

## THE REHABILITATION FUNCTION OF SPORT IN A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

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***Abstract.** Sporting activity plays an important role in the lives of many people, while at the same time affecting their social functioning. The problem discussed in this paper refers to the psychological context of sporting activity of prisoners, who are people isolated from society and subjected to social rehabilitation. The aim of the analysis presented in this paper is to identify possible relations between sporting activity and personality traits of perpetrators of crimes participating in the rehabilitation process. This problem is socially important as some personality traits may reduce the effectiveness of rehabilitation, while others may contribute to improving the effects of such activities and, at the same time, to positive functioning in the society. An analysis of selected texts relating to the problem revealed that the prisoners who were actively involved in sports had a higher level of emotional stability and extroversion compared to those who did not engage in such activities. Emotional stability is a desirable feature. Although extroversion may be considered a positive trait, it should be approached with caution in the case of prisoners as its high level may, at least in some cases, lead to impulsive or even violent behaviour.*

***Keywords:** criminals, mental life, personality, rehabilitation, social maladjustment, sports.*

### Introduction

The authors of the present study did not conduct research on their own, but they analysed scientific texts relating directly or indirectly to the subject of scientific research, which in this article is the psychological context of sporting activity of prisoners.

Rehabilitation is a measure taken to help socially maladjusted persons, and, in a strict sense, to people who committed crimes. The aim of rehabilitation is to guide a person in order to teach them live with respect for moral norms and legal regulations. Various methods have been used in the rehabilitation, including the rehabilitation through sport, since sport activity can instil many social behaviours in people, and may also have an impact on the psychological life of people. In the

present paper, the psychological context refers to the personality of a person, including the personality traits of the perpetrators of crimes.

Personality, understood as a specific configuration of traits that determine the consistency of behaviours and identity of a person, significantly impacts on the quality of his or her social adaptation. Personality traits are relatively constant, but through psychocorrection, therapy or resocialization, the attempts can be made to modify them. An important area of rehabilitation is sporting activity of socially maladjusted people, and this activity may also impact on the psychological sphere of those serving prison sentences (Jaworska, 2015, 138-140; Marzec, Sarzała, & Woźniak, 2018, 106).

The aim of this paper is to show the rehabilitation dimension of sport in the psychological context, which in this paper is limited to the problems of personality, and thus, in the context of possible modification, if possible, of personality traits in prisoners. The paper presents an analysis of the results of research concerning this area. This is a very important area of research due to the fact that one of the most important aims of social rehabilitation is to make positive changes in social life, psychological life, and personality (if possible) of a socially maladjusted person.

The problem of the role of sport in personality development and upbringing has already been explored in literature (Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Gallagher, Yancy, Denisen, Kuhnel, & Voils, 2013; Jaworska, 2015). Despite documented knowledge on this issue, there is a need for further research in this area. To date, no in-depth analyses have been conducted concerning the rehabilitation effects of sports with a broader consideration for the problems of the potential of modification (at least to a small extent) of personality traits of perpetrators of crimes serving imprisonment sentences.

### **Social adaptation and personality**

Personality plays an important role in the social functioning of a person, because it can largely influence the good or bad adaptation of a particular person to social life. In this paper, personality and its importance constitutes the psychological context of the resocialization function of sport.

It should be emphasized that there are a plethora of scientific theories explaining the concept of personality and its structure. Researchers (Hall, Lindzey, & Campbell, 2004) have presented various personality theories: psychodynamic (psychoanalytic), emphasizing personality structure, emphasizing perceived reality and emphasizing learning phenomenon.

This study will use the concept of Eysenck, approaching personality in terms of the three features: neuroticism, extroversion – introversion, psychoticism (Eysenck, 1960). According to this concept, personality represents a relatively

stable and permanent organization of the character, temperament, intellect and physical constitution of the person, determining adaptation to the environment. Character is understood as a system of voluntary behaviour of a person (will). Temperament means a system of affective behaviour (emotions). Intellect is a system of cognitive behaviour (intelligence). The physical constitution means the system of configuration (arrangement) of the body with the neuroendocrine system (Eysenck, 1960, 2).

