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Emotional Intelligence in Sports: Toward a New Program for Intervention

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Many diverse theoretical frameworks for Emotional Intelligence (EI) have been proposed; these varying conceptualisations have implications for applied sport psychology. This paper provides an overview of the various EI models, along with their critique, as well as their application in sport psychology. Importantly, the present paper presents a pioneering attempt to draw on all the major EI theoretical frameworks to propose an EI intervention program for professional practice in sport psychology. The aim of this program is to enhance the professional sporting performance and outcome.The AERI, an intervention program consists of four inter-related components: (a) attention, (b) emotional awareness, (c) emotion regulation, and (d) identification. This program, it is argued, would allow coaches, sports psychologists, and fitness leaders to adapt their approaches to train athletes to enhance their levels of EI..

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, Sports psychology, Intervention program

It was 19 minutes into the extra time of the final match of the 2006 World Cup when Zinedine Zidane, one of the best soccer players of all time, left the whole world shocked by head-butting Marco Materazzi of Italy for allegedly hurling spiteful words at him. The French player earned himself a red card for his actions, which marked the end of his international career.

Losing one's cool on the field is not new for any player. However, what distinguishes winning athletes from those who, although technically gifted, are able to manage their emotions is Emotional Intelligence (EI).

There is growing evidence of the role of EI in sport performance (Laborde, Dosseville, & Allen, 2015; Laborde, Dosseville, Guillén, & Chávez, 2014). Higher EI has been linked to higher performance in particular team sports, such as cricket (Crombie, Lombard, & Noakes, 2009), hockey (Perlini& Halverson, 2006), and baseball (Zizzi, Deaner, & Hirschhorn, 2003). Higher EI has also been found to be positively related to the use of psychological skills, such as success motivation (the ability to motivate oneself efficiently toward sport achievement) (Kajbafnezhad, Ahadi, Heidarie, Askari, & Enayati, 2012). Apart from group and individual factors affecting sporting outcome, EI also plays a role in enhancing sporting performance. For example, EI is positively associated with precompetitive emotions that optimise performance (Lane, Devonport, Soos, Karsai, Leibinger, & Hamar, 2010).

That EI is trainable and can be developed had led to the development of a host of intervention programs in sports based on theoretical models of EI. This paper examines and critiques the various theoretical frameworks for EI and throws light on their application in sports psychology. It proposes a new intervention program that draws on several EI theoretical constructs with the aim of enhancing professional sporting performance and outcome.

Models of EI

Many diverse theoretical frameworks for EI have been proposed; these varying conceptualisations have implications for applied sports psychology. Following is an overview of the EI models, along with their critique and the studies that have based their intervention programs on them.

Ability Model of EI

Salovey and Mayer first developed an ability model of EI (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), within which EI refers to a form of intelligence that

involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions. EI is conceptualized as an ability that varies from situation to situation, develops with age and experience, and is trainable.

The ability model emphasises four cognitive components, or branches, each of which can be measured and enhanced: Branch 1 reflects the perception of emotion and involves the capacity to recognise emotion in others' facial and postural expressions. It involves nonverbal perception and expression of emotion (Scherer, Banse, & Wallbott, 2001). Branch 2 involves the capacity of emotions to facilitate thinking. Knowledge of link between emotions and thinking can be used to direct one's planning (Izard, 2001). Branch 3 reflects the capacity to analyse emotions, appreciate their probable trends over time, and understand their outcomes. Branch 4 reflects the management of emotions; they are managed in the context of the individual's goals, self-knowledge, and social awareness (Parrott, 2002).

While it is touted as being conceptually coherent, the chief criticism associated with the four-branch model is that it measures abilities that may not have been put into practice. Another criticism concerns the psychometric properties of its measures (scoring method at odds with the theory, low reliability). It is also said that the subjectivity of emotional experience undermines the development of maximum performance (IQ like) tests.

