

Developing a taxonomy of psychosocial demands of elite athletes in a highly diverse culture

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Abstract:

Introduction: Cultural values and the social environment could affect the mental health of elite athletes, but mapping the interaction between cultural and elite athlete activities is challenging. Hence, a solid framework in the form of taxonomy could help to understand the interplay between culture and elite athlete activities. Psychosocial demands are articulated as external social pressure generated from social and cultural factors that are endured by elite athletes, which is believed to enable the understanding of elite athletes' potential stressors, which are connected to cultural values. **Problem statement:** By developing a taxonomy of psychosocial demands of elite athletes, researchers in sport psychology could investigate how cultural and social environments interact with elite athlete activities, particularly in a highly diverse culture. **Approach:** This article describes the development of a taxonomy of psychosocial demands using a literature review and cultural praxis paradigm. **Material and method:** A literature study consisting of four stages of determining criteria, refining the definition of psychosocial demands, classifying the types of psychosocial demands, and drawing the taxonomy of psychosocial demands was conducted. **Results:** The study resulted in a taxonomy of psychosocial demands consisting of three groups and eight subgroups: 1) personal characteristics inviting psychosocial demands, consist of: 1a) physicality; 1b) Socially stereotyped/stigmatized attributes; 2) performance-related expectancies, consist of: 2a) performance standards; 2b) prescribed mental qualities; 2c) prescribed ethical behavior; and 3) social-dynamic system demands, consist of: 3a) Social support; 3b) team dynamic issues; 3c) social politics and sports industry. Detailed descriptions of each group explained in this paper. The taxonomy has both practical and theoretical implications: it enables sports psychologist to understand potential stressors of an elite athlete derived from their cultural background; and for future research, the taxonomy used as a solid framework to investigate the interplay between culture and elite athlete activities. Limitations of the product is also discussed, as culture is a fluid phenomenon which could be rapidly changing.

Key Words: culture, stressors, demands, elite sport, cultural sport psychology.

Introduction

Recently, there have been emerging concerns about mental health issues in elite athletes, as evidenced by numerous scientific papers published on the mental health of elite athletes. Elite athletes endure numerous stressors from intensive training, competitive rivalries, and a high schedule load between competition and training, which might negatively impact their well-being (Reardon et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2016). The proneness to injury (Andersen & Williams, 1988), pressures from fans, sponsors, sports institutions, and competition committees (Larner et al., 2017), as well as balancing sports with other aspects of life, such as being a student (Cosh & Tully, 2014) and parents (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; T. Fletcher, 2020; McGannon et al., 2018), could induce stress. Some of these stressors might come from psychosocial factors, such as social pressure and cultural values, which contradict elite sport practice. Hence, careful examination of social and environmental factors that potentially induce stress is encouraged and recommended, especially for consultants and professionals working with elite athletes (Henriksen et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2018a).

The International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) mentioned that the social environment could harm or support the mental health of athletes, and their mental health has to be considered a vital matter by everyone involved in sport organizations (Henriksen et al., 2019). ISSP's statement implies that examining the mental health issues of elite athletes requires consideration of their cultural and social environment also. Several contradicting values, norms, or accepted standards might subside or heighten the risk of harming mental health (Schinke et al., 2018b). However, identifying challenges would be very challenging, as every country has a different culture, demography, geography, and meaning of elite sports. Culture is also a multilevel phenomenon, fluid, and changes over time (Ryba et al., 2018). Diverse culture adds more complexities, as acculturation and clashes likely exist.

Indonesia is known as a country with a highly diverse culture, proven by the high number of ethnicities inhabiting 17,000 islands (BPS (Badan Pusat Statistik), 2017). In the Indonesian context, its elite sport environment is still interpreted as having an unstable policy, being problematic, lacking funding, and is highly

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dependent on the political situation (KONI, 2014; Mutohir, n.d.; Undang-Undang Sistem Keolahragaan Nasional Nomor 3 Tahun 2005). The conditions mentioned above could generate demands and pressure on Indonesian elite athletes, but *what* those pressures are and *how* they affect them have been rarely investigated. A solid framework is required to bridge cultural, social, and athlete psychology. This framework might help to dissect any particular phenomenon being observed in culture. Psychosocial demands are then chosen as a concept of the psychological construct to understand how cultural and social factors affect the mental health of elite athletes.

