



## FEPSAC's role and position in the past and in the future of sport psychology in Europe

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC), this article aims to give an overview of the development of sport psychology in Europe and the role FEPSAC played in this period, and draw some conclusions for the future challenges facing FEPSAC.

**Method:** Hermeneutical interpretation of historical documents available from FEPSAC and other sources.

**Results and conclusion:** It is argued that sport psychology in Europe developed independently from the discipline in America, but also with great variety, due to different cultural, linguistic, and psychological traditions. The separation of Europe in two socio-economical and political blocks after World War II even strengthened these differences. When sport psychology started to recover after the damages of the war, a continental organisation was established as a logical consequence of the historically related differences. The strategic orientation of FEPSAC in the period of the two blocks is characterised by a diplomatic balance and high respect of the language and cultural differences, necessary requirements to allow maintaining the mutual exchange in areas of common interest. After the fall of the Berlin wall, the major strategic goals of FEPSAC revolved around: keeping contact with the Eastern European sport psychologists despite the economic difficulties in these countries; finding a common European understanding and giving this a voice in the world; and the support of the young generation and the development of sport psychology as a professional field. Unification and diversification are identified as the future challenges FEPSAC will be facing when attempting to remain the leading sport psychology organisation in Europe.

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Although sport psychology has undergone a huge development in the past 20 years in Europe, the overall process has been a slow one. When the *Fédération Européenne de Psychologie des Sports et des Activités Corporelles* (FEPSAC) was founded in 1969, sport psychology “was not a desirable field” but has now changed with the view that “Sport psychology of today is somehow in fashion.” (Geron, 2003, p. 19). In this paper, the authors trace the roots of European sport psychology and of FEPSAC, analyse their current status and show possible developments and challenges for the future.

### Development of sport psychology<sup>2</sup> in Europe

#### Historical roots of sport psychology in Europe

Many international sport psychology textbooks include a section about the development of sport psychology. Most of the sources agree in identifying the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century as the onset of academic study in sport psychology, but interestingly many authors locate the place of birth in North America where notably the names of Norman Triplett and Coleman Griffith are usually mentioned as key people, the latter often being considered to be the ‘founding father’ of sport

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Seiler is past-President of FEPSAC and served on its Managing Council from 1991 to 2007. Paul Wylleman is the current President of FEPSAC, serving on its Managing Council since 1999. Though based on official documents and cited references, the views expressed in this article represent the personal views of the authors.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the definition of the term ‘sport psychology’ in FEPSAC (1995) Position Statement #1, and taking into account the terminology in various European languages and cultures, the term sport psychology is used to characterise psychologically based approaches to all sort of sport, exercise, physical activity or culture, including physical education, APA and other areas.

psychology (e.g., Brewer & Van Raalte, 2002; Cox, Qiu, & Liu, 1993; Weinberg & Gould, 2003). This restricted view neglects that psychological questions concerning sport, physical activity and physical education were treated widely in Europe, for example, in the tradition of Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, as well as in France, Italy and Hungary (Bäumler, 2002; Kunath, 2003; Nitsch, Gabler, & Singer, 2000), resulting in a considerable number of publications between 1894 and 1900. These covered themes such as personality and character development, the relation between physical strain and mental performance in schools, pathological and psychohygienic effects of physical activity, and contributions on training and competition. However, all these contributions, though partially empirical and of high theoretical importance, were not based on experimental studies, and authors only occasionally worked in the field of sport and physical activity.

The term sport psychology (*psychologie sportive* in French) was seemingly first introduced by Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Olympic Games of the modern era, in 1900 (Nitsch et al., 2000, p. 15). The beginning of the 20th century was characterised by a further differentiation of sport, including the foundation of many international sport federations. The need increased for scientific treatment of evolving questions in sport psychology as well. This initiated a transition from a period of pioneering work to a period of institutionalisation, resulting in the first international congress on sport psychology in 1913 in Lausanne, Switzerland (Comité International Olympique, 1913; see also Kunath, 2003). This conference was initiated and prepared well in advance by de Coubertin. In the same year, his essays in sport psychology were published (de Coubertin, 1913).

World War I interrupted this development, but in 1920 a psycho-technical laboratory was established by Schulte at the German High School for Physical Exercise (DHfL) in Berlin (Kunath, 2003; Nitsch et al., 2000), 5 years before Griffith founded his lab at the University of Illinois in 1925 (Brewer & Van Raalte, 2002). The research in Berlin covered a broad range of themes, including the effects of sport on personality and cognitive performance, as well as psychomotor peculiarities of different sports and skills (Nitsch et al., 2000).

