The History of Sport Psychology

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Abstract

This research examines the most important studies and advancements that have been completed in the field of sport psychology since its first documented study by Norman Triplett in 1897. I provide the most relevant studies conducted by important figures in the field such as Coleman R. Griffith and Bruce Ogilvie. I also describe the first sport psychology organizations that were created and that are still active today such as the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) and the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport. In addition, I define the most supported trends of thought that have influenced the field during its different periods. Finally, I offer a prediction for the future of sport psychology and professionals in the field.

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The History of Sport Psychology

Since the first Olympic Games performed in Greece in 776 B.C., sport has become an essential aspect of nearly every society (Brasch, 1970). On the other hand, psychology, since its official beginning in 1879 with Wundt’s laboratory in Leipzig, has occupied a prominent place globally and has profoundly influenced fields such as sports and physical activity (Singer, Hausenblas, & Janelle, 2001). In this paper on the history of sport psychology I will focus on the evolution of the field in North America and I will also include the most significant advancements that have been done internationally.

The first studies related to sport psychology in North America date back to the late 1800s and the early 1900s and were conducted by Norman Triplett and Coleman R. Griffith (Van Raalte & Brewer, 2002). However, sport psychology as a field of academic research did not emerge until the late 1960s, when there was a significant increase of publications on the subject, research and graduate programs were created, and specialized organizations, such as the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP), were established. The field expanded during the 1970s and 1980s and the focus moved from a personality approach to an interactional model. During the 1990s sport psychologists advocated for a cognitive model and laboratory research decreased while field research became popular. Contemporary sport psychology supports a social cognitive approach and has consolidated itself as an influential field. Finally, psychology has a promising future because it applies to many of today’s societal values and practices (Cox, Qiu, & Liu, 1993).

Early Roots & Norman Triplett’s Study: 1895 - 1920

The most widely recognized early work in sport psychology is Norman Triplett’s laboratory study of social influence on performance. In 1897, Triplett, a psychologist at Indiana
University, studied how the presence of others affects individual ability and execution (Cox et al., 1993). He analyzed records of the Racing Board of the League of American Wheelmen and discovered that cyclists tended to pedal quicker when riding next to competitors as opposed to riding by themselves (Davis, Huss, & Becker, 1995). In order to generalize his findings to other forms of behavior, he tested his hypothesis through a laboratory experiment. Triplett had participants winding fishing reels as quickly as they could in order to direct a toy flag through a course, either on their own or in competition. The fastest times were recorded when pairs of participants competed, results that confirmed his hypothesis and phenomenon that he called social facilitation (Davis et al., 1995). His experiment constitutes a benchmark for sport psychology because it was based on his observations of the sport of cycling and it involved a physical task (winding fishing reels). This research study called *Dynamogenic Factors in Pacemaking and Competition* and published in the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1898, constituted the first recorded contribution to sport psychology (Cox et al., 1993).

Unfortunately, Triplett’s study did not motivate other scholars to conduct similar research. Few articles from that period are relevant to sport psychology. The two most important of these articles were published in 1903, one by Krohn and the other one by Patrick (Cox et al., 1993). Krohn published *The value of psychology in the presentation of a teacher of gymnastics*, a paper in which he encouraged physical education teachers to offer games that stimulate students’ psychological aspects such as memory, reasoning, and imagination (Cox et al., 1993). Patrick in his article *The psychology of football* talked about the psychology of football spectators. He focused on analyzing the reasons that brought English workman to spend their limited free time watching football games. He suggested that football games, and all sports in general, provided an opportunity for spectators to release mental tension and repressed
feelings in a socially acceptable manner (Patrick, 1903). The appearance of relevant articles such as these and Triplett’s work established a basis for sport psychology to flourish (Cox et al., 1993).

**Griffith Period: 1920 – 1930**

Whereas Triplett's work represented the first sport psychology research study in North America, the first individual to do systematic sport psychology analysis was Coleman R. Griffith, a doctoral student also at the University of Illinois (Cox et al., 1993). In the 1920s, Griffith began to apply laboratory findings to real-life sports situations and went into the field to make observations and interview athletes. In addition, between 1921 and 1931, Griffith published 25 articles on topics such as learning, personality, psychomotor skills, reaction times, and flexibility (Gould & Pick, 1995). In 1923, the University of Illinois hired him to help athletes improve their performance. Later, he worked as a psychologist for basketball and football teams, such as the Chicago Cubs, to help them improve their performance through motivational talks. In 1925, Griffith started teaching the first class in sport psychology and created the first sport psychology laboratory in North America. He also published the first two books on the topic titled *Psychology of Coaching* (1926) and *Psychology and Athletics* (1928) (Gould & Pick, 1995). For being the first person who systematically conducted research in sport psychology and for his extensive work including lessons, articles, and books, he is considered the father of sport psychology in North America (Williams & Straub, 1998).