Psychosocial demands are social pressure from the social and cultural environment of an athlete, which could be in the form of external hopes or expectations toward elite athletes, in a form of social norms; demands from family members, coaches and spouse; peer pressure; virtues or moral values; or a prescribed role (Rahayuni, 2019). This conceptual definition is inspired by Lazarus's stress and coping transactional theories (R. S. Lazarus, 2006), which imply that there are implicit external factors embedded in the culture of an individual that could become precursors of stress. However, these external pressures might hardly be recognized because they could be implicit and hidden (R. S. Lazarus, 2006). To make these external pressures visible, a literature study to organize social pressures in the form of taxonomy is required. This article will describe the process of organizing psychosocial demands that are potentially endured by elite Indonesian athletes, which through extensive literature study are articulated into a form of a taxonomy of psychosocial demands. The taxonomy will be beneficial for understanding the psychosocial demands of elite athletes from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Material & methods

An extensive literature study combined with reflective contemplation of the author's own experience as a former elite athlete in Indonesia was employed to categorize the psychosocial demands on athletes. This approach is categorized under qualitative study, which focuses on the subjective meaning of a person's experiences toward certain phenomena and contexts (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The decision to use the author's own experience as a former elite athlete in Indonesia was due to the author's familiarity with the diverse culture of Indonesia, and this skill is called cultural praxis (Ryba et al., 2013). Cultural praxis is a familiarity of knowledge of a particular culture (Ryba et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009). Adopting subjective meaning as part of the cultural praxis means the framework developed will be based on the social construction schema of Indonesian culture, which is highly diverse, and the author has become a part of this.

Procedure

The development the taxonomy of psychosocial demands consists of four stages: 1) determining the criteria for psychosocial demands, 2) refining the definition of psychosocial demands, 3) classifying the types of psychosocial demands, and 4) creating the taxonomy. The first stage involves defining *what a psychosocial demand* is. A literature study examines findings and theories from every branch of psychology to define the psychosocial demands. It began by scrutinizing every concept related to the demands and pressures. Psychosocial demands are similar to other concepts of *situational demands* (Lazarus, 1999), *demand characteristics* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), *job demands* (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), *hope* (Bernardo, 2010), *social pressure* (Markman et al., 2006; Worthy et al., 2009), and *organizational stressors* (Fletcher & Fletcher, 2005). From analyzing the similarities and differences between the concepts mentioned above, psychosocial demands are coming from athlete's social and cultural environment, which could be in the form external hopes or expectations toward elite athletes, social norms, significant others and peer pressure, virtues or moral values, or prescribed role (Rahayuni, 2020).

The second stage of developing the framework involves dissecting the aforementioned concepts into several indicators or criteria through a literature study. The breakdowns of definitions enable finding pre-existing constructs that could become psychosocial demands in the vast literature on sports psychology. The criteria is broken down as follows. 1) Psychosocial demands come from external forces, which could be in the form of informal or formal statements, values, norms, standards, the prescribed function of a specific role, social or peer pressure, projected hopes and expectations put to an individual. 2) The social pressures have to be significant enough that their absence or occurrence will affect individuals emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally. They can also become precursors of stress. 3) Psychosocial demands may generate various outcomes that might positively or negatively affect an athlete's career. The three indicators are then used to review the existing concepts, theories, terms, and psychological constructs among the vast literature on sports psychology.

In the third stage, the second literature study reviewed concepts and research in sport psychology that met the criteria. After reviewing several existing concepts in sport psychology handbooks (Hackfort & Schinke, 2020; Mellalieu & Hanton, 2016; Papaioannou & Hackfort, 2014; Schinke et al., 2016), concepts suspected as being psychosocial demands were listed, which were carefully re-reviewed by an expert. Finally, the last stage involved categorizing the psychosocial demands into smaller clusters. Each of the stages were discussed with colleagues, edited and revisited until a sturdy categorization was established. The psychosocial demands were finally categorized into three groups: 1) *personal characteristics that invite psychosocial demands*, 2) *performance-related expectations*, and 3) *social-dynamic system demands*. The categorization is presented in a diagram and explanation in the form of a narrative review. In the last stage, the groups of psychosocial demands were then organized and presented in a diagram, which later resulted in the taxonomy of psychosocial demands.

