





Your team can make you a better person: Team cohesion is associated with off-field prosocial behaviour via fairplay team norms and empathy in rugby union

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Abstract

Ample research has investigated the relationship between team cohesion and on-field behaviour, while the association between the first and off-field prosocial behaviour has been almost overlooked. To fill this gap, we conducted a study in a sample of Italian Rugby Union athletes to examine whether: (a) team cohesion is associated with off-field prosocial behaviour; and (b) the underlying mechanisms of this association. We focused on the two dimensions of team cohesion, that is social and task cohesion, and hypothesized that social cohesion should be associated with off-field individual prosocial behaviour via empathy, while the association between task cohesion and off-field individual prosocial behaviour should be mediated by on-field fairplay team norms. In total, 497 amateur, sub-elite, and elite Italian Rugby Union players (128 females) took part in this study by filling out an online survey. Results revealed that social cohesion was associated with greater empathy, which in turn was associated with greater expression of off-field prosocial behaviour. Task cohesion was associated with

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both greater on-field fairplay team norms and greater empathy, which in turn was linked to more off-field prosocial behaviour. Results are discussed with respect to the role of team cohesion in favouring the expression of prosocial behaviour off-field, thus underlying the role of sport in fostering moral behaviour (also) in everyday community life.

KEYWORDS

empathic concern, prosociality, social cohesion, social norms, task cohesion

1 | INTRODUCTION

Researchers recognize the centrality of cohesion for team dynamics, both in terms of social bonds (i.e., the quality of the relationships within the team), and task-related processes (i.e., those that favour the achievement of common performance goals) (e.g., Carron, 1982). Team cohesion has been widely investigated in relation to sports performance (e.g., Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 2002) and overall team attitude (e.g., Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014). Notably, scholars also investigated the association of the two forms of cohesion (namely social and task) with prosocial and antisocial behaviour towards teammates and opponents (e.g., Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2019). Indeed, sport does not only represent an environment which fosters learning, enhances performance, and, in some cases, constitutes a profession. From a social and pedagogical perspective, sport represents an educational tool for the community, as can be derived from the studies that associate sports participation with social outcomes such as lower levels of peer rejection (Shulruf, 2010), or lower exhibition of externalizing behaviour (Bartko & Eccles, 2003).

Despite recent findings revealing a relationship between team cohesion and prosocial behaviour on the field, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies examining the effects of team cohesion on the players' prosocial behaviour in their everyday lives. This is however of primary importance to determine the real value of sport as an educational tool at the community level, especially if we consider the potential reach of sports participation: in 2021, only in Italy, 39 million people (66% of the population) were engaged in regular sports activities, often from a young age (ISTAT, 2021).

Moving from this consideration, the first objective of the present study was to examine the association of team cohesion with players' off-field prosocial behaviour. Our second aim was to determine the underlying processes that explain the relationship between team cohesion and off-field prosocial behaviour. Two constructs, namely empathy (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009) and team fairplay (Rutten et al., 2008), emerged as particularly relevant for players' prosocial behaviour. However, in previous studies, their effect remained mainly confined to the field. To broaden the perspective, we investigated the possibility of a 'virtuous' transfer from team cohesion via these social competencies to players' off-field prosocial behaviour.

In this sense, we believe that the present study can, on the one hand, provide a significant theoretical contribution by broadening the knowledge of the beneficial social effects of sport on everyday life, and, on the other hand, offer indications for psychologists and practitioners on how to exploit sport as a social tool to improve people's lives.

2 | TEAM COHESION AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH ON-FIELD PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Team cohesion is one of the most critical social variables (Golembiewski, 1962) that continues to attract the interest of those who study groups also in sports (i.e., sports teams) and exercise (i.e., active groups) (Forsyth, 2021). It is defined as 'a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs' (Carron, Brawley, &

Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213). This definition is based on the multidimensional conceptualization of team cohesion in sport teams offered by Carron (1982), who postulated that team cohesion should be studied in relation to both the social and task-oriented concerns of the group, and that cognitions about the 'cohesiveness of the group are related to the group as a totality and to the manner in which the group satisfies personal needs and objectives' (Carron et al., 2002, p. 9). Social cohesion reflects the degree to which team members like one another, get along, and consider each other friends, while task cohesion is the extent to which team members are united in achieving team goals (Eys, Loughead, Bray, & Carron, 2009).

