Towards a Critical Social Sport Psychology
Hacia una Psicología Social y Crítica del deporte

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Abstract

Traditionally, Sports Psychology has been sustained from the cognitive behavioral perspective of the discipline. This approach has guided its work on the cognitive "psychological skills" of athletes, basing their work on objectivity and neutrality. This article proposes a critique of the cognitive behavioral perspective of Sports Psychology through a comparison with Social Critical Psychology of Sport. This contrast was made according to six dimensions: ontology, epistemology, object of study, vision of subject, approach and methodology. Finally, it is suggested to rethink the role of sports psychologists; develop a theoretical body that allows to generate new questions that facilitate the approach of new problems; and to reinterpret traditional techniques and to build new ways to intervene in practical work with athletes, teams, coaches, and other sports subject.

Keywords: **Psychology Sports; Cognitive Science; Critical Social Psychology; Socioconstructionism**

Resumen

Tradicionalmente la Psicología del Deporte se ha sostenido a partir de la perspectiva cognitiva conductual de la disciplina. Este enfoque ha orientado su trabajo sobre las "habilidades psicológicas" de índole cognitiva de los deportistas, basando su trabajo en la objetividad y en la neutralidad. Este artículo propone una crítica a la visión cognitiva conductual de la Psicología del deporte por medio de una comparación con la Psicología Social Crítica del deporte. Este contraste se realiza en función de seis dimensiones: ontología, epistemología, objeto de estudio, visión de sujeto, enfoque y metodología. Finalmente, luego de la comparación, se sugiere repensar el rol de psicólogo o psicóloga del deporte; desarrollar un cuerpo teórico que permita generar nuevas preguntas que faciliten el abordaje de nuevos problemas; y reinterpretar las técnicas tradicionales y construir nuevas formas para intervenir en el trabajo práctico con deportistas, equipos, entrenadores, y cualquier otro sujeto deportivo.

*Palabras clave: **Psicología del Deporte; Ciencia Cognitiva; Psicología Social Crítica; Socioconstruccionismo***

INTRODUCTION

Sport Psychology has traditionally been firmly rooted in cognitive behavioural psychology (Avilés et al., 2014; Ezquerro 2008 Llorens, 2006). According to this perspective — the hegemonic theory of subjectivity — the human mind is the sum of stimulus inputs and response outputs, a process which follows a logical and rational order (Sisto, 2006). As such, the theory of information processing is the approach most widely applied to sports practice (Moe, 2005).

As a result, the work of Traditional Sport Psychology (TSP) has focused on the cognitive 'psychological skills' of athletes and teams (Godoy-Izquierdo et al., 2009; Lorenzo et al., 2012; Moran & Toner, 2017). The constructs most widely addressed by sport psychologists have been motivation (García-Mas & Rivas, 2001; Gillet et al., 2010; Ntoumanis & Strauss, 2012); goal setting (Elliot, 2005; Gernigon et al., 2015); anxiety (Liberal et al., 2014; Olivares et al., 2016); emotions (Cantón et al., 2015; Latinjak et al., 2014); attention and concentration (García et al., 2005; Mora et al., 2001); mental imagery and practice (Sánchez & Lejeune, 1999); perception and memory (García-González et al., 2011; Noce & Samulski, 2002); and mental representations (García-González et al., 2011).

According to one of the discipline's fundamental texts (Weinberg & Gould, 1996), these constructs are developed from the cognitive-behavioural perspective and are considered the only way for the profession to operate. However, a decade previously, Rainer Martens (1987) was raising the first concerns about the paradigm, highlighting its limitations in terms of achieving an understanding of the full complexity of the sports phenomenon. In light of these reservations, some authors (Ingham et al., 1999, in Roper, 2016) went on to develop alternative perspectives of sports practice that included elements which were commonly overlooked or undervalued by the dominant paradigm.

