

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY – THEORETICAL BASICS OF SPORTING ACTIVITY

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INTRODUCTION

Performance Requirements

Performance in sport is not only determined by physical attributes and fitness, but in a wide variety of way by mental processes such as attitude and expectation.

Sporting activities are not the result of a simple „relationship between a stimulus and a response”, but rather a complex form of behaviour under a host of different environmental conditions. This is why sporting activity must be considered holistically as a system process that encompasses the following elements:

- the functional link between the person involved and the environment,
- what the person involved experiences inwardly and what he does outwardly, and
- mental and somatic processes.

Ultimately, a person’s subjective assessment of demands and the possibilities he has of meeting them impair his chances of performing to potential considerably.

In this presentation, I shall try to explain the matter of sporting activity in a way that allows the processes that take place to be described and elucidated, with the aim of developing well-founded measures to optimize sporting activities.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ACTIVITY

The Components of the Activity Situation

The primary concern in sports psychology is to optimize performance, that is to say, to improve

- a person's level of performance by enhancing his fitness, commitment and resilience (resistance, recovery ability),
- his relations with his social environment and
- organisational structures and procedures in sport on the one hand and the material conditions on the other.

The intervention necessary for this can only be effective if all the facets of a sporting activity concerned are understood and analysed. This may seem unclear and complicated at first glance, but if you look at it more closely, it can in the end be defined as simple and systematic.

Every activity situation is easy to structure and explain by using the three interrelated components involved: the person, the task and the environment (Nitsch & Munzert, 1977). This provides suitable access for a situation analysis.

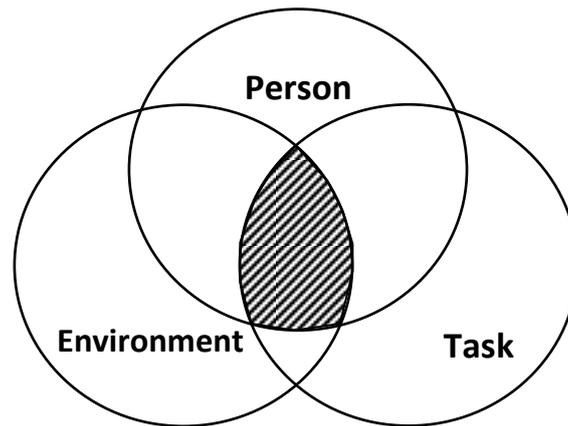


Fig. 1: Basic Components of the Activity Situation according to Nitsch & Munzert (1997)

This interrelationship (Fig. 1) results, on the one hand, from the agent, who acts in accordance with his emotions and motivation and so rates the activities on the basis of his personal abilities and his interest in them. This means that activities are rated on the basis of the extent to which they evoke positive emotions such as pleasure and confidence or negative ones such as fear or annoyance. They are also rated on the basis of the motivation that prevails for carrying out an activity, for instance, success, recognition, health or social security.

On the other hand, the agent considers the motoric and mental tasks he has to accomplish, which he rates on the basis of their attractiveness and ease with which they can be performed. He can render these challenges manageable and controllable by assessing the possibilities he has of mastering them and devising cognitive and motoric programmes for them. This becomes a key building block for accepting challenges and dealing with them with confidence.

Finally, the social and material environment plays a decisive part in this context, providing openings and suggestions for certain actions and activities. The reactions of spectators, trainers, friends and members of his family, team mates or opponents, the media and sponsors can have an influence on how a person goes about a sporting activity, either stimulating him, helping him to keep going, boosting him or hindering him. Above and beyond that, so-called material conditions prompt people to engage in sporting activities. For example, certain training and competition conditions (sports grounds and sports facilities, the weather, the equipment used in competition, etc.) can be a help or a hindrance or have a disruptive impact on them.

The Phases of the Activity

Following this explanation of the basic and interdependent or joint factors that influence an activity, I shall now take a closer look at the phases in which an activity is carried out and define them as a systematic model process (Fig. 2).

