

THE ATTITUDE OF ROMANIAN SPORTS FANS TOWARDS PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING

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Abstract: *Understanding the attitudes of athletes towards sports psychology is crucially important because if psychologists understand the barriers and hesitations of athletes towards psychological counselling, they can intervene educationally to foster a mindset and belief. In the current study, we aim to examine the existing differences between high-performance sports and non-professional (junior) sports regarding psychological counselling. The SPAR (Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised) questionnaire was applied to a set of 84 athletes, aged between 12 and 36 years old. In junior sports, the scores on the sub-scale of stigma tolerance are lower, and they are less concerned with the stigma issue, preferring to seek psychological counselling only when absolutely necessary.*

Key words: *sports psychology, motivation, attitude, sports consulting, psychological counseling.*

1. Introduction

Sport psychology should interactively highlight different approaches of psychological interventions in sport, aiming to optimize the performance that directly influences the activity of performance athletes: the psychological counselling for coaches, coaching, psychological counselling for the athletes parents, and sports organizations advice and primarily counselling for the athlete or sports team [1]. Our purpose is to debate and find the roots of the restraints and failure to capitalize on the huge image capital which could be achieved if the

major implications of the mental training on peak performance would be acknowledged. Primarily as an athlete and at the same time as a person passionate about psychology I have tried to merge my two passions that seemed so separate at one point in my conception.

The survey was completed by 84 athletes of various performance levels in different sports. The data collected from this questionnaire could assist professionals to determine whether the athletes are interested in acquiring mental abilities, if they are receptive to sports psychology, confident in the abilities of the counselor, and tolerant toward the

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counselor's personal features. Based on these findings, sports psychologists could tailor their approach based on the client's features, to be prepared in various approaches of the therapy [7, 8, 9]. On the other hand, I hope for this approach to be useful in initiating some steps towards accommodating the athlete with sports psychology and learning to differentiate it from pathological psychology [6]. The consumer could love psychology and resent the sports psychologist or vice-versa. Despite a presumption that a positive attitude towards psychology determines a positive attitude towards sports psychologist, in reality they are distinct constructs [11]. This situation is due to the fact that the attitude towards sports psychologist is influenced by many more factors than the psychology, while the attitude towards psychology is only determined by psychology itself. The perception on sports psychologist involves an important cognitive component, while psychology determines mainly an effective response [2].

2. Objectives

The objective of this study is to collect data on the attitudes of Romanian athletes towards psychological counselling by applying the SPA-R questionnaire. In this study, we aim to examine the existing differences between performance and non-professional (junior) athletes. Based on the general objective, we propose the following.

1. To examine the cultural differences between senior and junior athletes
2. To examine the differences between senior and junior athletes regarding the openness to sports psychologist.

3. To examine the differences between senior and junior athletes in terms of trust in psychological counselling.

4. To examine the differences between the senior and junior athletes in terms of stigma.

Hypothesis of the study:

1. Performance athletes will prefer a psychologist from the same cultural environment, which is similar to the perceived identity (CP), and non-professional athletes are concerned with this aspect
2. Performance athletes are more open to turn to counselling (PO) than non-professionals.
3. Performance athletes have more trust in psychological counselling (CO) than non-professionals.
4. Performance athletes are less concerned about the stigma of turning to a sports psychologist (ST), than non-professionals

3. Material and Methods

The questionnaire was filled in without tracing the names of the participants, in order to increase the sincerity of the responses. The SPA-R (Sport Psychology Attitudes Revise) questionnaire was developed by Lavalley et al. (2002) and consists of 25 items designed to assess the perceptions of athletes regarding their psychological preparation for sport [5]. The SPA-R contains four subscales. The four factors associated with attitude towards sport psychology are:

- A. Stigma tolerance consisting of 7 items
- B. Confidence in sports psychological counselling consisting of 8 items
- C. Personal openness consisting of 6 items
- D. Cultural preference consisting of 4 items

The questionnaire was applied to a set of 84 athletes aged between 12 and 36 years old. This set of athletes includes 62 juniors (non-professionals) with an average age of 16,01 years old and $SD=1,67$; the youngest is 12 years old and the oldest is 19 years old. In terms of seniority in sport $m=6.06$ and $SD=6.06$; the highest seniority is 11 years and the lowest is 1 year.

There are 22 seniors (performance athletes) with an average age of 23.31 years old where $SD=4.17$; the youngest performance athlete is 18 years old and the oldest is 36 years old. In terms of seniority in sport $m=11.36$ and $SD=4.63$; the highest seniority is 25 years and the lowest is 7 years.

Out of the total number of performance athletes participating in this study, 7 play basketball and represent 8.3% of the total and 31.8% of the performance athletes. There are 15 subjects who play handball representing 17.9% of the participants and 68.2% of the performance athletes.

Out of the total number of 62 juniors participating in this study, 57 play football, representing 67.9% of the subjects and 91.9% of the total juniors 2 juniors play basketball representing 3.2% of the total juniors and 2.4% of the subjects ; 3 juniors play handball representing 4.8% of the juniors and 3.6% of the subjects.

