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Aggression and sports performance: Untying the complex relationship

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Abstract

The intricate relationship between aggression and sports performance is a multifaceted subject that encompasses psychological, social, and physiological dimensions. This paper explores the dualistic nature of aggression, distinguishing between its potentially beneficial forms, such as increased motivation and competitive edge, and its detrimental consequences, including penalties, injuries, and psychological distress. By examining key theories of aggression—such as instinct theory, frustration-aggression hypothesis, social learning theory, arousal-excitation transfer theory, and cognitive neo association theory—this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how aggression can be effectively managed and harnessed in sports. Practical applications of these theories are discussed, highlighting strategies for coaches and athletes to promote positive aggression and mitigate its negative impacts, ultimately aiming to enhance performance while maintaining sportsmanship and safety.

Keywords: Aggression, types of aggression, theories of aggression, performance

Introduction

Aggression in sports is a topic that garners much attention and debate. Defined as any behaviour intended to harm or intimidate another person, aggression can manifest in various forms in the sports arena, from physical confrontations to verbal taunts. Understanding the relationship between aggression and sports performance is crucial for athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists. This article explores how aggression influences sports performance, the underlying psychological mechanisms, and the implications for managing aggression in competitive settings.

Types of Aggression in Sports: Aggression in sports can be broadly categorized into two types: hostile aggression and instrumental aggression.

- 1. Hostile Aggression:** This type of aggression is driven by anger and the primary goal is to cause harm or injury to another player. It is often impulsive and reactionary.
- 2. Instrumental Aggression:** Unlike hostile aggression, instrumental aggression is goal-oriented. The aggressive behaviour is a means to an end, such as gaining a tactical advantage or intimidating an opponent to gain a competitive edge.

Theories of Aggression and Their Application in Sports Performance

Aggression in sports is a complex phenomenon influenced by various psychological, social, and physiological factors. Several theories have been developed to explain the origins and manifestations of aggression, and these theories can be directly applied to understanding and managing aggression in sports contexts. Here, we discuss key theories of aggression and their relevance to sports performance.

Instinct Theory, proposed by Sigmund Freud and later developed by Konrad Lorenz, suggests that aggression is an innate and inevitable part of human behaviour. According to this theory, humans have a natural drive towards aggression that needs to be expressed.

Application in Sports

- **Catharsis:** Sports can serve as an outlet for the aggressive instincts of athletes, providing a socially acceptable means for the expression of aggression. For example, contact sports

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like football and rugby allow players to channel their aggressive impulses in a controlled environment.

- **Controlled Environment:** Coaches and trainers can create scenarios in training sessions that allow athletes to release built-up aggression, thereby reducing the likelihood of uncontrolled outbursts during actual competitions.

Also, the instinct theory has been criticized for being overly deterministic and not accounting for the influence of environmental and social factors on aggression.

Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, formulated by John Dollard and colleagues in 1939, posits that aggression is the result of frustration arising from blocked goals or unmet needs. When individuals are prevented from achieving their objectives, they experience frustration, which can lead to aggressive behaviour.

Application in Sports

- **Performance Pressure:** Athletes often face high levels of frustration due to performance pressure, injuries, or unfair officiating, which can lead to aggressive reactions. For example, a basketball player who feels wronged by a referee's call might react aggressively.
- **Coping Mechanisms:** Understanding this theory helps coaches develop strategies to manage athletes' frustration, such as stress-relief techniques and promoting a positive mindset to prevent aggressive outbursts.

This theory does not explain all forms of aggression, particularly those that occur without obvious frustration triggers. It also overlooks individual differences in aggression response.

Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura emphasizes the role of observation and imitation in learning aggressive behavior. According to this theory, individuals learn aggression by observing others, especially role models, and through direct reinforcement of aggressive actions.

Application in Sports

- **Role Models:** Athletes often look up to successful sports figures who may display aggressive behaviour. Coaches need to be aware of the influence that professional athletes have on younger players and emphasize positive behaviour.
- **Reinforcement:** Positive reinforcement of sportsmanship and penalizing aggressive behaviour can help in reducing unwanted aggression. For example, awarding fair play awards and penalizing dangerous plays can promote a culture of respect and self-control.

While social learning theory explains the acquisition of aggressive behaviour, it may not fully address the internal motivational factors behind aggression.

Arousal-Excitation Transfer Theory, developed by Dolf Zillmann, suggests that arousal from one source can be transferred to and intensify a subsequent emotional state. In sports, the physical arousal from intense competition can be transferred to aggressive behavior if provoked.

Application in Sports

- **Arousal Management:** Coaches and athletes can use this understanding to implement arousal management techniques, such as deep breathing, visualization, and relaxation exercises to prevent the transfer of competitive

arousal to aggression.

- **Situational Awareness:** Recognizing situations that may lead to heightened arousal and subsequent aggression can help in developing strategies to mitigate such scenarios, such as taking timeouts or employing calming tactics.

This theory focuses on physiological arousal but may not fully account for cognitive processes and individual differences in aggression.

Cognitive Neo association Theory by Leonard Berkowitz suggests that unpleasant stimuli can lead to negative emotions and thoughts, which can trigger aggressive responses. This theory emphasizes the role of negative affect and cognitive processing in aggression.

