

Considerations on the cathartic role of physical activities

Considerazioni sul ruolo catartico delle attività fisiche

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Abstract

Physical activities influence positively the individual's personality from a cognitive perspective; information assessment will be facilitated using socializing agents, while physical development will modify significantly the increase in self-esteem. Whereas sport cannot be considered the "repair shop" of (wrong) social acts, it benefits from the necessary instruments for fighting against violence and for social integration when it is practiced. The means through which it provides young people with the possibility of relaxing physically, of dissolving spiritual tensions and of setting them away from the aggression facts are simplified by those that influence the emergence of conflicts. Sport regarded as a microcosm is a positive space endowed with favouring valences in the maintenance of social contacts and in the cohesion of groups; however, when free time is used exclusively in disorganized and unstructured contexts, young people are tempted to accept aggressiveness and to prepare to use it at an extreme level.

This investigative approach aims to identify cathartic differences, as a result of practicing sport, on two groups of students.

Le attività fisiche influenzano positivamente la personalità dell'individuo dal punto di vista cognitivo; facilitando la relazione sociale utilizzando agenti di socializzazione, mentre lo sviluppo fisico altera in modo significativo l'aumento della stima di sé. Considerando che lo sport non può essere considerato l'"officina" di (sbagliato) atti sociali, questo gode degli strumenti necessari per la lotta contro la violenza e per l'integrazione sociale quando è praticato correttamente. E un mezzo attraverso il quale si offre ai giovani l'opportunità di rilassarsi fisicamente, per sciogliere le tensioni spirituali e rifiutando le situazioni di potenziale comportamento aggressivo e l'insorgere di conflitti. Sport considerato come un microcosmo è uno spazio positivo per la promozione dei valori nel mantenimento dei contatti sociali e la coesione dei gruppi; Tuttavia, quando il tempo libero viene utilizzato esclusivamente in un contesto disorganizzato e non strutturato, i giovani sono tentati di accettare comportamenti sbagliati.

Questo approccio investigativo è stato progettato per identificare le differenze catartiche, a seguito di pratica sportiva in due gruppi di studenti.

Keywords

Catharsis, Aggressiveness, Physical Activities, Behaviour, Formal Education.

Catarsi, Aggressività, Attività Fisica, Comportamento, Istruzione Formale.

Introduction

Physical activities influence positively the individual's personality from a cognitive perspective; information assessment will be facilitated using socializing agents, while physical development will modify significantly the increase in self-esteem. Whereas sport cannot be considered the "repair shop" of (wrong) social acts, it benefits from the necessary instruments for fighting against violence and for social integration when it is practiced. The means through which it provides young people with the possibility of relaxing physically, of dissolving spiritual tensions and of setting them away from the aggression facts are simplified by those that influence the emergence of conflicts. Sport regarded as a microcosm is a positive space endowed with favouring valences in the maintenance of social contacts and in the cohesion of groups; however, when free time is used exclusively in disorganized and unstructured contexts, young people are tempted to accept aggressiveness and to prepare to use it at an extreme level.

Catharsis appears as a solution to human aggressiveness, thus creating the possibility for individuals to unleash their hatred and accumulated frustrations using substitutive actions meant to reduce emotional tension. According to Lorenz, "the main function of sport today lies in the cathartic discharge of aggressive urge". However, more recent research focusing on proving the cathartic effect of violent images upon individuals (Baron, Byrne, 2000 *apud* P. Iluț, 2004) has concluded that their role is to decrease the intensity of the urge, to redirect destructive energy for a little while; thus, aggressiveness will inevitably emerge.

Sport and physical activity provide to social actors, through their dimensions, the opportunity of assuming various roles, of acquiring new social skills (tolerance, respect towards the others), of adjusting to the team's goal (through co-operation, cohesion) and of becoming active through the performances of the others. It also represents a defined social field; it is governed by relatively strict rules: there are norms sanctioning non-observance and punishing deviant behaviours. In this space, people learn to take on responsibilities, to respect the laws, to accept each other, to seek consensus, to volunteer for solving tasks (D. Tarschys – Council of Europe). Sports phenomenon is a factor that contributes to the education of social actors; we cannot separate culture from society, because they live in perfect symbiosis and they complete each other; together, they influence the individual. Social actors adapt to their society and culture. Each society and culture has a social model social that shapes to a certain extent the conduct of its individuals. In social fields, one may identify certain influences that alter the social actor depending on the environment in conformity with the idiosyncratic characteristics of the individual. Sport is an activity that can engage social behaviour because it is governed by relatively strict rules: there are norms sanctioning non-observance and punishing deviant behaviours.

