

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORTS
BUCHAREST**

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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Title of the thesis: STRATEGIES TO INCREASE SPORTS GROUP COHESION THROUGH PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION METHODS

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Introduction

In sports that require interaction and interdependence to perform for achieving the tasks, coaches have recognized intuitively that collective efficiency and cohesion are important variables to ensure successful results.

Sports group cohesion is one of the defining factors for the achievement of performance by any sports group. Starting with the '80s of the last century, group cohesion has become a permanent subject of study and assessment in the specialized literature, with a view to describing and classifying as accurately as possible its components, and also finding out the most efficient ways and means to optimize this parameter in the sports teams.

Motivation for choosing the theme

Performance sport, as many other areas of activity, is directly exposed to the current economic and social reality, with all kinds of constraints which visibly leave their mark on the results obtained. In this context, it is all the more appropriate for the experts in the field to be concerned with using still unexplored resources, in terms of psychological preparation of the athletes from individual sports, but especially team sports.

The question that arises is: how to achieve notable performances in team sports and what are means by which these sports could regain their former glory?

Through this research, we aimed to deepen, first theoretically, and then, in a subsequent stage, practically, the complex topic of psychological intervention through methods of action in the sports group.

It is true that up to now there have been applied, for teams from various sports, different types of psychological intervention, mostly cognitive-behavioral approaches, and that the action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama) have found their application in therapy, education and several organizations; however, we have not identified in the specialized literature either from country or from abroad any mention about the use of psychological intervention through action methods in sport, in general, and particularly at the level of sports teams. This has led us to initiate the present research, which aims to bring theoretical contributions to the field, but mainly to practically approach psychological intervention through methods of action in sport.

Theoretical, methodological and operational framework of the research

According to the requirements of Regulations on the organization and development of doctoral studies at UNEFS, the thesis is structured in three parts, Part I, dealing with the theoretical foundations necessary to clarify the preliminary research steps, described in Part II, *Preliminary research on the possibility of applying psychological intervention through action methods to a female handball team*, and the experimental ones, presented in Part III, *Experimental research on increasing cohesion in a female handball team by applying a psychological intervention program based on methods of action*.

In the first part, the theoretical foundations of the theme, there are discussed issues relating to the sports group, cohesion in the sports group, the sports game and the playing team, with an emphasis on the specific demands of current handball game and their effects on the team, especially from a psychological perspective. There are also presented the basic concepts related to psychological intervention and psychological assistance in sport, as well as the theoretical foundations of the action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama), with arguments for applying these methods to psychological intervention in team sports.

Conclusions of the theoretical part highlight that studies on cohesion conducted so far make reference especially to football, baseball and rugby teams, and to a very small extent, to handball teams.

The analysis of theoretical aspects relating to psychological intervention through action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama) provides theoretical and also practical arguments for using this type of intervention in order to increase cohesion in a sports team.

The literature review emphasizes the absolute novelty of a psychological intervention approach based on methods of action at the level of sports teams.

Part II consists in a preliminary research on the possibility of applying psychological intervention through action methods to a female handball team.

In the preliminary research, we started from the need for “mapping” the roles assumed by each member of the handball team, and then, after applying an intervention program based on methods of action, we expected each athlete to become aware of those roles and subsequently to match them, the final goal being a coherent and cohesive functioning of the team.

During the preliminary study, we aimed to find the extent to which the action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama), as psychological intervention methods, are accepted by the team members, given that it is the first attempt in our country to apply these methods to sports, in general, and sports games (handball), in particular.

To meet this goal, it was necessary to assess the general climate of the team, followed by the familiarization of subjects with the working methodology specific to psychodrama and sociodrama.

The hypotheses underlying our research are the following:

1. Members of a sports team can easily familiarize with the working methodology specific to psychodrama and sociodrama.
2. Assessing the roles assumed by each team member and the level of empathy they show in the initial phase of team building provide important benchmarks to apply the action methods, which can be enhanced subsequently in other directions of psychological intervention, in order to achieve an increased level of team cohesion.

Preliminary research was conducted at the School Sports Club 6 (CSS6) of Bucharest.

The study took place between February and September 2011. The subjects selected for our study were the members of Women’s Junior Handball Team from CSS6 Bucharest, due to the favorable premises for initiating a psychological intervention program based on methods of action.

In this study, we started with a number of 16 subjects, but only 14 remained in the team (one of the female players was transferred to another team, and the other got injured); the subjects were aged 15 to 17 years.

After selecting the subjects for our preliminary study and identifying the optimal framework to conduct working sessions with the team, it was achieved an assessment of the psychological climate within the team by using the conversation (interview) with the girl athletes and initiating group sessions. The last stage of preliminary research was focused on applying the tools for the psychological assessment of subjects and designing the psychological intervention program based on methods of action.

After conducting the preliminary study, we can assert that the hypotheses of preliminary research have been confirmed, tracing thus the directions of experimental research:

Hypothesis 1, according to which *members of a sports team can easily familiarize with the working methodology specific to psychodrama and sociodrama*, has been confirmed, since the subjects accepted and got involved constantly into the psychological intervention sessions.

Hypothesis 2, according to which *assessing the roles assumed by each team member and the level of empathy they show in the initial phase of team building provide important benchmarks to apply the action methods, which can be enhanced subsequently in other directions of psychological intervention, in order to achieve an increased level of team cohesion*, has also been confirmed. Thus, in the further conduct of the research, we shall focus on developing the roles of Teamworker and Finisher at the level of the entire team, as well as on developing the role of Coordinator by “training” this role in the new coordinator of the game.