In the Soviet Union, a similar development took place with the establishment by Rudik of a sport psychology research department in 1920 at the State Academy of Physical Culture in Moscow and by Puni in 1929 at the Lesgaft Institute for Physical Culture in the then Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) (Kunath, 2003; Ryba, Stambulova, & Wrisberg, 2005; Stambulova, Wrisberg, & Ryba, 2006).

Economic depression in the thirties and the ideological agnosticism of the Nazi regime resulted in a rapid decline of sport psychology in Germany. World War II left behind a destroyed continent, including sport and scientific infrastructures and organisations, as well as huge economic difficulties (Nitsch et al., 2000). Astonishingly enough, the International Olympic Committee organised a scientific Congress at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Olympic movement in 1944 in Lausanne. On the sport psychology day, 16 papers were presented, and a proceedings book was published after the war in 1947 (*Bureau International de Pédagogie Sportive et Institut Olympique de Lausanne*, 1947). Maybe due to more vital problems in those years, this book hardly gained much attention.

#### *Diversity of theoretical traditions and cultures*

A second aspect is the different psychological backgrounds in European sport psychology. In different major language regions in Europe, such as French, German, Spanish or Russian, diverse cultural and philosophical traditions had evolved. With this background, psychological concepts developed in a differentiated way,

and since only few translations were available in the first half of the last century, exchange remained sparse.

One psychological tradition, the cultural-historical school, theoretically supports this observation. Established in the 1920s, and influenced strongly by the historical materialism of Marx and Engels, the cultural-historical school in Russian psychology (Vygotski, Lurija, Leont'ew) claimed that psychological functions are a result of the cultural and historical development of society, are based on material foundations, and evolve in the course of activity. The conceptions of a subjective internal representation of the external world and higher nervous functions were theoretical contra-positions against a simple reactive understanding of the human being (Kölbl, 2006; Mintz, 1958).

Psychology in France was influenced by different contemporary trends. For example, Ribot established 'scientific', that is experimental, psychology in the tradition of Wundt in the last decennials of the 19th century (Nicolas & Murray, 2000). Others adopted the work of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, psychoanalytical approaches or the traditions of Anglo-American psychology. As a consequence, sport psychology in France developed with a variety of theoretical approaches and methods, still used for approaching the psychological problems emerging in the field of sport (Ripoll et al., n.d.).

Also in Germany, a variety of psychology schools developed. The so called 'traditional approach' of Wundt in Leipzig was diffused widely by many of his students, among whom was Münsterberg who later assisted William James when he established his psychology laboratory in Harvard. But Gestalt psychology also developed with many different views and schools (Berlin, Leipzig, Würzburg), with the field theory of Kurt Lewin becoming one of the most influential ones. The aspect of psychomotor co-ordination and motor control was an important issue in many approaches in the time between the two World Wars and included interdisciplinary research questions and methods (Nitsch et al., 2000).

#### *World War II and its consequences*

After World War II, sport psychology in Europe suffered from a major contraction, but from 1950 new attempts were made, for example, with the first conferences (Rudik, 1958) and books published in the U.S.S.R. (for example, Puni, 1959/1961; Rudik, 1958, 1963) and the first PhD thesis in Germany (for example, Kohl, 1956; Neumann, 1957). Maybe impacting the development of the field even more was the separation into, and co-existence of, two political blocks. Attempts to show superiority of the respective socioeconomical-political system resulted in an instrumentalisation of Olympic sport. Especially the two German states, up until 1964 competing in a unified team at Olympic Games, invested in the development of top level sport. The use of sport psychology for the success of athletes was first established in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), but also the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) started to support sport science with the foundation of the Federal Institute of Sport Science in Cologne (Nitsch et al., 2000). Institutes of physical education and sport science were established at European universities. With growing prosperity and leisure time, the importance of sport as a major societal and economic phenomenon increased in Western European countries, whereas the socialist countries subordinated sport and physical activity to the goal of developing society and the socialist personality (Kunath & Müller, 1972). Despite independent theoretical development of sport psychology in the Eastern and Western parts of Europe, contacts were established at an individual level, and during several national and international meetings and conferences (Kunath, 2003).

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