



Emotional experiences in youth tennis



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To explore adolescents' emotional experiences in competitive sport. Specifically, this study sought to identify, 1) The emotions adolescents' experience at tennis tournaments, 2) The precursors of the emotions they experience, and, 3) How adolescents attempt to cope with these emotions.

Design: Case-study.

Method: Four adolescent tennis players competed in four or five tennis matches under the observation of a researcher. Immediately following each match, participants completed a post-match review sheet and a semi-structured interview. A further semi-structured interview was completed at the end of the tournament. Review sheets, notes from match observations, and video recordings of matches were used to stimulate discussions during final interviews. All data were analyzed following the procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Results: Participants cited numerous positively and negatively valenced emotions during matches and tournaments. Participants' emotions seemed to be broadly influenced by their perceptions of performance and outcomes, as well as their opponent's behavior and player's perceptions of their own behavior. Participants described various strategies to cope with these emotions, such as controlling breathing rate, focusing on positive thoughts, and individualized routines. Further, if participants perceived them to be facilitative, negative emotions could be beneficial for performance.

Conclusion: This study provided original insights into the complexity of adolescent athletes' emotional experiences at competitions and highlights the critical need for further in-depth examinations of youth sport to fully comprehend the experiences of young people. Most notably, the findings highlight the necessity of considering the impact of both intra- and interpersonal influences on adolescents' emotional experiences, while also accounting for temporal changes.

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Emotions are a central component of youth sport participation (Crocker, Hoar, McDonough, Kowalski, & Niefer, 2004). One of the most common emotions experienced when participating in sport is enjoyment and feelings of enjoyment have been identified as one of the main reasons children and adolescents play sport (Weiss, Kimmel, & Smith, 2001). When children and adolescents enjoy their sport experience they demonstrate higher levels, and more positive types, of motivation, increased sport commitment, and sustain participation for longer (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-Carter, 2008). However, participation in sport is not always enjoyable (McCarthy & Jones, 2007). Sport

involvement can also result in anxiety, which can have negative consequences for young athlete's participation, health, and performance (Crocker et al., 2004). For example, high-levels of anxiety have been associated with avoidance of sport, reduced sport enjoyment, burnout, sleep disruption, and dropout or discontinuation (see Mellalieu, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2006).

In addition to experiencing anxiety and enjoyment, adolescents are likely to experience a range of other emotions when participating in sport (Nicholls, Hemmings, & Clough, 2010). For instance, Crocker et al. (2004) described different emotional states that could be experienced in youth sport ranging from happiness due to sporting success, to sadness from experiencing defeat, and anxiety as a result of fearing competition. Given the range of emotions associated with youth sport, as well as a recognition that emotions can influence performance levels, it is somewhat surprising that limited consideration has been given to unpacking the various emotions adolescents might experience when participating in sport

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(McCarthy & Jones, 2007; Nicholls et al., 2010). It has been suggested that, as well as focusing on enhancing sporting performances, sport psychologists should consider working with athletes to maximize positive emotion and motivation in sport (McCarthy et al., 2008). To fully understand experiences in youth sport, and in turn, be able to help youth athletes cope with positive and negative experiences, it is pertinent to explore the range of emotions adolescents experience when they are competing.

Youth sport competitions were selected as the focus of this study because they are an integral part of youth sport but maintain a difficult position in the overall experience. Through competition young athletes not only test their physical skills but also have an opportunity to develop psychological and social characteristics (Cumming, Smoll, Smith, & Grossbard, 2007). Also, for those individuals who seek to excel in sport, competition during youth provides them with an opportunity to learn and develop skills that will be beneficial in the future (cf. MacNamara, Collins, & Button, 2010). However, participation in competition is one of the main stressors for youth athletes and can result in feelings of pressure and anxiety (Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005; Nicholls et al., 2010). By developing an understanding of adolescents' experiences in competition it is hoped that practitioners can work to prepare adolescents to manage different emotions, allowing them to gain the benefits of participating in competition, while limiting negative outcomes.

Although there are various theories and frameworks that can be utilized to study emotions in sport, much of the research that has been conducted with adult populations (e.g., Martinent & Ferrand, 2009; Neil, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Fletcher, 2011; Uphill & Jones, 2007) has used Lazarus' (1991) Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT). Lazarus (1991) stated that emotions are a by-product of personality and environment combined with cognitive, motivational, and relational features (Lazarus, 1991). Emotions are relational because they always encompass a person-environment relationship involving harm and/or benefit (Lazarus, 2000). Lazarus (1991) proposed that there were 15 discrete emotions, each of which involved a distinct core relational theme summarizing the transactions within the person-environment relationship for that emotion. CMRT further suggests that emotions are reactions to the status of goals in adaptational encounters. Therefore, motivation accounts for an understanding of what makes adaptational encounters personally relevant and a source of harm or benefit to be developed (Lazarus, 1991). Finally, the cognitive aspect of the theory refers to knowledge and appraisal of occurrences during adaptational encounters. Knowledge comprises situational and generalized beliefs about how things work, and appraisal is an evaluation of the personal significance of an encounter with the environment (Lazarus, 1991).