There have been a few EI intervention studies in sport that have utilised the ability model, the most recent of which has been the study by Crombie, Lombard, and Noakes (2011). In this study, EI training (ten sessions, each of 3-hours targeting the components of the four-branch model) was associated with greater increases in ability EI in cricketers, compared to a no-intervention control group. The authors concluded that the narrow scientific focus and conception of the ability model may have produced the positive intervention results (Crombie et al., 2011).

Trait Model of EI

Unlike the ability model which conceptualises EI as a set of cognitive abilities (i.e., states), the trait models suggest that, as part of their personalities, individuals have many emotional self-perceptions and dispositions (Petrides, Pita, Kokkinaki, 2007). Trait EI essentially concerns people's perceptions of their emotional worlds. Though, different conceptualisations exist regarding EI at the trait level, the one proposed by Petrides et al. (2007) has received most attention.

Research has consistently found a positive relationship between trait EI and sports performance (e.g., Kotsou, Nelis, Grégoire, & Mikolajczak, 2011; Nelis, Kotsou, Quoidbach, Hansenne, Weytens, Dupuiset al., 2011). Trait EI has been linked with satisfaction of sports performance through a path model involving stress and coping appraisals (Labordeet al., 2014), and has been associated with the use of more efficient coping strategies (Laborde, You, Dosseville, & Salinas, 2012).

The Trait EI model has been criticised on the following accounts: the measurement of trait EI employs self-reports, which constitute unreliable assessments of objective competencies; and it correlates too much with existing personality traits to be useful (Gignac, 2006). However, these criticisms have been empirically refuted.

Numerous studies have employed interventions to improve trait EI for athletes. In a recent study, EI training (4 sessions over the 5-month sporting season) was successful in increasing specific aspects of trait EI (i.e., social competence, emotion perception, and emotion management), but not global trait EI in rugby players, as compared to a control group (Campo, Laborde, & Mosley, 2016).

Mixed Model of EI

A third approach to EI is called the mixed model approach because of the mixed qualities that such models target. This model introduced by Goleman (2001) suggests that the competencies associated with EI relate to four cardinal domains, defined by two key domain facets: (a)

ability - recognition versus regulation of emotion, and (b) target - whether competence relates to self versus others. The product of the two categories (ability by target) yields the following four EI components: (a) recognition of emotions in self; (b) recognition of emotions in others; (c) regulation of emotions in self; and (d) regulation of emotions in others. Each of these components encompasses a set of emotional competencies, which are learned capabilities. Goleman posited that each individual is born with a general EI that determines his/her potential for learning emotional competencies. Goleman's model has been critiqued for being mere pop psychology (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008).

Bar-On's (1997) mixed model of EI proposes that EI consists of five components, each encapsulating several competencies: intrapersonal (self-awareness, assertiveness, self-regard, self-actualization, and independence), interpersonal (empathy, social awareness, and interpersonal relationships), adaptability (reality testing, flexibility, and problem solving), stress management(emotional management and regulation), and general mood (self-motivation, optimism, and happiness).

Mixed models of EI have been criticised as being flawed in their inclusion of many unrelated personality competencies (Crombie et al., 2011). Several researchers have also questioned whether there is a strong rationale to label mixed models as measuring EI at all (e.g., Mayer & Ciarrochi, 2006).

There have been numerous intervention studies on athletes based on Bar-On's model of EI. In the study by Barlow and Banks (2014), for example, EI training (30-min one-to-one coaching session of feedback and discussion of trait EI scores) improved self-efficacy and decreased anxiety in netballers, compared to a no-intervention control group.

Tripartite Model of EI

Recently presented as a reconciliation of trait and ability EI conceptualisations by Mikolajczak (2009), this model proposes that EI operates on three levels- knowledge, ability, and trait. Knowledge represents what individuals know about emotions, ability represents an individual's options regarding emotional situations, and trait represents how individuals typically react in emotional situations. These three levels of EI-related individual differences are loosely connected, that is, knowledge does not always translate into abilities, which, in turn, do not always translate into practice (dispositions).The model is hierarchical, wherein knowledge underlies ability, which in turn underlies dispositions.

