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THE AGGRESSIVE RESPONSE AS A DEFENCE MECHANISM
ON THE BASKETBALL COURT

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Abstract

Aggressive behaviour is often noticed during sports competition. Athletes tend to act out, in their attempt to access all their resources for the game, for the competition, in their attempt to win. Athletes' focus is on the stake of the game and they act following their aim in the game. The purpose of our research work is to analyse the aggressive response of a former basketball player and his reasons behind this behaviour on and outside of the basketball court. We were interested in the internal mechanisms that had led to aggressive behaviour during his career. Nowadays, he is a 68-years-old basketball coach with a long history of suspensions as both an athlete and coach. The research methods used were the observation, the interview and the case study. The structured interview took place in August 2017 and focused on the moments prior to his aggressive responses during the games, competitions or training sessions. We tried to understand his particular perspective on certain moments and the difficult relationships with the coach and other players. The results of the case study led us to a better understanding of the fragile balance between the athletes' will for wining and overstepping the roadblocks along the way to the end of the game. During the game, the athletes need to use all their resources, all their strength in their attempt to win.

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1. Introduction

Aggressive behaviour is a response to some factors or events that can have adaptive or negative consequences. Aggressive response can be understood as a hostile interaction disavowed by the social perception and ethical standards. In human interactions, one of the main causes of aggressive behaviour is identified as frustration in limiting the achievement of goals. For the athletes reaching for their goals, it is the main drive during training or competitions. During competitions, the athletes or the sport teams reach for a goal that cannot be shared. In sports competitions reaching for the goals that are mainly related to prestige, it is a strongly-motivated emotional “roller coaster”. Each sports event brings anxiety, fear, anger, joy, excitement and so on. In our attempt to understand aggressive behaviour, we find that, among other causes, can be the poor coping mechanisms in handling powerful emotions related to different social interactions such as: athlete-coach, athlete-peers or athlete-referees etc., or to the stake of the game.

The emotional charge of the athletes during competitions is a well-known fact. So, analysing the behavioural aspects of the athletes, we analyse their defence mechanisms as part of a better understanding of the aggressive behaviour.

Defence mechanisms are meant to protect the person or to help him/her to adapt to certain stimuli from the environment. The concept of defence mechanism comes from the psychoanalytic theory and refers to internal strategies created by the unconscious to manipulate, deny or modify the facts in order to protect the person from various emotions that cannot be fully understood or accepted. Behaviours, emotions, thoughts that are unpleasant or unacceptable are modified by the defence mechanisms like denial, projection, repression, passive aggressive and acting out (Vaillant, 2000).

2. Problem Statement

2.1. The role of defence mechanisms in managing emotionally challenging events

Sports come with a long series of aggressive responses on or outside of the court. There are several theories that explain and highlight the main characteristics of aggressive behaviour. The psychoanalytic theory defines the libido as a fundamental drive (Freud, 2010) and, in 1908, Alfred Adler describes the drive of aggression as innate and instinctual (Adler, 2010). Later on, in 2000, Vaillant describes the four levels of the defence mechanisms: pathological (delusional projection, conversion, denial splitting and distortion), immature (acting out, fantasy, idealisation, passive aggression, projection and somatisation), neurotic (displacement, hypochondriasis, dissociation, isolation, intellectualisation, rationalisation, regression, repression and withdrawal) and mature (altruism, anticipation, humour, identification, introjections, sublimation and thought suppression). Referring to the aggressive response, we placed it on the second level of the defence mechanisms. Such defence mechanisms have the purpose to decrease the distress and anxiety that are determined by the actions and behaviours of others or by the uncomfortable reality. Such defence mechanisms are present in adults when they face a harsh situation and cannot deal with it. Each defence has certain proprieties. The defence mechanisms mitigate the painful impact of emotions or the cognitive disagreement (Vaillant, 1977), they are unconscious or involuntary and, for the person, are invisible (they are obvious for the researcher, therapist or other persons). The defence mechanisms keep the painful thoughts and feelings out of awareness. An important role of the defence mechanisms is underlined by Cooper (2002) and Fenichel (1945), that of preserving self-esteem and

maintaining self-organization. In different ways, the defence mechanisms have this characteristic of self-protecting the individual in a poorer or better adaptive way.

Anna Freud (2002) brings her contributions to the concept and classification of defence mechanisms; and these contributions helped underlining the ego's functions.

Nowadays, researchers and therapists talk about the coping mechanisms. There is a difference between coping and defence mechanisms (Craemer, 1998, 2000), which needs to be taken into account (Table 01).