**Isolated Sport Psychology Work: 1930-1960**

Although Griffith is considered to be the father of sport psychology in North America, his work did not lead to the emergence of sport psychology because he did not have immediate followers who continued his work. In fact, during the period between 1930 and 1960, sustained
programs were nonexistent and only some sporadic research was done (Williams & Straub, 1998). In 1931, Walter Miles, B. C. Graves, and Glenn Warner, a professor, graduate student, and football coach, respectively, at Stanford University, studied reaction times of football players. Miles created a chronoscope to simultaneously time the reaction times of different players in order to enhance the team’s coordination and speed (Baugh & Benjamin, 2006).

In 1938, Franklin Henry, director of the Department of Physical Education at the University of California, created the first graduate program on psychology of physical activity. In 1949, Warren Johnson studied the emotions of football players prior to competition, setting a basis for later work on competitive emotion. Finally, in 1951, John Lawther, a psychologist who coached the Pennsylvania State University basketball team, published a book titled *Psychology of Coaching* about motivation, team unity, personality, and the handling of athletes. Despite the remarkable but sporadic work of all this individuals, sport psychology did not emerge as a field of academic research until 1965 (Williams & Straub, 1998).

**Birth of Sport Psychology and Applied Research: 1960s**

In the 1960s, three factors combined to lead to the birth of sport psychology as an area of academic research within sport sciences. First, numerous research programs and graduate courses were established (McCullagh, 1995). Henry, Lawther, and Arthur Slater-Hammel, a professor at the University of Indiana, started to offer several courses on sport psychology in their respective institutions. Due to this proliferation of specialized programs and courses in the field, sport psychology finally separated itself from motor learning and became a distinct discipline within the academic field of physical education (today called Exercise and Sports Science) (Cox et al., 1993). Thus, while motor learning courses of the time specialized on the way individuals acquired motor skills (not necessarily sport related skills), sport psychology
courses focused on the effect of psychological factors such as personality, self-confidence, and emotions on skill and performance of athletes in sport (McCullagh, 1995).

Second, applied sport psychology emerged thanks to the noteworthy work of Bruce Ogilvie and Tom Tutko, two clinical psychologists of San Jose University (Williams & Straub, 1998). After conducting extensive research on athletes’ personalities, Ogilvie and Tutko wrote the book *Problem Athletes and How to Handle Them* (1966) to guide coaches on how to help their players succeed. In addition, in 1969 they created the first sport-specific psychological test to measure athlete motivations and predict athletic success, which they called *Athletic Motivation Inventory (AMI)* (Williams & Straub, 1998). This test was created to assess elite athletes in particular and consisted of 190 multiple-choice items addressing eleven different personality characteristics. Half of the items addressed what Ogilvie and Tutko labeled as desire factors, including drive, leadership, determination, aggression, and organization; while the other half addressed emotional factors including trust, coach-ability, emotionality, self-confidence, mental toughness, and conscience development. The Athletic Motivation Inventory (AMI) has become the most widely referenced inventory in the history of sport psychology and it is still used currently (Warren, 1893). Finally, Ogilvie and Tutko worked as consultants for several college and professional teams such as Los Angeles Lakers and Dallas Cowboys. For all his extensive work, Ogilvie is considered the father of applied sport psychology in North America (Williams & Straub, 1998).

Third, in the 1960s, as more and more individuals became interested in sport psychology, many specialized organizations developed (Singer et al., 2001). In the early part of the decade, sport psychologists started to gather internationally in Rome with the creation of the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP). The first president was an Italian psychiatrist
named Ferruccio Antonelli who led the organizations during the first years. The first meeting of the organization, known as the First World Congress of Sport Psychology, was held in 1965, a date that many consider the official birth of sport psychology as a distinctive area of academic research (Singer et al., 2001). Since this first meeting in 1965, the ISSP holds meetings every four years to provide an opportunity for sport psychologists around the globe to promote and share information and research regarding sport psychology. In addition, the ISSP sponsors international meetings on sport psychology and publishes two well-known academic journals including the *International Journal of Sport Psychology* and the *Sport Psychologist* (Williams & Straub, 1998).

In 1966, soon after the ISSP was established, the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport (NASPSPA) was created. In 1967, after being accepted by the ISSP, the NASPSPA became official and held its first meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada. The first president of the organization was Hammel, and since then, the organization holds annual meetings. The main goal of the organization has been to promote the scientific study of human behavior when people are performing sports and physical activity and to facilitate scholars on the field to share information. The organization’s annual meetings are mainly attended by scholars in sport psychology and in motor learning and development. The NASPSPA sponsors and publishes the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* and has become the most well recognized and prominent organization of academic sport psychology in the world (Cox et al., 1993).