As evidence of the centrality of team cohesion in sport, Carron et al. (2002) meta-analysed 46 studies examining the relationship between team cohesion and performance and showed a moderate-to-large positive effect. Not only team cohesion enhances sports performance but, most importantly for our study, it appears to have a relevant impact on athletes' social skills (Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014; Bruner, Eys, Wilson, & Côté, 2014). Prapavessis and Carron (1997) identified cohesion as the mediating mechanism in the relationship between individual sacrifice and conformity to positive behavioural norms in sports teams.

Other studies examined the association between team cohesion and prosocial behaviour within the sport-specific context. In sport research, prosocial behaviour has been defined as a voluntary behaviour intended to help or benefit another individual or group, for instance, helping a player off the floor and encouraging a teammate (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009; Kavussanu, Seal, & Phillips, 2006; Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006). Al-Yaaribi and Kavussanu (2017) showed an association between higher task cohesion and perceiving display of prosocial behaviour by a teammate. Pepe, Gönendi, Gönendi, and Gökoyun (2021) found that football players who experience high levels of both social and task cohesion also have positive attitudes and behaviours towards their teammates and opponents. Similarly, Bruner, Boardley, and Côté (2014) and Bruner, Eys, et al. (2014) tested youth athletes on various psychological dimensions, including social and task cohesion, as well as prosocial behaviour towards teammates and opponents. They found a strong association between both social and task cohesion and prosocial teammate behaviour.

Specifically, in sports teams, task cohesion has been associated with prosocial behaviour due to its foundation on shared goals and mutual commitment to achieving success (Carron, Eys, & Martin, 2012). Athletes perceiving heightened levels of task cohesion are more likely to exhibit behaviours such as providing support and sharing experiences with their teammates (Martin, Carron, Eys, & Loughead, 2011). Likewise, the perception of high social cohesion contributes to the fulfilment of the psychological need for affiliation, consequently fostering prosocial behaviour among athletes in a 'virtuous circle' (Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014; Bruner, Eys, et al., 2014).

These results indicate that both social and task cohesion can impact on-field prosocial behaviour while, to date, the relationship between sport cohesion and off-field prosocial behaviour has been overlooked. Taking a preliminary step in this direction, O'Donnell and Barber (2018) investigated how externalizing behaviours in everyday life were influenced by sport participation when both prosocial and risky teammates were present and found that contact with prosocial peers mitigated the negative impact of risky ones. This is one of the first studies which systematically linked athletes' social experiences within the team to their daily off-field behaviour, thus emphasizing the potential consequences of a prosocial sport environment on everyday life. We extended this research by examining this relationship in Rugby, a sport that is consistent with, and well-known for, the promotion of positive values (see Collins, 2009, 2015). Importantly, we focused our research primarily on elite athletes, as sport constitute a significant part of their lives. We anticipate that this immersion in sports may particularly foster behaviours that could be transferred to real-life contexts.

The present study focuses on understanding how the positive effects of team cohesion extend beyond the field, as well as on uncovering their mediating processes.

