

SPORT AND EXERCISE PSYCHOLOGY

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Summary

Sports and exercise psychology are presented as major dimensions of the society. A psychology of sport and exercise has become crucial for human development not only because of its dimensional importance but also in the context of an alarming epidemic of obesity that afflicts most countries in the world. Major themes related to these areas are then approached by the author, highlighting the cultural, political, and economic components of social life. Technological advances, academic production and social networks are viewed as supports for the craft of a professional field that reveals itself as complex, vigorous and essential in the social fabric.

1. Doing Sports and Exercise: Meanings and Feelings

Sports and physical activity through exercise constitute major dimensions of human life. For all we know, in all historical societies sports have played a major social role. The legacies of the classic civilizations inscribed many names of heroes and athletes who were projected to honor and fame owned to their performance in sports. Sports have been affirmed as a cultural force and conceptualized in relation to human development in the West since the advent of the Olympic Games in the classic Greek tradition.

By the same token, physical activity through the regular or irregular practice of exercise has become a part of everyday life in most societies. Recognized as a means for good health, in terms of body and mind, exercise is currently considered a need for achieving a good life.

Such a powerful component of life could not exist without eliciting a great deal of emotion. People whose lives are in some way implicated with sports - the athletes, coaches, fans, sport event organizers, and many others involved with the promotion and implementation of sports, as well as with the organization of structured physical activity, tend to be emotionally involved to the fullest. Sports and exercise involve issues of personal motivation and policy making, among others, which make for the attribution of social meanings and for the emergence of very strong individual feelings.

The fields involved with the study and practice of sports, exercise, physical activity, and movement are conceptually intertwined. These fields make for a theoretical framework that reflects the practical world of sports and physical activity and reaches far beyond the studies and practices applied to the improvement of technique or for the betterment of performance.

The sport, exercise, physical activity, and movement conceptual framework permeates the practice of sports and exercise at different levels of the social scale. From a structural perspective, sports and exercise have been integrated to the health sector, especially as it is perceived as means to personal development, socialization, disease prevention, health care, and health maintenance. Sports and exercise have, thus, become a part of everyone's life, no matter one practices them or not. Also, sports and exercise have been for long a part in school curricula from basic to higher education, and has become a mass media phenomenon, affirming its importance at all levels of social life. Finally, sports and exercise have fostered a complex and robust commercial and industrial sector, nurturing markets of various sorts all over the world.

For these and other reasons, sports and exercise have a considerable impact on human life and have become an object of interest for the field of psychology, the science committed to study human development, human relationships, emotions, and behaviors.

2. Sport and Exercise as a Complex Social and Psychological Phenomenon

It is always difficult to delineate a professional field especially nowadays, when we can contend that the main paradigm guiding social life is one of complexity (Morin & Moigne, 1999). Under this paradigm we accept that social phenomena result from a variety of influences, scripted at the macro political level, translated into cultural patterns, and created in the context of mundane events we live through on an everyday basis. Social phenomena are constituted by the fabric of social interactions at individual, family, and community levels.

Social interactions of all kinds do not occur in isolation but are interconnected. Social life is organized as a perennially constructed relationship between concepts and actions, permanently reinvented and mediated by cultures, subcultures, institutions, and individuals. Describing this mode of operation in terms of the General Systems Theory we can state that social interactions imply a combination of open and semi-opened subsystems that process matter-energy and information (Miller, 1975). In this systemic view social interactions occurring between and amongst different institutions and individuals (the social actors) influence and respond to each other in a myriad of ways.

Looking at the organization of social life as a complex system such as described above, sports and exercise cannot be understood as isolated phenomena and with an isolated life of its own. They admit ramifications involving the various levels and dimensions of social interactions, crossing areas and sectors of society, interfering in and being interfered by different fields of practice and knowledge.

For the society to function well, dialogue between and amongst these different areas is needed. The areas directly related to sport and physical activity, however, are too many and to affect these dialogues there is a need for the social, health, and behavioral sciences to collaborate, which is in itself a tremendous challenge. A dimensional map of activities involved in sports and exercise will show connections of these areas to virtually all other areas of life. For example, sports and exercise serve as means for human development, both physically and psychologically; for body building and body modeling; socialization; personal identity construction; for establishing group identities, be it in schools, communities, neighborhoods, cities, provinces or states, and even nations. Sports and exercise constitute an important economic sector around the world; are largely utilized in health promotion, health education, health care services, disease prevention, and rehabilitation; and certainly involve politics and interfere in international relations and diplomacy. All in all, sports and exercise influence and are influenced by social events and are shaped and help to shape social life (Carron, Hausenblas & Mack, 1996). Let's look at this dimensional map in more detail.

