

Sarah: a case study

This case study will closely examine and outline a sports person. It will provide an insight into the psychological concept of the individual, describe the consequences of this psychological concept and give a theoretical underpinning and possible suggestions of how to explain the individual's behaviour.

The individual:

The individual in this case study is called Sarah, a 27 year old female, playing table tennis. Having started at the age of 19, she is now in her eighth year of playing, she only started playing regularly and competitive, i.e. twice or three times a week, at the age of 22 when she finally joined a club to enter competitions. She is not only competing for a local club but in addition she is part of the university squad and also plays occasionally for the county team competing in the 2nd division. Even though she is already aged 27, she is still pursuing higher ambitions, playing as a regular team member for the county league and hoping for selection into the regional team to represent North England.

The last season has been fairly successful for Sarah, having only lost very few matches. Her local team got promoted into a higher local division and is still ambitioning a further promotion with her being the most successful player in the team and one of the most successful in the league.

The start of the actual season was very promising for Sarah and her team having won all matches so far and being number one in the league table. But her appearance in the county league was not as successful. Having won the first match, she got injured in the second match, entirely rupturing one of her dominant foot's

ankle tendons. A surgery had been undertaken to fix the tendon. The accident caused a three months break from any physical activity but included physiotherapy. After this break she appeared back on court, first losing her matches but then winning occasionally. She is now slowly getting back to her old strength. Her team meanwhile lost the top position and is now third in the league, still in a good position to come back to the lead.

The psychological concept:

Sarah is reporting a severe loss of self-confidence. Feeling unsure about her ability to play well, she is not only worrying about her self and her original ambitions but also about what her fellow team members and her coach is thinking about her. Even though no negative comments about her performance were mentioned, she feels that her losses have affected the team's overall ability. Guilt is arising in her. Not only the team's hope for promotion seems to have gone, Sarah is very doubtful about becoming a full member of the county squad. She is now feeling very disappointed that her ambition for a national team seems to have completely gone. She is thinking that her age plus the injury and the time she'll need to come back to full strength will not make her ambitions become fulfilled.

When playing she feels weak and tends to think back to the times when she wasn't injured, often saying to herself: "If I haven't had this injury, we would still be top of the league and I wouldn't have lost so many matches. Normally I could have beaten these opponents easily but I feel so weak on my foot since the accident".

Consequences of the psychological concept:

Due to her ankle injury not only Sarah's behaviour but also her cognitions and perceptions as well as emotions have been affected and changed.

Her performance is weaker than before her injury, even though occasional wins occur. No longer is she the dominating player in the team nor the league. Within her behaviour, a change of performance style can be noticed. She now is defensive and temporising rather than aggressive and impulsive. She is trying not to put too much impact on her injured foot as she fears another injury could happen even though her GP has told her the tendon is now stronger and more stable than before. But Sarah is still wearing a special support on her ankle, thinking that without she couldn't uphold the fast game's demandings.

Sarah has also started negative self talk affecting her cognitions and perceptions of her play. She is putting herself into pressure as she is blaming her poor performance to have caused a knock-on effect on to the team's performance.

She is disappointed being no longer a good performer and losing against opponents she once had beaten easily. Worries and guilt have arisen as well as fear of a future injury in her injured foot that she perceives as weak.

Effects on the performance:

Sarah is now doubting about her own ability to play and competing well enough for the team and her ambitions. As she has lost several matches since coming back from her injury break, she changed her tactical behaviour from playing aggressively to a more defensive and temporising play. Since then, she has become more successful even though not every one of her matches has been won. Occasionally she is playing aggressively but most of the time she is hoping for errors made by her

opponents. Her overall fitness has been affected by the injury causing her to feel weak and tired after a short time of play. Nervousness before and during a match is now felt more often by her, causing a lot of unforced errors in her performance resulting in a loss of the match.

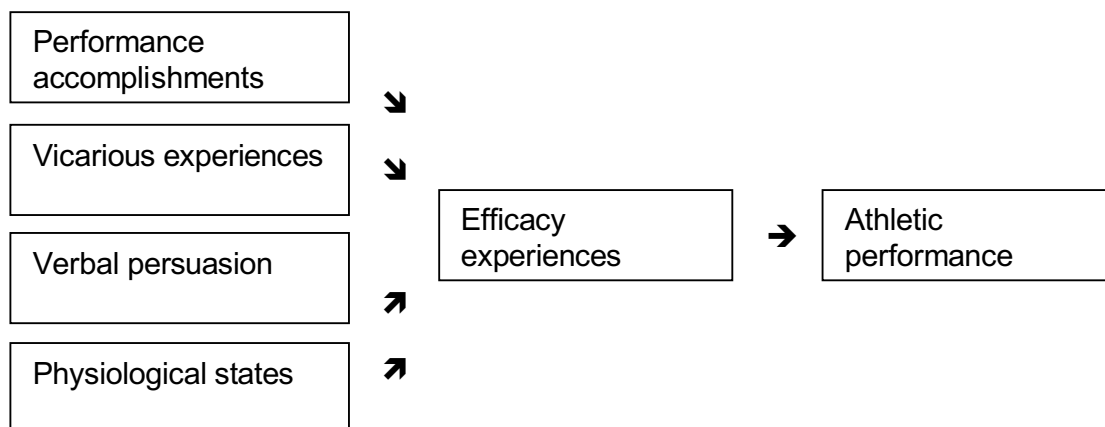
Theoretical underpinning:

Trying to describe and explain Sarah's behaviour, cognitions and affects, different theories can be used. The most helpful however would be those examining the self-confidence of the individual. Therefore, the most useful will be Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

According to Cox (1998), self-efficacy is a situation specific self confidence.

