

# THE CREATIVITY-SPONTANEITY PROCESS IN SPORTS: CASE STUDY FROM THE COACH'S PERSPECTIVE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Creativity has been described as an intrinsic characteristic of the individual (Cramond, 2001). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) gave a definition that has made doctrine in the field of creativity research. "Creativity is any act, idea, or product that modifies an existing domain or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of the creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain or establish a new domain." (p. 28). On the other hand, in the field of physical activities the athletes, need to perform the specialized technical actions that characterize each sport (Araújo, 2005). This proficiency is composed of two elements, which are usually identified as technical and tactical intelligence. Consequently, this has motivated athletes and coaches to engage in the deliberate and systematic practice referred to as the training process (Macnamara et al., 2014). This has led to the field of sports science research seeking an understanding of the phenomenon based on empirically based studies (Macnamara et al., 2014). Despite the concepts highlighted by behaviorists, the explanation of how someone can acquire a new movement pattern is not robust enough (Macnamara et al., 2014). A second innovative step in managing the teaching-learning process of new skills led researchers to establish information that supported the view that a central mechanism exists to control movement mobility programs, which prompted the concept of motor programs as a consequence (Brito et al. 2017).

However, in the process of selecting stimulus-driven responses to choose the "right tool" from the "toolbox," this approach still does not explain how the "tools" are accessed in the "toolbox," let alone how they are formed to be appropriate for the context at hand. As a result, in order to merge the previously highlighted guiding role of the environment relative to the active role played by the individual characteristics that distinguish each person, a hybrid approach referred to as the bioecological approach has recently been developed (Madeline, 2017).

A practical implication in the field of combat sports is for example: the criterion of success being to perform actions that strike the opponent, two operations need to be performed to achieve this goal. The first is to diagnose one or more features of the opponent's body that should be

targeted. The second is to discover the "movement tool" that can be used for that purpose. Consequently, the teaching and training of combat sports should consider these aspects and emotions as an important guiding context (Martins & Rosado, 2017). According to the model, such a strategy will provide a more successful experience of the creative process that lies at the heart of learning the fundamental techniques that make up the combat activity of choice. Another central aspect of the model is the idea that behavior is emergent (Araújo, 2005).

This dynamic and emergence of behavior in competition must be centered on the subjectivity of interpersonal relationships and coordination, where space, time, and the action of the other are the reference criteria. This also means that the ideal experience from an emotional point of view must also be looked at as part of the process. Csikszentmihalyi (1990), on the positive aspects of human experience - such as creativity, states that the process of total involvement with the activity is the key concept for optimal experiences, and calls this state the state of flow.

To be able to experience flow, one must (1) have clear goals to be achieved, (2) be immersed in the activity, becoming deeply involved with what one is doing, (3) focused attention, because concentration leads to involvement, which can only be maintained by constant contributions of attention. Finally, (4) take advantage of the immediate experience, that is, learn how to focus on and engage in the experience you are performing now.

In the context of sports, athletes are engaged in highly structured activities with well-established goals within rules that are also very objective, where competition with oneself and/or others requires a high level of commitment and involvement (Kent, 2006).

These activities require very intense physical effort and/or very complex technical and physical skills and are often performed in the presence of spectators. In fact, various risk elements (e.g., injuries), exposure to environmental conditions (i.e., the weather), and interactions with teammates, coaches, opponents, and referees may be present in sports activities (Swann, 2016). It is also important to note that these factors present a variety of mental and physical challenges, which means that sports activities are particularly prone to experiencing flow states (Macnamara, et al., 2014). And in this regard, spontaneity and spontaneous behaviors also find strong expression. This is how decision-making processes will be fluid and dynamic, requiring feedback concomitant with constant action and readjustment to the impositions of the competition.

Moreno's (2008, p. 54) definition states that spontaneity "propels the individual in the direction of an appropriate response to a new situation, or a new response to an old situation" without "disordered behavior and emotionalism resulting from impulsive action are far from being desiderata of the work of spontaneity (Kipper, et al. 2010).

