Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
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Positive psychology and applied sport and exercise psychology, though different fields by name and trade, are bedfellows who have remained largely strangers to each other until recently. Most of the theories and bedrock assumptions of positive psychology will be of no surprise to sport psychology practitioners because both fields have developed with the charge of facilitating optimal functioning of human beings. In this chapter, I will discuss potential interchanges in theory between the two disciplines and make concrete suggestions for how positive psychology can inform applied sport psychology practice. What I present is not exhaustive, but it reflects my hope that collegial collaboration will produce an interdisciplinary approach and enhance the richness and complexity of both disciplines.

A brief history of positive psychology

Historically, clinical psychology as a discipline has focused on the diagnosis and treatment of psychopathology, such as anxiety disorders, depression, and schizophrenia, with the laudable goal of alleviating human suffering. This dominant paradigm of resolving issues of human frailty improved quality of life for many, but resulted in a fundamentally single-sided perspective of the human condition. In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman (1999), after decades of conducting seminal research on depression and learned helplessness, sounded a call urging social scientists to broaden empirical inquiry into what makes life worth living with the belief that human beings want to thrive, not simply survive. The plea for a study of human strength, virtue, goodness, and happiness is not without precedent, and is built on the foundations laid by the work of philosophers, religious figures, and humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow, Gordon Allport, and Carl Rogers. Positive psychology represents the modern resurgence of an old theme and a collective identity coalescing different lines of theory and research from diverse scientific fields. The backbone of this identity is rigorous, empirical research into the conditions and processes that enable optimal functioning of individuals, groups, and institutions. Peterson (2006) best summarized the ancestry of positive psychology as having “a very short history but a very long past” (p. 4).
The positive psychology movement has captured the global attention of popular media, leading scientists and researchers alike, but it is not without its critics. That positive psychology is solely focused on the positive, that it suggests positive is unconditionally better or preferable over the negative, and that it implies traditional psychology is negative are common misconceptions that have been the source of much disparagement (e.g., Lazarus, 2003). Positive psychologists do not deny the existence of disease, suffering, or tragedy, nor do they aim to devalue, degrade, or mutually exclude mitigating approaches. Rather, they suggest that the other side of the human condition—goodness, strength, and all that goes right in life—deserves equally earnest exploration.

Well-being and satisfaction with life rank highly among personal desires for most individuals, but we now know that happiness is not formulaic: it is not usually the end product of realized dreams and aspirations, material gains, or life circumstances. Success can bring happiness, and according to a meta-analysis by Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005), happiness is associated with, and can precede, success in various domains in life such as marriage, relationships, and work. Happiness is desirable because it is valuable and has practical utility; it is associated with many physical, psychological, social, and cognitive benefits through life. Happy people more frequently occupy positions of leadership, have more robust social networks and stronger interpersonal relationships, are in better health, and even live longer than their less happy counterparts.

Beyond a mere “happiology” positive psychology research serves the descriptive function of illuminating those conditions that enable the “good life,” (e.g., by Aristotle’s concept of eudaimonia). Eudaimonia is beyond hedonism, or subjective dimensions of experienced pleasure. Human beings desire meaningful relationships with others, strive for fulfilling careers, have ambitions toward success and achievement, and yearn to live productive and engaging lives. To capture this complexity, positive psychology is founded on three pillars. The study of positive subjective experience concerns the role of positive emotions for the past (e.g., contentment, satisfaction), the present (e.g., pleasure, happiness), and the future (e.g., hope, optimism), and optimal experiences such as flow and engagement. The study of individual strengths of character (e.g., kindness, courage, curiosity), values, and interests are contained within the pillar of positive individual traits. The study of enabling institutions examines positive psychology in the social context and the extent to which larger groups, communities, institutions (e.g., schools, families, workplaces), and relationships with others enable the “good life.” Peterson’s Primer in Positive Psychology (2006) includes an in-depth treatment of each pillar, as well as additional readings and resources. To bridge research and practice, positive psychologists have developed empirically validated interventions designed to enhance well-being.