Additionally, Gill (2000) states that it is also the belief or the perception that one is competent and can do whatever is necessary in a specific situation to perform a task successfully.

The following diagram according to Gill (2000) and Weinberg & Gould (1995) will illustrate Bandura's theory:



Performance accomplishments, according to Gill (2000) as well as Weinberg & Gould (1995), are based on mastery experiences and provide therefore the most dependable information on self-efficacy.

Vicarious experiences, stated by Weinberg & Gould (1995) include modelling and imagery. Seeing demonstrations and watching somebody else successfully accomplishing the skill will increase self-efficacy (Gill, 2000). The effect will be enhanced when similarity between model and individual is greatest (Weinberg & Gould, 1995).

Verbal persuasion will also influence the individual's behaviour and represents verbal encouragement from the coach or fellow athletes like "You can do it", "You have done it well", as well as positive self talk like "I can do it". Most influential on the performance will be a trustworthy and credible source (Weinberg & Gould, 1995).

Along with Gill (2000), the role of the fourth source of efficacy is less clear, but Bandura suggests that the perceptions of arousal, respectively the physiological states, positively affect the performance through efficacy expectations. Noticing a fast beating heart prior to a starting match will negatively affect confidence when interpreted for example as nervousness or anxiety.

In favour for the individual in this case study, all four sources of self-efficacy can be used to successfully change and improve her self confidence.

As vicarious experiences play an important role in building up efficacy experiences, it is vital for Sarah to observe other athletes from a similar age group, that have undergone a very similar or the same situation like hers, successfully coming back to a very good performance on court. Seeing athletes that have undergone surgery for a ruptured tendon who are still performing well, without even wearing a special support, so well that they have been selected for high level teams or athletes that

dominate a league, will beneficially affect her self-confidence and positively influence her performance. She will then notice that it is possible to come back from an injury without loss of performance. Her coach should arrange training and exercise with those fellow athletes to provide bases for modelling and imagery.

Meanwhile verbal persuasion should take place in addition to positively reinforce her. Praise from her coach for good effort and successful play like “Good shot”, “Well played”, will also build up her self-confidence. Praise in the right situation from her team members like “We are proud of you”, “You are a great player” and fellow athletes will be useful too, especially when coming from those who had the same injury and will persuade her in keeping up the effort and the good play as they will represent a similar model. These verbal persuasion will relieve her from her guilt and self-inflicted pressure she experienced since coming back.

Perceiving her nervousness before and meanwhile playing as negative has affected her play in a negative way as she produced more unforced errors causing a loss of the match. By using relaxation techniques as well as changing her negative perception of the nervousness to a normal and/or even positive/beneficial aspect before a match, Sarah will be able to concentrate more on the actual match itself rather than on the physiological state. If Sarah is perceiving her injured foot as still weak even though her surgeon has reassured the stability of it, her coach might introduce special weight training to build up supporting muscles to change Sarah's perception. Her perceived loss of fitness and stamina should be explained to her by her coach as a natural result due to her three months break from physical activity. The coach should then develop a special fitness programme to regain the same level again. No longer will she feel tired after a short time within her matches.

As performance accomplishments play a major role in the build up of self-efficacy, it is important for Sarah to remember her previous accomplishments and use these as

positive reinforcement. But her coach should not only remind her of her previous dominance in the team and of the league but also create a special training for her where she can regain self-efficacy in her play, that is practicing shots and an aggressive play in a realistic game play situation. The more often applied and undertaken, the more Sarah will be successful. The more successful Sarah will be, will then in turn beneficially affect her play in matches.

No longer should Sarah feel less confident and guilty as she is now back on the winning side, her negative self talk will be transformed into positive reinforcement like "I can do it". Her nervousness will be perceived as beneficial to raise her attention before a match and meanwhile performing well in the match she will hear praise from her coach and team members which then will again increase her self-efficacy and enhance her performance. The enhanced performance then might have an influence on the other team member's play, i.e. a motivation to perform as well as she did. In turn, this might then bring the team back to its top position in the table as their best player is playing well again and a further promotion is not out of reach.

Further notes:

As Thomas and Nelson (2001) state, a case study is a '*form of descriptive research in which a single case is studied in depth to reach a greater understanding about other similar cases*', producing qualitative data. But it has to be stated that the interpretation of the evidence from a case study has to be linked to certain factors that might question the above mentioned quote about understanding similar cases. Eysenck (2000) mentions the problem of generalisability of the findings. A causal relationship can not always be established as further factors might have affect the

findings. And a case study is producing a lot of data as well as being very time consuming.

But according to Eysenck (2000), the case study is an inductive way suggesting a hypothesis/theory where no model or theory existed. This new theory can then be tested under more controlled conditions with more participants (Eysenck, 2000).

Hence, using Bandura's self-efficacy theory to build up an injured athlete's confidence might have been helpful in this particular case, but in general it can not be said that this theory will build up injured athletes' self-confidence when applied.

Depending on further factors, the application of, e.g., Weiner's attribution theory or the Achievement goal theory could lead to a similar, respectively same result, i.e. building up the self-efficacy of an injured athlete.

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