

ADAPTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING UNDER STRESSFUL AND DEMANDING SITUATIONS: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY WITH ELITE ATHLETES

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INTRODUCTION

Recent emphasis on personal strengths and adaptive functioning of successful top athletes, considered as “expert emotional regulators”, may shed light on a better understanding of relationships between goals, coping, emotions (Lazarus, 1991, 2000), as well as on social and health outcomes and human adaptation in general. In this way, competitive sport seems to be a natural and real “laboratory” to study these relationships. Like other achievement situations, sport competition arise a wide array of emotions, and there is some consensus and a general belief among authors that attaining and sustaining an appropriate emotional state is a key feature of optimal functioning and well-being in sport contexts (Uphill & Jones, 2007). Within the sport psychology literature, a vast amount of research shows that athletes need to be able to cope with different stressful as well as challenging situations, “not only to perform to the best of their ability, but also to make sports a satisfying experience” (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p.11). Using a case study approach (Yin, 2003), the purpose of the present study was the identification and exploration of similarities and differences in the “ways of being” patterns (Schutz, 2005) and psychological functioning under highly stressful and demanding situations.

PARTICIPANTS

Two purposefully selected high-performance athletes, competing at international and top level in canoeing:

Participant 1: male, 21 years old, national champion, European under-23 champion, medalist at European Championships, and classified in the top 10 ranking at the Olympic Games.

Participant 2: female, 17 years old, national champion, classified in the top 10 ranking of competitions at the International level.

PROCEDURE

Following previous qualitative research in the sport domain (e.g., Holt & Dunn, 2004; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Connaughton et al., 2007) a semi-structured interview guide was used (adapted from Cruz & Dias, 2005). The interview questions that we consider in this presentation are related to three main areas or sections: a) motivational orientations and achievement goals; (b) emotions experienced at major challenging and high demanding national and international competitions; and c) coping and emotional regulation strategies.

Following content analysis procedures, the following steps were undertaken: a) the interviews were transcribed, read, re-read; b) raw data was inductively and later deductively analysed; (c) specific and emerging themes reported by the two participants were identified and described; and (d) themes were analysed and grouped into general dimensions.

Intra and inter-case analysis were performed in order to identify similarities and differences in “ways of being” and psychological functioning of both athletes under highly stressful and demanding competitive situations.

RESULTS

PARTICIPANT 1

Goals

- Performance goals: “... in the Olympic Games I try to have the best performance”.
- Mastery goals: “... we will try to beat our time, we will try to improve!”

Emotions

- Proud: “When I was in the Olympic Games finals, I was very proud!”
- Happiness: “...after the competition, sometimes I’m so euphoric...”
- Anxiety: “...anxiety is always present. (...) my coach tells me that I deal well with pressure.”
- Anger (to others): “I’m so angry, I feel like smashing everything around me. (...) I want to beat them down and I want to win.”

Coping strategies

- Imagery: “...because he (father) starts to whistle and I hear him from afar, I think «My father is here, I have to prove to him that I’m the best and that I want to win this».”
- Positive thinking: “During competition I try to think about positive things only. (...) That it is not a battlefield, I will not die, I will not get shot...”
- Self-talk: “(...) «I’m going to tear it up!» That’s what I say to myself.”
- Emotional and Social Support (parents, coach and friends): “My father is still my greatest supporter...”
- Informational support: “Last year on this track your time was 3’40m. Now let’s try to improve!” [coach orientations]
- Religious coping: “...I always do the sign of the cross before the competitions, three times. Always...after the competition too...”

PARTICIPANT 2

Goals

- Performance goals: “[my goal is] to go to the junior world championships and to the European championships.”
- Mastery goals: “... is to improve my time and my skills!”

Emotions

- Proud: “[after a injury]...when I improved my time [performance] ... personally, I felt very proud!”
- Happiness: “...personally I was happy, very happy, because I improved.”
- Anxiety: “When I’m going to start the competition, I begin to shake a bit, I take a deep breath and (...) I try to think that it will be over soon and that I will make it.”
- Anger (towards self): “Anger, I feel when I know that I could be better than I was. I’m angry with myself because I could have been better, and I failed, maybe it was my fault...”

Coping strategies

- Imagery: “I think [view] about the finish line, I think that I am in first place... I cheer myself on, make myself go harder and faster, it’s me watching myself and willing myself to go that extra mile...”
- Positive thinking: “I try to think that it will be over soon and that I will make it to the finish line...”
- Self-talk: “Go! You can do it! Don’t give up now! Only a little more ... only 500 meters left!”
- Emotional and Social Support (parents, coach and friends): “My mother is always there to help me. Even psychologically when I have a problem...”
- Informational support: “... you have to make it past 500 meters with this time...!” [coach orientations]
- Emotional regulation: “... [my sister] gave me some Reiki CDs ... and so, before competitions, I fall asleep listening to those sounds, to relax...”

CONCLUSION

Content analysis revealed some common themes and patterns: systematic use of both performance and mastery goals; perception and appraisals of stress as an “ally”; emotional diversity and co-occurrence of both positive (proud, happiness) and negative (anxiety, anger) emotions; expert regulation of emotions and meanings, using a combination of different coping strategies, including a stable emotional and social supportive network (parents, coach and friends). In addition, particular differences in the goal and thought content suggest developmental differences in the process of learning to function and cope in adaptive and efficient ways. Overall, results show that design and refinement of interventions aimed to improve the well-being of athletes and the use of positive coping approaches beyond the sport context can be a fruitful future avenue, including the transfer and application of such psychological skills to other health and life contexts.