A theory of positive interventions

A theory of positive interventions (PIs) first requires distinction between mental illness, defined as the presence of a pathological disorder, and the concept of mental health, historically defined as the absence of mental illness. Keyes and Lopez (2005) suggested that mental health, like illness, should be characterized by the presence of a certain set of symptoms and researched as a syndrome of well-being. If business-as-usual psychological interventions aim to cure mental illness, then positive interventions focus on the promotion of mental health. PIs are distinguished in their end-goals from approaches aimed at alleviating the burden of mental illness, remediary pathology, diminishing deficits, or relieving suffering.
Because shifts in positive and negative affect are often orthogonal, reductions in negative emotions, such as anger, do little in the way of increasing positive emotions, such as joy. Although treatment for depression can increase well-being, the absence of depressive symptoms is insufficient for signifying flourishing. Many positive interventions are not new and can, and often do, intersect with business-as-usual psychological therapies. Long-distinguished modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral and rational–emotive behavior therapy, have been used to enhance well-being for many years. Nevertheless, practitioners can bolster the effectiveness of strategies to ameliorate mental illness by incorporating positive psychology approaches (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005).

Most positive psychology researchers agree that lasting change to happiness occurs from the inside out, and not through the reconstruction of external life circumstances (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Positive interventions are exercises, techniques, or action-based strategies intended to produce gains in positive affect, happiness, subjective well-being, meaning, engagement, optimism, and satisfaction with life by cultivating fundamental “nutrients” required for creating and ordering a good life. Psychological research consistently shows a human bias toward the negative: the bad is more powerful and often holds more weight than the good when it comes to emotions, thoughts, and events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Consistent with adaptation theory, positive events are far more transitory and ineffectual than negative events. Thus, PIs are aimed at the deliberate cultivation of a positivity offset to counter the negativity bias.

Several common psychological characteristics have been identified as common denominators of highly successful athletes: emotion/arousal control, attention/focus, self-regulation, confidence, positive self-talk, and a high level of commitment (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffet, 2002). The following is an overview of potential ways in which positive psychology research can inform the practice of sport and exercise psychology, along with examples of empirically validated intervention strategies that may contribute to athlete well-being and success. In this chapter, the intervention strategies are organized by the target mechanism – emotional/affective, cognitive/attentional, and behavioral. Resulting transformations can extend beyond their targets: affective approaches can influence shifts in attention and cognition; behavioral approaches can alter affective states, and so on. Therefore, the categories are neither finite nor absolute, and each technique is applicable to individual, interpersonal, or group settings.

**Affective approaches**

The most obvious mechanisms through which positive interventions work are the emotional/affective systems. The distinction between positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, contentment) and negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, grief) are derived from how they are subjectively experienced. That is, positive does not refer to a “good” emotion and negative a “bad” emotion. Negative emotions have been at the forefront of psychological inquiry because of their well-known associations with stress, coping, mood regulation, and their links to psychopathology and poor health, whereas positive emotions, which are still central to the human experience, have gone largely unexamined. Positive emotions have the capacity to broaden the scope of attention; raise awareness of the surrounding environment and increase openness to stimuli; build durable intellectual (problem solving, learning), physical (coordination, cardiovascular health), social (bonding, inter-personal relationships), and psychological (resilience, goal orientation) resources; and can serve as effective antidotes to physiological activation and cardiovascular reactivity that result from experiencing negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2009).
In sport psychology, optimal states leading to high performance include the presence of both types of emotions, as evidenced by well known models such as Hanin’s (1995) individualized zones of optimal functioning, and yet most affective strategies have focused on managing psychological and physiological consequences of negative emotions. Positive emotions, such as enjoyment, have been associated with increased participation, motivation and commitment, reduced burnout, and higher quality interpersonal and team dynamics (Vallerand & Blanchard, 2000). More recently, Skinner and Brewer (2004) found that anticipatory positive emotions experienced prior to competition might be beneficial for enhancing intrinsic motivation and for framing positive appraisals of perceived challenges. Enjoyment can also facilitate opportunities for flow, or a state of deep engagement, which often accompanies moments of peak performance and can contribute greatly to quality of life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

