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Challenging the 'Myth' of a Spiritual Dimension in Sport

Lee Crust
York St. John College

ABSTRACT

This paper critiques the position of researchers and theorists who have called for greater recognition of a spiritual dimension in sport, an integration of spiritual dimensions into existing sport-related models, and applications in sport psychology consultancy (Udermann, 2000; Watson & Nesti, 2005). Definitions of spirituality and the relationship between spirituality and religion are discussed. Comparisons are made between past research using traditional and non traditional methods of enquiry. It is argued that the dominant approaches of most sports psychology consultants (promoting self-regulation and internal control) are diametrically opposed to spiritual practices where faith is placed outside of the self. Given the lack of substantive empirical evidence, it is concluded that calls for greater integration of a spiritual dimension in sport are somewhat premature, and potentially troublesome, although consultants should be sensitive to individuals' belief systems in order to promote a productive working alliance.

Introduction

In spite of the skepticism of some coaches and athletes, and the circulation of several myths that challenged the usefulness of sport psychology (Gould & Eklund, 1991), there has been a gradual acceptance of the role, and importance of the application of psychology in sport. The publication of scientific research supporting the effectiveness of sport psychology interventions has undoubtedly helped in this regard (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). However, theorists and researchers in sport and exercise psychology have recently argued that traditional scientific approaches have ignored or failed to capture the spiritual dimension of sport (Watson & Nesti, 2005). When compared to other professions, such as occupational therapy (Unruh, Versnel, & Kerr, 2002), it appears that research concerning sport and spirituality has been slow to emerge. Theorists such as

Watson and Nesti (2005) argue that sport has a long history of religious and spiritual connections, and that today, many experiences of athletes are not easily explained by natural science (Nesti, 2004). However, it is argued in this paper, that the integration of spirituality into sport psychology consultations is a retrograde step that may undermine the credibility of a growing discipline, which through scientific endeavour, has managed to dispel myths and negative connotations to gain academic and professional recognition.

Whereas cognitive-behavioural psychologists and psychophysicologists explain human experiences in terms of thoughts, feelings and physiological mechanisms (and interactions), those who propose a spiritual dimension to sport argue for the importance of factors outside of the 'mind-body' link. This is consistent with the view of Lawrence (2005) who suggests that people appear to be questioning a purely mechanistic view of life. However, it is here that some theorists cross the boundary from science to pseudo-science and present us with the notion of human spirit (an un-testable concept).

According to Maddi (2004) existential psychologists emphasise the constant search for meaning and purpose in life that involves ever-present decision-making. Through examining the personal experiences of some athletes, evidence of a spiritual dimension appears to emerge as some athletes explain their sports experiences in spiritual terms (Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson & Hayes, 2004; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000; Watson & Nesti, 2005). These experiences appear to reflect unusual feelings such as being 'guided' or 'helped', when mentally, athletes were ready to succumb to fatigue. Dillon and Tait (2000) referred to spirituality in terms of "experiencing the presence of a power, a force, an energy, or a God close to you" (p. 91). It is proposed that since these experiences do not fit with conventional theory, that there is a need to work towards new explanations. Ostensibly, this may appear to be a rational argument, and one that can encourage new approaches and increase understanding.

The British science writer, Richard Dawkins (2005), indicates that science feeds on mystery, for it is that which is not yet known or understood that drives science forward and gives scientists something to do. Unfortunately, as Dawkins rightly points out, mysteries that are not yet explained by conventional science seem by default, to become gaps that are filled by God. And once a toe-hold is established, individuals who call themselves 'scientists' can forward theories that have 'immunity' to natural scientific rigor, with the premise that such phenomena cannot be studied in a conventional manner; spirituality being the perfect case-in-point. Fortunately or unfortunately (depending on perspective) acquisition of knowledge depends not only on developing theories, but on testing such theories, collecting and comparing evidence, eliminating rival hypotheses and a clear conceptualisation and delimitation of the area of study. When a spiritual dimension of sport is considered in these terms, the arguments for its existence seemingly collapse.