This theory of personality is based on the assumption of reactivity of the autonomic nervous system and the speed and persistence of the reaction. In the environmental conditions which are not conducive to adjustment, high reactivity may be associated with the development of neuroticism (emotional instability). Furthermore, the difficulty of using conditional reactions may be related to the development of extroversion. Psychopathic disorders may develop in people with a high level of neuroticism and a high level of extroversion. On the other hand, people with a high psychotic intensity may show a tendency to behave in an antisocial, nonconformist and criminal way (Hall, Lindzey, & Campbell, 2004).

Referring to this theory, two types of extroversion can also be distinguished: the extroversion of good adjustment (clinging to people, social extroversion) and the extroversion of bad adjustment (impulsiveness and lack of self-control). In the situation of extroversion of bad adjustment, the people tend to be impulsive, manifest uncontrolled aggression, do not fear, do not feel guilty, are unable to analyse their inner life and have problems with social adaptation (Pospiszyl, 1985).

For example, Stanik (2013) indicates that the highest index of extroversion and neuroticism is observed in people committing hooligan acts and rape, and the lowest are found in those committing thefts.

Social adaptation may depend on a number of factors, including personality traits that may accelerate or inhibit the process. In the case of perpetrators of crimes, negative traits and their importance in disturbed behaviour should be analysed, with such traits including aggressiveness. Many criminal acts should be regarded aggressive. Sporting activity can also be used to reduce the level of aggressiveness and other negative traits.

Committing violent acts may lead to the formation of negative personality traits. In many cases, criminal lifestyles are developed. In the process of rehabilitation of perpetrators of crimes, modification of personality should be the focus of measures taken, despite the fact that it is a relatively constant structure of human traits (dimensions, factors).

### **Sporting activity in relation to personality**

It is rather difficult to demonstrate an unambiguous effect of physical activity on personality traits. In research conducted both in Poland and abroad, the personality of people practising sports is measured by the features of the Big Five (neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness and the previously described dimensions of the Big Three (extroversion, psychoticism, neuroticism).

Previous studies have demonstrated that each dimension in the area of Big Three is correlated with sporting activity (Eysenck, Nias, & Cox 1982). According to the research, people practising sports differ significantly from those not practising any sports in terms of the intensity of all three dimensions of personality (extroversion, psychoticism, neuroticism). A study by (Eysenck et al., 1982) showed that athletes have a higher level of extroversion and psychoticism and a lower level of neuroticism compared to non-athletes.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the trait of the Big Five that was most strongly correlated with sporting activity in most studies was conscientiousness (Rhodes & Smith, 2006; Gallagher, Yancy, Denisen, Kuhnel, & Voils, 2013).

In a study by (Bogg & Roberts, 2004), authors also found significant correlations between the amount of energy expenditure per week during practising sports and conscientiousness, as well as extroversion and neuroticism. However, it should be stressed that the correlation was positive in the case of extroversion and conscientiousness, and negative in the case of neuroticism.

People involved in sports on regular basis are characterized by an above average level of emotional stability and conscientiousness. Athletes are also characterized by higher openness to experience and extroversion than those who do not practice any sport. However, there were no differences in the case of athletes and non-athletes who were not involved in sports in terms of agreeableness (Kajtna, Tusak, Baric, & Burnik, 2004).

In many cases, sports undoubtedly have a positive effect on the psychological life of those who practice it. Therefore sporting activity can also be approached, with due caution, as a method of social support for prisoners.

Sporting activity encourages people to lead healthy lifestyles and it can influence the person's motivation, the structure of mental needs, values or social attitudes. However, sporting activity without proper control can lead to injury or overload to the body. In the case of prisoners, there is also a risk that sporting activity will be treated only as strength training, which in practice may translate into aggressive behaviour and violence in the penitentiary environment.

### **Sporting activity in relation to personality traits of perpetrators of crimes**

Based on the results of previous studies, the attempt can be also made to determine the potential effects of physical activity on the modification (if such modification is possible) of personality traits in prisoners.

Furthermore, it should be noted that sporting activities are widely accepted by prisoners as a form of rehabilitation, regardless of the degree of demoralisation. The most popular sports among prisoners include soccer, basketball, and combat sports, especially boxing (Poklek, 2005). The prisoners are also offered other forms of physical activity, such as Nordic walking, canoeing, and running. There is also much interest in gym training, which requires the presence of qualified coaches, who should help prisoners focus on the physical and mental development rather than merely on the development of strength, which can be used for evil purposes, i.e. against the objectives of rehabilitation (Jaworska, 2015, 139).