Moreno suggests a schema he calls the "Canon of Spontaneity-Creativity" (Moreno, 2008, p. 60), where he associates creativity with spontaneity. Moreover, he takes into account not only the spontaneity of the individual but also that of the group: "the foundation of the process is the principle of creative spontaneity, the uninhibited participation of all members of the group in the production and active catharsis" (Moreno, 1999, p. 32).

Moreno is also dedicated to how spontaneity can be measured, referring to a quotient of spontaneity that would allow different individuals to be compared in a different way to the results

obtained in other psychological aptitudes, such as intelligence or memory. The behaviors are noted and evaluated by the observer(s), according to a frame of reference where speed, originality and appropriateness were taken into account (Kipper & Shemer, 2007, p. 128).

This type of evaluation enabled Moreno to systematically study phenomena linked to spontaneity and to develop his theses on the subject, namely the role theory (Abreu, 2006). Moreno's theory also presents the specific training process for the development and effective formation of personality, as well as the various social roles that the individual assumes in the society (Abreu, 2006). Finally, the integration of each role in the individual is fundamental, because without it "the strength and appropriateness, or spontaneity in performance is not revealed and responses and performance are stereotyped, forced, difficult. And, above all, they are not performed with pleasure nor do they lead to a feeling of personal accomplishment" (Abreu, 2006, p.55).

As already mentioned, the concepts of creativity and flow have been widely used and accepted, but this idea of social role was never transmuted to sport, without ever considering the concept of spontaneity (Brito et al., 2017). Therefore, the aim of this study was to interview an experienced coach, in order to describe his thoughts about how he conceptualizes the concepts of creativity, flow and spontaneity, trying to clarify concepts that allow us to understand and lay the foundations for the formation of strategies that enable sport to consider the concept of spontaneity.

## **2. MATERIAL AND METHOD**

### **2.1. Participant**

The choice of participant was based on the following criteria (Hodges et al. 2007): To hold a professional title of sports coach (Level II) and being currently active; Recognized and indicated by their peers; Relevant results as a coach; Sports curriculum as an athlete; Academic training, preferably in Sports Science; Author of technical-scientific articles in the specialty. Thus, we decided to request an interview with a coach with coaching experience from youth to elite levels. This last characteristic allows us to redirect the questions, in case it is relevant to consider differences mediated by the age of the athletes (Hodges et al., 2007).

### **2.2. Procedure**

First, we contacted the coach and scheduled a day at his convenience. On the day of the interview we underline the importance of his participation, again clarifying the reasons that led to the request for participation, as well as the guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality. After his agreement, we formalized it by signing the previously prepared authorization form. Keeping a same calm atmosphere, we continued in informal conversation, asking him to be truly open to the questions asked and trying to stress the idea that we would not evaluate his answers or thoughts. Finally, he was informed that the data could be made available if he wished.

During the course of the interview, a neutral and cordial atmosphere was maintained in order to maintain the interviewee's confidence to answer the questions posed.

Specifically, the format was "dialogue-like" in order to keep the whole process fluid, conducting the interview within the confines of the study content. We emphasize that it was very useful to train and study the script questions beforehand. We believe that this aspect had important implications in the fluidity of the interview, as well as in the relationship maintained with the interviewee. The interview lasted about 53 minutes.

As previously stated, we tried to follow the order and structure of the script, but in some cases it was necessary to explain the meaning of the questions. This aspect was particularly important in the topic of spontaneity.

The interviewee was never interrupted, except when it was perceived that he was straying from his speech, or even seemed lost. The interview was recorded using a computer system equipped with a back and forth foot pedal, as well as a cycle count monitor. It was later transcribed into a Word processor.

