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Building an Identity Through Sports Career

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Abstract: Sports career involves an important educational process in the development of the human being. Through sports, each athlete achieves physical, spiritual and psychological skills that can help the social integration. The purpose of this paper aims to identify the mechanisms of internal motivation for sports career at a former basketball player. We are interested in finding out the relationship between internal motivation and building the professional identity and reaching a certain professional status. The date collected during the interview methods helps us to create a case study that reflects the building process of the identity of a professional basketball player. The date was collected in August 2017, when the interview took place. The former athlete nowadays is a 73 years old basketball coach. The interview was structured and investigated different aspects of his career: the psychological aspects of a professional athlete life style, the structure of his motivation for sports career and its implications during competition. We understood the social status of a sportsman as an important part of his identity. Our research led us to a better understanding of characteristics of the emotional support system of the basketball player and his needs identified for a complex training in sports competitive activities. The role of the sports competitive activities can be linked to the building professional identity and to the achievement of the competitive spirit and resilience in any stressful situations that can challenge emotional resources of the human being. We could emphasis the connection between the achievement of the sports educational process and the everyday life events where the resilience can make the important change between gain and loss, success and failure.

Keywords: Competition, sports, identity, motivation, professional status, resilience.

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1. Introduction

Sportsmen career has an official status since 1931, when Romanian National Federation of Basketball started. Nowadays the statistics show us that there are 41.800 basketball players in Romania and 21.886 basketball players are professional (Schiopu, 1997). Even so, basketball does not have the same popularity as it did in the 70' and 80'. The Romanian professional athletes have a different social status with a different social recognition for their work and role.

2. Problem Statement

Sports career involves an important educational process in the development of the human being. Through sports, each athlete achieves physical, spiritual and psychological skills that can help the social integration. Professional sports are sports with a specific activity in which the athletes train for improving their skills and have a better performance. The professional athletes get involved in different competitions as a final result of their professional activities and they receive payment for their performance. The sports competitions are important public events with a social impact and with the purpose of establishing the best performance in a certain sport field and have rules established. Each competition and game bring for the sportsmen new challenges and opportunities to highlight their achievement, progress and motivation.

Motivation can be understood from different perspectives but we could distinguish the ability of these persons to identify a task, and persist to finalize it. The motivation is a fundamental element of the human psychic, a reunion of needs, tendencies, motives, emotions, interests, and intentions, ideals that support different actions, life events and attitudes. Motivation plays an important role in human life, and can make the difference between success and failure. The athletes focused on their goals, intensify the effort, work harder to overcome their fatigue, pain or disappointment, that's how the motivation works for them. The competitions involves physical training, technical and tactical training, psychological counselling or mental coaching. The perseverance is one of the most important characteristics of the sportsmen, to persist until they reach their goals or their team's goals. Another important aspect of the motivation is locus of control, a concept developed by J. Rotter (Cyrulnik, 2005). As long as one person has a certain perception that the actions or life events depend on his own will, that means that they have an internal locus of control. When a person has an external

locus of control, that person believes that his own life depends on outside factors. The most efficient is a strong internal locus of control. The person with an internal locus of control has a better stress management because he feels that his actions depend on his own will and that his actions are important. As long as he feels that he can control what is happening to him, he can actively reach for different strategies of overcoming unpleasant events, roadblocks or injuries.

The status of the sportsmen is an important one, often they are well-known in their communities, they become public figures and they become role-models for the young people. The internal structures of identity are developed through identification process that creates an emotion of belonging that includes the need of acceptance in a group as: family, friends, co-workers, team, and religion(Atkinson, 2006). The human being has a social nature and it is developed in different groups: family, religious community, sport team, etc. Later on, the human being can make a distinction between "our" and "their", so it is born the competition and rivalry.