In her book, Fredrickson (2009) provided many intuitive, user-friendly suggestions for cultivating positivity, such as solidifying social connections and practising altruism and kindness. Meditative practices such as loving kindness meditation (LKM), which encourages warmth and caring toward oneself and others, produced short-term gains in the daily positive emotions among employees of a corporation. Consonant with previous studies, increased positivity promoted long-term gains in other personal resources, such as the acquisition of mindfulness skills, meaning and purpose, and social and relational benefits, which in turn decreased depressive symptoms and increased life satisfaction (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). LKM is a low-cost intervention that can be delivered by trained facilitators or self-learned using a variety of audio and video resources (e.g., Salzberg, 2005).

Savoring, or the processes underlying individuals’ capacities “to attend to, appreciate, and enhance the positive experiences in their lives” (Bryant & Veroff, 2007, p. 2), can also enable individuals to prolong the beneficial influence of experienced positive emotions. Leveraging their knowledge of psychological skills training in imagery (usually used to help athletes mentally rehearse and prepare), practitioners can encourage clients to manipulate auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic senses to retrospectively savor past successes. Video clips of peak performances, collages of particularly enjoyable team trips, or opportunities to share and celebrate accomplishments (both big and small), can aid savoring practices.

Cognitive and attentional approaches

Cognition and attention effectively regulate much of the way we construct our worlds, and our perceptions, emotions, and behaviors are often influenced directly by what we attend to and how we process, translate, and think about sensory information and external stimuli. Optimal states are achieved by involving some type of active construction or the marshaling of cognitive resources to willfully shift and control attention, a critical skill that enables human beings to have a role in experiencing and responding to life events without becoming slaves to their affective systems. Cognitions help individuals predict the future, reconcile and interpret past experiences, and regulate emotional and behavioral reactions to present events.

Dispositional optimism, or the global expectation of good things and favorable outcomes, has been linked to: (a) positive mood; (b) perseverance; (c) effective problem-solving; (d) academic, athletic, military, occupational, and political success; (e) popularity; (f) good health; and (g) a long life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Highly successful athletes are often optimistic, and in sport, optimism can heighten sport confidence and task-focused coping
strategies in dealing with a sport-related slump (Grove & Heard, 1997). Optimism, as an attributional/explanatory style, describes the way in which individuals interpret both positive and negative events or outcomes in life. For example, a person with a pessimistic style tends to explain failures as one’s own fault (internal), as unchanging (stable), and as occurring at most times across most situations (global). In contrast, a person with an optimistic style explains negative outcomes as due to environmental factors (external), as variable (unstable), and as occurring as isolated incidents in certain situations (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Optimistic swimmers performed as well or better than their first efforts after perceived sport failure (Seligman, Nolen-Hoeksema, Thornton, & Thornton, 1990). Optimism enabled young students to perform better and experience a lower drop in success expectation and stress/anxiety compared to pessimists (Martin-Krumm, Sarrazin, Peterson, & Famoso, 2003), and mediated the effects of a low perceived ability on task value in physical education classes (Martin-Krumm, Sarrazin, & Peterson, 2005). Just as certain forms of pessimism can bring benefits, excessive optimism can have its costs. For example, extreme optimism has been correlated with decreased well-being in novice exercisers who fail to meet their expectations (Jones, Harris, Waller, & Coggins, 2005).

