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Psychologists in sports contexts: Yes? No? Perhaps?

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ABSTRACT

This work provides a reflection about the development of sport psychology as a scientific, professional, and practical domain, emphasizing that mental factors can impact the performance and wellbeing of sports agents (particularly athletes). Specifically, the manuscript is organized into three sections: (a) some important historical events that helped build sport psychology as a scientific domain and main scientific and professional associations that contributed to spread knowledge and practice of sport psychologists; (b) some data about research and practice of sport psychology; and (c) a reflection of what conditions can facilitate or debilitate the employment of sport psychology professionals by providing a decision tree (and a related questionnaire) that can help the decision for hiring or not a sport psychology professional.

Keywords: sport psychology, psychological factors, psychological intervention, sport psychologists' integration questionnaire

PSYCHOLOGISTS IN SPORTS CONTEXTS: YES? NO? PERHAPS?

Sport psychology is an exciting and well-established area of psychology, with over a century of research that strengthened this scientific domain, with several implications to practitioners. Thus, it makes sense to reflect about the employment of sport psychology professionals in real sports contexts. In this work, we briefly describe some key moments of the development, research and practice of sport psychology that help to understand this field of knowledge and serve as basis to discuss the dissemination of sports psychologists in sports. In simple words, we will discuss the favorable and unfavorable conditions to the practice and employment of sport psychologists in sports contexts.

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Sport psychology refers to the scientific study of individuals and their behavior within sport contexts, as well as the practical application of that knowledge (Gill & Williams, 2008). Thus, among others, sport psychologists are interested in understanding how psychological factors impact performance, and on how participating in sport contexts impacts one's psychological development, health, and well-being (Araújo & Serpa, 2004; Weinberg & Gould, 2024). The population base of sport psychologists is broad, and includes children, adults, elite athletes, seniors, and people with disabilities to achieve maximum participation, peak performance, and personal satisfaction and development through participation in a sport context (Weinberg & Gould, 2024). Apart from athletes and sport participants, sport psychologists also develop their work with sport organizations as a whole, including federations, clubs, staff, managers, coaches, referees, and parents. Even though Sport Psychology is a fairly recent field of research and psychological intervention, it is a solid area of research and professional practice, and has come a long way to establish itself as an independent field of psychological science.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The first research related to sport psychology was published in 1898 by the American psychologist Norman Triplett whose work is considered the first experiment in the field of Sport Psychology (Cruz, 1996). Triplett studied how the presence of others may hinder or increase performance by comparing the average speed of cyclists when racing alone (against the clock), racing with pacers, or

racing in a competition (against other cyclists). In a nutshell, Triplett concluded that, when racing against others or with pacers, cyclists tend to be faster and, therefore, that the presence of others can influence performance. Over a decade later, in 1913, an important step was taken in Europe, when Pierre de Coubertin, even though he was not a psychologist, promoted a scientific meeting (Congress of Lausanne) in which, under the general theme of “Psychology and Physiology of Sports”, aimed to launch and disseminate sport psychology as a new scientific area (cf. Serpa, 2009). In the subsequent decades important steps followed that event, particularly the development of sport psychology laboratories in the United States of America, Russia, Japan, and Germany (Weinberg & Gould, 2024). However, only in the 60s Sport Psychology was definitely recognized as a scientific discipline and professional practice.

Indeed, the period between 1960-1980 was key to establish Sport Psychology as an independent branch of research and practice within Psychology. Particularly, it is important to highlight the I World Congress of Sport Psychology (Rome, 1965), in which the International Society of Sport and Exercise Psychology was officially created followed by the European Federation of Sport Psychology four years later (Serpa, 1995). During this period, sport psychology became a separate component of physical education (nowadays referred as kinesiology or exercise and sport science), and was mainly focused on studying how psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, personality, self-esteem) influenced performance and, on the other hand, how participating in sport influenced psychological development (e.g., personality development, aggression) (Weinberg & Gould, 2024).

From 1981 onwards, Sport Psychology registered a tremendous growth, not only in North-America and Europe, but around the world, and American Psychological Association (APA) decided to create a special division dedicated to this field. In the early years of the 80s, the elite athlete was the main focus and researchers tried to understand how to best develop psychological preparation to competition (Brito, 1996). It is important to note that, in this period, most research topics were centered around “problematic athletes” because these were the athletes that concerned sport agents and that looked for the help of psychologists. Thus, it was mostly clinical psychology applied to athletes who were looking for changing their behavior in this context (Brito, 1996). At the end of that decade, the shift has changed from studying personality, perception, motivation, anxiety, and stress to developing specific techniques of mental training and cognitive strategies (Cruz, 1996). Therefore, sport psychologists were particularly interested in developing an in-depth knowledge about athletes and their psychological profiles in order to develop interventions to maximize performance. Achieving excellency was the pivotal point in this period, and sport psychologists were focused on helping athletes preparing for training and competition and optimizing their performance became the main aim, and specific training programs of mental skills for sport and performance started to emerge (Brito, 1996). In the mid-90s, Sport Psychology was established in the scientific and practice communities, and an interest for sport participation, youth development in sport, motivation, and other initial concerns became hot topics again.