### **2.3. Data analysis procedure**

For the transcription, a two-column textual format was designed. In the left column, intended for text, we identified the interviewer and interviewee in each text sequence. In the right column, smaller, we labeled the data by applying the index previously created to identify initial themes or concepts (numeric code that resulted from the index that also marked the sequence in which the questions occurred). This strategy allowed us to identify and recover specific segments, to be included in the presentation and discussion of the results. Through "floating" reading, we established contact with the themes to be analyzed in the text. This "light" reading allowed a perception, or even impression, of the direction to follow, establishing guidelines for further analysis. In this context, the strategy followed was to build a thematic index.

The data were then sorted by theme, building thematic matrices. In a first column, once again, using the index, the answer was transcribed into these matrices as a way of marking subject units. In a second column, trying to reduce the data to dimensions, it was summarized with a certain level of abstraction. Then a third column was used to synthesize the data into thematic matrices, rewriting each response at an even greater level of abstraction to allow discussion against theory. In a more precise reading arising from the previous process, a more analytical reading was carried out, underlining passages with relevant ideas in order to achieve a representation of the content. To facilitate this task, all thematic matrices were printed. This process corresponds to the transformation of the data, which by aggregation and enumeration, allow a representation of the content to be achieved. The cut criteria in the content analysis was imposed by the nature of the interviewee's answers and arising from the questions formulated.

As stated, three major themes comprising sub-themes (categories) were established in order to characterize the interviewee's conceptual orientations. In this work, the data sought is descriptive in nature, meaning, therefore, that no answers or hypotheses are expected to be confirmed. However, we can identify topics in order to build thematic matrices under the purpose of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon in a natural context (Bardin, 2004).

Thus, the topics of the study are also the central themes in data analysis. They are:

Creativity - creativity results from the interaction between culture that contains symbolic rules, thought process and action of the individual that brings novelty to the domain of sport.

Flow - flow is a highly desirable state for athletes because of the association between flow and optimal performance. Therefore, understanding the concept of flow in sport is of great interest to athletes and coaches, but also to sport psychologists.

Spontaneity - is characterized as energy that cannot be seen with the naked eye and therefore, its existence must be inferred through behavior that has been defined as the person's response (s) to a situation. According to Moreno (1964), it is inferred that a given response is a result of spontaneity when there is appropriateness and novelty.

#### **2.4. Instrument**

This paper involves an in-depth interview about what a Portuguese expert coach thinks about creativity, flow and spontaneity. In order to capture the interviewee's thoughts, we used an in-depth interview with a semi-structured script, with the intention of collecting in detail, but with a certain degree of flexibility (open response), the responses of the study participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994).

Based on Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) model of creativity and flow, we crossed it with Moreno's (2008) concept of spontaneity, using an interview script adapted to the study questions. We built the interview script in 3 phases. In the first phase, we defined the themes and objectives of the study, resulting from the literature review on this subject. In the second phase we tried to identify the questions to be used. We then proceeded to reduce the number of questions by choosing those that best ensured obtaining the desired information, also checking the rigor and clarity of the questions, trying to avoid possible situations of induction of responses. In the third and last phase, we carried out an expert analysis of the provisional script, trying to analyze it for clarity and pertinence of the questions. In this phase, with the collaboration of a specialist in sports psychology, we reformulated terms that could raise misunderstandings or misunderstandings.

### **3. RESULTS**

We intend with this study to understand what the interviewed coach considers essential for the construction of creative thinking in athletes.

Regarding spontaneity, her mental representation is that spontaneity is the performance of an unpredictable act.

*"As a circumstance where a particular subject does something that no one was expecting."*  
Answer to question 2.5

The source of this mental representation is empirically based observation, as his personal experience seems to be highly valued for the formation of idea and principles. Nevertheless, he also states that, based on his observation, spontaneity can mean an unpredictable action performed in intersubjectivity, that is, in relation to another person. However, he stresses that he does not have the concept perfectly established. He even adds that each individual always places relativism in the interpretation of the concept, because the perspective and individuality of each person in relation to the context can make the definition vary.

When the concept of spontaneity is self-referenced, he calls it "click" and states that it is a process experienced as being surprised by the timing of his "click", since he can never predict it.

