

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILES OF INDONESIAN ELITE SWIMMERS

Miftakhul Jannah^{1*}, Olievia Prabandini Mulyana², Toho Cholikh Muthohir³

¹Department of Psychology, Surabaya State University, Indonesia

²Department of Psychology, Surabaya State University, Indonesia

³Faculty of Sport Science, Surabaya State University, Indonesia

*Email: miftaaja@yahoo.com

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Abstract

In Indonesia, sports psychology is one of the branches of psychology that plays a vital role in improving athletic performance and therefore, it is not confined within the boundaries of academic research. Even though a number of studies have been carried out in recent years on the psychological profiles of elite swimmers, there are only a few studies which provide empirical data on the psychological profiles of elite athletes. Owing to the importance of the relationship between the psychological characteristics and sports performance of athletes, the the objective of this study is to determine the psychological profiles of Indonesian elite swimmers. Two sets of factors are identified from a comprehensive literature review, namely motivational and emotional factors. However, based on the literature review, it is observed that the combination of motivational and emotional factors has not been investigated in most studies, particularly the relationship between these factors and the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers. In this study, we identified the psychological characteristics of this specific group of athletes using personal interviews and focus group discussions with 14 Indonesian elite swimmers (comprising seven males and seven females) and eight coaches from the East Java Province. Based on the results, we conclude that that there are six psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers: (1) self-confidence, (2) optimism, (3) resilience, (4) hope, (5) emotional stability, and (6) motivation for achievement.

Keywords: Psychological profiles, sports performance, Indonesian elite swimmers

Introduction

In Indonesia, sports psychology is one of the branches of psychology that plays a vital role in improving athletic performance and therefore it is not confined within the boundaries of academic research. Even though the benefits of sports psychology have been discussed widely among sports officials, coaches, team managers and athletes, the number of studies in this area is not as pronounced as other branches of psychology.

Over the years, studies have shown that sports psychology has a significant impact on sports performance. One of the main contributions of sports psychology is to improve the performance of athletes. Sports psychologists have great interest in identifying the psychological characteristics that make athletes successful in their chosen sport. Hanton and Jones (1999), Durand-Bush and Salmela (2001), and Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett (2002) have all examined how athletes developed psychological characteristics.

Even though it is widely acknowledged that psychology plays a vital role in improving the performance of athletes, only a few studies are focused on the psychological profiles of elite athletes. Based on our literature search, we observed that only a few studies provide empirical data on the psychological profiles of elite athletes, and most of the studies are focused on the significance of psychological skills or performance strategies practised by high performance athletes (Vealey, 2007). Moreover, the earlier studies in this field are merely focused on discerning between 'successful' and 'less successful' athletes in gymnastics (Mahoney & Avenier, 1977), racquetball (Meyers, Cooke, Cullen, & Liles, 1979) and wrestling (Gould, Weiss, & Weinberg, 1981; Highlen & Bennett, 1979). Based on the findings of these studies, the 'successful' athletes are those who possess high levels of self-confidence (Gould et al., 1981; Highlen & Bennett, 1979; Meyers et al., 1979) and the psychological characteristics of short-distance beginning swimmers in Egypt (Khalil, 2011). In addition, 'successful' athletes are closer to achieving their maximum potential (Gould et al., 1981; Highlen & Bennett, 1979). However, it is interesting to note that none of the studies available in the literature show the psychological profiles of Indonesian elite swimmers.

Since little is known regarding the psychological profiles of Indonesian elite swimmers, and owing to the importance of the relationship between the psychological characteristics and sports performance of athletes, the aim of this study is to fulfil this gap in the existing body of knowledge. Hence, the objectives of this study are set as follows: (1) to provide descriptive data on the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers and (2) to examine the differences in the psychological characteristics between male and female Indonesian elite swimmers. Based on a comprehensive literature review (though not presented in this paper), we identified that are two types of factors that affect the psychological characteristics of athletes, namely motivational factors and emotional factors. However, we observed that most of the studies do not investigate the combination of these factors in understanding the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study consist of 14 Indonesian elite swimmers (seven males and seven females) and eight coaches recruited from the East Java Province. We employed a descriptive method due to its suitability for this study.