Problems in Defining Spirituality

One of the initial tasks for studying a construct is to arrive at some consensus in regards to the definitions and boundaries of the subject. In essence, people must be aware

of what is being studied. When a theorist talks of imagery for example, there is general acceptance in the academic community as to what exactly imagery is. Researchers may not agree on whether imagery exerts an influence on the individual or on his or her performance, or how imagery works, but there is a general consensus as to what exactly constitutes imagery. So what is spirituality? In reviewing the role of spirituality in sport psychology consulting, Watson and Nesti (2005) acknowledge that spirituality is “notoriously difficult to define” (p.229). These theorists essentially side-step an important issue by offering two descriptions (what it is like, and when it occurs) rather than a definition of spirituality (its meaning).

In other sources, spirituality is defined in vague and wide-ranging ways, which contributes to its illusiveness. For example, Unruh et al. (2002) explored definitions of spirituality by comparing and contrasting definitions from diverse professional literature. Analysis of these definitions revealed seven thematic categories: (a) relationship to God, a spiritual being, higher power, (b) not of the self, (c) transcendence or correctedness unrelated to a belief in a higher being, (d) existential, not of the material world, (e) meaning and purpose in life, (f) life force of the person, integrating aspect of the person, and (g) summative, multiple features of spirituality. Although there appear to be some commonalities within the various definitions, equally there are contentions that urgently require clarification.

Spirituality appears to have religious connotations, and indeed the first two thematic categories reflect this point. Lines (2002), suggests that the concept of spirituality makes little sense without defining the spirit, and considers the spirit as a bridge between the human and the divine. However, it is unclear whether or not spirituality can be separated from religious belief. Roberts (2004) appears to suggest that it can by proposing that many people reject the idea of religion, but believe they are spiritual. However, Udermann (2000) uses the terms interchangeably although acknowledges that the meaning of spirituality and religion for an individual are idiosyncratic. Unruh et al. (2002) suggest that it is the religious dimension of spirituality that is most troublesome for occupational therapists; and it is likely to be so in sport. While some definitions of spirituality take a secular view, many definitions of spirituality include explicit reference to religion and higher beings (Unruh et al., 2002). Clearly, unless researchers are prepared to clarify the relationship between religious belief and spirituality, then confusion will continue.

Furthermore, Watson and Nesti (2005) state, “...spirituality could also refer to an athlete’s close relationships, or extraordinary and self-affirming moments in life such as winning an Olympic medal, or securing a personal best (p.229).” Such references are going to be contentious since life-events, as stated above, could quite easily be defined and explained in entirely different ways by cognitive-behavioural psychologists or psychophysicologists, who could provide substantive empirical evidence (not just personal accounts) to support their arguments.

Coakley (1998) highlights the symbiotic relationship that exists between sport and the media. To an extent, each is reliant on the other – certainly in the maintenance of

professional sport in its current form. The media uses sensationalism (Walsh, 1982) and choose highly emotive language to capture public attention. It is doubtful whether the choice of terminology used to sell newspapers is based on a scientific understanding of concepts such as 'spirit', 'mental toughness' and 'resilience'. A quick search of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) sports website reveals how certain words and phrases can become part of sporting culture (BBC, 2005). Over four hundred articles refer to the word 'Spirit', many of which are included in the title such as 'spirited display', 'fighting spirit' and 'spirited comeback'. In media writings and interviews with athletes, coaches and managers, questions using such terms as 'spirit' to describe the attitude and commitment of players in adverse circumstances, can lead to confusion and further complications. So how can researchers ensure that the language used by athletes is their accurate assessment of the experience they have had – and not just based on selective perceptions and common language that has been learned via loose media terminology?

The Power of Beliefs

Psychologists have long been interested in beliefs such as self-fulfilling prophecies, and the ways in which these influence peoples' behaviour and their performances (Sternberg-Horn & Lox, 1993; Weinberg & Gould, 2003). Most psychologists would agree that beliefs (religious or otherwise) have a powerful influence on individuals' cognitive and affective states, and ultimately on their behaviour (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Manganaris, Collins & Sharp, 2000; Ness & Patton, 1979; Wiseman, 2003). People act, and perceive things in accordance with their belief systems and these beliefs can influence emotional states (Jones & Swain, 1995; Wiseman, 2003) and attentional processes (Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Wiseman, 2003).

