

VII International Congress from Psychology of Sport (1990)

Introductory conference « Self-esteem and promotion through sports activity »¹

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I have the formidable privilege of introducing the first set of papers of this Congress focused on Sport Psychology. The task is made all the more difficult by the fact that not only can I not rely on prior knowledge of the content of the many presentations that will follow, but I am not a specialist in Sport Psychology.

However, it is a great pleasure for me to be with you today! First of all, because I was a sportsman myself, admittedly at a medium level, some time ago. The sports world was my second family for many years. And my last rugby match, as a veteran and father of a player, was not so far away after all!

It is also a pleasure to be here insofar as my reflections and work on personalisation and on personal and collective identities can find interesting applications in the field of sports practices and the research undertaken on them.

I will try to enumerate some questions, in my opinion crucial, concerning the psychological aspects of the individual or collective itinerary of sportsmen. But first I would like to mention a few issues concerning sport psychology, as a fundamental scientific practice, but also through its applications, likely to respond to social demands.

In this context, the sports psychologist is called upon as an expert by the decision-makers. But can he remain neutral when ethical, political, socio-economic or cultural problems arise? As a citizen, he has opinions, which he can express in private or in public. But as a professional, should he not give priority to objectivity and scientific rigour, and leave his personal opinions in abeyance? I think so, but I would like to show by means of a few examples that the problems raised can influence the very object of his research. These problems determine the content, the continuity and the style of sports practices, as well as the representation of the athlete, the optimal characteristics of his or her personality, and the institutional and relational framework in which his or her sports activities are inserted. These problems even have an impact on individual and collective performance.

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Some issues related to sports practices and institutions

The issue arises when the sport community is confronted with a problem, posed from the outside or the inside, and causing ideological divisions, decision-making difficulties, the need to repress, channel and prevent. This problem can be general or specific to the sport community.

I will take five examples, well known to all. My aim is not to rekindle controversy, but to show the need to take these problems into consideration in multidisciplinary research on sport.

1. Awards, money and the star system

What drives performance progression? Determinations internal to the individual (desire for success, motivation for achievement, desire to please...) likely to be reinforced by external rewards (money, medals and cups, media notoriety, festive celebrations of the "third half" type, jubilee...).

In other fields, research shows that increased external rewards are not systematically accompanied by increased activity or performance. Little research has been undertaken in the field of sport on the actual influence of salary, bonuses, press and television advertising. Little is therefore known about the influence of these rewards on the personality of the athlete, in the short or medium term

2. Doping and psycho-relational doping

Performance forces the athlete to make a constant effort to surpass himself, sometimes beyond what is bearable. In order to succeed, they must mobilise internally and seek support, backing and mediation from outside. They may use products (legal or illegal) or rely on special people (parents, coaches, companions, etc.) to support them in their efforts and to convince them of their constructive value. A great deal of research has been undertaken on the physical and psychological effects of doping. On the other hand, little analysis has been made of the essential role of these resource persons (love, dependence, persuasion, etc.) on the functioning of the behaviour and personality of athletes, on the choice of their strategies, on the dosage or overdose of their efforts.

3. From idealisation to realistic practice of sporting success. From the masses to the elite and back

Sporting activity, like any other activity but perhaps in a more exemplary and prototypical way, is included in a general aspiration to success, both personal and social. But not all individuals or groups can hope to achieve a level of excellence. Sports circles seek to promote simultaneously the popularisation of all sports among all human groups and special assistance to high-level sportsmen and women or to those who, by their proven potential, revealed from their first performances, are likely to become so. We know how much this procedure is contested, and how difficult it is to put in place, when it comes to intellectually "gifted" people. Many perceive in it the seeds of 'class favouritism'. As far as the sporting elites are concerned, how are they selected and trained? Should champions be grouped together in specific places and according to specific lifestyles?

Beyond the polemics about elitism, what are the optimal conditions for achieving high-level performance? To what extent is this achievement integrated with the issue of personalisation and social integration? This "high level" period is not eternal, how can we

allow the athlete concerned to manage the "descent" and end phase and help him/her to cope with it?

Even for the professional athlete, the time spent in sport is limited to a period of his or her life during which he or she is more or less "disengaged", obliged in any case to lead a particularly regulated life. Do we not talk about the need for "reintegration"? How does his sport project fit into his life project? How do his sports practices fit into the organised set of his activity systems, his time and his living space? How does he/she experience being perceived as an admired prototype of social and personal success? Does he/she develop a feeling of omnipotence (getting a "big head", getting carried away...) or does he/she show realism (keeping a cool head)? Are they stressed by their successes and/or failures? Is he/she anxious about the future (the one after)?

How does the grassroots athlete experience ordinary performance? How do they perceive the success of others? Is there identification, emulation, jealousy, estrangement or disinvestment through discouragement?

4. The heroic function of sport and the narcissistic function of 'soft' physical activities.

Some people oppose competitive sport to physical expression for its own sake. For the former, sports practices are based on confrontation with obstacles, time and others, on the quest for performance, on surpassing limits, on heroic self-transcendence, implying a constant tension towards the future, in a coded, hierarchical framework based on the spectacle. Soft body activities, on the other hand, are based on well-being and pleasure, personal intimacy and relaxation, freedom, creativity and communication, and love.

It would be interesting, beyond ideological positions, to show what the real psychological and psycho-social conditions and processes are for each of the activities concerned. What representations do those who practise them have of them, what values support these representations, what representations and values do those who disdain them evoke? What benefits do they derive from them, and at what level do these benefits transform or reinforce their sense of their own identity and their own life project, or their own personality, their activities in other fields, their sense of work or life in common?