Application in Sports

- **Emotional Regulation:** Training athletes to manage their emotions and cognitive responses to negative stimuli can reduce aggression. Techniques such as cognitive restructuring and mindfulness can help athletes maintain composure during stressful situations.
- **Preventing Triggers:** Identifying and minimizing situations that cause negative emotions (e.g., unfair treatment, taunting) can help in reducing aggression. Establishing a supportive and fair sports environment is crucial.

This theory may oversimplify the complex interplay of emotions and cognitive processes in aggression.

Several psychological mechanisms mediate the relationship between aggression and sports performance.

1. **Arousal Levels:** Aggression can increase arousal levels, which, within an optimal range, can enhance performance. However, if arousal levels become too high, it can lead to anxiety and impaired performance.
2. **Self-Efficacy:** Athletes with high self-efficacy are more likely to channel aggression constructively. They have the confidence to use aggressive behaviors strategically without losing control.
3. **Emotional Regulation:** Effective emotional regulation skills are crucial for managing aggression. Athletes who can control their emotions are better equipped to use aggression positively and avoid the negative consequences of hostile aggression.

Impact of Aggression on Sports Performance

The relationship between aggression and sports performance is complex and can be both positive and negative.

Positive Impact: In some cases, controlled aggression can enhance sports performance. For instance, in contact sports like football or rugby, a certain level of aggression can help athletes assert dominance, maintain focus, and increase their competitive drive. Instrumental aggression, when used strategically, can intimidate opponents and provide a psychological edge.

- **Motivation and Intensity:** Controlled aggression can increase an athlete's motivation and intensity. For example, football players often use a degree of aggression to maintain a high level of physicality, which is essential in a contact sport.
- **Competitive Edge:** Athletes who can channel their aggression effectively often have a competitive edge. This controlled aggression helps them stay focused, assertive, and dominant during competitions.
- **Team Dynamics:** In team sports, instrumental aggression can foster a sense of unity and collective resilience. Teams that play with controlled aggression often intimidate their opponents and assert psychological

dominance.

Negative Impact: Conversely, uncontrolled or excessive aggression can be detrimental. Hostile aggression can lead to penalties, injuries, and even disqualifications, which harm the team's overall performance. Moreover, it can disrupt an athlete's focus, leading to poor decision-making and decreased performance.

- **Penalties and Fouls:** Excessive aggression can lead to penalties, which can be detrimental to a team's performance. In sports like soccer and basketball, players who cannot control their aggression often accumulate fouls that can lead to suspensions and weaken the team's lineup.
- **Injury Risks:** Hostile aggression increases the risk of injuries to both the aggressor and the target. This not only affects the immediate game but can also have long-term implications on an athlete's career.
- **Psychological Effects:** Aggressive behaviours can lead to negative psychological effects, such as increased stress and anxiety. Athletes who frequently engage in hostile aggression may suffer from poor mental health, impacting their overall performance.

Managing Aggression in Sports

Given the dual nature of aggression's impact on performance, managing it effectively is essential. Effective management of aggression involves a combination of Education, Psychological training, coaching strategies, strict enforcement of rules, stress management techniques and promotion of sportsmanship.

- **Education:** Coaches should educate athletes about the types of aggression and their potential impacts. Emphasizing the importance of instrumental aggression and the dangers of hostile aggression can help athletes make better decisions.
- **Psychological Training:** Techniques such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) can help athletes manage their emotions and channel aggression positively. Mindfulness and relaxation techniques also play a role in reducing hostile aggression.
- **Coaching Strategies:** Coaches play a crucial role in teaching athletes how to use aggression constructively. Emphasizing fair play, respect for opponents, and self-control can help athletes maintain a balance between competitiveness and sportsmanship.
- **Rule Enforcement:** Strict enforcement of rules and regulations by referees and sports organizations is essential in curbing excessive aggression. Clear guidelines and consistent penalties for aggressive behaviour can deter athletes from engaging in harmful aggression.
- **Stress Management Techniques:** Teaching athletes stress management and emotional regulation techniques, such as mindfulness and deep breathing exercises, can help them maintain control over their aggression.
- **Promoting Sportsmanship:** Encouraging a culture of sportsmanship and respect within teams can reduce the likelihood of hostile aggression. Highlighting the values of fair play and mutual respect can shift the focus from harming opponents to performing well.

Conclusion

Aggression in sports is a double-edged sword. When managed effectively, it can enhance performance by increasing motivation, intensity, arousal and competitive drive. However, uncontrolled aggression can lead to negative outcomes, including penalties, injuries, psychological issues

and decreased performance. Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying aggression and implementing strategies to manage it can help athletes harness its positive aspects while mitigating its negative effects. By promoting controlled aggression and emotional regulation, the sports community can ensure that aggression contributes to, rather than detracts from, athletic excellence. The application of aggression theories in sports provides valuable insights into managing and harnessing aggression to enhance performance while minimizing its negative impacts. Coaches, trainers, and sports psychologists can use these theories to develop comprehensive strategies for aggression management, focusing on emotional regulation, positive reinforcement, and creating a supportive environment. By understanding the underlying mechanisms of aggression, athletes can achieve peak performance without compromising sportsmanship and safety. It is crucial for athletes, coaches, and sports organizations to work together to harness the positive aspects of aggression while minimizing its detrimental effects. Through psychological training, strategic coaching, and strict rule enforcement, the balance between aggression and performance can be effectively maintained.

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