This model suggests that instead of choosing one EI perspective over another, it is better to view each model as best suiting a different context. The main concern with this model, however, is its lack of empirical base, and the dearth of sport intervention programs based on this model.

An EI-based Intervention for Athletes: AERI program

Sports psychologists have relied on a variety of techniques in aiding athletes to enhance their performance on the field and to manage their anxiety. These have included cognitive-behavioural techniques, such as mental imagery, mental rehearsal, self-regulation, and anxiety management. These have also included somatic methods such as biofeedback, progressive muscle relaxation, and meditation.

CBT attempts to change the way the player approaches the given task to lay the foundation for specific performance enhancement techniques to occur (Behncke, 2004). Somatic methods are primarily concerned with gaining control of various bodily functions (Behncke, 2004).However, both the approaches are limited in that they focus on the specific issues or current problem situation to the exclusion of the more general psychological profile of the athlete.

Thus, an intervention is warranted that provides a broader range perspective to performance-related issues faced by athletes and that also informs their general approach to themselves and their sport. In a recent review of EI in sports, Laborde et al. (2015) make a convincing case for designing interventions that target all the components of EI- knowledge,

ability, and trait- in sports. They also encourage the development of multimodal interventions that target multiple psychological skills that have been successful in developing sport performance (e.g., Barker & Jones, 2006) and incorporating EI training with established psychological training techniques (e.g., Wagstaff, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2013).

The following program draws upon theoretical and applied research on EI and on empirical investigations of EI-based interventions to develop an informed understanding of what works and what does not. In inculcating EI in athletes, the following components require training: attention, emotional awareness, emotional regulation, and identification, and hence this program is named AERI. Following is a description of each of its components:

Attention

The ability to selectively concentrate on relevant cues while ignoring irrelevant information separates elite athletes from average competitors (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). A strong, stable, and perceptive attention that affords calmness and clarity is the foundation upon which EI is built (Tan, 2012). Attention relates to self-regulation through response flexibility - the ability to pause before acting. This, in turn, could be trained by mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally' (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4).

Several mindfulness-based interventions have been developed for athletes, of which two empirically supported approaches are: Kaufman and Glass' (2006) Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE), and Gardner and Moore's (2007) Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) approach.

While employing these approaches have resulted in significant performance improvements across varied sports such as golf, archery, and running (e.g., De Petrillo, Kaufman, Glass, & Arnkoff, 2009), they are limited in their overall utility to athletes seeking to manage other aspects of their performance, such as rebounding from failure.

For the present intervention model, the following components, based on the MSPE, are proposed to be trained to achieve attention control:

Raisin exercise, which introduces the concept of mindfulness by having players focus on using all of their senses while slowly eating a raisin;

Sitting meditation that increases in length over the course of the program from 10 to 25 minutes, in which players are first guided to focus on their breath, then the sensations in their bodies, and finally to the sounds around them (e.g., cheering versus booing crowd);

Body scan, during which players direct their attention to different areas of their body in sequence from their feet to their head, while being guided to notice and accept whatever sensations arise;

Sport-specific meditation (e.g., a running meditation), designed to give athletes the opportunity to apply the mindfulness skills they have developed throughout the program to the actual sensations that they experience when participating in their sport; and

Flow, also referred to as 'being in the zone' wherein athletes are involved in playing their sport (with a clear set of goals), are given clear and immediate feedback (given by self or the coach), and have a good balance between perceived challenges and their own perceived skills (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990).

Attentional control is likely to be useful for athletes in both closed- and open-skilled sports, and in both individual and team sports. It would enable the athlete to remain fully focused on the task at hand in the face of competition-specific and/or personal life-related distractions.

