

## DO WE REALLY NEED SPORT PSYCHOLOGISTS? Facilitators and Barriers to Sport Psychology Development

### PRECISAMOS REALMENTE DE PSICÓLOGOS DO ESPORTE? Facilitadores e Barreiras ao Desenvolvimento da Psicologia Do Esporte

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#### Abstract

Even though sport psychology is an established field of Psychology, with over a century of research and well-defined practice, there are still questions about the added value of these professionals. In this paper, we briefly reflect on some of the advantages of hiring sport psychologists, namely the benefits of supporting evidence-based practice, certified professionals, and developing the athlete as a whole (not just focusing on their performance). On the other hand, there are some barriers related to costs, work conditions, and development opportunities that make organizations question the hiring of such professionals. In this manuscript, we propose a decision-tree on hiring sport psychologists based on one's analysis of four domains: beliefs about science, ethical issues, career opportunities and work conditions.

**Keywords:** Sport Psychology; Psychological Intervention; Sport Psychologist.

#### Resumo

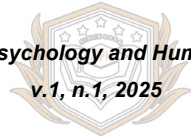
Embora a psicologia do esporte seja uma área consolidada da Psicologia, com mais de um século de pesquisa e prática bem definida, ainda existem questionamentos sobre o valor agregado desses profissionais. Neste artigo, refletimos brevemente sobre algumas das vantagens de contratar psicólogos do esporte, a saber, os benefícios de apoiar a prática baseada em evidências, profissionais certificados e desenvolver o atleta como um todo (não apenas com foco em seu desempenho). Por outro lado, existem algumas barreiras relacionadas a custos, condições de trabalho e oportunidades de desenvolvimento que levam as organizações a questionar a contratação desses profissionais. Neste manuscrito, propomos uma árvore de decisão sobre a contratação de psicólogos do esporte com base na análise de quatro domínios: crenças sobre a ciência, questões éticas, oportunidades de carreira e condições de trabalho.

**Palavras-chave:** Psicologia do Esporte; Intervenção Psicológica; Psicólogo do Esporte.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Mental health in sports contexts, particularly in elite contexts, has been increasingly addressed and draw attention to the role of sport psychologists. The recent cases of high-profile athletes such as Michael Phelps, Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles have brought to public discussion the potential harmful effects of the “win at all costs” sporting culture. At the same time, sport psychology has over a century of research and has known recent shifts in research and intervention that urge us to reflect on the implications of this domain and whether sport psychologists are really necessary in these contexts. In this manuscript, we will reflect on the ontology, object, and practices, discussing our view on the field, the barriers it faces, and the potential added value of sport psychology, making a case of why sport contexts should make psychological interventions a priority.

## 2 SPORT PSYCHOLOGY: FACILITATORS FOR HIRE

Three main arguments sustain the increasing development of sport psychology and the need of hiring sport psychologists, as described below.

### 2.1 Sport Psychology is Evidence-Based Science!

First of all, what is sport psychology after all? An accepted definition is that it refers to the scientific study of individuals who are part of sports contexts and their behavior, and how that knowledge is put into practice (Gill; Williams, 2008). This definition highlights two central aspects that we would like to discuss here: (1) scientific study; (2) translate knowledge into practice. Let's focus on the first aspect. The first research related to sport psychology dates of 1898, when Norman Triplett studied how the presence of others hinders or benefits performance. Important steps were taken afterwards and in the 60s, sport psychology was finally established as an independent scientific discipline and professional practice within Psychology. But what does it really mean to look at sport psychology as a *scientific field*? Well, in a nutshell, it means that systematic methodology is used to create knowledge. It means that researchers employ different methods (e.g., observation, data collection) to empirically test knowledge. In other words, it means it is evidence-based.



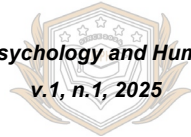
But why is that *so important*? Saying sport psychology is a scientific field can sound, to some, very ‘theoretical’... After all, isn’t “science” the opposite term for “practice”? Well, it might be for non-scientific fields but certainly is not for sport psychology. Practice cannot be dissociated from science. Sport psychologists base their practice in knowledge that has been “scientifically produced”, that is, they employ practices that have been previously studied and tested through different approaches. In simple words, the intervention strategies and techniques used by sport psychologists have proven their usefulness. In other words, they base their practice on what was tested before and *in what they know works!*

## **2.2 Sport Psychology is Psychological Expertise!**

Sport psychology is a scientific area within Psychology. This idea seems logic and scientific valid. However, some debate still exists regarding the nature of sport psychology as a subdiscipline of Psychology or as a subdiscipline of sport and exercise science (for a full debate, see Kontos; Feltz, 2008). Our perspective is that sport psychology is an applied field of Psychology because before being a “sport psychologist” it is necessary to have graduation and training in Psychology.

A background in Psychology is essential to educate future generations of sport psychologists in topics related to basic aspects of human functioning and behavior (e.g., genetics, neuroscience, perception, memory, emotions, motivation, learning, intelligence, personality, among others), models of psychological evaluation and intervention (e.g., counseling and individual intervention; groups, teams, and organizational intervention; and social and community intervention; ethical issues of Psychology, among others), and research methodologies (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods of research and data analysis).

Then, post-graduate training of psychologists (i.e., master programs, PhD programs, post-professional training on sport Psychology and sports sciences) should educate psychologists on applied aspects of human functioning and behavior in sports contexts (e.g., exercise physiology, sports biomechanics, training planning, sport sociology, among others), models of psychological evaluation and intervention in sports (e.g., clinical sport psychology; educational sport psychology; and social and organizational sport psychology), and research methodologies (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods of research and data analysis in sport psychology).

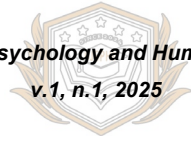


In simple words, being a sport psychologist is having scientific and professional training to (a) assume a clinical sport psychology approach to help clients (most of them athletes) to deal with psychological and emotional problems (e.g., manage stress and anxiety in competitions, manage lack of motivation in training and low self-confidence in competitions, drug and doping use in sports, among others); (b) assume an educational sport psychology approach to help clients (some of them athletes) to improve their personal experiences in sports (e.g., design psychological training programs to increase the athletes mental skills to compete; design life skills programs to increase the athletes ability to succeed in sports and in life, design communication and leadership training programs to facilitate the athletes and coaches relationship, design programs to improve positive relationships between parents and athletes in youth sports, among others); and (c) assume an organizational sport psychology approach to help clients to define policies that stimulate the potential positive effects of sports on all the individuals involved (e.g., design policies that improve fair-play behaviors in sports, design psychological evaluation protocols to select and recruit elite athletes to a sports club, develop sport campaigns to increase the number of young athletes practicing sports, among others).

This understanding of the sport psychology profession is not consensual and other countries and organizations consider alternative paths. Indeed, we agree that alternative backgrounds could be considered under certain circumstances (particularly considering experts that are already in the field), as long as some of the requirements are met (this discussion is being held on different forums and organizations that regulate Psychology professions, including EFPA, the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations).

### **2.3 Sport Psychology is about Wellbeing and Performance!**

Even though a lot of the work sport psychologists do is centered on athletes, and particularly on elite athletes, that does not encompass all that sport psychologists do. Their added value goes well beyond performance, and specifically high performance. In fact, sport psychologists work with a wide range of individuals involved in sports, including, at least, high-performance athletes, individuals of all ages practicing sports and exercise for health and well-being reasons, young people doing sports in organized competitive contexts, adults doing sports for recreational reasons and fun



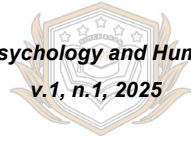
experiences, and even other individuals outside sports that are concerned about their performance, particularly when facing stressful situations (e.g., actors, police and military professionals, CEO's, politicians, health professionals, among others).

In the limit, this can imply to accept that the future of sport psychology will become even more specialized, integrating the “traditional” (sport) psychology performance area (for individuals concerned with achieving high levels of performance) and some other distinct domains related to sport psychology developmental area (for young athletes), exercise psychology wellbeing area (for individuals interested in improving their physical and mental conditions), and even sport participation psychology area (for individuals interested in stimulating and increasing their mental and physical abilities through the practice of sports without competitive reasons).

The potential multiple forms of sport psychology imply that sport psychologists work with a wide range of populations, including children, adults, people with disabilities, and others, and such work can focus (apart from performance) on achieving maximum participation and personal satisfaction and wellbeing through sport (Weinberg; Gould, 2024). Thus, it is true that sport psychology still gives a lot of attention to performance athletes and keeps developing new ways of training psychological strategies to this end. However, and this has become more prominent in recent years, sport psychology has a concern for the individual not ‘just’ as an athlete, but as a whole person.

This more holistic approach when intervening with athletes also implies recognizing that they face other challenges and transitions in their life not just related to performance but also related to other athletic and non-athletic paths and development (cf. Stambulova; Wylleman, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2020). Sport Psychologists have a key role in monitoring and developing their wellbeing, equipping athletes with psychological skills to deal with different challenges and transitions they face, minimizing the odds of developing mental issues (cf. Schinke et al., 2017).