In the recent years, new trends have been considered. The biggest shift is, however, the concern for the athlete as a whole person, reinforcing that sport is only a part of athletes do, along with other matters and non-athletic environments. This has important implications. First, more attention has been given to health, and particularly to mental health which is today at the center of sport psychologists’ concerns, as it constitutes a major resource for athletes’ development and performance (cf. Schinke et al., 2017). The recognition that sport environment can constitute an increased mental health risk (due to their training loads, competition, and stressful lifestyle), lead the International Society for Sport Psychology to issue a Position Stand highlighting the concerns for mental health in athletes, and the need for sport psychologists not only intervene and monitor athletes’ mental health, but also proactively work in preventing mental ill-being (cf. Schinke et al., 2017). A second important implication is a more holistic approach in intervening with athletes, taking a wider perspective of different challenges and transitions that athletes face and the need for athletic and non-athletic development. Specifically, the discourse around athletes’ career has changed, and athletic career is now seen as part of a life career (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014), which has import implications, namely by expanding the meaning of athletic experiences “from doing sport for the sake of sport to doing sport for the sake of sport and life” (Stambulova et al., 2020, p. 527). Finally, a second important change refers to the broader application of the sport psychology principles to other contexts, specifically to other performance contexts. The conceptualization of Sport Psychology as “Sport and Performance Psychology” has increased in the recent years, as a form of reinforcing the application of sport psychology principles and techniques to other high-performance areas, such as artistic performance, business, medicine, military, among others. Thus, Performance Psychology is emerging as

an area of interest and opportunity for Sport Psychologists to develop their careers.

MAIN SCIENTIFIC AND PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Some of the most important North-American and European scientific and professional associations include:

- International Society of Sport and Exercise Psychology (ISSP)
- North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (NASPSPA)
- European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC)
- Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP)
- American Psychological Association (APA) Division 47 – Exercise and Sport Psychology
- Sociedad Iberoamericana de Psicología del Deporte
- Portuguese Society for Sport Psychology

The aforementioned historical development of Sport Psychology shows this is a young profession, and this scientific and professional associations are fairly recent. Most importantly, these associations provide important guidelines regarding the ethical principles that sport psychologists have to respect and that guide their practice having athletes' or other sport clients' welfare on the top of their priorities. Some of these associations (as APA, for example) also define guidelines for specific knowledge (about social, historical, cultural, and developmental issues related to sport participation, and well as the bio behavioral bases of sport and exercise), as well as for certification that psychologists need to acquire to complete their practice license. These certifications protect those who request their services, ensuring that the professional they seek possesses an in-depth and specialized knowledge in order to intervene with adequate and specific science-based strategies.

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Sports Psychology combines today a very significant volume of data about the evidence of psychological intervention in different sport contexts and in a significant variety of intervention targets.

TARGETS, CONTEXTS, AND PURPOSE OF INTERVENTION

Achieving peak performance requires much more than the development of physical and sport abilities. Mental abilities are increasingly valued because having “natural” talent does not explain per se sport excellence. Therefore, sports psychology aims to provide athletes and other sports agents mental and behavioral resources that enhance their performance and well-being. It is important to highlight that the work of a sports psychologist is not limited to elite athletes. It is often assumed that sports psychologists work exclusively with high-performance athletes or their teams; however, sport psychology extends far beyond high performance. Psychologists support individuals of all ages and in various sport contexts, such as athletes, coaches, parents and other amateur or elite sports agents, participants of physical exercise of all ages, levels and for different reasons (e.g., students engaging in physical activity in schools, gym-goers, individuals exercising for health improvement, among others) (Weinberg & Gould, 2024).

Thus, sport psychology encompasses not only practical activities such as high-performance sports, creative sports, or other physical activities, but also research, clinical, and educational areas (Singer, 1993). Therefore, in the sports context, sports psychologists work in various settings, most notably in sports clubs and national federations, but also in schools (e.g., elementary, secondary, or university education), amateur institutions, and adapted sports contexts.