3 | POTENTIAL MEDIATORS

When studying the off-field socio-moral outcomes of team cohesion, it is worth noting that they can be explained by both individual and environmental (team) variables. One potential mediator is empathy (Davis, 1980, 1983), which

refers to other-oriented affect consistent with another person's emotional experience and/or perceived well-being. In sports literature, empathy has been consistently found to be inversely associated with antisocial behaviour towards both teammates and opponents (see Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009; Kavussanu, Stanger, & Boardley, 2013). Sezen-Balçikanlı and Sezen (2017) found a negative correlation between empathy and the behavioural outcome of yellow/red cards and fouls in a sample of 76 professional male futsal players. A recent meta-analysis has further found that empathy is generally associated with greater prosocial behaviour in everyday life (Yin & Wang, 2023). In a study on the role of team cohesion and empathy in predicting curlers' performance, Bedir, Agduman, Bedir, and Erhan (2023) found a consistent association between the two variables. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that empathy could be a mediator in the relationship between cohesion and off-field prosocial behaviour. Empathy has two facets which differ in their focus and outcomes (Davis, 1980, 1983). The first, perspective-taking, involves cognitively understanding one's point of view; the second, empathic concern, refers to the feelings of compassion and care for another's well-being. Research suggests that empathic concern might be the best predictor of prosocial behaviour because it elicits an emotional motivation to help (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). For this reason, in the present research, we focused on empathy's affective dimension (i.e., empathic concern).

Based on previous studies that underline the association between empathic concern and social cohesion (Fotopoulou, Zafeiropoulos, & Alegre, 2019), we predict that empathy, which is by definition shaped by one's relationships with significant others (e.g., Moreno, Klute, & Robinson, 2008; Wałęcka-Matyja, 2017), could represent the link between social cohesion and players' off-field prosocial behaviour.

Among the social environmental factors that can promote prosocial behaviour and inhibit antisocial behaviour are team fairplay norms. In the sport context, fairplay represents 'a set of norms for rule conformity and justice' (Loland, 2013). Studies conducted in football revealed that team values related to fairplay (e.g., fewer aggression-related team norms) are predictive of the actual application of fairer game strategies (Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996). In the present study, we define fairplay team norms as the set of 'perceived shared rules' on how to behave towards teammates and opponents. We chose to investigate the link between these (on-field) team norms and off-field prosocial behaviour to explore the potential 'transfer' of sport's beneficial effects to everyday life. Based on the assumptions of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), individuals conform to the norms of their relevant ingroups (in this case, the team), not only when ingroup members are present, but also in their absence, to maintain consistency with their group's morals and avoid the mental discomfort of inconsistency between beliefs and actions (i.e., cognitive dissonance; Festinger, 1957). In accord with this, a study by Rutten et al. (2008) with a sample of 331 young male football players showed that 8% and 14% of the variance in on-field prosocial and antisocial behaviour, as well as 21% of the variance in off-field antisocial behaviour, could be attributed to features of the sporting environment, including positive team attitude towards fairplay.

Team norms are usually better explained by task cohesion rather than social cohesion (e.g., Høigaard, Säfvenbom, & Tønnessen, 2006). For this reason, we argue that the degree of cohesiveness towards a goal (i.e., task cohesion) would impact group members' adherence to fairplay team norms, which are implied in achieving both moral and performance goals (Patterson, Carron, & Loughead, 2005).

4 | THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Given the importance of team cohesion in promoting positive social outcomes within the sport context, this study aimed to broaden the focus by examining team cohesion (i.e., social and task cohesion) as a predictor of athletes' prosocial behaviour in daily life, as well as the mediators of this association, namely empathy and fairplay team norms. To this end, we employed Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley's (1985) Group Environment Questionnaire, which allows a clear distinction between social and task cohesion when testing for team cohesion. To assess empathy, we used a validated measure of empathic concern (Albiero, Ingoglia, & Lo Coco, 2006; Davis, 1980, 1983). We measured fairplay team norms sample by adapting a classic measure of prosocial and antisocial behaviour in sport

(Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009), thus investigating a variable directly relevant to our outcome of prosocial behaviour. Lastly, off-field prosocial behaviour was assessed via the standardized Italian version of a prosocialness scale for adults (Caprara, Steca, Zelli, & Capanna, 2005).

