Defining elite athletes: Issues in the study of expert performance in sport psychology

Christian Swann a, *, Aidan Moran b, David Piggott c

a University of Lincoln, UK
b University College Dublin, Ireland
c Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

ABSTRACT

Objectives: There has been considerable inconsistency and confusion in the definition of elite/expert athletes in sport psychology research, which has implications for studies conducted in this area and for the field as a whole. This study aimed to: (i) critically evaluate the ways in which recent research in sport psychology has defined elite/expert athletes; (ii) explore the rationale for using such athletes; and (iii) evaluate the conclusions that research in this field draws about the nature of expertise.

Design: Conventional systematic review principles were employed to conduct a rigorous search and synthesise findings.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search of SPORTDiscus, Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, and PsycARTICLES was completed in September, 2013 which yielded 91 empirical studies published between 2010 and 2013. The primarily qualitative findings were analysed thematically.

Results: Eight ways of defining elite/expert athletes were identified, ranging from Olympic champions to regional level competitors and those with as little as two years of experience in their sport. Three types of rationale were evident in these studies (i.e., “necessity”, “exploratory” and “superior”); while findings also indicated that some elite athletes are psychologically idiosyncratic and perhaps even dysfunctional in their behaviour. Finally, only 19 of the 91 included studies provided conclusions about the nature of expertise in sport.

Conclusions: This study suggests that the definitions of elite athletes vary on a continuum of validity, and the findings are translated into a taxonomy for classifying expert samples in sport psychology research in the future. Recommendations are provided for researchers in this area.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
clearly, such imprecision in the criteria used to define Olympic champions (e.g., Grant, 2012) have been ascribed to athletes with as little as 10 years of sustained deliberate practice (e.g., Welch & Tschampl, 2012). Similarly, they have been applied in a rather cavalier fashion to such heterogeneous samples as Olympic champions (e.g., Grant & Schepm, 2013), professional performers (Jordet & Ellefink-Gemser, 2012), inter-varsity athletes (e.g., Steiner, Denny, & Stemmle, 2010), members of national squads (Bertollo et al., 2012), and athletes who were simply part of a competitive team (Voss, Kramer, Basak, Prakash, & Roberts, 2010). Clearly, such imprecision in the criteria used to define participants as “expert” athletes threatens the validity of research on expertise in sport. For example, at a theoretical level, it is difficult to draw valid conclusions about expertise from studies in which experts have been defined using significantly different criteria. Unfortunately, the extent of this definitional problem at the heart of expertise research has not yet been investigated systematically. Furthermore, few guidelines are currently available to help researchers define “expertise” as objectively as possible in the study of sport. Against this background of confusion, the present paper attempts to fill three main gaps in the field by providing a review of research that has sampled elite/expert athletes. First, we aimed to analyse, and evaluate the validity of, the definitions used by researchers studying such participants. Second, we aimed to explore the rationale provided by the authors of these studies for employing elite/expert athlete samples. This information is crucial in determining the extent to which these studies sought to increase theoretical understanding of expertise. Thus our third aim was to explore the general theoretical conclusions that have been drawn about expertise from research with these athletes.

Method

Development of search strategy

Our review used conventional systematic review principles in order to ensure the rigorous selection of studies based on replicable criteria (cf. Centre for Reviews and Dissemination [CRD], 2009; Smith, 2010). To begin, a list of key words was trialled in a preliminary search on the SPORTDiscus database, and the findings from this exploratory search were reviewed so that the most efficient and effective search terms could be identified. The main focus of this review was definitions relating to elite or expert athletes, and therefore we primarily sought to retrieve studies which explicitly used these terms. Other relevant terms (e.g., “skilled” or “experienced”) were initially trialled but combining these with elite/expert produced either an excessively high (over 280,000) or overly restrictive (just 300) number of possible inclusions, and therefore the terms elite/expert were prioritised. Furthermore, this review was primarily concerned with sport psychology research, but to capture studies from overlapping areas (such as motor control/performance and skill acquisition) we also included cognitive psychology and neuroscience in the search. The trialling process identified a number of irrelevant terms that were designated as ‘limiters’ to be removed from the final results. The list of search terms employed was:

(elite OR expert*) AND athlete* AND sport AND (psychology OR neuroscience)

NOT (adolescent OR youth OR junior OR review)

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Inclusion/exclusion criteria were employed to ensure that the boundaries of the review were clearly defined, and that the search strategy would identify all literature relevant to the aims of the review (CRD, 2009; Smith, 2010), while also keeping the number of inclusions manageable (which we deemed to be less than 100). The studies included in this review needed to be: (i) peer-reviewed research studies published in the English language; (ii) published (either in paper or online) between 2010 and September, 2013 when the formal search was finalised; (iii) original empirical, primary evidence/data; (iv) concerned primarily with either sport psychology or cognitive psychology/neuroscience (e.g., published in journals in these fields); (v) ones that explicitly described their sample as “elite” or “expert” in either the title or abstract (e.g., studies were excluded if they mentioned expertise but described their sample as “skilled” instead); (vi) ones that explicitly referred to elite athletes, and not coaches, referees, parents, or panels; (vii) ones that involved sporting activities as defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science and Medicine (Kent, 2006); (viii) ones that did not refer to young/junior, or adolescent elite athletes in the title, abstract or full-text (unless they also used, and provided data about, elite athletes in their sample); and (ix) as a final measure to help reduce the number of returns towards the ‘manageable’ threshold, all included studies needed to be published in journals with an impact factor.

Search returns

The search process was finalised on the 14th of September, 2013, and initially returned 731 potentially relevant studies. After duplicates and studies not published in English were removed, the titles and abstracts of the remaining potential targets were assessed for relevance. This step reduced the potential target papers to 240 articles. Another 80 papers were removed because they were not published in journals with an impact factor. Full-text copies were then obtained for the remaining 160 studies, after which a further 69 were excluded either because: (a) they stated in-text that they used young/junior athletes; (b) they were not sufficiently focused on psychology; or (c) they did not explicitly describe their sample.
دریافت فوری
متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات