



Exploring emotions as social phenomena among Canadian varsity athletes[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 October 2015

Received in revised form

11 July 2016

Accepted 19 July 2016

Available online 21 July 2016

Keywords:

Group

Team

Affect

Emotion

Group-based emotions

Collective emotions

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Athletes are constantly engaging with teammates, coaches, and opponents, and rather than treating emotions as manifested in the individual as is often the case, psychological analyses need to treat emotions as social and relational. The purpose of this research was to explore athletes' accounts of emotions as social phenomena in sport using qualitative inquiry methods.

Method: Fourteen Canadian varsity athletes (7 males, 7 females, age range: 18–26 years) from a variety of sports participated in two semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using inductive coding, categorization, micro-analysis, and abduction (Mayan, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results: Athletes reported individual and shared stressors that led to individual, group-based, and collective emotions, and they also reported emotional conflict when they simultaneously experienced individual and group-based or collective emotions. Emotional expressions were perceived to impact team functioning and performance, communicated team values, served affiliative functions among teammates, and prompted communal coping to deal with stressors as a team. Factors which appeared to influence athletes' emotions included athlete identity, teammate relationships, leaders and coaches, and social norms for emotion expression.

Conclusions: Our study extends previous research by examining emotions as social phenomena among athletes from a variety of sports, and by elaborating on the role of athletes' social identity with regard to their emotional experiences in sport.

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1. Introduction

Athletes report a wide variety of emotions associated with their participation in sport, which can have positive and negative consequences for performance and team functioning (e.g., [Martinet, Nicolas, Gaudreau, & Campo, 2013](#)). Researchers have focused largely on the implications of emotions at an individual level, where emotions are thought to arise as a response to an event that an individual appraises as relevant to his or her goals and serve to

help the individual adapt to their environment and deal with problems or challenges ([Lazarus, 1991; 1999](#)). Positive or pleasant emotions are generally associated with adaptive performance outcomes, while negative or unpleasant emotions are generally associated with maladaptive performance outcomes (e.g., [Cerin, 2003; Wilson, Wood, & Vine, 2009](#)), although in some cases negative emotions have been found to be beneficial for performance (e.g., [Robazza & Bortoli, 2007; Woodman et al., 2009](#)). However, this intrapersonal approach typically has not taken into consideration the social context within which emotions occur and operate, despite theoretical propositions that emotions influence and are influenced by others ([Lazarus, 1991](#)). Additionally, researchers investigating team chemistry in sport have argued that “the interaction among shared cognitions, socio-behaviors, and affections in sports has been conceptually noted as crucial in competitive athletic settings” ([Gershgoren et al., 2016](#)). This is also

[☆] This study was supported by an Insight Development Grant awarded to the first author by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant number: 430-2014-00844).

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underscored in rare research on emotional life in sport and physical activity that highlighted emotions are constituted within embodied social relationships (Phoenix & Orr, 2014). In so doing, it was argued that rather than treating emotions as manifested in the individual as is often the case, psychological analyses need to treat emotion as social and relational. Such a conceptual move is reinforced in cultural sport psychology (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Athletes are constantly interacting with teammates, coaches, and opponents, and it is therefore important to explore emotional phenomena while considering the social aspects of the sport context.

Group-based and collective emotions explicitly concern the social dynamics of emotional experiences. Group-based emotions refer to emotions that are tied to an individual's identification with a particular social group/team and they are thought to occur in response to events that are deemed relevant to the group as a whole (Goldenberg, Halperin, van Zomeren, & Gross, 2016; Goldenberg, Saguy, & Halperin, 2014). Collective emotions are a form of group-based emotions that are also experienced as a function of one's identity as a team member, but they are experienced simultaneously by a team or group of individuals (Goldenberg et al. 2014). Collective emotions refer to the "synchronous convergence in affective responding across individuals towards a specific event or object" (von Scheve & Ismer, 2013, p. 406), which is similar to emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002). An example of collective emotions could be a team of athletes who are happy and celebrating together after winning a competition. In contrast, group-based emotions need not occur in the presence of others: for example, an athlete may feel group-based emotions such as pride or shame as a function of his or her identity as a team member, but does not need to be physically present with teammates to experience such emotions.

