

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY FROM A COMPREHENSIVE PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY POINT OF VIEW

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The range of convenience of PCP has proved to be quite large, and one of the fields in which it can fully prove its usefulness is sport psychology. In the past, thanks in particular to the contributions of Richard Butler and David Savage, we had important examples of the way in which PCP tools can help understand and facilitate athletes' and coaches' experiences. In this paper I will try to look at sportspersons' experience through the lenses of PCP and in particular of the Sociality Corollary. In the first part I will outline my tentative effort to subsume athletic experience by means of PCP professional constructs. In the second part I will illustrate my constructivist approach by means of a case study.

Keywords: *constructivist sport psychology, sociality corollary*

FOREWORD

I've been working in sport psychology since 2005. At the beginning I had some difficulties because scientific literature and manuals are informed by a Cognitive Behavioral (CB) approach, an approach very far from and different from PCP. Slowly I began to look for and find a personal constructivist way to work with sportspersons, using PCP and Butler's (1989; 1991; 1997; 2000) and Savage's (1999; 2003) works, and sometimes subsuming by means of PCT some CB techniques. Lately I have felt the need to share my approach with constructivist colleagues, so in 2016 I set up a PCP Sport Psychology Group in the Institute of Constructivist Psychology in Padua. One of my goals was to help young colleagues to find - more easily than me - their personal constructivist path to sport psychology sharing with them my experience.

This paper collects some of my reflections. In particular I'm going to briefly introduce the Cognitive Behavioral approach to sport psychology to differentiate it from my PCP approach. I will then focus on the experience of a specific athlete through the lenses of PCP and I will reflect on how transitive diagnosis can be a superordinate comprehensive tool useful to understand athletes. In conclusion I will

maintain that the main difference between CB and PCP approaches is the construction of a relationship by means of the Sociality Corollary.

As you may see, the CB approach will be one of my main interlocutors: what I am going to demonstrate is that, coherently with PCP, we do not really need to make any reference to cognitive processes or emotions to understand sportspersons, and PCP can be a complete alternative approach to CB.

INTRODUCTION

Sport Psychology is an expanding field. A winning mental attitude is considered to be one of the keys to peak performance, and athletes, coaches, and teams ask for psychologists' help in mental training and in solving emotional problems that undermine athletic performance (Gallucci, 2014).

A growing body of research and techniques, mainly – as previously mentioned – informed by a cognitive behavioural approach, is the answer to these requests. Recently neuroscience and information technology entered the psychologist's toolbox next to cognitive restructuring, refuting irrational thinking, thought stopping, imagery and relaxation techniques, biofeedback, attention control training (Gallucci, 2014; Cei, 1998).

Indeed, according to the APA Division 47, Applied Sport Psychology is: *The study and application of psychological principles of human performance in helping athletes consistently perform in the upper range of their capabilities and more thoroughly enjoy the sport performance process.*

Applied sport psychologists are uniquely trained and specialized to engage in a broad range of activities including the identification, development, and execution of the mental and emotional knowledge, skills, and abilities required for excellence in athletic domains; the understanding, diagnosing, and preventing of the psychological, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and psychophysiological inhibitors of consistent, excellent performance; and the improvement of athletic contexts to facilitate more efficient development, consistent execution, and positive experiences in athletes. (APA Division 47 Practice, n.d.)

The underlying assumptions of the mainstream psychological approach to sport experience seem to be: a vision of sportspersons as the sum of their cognitive, behavioural and emotional processes; a vision of sport practice mainly as the search for the personal optimal performance. The PCP point of view on the experience people make in sports and on the role of the sport psychologist can be very different. In what follows I will argue how.

PCP CONSTRUCTION OF SPORT EXPERIENCE

From a PCP point of view, (Kelly, 1991) sport practice can be seen as one of the experiments people choose to make in their life. In this perspective we assume that sport goals are channelized by persons' constructions, and not simply - and a priori - by the will to win or to optimize performance or wellness. According to the Choice Corollary, sportspersons choose the alternative they anticipate as most elaborative for them and reconstrue their experience thanks to validations and invalidations. By construing their own changes they undergo transitions and make other subsequent choices.