In line with the literature reported above (e.g., Fotopoulou et al., 2019; Høigaard et al., 2006), we predicted that team cohesion would be associated with greater prosocial behaviour in everyday life via two different paths. First, social cohesion would be associated with greater empathy which, in turn, would be linked to greater off-field prosocial behaviour. Second, task cohesion would be associated with more fairplay team norms (on-field) and, in turn, with more off-field prosocial behaviour.

5 | METHOD

5.1 | Participants

The eligibility criteria for the present study were being (1) a female or male Italian Rugby Union player; (2) an adult (18 years old or over); (3) an amateur, sub-elite, or elite rugby player; and (4) an active player at the moment of data collection. A priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), showed that a regression analysis with four predictors (two independent variables and two mediators), an alpha level of .05 (two-tailed), and a power of .95 to detect a small-to-medium effect size of $f^2 = .06$, required a sample size of $N = 315$. Our sample far exceeded this number.

Respondents who filled out at least part of the questionnaire were in total 517, from Rugby Clubs located in seven Italian regions.¹ Among these respondents, 128 were female rugby players, 384 were male rugby players, and 5 did not provide gender information and were excluded from the analyses. We further excluded respondents who fully skipped some measures included in the main analyses ($n = 4$) or respondents who declared to be coaches instead of players ($n = 7$), four participants for data missing almost totally ($n = 2$) or completely missing on the dependent variable ($n = 2$). The final sample included 497 respondents ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.41$, $SD = 11.33$ years, age range varying from 18 to 70 years old due to a small number of amateur players competing in the 'Old' category). Out of these participants, 128 (25.75%) were female rugby players, a percentage that reflects the Italian national gender distribution of the players members of the Italian Rugby Federation. The rugby experience of participants, expressed in years of practice, was in general high ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.65$, $SD = 9.91$ years). Moreover, 14.5% of the participants were amateur, 57.7% sub-elite, and 27.8% elite rugby players.

5.2 | Procedure

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey (Google Forms, Google, Mountain View, CA, USA) thanks to the support of the Italian Rugby Federation (IRF). Specifically, the IRF forwarded the presentation of the research to all the Clubs on the national territory, encouraging participation and providing the interested Clubs with the contact details of the researchers. Next, the researchers forwarded the questionnaire's link to the teams' coaches and trained them on how to create an appropriate setting and supervise data collection. The questionnaire was administered (in Italian) between March and September 2020 to the participants, who filled it out collectively on their mobile phones or tablets at their respective training centres. All participants provided consent to participate and were reassured regarding the anonymity of their responses. The procedures were conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki, and ethical approval was provided by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the University of Verona.

5.3 | Measures

Because the questionnaire was administered online, all the original response scales were adapted to a 7-point Likert scale to standardize them and facilitate the survey compilation.

Team cohesion was assessed using Carron et al.'s (1985) 18-item Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ), which measures social (e.g., 'Our team would like to spend time together in the off-season'; 'Some of my best friends are on this team') and task cohesion (e.g., 'Our team is united in trying to reach its goal for performance'; 'I'm unhappy with my team's level of desire to win', reverse item) (Brawley, Carron, & Widmeyer, 1987). For each statement, participants indicated their level of agreement on a scale ranging from 1 ('completely disagree') to 7 ('completely agree'). We averaged the items of each dimension, thus obtaining one score of social cohesion ($\alpha = .78$) and one score of task cohesion ($\alpha = .77$).

Empathy. We used the 7-item 'Empathic concern' subscale of the Italian version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (e.g., 'I am often quite touched by things that I see happen'; 'I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me'; 'When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them') (Albiero et al., 2006; Davis, 1980, 1983). Participants expressed their level of agreement with each item from 1 ('completely disagree') to 7 ('completely agree'). A single score of empathy was computed by averaging the items ($\alpha = .75$).