In sport, athletes' expectations have been shown to relate to performance (Fitzsimmons, Landers, Thomas, & Van der Mars, 1991; Nelson & Furst, 1972; Ness & Patton, 1979) with attention being on important mechanisms by which expectations exert their effects. Athletes are more likely to focus their attention on factors that reinforce their beliefs (i.e., if the athlete is expecting to lose then he or she is more likely to selectively attend to, and dwell on his or her mistakes) which creates a negative sequence of events. This corresponds to a form of 'selective attention'. The reticular activating system, situated at the base of the brain, appears to operate as a perceptual filter (Gross, 2001) and directs attention to things that conform to individual beliefs.

For example, people who believe they are 'unlucky' will focus on experiences that re-affirm this belief. Robert Wiseman's extensive work on luck supports this notion – he contends that luck is essentially linked to cognitive processes and perceptions (Wiseman, 2003). In one experiment, Wiseman (2003) had lucky and unlucky people read a newspaper and count the number of photographs inside. However, he had secretly placed a large message in the newspaper saying "tell the experimenter you have seen this and win £250." The lucky people tended to see it while the unlucky ones tended to miss it. Wiseman (2003) contends that this difference was due to the belief people had of being

unlucky, which made them more anxious, and this anxiety disrupted their focus – these people saw purely what they wanted to see and missed other opportunities.

The evidence presented thus far indicates that beliefs can have powerful influences on the individual – so it is reasonable to assume that religious or spiritual beliefs will influence the individual likewise. People who believe in the existence of a human spirit are likely to pay attention to experiences that are interpreted as supporting this belief while missing other cues and possible explanations. As such, it is evident that calls to study spirituality and related phenomena by scientific means (Persinger, 1987), and retaining a sense of scepticism, appear appropriate. Wade and Tavis (1996) state that “The truth about human behaviour is most likely to emerge if we are aware of how our beliefs and assumptions shape and alter our perceptions” (p. 239). It would also seem reasonable to suggest that experiences (feelings and emotions) are the result of chemical and biological changes within the body, coupled with our cognitive interpretations. Research has shown the importance of biochemical processes in the experiencing of emotions (i.e. injecting chemicals can produce ‘as if’ emotions) but the missing link is individual interpretation (see Wade & Tavis, 1996). But why use science to spoil a good mystery when a supernatural explanation can be forwarded? (Dawkins, 2005) Conveniently, the spirit is of course immaterial, intangible and therefore, it is impossible to deny its existence.

However, it does appear that controlled scientific experiments can artificially induce unusual, spiritual or religious experiences (Cook & Persinger, 1997; O’Keeffe & Angliss, 2004). For example, Cook & Persinger (1997) found significant correlations between subjective ‘sensed presence’ (spirit, God etc.) and the applications of weak magnetic fields (similar to those generated by a computer monitor). More recently, one project (Infrasonic Music) has shown that experiencing spiritual feelings in church, or more frightening spiritual experiences (hauntings) may be explained by extreme bass sound (infrasound) produced by some organ pipes (O’Keeffe & Angliss, 2004). This double-blind experiment used 522 participants and found that odd sensations, which some attributed to God, increased by an average of 22% following listening to contemporary music, intermittently laced with low frequency sounds. Infrasound is largely inaudible to the human ear, but can cause vibrations to internal organs. It is the attribution of the sensation that may provide evidence to suggest that spirituality is an illusionary concept.

An Over-Reliance on Qualitative Research

Whilst non-traditional methods of enquiry are valuable in the process of knowledge acquisition, there is a danger that the recent trend towards qualitative work in sport (Munroe-Chandler, 2005) goes too far. It is clear that knowledge based on statistical evidence alone negates the rich, descriptive information which can further understanding of the phenomena. However, the over reliance on personal testimonies is also a dangerous approach. Clearly a mixed methodology would seem to provide some middle ground, but this to, is not without problems. Where personal accounts and descriptions may help in establishing conceptualisations and aid the development of constructs in the

early stages of knowledge development (Thomas & Nelson, 2001), there are some serious drawbacks to qualitative research that must be considered.