In this light *motivation, emotion, anxiety, arousal* can be seen as *personal constructions* whose meaning has to be found in the sportsperson's experience as opposed to "real entities" defined by a psychological discipline. Indeed, from an epistemological point of view CB and PCP are very different. CB can be considered a critical realist theory (Chiari, 2016), that is a theory which implicitly assumes the existence of a symmetry between reality and human knowledge: as humans we represent, by means of our cognitive processes, objects existing in the world. So, when we speak about "motivation" we assume that we are referring to an existing mental process. Seen from a constructivist point of view "motivation" can be one of the poles of a construct, that is of a personal or professional discrimination useful to impose some order and predictability on our experience.

To illustrate the way in which PCP professional constructs can subsume the athletic experience I constructed *Table 1*. In this table we can find some of the experiences a sportsperson can live, the concepts cognitive psychology construed to face that experience, and some of the ways in which it is possible to understand that same experience by means of PCP. I do not consider these last ones as the only possible interpretations for the experiences in the first column, but I think that they can offer some examples of the PCP method of subsuming them. I collected the examples present in the first column during my work with judokas.

We can see that in some examples PCP doesn't offer a specific professional construct but, consistently with its meta-theoretical nature, its understanding combines professional constructs with sportspersons' specific personal constructions. As already underlined by Savage (2003), this is an important and valuable feature of PCP approach. It avoids creating new psychological entities as is common in psychology – remembering Kelly's words: "*In science the task is to keep one's overriding assumptions at a minimum and work primarily with tentative inferences*" (Kelly, 1991, p.370) – and to look at persons' experiences through their own eyes.

Sportsperson's experience	Cognitive psychology concepts	PCP possible constructions
<i>Mi sentivo rilassato, stavo bene</i> <i>I felt relaxed, I was fine</i> (L, 17 years old, answering to the question: "How did you feel before the match?")	Arousal, activation (i.e. Hanin, 1980; 1989; Hanin and Spielberger, 1983)	The choice of construing loosely (vs. construing tightly)
<i>Mi concentro sull'avversario</i> <i>I focus on the opponent</i> (G, 17 years old, answering to the question: "What do you do before the match?") <i>Ho imparato a concentrarmi, ad accendere e spegnere la lampadina</i> <i>I learnt to concentrate, to turn on and off the light</i> (A, 16 years old, after a match)	Attention, focus of attention (narrow/wide, external/internal) (i.e. Nideffer, 1976)	The choice of constricting – or dilating - on some elements of the perceptual field
<i>G se ha un obiettivo fa di tutto per raggiungerlo</i> <i>If G has a goal, she does everything to get it</i> (G, 15 years old, self-characterization)	Motivation, lack of motivation (i.e. Nicholls, 1992; Vallerand, 2007)	Fundamental Postulate, Choice Corollary
<i>Mi sento insicura e spaesata</i> <i>I felt unsecure and lost</i> (G, 15 years old, answering to the question: "How do you feel in the machtes you can't give your best?") <i>Mi sentivo i crampi all'intestino, il mal di pancia, mi sentivo affaticata e con poca energia...non c'ero con la testa...</i> <i>My belly was cramping up, I felt tired and with no energy... I wasn't there...</i> (A, 16 years old, after a match)	Performance anxiety (state anxiety) (i. e. Spielberger et al. 1970; Martens et al. 1990)	Transitions: Threat [the awareness of an imminent and comprehensive change in one's core structures (Kelly, 1991, vol.I, p. 391)], threat of guilt [the awareness of an imminent and comprehensive change in core role constructs], anxiety [the awareness that the that the events with which one is confronted lie outside the range of convenience of one's construct system (ibidem)].
<i>I felt reactive, concentrated and feisty</i> <i>Mi sentivo reattiva, concentrata e grintosa</i> (A, 16 years old, after a match) <i>Mi sento forte</i> <i>I feel strong</i> (G, 16 years old, answering to the question: "How do you feel in the machtes you give your best?")	Mental toughness (i. e. Guicciardi and Jones, 2012), self-esteem (i.e. Martin and Murberger, 1994) self-confidence (i. e. Vealey, 2001), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989)	Aggressiveness [the active elaboration of one's perceptual field (ibidem)] Personal construction of the role of the Self as <i>reactive</i> , <i>concentrated</i> , and <i>feisty</i> (A), or <i>strong</i> (G)
<i>I miei obiettivi per quella competizione erano:</i> <i>1. arrivare fino in fondo</i> <i>2. pensare incontro per incontro</i> <i>3. ricercare la pulizia del judo</i> <i>My goals for the competition where:</i> <i>1. go all the way</i> <i>2. thinking one match at a time</i> <i>3. strive for the quality of my judo</i> (N, 15 years old)	Goal setting (i.e. Locke and Latham, 1985)	N. is enhancing his level of cognitive awareness on the experience cycles involved in the competition he is going to take part in.