From his personal experience, he ponders the creation of the new at the internal level, perhaps by a process of confirmation bias, he generalizes.

*"... within our internal world, our filters, with which we analyze reality, the perspective we have on the world, the way we look at things, there is creation of something new because there is restructuring of that internal self." Response to question 3.*

His preferred approach to the topic seems to be the biological model, as he recurrently drew analogies with cellular regeneration at the biological level, considering the internal restructuring of an individual as a creation of something new, namely a new internal self.

For the interviewee, the reality of phenomena is the perceived reality, and in this line of thought creativity is the possibility of perceiving what was always there to be perceived. In short, he does not consider that he creates, but that he perceives. In addition, he seems to highly value projective creativity, since he understands creativity as the ability to perceive what exists in the world in terms of external creativity.

For the study participant, the creative process develops through an internal movement that aims to unite ideas. This process energizes thinking in a way that extends beyond previously established rationales, to which he associates divergent thinking, and which is strongly influenced by individual representations and values; therefore, a creation is a connectivity of concepts or terms previously unknown in consciousness.

In this vein creativity seems to be the ability of each subject to establish connections between constructs previously improbable to themselves.

When applying this rationale to sports, and specifically to the martial art that you practice and teach, the concept of martial artist is applied to individuals who demonstrate the ability to perform their martial activity in a creative and original way.

Therefore, what motivates the creative act is the need arising from the situational constraints in which the athlete finds himself. Thus, depending on the sport, success criteria are established for the practitioners' tasks and technical sportive gestures, to which obstacles arise that cause us to be placed before a decision making process after analyzing the situation. The result is often new or better responses to the situation or problem imposed by the environment.

The psychological experience that seems to accompany the experience of the participant in the study is intrinsic motivation, as he claims to derive pleasure from the fact that he is performing the activity of teaching and training the sport in which he specializes. It also seems that he uses this activity to control ontological anxiety, the normal anxiety that accompanies the life of any individual. In our participant's case, it seems to result in experiencing a more authentic and meaningful existence to increase self-knowledge. According to his narrative, "Macro-wise the elements of focus are reducing stress levels and experiencing life in a more comfortable way." This idea finds follow-up in the additional sharing that mentions "the tendency to see things objectively and rationally" because when you are in this theme it is because "the need for the practical effects of this activity" sets in. There also seems to be some projective elements in this

process, because in the participant's narrative one notices a psychological tendency to share content, knowledge, concepts that he considers practical and useful, both for practitioners and for people who train for themselves. He also seeks psycho-emotional well-being, which directs the person towards his internal reality, so that he feels more balanced, or happier, or less anxious. Another salient aspect of psychological experiences, namely emotions and sensations, is that he enters into a state of being completely focused on the present moment, becoming absorbed in the activity in which he is involved. He even states that he considers that he experiences moments of obsession, entering a mental state of focused attention.

This process is perceived as a source of satisfaction, both in terms of attitude and behavior. When he is in this situation he experiences time in an accelerated way, drawing from it an existence themed by maximum pleasure, where the notion of time seems to suspend itself.

On the process, the participant of the study seems to be able to compulsively engage in activities related to causes of intersubjectivity, and it even seems that without this aspect, the practice of sports itself is devoid of purpose. In short, in his discourse he seems to fully acknowledge that he has established a belief that through guided discovery type of teaching or practice conduction methodologies, with an open-minded attitude, it is possible to teach content to all people who wish to improve their sports performance.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The results of the study are in line with the idea of intrinsic creativity of the individual (Cramond, 2001). As previously stated, there are several types of creativity, but the participant in our study shows a strong tendency to value innovative creativity and inventive creativity; those in which there are situations of improvement through modification, involving skills and also where ingenuity is displayed with materials, methods and techniques. Moreover, we were able to establish an online, but only partial, relationship between the representations of this expert coach and the theory presented by Taylor (1959); where conceptions of creativity are based on observable situations, because in the conceptions of our expert coach, internal processes are considered, which does not happen in Taylor's proposal (1959).