Out of the total non-professional subjects 57 are males representing 67.9% of the subjects and 91.9% of the juniors. There are 5 female non-professional subjects representing 6% of the participants and 8.1% of the non-professionals.

4. Results and Discussions

The internal consistency of subscales was analyzed by calculating the α parameter. For Cultural Preferences (CP) subscale the result was $\alpha=0.64$; for Confidence in Psychological counselling (CO) subscale $\alpha=0.86$; for Stigma Tolerance (ST) $\alpha=0.79$; and for Personal Openness (PO) $\alpha=0.67$. Two subscales fail to reach the recommended threshold, $\alpha=0.70$ of internal consistency but by reference to the study on validity and reliability of the questionnaire conducted by Martin et al. (2002) we can state they are tolerable. In this study the results were the following CP: $\alpha=0.66$; CO: $\alpha=0.84$; ST: $\alpha=0.83$; PO: $\alpha=0.64$, accepted results as the number of items in the two subscales failing to reach the 0.70 threshold is lower.

The Cultural Preference subscale includes items referring to the resemblance of the subject to the psychologist and to the counselor's sport profile. To interpret the data in this subscale we come down to the comparison of environments and note that performance athletes have a lower average in CP subscale than non-professionals, thus juniors shall manifest higher cultural preference than seniors.

In the next subscale, Personal Openness (PO), we notice a difference between performance athletes and non-professionals, with higher scores in seniors. A high score in this subscale means lack of personal openness in general, the individuals being reluctant in discussing problems with others. Other practitioners consider any reluctance of athletes in discussing personal problems with others as a barrier in turning to a sports psychologist.

As the significant is lower than 0.05 the null hypothesis is rejected and the second

hypothesis is confirmed. Therefore, the performance athletes are characterized by a lower personal openness to experiment sports psychology, they are less willing to discuss their problems and worries with others, compared to non-professional athletes

In terms of Confidence in psychological counselling (CO), meaning the faith of the athlete in the usefulness of psychology in sports and of mental training, the same procedure of comparing environments is applied. To calculate the significant between the environments we observe that $p < 0,1$, so the difference between the two groups is not significant, therefore the third hypothesis is invalidated and conclude that there are no differences in terms of confidence in psychological counseling between performance athletes and non-professional ones [13].

Stigma Tolerance (ST), measures the athletes' concern that they could be labelled by others as mentally disturbed if turning to a psychologist. Our hypothesis is that performance athletes shall be less concerned of the stigma of turning to a psychologist than non-professional athletes. A high score in this scale means concern about the stigma of turning to a

psychologist. By comparing the environments we notice that performance athletes have higher average in this subscale than non-professional athletes.

In order to analyze the significant between the environments we shall use the independent T test and observe that it is lower than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there are no major differences between groups is invalidated. Thus, the fourth hypothesis is not true and performance athletes develop a higher concern of the stigma of counselling than non-professional athletes.

Overall our main hypothesis is invalidated and non-professional athletes (juniors) are more concerned of the psychologist's features, have a higher personal openness, lower stigma tolerance, and scores in psychological counselling trust are similar to performance athletes showing reduced ambiguity to sports counselling.

Thus we obtained a comparison between the answers of seniors and juniors and we will discuss hereafter their psychological implications in this study

Table 1

Image of Satisfaction with the assistance provided by psychologists according to seniors

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	he (she) didn't call	10	11.9	45.5	45.5
	to some extent	5	6.0	22.7	68.2
	very pleased	7	8.3	31.8	100.0
	Total	22	26.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	73.8		
Total		84	100.0		

Table 2

Image of Satisfaction with the assistance provided by psychologists according to juniors

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	he (she) didn't call	43	51.2	69.4	69.4
	not at all	1	1.2	1.6	71.0
	to some extent	6	7.1	9.7	80.6
	very pleased	12	14.3	19.4	100.0
	Total	62	73.8	100.0	
Missing	System	22	26.2		
Total		84	100.0		

The first table illustrates the satisfaction related to counselling in seniors and it shall be compared to the results obtained by juniors in this item. We noticed that 69.4% of the juniors and 45% of the seniors never turned to a psychologist. These rates are quite high as it is well known that mental training is decisive in sports training.

The satisfaction rate of the two groups is though gratifying: 80% of juniors and 100% of the seniors who turned to a sports psychologist were satisfied with the counselling. The question arises: why aren't there more athletes turning to sports counselling? The existence of collateral factors other than those related to attitudes is very likely.