Resilience is another characteristic that brings to the sportsmen the strength to overcome difficulties, problems, accidents and traumas. Resilience is the ability to adapt and to reach success while overcoming different disadvantages. Resilience is understood by Boris Cyrulnik (Cyrulnik , 2005) as an ability that is shaped, developed during life span experience, so it is an acquired ability. Șerban Ionescu (Ionescu, 2007) associates the term of resilience with: "the ability to endure the challenges", "keeping sense and coherence", "invulnerability", "the ability to adapt to stressful situations". As an important part of the surviving mechanism, the resilience is a part of the human self. So, the identity that is structured during the ontogenesis includes all that the sportsmen know about themselves: abilities, performance, their will to overcome roadblocks - resilience, their social status, etc.

3. Aims of the research

The purpose of this paper aims to identify the mechanisms of internal motivation for sports career at a former basketball player. We are interested in finding out the relationship between internal motivation and building the professional identity and reaching a certain professional status.

4. Research Methods

The research methods used were the observation, the interview method and case study.

The case study (Yin, 2005) is an illustrative method that gives us access to the information about the interviewee's experience and opinion on basketball training, player-coach relationship and competitions in the 60' and 70'. The case study starts from some particular characteristics or a progressive process and analyzes in a complex manner. This case study gets detailed information about one former basketball player career and offers new conclusions on the needs and motivation in sports. This case study allowed us to analyse an extensive professional career with ups and downs, and a natural change from sports career to professional coaching. His whole professional career lasts for over 40 years. We consider this case study useful in understanding the building process of an identity through sports career and the building process of a social role model for the young people that are trained by him.

This research focused on one former basketball player and the interview took place on August 2017, at his sports club's office where he works as a head coach for the local professional basketball team. The interviewee is 68 years old former basketball player, with good sport performance at the National and European level. He was interviewed following an interview structured guide with questions focused on: the motivation for sports career, difficult moments and solutions in overcoming these during a sports career, relations and social status, resilience.

The date collected through the mentioned above methods helped us to create a case study that reflects the building process of the identity of a professional basketball player. His personal evolution, his career becomes a creative and fulfilling process.

Observation is a scientific method which involves a direct contact between the scientist and the scientific subjects. The researcher had a direct contact with the interviewee and could record precisely and notice some particular aspects that help us to get a better understanding on the human and sportsman's experience (Atkinson, 2006).

The date illustrates our findings regarding motivation in sports career, resilience and the role and social identity during a professional career.

5. Findings

The questions of the interview focus on the emotional charge of different life events or sports competitions. These questions make the dialogue between the coach and the researcher, an active interaction, rich in personal meanings on the events. The dynamic between the two persons is full of empathy and the personal experience is shared openly by the former athlete. The questions from the interview are open questions; the interview is on open dialogue and the relationship between the two participants has the purpose of getting a better understanding upon the interviewee's opinions, his particular experience and the way that he sees the issues, the problems and the solutions, his reactions at different events where he is a part of or just a spectator. The dialogue is a creative process of unveiling new meanings of the past events and in the same time opening new perspectives. The answers of the questions lead to a new understanding upon the emotional charge and motivation of each significant game or competition of his career.

The former athlete is a 68 years old basketball coach, working for the same basketball team in his home town where he played for most of his career. The coach is a well-known former Romanian basketball player from the 70's and 80's. During the communist period of time he managed to have significant performances for his team and for the city that he represented. For 20 years he managed to stand out in the court and to prove how motivated he was to become one of the best. Nowadays he proves himself as a coach and his work is significant for the rookie players and the senior ones, reaching for performance at the national basketball competitions.

The interview focused on four directions such as: sports career, motivation, the social status and resilience.

• Sports can be understood as a set of physical and psychological specific activities that facilitates human development and brings an emotional gain for complex and challenging life or professional events. Sportsmen face these challenges differently than their peers and our research focused on the difference that can be noticed in their **professional career** and everyday life. Sports career involves a professional perspective that gives security to the human being in that period of time. The sportsmen have certain facilities related the cover of the basic needs and the facilities to travel abroad, to have a social status and to become well known as a individuality. The former athlete says that "the [communist] party was giving" referring to the apartment that he receives because he is a

sportsmen. This situation that offers security and stability for each individual is not a common one for the Romanian citizens. Sportsmen have a different social status offered by the sports career and can get some economical benefits that keeps them motivated. The basketball player has a good performance and he is a member of the National Basketball team and he is allowed to travel abroad. "I didn't run away, I've never really thought like that because my sister was volleyball player. She could have had many problems with the party". Sports career is not a simple profession like any other, it is a profession that is protected by the State and its communist regime and the athletes enjoy better living conditions, which we can relate to the defense mechanisms and self-preservation.