The entire process was conducted between September 2016 and June 2022. The results of each group and the taxonomy is presented in Figure 2.

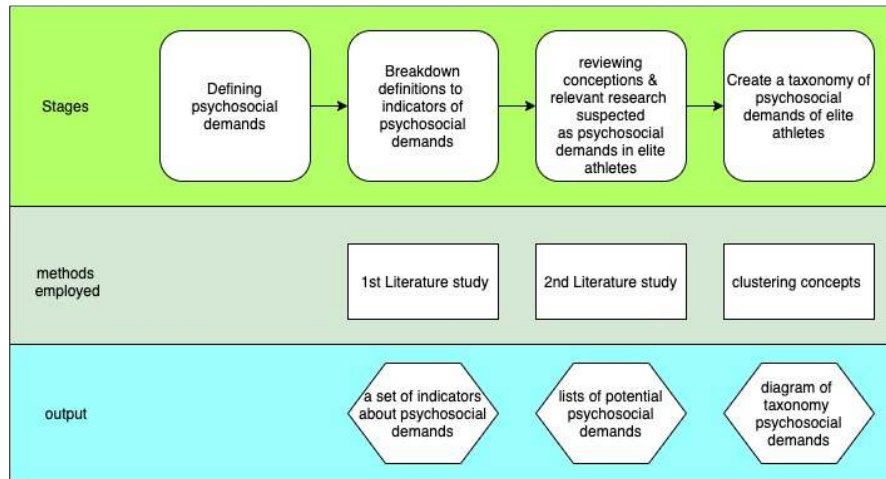


Fig. 1. Process of categorizing psychosocial demands on elite Indonesian athletes

Results

Group 1: Stereotyped sociocultural characteristics

Stereotyped sociocultural characteristics are demands from stereotypes, prejudice, false judgement, or stigmatized characteristics about elite athletes. This group consists of two subgroups: 1) *physicality* and 2) *socially stereotyped or stigmatized attributes*. The first subgroup, *physicality*, is associated with race, ethnicity, or specific groups in which the athlete identifies him/herself as a member, which includes gender, religion, social class, and stigmatized sexual orientation. For example, gender roles might become psychologically demanding if an athlete chooses a sporting discipline judged as being socially unfit for their gender, for instance, boxing for women, as they are judged as being 'too masculine or 'tomboys' (Krane et al., 2004; Ng et al., 2021). Male athletes also could experience discouragement if they do not display strength and hide their emotions (Anderson, 2008). Sexual orientation could also become physically demanding if peers and authorities in the team does not compromise on athlete's sexual orientation, resulting in bullying, discrimination, oppression, or alienation (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). An athlete's race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (SES) is another aspect that can be demanding, especially if certain SES groups are stigmatized, oppressed, discriminated, or marginalized (Bimper, 2015; Pot et al., 2016).

The second subgroup is socially *stereotyped or stigmatized attributes*, which are related to stereotypes in the elite sporting environment that some races/ethnicities associate with specific negative characteristics, that invite subtle or hostile racism, discrimination, alienation, or irrational expectations related to one's race or ethnicity (Kontos, 2012; Kontos & Breland-Noble, 2002). For instance, indigenous athletes in Canada are often assumed to be 'not educated' (Blodgett et al., 2017; Schinke et al., 2011). Particular cultural beliefs or values attached to any ethnicity could also hinder the elite, for instance, by measuring success only based on academic achievement (Lau et al., 2007; Yama & Zakaria, 2019). Religious values might invite psychosocial demands if the values collide with sporting practices or regulations. For instance, Galli described a Muslim athlete who felt unfairly treated when his coach forbade him from religious fasting during Ramadan (see Galli, 2019, p.31). Another concrete example of how sport participation might conflict with elite sport is the debate surrounding the usage of hijabs (headscarf or veil) in Muslim female athletes, which attracts various reactions, including criticism, discussion of gender, culture, the whiteness narrative, and the commodification of elite sports (see Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019).