Sport may be a particularly valuable context for studying emotions as social phenomena. Specifically, sporting matches are collective events with specific features that contribute to collective emotional experiences or emotional synchrony among spectators (Cottingham, 2012; Paez, Rimé, Basabe, Włodarczyk, & Zumeta, 2015). Among athletes, Totterdell (2000) investigated mood convergence among 33 professional cricket players and found that the happy moods of individual players were positively associated with the team's average level of happiness during a championship match. Athletes' own positive mood was significantly associated with their subjective ratings of their own performance, and over the course of the match, changes in the team's aggregate positive mood were associated with changes in the team's performance. In spite of this early evidence suggesting that team collective emotions may be important for performance outcomes, athletes' perceptions of group-based or collective emotions in sport, and the social functions of these emotions, have not been explored.

Considering emotions as social phenomena also seeks to account for the social functions of emotions within the context of social relationships. Within a socio-functional perspective of emotions, emotions are thought to help individuals adapt to their environment and solve problems, but also coordinate social interactions and relationships (Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Although there has been little attention to the interpersonal or social functions of emotions in sport (Crocker, Tamminen, & Gaudreau, 2015; Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014), one exception is a study by Friesen, Devonport, Sellars, and Lane (2013), who provided initial evidence that emotions function at multiple levels within the social context of sport according to a socio-functional perspective outlined by Keltner and Haidt (1999). At the individual and dyadic/peer levels, athletes' perceptions of their own emotions and the emotions of their teammates served as indicators of when they should regulate the emotions of their teammates. At the team level, changes in the team's goals were

associated with new emotions and the use of different emotion regulation strategies. Emotions such as guilt, embarrassment, and anger were evoked to motivate teammates to adhere to a cultural mentality of winning and productivity. The Friesen et al. (2013) work was limited to the narratives created from two athletes' perceptions of the impact of their own emotions on interpersonal emotion regulation. We sought to build on this research by investigating multiple athletes' perceptions of the social functions of emotions, and we sampled athletes from a variety of sports that reflect the social contexts where athletes train and sometimes compete with other team members (Evans, Eys, & Bruner, 2012).

Emotions are also thought to mobilize group members and coordinate collective actions to deal with problems as a group (Kelly, Iannone, & McCarty, 2014) and to meet shared goals (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Thus, another objective was to explore the role of emotions in coordinating the actions of athletes to deal with stressors collectively as a team. Drawing on collectivist frameworks of coping (e.g., Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998), communal coping takes place when a stressor is perceived as "our" stressor rather than "yours" or "mine". To understand how emotions may coordinate collective actions to deal with stressors as a team or group, it is important to comprehend how athletes appraise events as relevant for the team or group. Sport stressors can have repercussions for group members even if an athlete is not directly or initially affected by the event. For example, injuries can cause changes in team lineup, teammate relationships, and the team emotional climate (Surya, Benson, Balish, & Eys, 2015). Organizational stressors (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012) can also affect an entire team or group of athletes, as they include cultural and team issues as well as leadership and personnel issues. To date, researchers have tended to adopt an intrapersonal approach to examine how athletes perceive stressors in relation to their personal goals and values (e.g., Thatcher & Day, 2008; Wolf, Evans, Laborde, & Kleinert, 2015) and in examining athletes' individual responses to organizational stressors (e.g., Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012). In keeping with an exploration of emotions as social phenomena, we sought to explore athletes' appraisals of stressors that were relevant for themselves and for their team, and to investigate how emotions may coordinate actions to deal with stressors collectively as a group.

The purpose of this research was to explore emotions as social phenomena in sport. The research questions were: (a) What do athletes perceive as individual and shared stressors in sport? (b) How do athletes experience and express emotions individually and collectively in sport contexts? (c) What social functions do emotions serve in sport settings? (d) What factors are associated with emotions as social phenomena in sport teams and groups?

2. Methods

We approached this research from an interpretivist/constructionist position (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Schwandt, 1994), which seeks to understand the complex worlds of those who live them, and wherein knowledge is portrayed as a construction of relative consensus among individuals' experiences/interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). From this perspective, interpretation is central to understanding the meanings and experiences of participants, who construct and interpret their own behaviours and those of people around them (Schwandt, 1994); accordingly, our interpretations are viewed as constructions of our participants' interpretations of their own experiences. This reflects a transactional epistemology where findings were co-created between the investigators and participants, and also through ongoing discussions between the co-investigators during the analysis and writing of the results.

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