Table 3

Image of the Juniors results of discussing personal issues with the psychologist

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	he (she) didn't call	6	7.1	9.7	9.7
	to some extent	33	39.3	53.2	62.9
	very pleased	23	27.4	37.1	100.0
	Total	62	73.8	100.0	
Missing	System	22	26.2		
Total		84	100.0		

Table 4

Image of the Seniors results of discussing personal issues with the psychologist

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all	1	1.2	4.5	4.5
	to some extent	14	16.7	63.6	68.2
	very open	7	8.3	31.8	100.0
	Total	22	26.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	73.8		
Total		84	100.0		

The answer to the open question submitted to juniors and seniors whether they would discuss personal problems with the psychologist show that 4.5% of the seniors and 9.7% of the juniors would not discuss personal problems with the sports psychologist and 31.8% of the seniors and 37.1% of the juniors state to

be open to turn to a sports psychologist. The rate of undecided is high, namely 63% of the seniors and 53% of the juniors, therefore the sports psychologists should take steps to convince them and to explain the usefulness of this stage in sports counselling.

Table 5

Image of the Seniors results of discussing performance issues with the psychologist

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	to some extent	10	11.9	45.5	45.5
	very open	12	14.3	54.5	100.0
	Total	22	26.2	100.0	
Missing	System	62	73.8		
Total		84	100.0		

Table 6

Image of the Juniors results of discussing performance issues with the psychologist

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not at all	1	1.2	1.6	1.6
	to some extent	15	17.9	24.2	25.8
	very open	46	54.8	74.2	100.0
	Total	62	73.8	100.0	
Missing	System	22	26.2		
Total		84	100.0		

Discussing performance issues with the psychologist is also the extent to which the athlete sees how sports counselling could help to improve performance and the desire to turn to such a service, thus even the most reluctant athletes in discussing personal problems shall be open to counselling for performance related problems [4]. Based on the two tables above, 45% of the seniors are willing "to some extent" to turn to counselling and 55% are "very open". For juniors, the rates are even higher, 74%

state to be "very open", 24% are willing "to some extent", and only 1% are not interested in counselling.

This forces and motivates us in developing relevant and scientifically validated means, providing athletes with professional and competent intervention.

5. Conclusions

Based on the attitude it can be stated that this study is an investigation of this concept and we have some reservations

regarding the hypothesis that performance athletes show less reluctance towards counselling as compared to non-professional athletes.

Therefore, in this analysis we have noticed different values of the operationalized concepts - stigma tolerance (ST), Cultural preference (CP), confidence in psychological counselling (CO) and personal openness (PO) subscales in performance and non-professional athletes

Despite all expectations, the juniors scored lower in ST and thus shall be less concerned by the stigma of those who turn to psychological counselling. This can be interpreted as having certain advantages as we can say that the future holds promise. This is probably due to a broader conception of young people on the meaning of general training and implicitly of mental training.

Young people are more informed and can find motivation in a direction that can offer them a successful career. For that matter juniors have positive scores in other subscales as well, such as in cultural preference (CP); showing a cultural preference leads us to believe there is interest in contacting sports psychologist, knowing that preferences are triggers of actions. Personal openness (PO) or the fact that people are open and capable of discussing personal problems and concerns which shows that juniors are more open to this approach, while seniors still think that personal problems should be dealt with at home or on their own.

A part from being harmful for the performance as the effects of negative emotions on mental and physical performance are well-known, this conception is expressed by a leader, which makes it dangerous as it could influence

such cognitive schemes of other athletes as well.

For marketing purposes, a more active involvement of sports psychologists is absolutely necessary to shape some formal and informal leverages to promote the concepts of sports psychology. [3] This field is the psychology of health, of performance equipped with efficient intervention means and methods, able to provide satisfaction if applied in a scientific and ethical spirit [10].

We are backed by the confidence in psychological counselling (CO) or by the athlete's beliefs that the sport and mental training are useful. The juniors eager for performance seek for ways to excel, are interested in the latest findings in sport science and become more aware of the psychological factor for success mainly noticed in the western athlete, who is more balanced and more stable in competitions. Teenager juniors seem to be extremely open in trying to benefit from sports counselling, though the concept is somewhat ambiguous. In contrast, coaches are not willing to sacrifice much time for mental training, and what seems to be even worse is that the leaders are not willing to make a real financial effort in this regard.

The seniors also consider that mental training is useful, some of them even experienced it in the national but mainly in the foreign sports clubs where they have performed. But as shown in this study, they scored low in personal openness and stigma tolerance, as they are more conservatory and time-serving.

In this context we have to mention the role of the psychologist in stimulating counselling activities, in being close to the athletes, in promoting their activities. The fact that all non-professional athletes are

juniors influences somehow the concept of this study, as it is obvious that in everyday life not all amateur sportsmen are juniors but this is beneficial for the practice as it is very likely for many more junior athletes to become performance athletes than amateur or casual sportsmen [12].

In this train of thoughts, I consider that our effort should be focused on counselling young people, on self-growth and marketing programs, maybe even on initiating laws promoting sports psychology, supporting its optimization approach of performance and high performance athletes.

An extremely important factor in psychology or sports psychology development is represented by the fact that the psychologists and sports psychologists have become more well-known, recognizing that some competences or skills, or the success of a team is also due to mental training, performed in a scientific and organized way, would be for the people researching or practicing in this field a realistic and well-deserved assessment.

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