

# Spiritual Well-Being in Sport and Exercise Psychology

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Dev Roychowdhury<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

Research indicates that spirituality plays a cardinal role in enhancing sporting performance, personal growth, and well-being. Numerous researchers have attempted to examine the nexus of religion, spirituality, and psychological constructs to understand their role in sport and exercise performance and contexts. Despite the findings that spiritual well-being plays a crucial role in athletic excellence and as a buffer against a wide range of stressors and negative behaviors, it has received scant attention in the sport and exercise psychology literature. This present commentary examines the role of spirituality in sport psychology literature and proposes that spiritual well-being be incorporated into sport and exercise psychology training and consultancy to improve and enhance service delivery. This article also identifies a number of key areas for future research and practice.

## Keywords

spirituality, spiritual well-being, spiritual counseling, religion, sport and exercise psychology, performance, athletic excellence

Spirituality has been identified as an important factor in enhancing sporting performance, fostering excellence and individual growth, and overall well-being (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Dillon & Tait, 2000; Joseph, Linley, & Maltby, 2006; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Nesti, 2004; Ravizza, 2002; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). Despite the keen interest taken by a number of traditional scholars to examine the nexus of spirituality, religion, and psychology (e.g., Allport, 1950; James, 1890, 1902; Jung, 1938), the construct of spirituality in a range of human experiences in the recent past, especially in sport and exercise psychology, has received scant attention. The conceptualization of psychological constructs believed to encompass spiritual elements in the applied psychology literature have predominantly been confined to concepts such as peak experiences (Maslow, 1968) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The purpose of this article is to comment on the role of spirituality in sport psychology research and practice, and to stimulate further discussion.

## Religion and Spirituality in Sport Psychology

The nomenclature of religion and spirituality have often been interchangeably used in sport psychology literature. A number of researchers have proposed working definitions for these terms. Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975) characterized religion as a belief system in divine or superhuman power, which is emphasized by ritualistic practices of worship.

Similarly, Hyman and Handal (2006) typified religion with the external and organizational practices in a group setting that is associated with a higher power. On the contrary, Helminiak (1996) considered spirituality to possess religious and humanistic values whereby personal meaning is a derivative of what is deemed ultimate and valued. Hill et al. (2000) defined spirituality as the emotions, impressions, cognitions, and behaviors that ascend from a pursuit for the sacrosanct.

It should be noted that while the ontology of religion (as a belief in and worship of a divine power) dates back to prehistoric times, the term “spirituality” or its cognates were not commonly used as part of the vernacular until the beginning of 20th century. Furthermore, while Western ecclesiastical thinking has had a long history of placing great emphasis on the binary demarcation between the religious and secular, Eastern traditional practices have had an even longer philosophy of placing holism, universalism, and inclusiveness as essential components of the transcendental and perennial human experience. The term “spirituality” underwent a major discursive shift in the later part of the 20th century, whereby thinkers and researchers argued for the acceptance and instantiation of New Age spirituality as a new category

<sup>1</sup>DR ACADEMY, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

### Corresponding Author:

Dev Roychowdhury, DR ACADEMY, Suite 3501, LPO Box 5003, Bruce 2617, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia.  
Email: info@drdevroy.com



that would find its place between theology and secularism (e.g., Huss, 2014).

Today, New Age spirituality is understood to be characterized by an inward and reflective search for meaning and sacralization of the self, which may result in a sense of profound transformation (e.g., Heelas, 1996; Heelas & Woodland, 2005). Despite retaining its reference to the scriptural on one hand and corporeal on the other, modern age spirituality is now considered to also encompass the metaphysical, moral, ascetic, psychological, subjective, experiential, existential, physical, and social within its semantic field. Heelas (2011) observed that the term “spirituality” today is regularly related to physical and material actions (such as health, yoga, martial arts, sport, and exercise) and is increasingly being related to other domains, such as business and education.

As such, providing a working and operational definition of religion and spirituality is beyond the scope of this article. However, for the purpose of this article, the term “spiritual well-being,” coined by Ellison and Paloutzian (Ellison, 1983; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982) in their development of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) which incorporates the dimensions of religious, spiritual, and existential well-being, has been used.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of spiritual well-being in athletes’ lives (Acevedo, Dzewaltowski, Gill, & Noble, 1992; Dillon & Tait, 2000; Howe & Parker, 2014; Storch, Kolsky, Silvestri, & Storch, 2001; Storch, Storch, Kovacs, Okun, & Welsh, 2003; Vernacchia et al., 2000). It has been observed that many athletes employ spiritual practices as means to overcome setbacks and enhance performance (e.g., Coakley, 2003; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Maranise, 2013; Park, 2000; Watson & Czech, 2005). Spiritual well-being has also been found to provide buffer against stressors (Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007) and act as a deterrent for negative behaviors such as substance abuse (Storch et al., 2003).