Emotional Awareness

Within the sporting environment, a player high on emotional awareness (i.e., knowledge about emotions) may be able to read her teammate's or opponents' emotional response to the atmosphere of the competition, and may have a good understanding of why others in

the competition are responding in a particular way and how it affects the individual or team's performance.

In addition, awareness may contribute to the equation separating athletes on the basis of their sport type— awareness is most predictive of individual open-skilled sport type (Nideffer, 1990). For example, the ability to identify that your opponent is experiencing 'negative' emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt, allows a tennis player to capitalize on his/her opponent's weaknesses. The player may force play around the baseline having recognized that his/her opponent has shown frustration throughout the match at points played around this area of the court (Anshel, 1990).Conversely, by acknowledging that his/her opponent is experiencing 'positive' feelings the player can re-evaluate his/her own game-plan to change the dynamics of the match.

For the present intervention model, the following components are proposed to be trained to achieve emotional awareness:

Identify feelings and situational triggers: One's own feelings could be identified by looking at a list of feelings given by the therapist and/or by noticing the physiological changes in one's body. Others' feelings could be identified by paying attention to others' reactions to specific points in the game, such as a winning or losing point. Subsequently, the athlete could determine what situation immediately preceded the specific feelings.

Identify the intensity of feelings: Numbering the intensity of the feeling on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the most intense, a feeling could be experienced (e.g., so angry one could explode). By labelling the intensity, an athlete can develop perspective on the degree of emotions s/he experiences at various points of the game, rather than having all the feelings blend into one big, unmanageable, and scary knot.

Identify associated thoughts: Athletes are taught to link their emotions to their thoughts. For example, what thought I had in response to that particular point in the game, what that meant to me, what did it say about the situation, etc.

Plan behavioural responses: The therapist and athlete can work toward replacing the unhelpful thinking with more positive and self-enhancing thoughts and coping strategies.

Athletes are given self-monitoring forms which they can fill after every practice session, to improve their emotional awareness and work on their responses or strategies.

Emotional Regulation

This entails developing and/or strengthening skills that will enable athletes to module their feelings, and to foster and maintain beneficial moods and emotions so as to effectively manage stress within oneself. By effectively regulating one's emotions, athlete is better able to remain task focused and avoid external and internal distractions. S/he is also better able to regain psychological control following unexpected, uncontrollable competition-related events.

For the present intervention model, the following components are proposed to be trained to achieve emotional regulation:

Identify the problematic feelings: The therapist works with the athlete to note which feelings seem to be problematic, and identifying any patterns. For example, it would be helpful to recognise if there are any feelings that emerge repeatedly (anxiety, anger, etc.), situations that typically trigger these feelings, how the player typically copes with these feelings, and if there are any negative consequences to their strategies.

Identify and practice adaptive emotional regulation strategies: Intervention can be targeted at any one channel: physiological, cognitive, and behavioural, as it will impact other channels as well. Physiological strategies include progressive muscle relaxation and self-hypnosis. Cognitive strategies include positive self-statements and positive imagery. Behavioural strategies include time out and replacement behaviours.

Identify goals of experiencing positive emotions:Emotional regulation means not only working towards reducing distress, but having opportunities to increase experiences

of positive emotions. The therapist reviews goals for experiencing positive emotions: positive emotions to direct actions, enhance motivation and optimism, and produce greater self-awareness and connection to others.

Learn distress tolerance skills: It is equally crucial that athletes be trained in the ability to endure pain without resorting to behaviours that are damaging to them. The therapist begins with assessing the player's distress tolerance strategies used in the past (e.g., externalising behaviours, avoidance), connecting distress tolerance to the player's goals (e.g., are the goals important enough totolerate distress worthwhile?), and identifying pros and cons of enduring distress.

Identification

This refers to the ability to identify and differentiate between personal target (i.e. goals that are set by the athlete for him/herself) and professional target (i.e., goals that are set by the athlete for the upcoming match). It also refers to the ability to draw on one's specific identity and relate it to the larger context.