One such neglected approach is the so-called 'Cultural Sport Psychology' (McGannon & Smith, 2015, 2017; Ryba, 2017; Ryba et al., 2010; Ryba & Wright, 2005; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009), which addresses the phenomenon of sport according to the tradition of cultural studies, putting power, privilege and praxis as the focus for the construction of knowledge. According to Emily Roper (2016), who refers to the ideas of Michel Foucault, power is a relationship that operates at the very heart of social relationships and is both scattered and pervasive: power is in all places and comes from all places, and the sports context is no exception. Roper asserts that those who enjoy privileges are unconscious of their presence, and only when these privileges are pointed out by the oppressed do they become aware of their influence. This puts oppression and privilege in positions of opposition as, for instance, not everyone has the means

to pay a sport psychologist. With regard to praxis — or theoretically informed practice — the author highlights the challenges involved in empowering marginalised sectors and those whose lives are marked by iniquity. These groups, which include migrant populations, minority ethnic groups (Kontos & Breland-Noble, 2002), and women, are considered to have less access to sport, exercise and recreation (Fisher et al., 2003).

Cultural Sport Psychology therefore encompasses all social, cultural and historical contexts involved in sports practice. Furthermore, it emphasises the identities and meanings constructed in the field of sport, exposing language and discursive practices (Blodgett et al., 2015), and criticising the individualist, quantitative and apolitical focus of TSP (Ryba & Wright, 2005).

The relevance of this criticism becomes apparent upon consideration of the conditions in which modern sport was born: a context permeated by economic, historical, political, cultural and social elements that are articulated to the benefit of certain power-centric interests (Corriente & Montero, 2014). In other words, contrary to public claims, sport as a practice is neither neutral to nor isolated from global, national or local political realities. As such, the individual, quantitative, apolitical focus mentioned above makes TSP a naïve accomplice in the multiple forms of discrimination and abuse that exist in the world of sport, becoming an ally of the status quo and diminishing the potential of transformative proposals through its acritical existence.

This problematic state of affairs presents an opportunity to make known the limitations of TSP and to formulate new proposals that are of social and cultural relevance to the context in which sport is practised. The aim of the present work is therefore to formulate a theoretical and practical perspective from which to critically approach research and intervention involving athletes, coaches and other actors associated with sports practice. In order to achieve this, we will make a comparison between Traditional Sport Psychology and a new perspective that we have termed Critical Social Sport Psychology, which is inspired by a number of proposals relating to Cultural Sport Psychology. We will then discuss the future of CSSP and the challenges that future research and interventions should seek to overcome.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL SOCIAL SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Traditional Sport Psychology (TSP), the hegemonic approach applied within the field, is a positivist paradigm (Whaley, 2001). Currently, the primary ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations of TSP are the cognitive sciences, which propose a single reality that pre-exists the subject and is ac-

cessible only by means of measurable and quantifiable scientific rationality (Sisto, 2006). It is based on a technical approach to knowledge production (Habermas, 1972) and oriented towards the control and prediction of the psychological skills of athletes and sports teams (Kavussanu, 2017).

Critical Social Sport Psychology (CSSP) offers a criticism of TSP, while simultaneously conducting a continuous and ongoing appraisal of its own practices. CSSP embraces the proposals of Critical Social Psychology (Íñiguez, 2003; Fernández, 2019; Montero & Fernández, 2003), which question the form of knowledge production mentioned above. Furthermore, it seeks to generate discussions based on research and the field itself with a view to constantly improving the work of sport psychologists and, in turn, the lives of athletes. In terms of praxis, CSSP acknowledges people's capacity to change and constitutes a means of connecting with that change.

Following the ideas of Lupicinio Íñiguez (2003), rather than being considered as a discipline or subdiscipline in its own right, CSSP should be thought of as a perspective that constantly questions and challenges forms of knowledge production within the field of sport. It can also be understood as a practice that invites fresh examination of the specific field of Sport Psychology. For example, TSP would address anxiety using individual strategies focused on encouraging the athlete to relax. By comparison, CSSP would focus on how the individual and their team construct anxiety by studying the associated meanings and practices that athletes, coaches, families and even the authorities produce and reproduce.