It seems that our coach's representations are more aligned with Maslow's (1943) pyramidal theory, where the psychological basis of creativity includes the individual self-actualized view on creativity.

As verified, the coach presents more than one possibility of creativity representation, being that the last one, apparently his favourite, is more in line with Csikszentmihalyi's (1996), considering that creativity is any act, idea or product that modifies an existing domain or transforms an existing domain into a new one. When considering the sport context, the expert coach clearly identifies that competencies for context-referenced actions are necessary, a perspective that is aligned with the idea of ecological approach to sport (Araújo, 2005). The expert coach, when reflecting on his own process, states that he has a mindset of involvement and focused attention, which results in an involvement of deliberate and systematic practice, aspects

also referenced in the sport psychology literature as fundamental for optimal performance (Macnamara et al. 2014).

As in the literature, our coach, in his search for understanding how to maximize the learning of tactical intelligence and technique through effective training experiences, also uses metaphors as the "right tool" from the "toolbox" to formulate the ideas in question. In fact, his ideas seem to be nested in the bio-ecological approach (Madeline, 2017), which means that for the coach of the study, and as in the sport psychology literature, the teaching and training of combat sports should consider the contextual and emotional variables (Martins & Rosado, 2017). Another of the central aspects revealed by the coach, and which is also in line with the literature, is the idea that behavior is emergent, and the dynamics of training should be based on the idea of emergence of behavior in competition. From the point of view of psycho-emotional experiences, creativity should also be considered, because these experiences depend on the ability of each individual to control what happens in consciousness (Swann, 2016). For, as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states, the process of engaging fully immersed in activity is the key concept for optimal experiences, that is, for achieving the flow state. This flow state, which considers four essential characteristics, i.e., clear goals, being immersed in the activity focused attention, and finally being able to be in the present moment, are also a state that our participant reports in his subjective experience.

Finally, the results obtained do not allow us to affirm that the participant establishes a clear link between creativity and spontaneity, it seems that, as Moreno predicted (Kipper, 2006), there is a tendency to confuse spontaneity and impulsiveness. In this context, the coach even says that he finds it difficult to define the term spontaneity and, when he tries to do so, he states that it is like a spurious expression with too many emotional and linguistic clippings. We note finally that he overlaps the definition of creativity with the definition of spontaneity, saying verbatim that creativity is "the creation of an appropriate response to a new situation, or a new response to the problem." Perhaps this is another clue to the justification why the theory of spontaneity has never been transmuted to sport. As already mentioned, the constructs of creativity and flow have been widely used in sport, but without ever considering the concept of spontaneity.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The coach values innovative creativity and inventive creativity as a way to improve the creative skills of athletes. His main source of knowledge for forming these impressions are his everyday observation experiences, as he does not seem to be able to conceptually distinguish the difference between creativity and spontaneity. Paradoxically, he makes an overlapping version of the concept, calling it creativity, which results in a representation closer to the concept of spontaneity.

The coach values the state of flow through deliberate practice, with a view to an optimized performance from the valorization of contextual and emotional variables.

As a final conclusion, we found in this coach the absence of the concept of spontaneity as a technical-scientific concept in the mental representations, which would facilitate the development of creativity in his athletes.

From the point of view of the continuity of this work, it is important to consider other dimensions of the coaches' conceptions, namely about their knowledge about athletic identity. On the other hand, the analysis of aspects related to tactical and strategic training, as well as the decision-making ability of athletes facing emerging competition conditions, deserve more extensive and significant deepening. The analysis of the motor tasks proposed for each skill, and for each level of practice, could itself be described. The analysis of the planning and the procedures for process control and evaluation should be considered fundamental, namely the evaluation of the performance levels of the practitioners. The ways of managing physical and psychological training, and their integration with technical training should also be considered in detail. From a practical point of view, it would also be interesting if the theoretical models we have discussed here could be exported to the training of coaches. Thus, from what has been said, we believe that spontaneity is a cornerstone in the quality of creativity in sport training.

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