Fairplay team norms were assessed with an adapted version of the Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviour in Sport Scale (PABSS; Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009), composed of 20 items. The PABSS measures two dimensions of prosocial and antisocial behaviour towards both teammates and opponents. Example items for prosocial behaviour are 'Congratulate a teammate for good play' and 'Help an opponent off the floor' while examples of items for antisocial behaviour are 'Argue with a teammate' and 'Try to wind up an opponent'. To capture prosocial and antisocial behaviour team norms, we asked participants to indicate 'how often they engaged in *behaviour* during the current season, and how often their team engaged in *behaviour* during the current season?' Responses were made on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'never' to 7 = 'all the time'. We computed a fairplay team norms index by calculating the difference between the average prosocial team norms both towards teammates and opponents ($\alpha = .74$) and the average frequency of antisocial team norms, again, both towards teammates and opponents ($\alpha = .86$). The scale for this index ranges from -6 to $+6$: scores above 0 indicate greater frequency of prosocial compared with antisocial team behaviour; scores below 0 indicate lower level of antisocial compared with prosocial team behaviour; and a score of 0 indicates an identical level of prosocial and antisocial team behaviour.

Off-field prosocial behaviour. Assessment was conducted with the standardized Italian version of the Prosocialness Scale for Adults (PSA; Caprara et al., 2005). The scale comprises 16 items which describe behaviours like sharing, helping, and taking care of others (e.g., 'I am pleased to help my friends/colleagues in their activities'; 'I do what I can to help others avoid getting into trouble'; 'I spend time with those friends who feel lonely'). Participants expressed how much each statement was true for them from 1 ('completely false for me') to 7 ('completely true for me'). A single score of individual off-field prosocial behaviour was computed by averaging the 16 items ($\alpha = .91$).

5.4 | Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Missing data were replaced with multiple imputation techniques. A series of one-sample *t*-tests was used to define a significant deviation from the midpoint of the scale for each variable to statistically determine participants' average response range on all the variables. Pearson's correlation was used to determine the relationships between study variables. A mediation analysis with parallel mediators was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS version 3.5 computational tool for SPSS (Model 4). This tool enables the estimation of path coefficients, standard errors, and effect sizes, as well as the significance of the indirect effects obtained through the bootstrapping method. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

6 | RESULTS

6.1 | Preliminary analyses

Means, standard deviations and correlations for the different measures are presented in Table 1. Both social and task cohesion scores were high, as indicated by the average score significantly different from the mid-point of the scale (4), $t(496) > 33.95$, $p < .001$. As shown by the fairplay-team-norms-index sensibly higher than 0, participants perceived on average greater prosocial ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 0.81$) than antisocial team norms ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(496) = 45.42$, $p < .001$. Finally, they also reported high levels of empathy and off-field prosocial behaviour, as indicated by the mean scores higher than the scale mid-point (4): for empathy, $t(496) = 38.62$, $p < .001$; for off-field prosocial behaviour, $t(496) = 42.94$, $p < .001$. Correlations among variables were generally of moderate magnitude and in line with predictions. Social cohesion was positively associated with empathy, and task cohesion was positively associated with fairplay team norms. Both empathy and fairplay team norms were positively associated with off-field prosocial behaviour.

6.2 | Main analyses

To test our hypotheses, two mediation analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2016; Model 4). In the first analysis, social cohesion served as the predictor, empathy and fairplay team norms were the mediators, and off-field prosocial behaviour was included as the outcome variable. In this analysis, we used social cohesion as a covariate to control for its effects. In the second analysis, social cohesion was replaced by task cohesion as the predictor and task cohesion was used as a covariate. Results are shown collectively in Table 2 and Figure 1, where it can be seen that both social cohesion and task cohesion were positively associated with empathy, and task cohesion was positively associated with fairplay team norms. In turn, both mediators were positively associated with the dependent variable.

Indirect effects are reported in Table 3. In line with our predictions, social cohesion was indirectly associated with greater off-field prosocial behaviour via empathy, but not via fairplay team norms. Also consistent with expectations, the indirect effect of task cohesion on increased off-field prosocial behaviour via fairplay team norms, was significant. Unexpectedly, task cohesion was also indirectly associated with the outcome variables via higher empathy.²

7 | DISCUSSION

While a vast literature recognizes the significance of cohesion for sport teams in relation to sport performance (e.g., Carron et al., 2002) and team morals (e.g., Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014; Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2019), less

TABLE 1 Cronbach's alphas, means, standard deviations and correlations among variables ($N = 497$).

