The Coping Strategies Employed by Female College Athletes after Losing a Game

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the coping strategies employed by university athletes who have lost in a competition. A sample of ten hand ball women athletes (age between 21-24 years old) who represented one of the largest universities in Kuala Lumpur in the Malaysian Inter-varsity games agreed to participate in this study. All of the athletes have signed the consent letter, giving their permission for the interview to be recorded. The result for content analysis has identified two major dimensions; 1) how athletes cope, and 2) ways to cope. In the first dimension (how athletes cope), three major themes have emerged from the interview, which are social support, problem solving, and doing other activities. On the other hand, the second dimension (ways to cope) has identified two major themes, which are concentration and self confidence. However, social support has been claimed by losing athletes as the main coping strategy used to overcome their grief after losing the competition. Suggestions are also recommended in the paper.

1. Introduction

Athletes often have the desire to be successful in whatever sports they commit themselves into. For those in the sports arena, being diligent, consistent, focused and highly committed are the important qualities needed by any athlete who desires to achieve success in competitions. Together with good sportsmanship and great fighting spirit, these athletes are on the right track to achieve the highest recognition of their skills in a competition. The success and victory gained will motivate these athletes to excel further in their respective sports. According to

Lazarus (2000), for those who wish to gain victory in a competition, they need to be focused and possess the motivation to leap themselves to higher levels. However, when athletes are faced with defeat after putting in a great effort, will their focus be deviated? How then will they cope with these kinds of situations? Therefore, it is vital that athletes should plan meticulously in terms of cognition and behavior to prepare them well when facing those kinds of situations (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). The sense of defeat faced by athletes should be handled wisely through a variety of strategies or methods that are useful in assisting them to face failures and stress.

The differences between levels of competition and gender are factors leading to the different strategies or methods used in confronting and coping with failures. However, lower levels of game and similar gender will also lead to differences in methods of coping. According to Nicholls and Polman (2007), there was no significant difference between individual differences and coping strategies. Therefore, in order to understand more about a particular gender, this study had chosen to examine the coping methods used by female hand ball university players in overcoming this difficulty.

In this study, the researchers will focus on identifying and determining the strategies or methods used by female athletes particularly in adapting themselves to the sense of lost faced by them. There are of coping strategies for athletes who have faced difficulties during shock, injury, stress, high expectation and time constraint (Kristiansen, Roberts & Abrahamsen, 2007). In this research, the researchers had classified losing as part of stress triggers.

There are existing studies that were being carried out by researchers enquiring the methods used by athletes to cope with stress generated from the type of sports that they are involved in (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Through these studies, it was found that the respondents tried to adapt themselves to their sense of losing or stress from sports through a variety of methods which included enquiring for social support (Crocker, 1992), releasing negative emotion (Gaudreau & Blondin, 2004), and remaining confident (Poczwardowski & Conroy, 2002). Distanced adjustment had also been reported in a few studies, for example Crocker, 1992; Giacobbi et al., 2004.

During these crucial moments, a process named *coping strategy* plays an important role in dealing with stress. The coping process requires the athletes to adapt themselves to specific methods that could neutralize or reduce the specific kind of stress that they are facing at crucial moments (Kristiansen, et al., 2007). Therefore, it was felt that this research is important in order to examine how coping strategies have helped in assisting the athletes to reduce the stress faced especially during their moments of loss.

Other than that, the purpose of the study is also to examine whether the sense of defeat or loss faced by the athletes will cause them to give up or become panic when facing opponents that have beaten them in the past competitions. The purpose of the study is also to examine the duration needed for athletes to adapt themselves to the sense of loss. This study is significant as it provides guidelines and implications that could be used as references towards the 'catalyst' chosen by athletes in adapting themselves on loses that they have faced. Individuals that will succeed in the future are people who are able to control situations and have confidence in completing a specific task through continuous effort (Hatzigeorgiadis, 2006). If athletes are able to adjust themselves towards losses, this indicates that they will work hard to achieve their goals in their sports of interest in the future. The act of retreat could also be prevented indirectly. Nevertheless, will they be able to solve this problem in a short period of time?

2. Methodology

The researcher had adopted an interview method to gather data for this study. The data gathered will be analyzed by content analyses.

