

Positive Psychology: The Application in Sports Science and the Military

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Abstract

The origin of positive psychology was described by Peterson (2006) as a formal psychological paradigm. The term was first used by then-APA President Martin Seligman in 1998, and developing the scientific basis of positive psychology was one of Seligman's presidential initiatives. Positive psychology is the term given to a collection of studies aimed at researching what makes life worth living. Positive psychology aims to gain a deeper understanding of positive emotions, positive traits, and positive institutions. In time past, the field of psychology has largely focused on analysing mental disorders and human suffering. Happiness was regarded simply as an absence of suffering, but had never been actually studied in depth. The thought of positive psychology as conceptualised is aimed at the influenced by humanistic psychology, was not to replace traditional psychology, but to build a more complete picture of human experience (Seligman, 2004).

Similarly, psychology has been more oriented by focusing positively on the strength character and well-being of human being. Positive psychology is a fast-developing area of research that emphasizes personal growth and the positive qualities of life. It is the scientific study of what makes life most worth living. It encompasses positive experiences, traits, relationships, and institutions and involves a variety of practical strategies for enhancing well-being. It is also the science of happiness and well-being. Instead of drawing on a "disease model" as traditional psychology does, this new positive science focuses on factors that enable people to feel good and flourish using their natural strengths to bring out the best in themselves (Salam-Younes, 2011). Positive psychology in sport has been defined as the science of happiness and strength (Carr, 2011). While conventional psychology traditionally focuses on human weakness and pathology, positive psychology focuses on those things in life that make life worth living. Rather than attempting to replace conventional psychology, positive psychology compliments it. It has its foundations in the science of human strengths, happiness and wellbeing.

The three pillars of happiness are pleasure, engagement and meaning. The extent to which we experience each of these reflects on the levels of satisfaction we have in our lives. It is a fascinating field, and one that is well worth the effort of spending some time studying, but here in this presentation our attention is to focus on just one aspect of the topic; how it applies to elite sport and the military.

In fact, the aims of positive psychology have been fundamental to sports psychology for many years before the concept of positive psychology were first published by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). For the last thirty years or so sports psychologists have studied the qualities that make a great athlete and how performance can be improved, and their experience has helped many individuals and teams hit peak performance in both professional and amateur sport. Sports psychologists have even extended the boundaries of this approach beyond sport, applying it to fields such as performance arts, business and military. Positive psychology is becoming a big branch of psychology that "studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive". This positive science aim to favours and promotes research and application in areas such as: hedonic well-being, eudemonic well-being, subjective well-being, optimistic explanatory style, positive thinking, and character strength (Martin-Krumm and Sarrazin, 2004; Biddle, Fox and Boutcher, 2000; Seligman, Nolen-Hoeksema, Thornton and Thornton, 1990).

Theoretical Perspective of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology, from the beginning has spurred research in different perspectives, such as happiness, optimism, self-esteem and efficacy, well-being, motivation, flow, strengths and virtues, hope, resilience, mindfulness, and positive thinking. Specifically, there is a focus on three areas of positive experiences: the past (well-being and satisfaction) the present (happiness and flow) and the future (hope and optimism). These fields of research warranted the need for positive interventions, to increase happiness and well-being. These interventions have been applied in various disciplines, such as education, human resources, organizational functioning, therapy, career counselling, and health sports and military. The sections below explain the core concepts of the theory.

Authentic Happiness Theory

Authentic happiness theory explains the fact that people can feel happiness from different types of experiences. The pleasant life: This refers to feeling positive emotions in the most intuitive way, of feeling pleasant sensations. For example, eating ice cream because it tastes good, or riding a roller coaster because it's fun. Gaining happiness at this level necessitates relatively little effort.

The engaged life: Engagement is characterized by flow. Flow refers to the experience of completely losing oneself in an activity. Individuals become totally absorbed in what they are doing and lose track of time. They are not thinking, but in essence unified with what they are doing. Individuals could experience this in many activities, such as at work, dancing, playing baseball, or even solving a crossword puzzle.

In order for flow to occur, the person has to be using their signature character strengths, and usually there has to be some sort of challenge, but not too big of a challenge. Usually, activities with clear goals and feedback will cause more flow. Flow causes an inner motivation and intrinsic reward. As opposed to the pleasant life, this form of happiness necessitates more effort. Being in flow invigorates the person, filling one with positive energy.