Shortly after NASPSPA was created in the United States, the Canadian Society for Psychomotor Learning and Sport Psychology (CLPLSP) was created in Canada. The CLPLSP was founded in 1969 by Robert Wilberg, a professor at the University of Alberta. During its early years, the CLPLSP was a subsidiary society of the Canadian Association for Health,
Physical Education, and Recreation, but it became self-governing in 1977. During the 1970s, both the members of the NASPSPA and the CLPLSP became crucial in creating a research base for sport psychology and achieving acceptance of the new field among scholars (Cox et al., 1993).

A Personality Approach: The 1970s

During the 1970s, sport psychology progressively consolidated itself as an independent discipline within the sport sciences field in North America. The main reason for this growth in popularity was the amount of research conducted and books published during this period. In actuality, the major role of sport psychologists during this decade was conducting systematic experimental research in order to create a solid base of knowledge for the field (Van Raalte & Brewer, 2002). However, there was a lack of agreement regarding on what this knowledge base should focus. During the 1960s, as Ogilvie and Tutkus’ work shows, there had been a clear interest in personality research. In the 1970s the majority of psychologists still believed that personality characteristics were the main factor influencing athletic performance and there were numerous publications on this topic. However, the 1980s witnessed a shift towards an interactionism model (Williams & Straub, 1998).

In 1977, Schurr, Ashley, and Joy conducted one of the most recognized studies on the influence of personality traits on sport performance and choice. They sampled of 1,596 college students and had them complete the Cattell 16 PF Questionnaire (Cox et al., 1993). This questionnaire consists of a self-report assessment test that measures 16 different personality features. The researchers analyzed personality differences between athletes and non-athletes and between team sport players and individual sport players. The results showed notorious personality differences between athletes and non-athletes and also between team sport players
and individual sport players. First, athletes rated significantly lower in anxiety and significantly higher in self-sufficiency and objectivity than non-athletes. Second, team sport athletes rated significantly higher in anxiety, dependence, and extroversion than individual sport athletes. Therefore, the researchers concluded that personality is a determinant factor in both performance and choice of sport (Russel & Jarvis, 2003). This study stands out from other personality studies conducted during this period because the results were significant and because of the large sample size and the amount of personality traits the Cattell 16PF covers (Cox et al., 1993).

**The Interactional & Cognitive Models: The 1980s**

Focus on personality theory started to decrease during 1980s due to criticism and controversy against research methods used and personality tests such as the AMI (Cox et al., 1993). The AMI and other personality tests were criticized for lack of reliability and validity and therefore not being accurate at predicting athletic performance (Vealey, 2002). Thus, while there were still some psychologists who supported a personality standpoint of view, the majority of scholars disagreed and argued that environmental factors played the most important role in influencing athletic performance (Cox et al., 1993).

In regards to this debate, Morgan, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, argued that there was a significant relationship between personality and athletic performance. However, he noticed that the majority of the studies that had been conducted on the topic had many flawed designs that were not reliable. Morgan added that one of the few studies on personality that did not present significant methodological flaws was Schurr, Ashley, and Joy’ study conducted in 1977. Morgan concluded that while personality traits influence and are a good predictor of athletic performance and success, they are not always accurate. Therefore, he encouraged sport
psychologists to keep personality profiles in mind but to also take into account that the environment plays an important role in athletic performance (Cox et al., 1993).

In the 1980s, the interactional approach consolidated itself as the new trend of thought in sport psychology. According to this model, the environment is a much more influential factor on an athlete’s performance than any personality tendency. In other words, athletic performance is not determined by an athlete’s natural response but by his response in a particular situation (William & Straub, 1998). For this reason, sport psychologists gradually started to use mood state inventories rather than personality inventories to study the impact of psychological dimensions on the performance and success of athletes (Cox et al., 1993).

The most recognized mood state test of the time was the Profile of Mood States (POMS) which was created by McNair, Lorr, and Droppleman in 1981. POMS evaluates temporal and enduring mood states on a scale from one-to-five on six different factors including tension, depression, anger, fatigue, vigor, confusion (Auweele, Nys, Rzewnicki, & Mele, 2001). One of the most notorious studies using the POMS was conducted by Morgan who administered the POMS to both successful and unsuccessful athletes. After comparing the results, he proposed the Mental Health Model and the Iceberg Profile theory. The Mental Health Model suggests that successful athletes show higher rates in mental health than unsuccessful athletes. The Iceberg Profile Theory proposes that successful elite athletes will score above average on vigor (only positive trait on the POMS) and below average on tension, depression, anger, fatigue, and confusion (negative traits on POMS) (Auweele et al., 2001).