The notion of fair play is vital in this context: one cannot discuss education and socialization without the promotion of moral features, because the specific approaches in the learning process may have positive effects upon the fair-play characteristic and without the promotion of a prosocial behaviour.

The purpose of the investigative endeavour is to identify the cathartic role of sport, through motor activity practitioners and non-practitioners: active individuals in the sports field, (the students of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport) and social actors with low motor activity, (students in technical specialties).

1. Research objective

The identification of differences between the subjects in terms of aggressiveness level, related to practicing/ not practicing motor activities, with a cathartic effect upon social behaviour.

2. Research hypothesis

There are differences between the subjects of the groups according to independent variables: gender and faculty, in terms of aggressiveness levels (with the four dimensions included: physical aggressiveness, verbal aggressiveness, hostility and annoyance).

3. Research sample

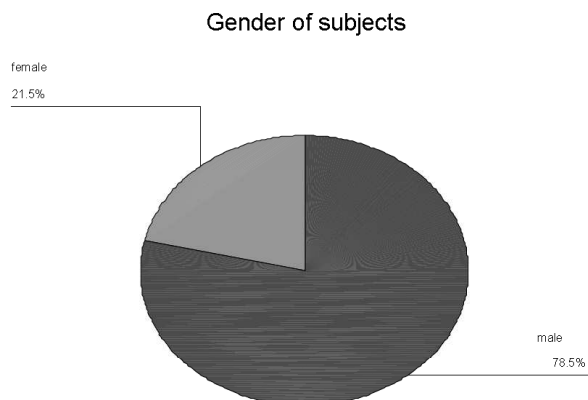
This study was conducted on a sample of 502 students within the faculties of Physical Education and Sport, “Al. I. Cuza” University Iași and Automatic Control and Computer Science, “Gh. Asachi” University Iași.

4. Research sample

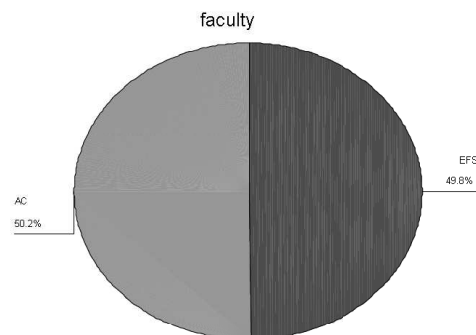
The research comprised the subjects of study I (N=502), within the faculties of Physical Education and Sport [EFS], “Al. I. Cuza” University Iași and Automatic Control and Computer Science [AC], “Gh. Asachi” University Iași. For the *faculty* variable, subjects were selected randomly; the only thing that mattered was their number.

Independent variables		Number of subjects	Relative frequency
Gender of subjects	Male	394	78.5%
	Female	108	21.5%
Faculty	EFS	250	49.8%
Faculty	AC	252	50.2%

Table 1. Independent variables of the study



Graph 1. Research sample by *gender* variable



Graph 2. Research sample by *faculty* variable

Independent variables: faculty (EFS, AC), gender (male, female). Annex 1

5. Variables

Dependent variables – aggressiveness dimensions:

- **physical aggressiveness;**
- **verbal aggressiveness;**
- **hostility;**
- **annoyance / (anger).**

Independent variables:

- **faculty** – Physical Education and Sport, Automatic Control and Computer Science;
- **gender of subjects** – male, female;

6. Procedure

The questionnaire was applied during the seminar hours of the *Handball* discipline (Faculty de Physical Education and Sport), and during the seminar hours of the *Physical Education and Sport* discipline (Automatic Control and Computer Science), in groups of 30 subjects each. Subjects were ensured that the questionnaire would be confidential and they were asked to fill out the questionnaire from a personal perspective.

7. Method

We also applied the aggressiveness questionnaire by Buss and Perry (1992). The aggressiveness scale contains four dimensions: physical aggressiveness, verbal aggressiveness, annoyance / *anger* and hostility. The total score for aggressiveness is represented by the sum of these factors, (questions with an asterisk are scored reversely).

Dimensions:

- physical aggressiveness: 2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 16*, 22, 25, 29;
- verbal aggressiveness: 4, 6, 14, 21, 27;
- annoyance: 1, 9*, 12, 18, 19, 23, 28;
- hostility 3, 7, 10, 15, 17, 20, 24, 26;

The scale comprised 29 statements. In the pre-testing phase, the questionnaire was applied to 50 subjects (20 students within the Faculty of Automatic Control and Computer Science and 30 students within the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport); Alpha Cronbach's coefficient of internal consistency for the items was 0.84. The value of internal consistency index demonstrates that the scale measures indeed what we have proposed.