Research conducted in 16 prisons in Poland, which covered 249 convicted men aged 22 to 55 years, showed that prisoners who regularly took part in physical activity were characterized by higher emotional stability than prisoners who were not involved in physical activity (Jaworska, 2015, 144). Physically active prisoners achieved higher extroversion scores than prisoners without physical activity (Jaworska, 2015).

Furthermore, it should be noted that high extroversion related to the tendency for searching sensations, being constantly active, the need for changing and challenges, is a relatively permanent factor in the personality of prisoners engaged in sporting activity. Extroverts tend to look for stimuli and behaviours characterised by the lack of inhibition. This tendency may lead to antisocial behaviour. In the case of physically active prisoners, however, this property may turn out to be conducive to the search for other types of (positive) activities such as sport. Furthermore, with reference to the distinction between extroversion and "extroversion of good and bad adjustment", it can be assumed that the extroversion of prisoners practising sport is extroversion of good adjustment, conducive to the development of socially acceptable behaviours and, under conditions of isolation, can represent a form of substitution for aggression (Pospiszyl, 1985).

Sporting activity does not always lead to the integration of personality towards being more prosocial. For example, professional athletes are often characterised by nonconformism and low sensitivity to social norms (Eysenck et al., 1982).

The problem of antisocial behaviour should be considered not only from the standpoint of personality traits, but also in the context of the sociocultural

environment affecting the individual, which is particularly important in the case of perpetrators of crimes.

The rehabilitation function of sport has also been emphasized in psycho-corrective measures used in both prisons and youth detention centres. Sporting activity can help instil social attitudes, contribute to the emergence of new positive interpersonal and group relations, influence the formation of conscientiousness and responsibility, improve strong will (perseverance, motivation), but it can also represent an additional element in stopping inappropriate, or even criminal, lifestyles or a preventive element in the process of combating addictions.

### **Conclusions**

The authors of this paper realize that the problem of scientific research they have taken up should be presented in a more in-depth manner, but the available source material limited the broader approach to the problem. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn from the paper for the practice of rehabilitation of prisoners (and indirectly juveniles from youth detention centres). Sporting activity may be a factor that improves mental functioning of the prisoners if it occurs under conditions of appropriate control. The analysis of selected scientific texts presented in this paper shows, for example, that prisoners' sporting activity can enhance emotional stability and extroversion. While emotional stability should be considered a desirable psychological feature, extroversion is somewhat more questionable, as a high level of extroversion can lead to violent behaviour in prisoners.

In the prison environment, positive functions of sports or recreational activity (relax, playing) are often observed. Sporting activity in prison isolation often plays the role of training to replace aggression. The psychological context of rehabilitation through sport refers to a large extent to personality problems. Many definitions of personality have been used in psychology. For example, it can be treated as a structure of traits (dimensions, factors). Personality traits are relatively constant, but this does not preclude the emergence of at least a tendency towards changes. However, an immediate change is unlikely to be expected. Among the prisoners, the role of the sport can consist in the development of extroversion of good adjustment and reduction in the level of neuroticism. In the case of rehabilitation in the prison environment, in the case of an unfavourable set of basic personality traits, the behavioural tendencies may, through appropriately chosen sporting activity, be redirected towards physical activity and athletic achievements, so that they are not oriented towards criminal acts.

It should be noted that the analysed examinations present only the relations between physical activity and basic personality traits. Furthermore, personality

includes more traits which can perform the function of significant positive reinforcements in the process of social rehabilitation of socially maladjusted people, including those with criminal records. This fact can therefore be used among perpetrators of crimes as an important element of rehabilitation through sport.

It is also worth stressing that imprisonment alone can contribute to personality disorders. Through deprivation, stigmatising and destructive impacts on personality, long-term imprisonment leads to negative effects that may even intensify criminogenic attitudes. Therefore, the development of rehabilitation initiatives in the form of sport-related activity programmes is one of the possibilities of changing the deprivation and frustration conditions of imprisonment.

Physical activity and sporting success can be used not only to satisfy the need for stimulation, prevention of frustration and aggression, but also to inspire the spirit of sports competition and represent a form of activation conducive to individual development and providing opportunities for presentation of one's strengths in a socially acceptable form. Consequently, sporting activities, as a form of rehabilitation, may contribute to changing the perception of former perpetrators of crimes and facilitate their social readaptation, i.e. the process that occurs after they leave prison, i.e. in freedom conditions.

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