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## **Sport Psychology as Cultural Praxis: Future Trajectories and Current Possibilities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I argue for the development of a “sport psychology as cultural praxis” (Ryba & Wright, 2005) discourse that reflects the paradigmatic shift that I believe would provide a viable gateway for the entry of psychology of sport into the arena of (post)sport studies. I begin with an outline of future trajectories of the discipline and focus on a brief theoretical articulation of the intersection of applied sport psychology and cultural studies as one of the possible approaches to future work in sport psychology. Next I illustrate how the hegemonic origin story limits the discourse and practice of the field. I conclude with a call for increased interdisciplinarity and the incorporation of international trajectories into North American sport psychology.

### **Introduction**

The late 1990s and turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed sport psychologists ruminating about the future of the discipline. Performance enhancement and mental simulation were firmly established as the primary emphasis of sport psychology theory and practice. This, in combination with a consideration of the athlete as a unified individual, the utilization of quantitative research methods, and an accepted divergence of academic and applied sport psychology, constituted a mainstream, traditional psychology of sport that exists to the present day. However, there are a number of current developments and proposals (interdisciplinarity, consideration of gender and power issues, etc.) that have begun to introduce new, distinctly untraditional trajectories for sport psychology. Silva (2001), therefore, observed that “[s]port psychology is at a vital crossroads;” and that “[d]ecisions made in this decade will determine the future...growth of sport psychology on a global level” (p. 830). As a result, a number of prominent scholars in the field have

attempted to predict future trajectories for sport psychology (c.f., Silva, 2001; Williams & Straub, 2001) and many of them point to new directions rather than a continuation of traditional approaches and characteristics. Figures like Daniel Gould, Terry Orlick, John Silva, and Robert Weinberg, for example, appear to be in agreement that sport psychology will forge links with other related fields such as exercise science, counseling, and psychology and that strongly interrelated programs or even interdisciplinary programs will emerge as a result. They also anticipate that applied sport psychology will bridge the gap between research and practice, that research will increasingly be conducted in naturalistic settings and sport-simulating lab situations (as opposed to the purely artificial environment of the traditional laboratory), and that there will be a shift toward the educational model, as opposed to the clinical model, of sport psychology consulting (Silva & Weinberg, 1984; Williams & Straub, 2001).

Another set of figures, like Brenda Bredemeier, Diane Gill, Vikki Krane and Carole Oglesby, have contributed to the evolution of an emerging feminist sport psychology. These individuals have initiated a new dialogue on the future of sport psychology, one that predicts the growing importance of such issues as interdisciplinarity, gender and social difference in general and issues of power and representation in research and in the field of sport in particular. Their efforts began to open up traditional sport psychology to critical epistemologies and qualitative research methodologies. It is testimony to the importance and growing influence of feminist work in the field that apart from individual essays, an entire issue of *The Sport Psychologist* was recently devoted to the topic of feminist sport psychology.<sup>1</sup>

In other areas of sport studies, exciting innovative work has been done on the intersection of cultural studies, philosophy, history and sociology of sport. Sport studies scholars such as David Andrews, Cheryl Cole, William Morgan and Patricia Vertinsky, for example, injected critical approaches into their fields by undertaking analyses of sporting practices as cultural phenomena, in conjunction with political economy, ideology, and power relations. In a similar vein, the intersection of cultural studies and sport psychology offers new trajectories for the future work in our field.

In this paper, I draw on a recent co-authored paper with Handel Kashope Wright (Ryba & Wright, 2005) to discuss the possibility of (re)conceptualizing sport psychology by means of its articulation with cultural studies. Specifically, a heuristic “model” of cultural studies as praxis, developed by Wright, is drawn upon to problematise the privileged modern status of sport psychological discourse (i.e., institutionalized, positivistic, white, male, middle class and elitist) and propose a sport psychology as cultural praxis discourse as yet another possible future for the field.