Several applied sport psychology practitioners have also highlighted the significance of spiritual well-being when dealing with athletic issues (e.g., Balague, 1999; Gamble, Hill, & Parker, 2013; Ravizza, 2002; Watson & Czech, 2005; Watson & Nesti, 2005). Noting the importance of spiritual well-being in sporting performance, Watson and Nesti (2005) proposed four broad areas for future research: (a) reconciling spirituality into athlete-focused services, (b) incorporating spiritual practices into psychological skills training, (c) investigating the association between spirituality and psychological constructs, and (d) examining the efficacy of spirituality in sport psychology consultancy.

It is evident that sport psychology consulting will greatly benefit from incorporating elements of spirituality in enhancing service delivery (e.g., Ravizza, 2002; Watson & Nesti, 2005). That is, understanding athletes’ spiritual well-being and worldview will equip sport psychology consultants to tailor appropriate and accurate interventions that will

comprehensively cover the services that those athletes need. Emerging discourse in sport psychology has called for a greater awareness of culturally informed research and practice in an effort to broaden the epistemological gamut of theory and practice in the field by including elements of culture and diversity, especially religion and spirituality (e.g., Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001; Hanrahan, 2011; Hanrahan & Schinke, 2011; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013; Ryba & Wright, 2005, 2010; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Schinke & Moore, 2011; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). This approach is particularly relevant in modern sport and exercise contexts which are increasingly becoming multicultural and diverse.

### **Psychological Constructs, Spiritual Well-Being, and Sport Psychology**

Researchers addressing spiritual well-being in sport psychology have predominantly focused on psychological constructs such as peak experiences (Maslow, 1968) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), and have noted a strong relationship among them (Della-Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Dillon & Tait, 2000; Hollander & Acevedo, 2000; Ravizza, 2002). For instance, Dillon and Tait (2000) examined the relationship between spirituality and being present in the zone in team sports and reported that spirituality may increase the likelihood of more “in-the-zone” states which may in turn lead to enhanced coping mechanisms. Despite the findings of this research, one major drawback is that the direction of this correlational relationship was not known.

Ravizza (2002) observed the limitations of conventional sport psychology approaches in addressing the spiritual elements in sport and exploring aspects of personal meaning in the lives of athletes. Ravizza also noted the effectiveness of certain elements of Zen philosophy and Hatha Yoga to assist athletes transcend their ego, become engrossed in their task, and experience a state of relaxation. This is of paramount importance for athletes, especially in competitive contexts.

It is fundamentally crucial for athletes in competitive contexts to remain calm and perform under pressure (Craft, Magyar, Becker, & Feltz, 2003). To achieve this, athletes must remain task-focused, technically experienced, and effectively manage stressors and distractions. In other words, athletes must be mentally trained to be “present in the moment” to successfully execute what they have spent hours training for. The general concept of present-moment awareness is related to the construct of mindfulness, which has garnered noteworthy attention among sport psychology consultants in the recent past (Gardner & Moore, 2004, 2006, 2007; Kee & Wang, 2008). Mindfulness has been defined as “. . . paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Mindfulness finds its roots in the Eastern philosophical traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism and emphasizes accepting both internal and external experiences while

simultaneously maintaining sharp awareness. Although a number of researchers have noted the potential importance of Eastern philosophical principles to positive psychological states and psychotherapy (e.g., de Silva, 1986; Epstein, 2007; Germer, 2005; Germer, Seigel, & Fulton, 2005; Ravizza, 2002; Rosenbaum, 1999; Wray, 1986; Zizzi & Andersen, 2010), there have been few applications of these principles in the sport psychology consultancy.

Gardner and Moore (2004, 2006, 2007) and Kee and Wang (2008) studied the effectiveness of mindfulness on athletic performance. They advocate that a present-moment awareness is associated with sporting performance as it helps athletes manage distractions from past, future, or current events. Athletes' level of mindfulness was also found to be linked to self-control, clear goals, task concentration, and loss of self-consciousness. Therefore, more mindful athletes are more likely to experience flow states during their athletic performance. As research has identified spirituality as an important factor in influencing sport performance, it would be worth to focus on the relationship between mindfulness and spirituality and examine how this affects athletic performance. More specifically, future research should, therefore, focus on examining the relationship between spiritual well-being and psychological constructs to measure their influence on performance in sport and exercise.