Is a compromise possible between the strategy of overcoming and the strategy of pleasure and harmony? In ideological terms this is unlikely! The confrontation between Greek stoics and hedonists still runs through philosophical and religious (West-East, etc.) as well as political and professional systems of representation (economic competition/nature conservation, etc.).

But at the individual level the strategies mentioned are no longer so opposed and must be studied in their own right, even if the subject is necessarily concerned with conflicts of ideas and collective divergences in practices and attitudes.

5. Olympism and the universalisation of sports and cultural practices

International sporting events, and their prototype, the Olympic Games, facilitate the emergence of (rather peaceful) venues for sporting confrontation between cities, nations and continents. They also favour the emergence of a universalization of practices and associated values. Some consider this universalization as the result of acculturation. The traditional activities, games or leisure activities of a culture have been abandoned in favour

of a modern Western type of sport. These changes are said to be the result of "cultural colonisation".

Beyond the polemic, here again, it is necessary to analyse the consequences of such changes on individual and collective practices. The success of a high-level professional can promote a social class, a group, a nation, and in turn serve as a prototype, with all that this can imply in terms of mobilising and personalising, but also in terms of illusory and alienating, especially in traditional societies where the individual exists only through the collective identity of the group to which he or she belongs.

Beyond the relativity and defence of particular cultural identities, the problem of the accession of peoples to a universal culture integrating particularisms and diversities arises.

Sport psychology: general and differential aspects

When studying the attitudes and representations, conscious or unconscious, or behaviours of sportsmen and women, the sports psychologist cannot avoid taking into account the non-psychological variables that frame and influence the subjects under consideration, otherwise he or she will fall into psychologism, based on idealistic or technical illusions.

However, it must articulate these non-psychological variables to its specifically psychological object, the subject in its own dynamics, the relationships it establishes with its own body, with its affective and relational strategies, its cognitive evaluations, its decisions, its particular way of apprehending space and time, of appropriating, accepting or refusing the values, norms and constraints proposed by groups or institutions, whether sporting or not.

On these different points, sport psychology can benefit from the work of general psychology, social and developmental psychology, enriched in return by contributions specific to sport, motivation, information gathering and processing, anticipation, planning and forecasting, self-evaluation, control of emotions and the effects of stress, the social psychology of groups (cohesion, consensus, articulation of roles, collective tension towards achievement, learning of common automatisms) and of relationships (cooperation, friendship, love, listening, empathy)

From this complex set of issues, I would like to highlight a few points concerning self-esteem and the promotion of the individual through sports activities:

1. Sporting activity facilitates the control and objectification of the body through multiple sensory-motor and instrumental appropriations
2. It also facilitates the overcoming of physical impotence through imitations and identifications, through the appropriation of prototypical or stereotypical representations, allowing the subject to direct and channel his or her emotions, and provoking the emergence of mobilising and exhilarating passions.
3. However, sporting activity allows these same identifications to be overcome through cognitive behaviours of evaluation, comparison and critical differentiation, through the learning of cooperative relational behaviours, and through progress in the control of emotions.
4. When sports activity is sanctioned by successes, it increases the feeling of positive self-esteem. It allows the subject not only to assert himself in the eyes of others and to be socially recognised, but also to develop the motivation to achieve, the feeling of self-realisation, to raise the level of aspiration and orientation. But success can also

develop illusions and anxieties and thereby destabilise, or at least weaken, the self-image. In short, managing success is sometimes as difficult as managing failure! It is therefore important to consider the model of success and the assumption of personalisation and social recognition as normative, and the image of the successful champion in all sports as a prototype that is necessarily far removed from real behaviours, representations and attitudes.

5. The prototype of sporting success is often transposed to the field of school (the good student) and business (the dynamic executive). But these are, for the moment, only advertising analogies. Initial research in this area does not seem to support this.
6. Current research on body image (Bruchon-Schweitzer, 1990) shows that it is at the cost of multiple illusions that we are satisfied with ourselves and our bodies, and serene... There is, in fact, little concordance between the perceived body capacities and the real verified capacities. Sporting activity, on the other hand, leads to a more realistic self-assessment. It forces one to go beyond the "soft defences" and to take the risk of failure or defeat. Here again the effects can be contradictory. "The price of lucidity is to induce doubt, self-criticism and dissatisfaction" (op.cit.). But it allows a revival at a higher level.
7. Success or failure can have different impacts depending on how the athlete situates them in relation to other domains, how those close to him support (in the double sense of the word) his activities, and how he assumes them affectively, emotionally. The work on coping (ways in which a person faces a stressful situation, serious illness, etc.) can be applied to any situation (negative or positive) that causes stress, in sport as elsewhere!

In **conclusion**, it can be said that sports activity is particularly useful as one of the means of personalization and socialization, from childhood and throughout life.

In terms of **socialisation**, it encourages identification with successful people. It enables social initiation and the acquisition of skills through multiple motor, emotional and relational learning. It facilitates cooperation and through it integration and social promotion.

In terms of **personalisation**, sport allows for autonomy, self-control, self-knowledge, self-promotion, psychic integration of values, norms and projects, in a word, self-realisation. But like any human being, the athlete experiences the negative. They experience conflicts, crises, and are confronted with situations that limit their potential. Faced with obstacles, he can, like everyone else, manifest contradictory strategies: mobilise to reach the planned objective, or readjust the target according to his means, or manifest his opposition to the demands of others, or pursue a utopian project, or passively wait for the solution to appear!

Because he is a person in relation with other people, tending towards his realization, but lucid on himself, he can be something else, and much more, than a machine to debit records. In fact, the machine does nothing other than what it is programmed to do. It repeats, it does not create. The successful athlete takes one more step, one more jump... He takes the risk, even if he knows that after the jump he will fall again, or that after him, someone will already jump higher or further. By surpassing himself, he participates in more than just himself... with others!

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