Table 01. The difference between coping and defence mechanisms, according to Craemer (1998)

Feature		
Coping process	Defence mechanisms	Difference
Conscious	Unconscious	Critical
Used intentionally	Nonintentional	Critical
Situationally determined	Dispositional	Not a critical difference; a matter of emphasis
Nonhierarchically	Hierarchical	Not a critical difference; a matter of emphasis
Associated with normality	Associated with pathology	No difference when self-report and context are controlled

2.2. Aggressive response in sports

Quite often, the media provides information about different aggressive behaviours during sports competitions that involve fans, athletes, coaches, referees etc. Aggressive behaviours are morally disapproved by the social standards of the communities. There are different theories that provide understanding of aggressive behaviours. The first theory was the psychoanalytic one (Freud, 2005). This theory explains the main drives involved in human development and behaviour, that is the drive of aggression (Thanatos) and the drive of pleasure (Eros). Thanatos involves destructive energy that expresses in the interaction with the others, but can have a self-destructive direction as well. Eros and Thanatos try constantly to express themselves seeking constant satisfaction, and both of them oppose one another. While the aggressive drive opposes Eros, in the same time supports it in the pursuit of satisfaction (Kohut, 2016).

The theory on aggression of Albert Bandura (1973) has a social perspective – a social learning theory. His theory emphasises that aggressive behaviour is learned by observing and imitating others. Learning is a cognitive process that can be reinforced by rewards or desisted by punishments. According to this theory, aggression is learned by observation and by the direct experience of aggressive behaviours that are approved or perceived as approved.

There is a well-known theory called the frustration-aggression-displacement theory that explains the aggressive response given by a person as a result of blocking his/her attempt to reach certain goals. This obstruction determines frustration, which motivates the person to respond aggressively (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). In sports, frustration represents the main cause for aggression and is linked to the achievement of power or dominance, prestige, getting self-recognition and preserving self-esteem etc. (Tomar & Singh, 2012). The level of aggression is differently tolerated according to the sports standards. In some sports, aggressive acts are accepted within the rules (American football, boxing and

wrestling), in other sports, the perception of aggressive acts is subjective and depends on the officials, team members and others (basketball, handball, water polo) (Cratty, 1983).

In basketball, aggressive players, such as defensive players, shooting guards or point guards, are appreciated for their ability to act decisively for the stake of the game. Competitive sports involve a certain degree of hostility between the athletes, and aggressive acts are accepted to a certain degree which varies from sport to sport (Tomar & Singh, 2012). Young or mature, all athletes face challenges during the competition and face disruptive events where aggressive behaviours can be noticed.

One protective factor of the athlete during a competition is the perceived social support that refers to one's possible access to the social and emotional support, which is a subjective judgement and expectation for help from the coach and teammates. This protective factor provides better emotional regulation and can decrease the aggressive potential response during stressful events like competitions.

3. Research Questions

Which is the internal dynamics of the aggressive response related to a trigger? Is the penalty a factor in a behaviour change?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our research work is to analyse the aggressive response of a former basketball player and his reasons behind this behaviour on and outside of the basketball court. We were interested in the internal mechanisms that had led to aggressive behaviour during his career. Nowadays, he is a 68-years-old basketball coach with a long history of suspensions as both an athlete and coach.

5. Research Methods

The research methods used were: the observation and the interview method, which led to a case study.

The case study (Yin, 2005) is a method that organizes and brings to the light information about the interviewee's experience and the personal perception and emotions involved in the basketball training, player-coach relationship and sports competition events during the 60's and 70's.

The case study starts with information provided by the answers to relevant questions regarding the emotional challenges linked to the different facts during his career as a basketball player and a basketball coach.

This case study reflects in a different light the career experience of a former basketball player and provides a new perspective on the defence mechanisms and aggressive behaviour in sports. It allowed us to analyse a complex professional career with ups and downs. His professional career has lasted for over 40 years. This case study is important in understanding the aggressive response to various stressful aspects and the emotional coping mechanisms during and after the sports competitions.

This interview was focused on a former basketball player and took place in August 2017, at the sports club's office where he has been working for more than 20 years. Nowadays, he is a head coach for the local professional male basketball team. The interviewee is a 68-years-old former professional basketball player. His sports performance was placed at the national and European levels. He was

interviewed, following two main directions, on: the aggressive response and the particular context that triggered him to act out; the management of the consequences of his aggressive behaviour that involved periods of suspensions as both a basketball player and a basketball coach. He was asked if these situations affected his sports career, about his relations and social status in the community etc.

The collected data helped us create a case study reflecting a deeper understanding of the defence mechanisms in athletes. His personal development and his career become a creative and fulfilling process.

Observation allowed us to collect additional information about the emotional charge of different events reported by the interviewee. Direct contact between the researcher and the coach allowed the researcher to notice the nonverbal aspects of communication and provided us with a better understanding of the experience (Atkinson, 2006).

6. Findings

The information for this study is provided in an interview given by a former basketball player and actual coach of a men's professional basketball team. His career has lasted for over 40 years and, during this period of time, he has faced various suspensions as both a player and a coach.