2.1 Population and Sampling

The respondents of this study are athletes from one of the biggest universities in Kuala Lumpur in inter-university level competition in Malaysia (MASUM) who were defeated during the tournament. The selected athletes were interviewed and the informed consent had been signed by those who agreed to participate in the tape recorder interviewed. In this study, the researchers had been able to select 10 defeated hand ball players as the respondents. All of the respondents are female players aged between 21-24 years old.

2.2 Research Instrument

The questions for the interview are divided into three sections. The questions being asked are related to respondents' background information, experiences and achievements as well as motivation factors. A pilot study had been conducted to examine the extent of the effectiveness of the interview questions.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The process of data collection was initiated after obtaining the approval from the Academy research committee and the validation of the interview questions. The selected athletes were then being contacted to ask for confirmation and approval for the interview. A confirmation contract had to be signed before conducting the interview to ensure that all information provided is true and valid. The respondents were given an orientation before hand to ensure that they understand the objectives of the study and that they are required to provide the needed information.

The recording of the interview was carried out after the respondents were ready and had studied the interview questions a day earlier. All the recordings of the interview were transcribed and then sent back to the respondents for correction and validation purposes. The edited transcripts were then analysed.

The findings of the transcript were analysed. All of the interview transcripts were read and checked thoroughly. After the transcripts were read, they were categorized and arranged according to the information obtained. After that, the transcripts were gathered under general themes, main themes and opinions given by the athletes. From this information, the researchers were able to identify the significant themes used by the athletes in their self-adjustment methods. The percentage obtained from the analysis indicated the frequency of the adjustment methods used by the athletes being interviewed when encountered losses.

When the interview took place, the respondents had just returned because of losing in the MASUM competition. The respondents were made up from atheltes ranging from 21 to 24 years old. Majority of the respondents had participated in MASUM competition twice (70%) and the remaining took part in MASUM once (30%).

The data obtained from the interview were analyzed to identify the raw data. The raw data obtained were organized based on specific themes. The specific themes were then divided into 2 general dimensions that are (i) Coping Strategies and (ii) Methods of Solution (Figure 1).

Based on Table 2, it was found that 31.4% adapted themselves to their sense of loss by asking for social support. This followes by themes like engaging in other activities (24.4%) and focusing (17.8%). Next is solving problem (15.7%). The lowest theme used by the athletes was self confidence (10.7%). Based on the themes above, reserachers had classified the themes into 2 dimensions with 3 themes (social support, problem solving and engaging in other activities) were classified under strategies for self-adjustment towards loss and stress. Skinner, Edge, Altman dan Sherwood (2003), identified, 5 main dimensions in their analysis, (i) problem solving, (ii) seeking support, (iii) avoiding problem, (iv) troubled and (v) reorganizing awareness. In order to achieve one's goal, it is assumed that a firm relationship should exist between one's goal and performance (Hatzigeorgiadis, 2006). Therefore, 2 more themes (focus and self confidence) had been classified into the dimension of methods for solution. This is because in the process of coping with loss, athletes will need to set goals for their coming competitions. Indirectly they had to be focused and boost their confidence level in handling both of the situations at the same time. The source of mental power originates from the ability of those who are able to focus be positively and carrying out a routine in planning for coming competitions (Kristiansen, et al., 2007).

Researchers also found that 100% of the respondents being interviewed share similar goal that is to achieve victory in competitions they are involved in. Other than that, the factor contributing to their involvement in sports is the encouragement from family and friends.

3. Self-adjustment Strategies towards Loss and Stress

Through this study, researchers had divided the findings of the analysis into 3 strategies that are (i) Social support, (ii) Problem solving and (iii) Engaging in other activities.