Part III, *Experimental research on increasing cohesion in a female handball team by applying a psychological intervention program based on methods of action*, has started from the premise that, in a sports group, cohesion is multidimensional and includes:

- task cohesion - the level of motivation in achieving the group’s objectives;
- social cohesion - the motivation to develop and maintain social relationships within the group.

The research objective was to develop sports group (sports team) cohesion through psychological intervention using action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama).

Research hypothesis: the action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama) applied to the sports team, in compliance with the methodological conditions required by the psychological intervention program, improve cohesion at the group level.

Specific hypotheses:

1. The application of action methods within a sports team improves empathy values at the group level.
2. The psychological intervention program based on methods of action enables the development of certain team roles.
3. The action methods applied to the sports team lead to an increase in the social dimension of cohesion.
4. Increasing the level of team cohesion, in general, and the social dimension of cohesion, in particular, is directly related to the performance achieved by the team.

Experimental study was conducted at the School Sports Club 6 (CSS6) of Bucharest, with the support of Women's Technical Committee of the Romanian Handball Federation. The research took place between the months of October 2011 and May 2012.

The subjects of our experimental study were members of Women's Junior I Handball Team from CSS6 Bucharest, previously selected within the preliminary research already presented in the second part of the doctoral thesis. In this study, we had a number of 14 subjects aged between 16 and 18 years. After selecting the subjects and designing the psychological intervention program based on methods of action, we performed an intermediate assessment of subjects and continued the group sessions, the research ending with a final assessment of both the subjects and the psychological intervention program based on methods of action.

The means used were focused on three dimensions: 1. assessing the subjects - using the following tools: Team Role Inventory (Belbin); Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE); Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ); 2. processing the game reports/sheets and 3. applying the psychological intervention program based on methods of action to the subjects.

The analysis of experimental research data leads us to draw the following conclusions:

Hypothesis 1 of the research, according to which the application of action methods within a sports team improves empathy values at the group level, has been confirmed by the results achieved by the subjects.

Significant differences have been recorded as regards the increase in empathy between the initial and intermediate testing, on the one hand, and between the final and initial testing, on the other hand.

Empathy has recorded a significant increase in value, confirming that through methods and techniques of action applied to the sports team, the team members can manage to “train” empathy, which leads to a more appropriate and rapid understanding of interpersonal relationships, with immediate effects on the game relationships.

Hypothesis 2 of the research, which specifies that the psychological intervention program based on methods of action enables the development of certain team roles, is confirmed by the dynamics of results achieved in Belbin’s Team Role Inventory.

After applying the psychological intervention program based on methods of action, whose purpose was to increase cohesion (social and task-focused one), the preponderantly developed roles were those of Teamworker and Finisher.

Results obtained following the initial, intermediate and final testing show a significant increase in weight of these two roles in the female athletes of the investigated team.

Hypothesis 3 of the research, which states that the action methods applied to the sports team lead to an increase in the social dimension of cohesion, has also been confirmed.

Analyzing and interpreting data from the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ), it has been found a significant increase in the social dimension of cohesion following the psychological intervention within the team.

The largest increase is noticed for the indicator “Group integration” from the social point of view (GI-S), whose final value has doubled compared to the initial one. Another important modification is noted for the indicator “Group integration” in terms of task (GI-T), which, in its turn, has increased significantly in the final assessment compared to the initial assessment of cohesion.

Hypothesis 4 of the research, according to which increasing the level of team cohesion, in general, and the social dimension of cohesion, in particular, is directly related to the performance achieved by the team, is confirmed by the results achieved in the National Championship of the 2011-2012 competition season, ended by the CSS6 team with winning the 3rd place and the bronze medal.

The results obtained from our research, validated by evidence (concrete results in the games played at the National Championship by the handball team investigated in this study), entitle us to assert that the general hypothesis, according to which *the action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama) applied to the sports team, in*

compliance with the methodological conditions required by the psychological intervention program, improve cohesion at the group level, has been confirmed.

Consequently, the psychological intervention program based on methods of action can be successfully applied in the psychological assistance of sports teams, bringing an important contribution to the field, from both the theoretical, methodological and practical points of view.

We think that the research conducted by us to highlight strategies to increase sports group cohesion through psychological intervention methods has reached its purpose, the obtained results contributing to the theoretical and practical improvement of two fields that are closely related: sports (games) and sports psychology. This statement is supported by the results achieved in both the preliminary and final research.

Preliminary research has proven that athletes, in general, and those who are members of sports game teams, in particular, get quickly and easily familiarized with the group work based on action methods (psychodrama and sociodrama).

Final research has revealed the applicability of psychological intervention based on methods of action and the impact of this intervention on increasing team cohesion, with lasting effects in terms of performance.

The novelty and originality of this doctoral thesis consists in the fact that we have designed an original psychological intervention program based on methods of action. The program developed by us can represent a benchmark or a starting point for other intervention programs applied to sports teams. Through this type of program, we propose a new way of approaching psychological intervention within the team, which takes into account the team building dynamics, the team's needs assessed in real time and the achievement of results at both the athletic and personal levels, issued from an "ecological" approach to the psychological preparation of the team.

Research conducted during the doctoral studies was promoted under various forms. Fragments from the thesis, under the form of scientific papers, were submitted at different national and international scientific events or were published in specialized journals.