Data Collection Tools

We used the following data collection tools in this study:

1. Personal interviews with the subjects
2. Focus group discussions with a panel of experts to determine the psychological profiles of Indonesian elite swimmers

Results and Discussion

Based on the findings obtained from the personal interviews and focus group discussions, we found that the most 'successful' male and female elite swimmers possess the following six characteristics: (1) self-confidence, (2) resilience, (3) hope, (4) optimism, (5) emotional stability and (6) motivation for achievement.

We also found that both male and female high performance swimmers possess these three motivational characteristics: (1) motivation for achievement, (2) hope and (3) optimism. Hence, these swimmers strive for quality-driven goals, and they are highly conscientious and committed to their sport. Both male and female Indonesian elite swimmers naturally strive for excellence and they persevere to achieve their goals. These findings agree well with those presented in the literature, in which high performance athletes attain high scores in performance-approach goals (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2000). Hence, the need to demonstrate one's level of competence to others appears to be a powerful source of motivation for elite athletes.

With regards to the emotional stability of Indonesian elite swimmers, our results are consistent with those presented in the literature, whereby it appears that there is no link between emotional stability and sports performance (Hassmén, Raglin, & Lundquist, 2004; McAuley, 1985; McKay, Selig, Carlson, & Morris 1997). In general, we discovered that elite swimmers would like to increase positive emotions while decrease negative emotions as much as possible. Positive emotions such as enjoyment is one of the determining predictors of sports commitment and it is the main reason for athletes to be involved in sports activities. Our findings are also consistent with those of previous studies (Highlen & Bennett, 1979; Meyers et al., 1979), whereby high performance athletes tend to exhibit higher levels of emotional stability. Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett (1981) has also proven that there is a difference in the emotional stability between 'successful' and 'less successful' athletes.

Our results indicate that both male and female Indonesian elite swimmers possess high self-confidence. Self-confidence is a characteristic that makes elite swimmers capable of doing what is necessary to achieve his or her goals. It has been shown that self-confidence is capable of making an individual behave appropriately in order to attain the desired results. Confident swimmers are generally aware that most of their confidence stems from experiencing success over time. These swimmers have learned to work on the controllable factors in practice which will help them enhance their abilities and give them a feeling of success. These swimmers are fully aware that they have to put in a significant amount of hard work so that they are confident when they step up the starting platform to race. This finding agrees well with those in previous studies (Feltz, 2007; Gould et al., 1981; Highlen & Bennett, 1979; Meyers et al., 1979), in which there is a significant correlation between high self-confidence and sports performance.

However, it shall be noted that there are a number of limitations in this study which are worth mentioning here. Firstly, this study is focused on a sample of subjects (Indonesian elite swimmers) that have not been investigated extensively in the field of sports psychology. Even though we were able to determine the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers, the sample size is rather small from a statistical point of view and therefore, the results need to be interpreted with caution. Secondly, we implemented a cross-sectional design which did not provide insight on the effects of psychological characteristics on performance goals. Hence, we recommend that a field study should be carried out in the near future using longitudinal design.

Implications of the study

The implications of this study are listed as follows:

1. The psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers identified in this study can be used to evaluate their mental skills.
2. A method of assessment should be devised to assess the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers.
3. Standard levels should be established to describe the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers.
4. Sports psychologists and coaches should design more effective training programmes in order to improve the performance of swimmers, taking into account their psychological characteristics.

Conclusion

In this study, we have identified six psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers: (1) self-confidence, (2) optimism, (3) resilience, (4) hope, (5) emotional stability, and (6) motivation for achievement. We have also identified a number of psychological characteristics that are associated with the performance of elite athletes. Perhaps, the most encouraging finding of our study is the realization that most of the psychological characteristics that are critical to the success of elite athletes can be

developed and learned over time. Even though we have successfully determined the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elite swimmers, it is worth mentioning here that the results are nomothetic. Nevertheless, our findings provide insight into the elements of excellence in sports psychology. Furthermore, our findings reveal that the psychological characteristics do not differ significantly between male and female Indonesian elite swimmers. For this reason, adequate support should be given equally to both male and female athletes, and recognizing the unique developmental pathways that will cater to their needs.

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