Another important aspect refers to how sports contexts represent a positive educational environment that allow athletes to develop not only as players but also as individuals, specifically regarding to how athletes learn sports skills, including psychological skills. In other words, can sports represent an educational context that favors the personal and technical development of athletes? The answer to this question may depend on if sports context stimulates the development of athletes' life skills. Life skills in sports concerns to personal abilities of athletes (e.g.: motivation, stress management, communication, etc) that can be learned in this specific context and then transferred to other life domains of athletes. To facilitate the learning of life skills, Gomes and Resende (2020) propose that

athletes should be provided to opportunities do learn life skills by following four stages: (a) motivation, informing athletes about the interest and usefulness of learning a life skill; (c) learning, delivering specific training opportunities for athletes to learn the life skills; (c) automatization, providing athletes with specific opportunities to use the life skills in a certain sport situation; and (d) transference, where athletes are provided with different opportunities inside or outside sport to use the life skills learned in sports. This educational model of life skills, used by sport psychologists, can indeed reinforce the developmental value of sports to the wellbeing and growth of athletes.

INTERVENTION AREAS

Despite the diversity of intervention contexts, effective practice in the field of sports psychology involves the use of evidence-based approaches, methods, and interventions. Depending on the professional conducting the intervention and the clients' needs, sport psychology practice may involve individual or group sessions directed to improve several mental skills, such as (a) motivation, by using goal setting strategies; (b) concentration, by using mental plans for competition and imagery; (c) control of arousal and emotions by using relaxation and cognitive strategies; (d) cohesion, by using team building techniques; (e) leadership of team captains, coaches, and sport managers by using communication training techniques. Sport psychology interventions also include promoting the mental health of athletes when they face injuries, loss of sport confidence, and other adverse consequences of sports (Balaguer et al., 2015; Northouse, 2021; Weinberg & Gould, 2024).

RESEARCH DATA

Psychological interventions contribute to athletes' performance improvement, being particularly evident when performance depends more of cognitive elements (Brown & Fletcher, 2017; Lochbaum et al., 2022). Thus, it is not surprising that several scientific and professional journals and books are dedicated to understanding how psychological skills are applied to sports (Hill & Mellano, 2021). Regarding motivation and concentration competencies, they are key factors to help athletes (particularly the youngest) overcoming challenges and consequently achieving excellence (Dohme et al., 2019). In what concerns arousal and emotions control, data indicates that relaxation helps athletes to face the competitive context in a more adaptive manner (Diaz, 2011; Renaghan et al., 2023). In similar way, imagery is quite powerful for helping athletes to concentrate for competition, with significant advantages for those who use this strategy compared to those who do not (Feltz et al., 1983; Toth et al., 2020). Concerning team cohesion, results indicate that when coaches prioritize cooperation and union in their teams, athletes tend to be more united in pursuing common goals (Balaguer et al., 2015; Moustakas & Robrade, 2023). Finally, sport psychology can also help to improve the leadership competency of coaches, existing evidence that the use of positive leadership behaviors (e.g., transformational leadership behaviors, positive feedback, among others) associated with the ability to solve conflicts can impact the performance and wellbeing of athletes (Edelmann et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2022; Morais & Gomes, 2019; Weinberg & Gould, 2024).

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY: WHERE DO WE STAND?

The previous sections answer the question of "where do we stand?" clearly: sport psychology is a solid scientific and professional field that can benefit all individuals involved in this context. If this is the case, the question is whether sports psychologists have gained the prominence that would have been expected. And the answer is, unfortunately, no! It is therefore worth thinking about the factors that facilitate and debilitate the effective credibility of the sports psychologist in the sports community.

FACTORS FACILITATING THE DIFFUSION OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

There are three main arguments in favor of hiring sport psychologists:

1. Science with Empirical Evidence

This is the main reason for accepting sport psychology among other areas of knowledge related to sport. In fact, it is possible to scientifically demonstrate the validity and usefulness of the intervention strategies and techniques used by sport psychology professionals, and these professionals effectively add value to the actions of all sports agents, most notably to athletes.

2. Application to Multiple Contexts and Targets

As mentioned before, it is quite evident that sport psychology is a consolidated scientific field, and that have produced relevant knowledge about how to intervene with children and young athletes doing juvenile sports, young and adults athletes doing high-performance sports, adults and older people practicing sports and exercise for health and well-being reasons, until a point that sport psychology can even be divided in distinct fields: sport psychology for young athletes, sport psychology for high-performance athletes, sport psychology for individuals interested in doing sports without competitive purpose (“participant sports”), and exercise psychology for all individuals interested in improving their physical and mental conditions. Besides, sport psychologists can work with a wide range of individuals, including the most referred ones (athletes of all ages), sports coaches (from different sports), managers and administrators (from different sports), families and significant others of athletes, and all of those involved in sports for fun and professional motives (fans, media, etc.).