### **What is sport psychology as cultural praxis?**

Sport psychology as cultural praxis is the discourse and practice that is currently evolving out of a traditional sport psychological discourse. It pushes our singular “scientific” discipline to become one that draws on and crosses a number of disciplines (e.g., sociology, history, philosophy and public policy, among others). In other words, it

is interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, focused on issues of sociocultural difference and social justice (with a particular emphasis on a reconceptualization of the athlete's identity), blends theoretical and practice work together in praxis and favors forms of progressive qualitative research, such as what Patti Lather (1991) has called "research as praxis" (Ryba & Wright, 2005).

It is significant to note that inter/anti/post/disciplinarity are integral characteristics of cultural studies. Interdisciplinary projects within a cultural studies paradigm display a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches since the investigated issues are considered to be more important than the disciplinary constraints placed on what questions one can ask and examine within an individual discipline. When cultural studies intersects with sport psychology, the resulting articulation<sup>2</sup> pushes sport psychology out of a "theoretical and methodological monoculture, which is still too dominant in our field" (Stelter, 2005, p. 15), into becoming an aspect of multicultural inter/anti/post/disciplinarity. "Doing" sport psychology this way opens up the field to new research topics and pressing questions facing contemporary sporting culture. In addition, this theoretically and methodologically expansive version of sport psychology provides a vantage point for the entry of psychology of sport into the arena of interdisciplinary (post)sport studies.

One of the effects of the articulation of sport psychology with cultural studies (which has been increasingly informed by poststructuralist and postmodern theorizing) is that the (re)examination of identity in general and the identity of the athlete in particular becomes a central concern. Sport psychology, as a discourse that "focuses on the individual" (Gill, 2000, p. 228), is intimately connected to the theorization of the athlete's identity and subjectivity. Thus, the way the individual (or in poststructuralist/postmodern terms, the subject) is theorized is not merely central to the psychology of sport but also determines the focus of its research and practice (in terms of pedagogy, methodology, research methods and theoretical frame). Various poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives offer a theorization of the subject, which is radically different from the liberal humanist perspective that is central to Western academic and civic discourses (Weedon, 1997) and is still taken for granted by the North American sport psychological discourse. By default, then, postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing disrupts and problematises the dominant sport psychological perspective on the individual and the modern understanding of sporting structure and athletic experience.

Generally speaking, sport psychologists tend to operate with a psycho-social view of the individual and to rely on the interactional mode of analysis. Weinberg and Gould (2003), for example, proposed three levels of personality structure (i.e., the psychological core, typical responses and role-related behavior) that encompass an "internal/constant – external/dynamic" continuum. This conception of the individual is consistent with the humanist belief in what poststructuralists would describe as essential subjectivity, i.e., a predetermined authentic essence that makes the subject what he or she is (Weedon, 1997). Humanist discourses of the unified rational subject, who has agency and control over his or her life, stem from the scientific assumptions of reality, objectivity and truth, subscribing to the idea of a singular true reality that can be accessed by means of

rationality and modes of scientific thinking (e.g., the psychological core that represents the “real” you can be objectively measured by various psychological inventories).

Unlike this *disembodied* viewpoint on the athlete, sport psychology as cultural praxis draws on poststructuralist and postmodern conceptions and, therefore, considers the athlete to be an *embodied* subject of multiple discourses (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and various identifications, a member of numerous social and cultural groups, and a part of sport as an institution immersed in a particular sociocultural and historical context. Considered in light of Foucault’s (1982, 1985) notion of fragmented subjectivity, athletes are both subjected to and active agents within various discourses. This reconceptualization of identity is one that traditional sport psychologists find particularly difficult to accept and to which they offer considerable resistance. However, we must confront the fact that athletes have multiple, fragmented identities and identifications within various discourses of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, region, etc., that athletics is a subculture within a larger culture, and that the institutions in which athletes are located attempt to control and mold their behavior. The complex dynamics involved in athletes’ negotiations of their subjectivities within and in relation to these various discourses has a crucial effect on athletes’ lives and performances.