Cognitive appraisal is a central process involved in emotion generation and regulation. Cognitive appraisal consists of primary and secondary appraisals, which are key interrelated processes in the theory. Primary appraisals are motivationally orientated and evaluate the importance of a situation to the individual and whether personal goals are at stake (Lazarus, 1991, 2000). Primary appraisals consist of three components; goal relevance, goal congruence, and goal content (Lazarus, 1991). The appraisal is termed primary because without a goal at stake there is no potential for emotion (Lazarus, 1991). Secondary appraisal assesses what action can be taken in situations where there is the potential of harm or benefit to the individual. Responsibility of blame or credit is evaluated along with coping potential and future expectations (Lazarus, 2000). Blame or credit is dependent upon whether one feels accountable or responsible for the harm, threat, or benefit combined with an attribution of control of harmful or beneficial actions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus' CMRT posits that an individual's appraisal of a situation, along with their coping, influences the type of emotion experienced and how their emotions transform throughout the person-environment transaction (Lazarus, 2000). Thus, coping is the second key process involved in Lazarus' (1991) CMRT. Coping relates to the action that is taken to manage demands, more specifically it has been described as the psychological reaction to action tendencies that are subconscious, automatic responses to threat (Lazarus, 2000). How one copes is influenced by appraising what action is possible or necessary, what action is acceptable in the situation, and what action is likely to be most effective in dealing with the situation (Lazarus, 2000). Coping was initially classified into two categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, more recently it has been suggested that individuals may also use avoidance coping strategies and cognitive reappraisal (Tamminen & Holt, 2012) or task-oriented, distraction-orientated, and disengagement-orientated coping strategies (Gaudreau, El Ali, & Marivain, 2005).

Research with adult athlete populations has demonstrated support for different components of CMRT. For example, Uphill and Jones (2007) interviewed 12 international athletes representing a range of sports and noted that primary and secondary appraisal components were associated with a range of emotions (anger, anxiety, guilt, happiness, pride, relief, sadness, and shame), providing some support for Lazarus' (1991) core relational themes. Supporting the critical role of appraisals in the generation of emotion, Neil et al. (2011) interviewed twelve performers from varying sports and identified that in certain situations appraisals and negative emotions were interpreted as debilitating for upcoming performance, consequently resulting in a debilitating effect on athlete behavior. However, in other situations where appraisals and negative emotions were cited, further appraisals of the situation allowed athletes to interpret the appraisals and emotions as facilitative for upcoming performance through increased focus and/or effort. In contrast, Nicholls, Perry, and Calmeiro (2014) tested a model of achievement goals, stress appraisal, emotions, and coping based on a sample of 827 athletes and identified that emotions are just as important as appraisals in shaping coping.

CMRT has also been used within the youth sport literature, particularly in studies of stressors, stress appraisals, and coping (see Tamminen & Holt, 2010 for a review). However, the majority of these studies have not focused upon or included details regarding the emotions that are experienced or generated (Nicholls et al., 2010). One exception is a study by Nicholls et al. (2010) that explored adolescent golfers' emotions generated during and as a consequence of stress appraisals, after coping, and after event outcomes. Following interviews with ten male golfers, Nicholls and colleagues identified three "causal maps" that described stressful situations with a favorable outcome (causal map one), stressful situations that had unfavorable outcomes (causal map two), and stressful events that were perceived as having neither favorable nor unfavorable outcomes (causal map three). In situations allocated within causal map one, participants identified 10 different stressors, which could lead to participants experiencing anxiety or anger. Participants implemented different coping strategies to manage their anxiety and then reported feelings of happiness, anxiety, hope, relief, and anger. In causal map two, a similar range of emotions were experienced as in map one but also included pride and sadness. Finally, in map three, fewer emotions were reported, with only anxiety, sadness, and happiness being experienced. These findings highlighted both the importance of coping in generating positively toned emotions, as well as the possibility for multiple emotions to be generated from stress appraisals of one event outcome.

Such studies demonstrate the utility of adopting CMRT as a

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