However, the interactional approach to sport psychology also was replaced by a new cognitive-behavioral orientation. This cognitive-behavioral orientation added cognition to the interactional model. Therefore, the cognitive-behavioral orientation suggests that athletic
performance is determined by both the environment and the athlete mental processes. Sport psychologists of this period focused on cognitive intervention programs including mental imagery, hypnosis, and visualization (Feltz & Kontos, 2002). According to sport psychologists of that period who supported the cognitive-behavioral orientation, mental imagery helps to reduce anxiety and to enhance attention. In addition, imagery and visualization techniques boost precision and efficiency. On the other hand, other cognitive-behavioral psychologists argued that mental imagery usefulness depends on each case since it can only enhance athletic performance if the athlete or team as a whole has a positive attitude towards this practice (Cox et al., 1993).

During the late 1980s sport psychology also experienced another shift and sport psychologists moved from focusing on laboratory studies to mainly conducting field studies. Since 1984 the percentage of field research increased from 25% to 65%, while the percentage of laboratory research dropped. Applied sport psychology research moved from primarily studying physical education to focusing on enhancing performance of elite athletes. This shift towards applied research led to the creation of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) in the United States (Williams & Straub, 1998). This organization was founded in 1985 by John Silva, a sport psychologist at the University of North Carolina who was also elected first president of the organization. The main goal of the organization is to promote applied sport psychology research and to manage professional and practical problems of applied sport psychologists such as ethical considerations and qualifications. This association sponsors the *Psychology* and *The Sport Psychologist*, journals that publish articles based on applied research topics (Singer et al., 1998).

**Consolidation of the Field: The 1990s**
In the 1990s, the field of sport psychology experienced a further expansion both in North America and globally. During this period more research was conducted and better research methods were used which led to increased acceptance and respect towards the field among the general public and other fields such as psychology (Williams & Straub, 1998). The field was also enriched by the emergence of new forms of investigation such as interpretive and qualitative research methods that progressively became accepted and widely used (Singer et al., 2001). Numerous books and articles were published and many conferences and academic journals were created. In 1993, due to an expansion of literature on the field, the Handbook of Research on Sport Psychology was published (Singer et al., 2001). Finally, the traditional focus on the populations of college and professional athletes also broadened to embrace children, amateur adults, the elderly, and handicapped groups. As sport psychologists started to target a wider number of populations, the field has extended from the laboratory and competitive field to many different setting including schools, health centers, and gymnasiums (Van Raalte & Brewer, 2002).

**Contemporary Sport psychology**

Since its birth in 1965, sport psychology has been greatly influenced by many related fields such as psychology, sports science, and motor and learning. For this reason, sport psychologists have always been affected by research done by scholars of related fields, the research methods they used, and the ideological direction that led these other fields. Today, sport psychology has expanded so much that it has taken the role of causing impact on other fields. Learning, youth, mental programs, counseling, group dynamics, and well-being are examples of disciplines that are currently greatly influenced by sport psychology research and practices (Singer et al, 2001).
On the other hand, due to the number of professionals that have entered the field during the past three decades and the diverse educational background among them, several controversies have arisen within the field of sport psychology. Experts disagree regarding the amount and type of education and training that should be required to become a professional sport psychologist. There is also a debate over the ethical standards that should be embraced by professionals in the field. Finally, there is also another debate over the specific licensures and credentials sport psychologists should need to be able to enter different job positions (Van Raalte & Brewer, 2002). In an attempt to minimize all these controversies, the AAASP has taken the initiative to create the “certified consultant” designation. This designation consists of a curricular model that provides education, training, and credential standards and requirements for sport psychologists in order to become professionals in the field (Williams & Straub, 1998).

As far as ideological orientation, the predominant trend in current sport psychology is the social cognitive approach to sport psychology (Singer et al., 2001). This social cognitive orientation suggests that personal (emotions, thoughts, and physiological processes), behavioral, and environmental factors affect each other and determine athletic performance. This approach also proposes that the concept of self-efficacy is crucial in determining success and increasing participation. The theory of self-efficacy argues that if individuals believe that they can successfully perform a specific behavior or sport, they will be more likely to both engage in the behavior and succeed in it. Research on self-efficacy theory has produced consistent findings that showed that self-efficacy increases both motivation and participation and is also a good predictor of success. Self-efficacy has been demonstrated to be a key factor in increasing success among elite athletes, participation among people with chronic diseases, and persistence among people engaging in new sports (Vealey, 2002).
According to experts, sport psychology has a promising future due to the new trends that Western culture societies are embracing. First, the increased value on exercising and being fit increases the number of people engaging in sports. Second, the amount of organizations related to sport psychology that exist today, financially support and promote research on the topic. Finally, the fact that today’s sport psychology embraces a wide range of populations generates many job opportunities for professionals in the field and motivates students to pursue a career in the field (Singer et al., 2001).
References


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