In relation to the health field, sports and exercise have been largely recommended for healthy physical, psychological, and social development (Blair, 1993). In this way, sports are considered as means for achieving a good health status, for health promotion, and health maintenance (Eyler et al, 2003). Exercise and sports have also been of help for those suffering of certain health problems, preventing further development of ill conditions and helping in rehabilitation (Brosse et al, 2002).

The representation of sports and exercise as tools for health has opened the doors to sports and exercise in practically all domains of life. In the workplace, where most people spend most of their lifetime, this has been viewed both as a means for promoting the worker's welfare and for enhancing productivity (Gebhardt & Crump, 1990).

Sports have been pointed out as an excellent tool for psychosocial development and care. Its characteristics of both exerting collaboration, in the case of collective sports, and concentration, in the case of individual sports, as well as the sense of personal achievement, that can be found in both cases, have proved useful for developing a variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities (Nilsén, 2009).

By the same token, exercising has been pointed out as a means for physical and psychological development, as it works the body and demands organization and discipline. It has been for long used as a living metaphor for self-care and as an important component of self-esteem (Oglesby, Bell & Griffin, 1981). In structured and supervised exercise solidarity and collaboration are also praised.

The construction of group identities in a small scale, such as in school classes or neighborhood associations, can be affected by sports and exercise practice and this can

be useful for child and youth development and in community building and community organization (Brownson et al, 2005). Sports also influence other forms of group identification such as those based on gender, age, and other social and demographic characteristics (Connell, 1995). But the influence on the establishment of group identity shows the power of sports when it comes to the level of cities, provinces or states, and nations. National and international events show sports as a major definer of such identities. The examples are everywhere, from the various sports national leagues to international sport tournaments, the World Cup of soccer, and the Olympic Games.

From an economic perspective, sports and exercise are today in the center of a powerful industry and constitute the focus of a vast market at national and international levels. This involves paraphernalia of patents, trademarks, imports and exports, corporations, jobs, and the intricate network that sometimes in an organized form, sometimes in chaotic ways guide, stimulate, persuade, and provide consumers with products of all kinds. Many of these are directly applied to the practice of sports and exercise or can be social representations, such as club t-shirts and emblems.

The influence of sports in international politics and diplomacy, finally, is not to be overlooked. The internationalization of events and of the sport industry challenges national and international sovereignty and authorities in various ways. Consider, for example, the organization of a macro sport event such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup of soccer. Among the organizers there are private organizations of both for profit and not for profit natures. The interests in place are various and include the exclusiveness in the use of symbols and even words, licensing and marketing of products by major sponsors. In some cases ethical conflicts can occur between the corporate market approach and national laws and statutes.

Consider for example the promotion in sport stadiums of alcohol beverages produced by some major sponsor, in a country that has laws prohibiting the use of alcohol in public spaces. Or the promotion of such events in countries where there are laws guaranteeing quotas of low cost tickets for elders, students, and other minorities. These and other similar cases might become the center of political and diplomatic disputes that sometimes have to be directly negotiated at the organizational level but sometimes have to be solved at a national political level or even taken to international courts of law and of commerce. Sometimes these disputes capture the general public attention and affect public opinion, raising issues related to country's autonomy and sovereignty, national pride and national self-esteem, beside fostering public discussion on ideological positioning concerning ethical approaches to market economy, state ordering, and the public's interest. These, on its turn, may trigger emotional attitudes and personal and social behaviors concerning, for example, sympathy and antipathy, solidarity, collectivism, and hate.

The power of sports and exercise in relation to culture and social life is not, therefore, to be underscored. Sports and exercise can be strong components of personal identity but can also be elements of group integration from the family to the state and national levels. Examples are many and underneath the events is the development of personalities, subcultures, whole cultures, and social identifications. In this sense, a psychology of sports and exercise is more than needed within a vast scope of

possibilities for studying and intervening in the perspective of helping people at the personal level and in the perspective of social development. Sports and physical activity can be considered, in this way, as psychological phenomena in themselves, implicated with the construction of belief systems, psychological attitudes, personal and group identities and behaviors. All of this speaks in favor of the crucial importance of sports and physical activity within the various dimensions of psychological life.

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Biographical Sketch

Walter F. de Oliveira holds a Ph.D. (University of Minnesota), an M.P.H. (Master's in Public Health), University of Minnesota, an M.D. degree (Psychiatry), University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Works currently as Associate professor in the Department of Public Health, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, State of Santa Catarina, Brazil (since 2002). Founded (2011) and is currently head of the Professional Master's in Mental Health and Psychosocial Care, first of its kind in Latin America. Leads a research group on Health / Mental Health Policy with one of its research focus being on Sport Psychology. Founded (2007), was the first president (2008-2010) and currently serves in the Board of Directors of the Brazilian Mental Health Association - Abrasme. Was a Humphrey Fullbright Fellow

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