Group 2: Performance-related expectation demands

The second category of psychosocial demands is related to expectations of performance. Sport as a performance contest expects a display of certain physical aspects, skills acquisition, and prescribed mental qualities, which will be demanding if they are not accompanied by sufficient support. This group consists of three aspects: 1) *performance standards*, 2) *prescribed mental qualities*, and 3) *prescribed ethical behavior*. *Performance standards* are sets of physical standards that have to be fulfilled by athletes without sufficient support by sports organizations or teams, resulting in being prone to mental health disturbances or prolonged mental fatigue. Mental fatigue occurs when reduced capacity for maximal performance is caused by a prolonged period of demanding cognitive activity (Halson, 2014; Russell et al., 2019). Enduring training is a prerequisite to achieving goals, which, logically, will be psychologically demanding if it is done without proper assistance and support from sports organizations. This is align with Hanton and Fletcher (2006) findings that poor organizational capabilities in managing group training and competition could become higher-order stressors.

The third subgroups are standards that often linked with the demand prescriptions of mental qualities. A set of mental qualities are required to be mastered but without adequate support from coaches or sports psychologists could become psychologically demanding (Roberts & Papaioannou, 2014). These mental qualities are vital to attaining maximum performance, but without assistance, they generate stress, insecurities, pessimism, and guilt. For instance, adherence to training and commitment is expected to be compulsory (Chatzisarantis, et al, 2014) as well as the mental skill of coping with stress (D. Fletcher & Fletcher, 2005; D. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Nicholls & Polman, 2007), or mental toughness (Gucciardi & Hanton, 2016). These mental skills are essential, and they could be demanding or pressuring if athletes have to achieve them without assistance, facilitation, or an unsustainable learning environment.

The third subgroup of displaying *prescribed ethical behavior* is often in the form of a duty or task to serve corporate or sponsorship interests. A pressure to display specific ethical behavior in the arena, such as morality, sportsmanship, benevolence, or charity is also involved. Benevolence not prompted by themselves but predetermined by the club, team, sponsor, or sporting organization could make athletes feel untrue to themselves (Thorpe, 2012).

Group 3: Social dynamics demands

The final group, *social dynamic system demands*, are psychosocial demands caused by the interaction of an athlete with a structured social system. The system ranges from the micro-system of the athlete's family, such as parents, neighbors, and peers, to the more extensive social system of teams, clubs, sports organizations, politics, media, and the sports industry. This cluster was inspired by Bronfenbrenner and Morris' *bioecological model of human development* theory, which has been applied in the context of sport psychology (see Horn, 2004; Kerr & Stirling, 2015). These systems might result in irrational expectations of athletes to achieve specific targets or outcomes, such as obtaining medals, ranking, popularity, and financial benefit. These interactions might be related to the athletes' pressure to perform at a certain level, above or below their capabilities, which situating them within the relational power of politics and the sports industry. Athletes may not always be facilitated to work with these pressures, creating tensions. These clusters are divided into three groups: 1) *social support*, 2) *team dynamics issues*, 3) *social politics and sports industry*.

The first group, *social support*, is vital but might also be demanding or harmful to athletes. Family support can be a positive element for athletic success but, on the other hand, could be burdening and stressful (Kaye et al., 2019), for example, if athletes' parents project unrealistic targets (Dohme et al., 2021) or if athletic roles do not synchronize with familial roles, such as being an athlete and mother (McGannon et al., 2015). Another common issue is the conflict between the athletic role and other roles given by society, such as a student or other community member, that are considered compulsory (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Rees et al., 2015).

The second subgroup is *team dynamics issues*, which are psychosocial demands related to the team. An adverse team climate, oppressed roles or traditions, and informal roles in the team all might create an inconvenient climate for athletes (Brynzak et al., 2021; Keegan et al., 2009). For example, 'hazing' or bullying new team members could be burdening (Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). A team also has extreme internal rivalries or fixed hierarchies (Keegan et al., 2009). Recently, Feddersen and colleagues published a model about destructive culture in elite sports in the United Kingdom, characterized by denying responsibility, creating uncertainties through euphemistic language, and distrust of relationships (Feddersen et al., 2019). Elite athletes might be burdened with additional roles in the team, such as being an assistant coach, team leader/captain (Fransen et al., 2015) or any other demanding team role (Eccles, 2016). An athlete's relationship with his/her coach, even though it is a vital factor for success, is also prone to communication mismatch, conflict, maltreatment, abuse, and manipulation (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). There has been a growing body of literature examining the maltreatment of athletes, especially in youth sports (Parent & Fortier, 2017). Maltreatments by sports officials or the supporting team and facilitating athletic performance at an elite level also induced pressures and demands on these athletes. One example is Nassar's case of sexually abusing gymnastics athletes as their team doctor (Fisher & Anders, 2020).

