend to minimize hazing (Allan & Madden, 2008; Diamond, Callahan, Chain, & Solomon, 2016; Hoover, 1999; Johnson & Holman, 2004). Indeed, according to some authors (Allan & Madden, 2008; Hoover,

1999; Johnson & Holman, 2004), a large discordance exists among the number or reported actions and behaviors consistent with hazing and the actual reports of episodes of hazing in sport. For example, Hoover (1999) noted that only 12% of athletes reported being hazed, but 80% described these behaviors as part of their team initiation. So, it could be possible that young athletes do not consider hazing behaviors as potential violent acts.

Finally, when asked about manifestations of self-directed violence, young athletes described some manifestations of Atkinson and Young's (2008) typology of self-directed violence in sport. For these authors, self-directed violence in sport include some athletic practices introduced by the athlete that directly endanger their health, such as adoption of disordered eating, pursuit of sport despite injury, pain or fatigue, and, finally, use of performance-enhancing products or methods that pose serious risks on health. Young athletes described other behaviors which are not actually documented in the scientific literature, such as self-physical punishment with or without sport equipment and systematic self-disparagement. This is an interesting research result. Could these behaviors be considered as manifestations of self-directed violence in sport? Future research on this topic is needed.

The findings of the current study also suggest that there is a tolerance and a normalization of violence in sport by some young athletes. According to them, violence can appear as normal and as a necessary part of the game in sport, a way to achieve success, a way to protect themselves or a result of the cult of performance and high expectations. These data support the literature which shows that sport context provides a unique environment for the normalization of various inappropriate behaviors, especially with regard to sexual and emotional violence (Hoover, 1999; Kerr et al.,

2016; Parent et al., 2016; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). When they start to practice a sport, athletes are surrounded by a sport culture that tends to normalize risk, pain, injury and violence. Indeed, the Canadian sociologist Michael Smith (1983) proposed to examine the sport culture that encourages violent behavior from the outset. More specifically, he argued that the more norms, attitudes and policies in a particular sport encourage violence or reduce the inhibitions of violence in that environment, the more athletes will likely engage in violent behavior. For example, in North America, the violent culture in ice hockey has been identified as a problem for over 40 years (Atkinson & Young, 2008; Robidoux, 2001), whereas the same culture of violence is less prominent in other sports (e.g. tennis, badminton, volleyball). The subculture of a sport could thus explain the tolerance of violent behavior, as observed during the focus group with the athletes from team sports where physical contacts were allowed. In addition, several sociological approaches try to explain the tolerance of violence in sport. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) states that aggression is a behavior that is acquired through learning. Terry and Jackson (1985) have taken up this theory and adapted it to the sporting context. They identified three sources of reinforcement in the sporting environment that could justify why violence is seen as normal in sport: a) “significant others” (e.g. coaches, parents, teammates), b) sporting structure (e.g., unsatisfied or senseless regulation of some sports), and c) sport culture (e.g., highlighting of violent behavior in the media, professional model). The more likely these sources are to encourage and tolerate violence in sport (desirable and profitable to be violent in sport), the more athletes will tend to conform to this movement of standardized violence. Terry and Jackson also identify professional athletes and media as both important sources of socialization in sport culture. During our research, some young athletes used the professional model and the media to illustrate examples of

violence in sport. So, it is impossible to ignore this influence on the youth perceptions of violence and on their behaviors.

Finally, some authors suggested that the presence of violence in sport comes from the ideologies and values taking place in sports, particularly through the integration of social norms by athletes and all people of the sport system. Hughes and Coakley (1991) have developed a framework known as the Sport Ethic, which is a particular set of four norms, shared by athletes, coaches, parents, and other participants in sports, that are used as standards to evaluate commitment to the group and sport. Thus, athletes are supposed to be taught to strive for distinction, make sacrifices for their sport, refuse any kind of limit, accept risks and play through pain. When people overconform or underconform to these norms, deviant behavior can appear and may represent a risk factor for violent behavior. This set of norms could explain the use of violence in sport. For example, success and victory can be so important that a young athlete may adopt certain behaviors that are dangerous to his / her health and life, such as playing with an injury or resorting to doping. Similarly, too much emphasis on victory could also lead a coach to force athletes to take part in a training session or competition, to shout at them if their performance is not up to par. Some of these behaviors are normalized by youth, as illustrated in our results. They consider themselves to be part of the sport and accept the sacrifices needed to reach higher levels. Conversely, young athletes who tend to refuse Sport Ethic (e.g., refuse to train injured, refuse to follow instructions) could be questioned about their level of engagement (under-conformity) (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). They may then be the target of various comments which could have a negative impact on their confidence and their identity.

## **Conclusion**

Violence in youth sport has been the subject of some research over the years and represents a social problem that deserves increased attention. The purpose of this study was to describe young athletes' perceptions of violence in the sport context. The originality of this study lies in the fact that athletes' representations of violence in sport have seldom been explored so far. Results of this qualitative research contribute to an increased awareness of the perceptions of young athletes about violence in sport and the tolerance on their part of some violent behaviors in sport. Even if young athletes were able to recognize many forms of violence in sport, the findings showed that some forms of violence were not discussed. This could be explained by the configuration of the interviews (focus groups). It could be interesting in future research to see if those results would be the same if we ask same questions, but individually. This is a limitation of this study.

Also, whereas some athletes were completely against the presence of violence in sport, others see violence as a part of the sport, a strategy to achieve competitive success on the field, a protective mechanism or a result of the valorization of violence in sport by peers, parents, coaches and sport organizations. Considering young athletes' limited conception of violence in sport and its normalization, it seems crucial to make prevention efforts to help young athletes gain a deeper understanding of inappropriate behaviors in sport. But those efforts should not be restricted to young athletes. As we saw in the results, young athletes are influenced by adults and authority figures in sport, such as coaches, parents or other members of the sport community. Those actors also need to be aware that they sometimes consciously or not behave towards athletes in inappropriate manners, influencing the use of violence by athletes.

A number of recommendations for future research emerged from the findings of the current study. Given the notable findings that some forms of violence are considered as normal in sport, future research examining the young athlete's normalization of violence in sport would be worthwhile. For example, it could be worthwhile to look at different frequent sport behaviours, techniques and strategies used by young athletes and how those represent violence from a research and conceptual standpoint. Maybe looking at specific sports could be the best to better capture the sport subculture and particularity of each of them. A comparative study between boys and girls would also be interesting to confirm the observations made in this study. In addition, future studies need to document the athletes' explanations of all forms of violence in sport to better understand the nature and the acceptance of some violent behaviors. Finally, an interesting direction to pursue is the role of other athletes, parents, coaches, sports administrators and sport culture in the tolerance of such behaviors, as mentioned by some young athletes. This could be achieved by documenting social norms (such as those of the *Sport Ethic* - see Hughes and Coakley (1991)), endorsed in sport by those important socialization agents and links with violent behaviours in the context of sport.

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