Sport psychology from a comprehensive personal construct psychology point of view

<p><i>Mi sentivo sicura di me stessa e mi fidavo di me</i> <i>I felt unsecure and I didn't trust myself</i> (G, 15 years old, after a match) <i>Non mi sento all'altezza della finale</i> <i>I don't feel up to the final</i> (E, 23 years old)</p>	<p>High - low self-esteem, high - low self-confidence, self-efficacy</p>	<p>Personal construction of the role of Self as an athlete as <i>secure</i> and confident (G) or <i>not up to the final</i> (E)</p>
<p><i>Ho imparato che nessuno mi ferma se davvero voglio raggiungere il mio obiettivo, posso vincere anche con le più grandi</i> <i>I learnt that nobody can stop me if I really want to get my goal, I can beat also the best ones</i> (G, 15 years old, after an important competition in which she wasn't physically ok)</p>	<p>Resilience (i.e. Galli and Vealey, 2008) Mental toughness</p>	<p>Aggressiveness Personal construction of the role of Self as an athlete who can cope with adversity and win and who's able to fight also with the best athletes in the category.</p>
<p><i>Durante l'incontro pensavo che se perdevo avevo sprecato tre anni di lavoro</i> <i>During the match I was thinking that I had wasted three years of hard work</i> (A, 16 years old, after a match) <i>Pensavo che tutto quello che facevo era inutile e non mi sentivo efficace</i> <i>I thought that everything I was doing was useless and I felt ineffective</i> (A, 16 years old, after a match) <i>Penso ai miei punti deboli</i> <i>I think about my weaknesses</i> (N, 15 years old, "How do you feel in the matches you can't give your best?")</p>	<p>Cognitive anxiety (i. e. Morris et al, 1981), negative self-talk (i.e. Hardy et al., 2009)</p>	<p>The choice of construing some of the negative outcomes of one's own imminent performance. The choice to think about what she couldn't get.</p>
<p><i>Che sfiga, non ho mai una poul decente!</i> <i>What a bad luck, I have never a decent round-robin!</i> (E, 23 years old)</p>	<p>External locus of control (i.e. Robinson and Howe, 1987)</p>	<p>The choice to construe one's own defeats as consequences of bad luck. Hostility [is the continued effort to extort validation evidence in favour of a type of social prediction which has already been recognized as a failure (ibidem)].</p>
<p><i>Se sono lucida posso gestire l'incontro e vincere</i> <i>If I'm clearheaded I can handle the match and win</i> (G, 15 years old) <i>Ho imparato che se voglio quasi nessuno è impossibile</i> <i>I learnt that if I really want, nobody's impossible to beat</i> (G, 16 years old)</p>	<p>Internal locus of control (i.e. Robinson and Howe, 1987)</p>	<p>The choice to construe one's own performance as the consequence of one's own state of mind or efforts.</p>

Table 1: Sportspersons' experiences and professional constructions

Let's look, as an example, to A's words: "*I thought that everything I was doing was useless and I felt ineffective.*". She was explaining to me what happened during a match she had lost. In that moment she was questioning herself and her skills. Thinking of those thoughts as the consequences of the choice to focus on what was going wrong, I asked myself: which were A's anticipations about the match? And about herself? What was the alternative? These questions helped us recognize that her anticipations for this match had been channelized by her construction of the opponent, a girl she had met in the past and who had always defeated her. We tried to construe alternatively that judoka and, in the following match, it was A who won. It was not necessary to substitute the "negative self-talk" with a positive one, strategy that could have been an alternative one from a different point of view.