	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social cohesion	.78	5.78	0.84					
2. Task cohesion	.77	5.375	0.90	0.56*				
3. Fairplay team norms	.74	2.93	1.44	0.26*	0.41*			
4. Empathy	.75	5.50	0.86	0.24*	0.27*	0.31*		
5. Off-field prosocial behaviour	.91	5.60	0.83	0.20*	0.25*	0.40*	0.58*	

Note: Possible range for all items was 1–7, with the exception of the fairplay team norms measures, which was –6 to +6. * $p < .01$.

TABLE 2 Mediation analysis testing the impact of task cohesion and social cohesion on off-field prosocial behaviour via fairplay team norms and empathy (N = 497).

Predictor	Outcome			Fairplay team norms			Empathy			Off-field prosocial behaviour		
	Estimate	(SE)	95% CI	Estimate	(SE)	95% CI	Estimate	(SE)	95% CI	Estimate	(SE)	95% CI
Social cohesion	0.08	(0.08)	[-0.091/0.244]	0.12*	(0.05)	[0.020/0.232]	0.02	(0.04)	[-0.060/0.107]			
Task cohesion	0.61***	(0.08)	[0.453/0.766]	0.19***	(0.05)	[0.093/0.290]	0.00	(0.04)	[-0.080/0.085]			
Fairplay team norms	/	/	/	/	/	/	0.14***	(0.02)	0.091/0.181			
Empathy	/	/	/	22.14***	/	/	0.48***	(0.04)	0.407/0.550			
F	49.43***						77.68***					
R ²	.17			.08			.39					

Note: Non-standardized regression coefficients are reported.

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

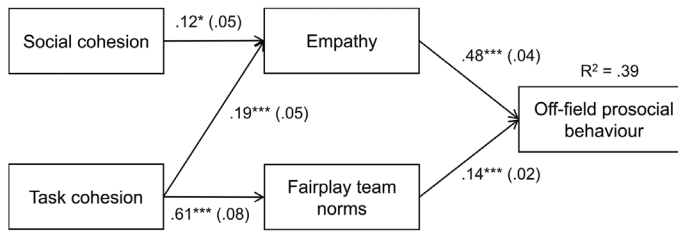


FIGURE 1 Mediation model of the effects of social cohesion and task cohesion on off-field prosocial behaviour via fairplay team norms and empathy. Only significant paths are reported (un-standardized regression coefficients; standard error in parentheses) ($N = 497$). * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 3 Indirect effects for fairplay team norms and empathy ($N = 497$).

Predictor	Mediator	Dependent variable	Mean bootstrap estimate (standard error)	95% CI
Social cohesion	Fairplay team norms	Off-field prosocial behaviour	0.01 (0.01)	[-0.016, 0.038]
Social cohesion	Empathy	Off-field prosocial behaviour	0.06 (0.03)	[0.003, 0.122]
Task cohesion	Fairplay team norms	Off-field prosocial behaviour	0.08 (0.02)	[0.049, 0.128]
Task cohesion	Empathy	Off-field prosocial behaviour	0.09 (0.03)	[0.041, 0.146]

Note: Mean bootstrap estimates are based on 5000 bootstrap samples. Boldface indicates a significant indirect effect at $p < .01$.

Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

is known about how it can impact players' everyday behaviour. To start filling this gap, we conducted a study among rugby players to test whether social and task cohesion were associated with off-field prosocial behaviour and to examine the mediating role of empathy and fairplay team norms.