The meaningful life: However engaging flow activities may be, they can be utterly meaningless and fill a person with a void after some time. For example, after being absorbed in a puzzle and finishing it, one can still feel like their life is worthless. In order to feel meaning, people have to be engaged in something that serves a goal beyond themselves, such as in religion, politics, or family.

Well-being Theory

Following criticism of his "Authentic Happiness Theory," Seligman made alterations to it and came up with the "Well-being Theory." As opposed to the goal of achieving happiness, this theory emphasizes the goal of reaching well-being. After all, people are motivated to do many things in life that do not necessarily increase happiness at the present moment. The classic example for this is having children. Parents to children often report less happiness at the present, but higher overall well-being.

Seligman describes five factors of well-being: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment (PERMA). As opposed to the previous theory, where character strengths were relevant only for engagement, here character strengths are relevant in order to maximize well-being felt from each factor. Maximum well-being leads to a state of flourishing. Flourishing is described as a state of thriving, of being full of vitality, and prospering as individuals and as a group.

Character Strengths and Virtues

Character strengths and virtues are the building blocks of flow, happiness, and well-being. There are six universal virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence. Each virtue includes four character strengths, as listed in the table below. A strength is described as something one is naturally good at, and enjoys engaging in. As opposed to talents, strengths necessitate effort, and are developed throughout life. When people recognize their strengths and use them for at something they value, it makes them feel empowered. The VIA (values in action) is a common tool used to assess strengths.

Positive Psychology and Elite sport performance

While physical activity is universally acknowledged as being beneficial to our health and wellbeing, in competitive sport the focus is on high levels of achievement and athletic excellence. This is where sports psychologists focus on the psychological factors that are all so important in achieving peak performance and which also draw on many of the elements of positive psychology. Some of the basic tenets of positive psychology include: "happiness, hope, optimism, wellbeing, resilience and flow" (Fleming, 2006) and the application of these to optimal functioning. In other words, it is about how people can feel good and thrive applying their natural strengths so as to make the best of themselves. These two aspects of psychology have so converged that the frequently field is now

referred to as “positive sports psychology”. Positive psychology in elite sports promote athletes well-being for better performance in sport and that was examined by myself and colleagues from Germany and Egypt when we examined the sleep habits of German athletes nights prior to competitions See Erlacher, Ehrlenspiel, Adegbesan and Galal Eldin (2011) and also examine the sport confidence of team sport players from Botswana, see Adegbesan (2010) where it was established that a relationship exist between the imagery use of these team sport players and their sport confidence. The construct of sport confidence is an aspect of positive psychology that advances an individual athletes’ level of self-efficacy.

Sports Coaching and Positive Psychology

A positive sport coaching is simply the application of the science of positive sports psychology to coaching. Much has changed over the years; in the bad old days the approach to coaching tended to be tough and unforgiving; little attention was paid to the emotional processes that went on in the minds of the athletes. Adegbesan et al (2014) examined the coaching intervention indices as predictors of effective coaching among Nigerian Coaches. The model of coaching efficacy which imbibed the principles of positive psychology was examined in the study above is said influenced by coaches past experience, coaching preparation, prior success, perceived ability of the skill of athletes and perceived social support of parents, school and community. They have provided information that will promote further studies in the area of challenges of coaching efficacy model and coaching behaviour as it affect learning and performance of athletes in Nigeria. The use of social support mechanisms need to be enhanced for the coaches to promote positive coaching efficacy behaviour.

Athletes and teams that are coached according to the findings of positive sports psychology perform at a higher level, exhibit greater resilience, optimism and emotional wellbeing. Their results are better performance under pressure and an ability to cope far better when faced with setbacks. Not only are they able to deal with failure in sport, they are able to apply the same coping strategies to their daily lives.