We consider that TSP needs to be "opened up to new, ground-breaking conceptions of the social and of human beings, remaining sensitive to the new imaginaries that emerge in contemporary society" (Íñiguez, 2003, p. 236, own translation). As such, CSSP views Social Psychology not as an empirical science to be appropriated, but as a field that is in a constant state of construction (Fernández, 2019). The present work does not attempt, therefore, to provide or institutionalise a definition of CSSP. Rather, it seeks to create a space within which to discuss and share experiences, while:

> Maintaining a radical opposition to despotic and authoritarian modes of thought, sustaining intense criticism of individualism and commitment to processes of political and social change, and blurring the boundaries of the theoretical and the methodological, the natural and the social. (Íñiguez, 2003, p. 236, own translation)

Table 1 provides a summary of the differences between Traditional Sport Psychology and Critical Social Sport Psychology.

	Critical Social Sport Psychology	Traditional Sport Psychology
Ontology	Multiple socially constructed realities	Single objective and neutral reality
Epistemology	Socioconstructionist	Positivist
Study object	Sports practice and the social context that influences it	Athlete, performance, and sports outcome
Vision of subject	Social with agency	Individual without agency
Approach	Educational, communitarian, discursive	Clinical, psychometric
Methodology	Based on understanding and transformation	Based on measurement and control

Table 1. Comparison between Traditional Sport Psychology and Critical Social Sport Psychology

Ontology

TSP is validated by means of the scientific method, considered the explanatory and descriptive key to understanding sport. This validation proposes a single objective and neutral reality that pre-exists the subject and is accessible only through scientific rationality involving measurement, quantification and categorisation of the phenomenon as a whole. TSP therefore supposes an essentialised reality in which the subject is positioned as a mere descriptor, represented in terms of cognitive frameworks.

By contrast, CSSP views reality as a social construction of which language and discourse are crucial elements. As such, it supposes not a single reality, but one that is multifaceted, and constructed and interpreted by the myriad subjects that define it. In this sense, reality is not an external or unconnected essence, but forms part of the subjects themselves as they construct it.

Unlike TSP, CSSP proposes that, far from being a politically neutral space, reality is a territory of constant struggle and rivalry between historically constructed hegemonies (Montero, 2001) that are also applicable to sport. In other words, the sports reality is a space permeated by power, ideology and discourses that circulate within it and participate decisively in its construction (Ryba, 2005).

Epistemology

TSP is based on the cognitive behavioural approach, which is a positivist epistemology of knowledge generation. The relationship between the knowledge

holder and the knowable is characterised by the aspirations of objectivity and neutrality (Moe, 2005; Sisto, 2006).

CSSP proposes new relationships between the researcher and the subject, as well as new notions of legitimacy of knowledge within the field (Mcgannon & Smith, 2017). From this perspective, the manner in which the cognisant subject approaches that which he or she wishes to learn is part of an interpretive act, as there is neither a single truth nor precise ways in which to expose it. In other words, knowledge is produced as a result of the construction of meanings through interpretations of information provided by the field and the subjects under investigation (Weed, 2017).

In light of this, we agree with Maritza Montero (2001) in her claim that the phenomenon of knowledge is intimately tied to power, and that it has inherent ethical and political consequences. The sport psychologist must reflect constantly on the political effects of the knowledge that they produce, as these will never be neutral. This fact puts them in an important position within the fields and lines of power that criss-cross sports practice.

The status of TSP as an objective science does not require it to adopt an ethical or political position within the production and/or application of knowledge. Such positions are not considered part of the discipline since their incorporation would imply a loss of the objectivity and neutrality of scientific rationality. By contrast, CSSP assumes the responsibility of posing fundamental ethical and political questions in the field of sport (Montero, 2001): for whom and why does knowledge exist, and what is the role of the other in its construction?

Study object

According to ideas put forward by Katia Rubio and Juliana Oliveira (2019), the principal study object of TSP has been performance and success in sports, with the primary focus being on the individual figure of the athlete or coach. "The demand for victory at any cost, the requirement to comply with changes to rules and schedules, and the need to consider the commercial interests of clubs and sponsors are all central to the role of the sport psychologist" (Rubio & Oliveira, 2019, p. 13, own translation), and from the outset they serve to condition the object with which they are working.

Specifically, the study object of TSP is individual cognition as identified in sports contexts. Although this may include individuals or groups of individuals, these will always be understood from the perspective of the cognitive sciences. The history of this approach to knowledge production has featured laboratory-based experiments and has been shaped by empiricist and positivist positionings and individualism in the generation of knowledge (Fernández, 2019).