As the previous examples can illustrate, in my opinion, the Choice Corollary can especially favour an understanding of athletes' or coaches' behaviours instead of judgements based on a right/wrong dimension. In this way the consultant has not got a normative, but a collaborative attitude.

To describe the way in which PCP can be used in consultation with athletes I will present the case of a young judoka, Giulia.

GIULIA

Giulia is now 16 years old. She's the fifth in the national ranking of her weight and age category. She trains 5 days a week and participates in the main national and European competitions for her category. She is a student too, and attends the second year of an Italian secondary school.

Many friends of hers are judoka too. They share training and competitions, support each other in difficult moments and celebrate their victories together.

I've known Giulia since 2015, when I took on the role of sport psychologist in her judo team. We've been meeting weekly since then, exploring in a group the meaning all of them give to judo, exploring their experience, their constructions of training and competitions, setting goals, anticipating matches and then revising them together, and experimenting with

loosening and tightening and imagery techniques.

But now let's try to look more closely at Giulia's experience:

When we met for the first time I had the image of a scared and worried girl. She was really good at judo and strong in competitions but, in her words, really anxious before a match. So anxious that she couldn't even hear the suggestions of her coach, and, after the match, she was unable to remember what she had done and how she could have won.

In cognitive terms we would have said that she had a problem with anxiety, her attention focus was too narrow (Nideffer, 1976) and so we would have tried to teach her relaxation techniques and given her exercises for her focus of attention. In PCP terms we may ask: what was Giulia's experiment in those matches? We can look at what she calls anxiety as a threat transition and ask: what was the anticipated imminent comprehensive change of her core constructions? We may see the numb experience in the matches as the consequence of the elaborative choice to constrict, and wonder about what the match would have been instead.

Indeed, this is what I tried to do with her. We found out that she was afraid of loosing the match, that is of being invalidated in her construction of "future champion": *to become a champion I have to win, if I don't win I will not be a champion*. It was a preemptive, tight and black and white construction. To avoid the threat of guilt she constricted. With nothing in mind and with the feeling of not being totally there, on the tatami mat, she used her strong point: all her strength and the two techniques she knew best, and, one way or the other, she dominated her opponent.

I hypothesized that a good way to reduce threat would have been re-construing *defeat*. So we worked on the meaning of *winning* and *losing* trying to loosen the implication *to lose/not to become a champion*. We saw *losing* as the consequence of a stronger opponent, as the opportunity to learn something new, as an implication of the attempt to use a new technique, as what may happen if we don't feel well or if we get an injury. We looked at the careers of famous athletes and how they coped with their defeats. We also used the experience cycle (Epting, 1984) to prepare for competitions

and to revise them. In this way we could appreciate the value of errors as “stepping stones to achievement”, as John Wooden¹ used to say.

During our work together and with the others in the group, we also experimented with the choice of constricting our perceptual field to the elements we considered more useful in any given situation: sometimes bodily sensations, images or thoughts, and some other times the features, movements, visual expressions of the opponent. But we also made experiments with dilation of the perceptual field, in particular by watching videos of the matches they had. So we superordinated the construct *Self vs. not-self* to the construct *paying attention to one thing vs. paying attention to the situation*. If in the dojo² they experimented with tightness, trying to define better their technical judo constructions, when in the group they made experience of looseness, letting go their muscles, construing the difference between the feeling of being relaxed and being tense, playing with words and images in “free associations”, collages, and poems. In this situation we had the construct *Self vs. not-self* to subsume the construct *relaxing vs. getting nervous*.

With these new possibilities in her mind, Giulia began to be more present during matches, to live fully what was happening, to listen to the suggestions of her coach. Her thoughts, in the moments preceding *hajime*³, were focused on her technical goals. She continued to win but in a very different, richer and more conscious way.