Positive Psychology and Self talk Technique

What athletes tell themselves can also have an impact on their peak performance. Positive self-talk is highly effective, but isn't always easy. Adegbesan, Mohammed and Uzoma (2014) examined the perceived influence of self-talk and imagery technique on emotions of non-elite athletes in Nigeria. It was revealed that significant correlation exist between the image use and self-talk technique used by the non-elite athletes. Self-talk is a component of positive psychology that has been used extensively within and outside sport domain to boost the confidence level of individuals. As we have said already, optimism is a fundamental tenet of positive sports psychology, but often our inner voice takes on a pessimistic tone, especially in the face of a recent setback. If you find out that you are having those negative thoughts, talk to your sports psychologist; there are many well established ways of dealing with them and changing them into positive ones.

Positive Psychology for Peak Performance

Achieving peak performance involves both the body and the mind. For athletes already in peak physical condition the deciding factor in achieving peak performance is their mental condition. Peak performance implies being in a state where everything flows, in other words being in the zone. Xinyi, Smith, and Adegbesan (2004) embarked on a cross-cultural comparison of Six Mental Qualities among Singaporean, North American, Chinese and Nigerian professional athletes. The personal characteristics investigated included competitive trait anxiety, trait self-confidence, concentration, mental preparation skills, achievement motivation, and leadership skills. Results showed that significant differences existed among the four countries on the six mental qualities. Follow-up univariate comparisons displayed that only anxiety and mental preparation scores showed significant difference between Chinese and Singapore athletes. Significant difference existed on all mental qualities between North American and Singaporean athletes and differences existed on five mental qualities, except competitive trait anxiety, between Chinese and North American athletes. No significant differences were found between North American, Chinese, and Nigerian athletes in competitive trait anxiety. It was found out that these six mental qualities are commonly used across culture, though at different degrees. But the pertinent thing is the fact that these mental qualities have positive impact on the athletes for podium performance. It can be transitory, a moment or period of exceptional functioning. For example the English bowler Chris Broad was in it when he took eight South African wickets for 15 runs. He described how the ball suddenly felt smaller in his hand, that time slowed down, than he felt supremely confident, invincible; and became mentally tougher. Elite soccer players sources of sport confidence social support, coaches knowledge, physical/mental preparation among others that forms a link with positive psychology was examined by Adegbesan (2007) and it was discovered that the male and female soccer players derived their confidence from these sources and these therefore invariable gave the players the mental edge for sporting success and excellence.

Application of Positive Psychology to the Military

My interaction with Col. Gregory Burbelo the then director of Army centre for enhancement performance (ACEP) at the United State Military Academy, West Point, New York at the annual conference of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology at Providence, Rhodes Island in 2009 ignited my interest in to develop collaboration with the military population. Having listened to the presentation of his research team on the use of basic components of mental skills used in positive psychology to develop mental toughness and well-being of cadets and families of military population, I became more enthused about my profession as a sport psychologist knowing fully well that I have become a beautiful bride to many disciplines. The psychological tools used at ACEP are

the same used for elite sport performance, exercise and physical activity promotion. Hence, there is job for many of us to do with the Nigerian military.

Application of Positive Psychology to Training Cadets

Professor Michael Matthews in 2004, collaborated with Angela Duckworth and Christopher Peterson aimed to explore the relationship between “grit,” a measure of passionate pursuit of long-term goals, and success among new cadets at United States military academy at West Point. As reported by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007), grit did not correlate with aptitude, leadership, or physical fitness measures. Moreover, grit was the only statistically significant variable in predicting retention through Cadet Basic Training CBT. Further result revealed that the relationship between grit and retention was relatively robust ($\beta = .44$). Indeed, cadets who scored a standard deviation or more above the mean were 60% more likely to complete CBT than those with lower grit scores. Cadets who successfully completed CBT were higher than those who left on nine strengths: bravery, optimism, persistence, enthusiasm, fairness, honesty, leadership, self-control, and teamwork.

Also, Matthews, (2008) asserted that young men and women attracted to military service may manifest a different profile of the 24 strengths than civilian counterparts. Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, and Peterson (2006) compared West Point cadets, Norwegian Naval Academy cadets, and U.S. civilians age 18–21 with some college on scores on the Values in- Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), an instrument described by Peterson and Seligman (2004) that assesses the 24 universal character strengths. Surprisingly, West Point cadets were more similar in their rank-ordering of character strengths to Norwegian cadets than they were to their own fellow American citizens. Both military samples scored high on strengths that are easily construed as important for military success, including teamwork, persistence, honesty, and bravery. These results clearly suggest that positive psychology-derived constructs such as character strengths may contribute strongly to our understanding of how to train and educate soldiers (Matthews, 2008a).