The third subgroup is *social politics and the sports industry*, which are related to an athlete's position within the relational power of the particular social, political, and economic context, which often interplays with the sports industry (Ryba et al., 2018). Dealing with incompetent sports organizations might be psychologically demanding, as supported by intensive studies on *organizational stressors* (D. Fletcher et al., 2012, 2012; Hanton et al., 2012, 2012). Organizational stressors are induced by the interactions of athletes with sports organizations, especially incapable sports organizations (D. Fletcher et al., 2012). The Internet further complicates psychological demands created by social dynamics and social media platforms, in which any event that was happening to an athlete could be seen by their broader audience, causing criticisms of elite performers through social media (Kristiansen & Lines, 2014). Social media is changing sports journalism, and sports organizations' work has consequences for athletes (Sanderson, 2011). Athletes can now freely share their voices, views, dissents, personal life, or personal views, which are prone to criticism and tensions with sports organizations (Sanderson, 2011). Independent journalism has also resulted in fake news and controversial content, which could be circulated without consent or investigation (Sanderson, 2011). For instance, an elite athlete could be criticized by fans or become the victim of public shaming (MacPherson & Kerr, 2019). Psychological demands may also

come from career transition ambiguity, where elite athletes move from junior to senior level or close to retirement. They may struggle to cope with the new environment during transitioning and deal with more competitive rivalry or vagueness after retirement (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). The athletic pathway is connected to the country's policy, social system, and context (Stambulova, 2016; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014).



Fig. 2. Taxonomy of psychosocial demands (copyright to Rahayuni, 2022)

Discussion

Indonesia is known for its diversity of cultures, comprising more than 300 different ethnic inhabitants in the archipelago. Cultural assimilation, domination, and marginalization might occur, including in sports teams, but these subjects have been avoided in the literature of sport psychology in Indonesia. However, it is confusing to establish a starting point; where can we start to understand the interplay of culture and sporting challenges among Indonesian athletes? This challenge has become a barrier and a limitation to conducting research. This taxonomy would provide a sturdy framework to understand the interplay of sport and culture in a highly diverse nation or society, such as Indonesia.

Understanding the interplay of culture and elite athletes' activities might be multidimensional, fuzzy, complex, and implicit (Ryba, 2017). The familiarity of culture could make people unaware of their own culture because they are immersed in the culture. On the other hand, the effort to recognize the interplay between culture and sport could produce a complex combination between demography, social-economic status, and the sports systems that build values and standardized norms. The three categorizations of this taxonomy aim to provide a framework that acknowledges the complexity of psychosocial demands and presents them in a more organized and meticulous manner. The taxonomy of psychosocial demands could help researchers and sports psychologists. For instance, if an athlete comes from a low socio-economic background, his/her economic background might become a stressor that leads him/her to feel inferior in the team, which could explain his/her underperformance issue. Thus, if an athlete has a parent who prioritizes academic skills over athletic skills, he/she might be burdened by the parent's demand to balance academic and sporting achievements. The two examples only suggest the practical implications of using the framework, which requires further research to determine the possibilities of using the framework.

However, there are also limitations to this taxonomy. As a framework, the interaction between sport and culture might change over time. Hence, the psychosocial demands could have been tied to a specific timeframe along a timeline of progression in Indonesian sport. Hence, there is a need to revisit and test this framework in future research whether they still be relevant.

Conclusions

I have provided the process of developing the taxonomy of psychosocial demands through a literature review study. The groups and subgroups of each psychosocial demands has been described in detail. Overall, the diagram would provide a more solid framework to investigate the complexities between culture and involvement in elite sport. Its potential and limitations has also described, which invites future researchers to delve deep down the interaction between culture and elite sport involvement.

Conflicts of interest - author have none conflicts of interest to declare.

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