• Though sports, the athletes build their intrinsic **motivation** for competition for reaching their goals. They act during competition because of their self-desire for gain or success. In this way, later on, the athletes start to act in their everyday life, focusing on the objectives of their activities and on their own direction of achievement.

The interviewee started as a child wanting to play football which was so familiar in that period of time, thinking that "basketball is for girls"; even so he goes together with a friend to basketball training and starts his career from there. After a while, he gives up on training, because his friend, a team member, leaves the basketball team too. He comes back, soon, after he understands the reasons which for his friend left. His qualities recommend him and his performance is so important for the local basketball club and for the national team of basketball. So, he becomes a well-known professional athlete. Even so, when he was a child he wanted to play football, in that period of time, sport was understood as football. He and his friends end up to a basketball court and start their training in basketball. He was attracted to sports because in his home town, people use to go to different games and sport events or competitions. In the 60' sports events were accepted social events by the communist regime, and the people took part to the sports competitions. The emotional support from the spectator is important for him, but for any other sportsmen. As we mention above, a part of his motivation is related to the economical aspects and benefits of his career as a part of the life-preservation and adaptation of the human and as a part of the social recognition.

• Soon after the beginning of his sport training, he is convinced that basketball is a future career for him and his qualities become a support of his performance, this career can offer him a **social status**. He doesn't express directly about how much is he fond of basketball but indirectly he talks about the lack of the encouragement from the club staff, coach or family

members. "I motivated myself", he says about his decisions, and his way of overcoming difficult moments of his sport career. A. Cosmovici (Cosmovici, 1996) explains that achievement motivation for the professional career is related with the desire for success, a certain performance that is socially accepted. We understand that his motivation for basketball is supported by his sport performance which is socially validated. "the basketball court was a circus!" – referring the show that is there, and that he is a part of that show. He is a spectacular athlete that is admired by the spectators. On one hand his career offers him a social status, on the other hand the people that are closed to him don't. He feels the lack of support from his coach, colleagues and family members. So, there are no relationships that can offer him the motive, the desire to act in a certain way, or to shape his behavior for an effective result. Along his career, it happens for the interviewee to behave aggressively towards his coach, or other basketball players as a defense mechanism. He feels that he needs to defense a certain place that he has inside his basketball team; and any verbal message, any action that threatens the security offered by his status inside his team, is followed by an prompt response or an aggressive one. We understand that one of the reasons for which he didn't play for another basketball team is related to the fact that he has a social status as a professional athlete in his home town and as a person, as well.

When he is asked directly during the interview about the support that he had, he says that he had no support system: "I was all by myself, no one was on my side!". In this harsh environment he build up his **resilience**. This singular position reflects a traumatic experience that somehow it is balanced by his passion for basketball and his performance that recommended him no matter what. At this point, the interviewer becomes a sort of ally and the confection carries on. His career of 20 years faces roadblocks but he manages to overcome all the difficulties all by himself. He places all by himself during his career, without an emotional support system. Without being involved in his career, his family stays by his side. We can say that the interviewee is a resilient individual and he fights to overcome the difficult moments, the periods of suspension but being so sure that he is coming back to the court "I was sure that I will come back!". We understand his own representation on his locus of control is a strong internal one. He refers to various actions as acts of his will and determination and the other external factors has no important meaning. So strongly motivated and with an internal locus of control he manages stress well and on a long term period of time. As an example, he is suspended for one year and a half, one time. When he comes back, he continues his career with no setbacks.

The lack of the emotional system is also linked to the social communist regime and its ideology which deprived the individuality. So the working class was important, in fact the class and not an individual. But trough sports career, individuals could overcome the ideology and find a breach into the system and affirm for themselves, stand out in the crowd.