Thus, in some ways, sport psychology as cultural praxis intersects with and underscores previously mentioned new trajectories. For example, it involves a move toward interdisciplinarity, a bridging of the gap between research and practice, and the incorporation of gender issues and power dynamics. However, this new trajectory differs significantly in terms of some of its details. First, while it has been predicted and proposed that sport psychology would forge links with related disciplines, such as exercise science, counseling and psychology and might even develop interdisciplinarity, the cultural studies approach makes interdisciplinarity almost a foregone conclusion rather than a mere possibility. Moreover, the links that it promotes are with sport studies (sociology, philosophy, and history of sport) rather than with exercise science and psychology. Second, it has been anticipated that sport psychology might start to incorporate qualitative research methods and, indeed, our field has somewhat opened up toward phenomenological and feminist qualitative work. Sport psychology as cultural praxis promotes further feminist and other explicitly political forms of qualitative research, such as narrative work, critical ethnography and institutional ethnography. Third, while feminist sport psychology has opened up the field to the examination of issues of gender and power, especially the empowerment of women, cultural studies has broadened that focus to include sociocultural difference (including masculinity, sexual orientation, race, etc.) and justice in general and the empowerment of athletes from socially and culturally marginalized groups in particular.

### **Thinking Historically about the Field**

Historian Peter Seixas contends that there is an inevitable tension between using history as “lessons from the past” that serve the present causes, and thinking historically. The latter is a more challenging approach that entails “the tangled interplay of continuity and change, the complexity of historical causation and the evidentiary basis of historical

interpretation” (Seixas, 2003). Seixas’ assertion underscores the fact that sport in general and sport psychology in particular are not fixed monolithic formations but have a history that reflects sociocultural politics and is related to efforts at social engineering (Wright & Ryba, in press). In other words, the meanings of sport and sport psychology “always already” have an initial sociocultural purpose that has been shifting over time to reflect dominant social values and cultural practices.

It appears, therefore, that one way of opening up and diversifying the “monoculture” of our field is to move away from its singular origin and begin to think of sport psychology internationally. Instead of approaching the psychology of sport in its totality using historical examples to legitimize the existing practices, sport psychology as cultural praxis rejects origin stories or essences and disrupts the traditional linear historical narrative by putting forward multiple, competing and shifting narratives and interpretations. As Wright (1995, 1998) has asserted, the point of the resulting multiplicity of origins and historical narratives of a field is not to have readers discern which version is “accurate” but to acknowledge the open-endedness of the field and highlight the politics of historical representation.

I argue, therefore, that a modern historical rendering of our field is sustained by putting forward a monolithic, singular history of sport psychology that creates a sense of uninterrupted progress and legitimizes the sport psychological discourse as a scientific model, influenced by the natural sciences. Moreover, the long-established privileged status of academic scholarship and research over professional issues and application have resulted in a fostering of sport psychology as a *homogeneous* positivistic and institutionalized discourse, positioned on the margins of interdisciplinary sport studies.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge some earlier work that had critiqued the prevailing scientific model that searches for objective and scientific analyses of human experience in sport. For example, Martens’ (1987) then radical essay challenged the practical significance of the published contemporary orthodox sport psychology texts and questioned the underlying ontological assumptions of sport psychology’s knowledge base that had resulted in the utilization of limited and limiting epistemologies. Similarly, in his earlier analysis of the then current status of sport psychology, Alderman (1984) contended that “research and statistical techniques [were] emphasized as the major contribution” and “the concepts explored [were] usually those which [were] easiest rather than those of theoretical importance” (p. 47). Although essays like those of Alderman and later Martens tended to question the validity of a number of scientific assumptions, specifically the notion of truth and objectivity, they were yet inextricably connected to the humanist project of modernity.

Today we need to face the reality of our rapidly changing (post)modern sport and exercise culture in a global context. Consider, for example, the following snapshot of our constantly mutating social world:

- Globalization and technological advances have constructed a hyper-real illusion of the unified world, which is strikingly divided along the sociocultural and

geographical axes of power. Some globalization issues that are relevant to our field include transnational sporting corporations, global production and consumption of athletic bodies and celebrity spectacles, athletic talent migration and blurring national identities;

- The fall of the Berlin Wall and break-up of the Soviet Union marked radical political changes in Europe and the world in general;
- The changing politics of the performing body and its relationship with the cultural shift in masculine and feminine identities as manifested in body modification, tattooing/body art, aggression and violence in sport, use of illegal performance enhancing means and megarexia and/or anorexia;
- New sports budding in our (post)modern hedonistic society that require new kind of sporting facilities and artificially constructed challenges;
- Finally, as current president of the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC) Roland Seiler (2005) has observed, physical education in schools is under constant attacks by politicians who aim at reducing PE classes; there are increasing health risks and medical costs associated with physical inactivity and a sedentary life style; and a growing number of elderly persons in society than ever before.