3.1 Social Support

Athletes tend to seek external support to help them in adapting themselves towards the problem that they are facing (Skinner et al., 2003). It was found that majority of respondents had chosen the method of social support as their mean of adapting to their sense of loss (31.4%). This shows that athletes are keen on seeking for external support to release their negative emotions. Among some of the ways of seeking for social support is sharing our emotions with people that we trust such as family members (mother,fathers,and etc) father or friends. Friends was found to be the highest source of comfort and support (48%), followed by mother (30%), coach (15%), ad the remaining was for father. Researchers found that athletes are proned to approach their friends for comfort and support. This is because maybe friends are the closest to them next to family members at that specific moment. According to a respondent:

> *I will share my feelings with my friend. I will hug her and cry as loud as I could to let out all my feelings within. She was the one closest to me at that time.*

The reason friends and mother become the highest source of comfort is because they are of the same gender. This may also be the reason why they are the main source of encouragement for athletes to be involved in sports. Whereas coach (15%) and father (7%) had obtained lower value because they are of a different gender from the athletes. Female athletes could communicate better with female coach or trainer as female coach could understand and relate to the athletes more (Fasting & Pfister, 2000).

Social support plays an important role in helping athletes to overcome their stress and sense of loss. Social support will also indirectly inspire and motivate their participation in their field of sports and help them in putting their lives back on the right path. Among the views obtained from the respondents:

> *The place for me to complain and seek support are my friends, parents and my coach. I will tell them what I was feeling at that time. After I have let out my emotions to them, I will feel much more relief.*

This shows that athletes need a strong support from close individuals that are able to share similar feelings and experiences as well as their opinions and views together with them, instead of support from individuals that are mere listeners. It is evident that social support is one of the main sources of support for athletes to continue to be involved in sports. Omar-Fauzee, et al., (2009) found that social support also played an important role in helping athletes to overcome difficulties and stress emotionally in order to achieve success.

3.2 Problem Solving

Problem solving refers to the active attempt of solving a problem by introducing a set of action and plans (Skinner, et al., 2003). This strategy enables athletes to reflect on the scene when their coach gave them feedback on their performance during the competition. 50% of the respondents stated that thorough discussion or post-mortem of previous competitions help to lower their stress level and so they will have a better clarification of a certain competition. Through this method, athletes were able to identify their team's strengths and weaknesses. Other than that, 50% of the athletes stated that group discussions with team members will also help in solving the problems that they are facing. Indirectly they were able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. In this kind of situation, athletes need to be brave in voicing out their feelings and accepting the opinions of team members regarding the cause of the weaknesses and strengths of the team. According to a respondent:

> *After a competition, normally our coach will give us feedback on the performance of the team. I will listen to his explanation and will try to recall the situation during the competition. From here, we will be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of our team.*

The identified strengths and weaknesses will then serve as a platform to strengthen and improve the performance of the team. Through this method, athletes from the team will no longer face the dilemma of reflecting the cause of their mistakes and loss individually.

3.3 Engaging in Other Activities

Behavious that are present in overcoming stressful situations include entertaining activities and strategies such as acknowledgement and isolation (Skinner, Edgeet al., 2003). This means that individuals will engage in activities that will bring them happiness and deviate their focus on different areas (Omar-Fauzee, Yusof, Zizzi, 2009). Therefore, 35% of the respondents stated that they often went out for a movie, 27.4% chose to do window shopping, 34.6% preferred recreational activities (jogging, bowling, cycling) and 3% would go to lounge karaoke. According to a respondent:

> *I do not like losing. So, I'll do something that will make me happy. When I'm not happy I will not go down the field. I will go out with my friends to sing and watch movie just to make myself happy.*

Athletes will find something to help them to forget their loss and stress.

4. Methods in Overcoming Problem

The second dimension is preparation for the coming competitions with 28.5%. According to Kristiansen, et al., (2007), a boxer who lost in a tournament with repeat his routine and focus on the element that cause his defeat in preparation for his coming competition. Therefore, an athlete who has lost in a competition should take a step forward, be more focused and boost her self-confidence to prepare for the next competition. There are a lot of ways in adjusting to the sports of one's interest, perceiving it as a burden or a challenge (Kristiansen, et.al, 2007). Findings of the study show that the theme of focus is 45% whereas self confidence is 55%. There are also

athletes who are reluctant to be associated with any past defeat. The best solution in overcoming this difficulty is by looking forward and not be troubled by the past.

