



Under the big top: An exploratory analysis of psychological factors influencing circus performers



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ABSTRACT

There is a substantial body of literature addressing psychological experiences of performers in sport domains; however, there is a paucity of literature exploring the psychological experiences of performers in other domains, specifically circus arts. This study was designed to be an exploratory investigation of the mental challenges faced by circus performers as well as mental strengths that contribute to performance excellence. The researchers hoped to gain: (a) a general insight into the mental side of circus arts, (b) insight into differences between the mental side of circus arts and sports/performing arts, and (c) insight into the differences that might exist amongst specific disciplines within circus arts. Participants ($n = 4$) consisted of 2 aerialists and 2 clowns/mimes. Participants each engaged in a 30–60 min semi-structured interview about the mental aspects of practice and performance. Results showed that mental skills such as confidence, concentration, energy management, and emotional management are considered integral to success in circus arts. Results also reflected differences that exist between circus and sport domains, such as the ability to embody emotions and connect with the audience. Future research should explore phenomena more systematically as well as continue to examine the differences that exist between circus arts and other performance domains.

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1. Introduction

Sport and performance psychology (SPP) has gained popularity among both professional and amateur sports as a way to enhance performance and gain a competitive edge. It has also found its place in the domains of business, military, and performing arts, though it is still considerably new to these areas (Harmison, 2011; Hays, 2002; Hays, 2009; Jones, 2002; Williams, Ericsson, Ward, & Eccles, 2008). There is a large and growing body of literature addressing the psychological experiences of performers in sports and performing arts domains; however, there is a paucity of literature exploring the psychological experiences of performers in other domains where the use of these services is growing. One such domain is circus arts. Circus arts call for the blending of athleticism and art (Filho, Aubertin, & Petiot, 2016; Ménard & Hallé, 2014). While existing literature on athletes and performing artists provides a strong foundation for service delivery, the blending of domains creates specific pressures that warrant further study.

1.1. Sports and performing arts

Researchers have accumulated an impressive body of literature to help understand the mental skills associated with performance excellence in sports (Williams et al., 2008). As the field has grown, research has expanded to study performing arts as well. Many of the major psychological components shown to affect performance in sports also affect that of performing artists (Hays & Brown, 2002). These are skills such as dealing with performance anxiety, coping with pressure, emotion regulation, building and maintaining confidence, motivation, commitment and concentration (Gilson, 2010; Hamilton & Robson, 2006; Hays, 2002; Hays, 2009; Krane & Williams, 2006; Nordin-Bates, 2012; Vealey & Chase, 2008; Taylor & Taylor, 1995). Just as each sport presents specific pressures, each performing art does as well. This is what creates the differences in the applications of the same mental skills. Several books have been published aiming to provide guidance to SPP professionals working with performing arts populations, such as *The psychology of dance* (Taylor & Taylor, 1995), *You're on! Consulting for peak performance* (Hays & Brown, 2002), and *Performance psychology in action* (Hays, 2009). These texts provide concrete examples of incorporating intervention strategies and consulting approaches from the sport domain into work with performing artists while taking into consideration the discipline-specific mental challenges faced

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and strengths required for success in these environments. Since circus arts are a combination of acrobatic sports and performing arts, much of the literature on the experiences of athletes and performing artists can be applied to gain a basic understanding of the psychological environment.

1.2. Mental skills in circus arts similar to sport and performing arts

Many psychological experiences from sports and performing arts also appear in the circus environment. M. Hallé, senior performance psychologist for Cirque du Soleil, and J. F. Ménard, SPP consultant for Cirque du Soleil, provide insight into the culture of circus arts based on their experiences. Ménard & Hallé, (2014) observed that many circus artists who come from elite sports backgrounds and have mastered the basic mental skills necessary for performance success. Hallé noted in an interview that working with fear issues and understanding and developing confidence are essential in circus arts (American Psychological Association, 2012). A recent study conducted by Hallé and Shrier (2011) on psychological risk factors affecting injury in circus artists demonstrated the importance of situation-specific confidence (self-efficacy) in this domain. Results showed that aerial artists with high self-efficacy were almost half as likely to become injured as those who exhibited low self-efficacy. Filho et al. (2016) also discussed the effect of fear of injury on aerialists' ability to focus and noted the helpfulness of pre-performance routines in controlling attention. This relationship with fear is similar to that reported in the literature by gymnasts and athletes from other high risk and extreme sports (Brymer & Oades, 2008; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; Chase, Magyar, & Drake, 2005). Studies on circus artists also point to the importance of mental skills related to dealing with pressure, performance anxiety, and emotion control in the circus arts domain (Filho et al., 2016; Hallé & Shrier, 2011). Emotional awareness is especially important in the area of clowning/miming as it utilizes methods of physical acting, ways of storytelling and conveying emotions through physical means. While some skills might be more salient in certain environments, these are not unfamiliar demands for athletes or performing artists to encounter.