In sum, these three main arguments suggest that (1) sport psychology is a well-established field (even though fairly recent) with solid research and practices; (2) sport psychology interventions and activities occur in the intersection of psychology with other fields of expertise, such as sports sciences, but a solid background in psychology (a comprehensive understanding of human functioning) is crucial; (3) sport psychology go beyond elite athletes including all individual involved in the sports arena, and does not only concern for performance, but also wellbeing.



Thus, sport psychologists are equipped to work in different settings, such as clubs, gyms, national federations, adapted sports contexts, among others. The advantages of hiring sport psychologists seem indisputable – so *why* are we still arguing for the need of hiring sport psychologists? The counterarguments for hiring sports psychologists are discussed in the next section.

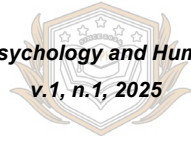
### **3 SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST: BARRIERS FOR HIRE**

In our view, there are a wide range of reasons that are instrumental in explaining sport psychology is still debating whether it deserves place in the sport arena. Here we detail three of them.

#### **3.1 Specialized Professionals are Expensive**

Hiring a sport psychologist implies a cost. Simple as that. Unfortunately, for many sport agents that can hire a sport psychology this represents a major problem due lack of funding or budget priorities. This barrier is exacerbated by the poor financial conditions under which a lot of sport contexts operate, deciding to direct their (scarce) resources towards basic operating needs. As a result, in the Portuguese context, a lot of sport psychologists work as consultants, with precarious conditions and little career stability and progression opportunities.

The consolidation of the sport psychology field also implies that we are able to measure and demonstrate the added value to the different contexts, so these professionals are seen as an investment, not a cost. Moreover, the costs of hiring a sport psychologist goes beyond the payment of a salary (or other forms of compensation) related to providing physical, material, and logistics conditions necessary to deliver the psychological services. For example, sport psychologists can need (certified) assessment tools, a physical space to deliver individual and interventions, and may need to travel alongside with staff for competitions that can happen domestically or abroad.



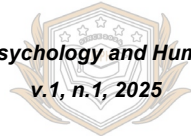
### **3.2 Alternative Professionals and Knowledge**

A second important barrier refers to the emergence of alternative professionals and knowledge. The increased appearance of “new professionals” (such as “mental coaches”, “performance coaches”, “sports and arts performative consultant”) who do not hold basic training in psychology and present themselves as being effective in “mental interventions” is not only a problem for sport psychologists, but especially a dangerous myth that can be detrimental to individuals who contact with these professionals. Psychological intervention is a scientific practice with important implications for individuals’ wellbeing as mentioned above.

Therefore, such practices require professionals with solid training in the psychology field and, therefore, it is important to seek qualified professionals. In a lot of European Countries and in the United States of America, for example, sport psychology is a regulated profession in an attempt to guarantee that individuals providing psychological interventions: (a) have the necessary training; (b) base their practice in evidence; (c) follow specific ethical guidelines; and (d) are held accountable for their interventions, in an attempt to guarantee the safety of those who seek help to improve their wellbeing. Of course, there are “good” and “bad” professionals in every context and jobs but hiring people without scientific and professional certification is a higher risk.

### **3.3 Lack of Opportunities**

A third important barrier is related to formal training opportunities for sport psychologists. Despite the fact that sport psychology is consolidated also as a field of practice, there are still few opportunities for postgraduation and professional certification. This might be, of course, more or less context-dependent but in some countries (e.g. Portugal), there are traditional areas of psychology (clinical/ health, educational, and organizational psychology), which often are reflected on the content of their specialization (Masters’ degree), and sport psychology is an “advanced” certification, subspecialty or proficiency (cf. American Psychological Association). Thus, there is a need for formal postgraduate study plans for sport psychologists that entail the complex combination of knowledge from a wide range of scientific areas (e.g., sports training, medicine, sports pedagogy, among others).



#### **4 TO HIRE OR NOT TO HIRE A SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST: A DECISION-TREE ANALYSIS**

Although the need to continue the path to develop the science and practice of sport psychology, there is now enough information about the benefits and limitations of this scientific area, helping organizations to make a decision on whether the investment of hiring these professionals is worth it. We acknowledge that the decision is complex and depends on different factors that need to be weighed.