4.1 Focus

As an athlete, one should always be focused on this goal, to prevent him from being burdened with stress (Hatzigeorgiadis, 2006). For some of the athletes, a defeat is not everything. They prefer to look at things positively and focus on their coming competitions. There were respondents who shared their opinions as below:

> *Losing is still losing. The outcome could no longer be changed. So there is nothing worth regreting. What is important to me now is focusing on the coming competition.*

This showed that the athlete is more focused on the up coming events and does not give up easily. This goes in congruent with the saying of Lazarus (2000), that those who wished to succeed in a competition need to be focused and be motivated to leap to a higher level. That is the reason why a defeat should be treated as the a catalyst or stimulant for more successed. The focus on post-mortem for past competitions was 34.7% whereas the remaining 65.3% were focused on their coming plans.

4.2 Self Confidence

10.7% of the athletes who are involved in sports overcome their stress related problems by boosting their confidence level. This shows that self confidence influences the performance of the athletes in the future (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Cumming & Hall, 2004). There were athletes who refused to recall any past events. They wished to increase their self confidence and keep on moving forward. Based on the news of a respondent:

> *What I need to do when I lose in a competition is to go against my negative feelings and convince myself that I can get through this. I can do it! I need to identify the cause of failure and overcome it.*

Athletes tend to forget about their past failures. Among the statements of the include the following respondents:

> *I will try to forget about it as soon as I could. The fastest way is to forget about my loss after a good night sleep.*

This shows that when their confidence level is increased they tend to forget about their problems instantly. Indirectly, this shows that they have adapted themselves towards their sense of failure.

5. Conclusion

When athletes are able to adapt themselves towards their loss and stress in a short period of time, this will help them to focus on future events or competitions. This will also prevent the occurence of long-term depression among athletes as well as lower the probability of quiting at the early stages. Therefore, when athletes can face their sense of defeat or stress, they will tend to forget about their bitter experiences. Throughout the process, they will adapt different methods in overcoming their difficulties.

This study shows that there are a variety of methods used by athletes in adapting themselves towards their sense of loss and stress. Based on the research findings, athletes who adapted the methods of social support (31.4%) and engaging in other activities (24.4%) were higher compared to athletes who opted for other methods. This indicated that athletes need someone to share their problems so that they could detach themselves from their field. Indirectly, athletes will take a longer period of time to adapt to the situation to help them in generating a more stable state of mind.

It is hoped that the research findings will be able to provide more detailed information to trainers and athletes regarding the adjustment strategies used in coping with defeat and stress. Other than that, it could also be used as a guidance to trainers and coach in understanding their athletes deeper as well as assisting them in designing better training programs during the initial preparation stage. This is because, each kind of sports requires different methods of self adjustment (Kristiansen, et al., 2007). This is also the case for athletes, where each individual will adopt a different adjustment method. Although the respondents being interviewed were made up of the same gender, the methods used for coping with the sense of loss and stress were found to be different for each individual.

Based on the study, majority of the athletes chose social support as their strategy in adapting themselves towards stress. There are a few methods that could be used by athletes to adapt themselves to stress. However, some athletes tend to overcome their stress related problem and their defeat in a competition by preparing themselves well for the upcoming competitions. They will focus and increase their confidence level in order to overcome these hardships.

It is hoped that in the future, more detailed studies with longer observation periods will be carried out to examine the effect of 'coping' in a competition. The process consists of a few stages starting with the initial stages of preparation until the stage of facing defeat followed with a new cycle of competitions again. Through this approach, researchers are able to have a clearer view of the effect of losing in a competition on future competitions. Other than that, researchers are also able to determine whether the methods of self-adjustment towards losing are useful in helping athletes to cope with the up-coming competitions.

Researchers could also examine the issue of universities overlooking the significant role of coach and trainers in helping athletes to overcome their sense of defeat. This is because, only 15% of the athletes confronted their trainers for support during their time of difficulties. The selection of trainer or coach for a team is very important. Based on findings, athletes trusted their peers more compared to their trainer and, this indicates that indirectly communication problems do exist between the trainer and the athletes in the team.