The reinforcement of functional optimism – one that is grounded in reality and enables accurate and flexible thinking – should be the goal of an intervention rather than the simplistic encouragement to think good things. Traditional cognitive-behavioral approaches such as raising awareness of one’s default thinking patterns and traps, examining how deeply held assumptions color beliefs, and reframing of events, are the best known and more effective ways to build resilience (see Chapter 57). Coaches, parents, and sport psychology practitioners can also retrain attributional style by nurturing a growth as opposed to a fixed mindset, emphasizing effort over ability, and helping athletes make accurate appraisals of what is and is not malleable or within their control. Sincere and specific effort-focused praise appeared to contribute to enhanced performance and a sense of mastery and accountability in students (Kamins & Dweck, 1999).

In addition to anticipating future events or interpreting past events, attention and cognition can be marshaled to command the present. Recording three good things that happened over the course of the day, in addition to a causal explanation for why they happened, can enrich feelings of gratitude and shift attention to illuminate and encourage positive interpretations of events. Mindfulness, a form of meditation dating back 2,500 years and rooted in the contemplative Buddhist practice called vipassana, can also foster moment-to-moment awareness and a passive, observational mindset with relation to thoughts, emotions, and the environment, as opposed to a reactive and change-oriented approach. Mindfulness may reduce distress, improve mood, promote inner peace, and consequently, even improve physical health. Mindfulness skills can be acquired through structured interventions, such as Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR), an 8–10 week intervention, combining weekly group sessions with an all-day mindfulness retreat, somatic elements of Hatha yoga, body scans, as well as emotive constituents of loving kindness meditation.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) can shift attention from that which needs to be fixed, to what can be grown and nurtured in the pursuit of change, and be used to discover and develop the positive core of an individual, team, organization, or community. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) defined AI as “the cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them” (p. 8). The AI process contains four phases: (a) discovery, or the articulation of key strengths and life-giving best practices; (b) dream, or envisioning results based on collective values and sense of purpose; (c) design, or co-constructing a proposition for an organizational architecture that leverages core strengths;
and (d) destiny, or building hope, affirming the capability for, and sustaining positive momentum for change.

**Behavioral approaches**

The lives of athletes are complex, and intensive participation often comes at a cost to other life domains, such as academic achievement and social relationships. Helping individuals resolve goal conflict and establish equilibrium in their lives is central to performance coaching in domains other than sport. For example, executive coaches do focus on developing managerial skills needed for advancing business, but they also teach tools for constructing balance between work and family lives and leisure activities, resulting in reduced turnover, and increased productivity and performance. Similarly, sport psychology consultants can help their clients enhance behavioral self-regulation, a precursor to a broad range of positive outcomes associated with happiness and well-being.

Expressively writing about one’s life goals and creating idiographic and personalized depictions of an individual’s “best possible self” can be an effective tool in improving self-regulation. The following is an example of a prompt for this exercise:

Imagine that your life has gone as well as it possibly could have. You have worked hard and achieved your goals. Think of this as your ‘best possible life’ or your ‘happily ever after’ … write a description of the things you imagined. Be as specific as you can.

(King, 2008, p. 522)

Through writing, individuals are able clarify what they value most, and reorganize and prioritize their approaches for living life in consonance with their most treasured aspirations. King (2008) found the articulation of a best possible self and daily striving for proximal goals that were related to larger life goals were highly correlated with well-being. Combined with long-established goal-setting techniques (see Chapter 51 in this book), writing exercises can provide an excellent platform for developing daily behavioral strategies.

One way to fortify self-regulation is by practising restraint over the undesired, but it can also be nurtured by harnessing strengths in the quest for the most coveted facets of life. Daily engagement in and pursuit of life activities congruent with an individual’s signature strengths correlated robustly with well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Strength development supporters posit that self-actualization occurs through cultivating the best in people, rather than shoring up weaknesses. In the workplace, strength-based approaches have increased employee engagement and job satisfaction, reduced turnover, and heightened productivity (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Strengths can also be informative in the same way as personality assessments, by raising self and other awareness of how preferences and thinking styles manifest themselves in individuals’ actions and the way they relate to the world. Character strengths can also have dark sides. For example, persistence prevents athletes from giving up too quickly in the face of difficult goals and setbacks. Fisher and Wrisberg (2004), however, found that having extraordinary persistence could lead to the continuation of maladaptive behaviors that can result in injury and be detrimental to performance.