## Athletic Performance and Excellence

The field of sport psychology is witnessing a shift toward a more athlete-centered model of sport and exercise psychology consultancy, which places more emphasis on athletes' overall physical and psychological health and well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2002). This is predominantly achieved by providing relevant mental skills training to athletes in an attempt to enhance performance. This new shift puts athletic excellence at the heart of performance. Danish and Nellen (1997) viewed performance excellence as tangible outcomes that may be evaluated from competitive environments, whereas personal excellence referred to various life skills that contributed to overall health and welfare.

Miller and Kerr (2002) observed that traditional views on performance excellence has been limited to focusing on the physical, psychological, and social elements within the context of athletes' overall health and welfare. As such, it should also be noted that essential life skills such as moral, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects play a significant role in the overall performance and should also be considered.

To enhance skills training in traditional sport psychology consultancy, athletes are often provided with mental preparation tools, especially in competitive contexts. The level of mastery of a mental skill usually depends on the amount of practice and on personal characteristics of athletes. Research indicates that athletes are better able to overcome challenges and distractions when they utilize pre-performance routines

(Orlick & Partington, 1988). Craft et al. (2003) found that some athletes may experience decline of performance or even choking when faced with challenging and stressful situations.

It is reasonable to believe that most athletes deal with multiple stressors while simultaneously attempting to achieve athletic excellence. Previous research indicates that athletes may not have the necessary skills to deal with adverse or stressful circumstances, such as career-ending injuries (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997) and retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001; Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997), and may experience suicidal ideation and depression (Ogilvie, 1987). Although issues such as athletic identity, career planning, and career-threatening injuries are usually addressed by the current models in sport psychology practice, an understanding of spiritual well-being may prove advantageous in sport psychology consultancy. This also draws support from research that indicates that spiritual well-being of athletes come to the fore when counseling athletes who have endured career-threatening injuries or are confronting retirement (Lavalley, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Egde, 2000). Existing models in sport psychology consultancy predominantly use cognitive-behavioral methods, such as anxiety control, arousal regulation, relaxation, and motivational techniques to help athletes deal with stressful situations. As such, these approaches do not comprehensively cover the myriad dimensions of athletes' lives. It is, therefore, recommended that traditional mental skills training approaches be broadened to include essential elements of athletes' spiritual well-being.

## Conclusion

The present commentary has important implications for sport and exercise psychology research and practice. Based on the literature reviewed in this article, it would be reasonable to state that spiritual well-being plays a significant role in the lives of athletes. Future research should focus on understanding the role of athletes' spiritual practices and their impact on overall performance. Furthermore, studies examining the relationship between psychological constructs and spiritual dimensions have reported strong links, which warrants further investigation. For instance, given the expansion of research on the benefits of mindfulness that has been witnessed in the past decade, future research should focus on investigating the role of mindfulness in enhancing athletic performance.

Future research in this domain should also focus on conducting explorative and phenomenological studies to examine the relationship between psychological constructs and spiritual well-being within sport and exercise contexts. Considering the experiential nature of spiritual elements and transient nature of psychological constructs, future research should utilize multi-method approaches, thereby using qualitative data to compliment and add value to quantitative metrics.

In sport and exercise psychology practice, it is important for consultants to understand and consider individuals' spiritual worldview. Current mental skills training approaches should also consider how individuals' spiritual orientation and beliefs shape their attitude, motivation, and temperament. This is of great significance, especially when working with individuals who have specific and/or different spiritual beliefs and practices that they equate with their overall well-being. For instance, sport psychology consultants can incorporate elements of an athlete's spiritual belief and/or practice into their pre-performance routine that helps focus their attention on task-relevant cues and alleviate stress and anxiety. Using such techniques alongside traditional methods will not only foster confidence and perseverance in athletes, but will also make the athletes feel assured and respectful in the consultants' approach to service delivery, thereby strengthening the athlete-consultant relationship.

In summary, sport and exercise psychology research and practice should arrive at a holistic understanding of spiritual well-being in sport and exercise contexts. A number of key areas for research and practice have been identified: (a) understanding what constitutes spiritual well-being for individuals, (b) examining the role spiritual well-being plays in athletic performance and excellence, and (c) incorporating spiritual well-being practices into existing models of mental skills training in sport and exercise psychology consultancy.


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### ORCID iD

Dev Roychowdhury  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3603-4600>

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### Author Biography

**Dev Roychowdhury** is a research scholar at the University of Canberra Research Institute for Sport and Exercise. He is also the founder and director of DR ACADEMY, an evidence-based research and consultancy enterprise headquartered in Australia. Roychowdhury has extensive lecturing, research, and professional practice experience and has held several senior executive and leadership positions across various organisations. He has also served as a Commissioned and Uniformed Officer in the Royal Australian Army within the Australian Defence Force. He has recently been elected to provide strategic, leadership, and research guidance as a Member of Managing Council of the Asian South-Pacific Association of Sport Psychology.