In line with our first hypothesis, social and task cohesion were positively associated with more display of prosocial behaviour in everyday life (such as sharing, helping, and taking care of others). This result is aligned with previous literature that suggests an impact of team cohesion on the athletes' personal social skills and behaviour on-field, in the sport-specific context (e.g., Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014; Pepe et al., 2021). It also adds to it, by finding a relevant association of team cohesion with off-field prosocial behaviour.

This finding is aligned with studies that propose strong and positive relationships within the sport environment as a protective factor for overall individual development. For instance, Bruner, Boardley, and Côté (2014) and Bruner, Eys, et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between both social and task cohesion and five dimensions of positive youth development, namely personal and social skills, initiative, cognitive skills, goal setting, and negative experiences. Results showed that higher team cohesion predicted greater personal and social skills, initiative, goal setting, and fewer negative experiences. O'Donnell and Barber (2018) found that the association between sports participation intensity and problematic behaviour was moderated by both prosocial and risky teammates. In other words, more time spent in sports can lead to more problematic behaviour when the sports social network includes more risky than prosocial mates. In this sense, our study supports the idea that rugby, both at the amateur and elite levels, qualifies as a safe sports environment and a promoter of positive values associated with sport (Collins, 2009, 2015).

A further relevant contribution of the present study regards indirect effects. Consistently with our hypotheses, the only psychological mechanism underlying the association between social cohesion and off-field prosocial behaviour was empathy (see Carron et al., 2002, p. 9). In contrast, task cohesion was indirectly associated with increased off-field prosocial behaviour via both mediators. This second result aligns only partially with our hypothesis. Indeed, task cohesion was associated with fairplay team norms, as found in previous studies (Al-Yaaribi & Kavussanu, 2017).

This finding is consistent with the idea that teams that are cohesive towards a common goal tend to adhere more to the (strategic and moral) rules shared within the team itself (Høigaard et al., 2006), and underlines the role of fairplay team norms in promoting prosocial behaviour (see Rutten et al., 2008).

This result is consistent with the 'transfer' phenomenon we hypothesized for prosocial team norms to be generalized to everyday life. Individuals tend to internalize the values, behaviours, and expectations of the groups they strongly identify with, allowing these norms to influence their actions even in the absence of other group members (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997; Sherif, 1936). Research suggests that this internalization process enhances social cohesion and identity, further reinforcing the sense of belonging to the group (Rathbone, Cruwys, Stevens, Ferris, & Reynolds, 2023). Consequently, the influence of group norms could extend beyond immediate social contexts, shaping individuals' behaviours in various settings as they strive to maintain consistency with the values of their groups and avoid cognitive dissonance.

Unexpectedly, task cohesion was associated with off-field prosocial behaviour also via empathy. This finding suggests that, in team sports, empathy can represent an asset to work better towards shared sports goals. Higher cohesiveness towards performance goals might be reflected in players' employing more personal empathetic resources. By working together to achieve their goals, players engage in closer interaction (see the task cohesion item 'If members of our team have problems in practice, everyone wants to help them so we can get back together again'), making them more likely to understand and show concern for others. On the other hand, if the players are working together well, this might enhance the feeling of closeness to one another, which may then increase empathy. Another potential explanation could be attributed to the proactive efforts made by players to comprehend each other's perspectives and feelings in pursuit of shared objectives. Over time, this deliberate endeavour may result in an increased empathic concern in general. This contention is also supported by the shared variance between task cohesion and social cohesion found in the present study ($r^2 = .31$).

The prominent mediating role of empathy falls within a vast literature (e.g., Yin & Wang, 2023) that underlines its role in promoting prosocial behaviour in different contexts, such as typical (Schoeps, Mónaco, Cotolí, & Montoya-Castilla, 2020) and atypical development (Zhao, Li, Song, & Shi, 2019), intergroup contact (Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Trifiletti, & Di Bernardo, 2016), as well as sport-specific contexts (Sezen-Balçikanlı & Sezen, 2017). Carzales, Gülseven, and Lannegrund (2023) studied the association between positive relationships with peers in extra-curricular environments (including sports) and youngsters' prosocial behaviour, as well as the role of empathy as a mediator, with a longitudinal study involving 676 French adolescents. Positive relationships with peers in out-of-school environments were related to youngsters' empathy after 1 year, which, in turn, was positively associated with their prosocial behaviour. Taken together with previous research, our findings highlight the role of a positive sports experience in shaping individual behaviour at the social and community level.