6. Discussions

The sports career is a secure perspective for an individual during the 70' and 80'. The perspectives are good and the sports career offers benefits for the individuals.

Our case study reveals that a sportsman has a long sports career, 20 years, and his performance is rewarded by a good cover of the basic needs, the opportunity of travelling and other economical support by the communist regime. Sports career is not only a beautiful profession; it is an opportunity that not many have during the communist dictatorship. We reveal the particularities of a sports career during a harsh period of time in Romania and the limits and advantages of the citizens.

The motivation is an internal mechanism that sustains the actions of the individual and is related with his need of self-development, success and social recognition of his performance (Cosmovici, 1996).

The interviewee reveals that his actions are supported by his will and his passion for basketball. He is well-known in his home town and makes a show in court and people come to see him. He is sure that any of his actions will lead him where he wants to go and the roadblocks are simply challenges. The economical aspects are seen more like a protection not a real reason for his career.

The athlete's performance is related to the professional and social status that he has in his home-town. As a member of a social group, a community his role is important for others and their presence makes him play better, be stronger, feels that his work is important (Cosmovici, 1996).

His performance is validated by the presence of the people at his basketball games. "The court was full of people." and he keeps playing for the same team, the same people from his community, even if he has other opportunities to play for the best basketball teams of the period of time.

The resilience is a part of our development and the building process involves a challenging environment, a role model and a strong internal locus of control (Cosmovici, 1996); (Hayes & Orrell, 2013).

For our athlete there is no a role model, there is no ally, he is all by himself trying to overcome difficult moments, failures, injuries, bed games,

losing competitions, etc. There is no one on his side and he has no role model in his life, he needs to keep on trying to succeed, to change different aspects and pursue his believes, his objectives and desires. He is a strong character that turn from a spectacular basketball player into an attentive coach and tries to change different aspects for his players. He keeps in contact with his former players and colleagues, has initiatives in working with them, giving them advice and being a role model for some of them.

6. Conclusions

The case study that we created gives us a perspective upon the sports career and the development of a professional basketball player during the 70' and 80'. For two decades he plays basketball and struggles with all the political challenges of the communist regime. His perspective on his career is related to the social status and the social validation and he fights to keep on going. He feels alone, he has no ally or close friend. The coach and his colleagues are not his allies. He feels closer to the people that come to see him at the games or sports events and for them he makes a show during the competitions. In the same time he is a leader for the basketball team and a well-known individual in his community. So the social roles are far more important that the advantages offered by stronger teams from that period of time.

He develops a strong will in overcoming the traumas, the injuries, the suspension periods of time, bad relationships with the coaches and other stuff members, lack of support, etc. He becomes resilient and his resilience is rooted in the feeling of loneliness and of belonging. On one hand he feels alone in his basketball career and group of professionals. He feels alone because he has no one on his side, no matter what. But on the other hand, he feels that he belongs to the home-town community, to the group of people that loves him and comes to see him at the games, that admires him in court. These feelings mingle with his passion for basketball where he feels strong, invincible, tenacious, efficient and important. He does not have a role model in his life as a basketball player, but as a coach he tries to change that for his players and he keeps in contact with them, takes care of them when they are sick or injured. That is not his job but he feels that it is his duty as a human being and as a coach to help and protect, to encourage and motivate in or out of the court. His social validating still goes on and the social status is not something that a professional gets in a certain period of time, in a certain moment. The social status is a constant change and involves a permanent process of validation.

The former basketball player manages to overcome the ideology of the communist regime. He manages to become an individuality, the well-known athlete in his community not just a member in a team. He is a part of the team, but he is a person as well. He does his job with passion, he stands out and he finds the breach into the system. The economical advantages offered are more like a protection, a mean, not a goal for his sports career. His sports career is long and surprising as a basketball player and as a basketball coach.

The most important aspect of our case study reflects the permanent process of becoming of the interviewee. As a player he changes, overcomes difficult moments, looks for solutions. As a coach he tries to protect the players, to help and encourage each one of them, fights for justice and fair play.

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