3. Response to Multiple Demands

This reason stems from the diversity of interventions that sports psychology professionals can assume (from a more clinical to a more organizational approach to intervention), which demonstrates the richness and interest of this scientific field. Specifically, there are interventions carried out with preventive purpose (e.g., to improve emotional control of athletes and coaches when facing the demands of competition or improving self-control of parents of young athletes while watching their competitions), illustrating a more clinical perspective of the intervention. On the other hand, there are interventions carried out to develop and promote psychological skills that facilitate individuals’ ability to adapt and respond to the demands of competition (e.g., improve communication and leadership skills of team captains, coaches, sports managers). In this case, it is assumed a more educational perspective of the intervention provided by the sport psychologist professional. Finally, an organizational perspective is illustrated by interventions carried out to promote better organizational policies that facilitate the way sports is delivered for all agents involved; for example, sport psychologists can be involved in establishing sport policies that increase fair play among those involved.

FACTORS DEBILITATING THE DIFFUSION OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Regardless the innumerable advantages of working with sport psychologists, their establishment in sport organizations are not yet a reality. Three factors serve as obstacles to hire sport psychologists:

1. Costs

Just like any other professional, hiring a sport psychology represents a cost. This aspect is exacerbated by the poor financial conditions in which many sports organizations operate, where scarce resources are directed towards basic operating needs. This represents an extremely damaging consequence for the development of sport psychology: it simple does not allow professionals in this field to have a long and consistent career in sports contexts, limiting the opportunity to consolidate psychological interventions and scientific knowledge itself. It is therefore urgent to stop seeing sport psychology professionals as a cost, but rather as an investment.

2. Alternative Professionals and Knowledge

The idea that other professionals with no basic training in psychology can achieve the extraordinary feat of being more effective in their “mental interventions” than psychologists themselves is a prevalent and extremely dangerous myth within sports contexts. The emergence of “new professionals” such as “mental coaches”, who, without any basic training in psychology, present themselves as the professionals best prepared to intervene in the mental factors in sports hindrance the expansion of sports psychologists (who sometimes, in desperation, stop calling themselves psychologists and adopt the terminology mentioned above) and, even worse, increases the likelihood that alternative knowledges are provided in sports without scientific and professional certification.

3. Few Training Opportunities

Even though, and as aforementioned, sport psychology is a well-established field of psychology, it has yet to be fully consolidated within the formal education and training of psychologists, having

still few opportunities for progression and improvement. The right opportunities for training sports psychologists are not always available due the fact that the traditional areas of psychology in Masters' degrees (e.g., clinical, educational, and organizational psychology) are still prevalent. Besides, the development of postgraduate study plans in sport psychology is complex because it entails the combination of knowledge from different scientific areas (e.g., sports training, sports medicine, sports technology, sports pedagogy, among others). This scenario challenges the development of sports psychology and, unfortunately, can favor the spread of such alterative knowledge to psychology.

In sum, considering the aforementioned benefits and obstacles, the question remains: Psychologists in sports contexts: Yes? No? Perhaps? There is no simple answer, but the decision may rely in the conditions that may be present when the opportunity to hire a sport psychology professional arise. Despite the diversity of factors that may influence hiring such a professional, four major areas of decision can be considered: beliefs about science (i.e., how much value is given to sport psychology as a scientific and practical field), about ethical issues (i.e., how much acceptance is given to ethical procedures adopted by sport psychology), career opportunities (i.e., how much interest is given to the need of offering a stable career to the sport psychologist), and work conditions (i.e., how much interest is given to the need of offering the necessary structural conditions that allow the sport psychologist to do the expected activities). Figure 1 describes in more detail these four factors, helping to make the final decision of hiring or not a sport psychology professional. Thus, depending of these four answers, a final decision may be selected, meaning that it can be "Yes" (conditions for hiring are met), "No" (conditions for hiring are not met), and even "Perhaps" (conditions are not fully met but they can be rearranged to make possible the integration of the sport psychology – "changeable scenarios" of Figure 1).