Personal accounts and descriptions are based on individual interpretations, which reflect personal perceptions and belief systems – they do not necessarily reflect reality. Just because an individual reports a strange experience that appears to defy a scientific explanation, does not make this experience a reality beyond the individual. In fact, nearly half the American population believe aliens have landed on the earth (Williams, 2004) – this does not make alien landings a reality.

Unfortunately, people are not always the most reliable sources of information. In studying the self-proclaimed psychic Uri Geller, Weil (1974a, 1974b) found that sense impressions of reality, do not always reflect reality. Weil (1974a) was initially astonished at Geller's so-called 'psychic powers', only to find later that other 'magicians' could just as easily deceive his senses with the same tricks. If spirituality is accepted as merely a personal construct, then to Watson and Nesti (2005) it would presumably have real meaning, whereas to others it may have no meaning at all. Without the use of scientific method, the development of knowledge of sport and spirituality will be restricted. In essence, the search for alternative explanations and critical examination of phenomena is necessary to prevent 'cognitive illusions' being accepted as reality. The emphasis that existential psychologists such as Nesti (2004) place on the question of 'what' someone experiences, does not deal with the arguably more important question of 'why' an individual experiences a phenomena. When an individual has strong spiritual beliefs, it is not surprising that unusual phenomena (such as a feeling of being guided) are labelled as spiritual experiences. Furthermore, people do not exist in a 'cultural vacuum' and influences such as the media must contribute to the language and terminology that participants, and as a consequence, qualitative researchers use.

A Problem of Selectivity

Further problems with qualitative research include the 'selectivity' of information to represent individual perspectives, and potentially small and unrepresentative samples. There are many examples of elite performers who describe overcoming adversity and showing resilience in terms that do not even approach spirituality and explain their success in terms of hard work, training to operate on 'auto-pilot' and mental strategies to deal with negative situations (Backley, 1996; Johnson, 1996). A plethora of research exists to show that the adoption of various attentional strategies such as association or dissociation can lead to enhanced endurance at moderate to high physical workloads (for a review, see Masters & Ogles, 1998). Such research is often ignored in favour of supernatural explanations. For example, Watson and Nesti (2005) explicitly propose links between spirituality and psychological constructs such as flow, based on exploratory evidence. Despite this, many qualitative accounts of athletes provide very different perspectives on flow, essentially based upon the importance of attention. One college wrestler explained his experience of flow following mental skills training:

Last year, some matches, I'd say I was in flow. I mean, but, what I went through this year of having a specific competition and pre-competition plan, it allowed me to focus more on what I was going to do than in the past. Because when it is general your mind goes every different way. But with this one, once you get to use it, you know exactly what you are going to do. So it takes a lot of that thinking and cognitive skills which you'd be using, and you're able to take that energy and direct it to a different area during a match (from Straub, 1996, p. 121).

Consideration might also be given to research into the concept of mental toughness in sport. Mental toughness reflects sports participants' ability to rebound following adversity, to maintain efforts and not to be balked when 'the going gets tough' (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002). The concept has its roots in health psychology, and existential psychologists' discovery of hardiness – a set of attitudes about oneself that allows individuals to turn potential threats into positive opportunities for growth (Kobasa, 1979, Maddi, 2004). Research appears to show that hardiness can act as a stress buffer, and does discriminate between those who remain healthy or fall ill when faced with similar stress inducing events (Kobasa, 1979, Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). Whereas hardiness reflects the 3 C's of commitment, control and challenge (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi, 2004), the sport specific research of Clough et al. (2002), added confidence, to more accurately reflect the related concept of mental toughness.

A Matter of Interpretation?

Despite exploring the personal meaning of mental toughness in sports, both quantitative and qualitative researchers such as Clough et al. (2002) and Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002) found descriptions and definitions given by athletes and coaches that did not represent spiritual factors. Clough et al. (2002) also showed relationships between mental toughness with various other psychological constructs such as optimism, self-esteem, life satisfaction and self-efficacy. Interestingly, no spiritual dimensions emerged despite 'spirit' and 'mental toughness' apparently sharing much common ground. For example, the media may refer to an athlete showing great 'spirit' to come back from an adverse situation (i.e. Whyte, 2005). The term mental toughness may be used in a similar way by the media, and possibly interchangeably with spirit. Clearly, a researcher who used such terms interchangeably would rightly be accused of being a poor scientist for not differentiating between the terms. Nesti (2004) suggests that there are "even times when in circumstances of physical hardship and psychological deprivation, the survival of the individual rests upon the existence of spirit" (p. 123). This argument is a philosophical one and clearly indicates why existential psychology has been criticised for being closer to philosophy than to science. To a more traditional sport psychologist, Nesti's comments must sound suspiciously like mental control or mental toughness. But here is where issues get even more confused.

Unruh et al. (2002) state that: "...a client who considers spirituality as a religious matter but does not have a religious faith may prefer to talk about what is important or meaningful in her or his life as psychological issues without constructing these preferences as spiritual matters" (p. 11). This argument can be reversed to suggest that

those with a religious faith may prefer to talk about spiritual issues rather than psychological constructs. On this basis it is clear that psychological and spiritual matters are in fact different labels for similar experiences, with individual's beliefs directing the verbal descriptors. In contrast, Unruh et al. (2002) believe that spiritual questions such as "What is the meaning and purpose of human life?" and "Why do bad things happen to good people?" provide a clear distinction between spirituality and related psychological constructs.

Internal Regulation and Faith in Oneself

While it is easy to support Watson and Nesti's (2005) call for more client-centred approaches to sport psychology consultations, it is important to draw attention to some of the implications of including spiritual dimensions in this process – especially if they are linked to religious belief. Simons (1992) provides a compelling argument for developing rational mental plans and physical routines based on research and best practice, as a method of dealing with athletic experiences and optimising performance. He is quick to differentiate these plans and routines from superstitious rituals. His position, like the majority of sports psychologists (Kirschenbaum, 1984; Orlick, 2000; Weinberg & Gould, 2003), is that interventions should be based on maximising an athlete's control over his or her mental state, and by so doing promote self-regulation and more control over performance. There is an abundance of controlled scientific support for the use of mental skills training as a means of improving performance (Greenspan & Feltz, 1989; Murphy & Martin, 2002; Weinberg & Comar, 1994).

There is a clear distinction to be made in regards to promoting a mind-set that facilitates internal control and one that relinquishes this in favour of placing faith outside of oneself (superstitious rituals including prayer). Interestingly, Jones et al. (2002) found that athletes ranked belief in oneself as the most important attribute of mental toughness. Clearly, each person needs to determine their own type and level of faith, but as Simons (1992) indicates, "waiting for something or someone to magically turn potential into reality is a person who will come up short" (p. 17). Therefore, sport psychologists should work with athletes in order to facilitate self-belief, self-regulation and internal control.

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the calls for the integration of a spiritual dimension in sport (Watson & Nesti, 2005) are somewhat premature and potentially more problematic than might have initially appeared. With increased demand for the services of sport psychology consultants, it appears athletes are taking the psychological elements of preparation and performance more seriously. The discipline appears to have dispelled numerous 'myths' concerning the relevance and usefulness of sports psychology (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). Part of this process has involved athletes beginning to use and appreciate the importance of psychological techniques. Some of these techniques, including those used to develop relaxation (meditation), have been adapted from religious forms – with the religious significance removed. Some researchers appear to advocate adding the religious and spiritual factors back into the sport domain

(Udermann, 2000; Watson & Nesti, 2005). Given the near collapse of orthodox religions in some countries (Robertson, 2004), this appears to be an unwise decision, and one that may risk the credibility of the discipline.