In order to strengthen the research profile of sport and exercise psychology and provide answers to continuously emerging and mutating sociocultural issues and challenges, it seems logical to inform and transform research and practice of sport psychology via social and cultural theories that reflect and work with the swiftly changing conditions of the (post)modern world. Positioning ourselves inside/outside the existing discourse of sport psychology and moving beyond the disciplinary boundary that confines and is confined by the work we dare to undertake, fosters the integration of sport psychology into interdisciplinary sport studies and opens up new avenues and exciting possibilities for the field in general and scholarly work in particular.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper, I briefly articulated the intersection of sport psychology and cultural studies as one of the possible approaches to future work in sport and exercise psychology and put forward an argument for an integrated sport studies that includes (applied) sport psychology. Sport psychology as cultural praxis contributes to bridging the dichotomies between academic and applied work, theory and practice, text and lived culture. It calls for taking practitioners' tacit knowledge seriously and promotes the development of interdisciplinary sport psychology praxis (i.e., theory driven practice and theory informed by practice). Moreover, while recently emerged existential and feminist epistemologies of sport psychology have opened up the field to the incorporation of qualitative research methodologies and examination of issues of gender and power, especially the empowerment of women, cultural studies has broadened that focus to include other forms of qualitative research and examination of sociocultural difference and justice in general and the empowerment of athletes from socially and culturally marginalized groups in particular.

Next, I demonstrated that the way our field is historicized shapes and naturalizes our belief of what constitutes legitimate work in sport psychology and influences our research approaches and theoretical frames. The taken-for-granted singular history of the positivistic model of sport psychology polices its disciplinary boundary and limits our ability to pose questions that don't straightforwardly fit within the traditional discipline. When we position ourselves inside/outside the traditional disciplinary boundary, we might become more responsive to alternative ways of exploring sporting phenomena that account for the diversity of experiences and understanding of our sociocultural world. Interestingly, the European sport psychological discourse which is constructed on the juxtaposition of national histories and has to accommodate the variety of cultural narratives and social perspectives appears to be more open towards new approaches, methods and conceptual models than its North American counterpart.<sup>3</sup>

In the present age characterized by rapid and widespread migration and globalization, it is increasingly important and productive to incorporate international trajectories into North American sport psychology. Traditional, positivistic sport psychology as an encapsulated insular discipline that is constructed and historicized by the nation-states principle unwittingly participates in the production of recycled and, inevitably, inadequate knowledge. Therefore, to prevent our field from implosion, I urge the gatekeepers to (re)examine current evaluation criteria and begin to use a more expansive and inclusive model when evaluating intellectual rigor. I further assert that "sport psychology as cultural praxis" pushes traditional sport psychology towards interdisciplinarity and internationalization of its research and practice, "provoking [the field of sport psychology] into new moves and spaces where [it] hardly recognizes [itself] in becoming otherwise, the unforeseeable that [it is] already becoming" (Lather, 2003, p. 5).

<sup>1</sup> Gill, D. (Ed.). (2001). In search of feminist sport psychology: then, now, and always [Special Issue]. *The Sport Psychologist*, 15(4). This special issue provides an inclusive overview of various approaches to feminist sport psychology research. The contributors are Diane Gill, Carole Oglesby, Ruth Hall, Vikki Krane, Brenda Bredemeier, Diane Whaley, Christy Greenleaf and Karen Collins, Tamar Semetjian and Jennifer Waldron, and Emily Roper.

<sup>2</sup> In a cultural studies sense, the concept of articulation means both to speak to something and to "make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time" (Hall 1986, p. 53).

<sup>3</sup>As an example, the theme of the 11th European Congress of Sport Psychology (2003) was "New Approaches to Exercise and Sport Psychology: Theories, Methods and Applications." The Congress invited scholars in sport sciences to submit papers that were "conscious of the changes and challenges of our time."

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