A. Beliefs about science ➤ Do you believe in sport psychology as a valid scientific domain and practical tool that can help the development of all involved? Implies • Accepting that sport psychology is a scientific domain based in empirical data and scientific assumptions; • Accepting that sport psychologists offer unique contributes to help human development of all sports agents. Changeable scenario ○ Not all potential targets of sport psychology intervention in a specific context are aware of the validity of sport psychology but they are sensible to training or they do not take decisions regarding the sport psychology activity.		
	↓	↓
Decision tree	Yes	No
B. Ethical issues ➤ Do you understand and respect the ethical code of action of (sport) psychologists? Implies • Accepting the professional responsibility and technical-scientific autonomy of sport psychologists. Changeable scenario ○ Not all potential targets of sport psychology intervention in a specific context are aware of the ethical issues of sport psychology but they are sensible to training or they do not take decisions regarding the sport psychology activity.		
	↓	↓
Decision tree	Yes	No
C. Career perspectives ➤ Do you have conditions to offer a contract to a sport psychologist? Implies • Accepting that sport psychologists are like any other professionals that need to be paid to do their job. Changeable scenario ○ There are no conditions to offer a full contract to the sport psychologist but there are alternatives of payment until conditions for a full contract are met (consultancy, project-based contracts, partial time contracts, among others).		
	↓	↓
Decision tree	Yes	No
D. Work conditions ➤ Do you have structural conditions that allow the sport psychologists to do their job efficiently? Implies • Accepting that sport psychologists need resources, materials, and tools provided by the organizations to work. Changeable scenario ○ Not all structural conditions are available but minimal conditions are available to start the activity of the sport psychology professional and there is a plan to provide all the necessary resources.		
	↓	↓
Decision tree	Yes	No
Scenarios 1. The basic conditions to employ the sport psychologist in the organization are guaranteed, being important to monitor them over time. 2. The basic conditions to employ the sport psychologist in the organization are not guaranteed, being important to openly discuss if there is something that could be done to solve these issues.	Hire (1)	Do not hire (2)

Figure 1 Decision Tree for Hiring a Sport Psychology Professional

CONCLUSION

Sport psychology is a fascinating domain of science and intervention, where performing under demanding circumstances is required. Achieving excellence in sport contexts is without any doubt the combination of several factors that can explain why the most well-prepared athletes can fail when pressure arise or why the most talented young athletes simple do not progress as expected. Beyond all factors explaining human behavior in sports contexts, the ones related to psychological are certainly worth of consideration. However, despite the enthusiastic growth of sport psychology in academia and scientific organizations, the establishment of sports psychologists in the field is far from the potentialities that sport psychology can offer. This paper discussed the development of sport psychology over time and the conditions involved in the employment of sport psychologists in sport organizations, arguing that “Yes” should be answer when the question is to hire or not a sport psychologist.

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APPENDIX

Sport Psychologists Employment Questionnaire

Please read carefully each question below, analyzing the implications of each one. Please try to answer the questions not thinking about “ideal scenarios” BUT thinking about what happens right in your professional context.

	Yes	No	Somewhat
A. Beliefs about science 1. Do you believe in sport psychology as a valid scientific domain and practical tool that can help the development of all involved? Implies - Accepting that sport psychology is a scientific domain based in empirical data and scientific assumptions; - Accepting that sport psychologists offer unique contributes to help human development of all sports agents.			
B. Ethical issues 2. Do you understand and respect the ethical code of action of (sport) psychologists? Implies Accepting the professional responsibility and technical-scientific autonomy of sport psychologists.			
C. Career perspectives 3. Do you have conditions to offer a contract to a sport psychologist? Implies Accepting that sport psychologists are like any other professionals that need to be paid to do their job.			
D. Work conditions 4. Do you have structural conditions that allow the sport psychologists to do their job efficiently? Implies Accepting that sport psychologists need resources, materials, and tools provided by the organizations to work.			
Sum of answers			

Interpretation of scores	Scenarios
Total of “YES” answers equal to 4 Decision The basic conditions to employ the sport psychologist in the organization are guaranteed, being important to monitor them over time.	Favorable scenario to employ
Total of “NO” answers equal to 4 Decision The basic conditions to employ the sport psychologist in the organization are not guaranteed, being important to openly discuss if there is something that could be done to solve these issues.	Unfavorable scenario to employ
Less than 4 YES answers Less than 4 NO answers One or more “SOMEWHAT” answers Decision - The basic conditions to employ a sport psychologist in the organization are not guaranteed in one or more areas, being important do discuss specific strategies that can be implemented to solve the issues in question; - If there is an agreement regarding strategies to implement, then there is a favorable scenario to integrate the professional; - If there is no agreement regarding strategies to implement, then there is an unfavorable scenario to integrate the professional.	Negotiable scenario to employ

Note. The instrument can be adapted to be used in other fields of psychology activity. For that it should be changed “sports” for the alternative context.