1.3. Unique factors in circus arts

While this demonstrates some similarities between the mental aspects of sports, performing arts, and circus arts, there are also examples of domain-specific mental challenges from circus arts. According to Ménard and Hallé (2014), the transfer of skills from sports to circus is an important element of focus for performance success, as is the transfer of identity between these domains. Circus acts often require collaboration with other artists. With many artists transitioning from individual sports such as gymnastics and diving, sharing the stage and the spotlight might present a challenge. Additionally, many new circus artists need to develop their artistic identity, learning how to act, dance, put on makeup, and express their emotions on stage (Filho et al., 2016; Ménard & Hallé, 2014). Transitioning from the structured world of sports to the creative process of circus arts might present a challenge, and it is important to excellence as a circus artist that individuals are able to make this mental and physical transition (American Psychological Association, 2012; Clay, 2011; Filho et al., 2016; J. F. Ménard, personal communication, March 22, 2013; Ménard & Hallé, 2014).

Circus arts call for engagement of the audience rather than impressing judges or defeating the competition. According to the experts in the psychology of circus arts, this is a different mentality than a competitive mindset and requires "adaptability and flexibility" on behalf of the performer in order to successfully achieve this relationship with themselves and the audience (Filho et al., 2016;

J. F. Ménard, personal communication, March 22, 2013; Ménard & Hallé, 2014). The role of the audience has been discussed in theater literature, but it has not addressed by SPP, thus presenting a novel concept (Hamilton, 2007). Filho et al. (2016) discuss pressure from the audience as experienced by clowns and suggested utilizing attention control strategies such as mindfulness to mediate this perceived pressure.

Another difference between sport and circus environments like that of Cirque du Soleil and the National Circus School is the international environment. Performers need to overcome language barriers and develop cross-cultural sensitivity in order to communicate and develop trust with other artists, as do SPP professionals (Filho et al., 2016; Ménard & Hallé, 2014). In high-level, multi-show circuses like Cirque du Soleil, artists also need to adapt to performing more often than they train. Cirque du Soleil artists perform 400 or more shows per year, which is quite different from a sport environment where athletes train much more often than they perform (J. F. Ménard, personal communication, March 22, 2013; Ménard & Hallé, 2014). Artists could also perform in a variety of settings (big top, theater, arena, outdoors), each of which presenting its own sets of challenges to prepare for (Ménard & Hallé, 2014). Currently, the only literature on the use of SPP with circus populations is based on experiences with Cirque du Soleil and the National Circus School (Filho et al., 2016; Hallé & Shrier, 2011; Ménard & Hallé, 2014). These are professional programs that attract and develop high-level circus artists. There are many circus artists that train and perform in different environments than Cirque du Soleil and the National Circus School, such as artists who perform for festivals, live music, and/or private events. Each setting presents different challenges, and it is essential to the understanding of this population that the experiences of all calibers of circus artists be studied.

1.4. Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore psychological demands experienced by circus performers in order to expand the literature, encourage the expansion of the application of SPP, and contribute to the effectiveness of delivering SPP services to circus artists. This study was designed to be an exploratory investigation of the mental challenges faced by circus performers as well as mental strengths contributing to performance excellence in this domain. By interviewing individual circus performers from the domains of clowning (including mimes and clowns) and aerial arts, we hope to gain: (a) a general insight into the mental side of circus arts, (b) insight into differences between the mental side of circus arts and sports/performing arts, and (c) insight into the differences that might exist amongst specific disciplines within circus arts.

2. Materials and method

2.1. Participants

Participants were purposively sampled from professional connections at circus centers in the United States. All participants were required to be either aerialists or clowns/mimes, have two or more years of experience performing in their domain, and involved as a performer at the time of this study. Aerialists were chosen because they represent the risky, acrobatic side of circus arts, and clowns/mimes were chosen because they represent the performing arts side through improvisational theater and physical acting. Out of twelve potential participants, a total of four participants expressed interested and met the criteria for this study (see Table 1 for demographic information). Circus artists included: aerialists ($n=2$), referred to respectively as A1 and A2, and clowns/mimes

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