By contrast, CSSP takes the complete concept of sports practice as its study and intervention object, taking into consideration the social, historical and cultural context that has influenced it. As such, it addresses not only performance, but the multiple social relationships that exist in the field of sport, exercise, and physical activity in general.

Importantly, this proposal is based on a context of commercial independence, removed from the economic interests that have permeated, conditioned and, above all, come to threaten the role of sport psychologists. Thus, and in accordance with the ideas of Rubio and Oliveira (2019), issues of sports performance can be considered alongside comprehensive concern for athletes themselves and can refer to any subject, whether individual or collective.

Vision of the subject

Within the framework of the cognitive sciences, TSP proposes a sports subject who is passive in their own construction and in the construction of their reality; measurable, controllable and standardisable; devoid of agency and denied their own voice, the same as an object studied by the natural sciences (Woolgar, 1988). In other words, the athlete is understood as an individual and rational subject, defined in terms of an essence in which cognitive processes and the processing of information are central.

From this perspective, the behavioural or emotional problems encountered by athletes occur as a result of inadequate processing of the objective information derived from external reality and, in turn, of sub-optimal behaviour on the part of the subject. For example, when dealing with a subject who is experiencing anxiety or stress, a sport psychologist whose work is based on the cognitive behavioural approach would apply a test to objectively establish the subject's level of anxiety and what degree of relaxation they require.

By contrast, CSSP understands the sports subject as a social subject possessed of agency: not as something measurable, but as someone understandable and transformable through the subjectivity of the sport psychologist. In this sense, the notion of reality proposed by CSSP is consistent with the idea of a subject with no predetermined essence. The athlete is understood as actively involved in the construction of their own subjectivity and, as such, part of the transformation of their reality and surroundings, whether these be to do with coaching, specialisation, competition, high-performance, community or otherwise.

We agree with Kerry McGannon and Brett Smith (2015) that people heavily involved in sport can have multiple forms of identification that go beyond that world, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and status.

As such, it is possible to achieve a reinterpretation of the notion of subject in which the key lies not in the isolated individual, but in their relationship with another. In the words of Montero (2001):

> The One recognises themself as such because of the presence of the Other; because of the relationship that exists between the two. They exist within the relationship but not outside it. Individuality is therefore an element of the relationship which is constructed by and within it. (p.6)

In this sense, the athlete exists through their relationship with other actors in the world of sport.

Approach

There is significant interest within TSP in relationships between personality, mental health, and sport. This is evident in a number of studies and other published works that focus on the issue (Cruz, 1997; Weinberg & Gould, 1996). The perspective therefore takes a clinical approach in terms of the way in which it addresses sports practice.

This involves the use of concepts and theoretical and practical tools from Clinical Psychology to study and treat the individual figure of the athlete. There have been efforts within TSP to establish relationships between personality, mental health and sport in order to identify personality patterns and traits in athletes that correspond to certain levels of sports performance, to identify those personality profiles most suited to high-performance sport, and to correlate personality structures with sports performance (Allen et al., 2013; García-Naveira & Ruiz-Barquín, 2013; Hoyt et al., 2009; Rhodes & Pfaeffli, 2012; Rhodes & Smith, 2006). In addition, the approach seeks to explain the issues faced by athletes from a biomedical perspective, attempting to determine the specificity and prevalence of mental disorders in sport (Bär & Markser, 2013; Gorczynski et al., 2016; Gouttebarge et al., 2016) and to determine the conditions and indicators of 'normality' or sound mental health in athletes (Rice et al., 2016) according to concepts such as resilience (Asma Hosseini & Besharata, 2010). In practical terms, the approach involves the use of clinical techniques from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, such as behavioural modification or cognitive restructuring (Alarcón et al., 2010).

In sum, TSP seeks to comprehend, explain and predict sports performance (Kavussanu, 2017) in terms of a logic in which the athlete, in their interaction with a stressful and adverse competitive environment can adapt, develop resilience, or establish a psychopathological framework. We consider that the approach constitutes a limitation for the discipline, as to individualise and pathologise sports issues is to prevent the inclusion of other elements in the analysis, such

as sociocultural and historical contexts, social relations, and political dynamics (Fernández, 2019), all of which have the potential to aid understanding of the subjective experiences of athletes. In this sense, the logic of mental health and psychopathological disorder places problems in the minds of athletes and pays no attention to the systemic conditions present.