The Values in Action Survey of Character (VIA-IS) is a 240-item questionnaire that produces rankings for an individual’s 24 character strengths across six broad classes of virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence, and can be taken online at www.viacharacter.org (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Practitioners and coaches can help athletes devise innovative ways to deploy their strengths in their goal
pursuits and in navigating adversity and challenges related to training and competition. A “strengths family tree” exercise can be used in a team setting by instructing members to take the VIA survey, and creating a visual representation of the team’s aggregate signature strengths. A deepened collective understanding of how strengths play out in a group dynamic can promote awareness of the group’s positive assets and foster understanding of individual styles of relating to the world, and fortify inter- and intrapersonal relationships.

A final behavioral strategy involves the deliberate structuring of a good day. This process begins with a recorded daily log of activities and scores from measures such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) or the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which can be taken online at www.authentichappiness.com. After several weeks, individuals can determine which days brought the most happiness or positive affect, learn about the potential reasons why, and use the knowledge gleaned to create more good days. Although labor-intensive, behavioral logs can be highly informative self-regulatory tools that can provide insight into what makes life most pleasurable to an individual.

**Future directions**

This chapter only begins to explore how positive psychology principles can be integrated or translated to applied sport psychology practice, but does not expand on the many ways that sport and exercise psychology can inform the study of human flourishing. Well-being is multi-dimensional, defined not only by psychological but also by physical health. Positive interventions can also act on physiological systems to promote well-being, and it is in this area where the decades of research on theory and practice in applied sport psychology can contribute greatly to positive psychology. Physical activity has a robust connection to cognitive and psychosocial development throughout the lifespan and can support psychological well-being by serving as an effective treatment for, and buffer to, illness. Sport can also be used as a mechanism to engage, motivate, and develop life skills and good character in youth (see Chapter 18) and has the capability to cross over racial, religious, and socioeconomic boundaries and bring people together in the pursuit and celebration of a common interest.

Positive psychology and sport psychology are two fields in their youth, still going through growing pains, and faced with similar challenges. Psychological illness remains a considerable public health concern, and with the deficiency-based and disease-focused stereotypes sustaining psychology, some may view positive psychology and sport psychology as dispensable luxuries. Practitioners in both fields continue to struggle in creating identities for themselves as valuable assets in the promotion of human flourishing. Positive psychology as an organized discipline is relatively new, but it is quickly evolving in depth and complexity. Drawing upon the deep roots of the field in the philosophy of humanism and humanistic psychology, positive psychologists continue to build on this foundation by producing a high volume of research, studying interventions and applications, creating academic programs and courses, and converging to exchange ideas at professional conferences and training institutes.

Continued research is needed to articulate whether positive psychology findings are applicable to the applied sport and exercise realm and whether specifically tailored measures and interventions need to be developed and validated for use within this domain. Future research should also illuminate how person–activity fit moderates the effect of positive interventions (e.g., Lyubomirsky, 2007) and the consequences of increased well-being and happiness on sport-related outcomes. Finally, given the natural and intuitive connection
between positive psychology and sport and exercise psychology, the opportunities for fruitful cross-fertilization appear abundant. Through continuous dialogue and academic exchange, both fields are poised to benefit greatly by learning from each other’s rich empirical foundations and histories. See Box 15.1 for some take-home messages from this chapter.

Box 15.1

Take-home messages about positive interventions

- Use positive interventions to augment clinical applications of sport and exercise psychology and mental skills training, and thereby enhance athlete well-being.
- Nurture positivity to offset the negativity bias and to prolong the physiological, psychological, and social benefits of positive emotions.
- Build resilience, retrain explanatory style, and command the present by nurturing cognition and attention.
- Improve self-regulation by writing about life goals, learning and using strengths in daily activities, and deliberately constructing good days.

References