Each moment of suspension is related to an aggressive response that he has, at a certain time, to different situations recounted by him in the interview. All these events take place during sports competitions. As a characteristic of his personality, he describes himself as a calm, reasonable and rational human being, but with a temper when put in the middle of a conflict. For the interviewee, the basketball competitions are considered to be a "circus show" or "a play" – a place where people come to see a show in the 60's and 70's. So, the "artist" is the basketball player. Losing a game involves the blockage or a loss in his attempt of reaching a goal or fulfilling a need and a desire. Thus, for the former professional basketball player, the moment when his team loses a game is the moment when his pursuit for goals is blocked. The strong frustration, anger, anxiety are too hard to handle, so he acts out. Vaillant (2000) considers this response to be an immature defence mechanism that involves certain social and professional consequences. Socially, his behaviour is considered immoral and disavowed, and the relationships with his opponents are weakened by the conflicts generated by the loss. Professionally, he is suspended for longer or shorter periods of time: one season, Romanian Men's Basketball Cup, up to a couple of years. In the same time, his relationships with his teammates and coach are weakened by his behaviour and the effects of suspensions. He feels guilty and ashamed for these situations, so, during the longest suspension period, he decides to leave his hometown and get a job outside the country.

The causes recounted to the interviewer are related to the triggers of athletes' behaviour. They are linked to: criticism, ironic comments, amplification of the loss after games, unfair refereeing etc. These triggers are connected to the frustration-aggressive behaviour relationship and his defences are related to his attempt to protect his prestige and self-esteem, despite the fact that, at the time, he was facing the loss, the failure together with all the emotions involved by these events. Defences work to keep the mind away from the full awareness of unbearable thoughts and feelings; so, for the athlete, acting out is a way of protecting himself from the harsh reality of the loss.

In the interview, we could not identify any supportive relationships for the basketball player. He describes himself all alone and his social relations are pretty weak. So, in any given circumstances, his

allies are missing and he relies on himself. The resilient response is missing from the former basketball player's behaviour. One important element that we could identify in the outcomes, after the loss of the game, is the lack of a preferential relationship with another adult from his work environment. The secure attachment bond is important in adults, as well as in children (Garmezy, 1991). Studies show that, in resilient children, it has been identified at least one healthy attachment or secure attachment. For adult athletes, one significant bond to a peer is consistent with resilient outcomes. The loss of a competition is an adverse situation for an athlete. Some of the athletes manage to overcome adversity and recover to change and hazards, but our interviewee has important challenges in the positive adaptation to stress and disruptive events. So, during the interview, he could not identify any significant relationship with a peer during his sports career.

One of the most serious problems, a consequence of his misbehaviour, was a suspension that lasted for over 2 years and was the milestone for the former basketball player. This suspension takes place during the Communist regime, after the basketball player gets involved in an altercation with his coach and is forced to leave the basketball club for a while. This situation makes him look for a job elsewhere. So, he leaves his club, community, family and hometown to work on a ship abroad, as a cook. Dealing with a suspension, he cannot be a part of the "theatre" in the basketball court anymore, which is why he tries to protect himself by leaving the whole situation behind. But this withdrawal makes us understand that we can identify in his behaviour another type of defence mechanisms – the neurotic one (Vaillant, 1977). Withdrawal is a severe form of defence and involves isolation and taking distance from the painful thought and emotions. This situation is one of the kind and we cannot find any similar events in his sports career. Finally, after a couple of years, he comes back to his hometown and his beloved basketball team. He plays for the same basketball team up to the end of his sports career. From that point on, he becomes the head coach of the same basketball team for which he has played in the past.

As a coach, the former athlete continues to protect himself in the same way and faces the same consequences. In the second part of his career, the conflicts are more orientated towards the rules, regulation standards and the role of the referees. But analysing the situations, we understand that the dominant defence mechanisms are the same – acting out. These defences help the interviewee to release tension and handle in his own way the unbearable reality.

7. Conclusion

The results of the case study led us to a better understanding of the fragile balance between the athlete's will for winning and overstepping the roadblocks along the way to the end of the game. During the competition, the athletes need to use all their resources, all their strength in their attempt to win.

The results of the study have led to the idea that, in his/her attempt to win, sometimes the roadblocks keep the athlete away from getting the prestige that he/she pursues and deserves.

Aggressive responses given by the interviewee along his career reflect the functioning of a certain level of defence mechanisms, and this kind of behaviour has not changed much during his professional path. So, to understand the relationship between trigger-frustration-aggression-acting-out, dealing with the consequences or punishments for the aggressive response did not bring a significant change in his behaviour; therefore, we cannot conclude that the social learning process has been effective in this case.

We are inclined to believe that the aggressive response is the expression of an internal mechanism that needs a lot of understanding, support and therapy for a significant change. For each person, an aggressive response to an aversive event may have a different and personal significance, which is why a direct and clinical understanding of each case is needed. For each athlete, aggressive behaviour has a significance that can be well understood by the teammates and coach, and this requires a particular understanding of the athlete, with his/her weaknesses and strengths.

During the 60's and 70's, this kind of personal approach to a basketball player was not common at all, and the interviewee did not have the opportunity to understand himself and to be better understood by the others: peers, teammates, coach etc. So, at the end, he details some frustrating events and the unpleasant consequences that followed.

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this study and should be considered as main authors.

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