By contrast, the approach proposed by CSSP is inspired by the use of theoretical and practical tools taken from Social Community Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Discursive Psychology. The social community approach provides a critical understanding of the experience and practices of subjects in the context of their communities, encompassing the social relations and cultures of which they are a part (Montero, 2004) and incorporating issues such as racism, job security, discrimination, gender violence, and public policy on sport, which are directly related to experience and the subjective discontent expressed by athletes.

The educational approach is based on understanding relationships established between teacher and learner during education processes by means of a socio-historical interpretation of educational trajectories (Sebastián & Lissi, 2016) as expressed by the coach-athlete relationship that forms in the various sports contexts. As such, it incorporates the psychological dimension in sports coaching, which it understands as a learning process that must account for the trajectories of the actors involved and how these have been formed in the context in which the actors learn (Bourgeois, 2009), moving the focus away from explanations based on notions of symptom, disorder, or personality structure (Baltar, 2003). This approach promotes the use of conceptual tools to understand sports contexts and their implications for learning processes. Dimensions identifiable within the sports context include macro- and micro-political analysis of the club or organisation (Ruiz, 1997); the role of the coach as an educational leader within a learning process (Murillo, 2006); the relationship between teacher and learner — or between coach and athlete — within the power relationship (Freire,1998; Johns & Johns, 2000); and, above all, the question of how coaches and athletes learn.

Finally, the discursive approach addresses the limitations of the clinical approach, understanding psychological processes as occurring not in the mind, but on the level of social relations (Edwards & Potter, 1992). For this reason, the focus of Discursive Psychology is action through speech and writing, based on the notion of language as a tool that 'does things' (Íñiguez, 2003), in that it enables us to "gain an understanding of social life and social interaction through the study of social reality considered as a text" (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 110, own translation).

When considering the tools mentioned above derived from Social Community Psychology, Educational Psychology and Discursive Psychology, it is clear that the sports subject constructs their subjectivity using language and the discourses that concern them. Thus, from an anti-essentialist standpoint, we are able to achieve a far richer and more complex understanding of the subject than would be possible from the personality structure or mental disorder angle. In practical terms, language enables psychologists to approach athlete identity by incorporating narrative methodologies that facilitate the expression of life stories, of meanings associated with the sports experience, and of new meanings derived from those experiences.

Methodology

Building on the ontological and epistemological foundations of TSP, the discipline's most thoroughly validated research seeks to identify the universal causes of the phenomena studied (Whaley, 2001). This aim is associated with a methodology that assumes the complete objectivity of sporting professionals, highlighting the quantifiable aspects of the phenomena studied and applying a reductionist approach to sports practice in order to explore the 'single reality' that exists within sport. The clinical and biomedical approach of TSP is oriented towards measurement, control and prediction of the workings of cognitive processes that underlie sports performance by means of standardised instruments for the measurement of psychological constructs.

By contrast, CSSP proposes a methodology of research and intervention that takes into account the social, cultural and historical contexts present within the field of sport. Also relevant are identities, life experiences, social relations, and the construction of subjectivities and meanings. Given that these are all elements of politically non-neutral social dynamics, the methodology for addressing them must also reflect this. As such, the purpose of research and intervention must be to change and improve the lives of actors involved in the practice of sport by means of a praxis that seeks first to understand their world and then to change it (Stanley, 1990).

The role of the researcher or the intervener is, therefore, as an agent of social change, and of particular importance is the choice of topics that will be of use to people as they attempt to resist conditions of discontentment and social injustice, as well as to conduct a political analysis of their findings and provide multiple interpretations.

