

Providing Clarity on Anger & Violence in Sports

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Despite there being no question about the fact that emotion has significant impact on athletes, anger is an emotion that has been underexplored. Definitions of anger that have permeated for decades lack pragmatic utility that lend themselves to greater understanding and translation into interventions geared towards performance enhancement and transgression reduction. As such, this paper offers definitions for anger, aggression, hostility and violence that refine older models and are compatible with current treatment models in the field of psychology.

The International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) published a position statement that defined aggression as the infliction of an aversive stimulus, physical, verbal or gesture upon one person by another (Tenenbaum, Stewart, Singer, & Duda, 1996). Silva (1978) suggests that an aggressive act in sport is intentional and observable, is committed with the intent to injure, and is personal (the person committing the act is responsible for the consequences). These attempts were progressive at the time and demonstrated an effort to fill a void. There were no definitions established in the sports domain. However, those definitions presented utility problems. First, they offered no meaningful relationship between anger and aggression, thus emotion and behavior blended into each other without an explanation of the differentiation or relationship between them. And second, they held the position that aggression has, at its core, harm to another as its goal. This is an incomplete position that is antithetical to the aggressive mandate that we put on athletes when pursuing their goals.

Further, when aggression was differentiated between instrumental and reactive (or hostile) aggression, there were some who equated instrumental aggression with assertiveness; which is also not precise.

To start, anger is a normal emotion that requires no judgment be placed on it. It is no more a good or bad emotion than happiness, sadness, or any other. Yet, society puts great shame on it making individuals likely to deny that they are angry or justify their emotion and subsequent behavior when it is in response to a provocation. Thus, anger is a normal emotion characterized by antagonism toward someone or something you feel has deliberately done you

wrong that is associated with a physiological activation of the sympathetic nervous system. As Spielberger noted and measured in the development of the State Trait Anger Expression Inventories (add dates), anger can be a state of emotional being, how one feels at a given time, or as a trait, lasting longitudinally pointing towards an emotional tendency. Anger may be turned inwards and it can look like depression or withdrawal, and has been associated with high blood pressure and other stress induced physical ailments, or it can be turned outwards in the form of externalizing behaviors such as yelling or physical violence. Anger can be an emotion of action as the physiological surge of the sympathetic nervous system can lend itself to an increase in strength, stamina, speed and a decrease in perception of pain. However, as there is a curvilinear relationship between emotion and pain (with individual and task specific differences), there is a point at which intense anger will decrease performance due to impairment in fine motor coordination, problem solving, decision making and other cognitive processes necessary in sport performance.

Anger is neither good nor bad. Athletes do not have to learn how to turn it on or off. It behooves athletes to learn to increase their self-awareness of their emotional state and adjust the volume of their emotions to match the emotional load that a given task requires. Without this, they are prone to mental mistakes that can sabotage peak performance.

Aggression or aggressiveness, however, is not describing emotion but rather, behavior. Clearly not all aggressiveness is the same, but stating that all aggression has causing harm to another as the main goal, would leave one concluding that there is no place for being aggressive outside of the most primitive societies and should result in legal punishment. This is not the case.

Aggressiveness is the tenacity with which someone pursues their goals. Given the training schedules, obstacles that are in their way, injuries they must overcome, and competitors who would prefer to be victors, success in sport and in life would not be possible if individuals are not aggressive. Perfectionism, persistence, stubbornness, and a healthy dose of obsessiveness are commonplace in high performing individuals. All of these descriptors fall under the aggressiveness umbrella. However, it is also certainly the case that some aggression has harming others as its central aim; and so, differentiation of subtypes of aggression is required.

When an athlete perceives the actions of another as provocative or harmful, they may have the urge to respond in kind. Reactive aggression is behavior that has as its primary and

sometimes solitary goal, to do harm to someone. Usually this is in response to a perceived injustice, insult, or wrongdoing. Reactive aggression is anger's spawn. Thus, when an athlete is sufficiently angry, they may be either hyper-reactive to a slight or insult or may lash out at someone randomly with very little provocation. Because anger exists normally and at variable levels, it is not really anger management we are trying to achieve (because that would mean that we must reduce all anger) but rather, it is reactive aggression that we are aiming to reduce. Reactive aggression can lead to performance underachievement as well as transgressions on and off the field. This comes as no surprise because in reactive aggression, the goals to harm are not compatible with any sport-related goal. An example of reactive aggression could be an offensive lineman trash-talking at a defensive player and the defensive player punches his provocateur in the head, which incurs an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty.

Instrumental aggression is goal-directed aggression in which harm to another is not the primary goal, although it can be a secondary result of the action. The focus is on achieving the sport-related goal. An example would be a basketball player who drives the lane for a layup and in the process accidentally elbows an opponent in the face. The goal was to put the ball in the hoop. The injury to the other player was an unintended consequence. Success in sports and in life comes from maximizing instrumental while minimizing reactive aggression.

As noted above, instrumental aggression has, at times, been used interchangeably with assertiveness. To be assertive is to stand up for one's rights and assertiveness training was developed to assist those with self-esteem problems communicate in a manner that would help them more effectively and appropriately have their needs met. Though improved communication may lead to better relationships with coaches or improve team cohesion, it does not lead directly to, nor is it a requirement for success in sports. An example to illustrate this would be the soccer player asking the goaltender to move from the net so they could score a goal. An athlete does not have the right to score or win. They must compete to do so. That requires instrumental aggression.

Violence has, at its core, harming another as the intended result. Affective violence emanating from anger is an extreme form of reactive aggression. Not all forms of violence have their genesis come from anger. Predatory violence, which is akin to hunting, is necessarily precise and measured and antithetical to rageful violence. As a whole, violence is problematic in society, but specifically, Terry and Jackson (1985) clarified sport violence as harm-inducing

behavior outside the rules of sport, bearing no direct relationship to the competitive goals of sport.

This was further dichotomized in the Abrams Model of Sport Violence (2010) which differentiated between Spontaneous reactive aggression related to anger and Planned reactive aggression which is reflective of poor sportsmanship, is pre-meditated and is system based – meaning it is often not just the result of the athlete, but can be a product of the athletic system that justifies such behavior in sports. When planned sports violence exists, the intervention must be systemic, not just athlete focused. Preventing such, is the impetus of Codes of Conduct (though they must be devised in an enforceable manner) and strong enforcement strategies by sports organizations, if not the legal system, in extremes of assaultive behavior.

Hostility represents more of a personality style characterized by chronic irritability and longstanding higher likelihood of angry reactions. Research has found that people who are frequently hostile tend to have a distorted cognitive set that leads them to be prone to perceiving neutral stimuli as provocative, have difficulty identifying non-hostile explanations for an event, difficulties generating non-violent responses on how to handle a situation, and a legitimization of violence as a manner in which problems should be solved. Collectively, this has been called the Hostility Bias (Dodge, 1985, Dodge et al., 1990) and provides the framework for utilizing cognitive behavioral interventions to challenge and remediate these cognitive distortions in different populations.

It is our contention that standardizing these definitions in the field of sport psychology allows for an increase in pragmatic utility and offers greater opportunities for research on etiology, prevention and treatment of anger disorders in athletics.

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