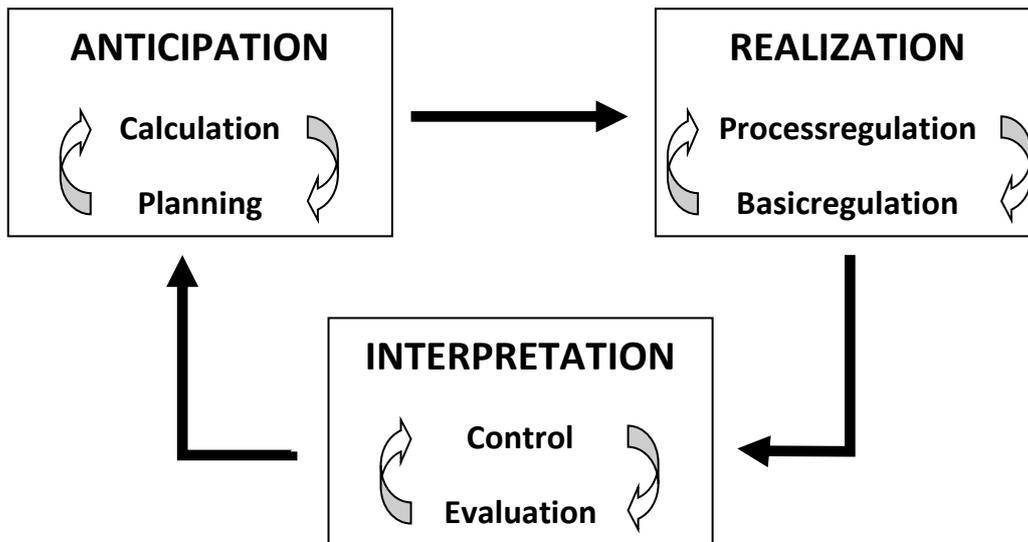


Fig. 2 Phases of the Triadic Structure according to Nitsch (1986)

Every conscious action starts with it being anticipated. This phase is therefore called the **ANTICIPATION** phase. It involves a planning process being set in motion in which ideas, including resolutions and expectations, are developed. Two other steps that are taken in this phase are the definition of the aim, including the likelihood with which it can be achieved, and an assessment of the starting situation and possible consequences.

The primary concern in the **REALIZATION** phase that follows is to carry out the action and execute the plans developed in the previous phase. The process that plays a decisive role in this is the general appropriate psychophysical regulation. What is meant by this is the optimum functionality, which primarily entails arousal and tension control. The link between the level of arousal and the quality of performance was established by Yerkes and Dodson back in 1908, who discovered that a person must achieve a medium level of arousal to perform as well as possible (Fig. 3).

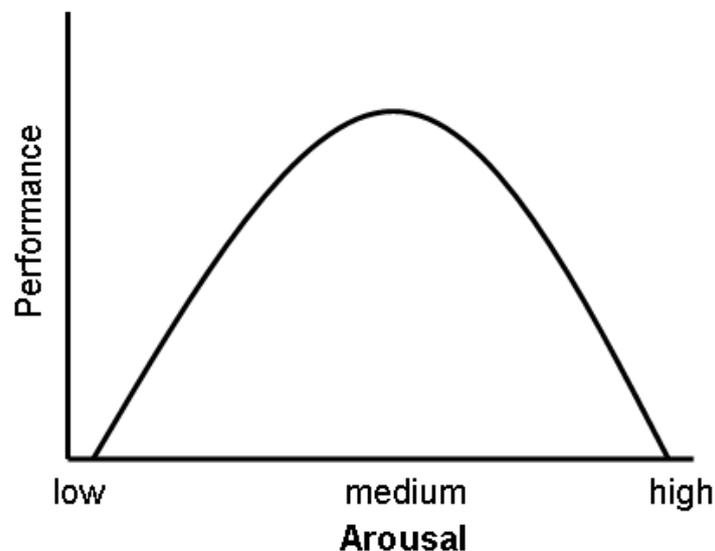


Fig. 3 Link between level of arousal and quality of performance, Yerkes & Dodson (1908)

Furthermore, the so-called process regulation initiates the application of the complex plan systems with their sensomotoric processes and goes through them step by step by processing relevant information and control pulses.

The final phase of an action is the INTERPRETATION phase, in which a comparison is made between the action that was intended to be taken and the action that was taken and the result it yielded, while a subjective assessment is made to explain the processes that have taken place and the consequences of the action.

CONCLUSION

The use of sport psychology to achieve effective practical intervention demands a scientific basis. The exemplary and systematic view of activity in general I have just presented can be used to draw up both instructions and guidelines for sporting activities. This applies not only to the optimization of action in competitive sport, but also to activities in health sport such as adiposity courses or coronary rehabilitation measures and sports counselling and personal coaching in leisure and mass sports.

I would like to conclude by remarking that irrespective of the field in which sport psychology is applied, it should ideally be applied on an interdisciplinary basis. This means that anyone considering counselling and intending to use intervention should discuss the matter with other people such as doctors, trainers and, possibly, members of their family, before taking recourse to such measures.

References:

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