¹ John Robert Wooden (October 14, 1910-June 4, 2010) was an American basketball player and head coach at the University of California at Los Angeles. He won ten NCAA national championships in a 12-year period as head coach at UCLA, including a record seven in a row. One of the most revered coaches in the history of sports, Wooden was beloved by his former players, and renowned for his short, simple inspirational messages to his players. These were often directed at how to be successful in life as well as in basketball.

² A Dojo is a hall or space for immersive learning or meditation. This is traditionally in the field of martial arts.

³ *Hajime* is the Japanese word meaning “beginning”. In the Japanese traditional martial arts such as karate, judo, aikido, Kūdō and kendo, it is a verbal command to “begin”.

Losing was no longer pre-emptively linked to *not becoming a champion*, but mainly, and not only, defined as an *unpleasant opportunity to learn something new*.

TRANSITIVE DIAGNOSIS IN SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Giulia's example allows the possibility of illustrating how PCP can subsume sport experience without any reference to the psychological concepts created in a cognitive behavioral approach. I used such words as emotions, concentration, relaxation and attention only if present as verbal labels in her vocabulary and I considered them as personal constructions.

In my experience, and from a professional point of view, PCP professional constructions can indeed offer a better comprehension of sportspersons' experience in their own terms. Trying to understand Giulia's experience I mainly focused on the Fundamental Postulate, the Choice Corollary, the Experience Corollary and the Experience Cycle, dilation and constriction, loosening and tightening, and the threat of guilt.

More generally, I think that transitive diagnosis can be the comprehensive and superordinated frame of reference that can help the consultant favour new and more viable experiences for sportspersons. In Kelly's words “the diagnostic dimensions are avenues of movement as seen by the therapist, just as the client's personal constructs are potential avenues of movements as seen by the client. Transitive diagnosis is, therefore, based on a dimensional system of axes and transitional states” (Kelly, 1991, vol. 2, p.153). For example, in Giulia's case identifying the tight and preemptive construction *to lose/not to become a champion* allowed me to work on propositionality and looseness.

Kelly wrote that “from the standpoint of the psychology of personal constructs, diagnosis is properly conceived as the planning stage of client management” (Kelly, 1991, vol. 2, p.153). I think that this can be true also when the client is an athlete or a team, when there is a problem, as in the case of Giulia, but also when there is no problem and the goal of the intervention is to improve the athlete's or team's sport experience.

The frame of reference given by transitive diagnosis, the professional construction of the client's construction processes, is useful also to map the change in those same processes.

Construing a transitive diagnosis is mainly a sociality exercise, it is so for the consultant, but also for the athlete, or for the team, or the coach. Together they try to understand - and mutually help the other understand - what is happening and why.

Some of the relevant moments in the work with Giulia involved her coach, we will call him Marco. He is more than a coach to her: he's an example, a mentor, a fundamental validational figure. On his part Marco is really attentive to Giulia, he's aware of her potential and, when we met for the first time, he was really worried by her attitude during matches, but he couldn't understand her. He was perfectly able to describe her behaviour, and to feel and name her emotions but he stopped there, unable to understand the reasons at the heart of the "problem". So he couldn't help her and was frustrated. During the years I worked with Giulia and her sportmates, Marco and I met regularly. We co-constructed a new understanding of Giulia based on the constructs emerging from our conversations. Construing Giulia's construction processes helped Marco in his coaching activity, especially in handling her errors and her very uncommon defeats, but also in underlining with her the importance of hard work in the career of a champion. With a new awareness and new constructions he resumed effectively his leading and mentoring role.

SPORT, PERSONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

In the previous paragraph I tried to give an example of the way in which PCP can usefully subsume psychologically sportspersons' processes by means of the use of PCP professional constructs. This use is subordinated to the Sociality Corollary: that is PCP diagnostic constructs are used to construct the construction processes of the athletes. In my opinion the Sociality Corollary and, more broadly, the way PCP looks at relationships are the particular contribution of the PCP approach to sport, and the added value of this theory.