Thus, we propose a decision-tree for deciding whether to hire or not a sport psychologist based on the analysis of four domains: (a) beliefs about science (i.e., importance given to evidence-based practice and sport psychology as a specific scientific and practical field); (b) ethical issues (i.e., acceptance of ethical procedures employed by sport psychologists); (c) career opportunities (i.e., importance given to providing a stable career/ career with progression opportunities); (d) work conditions (i.e., importance given to providing the necessary structure and conditions for sport psychologists to work). The following decision-tree summarizes different paths for making the decision of hiring or not a sport psychology (cf. Figure 1).

#### **5 CONCLUSION**

There is no doubt that sport psychology is a fascinating topic with substantial implications for practitioners, sports agents, and all individuals interested in comprehend the “mental side of sports”. The increasing interest for the topic of sport psychology has been well addressed by the academy and professional organizations that regulate the practice of this activity.

However, we can not say that sport psychology has already achieved a respected status by the sport community until a point where we see the general diffusion of sport psychologists in distinct sport contexts. By the contrary, the barriers to the development of sport psychology are still prominent and can limit the credibility of certified sport psychologist in the sports field. This implies that there is still a long path to go through before we achieve the deserved credibility.

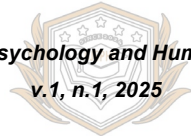
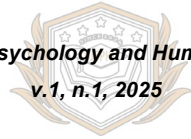


Figure 1 - Decision Tree for Hiring a Sport Psychology Professional

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| <b>A. Beliefs about science</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |     |    |
| ➤ Do you believe in sport psychology as a valid scientific domain and practical tool that can help the development of all involved?                                                                                                                                                               |     |    |
| <b>Implies</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |     |    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting that sport psychology is a scientific domain based in empirical data and scientific assumptions.</li> <li>• Accepting that sport psychologists offer unique contributes to help human development of all sports agents.</li> </ul>             |     |    |
| <b>Changeable scenario</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |     |    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Not all potential targets of sport psychology intervention in a specific context are aware of the validity of sport psychology but they are sensible to training or they do not take decisions regarding the sport psychology activity.</li> </ul>       | ↓   | ↓  |
| <b>Decision tree</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Yes | No |
| <b>B. Ethical issues</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |     |    |
| ➤ Do you understand and respect the ethical code of action of (sport) psychologists?                                                                                                                                                                                                              |     |    |
| <b>Implies</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |     |    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting the professional responsibility and technical-scientific autonomy of sport psychologists.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                           |     |    |
| <b>Changeable scenario</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |     |    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Not all potential targets of sport psychology intervention in a specific context are aware of the ethical issues of sport psychology but they are sensible to training or they do not take decisions regarding the sport psychology activity.</li> </ul> | ↓   | ↓  |
| <b>Decision tree</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Yes | No |
| <b>C. Career perspectives</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |     |    |
| ➤ Do you have conditions to offer a contract to a sport psychologist?                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |     |    |
| <b>Implies</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |     |    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting that sport psychologists are like any other professionals that need to be paid to do their job.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                     |     |    |
| <b>Changeable scenario</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |     |    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ There are no conditions to offer a full contract to the sport psychologist but there are alternatives of payment until conditions for a full contract are met (consultancy, project-based contracts, partial time contracts, among others).</li> </ul>   | ↓   | ↓  |

| Decision tree                                                                                                                                                                                             |  |  | Yes         | No                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|-------------|---------------------------|
| <b>D. Work conditions</b>                                                                                                                                                                                 |  |  |             |                           |
| ➤ Do you have structural conditions that allow the sport psychologists to do their job efficiently?                                                                                                       |  |  |             |                           |
| <b>Implies</b>                                                                                                                                                                                            |  |  |             |                           |
| • Accepting that sport psychologists need resources, materials, and tools provided by the organizations to work.                                                                                          |  |  |             |                           |
| <b>Changeable scenario</b>                                                                                                                                                                                |  |  |             |                           |
| ○ Not all structural conditions are available but minimal conditions are available to start the activity of the sport psychology professional and there is a plan to provide all the necessary resources. |  |  | ↓           | ↓                         |
| Decision tree                                                                                                                                                                                             |  |  | Yes         | No                        |
| <b>Scenarios</b>                                                                                                                                                                                          |  |  |             |                           |
| 1. The basic conditions to employ the sport psychologist in the organization are guaranteed, being important to monitor them over time.                                                                   |  |  | <b>Hire</b> | <b>Do not</b>             |
| 2. The basic conditions to employ the sport psychologist in the organization are not guaranteed, being important to openly discuss if there is something that could be done to solve these issues.        |  |  | <b>(1)</b>  | <b>hire</b><br><b>(2)</b> |

**Source:** prepared by the authors, 2025



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