Importantly, our findings have significant practical implications for coaches, who serve as pivotal social agents in fostering team cohesion and developing nurturing sport environments. They highlight the importance of enhancing team cohesion in strengthening empathy and fair play team norms with subsequent positive effects on off-field prosocial behaviour. Coaches can enhance team cohesion by implementing team-building activities that emphasize collaboration and shared goals (Martin, Carron, & Burke, 2009). They can also provide constructive feedback and promote an inclusive team culture where each member feels valued (Turman, 2003). By addressing various facets of cohesion, coaches can ultimately promote not only athletic performance but also positive social outcomes both on and off the field.

7.1 | Limitations of the study and directions for future research

While it presents elements of novelty, our study is not free from limitations. First, it is a cross-sectional study which, by its very nature, does not allow us to infer causal relationships among variables. We acknowledge that the relationship between team cohesion and prosocial behaviour can be bi-directional. Indeed, the opposite direction of

relationships has been hypothesized and tested in previous studies (e.g., Al-Yaaribi & Kavussanu, 2017; Pizzi & Stanger, 2020), which also found an association between prosocial behaviour towards teammates and task cohesion. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to offer a clearer view of the direction of the relationship between team cohesion and prosocial behaviour on and off the field.

A second limitation is that the measure we used to conceptualize team fairplay norms is an adaptation of a scale originally aimed at measuring individual prosocial and antisocial behaviour in sports, which is different from the way this scale has been used in previous studies (e.g., Al-Yaaribi & Kavussanu, 2017; Bruner et al., 2018). This adaptation allowed us to focus on norms that are specifically tailored to prosocial and antisocial behaviour in sport; however, this measure merely assesses descriptive norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), that is norms about what others are perceived to do. To obtain a more complete picture, future studies should also assess prescriptive norms, that is perceptions about how one should behave, and understand the relative contribution of these differential norms to prosocial and antisocial behaviour within and outside the field. Further prospective research avenues could also use sequential mediation designs to explore how individual moral identity acts as a potential mechanism in the association between team norms and off-field prosocial behaviour. Additionally, developing interventions aimed at promoting team cohesion, empathy, and adherence to prosocial norms within sports teams could yield practical insights into strategies for cultivating positive social outcomes through sport engagement.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, team cohesion is a key social-psychological variable in sport and, alongside the other variables we considered, has the potential to enhance players' off-field prosocial behaviour. Understanding social dynamics in sport as a social context that offers occasions to engage in positive or negative behaviour towards others may lead to explaining how to transfer prosocial behaviour from on-field to off-field, that is, from sport to daily life. The present study not only provides an important theoretical and empirical contribution in this direction but, feeding into a small line of applicative research (e.g., Cocco et al., 2024), it provides indications for psychologists and practitioners on which underlying mechanisms might be key to transfer prosocial behaviour from the field to the general community, which is especially relevant in contexts where sports participation is strong. Research in this setting can offer valuable insights into how sport influences not only physical health, but also social interactions and community cohesion, thereby providing evidence to inform public health strategies, educational policies, and community development programs. In this sense, understanding how to transfer what individuals have learned in sports to the outside world is a challenging task (Lee & Martinek, 2013) but also a very promising opportunity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The questionnaire also included other measures.

² The indirect effects were also significant when controlling for rugby experience, and when including age and gender as additional covariates. Additional analyses revealed that the effects of predictors (social cohesion, task cohesion) on mediators (fairplay team norms, empathy) or dependent variable (off-field prosocial behaviour) were not moderated by gender, or by participants' level of play (amateur, sub-elite, elite).

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