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Table 1. Demographic Data of Respondents

Demographic Factors	N	Percentage (%)
Gender:	10	
Female	10	100
Age:		
21 years	2	20
22 years	4	40
23 years	3	30
24 years	1	10
Experience in representing MASUM	3	30
Once	7	70
Twice		
Achievement:	8	80
State	10	100
University		

N = 10

Table 2. Coping With Loss

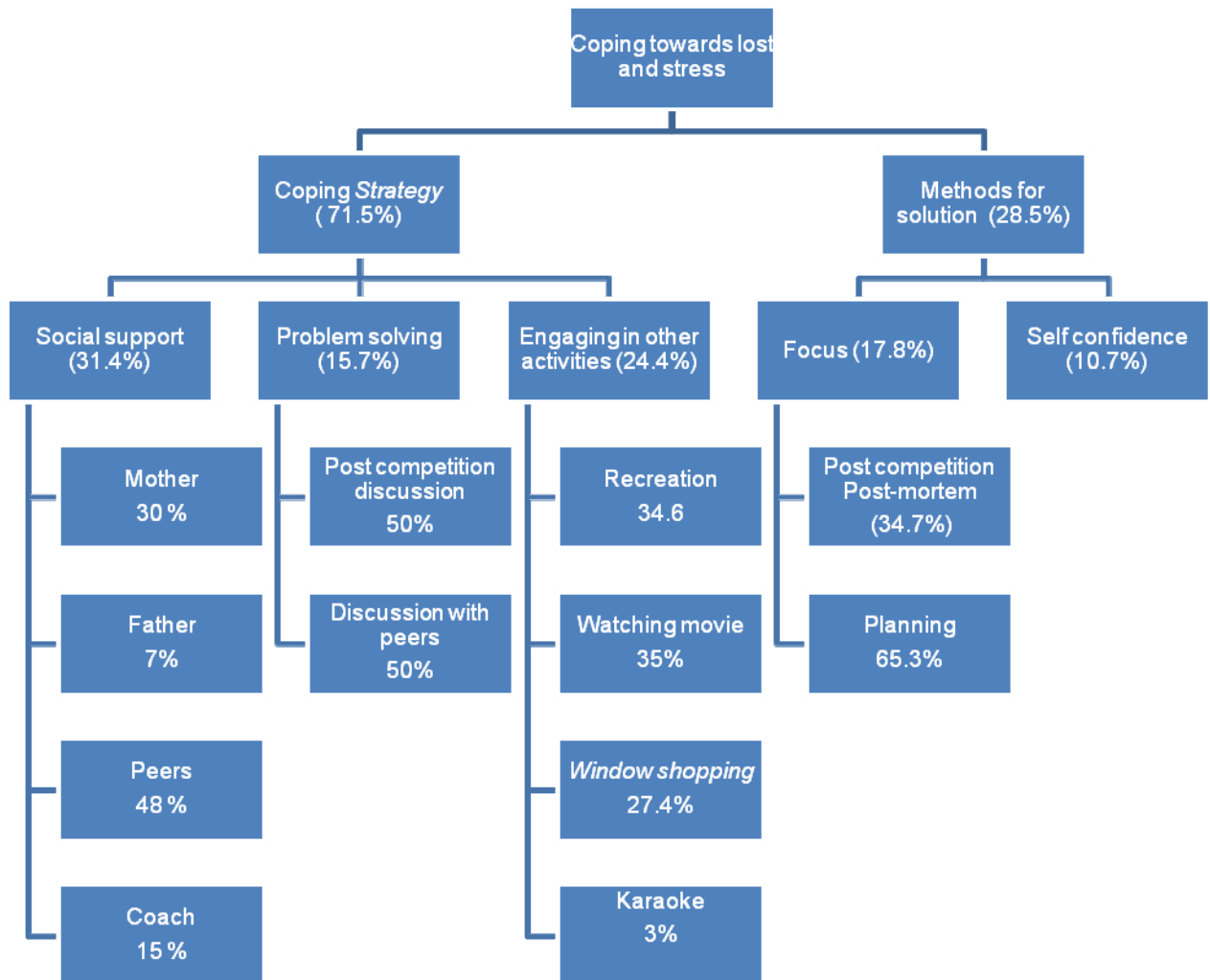| Main Theme	Total of Raw Data	Percentage (%)
Coping Strategies		
Social support	62	31.4
Engaging in other activities	48	24.4
Problem solving	31	15.7
Methods of Solution		
Focus	35	17.8
Self confidence	21	10.7

Figure 1. Themes on Loss and Stress