The CSSP perspective does not reject outright the use of quantitative tools, but we do consider that care should be taken with their findings. If confirmed from a position of scientific neutrality and validity, there may be ethical and politi-

cal implications that serve to reduce the visibility of the very subjects who contributed to the construction of that knowledge. On one hand, we propose that special attention be paid to quantitative interpretation of results; on the other, we recommend incorporation of language and interpretation by means of qualitative research tools that account for the multiplicity of meanings and the myriad points of view present in the practice of sport, for interpretations of these, and for the contextual localisation of knowledge (Sparkles & Smith, 2014).

Among the methodological possibilities made available by CSSP are the broad variety of qualitative research resources associated with the social sciences (Íñiguez, 2003), with narrative research (Smith, 2010), with the discursive perspective (Davies & Harre, 1999; Faulkner & Finlay, 2002; Garay et al., 2005), with narrative psychology (White, 2002), and with post-qualitative research and the materialist turn (Fullagar, 2017). These include the use of autoethnography, critical discourse analysis (Íñiguez, 2003), conversation analysis (McGannon & Smith, 2015), ethnomethodology (Firth, 2010; Guber, 2014; Izquierdo, 2003), Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006), identification of dominant and alternative narratives (Llorens, 2006; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2015), Q-Methodology (Gergen et al., 1999), the quasi-ethnographic approach (Murtagh, 2007; Silva & Burgos, 2011), and Point of View Theory (McCarl-Nielsen, 1990; Whaley, 2001).

DISCUSSION

In the present article we have conducted a comparison between Traditional Sport Psychology (TSP) and our proposed approach, termed Critical Social Sport Psychology (CSSP). The six dimensions summarised in Table 1 constitute the main differences between the two perspectives. We identified the limitations of TSP with regard to the way in which it addresses sports practice, proposing a new perspective that responds to these shortcomings.

The differences presented lend weight to the social and critical credentials of CSSP. Socially, our proposal views the subject as the result of their social relations (Íñiguez, 2003), a perspective which interprets the athlete as an active subject with their own voice and capacity to transform their reality.

Critically, CSSP focuses on the ethical and political elements of the work of the psychologist in the field of sport. This requires a comprehensive and emancipatory praxis whose objective is to understand and validate the experience of the athlete subject with a view to promoting social change and denouncing the injustices that exist in sport.

As we conclude, we now consider there to be four paths that must be explored in order to continue with the development of CSSP as a valid perspective within the field of Sport Psychology. Firstly, the role of the sport psychologist in both public and private contexts must be reassessed. Rubio and Oliveira (2019) assert that in the private sphere, the interests of clubs and teams condition the work conducted by sport psychologists, and that it is therefore important to expose the tensions and economic pressures to which these are subject, and to intervene appropriately. Secondly, we must assess the focus that governments put on sport, as priorities may change or remain the same with each new administration. This means that the work carried out by sport psychologists in the public sphere is affected by the changing perspectives installed by successive governments.

Thirdly, a body of theoretical work must be developed, raising new questions and addressing new problems. Knowledge production within the field of Sport Psychology must therefore include cultural studies (Fisher et. al., 2003), feminist perspectives (Bredemeier, 2001; Carter, 2019; Gill, 2001; Greenleaf & Collins, 2001; Hall, 2001; Krane, 2001; Oglesby, 2001; Roper, 2001; Semerjian & Waldron, 2001; Whaley, 2001) and post-qualitative approaches (Fullagar, 2017). These research traditions would encompass issues such as community, gender, ethnicity, migration, technology, territory, and power relations.

Fourthly, traditional techniques must be reinterpreted and new strategies developed for practical intervention in the work of athletes, teams, coaches and other actors in the world of sport. This includes the use of relaxation techniques, with emphasis on the way in which context, history and identity processes affect the athlete's performance and narrative. One option is the collective construction of meanings based on values or emotions experienced in the field of sport.

In conclusion, the present article constitutes our manifesto for effectively challenging the hegemony of Traditional Sport Psychology and, moreover, for tackling critically the neutrality with which TSP attempts to address the injustices and abuse experienced on a daily basis within the world of sport. We have performed a critical analysis of Sport Psychology, and this has led us to consider it a social science in its own right, part of the Social Studies of Sport (Soto-Lagos & Fernández, 2017). We hope that the present contribution will help to generate new dialogue, inspire fresh research approaches, and extend the map of connections within the field of Sport Psychology, exercise, and physical activity in general.

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