

Empowering Sport Women Developing for Competition and Life

Mrs. Rameshwari Kishor Gunjekar (Physical Director) CNCVCW, Kolhapur.

Abstract

Development through sports has a long and varied history in sports psychology. Unfortunately, there appears to be an under-representation of females in sports psychology research, both generally and in this important area. Thus, it is fair to assume that female athletes are likely receiving coaching, guidance, and psychological strategies focused on their development, but informed by evidence based primarily on males. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to introduce that females need their own specific research to best help them build empowering psychological characteristics. Reflecting the comparatively small numbers who make it to the top, such systems must not only help them in their sports, but also help them succeed in life. Indeed, we propose that the development of the necessary psychological characteristics could help females face the equality challenges they face in sport and in future leadership roles. Furthermore, that there needs to be a shift in focus when it comes to sport, and female athletes should not only be developed for their sport but also from their sport.

Keywords: Talent Development Pathway; Psychological Characteristics; Psychology from Sport

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to consider three separate topics and propose that they be examined simultaneously. First, we will offer a general overview of talent development and consider this against the work of Kamin and Collins' [1], 'three ages of support sciences'. This leads us to suggest a fourth 'age'; namely, psychology from sport. Secondly, we highlight the under-representation of females in sports psychology research and the negative effects this will inevitably have on the developmental process. In the third, we highlight the challenges females face in life and how using sport as a vehicle for psychological development could be useful. As a summary and plan for action, we finally consider the implications for conduct and research.

Part 1: Elite Athletes & Elite People

As research into the support industry for sport has evolved, three different styles of research have emerged. Collins and Kamin [2] referred to these as the 'three ages of support science'. We exemplify these through work in psychology as follows:

i. Psychology through performance

Psychology researchers test ideas in various laboratories, one of which is a sports domain (e.g., a psychologist tests if people have increased activation in the 'happiness' areas in the brain after engagement in activities they like such as exercise/musical performance/dance, etc.). The objective is to increase knowledge in psychology.

ii. Psychology of performance

Researchers investigate and develop sports (or dance or music or business ...) -specific theories or domain named variants of mainstream theories, through examination of performers (e.g., the development of a theory of "X construct for Y" such as a psychological skills inventory for dance). The objective is to build knowledge in a sport-specific domain.

iii. Psychology for performance

Researchers and support providers utilize psychological principles and methodologies to benefit the performance of specific individuals, teams or groups (e.g., intra-individual or team/group specific

work focused on understanding and enhancing performance for this particular group rather than theory development). The objective is to support the performer toward better achievements.

Part 2: Female Under-representation in Sport Research

As a parallel but distinct concern to this potential transfer, research in the field of sports science and medicine has revealed an alarming under-representation of work on women and girls [33- 36]. More specifically, and in the fast-growing work of psychology for sport there is an overwhelming amount of research carried out with male participants rather than females. In a recent study that critically analysed six journals in sports science and medicine, it was found that 63% of samples were mixed with both males and females, 31% included only males, and just 6% were solely females. Overall, females only represented 34% of all the research participants whilst constituting over 50% of the population; a promising direction of travel but still not enough! The unsettling element of this under-representation seems to be a bias that considers men in sports as the norm and women participants as the exception. To support this, Walton and colleagues [37] found that 69% of female-only studies made reference to sex or gender in the title, whereas, only 9% of male-only studies referred in this fashion. This suggests there is an assumption that sports related studies are male dominated although it would seem to be both unscientific and unjust to apply the same psychology theories and interventions on females. Undeniably, females may experience sport and exercise in ways that are poles apart from males [38]. Backing this, there has been work that has demonstrated the gender differences within psychopathology [39-41]. Thus, research originating from samples that are not representative could lack valuable insights and not appropriately advise practical applications.

Part 3 - The Female Paradox

Over the last few decades there have been increasing numbers of participating female athletes; in the USA this has been as a result of the enactment of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which prohibits sex discrimination in any education program that receives federal funds, such as, elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as colleges [50]. Title IX is best known as the catalyst for females' increased access to athletic participation opportunities. From 1973 to 2018, the number of girls participating in all high school sports increased by 261.7%, from 1,300,169 to 3,402,733 [50]. Improvements were also seen at the collegiate level (all three NCAA divisions), whereas in 1998 there were 6,346 female teams and in 2012 there were 9,274 [51]. Although Title IX limited sex discrimination and created more opportunities for females, there are still additional reasons why women and girls have participated in sport and exercise at a lower rate than men and boys. Reasons range from prescription to certain social norms, pressure around body image, and experiences of microaggressions and bullying [52- 55]. Even though participation rates have shown improvements in many areas of the world, females are still facing pressures to uphold fixed gender traits like flexibility and gracefulness [56]. In addition, Sage and Loudermilk [57] have described a constant and damaging myth that suggests that athletic success comes hand in hand with a 'loss of femininity'. Krane and colleagues [58] also described this as the 'female athlete paradox': that being a woman and an athlete are somehow considered as opposing. As a result, females who participate in sports often must navigate complex crossings between femininity and athletic competence

Gender Differences

There are many distinct gender differences in psychopathology within the general population. For example, it is found that women are diagnosed with anxiety and depression disorders roughly twice as often as men [39,40] and also struggle with eating disorders 6 to 10 times more [42]. On the other hand, male struggles more often exist in externalizing and, perhaps consequently, experience higher incidence of dependence disorders, such as drug and alcohol abuse [39,43,44]. Furthermore, these gender differences can be consistently found across different ages, income levels, and populations. In the present context, a sport-focused study by Schaal and colleagues [45] also found there to be gender differences in psychopathology. Specifically, female elite athletes have a higher chance of being diagnosed with a psychological problem as well. How to cite this article: Laken J, Dave C, Christine N. Empowering Women Through Sport: Developing for Competition and Life. *Ann Soc Sci Manage Stud.* 2024; 10(3): 555790. DOI: 10.19080/ASM.2024.10.555790

Conclusion

In summary, we recognize that there has been a lot of recent work on psychology for sport and how it can play a key role in the successful navigation of the talent development pathways. However, what we want to highlight is that the objective of developing for sport might not be as valuable as focusing on the development from sport. If an athlete develops psychological characteristics for sport we address that those characteristics might not be guaranteed to transfer and be applied as life skills, or skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and work [13]. Such transfer becomes particularly important since not many can effectively achieve or reach the top level [14]. With this in mind, we wish to focus on utilizing sport as a psychological developmental vehicle specifically for young females, who have been under-represented in the field of sport science [33-36]. We believe that this could allow them to captivate the necessary characteristics that will help them navigate the unique challenges in life that females may face distinctly from their male counterparts. Males and females have shown to have differences in various psychological challenges, and we believe it is time that females received their own guidance and curriculum to help them succeed in sport but also most importantly life. We hope this paper can be seen as a ‘call to arms’ for those researching in talent development and the wider areas of youth sport involvement. There is a clear need for increasing research in the benefits of such involvement and how they can be optimized, for both men and women. The balance is, however, somewhat tilted towards the male end. As a short-term change, we would ask coaches and managers to note the need for consideration of and catering for the differences; whether the goals are elite senior achievement, life development or, as we would ideally like to see it, a combination of both. One other comment - as views and impacts of traditional gender assignments are shown to be excessively dualistic, the complexities and inequities highlighted in this paper are further complicated. We hope that, in offering an overly simplistic picture to stress an inequality, we are not seen as ignoring what is a much wider issue.

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