8. Results

8.1 Faculty variable

For the *faculty* variable, after applying the t test for independent samples, the statistical data obtained showed no significant differences between the subjects of the two groups. The results are illustrated in the table below:

	Faculty	N	Means	t	Df	P
Hostility	EFS	250	22.45	0.675	500	0.500
	AC	252	22.80			
Physical aggressiveness	EFS	250	22.51	0.852	500	0.395
	AC	252	23.05			
Verbal aggressiveness	EFS	250	16.05	0.164	500	0.870
	AC	252	16.11			
Annoyance	EFS	250	17.71	0.014	500	0.989
	AC	252	178.71			

Table 2. Means, t grades and threshold levels for aggressiveness dimensions

Our hypothesis was not confirmed depending on the independent variable of *faculty*, because no significant differences were found between the two groups of this variable concerning the four dimensions of aggressiveness: hostility, verbal aggressiveness, physical aggressiveness and annoyance / anger. In other words, regarding the research sample overall, similar levels of subjects' aggressiveness were found.

8.2 The *gender* variable

Male subjects assess the four components of aggressiveness differently from female subjects. We applied the t test for independent samples and the statistical data obtained showed that only concerning factor 4, namely annoyance, no significant differences were found between the subjects of the two groups. The results are illustrated in the table below (Table 3).

	Gen	N	Means	t	Df	P
Hostility	M	394	22.22	2.985	500	0.003*
	F	108	24.11			
Physical aggressiveness	M	394	23.36	3.538	500	0.000*
	F	108	20.68			
Verbal aggressiveness	M	394	15.73	3.717	500	0.000*
	F	108	17.34			
Annoyance	M	394	17.63	0.664	500	0.507
	F	108	17.99			

* statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 3. Means, t grades and threshold levels for aggressiveness dimensions

Therefore, our hypothesis was confirmed for three of the four dimensions of aggressiveness (*gender* variable), as follows:

- Regarding hostility, statistical data show significant differences of scores obtained for this dimension between men and women: female subjects score higher than male subjects do. In other words, it may be suggested that women have significantly higher hostility level than men.
- Concerning physical aggressiveness, significant differences indicate higher scores obtained by men compared to women. In this respect, it can be stated that males have higher physical aggressiveness than women do.
- As for verbal aggressiveness, women score higher than men do. In other words, women are significantly more verbally aggressive than men are.
- In terms of annoyance, both men and women obtained similar scores.

The data obtained stand to explain the way men tend to solve conflicts: they prefer using physical, not verbal violence. Female subjects scored higher in the dimensions of verbal violence and hostility, which highlights their strategy for releasing piled-up tensions.

Conclusions

Through his behaviour and attitude, man reflects accurately the environments he lives in and the reality he perceives. This feature is related to the phenomenon of adaptability, characteristic to all living things – a way of surviving in the fight for existence, of submitting to the rigours of nature, (which demands the individual to be in balance in the environment). In a violent world, aggressive behaviour is an adaptation, a consequence of environmental influence. R. Boudon (1997) writes that any social phenomenon, irrespective of its nature, is the result of individual actions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. The aforementioned aspects suggest that aggressiveness and then violence may represent strategies on releasing piled-up tensions.

The study on the cathartic role of motor activities mirrors the way male social actors solve a tense situation, namely using physical violence. No significant differences were found concerning the *faculty* variable; furthermore, no mediating role was demonstrated for the effort practiced with a specific purpose and increased intensity or rational rhythmicity.

The behaviour of social actors – in terms of responses to external stimuli or internal impulses – adjusts to the specifics of the event, to the fulfilment of needs, to the personality type, while catharsis stands to explain the directing of destructive elements towards an immediate purpose. However, upon attaining the said purpose, the releasing role of a mobilizing, constructive purpose is replaced by the use of all individual resources for satisfying another need.

Aggressiveness and violence are expressions of the internal states of social actors. Violence emerges when the capacity of communicating is blocked, needs are hard to fulfil and aggressiveness fails to be filtered by reason.

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Annex 1. Independent variables

Gender of subjects

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	394	78.5	78.5	78.5
	Female	108	21.5	21.5	100.0
	Total	502	100.0	100.0	

Faculty

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	EFS	250	49.8	49.8	49.8
	AC	252	50.2	50.2	100.0
	Total	502	100.0	100.0	