There have been various calls for spiritual factors to be given more consideration by athletic trainers (Udermann, 2000) and sport psychology consultants (Watson & Nesti, 2005), but these reviewers must be aware that many practitioners will not always share their clients spiritual beliefs and vice versa. Where clashes exist, it is likely to be difficult, and in some cases impossible to establish an effective working alliance. However, no practitioners could seriously reject the need to respect individuals' spiritual convictions (Udermann, 2000). While some researchers will see the study of spirituality in sport as a legitimate and purposeful endeavour, others will remain more skeptical. Baum (1994, cited in Wade & Tavis, 1996) stated that: "I no more have a mind than I have a fairy god mother. I can talk to you about my mind or my fairy god mother; that cannot make either of them less fictional. No one has ever seen either one ...such talk is no help in a science" (p. 280). While most sports psychologists would reject this strict behaviourist argument based upon a general acceptance of the importance of cognitions, and of course the mind-body link, replacing the word 'mind' with 'spirit' may encounter less opposition.

It is difficult to conceive why a supernatural, rather than a scientific explanation to athletes' experiences must be sought. As Dawkins (1998, p. xi) explains, some people never lose the opportunity to quote Shakespeare's Hamlet, when he says "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." The scientists natural response is, of course, 'yes, but we are working on it.'

Unfortunately the over-use of non-traditional forms of enquiry to study spirituality, have not helped to unravel the truth. Clearly, before researchers look to develop greater understanding of the links between sport and spirituality, there is an urgent need to consider spirituality as a concept. Without an agreed conceptualisation of spirituality it is difficult to conceive how research in this area can progress, and how a strong argument for spirituality to be integrated into current practice can be made.

Scientific researchers such as Persinger (1987) have called for the application of scientific method to study such phenomena as spirituality. For Persinger, it appears that the common denominator for subjective experiences is brain activity, and his approach has taken a more critical perspective incorporating neuroscience and offering numerous scientific explanations for subjective experiences like the 'sensed presence' (Persinger, 1987). From this perspective, the existence of spirituality is clearly questionable as rational, alternative explanations exist.

In sport, there is emerging evidence to suggest that some athletes are using religious practices including prayer as both a coping mechanism to deal with stress and anxiety and to facilitate performance enhancement (Czech et al. 2004; Park, 2000). The effectiveness of such practices is currently unclear, but research is needed to compare the effects of prayer, against more traditional approaches to dealing with stress and anxiety in sport, using both religious and non-religious participants (to control for belief). Researchers

should also be prepared to compare and contrast physiological, biochemical, affective and neurological data in order to explore possible mechanisms to explain any observed changes.

While researchers such as Watson and Nesti (2005) advocate the need to investigate the experience of the spiritual within the practitioner-athlete relationship, there is a need to consider the wider implications of such endeavours. Future researchers should therefore examine the impact of connecting spirituality with sport psychology on the perceptions of athletes (those who do and do not consult sport psychologists should be included) both with and without spiritual beliefs; specifically whether such integrations influence clients' perceptions of the importance and credibility of sport psychology and whether spiritual beliefs (or lack of them) influence the decision to consult a sport psychologist. Attention should be given to the compatibility between spirituality and mental skills training (i.e., is commitment to mental skills training influenced by spiritual belief?). In all instances there is a need to compare and contrast participants who do and do not have spiritual beliefs. The strength of spiritual belief should also be controlled since past researchers have noted problems in this regard (Levin, 1994). Some clients may have stronger spiritual convictions than others.

From an applied perspective, while sports psychologists need to acknowledge individuals spiritual beliefs, it is important that the main goals of the consultation are not lost. According to Andersen (2000) these are to help athletes get better and become more competent. While recent emphasis on 'athlete centred' approaches to consultation have undoubted merit in meeting individual needs (Miller & Kerr, 2002), the importance of helping athletes achieve self-regulation by developing internal control is paramount. When athletes' senses of self are so connected with their sporting performances, helping them to perform better, will likely, have the additional benefit of enhancing their sense of well-being and possibly their health. To this end, there is far more evidence to suggest performance improvements are best achieved by using the more traditional mental skills that a sport psychologist has at his or her disposal, than by spiritual integration.

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