On the basis of my personal and professional

experience, I see sport experience mainly as a relational experience: we practice by following our coaches' instructions, looking at what our teammates do, helping them and being helped by them, being followed by supporters, receiving comments by friends and relatives... and so on. The greatest part of what happens in a sport environment is social. And, in my opinion, it is not possible to work with an athlete or with a coach without considering the way in which they construe their relationships and their and the others' role in relationships. I indeed consider sport experiments as relational experiments where, sometimes, the other is one of our multiple selves. This is where, in my opinion, cognitive psychology completely misses the point and PCP, instead, shows all its power.

Let's look, for example, at the relationship between coach and athlete. Teaching is one of the coaches' tasks. How do they teach? They seem to think that what is truly important is to have the athletes do the right exercises and not the way in which they speak, explain, comment or give feedback. Relationship, which is the heart of any learning experience, is simply not considered. Athletes are often considered creatures to subdue or, at best, passive recipients of the coach's knowledge. The implications of this state of affairs is very often a lot of frustration both in athletes and in coaches.

Butler (1989, 1991, 1997, 2000; Butler and Hardy, 1992; Butler et al., 1993) created the Performance Profile, a tool useful to help athletes and coaches set their goals, also to overcome this problem. It is an example of how the consultant can foster role relationships by means of role relationships. Usually goals are set by coaches alone: they believe they know their athletes and what they can or can't accomplish. But research demonstrates that goals are more effective when self-selected by athletes or set by coaches and athletes together (Gallucci, 2014). We may hypothesize that this happens because people normally anticipate and set goals choosing the alternative they perceive as most elaborative for them (Choice Corollary), and these personal vital goals may "interfere" with the coach's goals.

This is one of the reasons why Butler developed the Performance Profile. The first part of the procedure can be seen as a process of eliciting constructs. Coach and athlete are

invited to individually define their constructions of the optimal performance. Then these individual constructions are shared and discussed, and the present athlete's performance is evaluated along those dimensions individually both by the coach and the athlete. Eventually the two evaluations are shared and discussed again. In this way weaknesses and strengths are identified and improvement goals can be set. At the same time it is possible to identify differences in athlete's and coach's constructions and elaborate on them. More, what is really notable in the Performance Profile is that goals are set in the athlete's own terms: the starting point of the process is the athlete's experiences and constructions, and the sharing of these constructions help coach and athlete to better understand each other, that is to develop a mutual role relationship. The effort to construe her athlete's construction processes helps the coach to value the athlete's experience.

We can compare the relationship between athlete and coach to the therapeutic relationship, using the Kellian metaphor of supervisor and researcher. There refer to two experiences and two competences: the athlete is the expert of her own sport experience and construes from her point of view her performance; the coach is the expert of the discipline and, hopefully, of the didactics of the discipline, and construes from her own point of view the athlete's performance.

This can seem obvious to us, but in the many situations in which I shared this idea with coaches, in their eyes I saw astonishment, surprise, bewilderment and eventually – luckily – curiosity, as I had claimed something really new to their ears. Curiosity then became enthusiasm when they gave themselves the opportunity to act with their athletes according to this redefinition of their role. Looking at the world through their pupils' eyes made everything simpler, easier and faster and both coach and athlete were more satisfied. A normative, condescending and simplistic attitude was substituted by an understanding, cooperative and individualizing one.

But the relationship between coach and athlete is only one of the relationships present in a sport environment. There are athlete-athlete relationships, athlete-parent, parent-coach, manager-coach and so on, and PCP can really allow the sport psychologist to subsume and

work with any one of them or with them all: thanks to the construction of role relationships, constructivist sport psychology can foster any kind of role relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I tried to show how PCP can be used to work with athletes. I maintain that it can be a complete theory and, more, that in comparison with CBT, it has the advantage of looking at persons not only as scientists but also as nodes in networks of relationships among scientists. In working with the sportsperson-in-relation, the PCP consultant construes a role relationship and favours the development of role relationships among the persons he or she works with. This normally results in a better learning environment and in better sport experiences.

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