Positive Psychology and Clinical Applications

There is growing empirical evidence of the utility of employing positive psychology-based interventions in treating a variety of disorders. The role of character strengths in coping and resilience is of particular relevance to the military. Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2006) employed a Web-based retrospective study to examine the relationship between character strengths, again measured by the VIA-IS, and response to physical and psychological illness. They found that people with physical illness who were high in the character strengths of bravery, kindness, and humor experienced “less of a toll” on life satisfaction. For people suffering from psychological illness, those high in appreciation of beauty and love of learning fared better in life satisfaction. Moreover, Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, and Seligman (2007) reported that the character strengths most related to life satisfaction in nonclinical populations are capacity to love, hope/optimism, curiosity, and zest. Collectively, these results underscore the importance of positive character

strengths in adapting to the challenges of life. There is also evidence that character strength-based interventions are effective in helping veterans enrolled in a Veteran's Administration psychiatric recovery program. Resnick and Rosenheck (2006) asked clients enrolled in this program to complete the VIA-IS and examined how their character strengths might be employed to facilitate their recovery. Their qualitative analysis indicated that clients who completed the VIA-IS experienced a variety of positive outcomes. These included a sense of mastery and increased mood after completing the test and that many felt that the strengths approach was very relevant to their needs. Additional research with similar populations employing more stringent experimental designs is needed to more fully understand the role of character strengths in dealing with psychiatric issues among veterans, but these results are promising and important in that they suggest a fruitful area for future research and application. Also, given the premise that soldiers are fundamentally a young, healthy, and resilient population, it makes sense that positive-based interventions may be quite effective within these populations.

A positive psychology-based approach to dealing with psychopathology is in its infancy and much work needs to be done. Given the incidence of PTSD and related syndromes among soldiers and veterans, exploring the impact of positive psychology-based interventions on these pathologies would seem to be a particularly fruitful area of future research. For a variety of reasons, many soldiers are reluctant to admit to psychological problems or to seek treatment. A health-oriented, positive psychology-based approach might be more palatable to this population and destigmatize the seeking of assistance for those who experience adverse psychological effects of combat-related trauma.

Other Applications of Positive Psychology to the Military

Following the footsteps of other researchers outside the shores of Nigeria who have done extensive work on the application of positive psychology to sport and military life, it will be more appreciated if we as members of this association extend our focus to the concept of positive psychology to the community of military psychologists who, in turn, may see value in conducting basic and applied research with us in the following area as highlighted by Matthews, (2008) include:

- developing predeployment training protocols to build resilience of soldiers to
- combat-related stress;
- utilizing positive psychology methods to assist in reintegration following
- combat deployments;
- examining how character strengths might interact with cognitive factors to
- facilitate tactical, operational, and strategic decision-making;
- facilitating selection and training of elite combat units;
- evaluating the efficacy of positive psychology-based intervention in treating

- PTSD and related disorders;
- educating government agencies and healthcare organizations on the potential
- value of positive psychology in working with their target populations;
- conducting research to identify best practices for application to military families;
- exploring the extent and nature of posttraumatic growth (PTG) that may follow
- exposure to combat or other dire situations.

Conclusion

The success in both sport and military operations requires the application of the latest developments in psychological science and advances in related fields that will give advantage over the opponents. The advances in cognitive science in understanding the nature of operational decision-making may be leveraged with emerging behavioural science breakthroughs to redefine how tactical decision-making is taught to athletes and soldiers. The pillars of positive psychology provide a framework for pursuing research and application of positive psychology principles to sport and military psychology. Athletes and soldiers may be taught to better regulate affective states and to be aware of and to capitalize on their own hierarchy of personal character strengths. Future research in these areas holds great promise for developing more effective strategies to enhance and maintain resilience and to develop effective skills in dealing with the behavioural challenges when it does occur in sport and military domains. Finally, I challenge sport psychologists to look at positive psychology as a means to extend and improve our understanding of behavioural issues similar to athletes and soldiers with a view to developing collaborations with the military institutions.

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