For the present intervention model, the following components are proposed to be trained to achieve identification:

Identify and differentiate between targets: The athlete is helped to identify his/her personal goals, which relate to personal satisfaction and are based on one's optimal level of performance, and his/her professional goals, which are related to expected standard of performance for the next match. Then, s/he is helped to imagine four scenarios: both targets are met, one target is met but not the other, and both targets are not met. The athlete is then to identify what specific emotional and cognitive responses s/he is likely to display based on these four possible outcomes. Then, the athlete can practice regulation of the emotional responses and re-appraisal of the cognitive ones, to enable these factors to reach one's full potential.

Identify and differentiate between a mistake and failure: The therapist can also help the athlete differentiate between mistakes and failures. Mistakes are the errors or slips made during a game, and failures refer to the final outcome of the match. The differentiation can again help identify and plan specific emotional and cognitive responses to each, and respond according to what is helpful and facilitative of continuing with the player's best performance. For example, in reaction to a mistake in the game, such as missing scoring a basket via jump shot during a basketball match, it is easy to get demoralised and for that to affect one's subsequent performance in the rest of the game. But, once the player practises how s/he will re-appraise the mistake, what s/he will tell him/herself to pull oneself up immediately, and how s/he would continue to play with focus while drowning out the demoralising factors in the environment (e.g., a booing crowd or angry teammates).

Identify specific identity and channelize it: The athlete can also be helped to identify what specific identity s/he can relate to in order to draw inspiration and energy for the game. This specific identity could then be connected to a larger context, such as of a team, of one's sport, or of one's country. Identification with the team leads to increased team cohesion (Hogg, 1993) and in a sports team, cohesion is related to team success (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). An athlete could also draw on her national identity, if that is what she feels strongly about, and channelize it to motivate herself to play better, or to recover after mistakes or failures.

The four components of the AERI program are inter-related, in that training one would impact and facilitate the other. The first element, attention (A) and second, emotional awareness (E) are more task-focused, whereas the emotional regulation (R) and identification (I) components are more person-focused. It means that A and E focus more on developing certain skills, whereas R and I focus on extending the athletes' understanding of themselves in the development of 'Self' by becoming aware of their potential to overcome obstacles. Thus, the R and I go beyond the purview of performance enhancement and could achieve development of the 'whole person' and not only the 'athlete'.

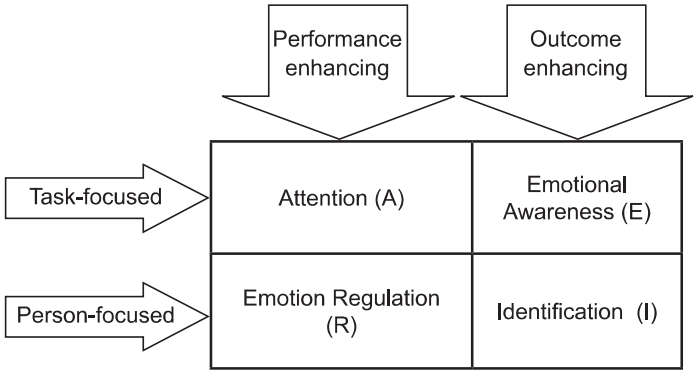

Figure 1. The AERI program for enhancing athletes' Emotional Intelligence

Also, the A and R relate to performance-enhancing aspects of the game, whereas E and I relate to outcome-enhancing aspects (Figure 1).

A major strength of the AERI program is that it draws threads from all the major EI theoretical frameworks with a limitation of lack of empirical base.

The AERI program could be incorporated by coaches, sports psychologists, and fitness leaders in their training regimen to enhance the level of EI in athletes. It can lend itself to both long-format (12-15 sessions, spaced throughout the sporting season) and short-format (5-8 sessions, before a sporting event), based on the specific requirements of the athletes and/or coaches.

We recommend future applied studies to take steps toward empirically testing the AERI program on athletes playing different category of sports, both individual and team sports, and both open- and closed-skill sports.

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