

The sport of orienteering: performance of physically active people who partake in leisure activities but have no experience in this modality

Deporte de orientación: representaciones de los practicantes de actividad física deportiva de ocio sin experiencia en esta modalidad

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Abstract

In the last few decades there has been such an increase in the number of people that take part in the sport of orienteering that it is thought that there are more than a million participants in over 58 countries (Eccles, Walsh & Ingledew, 2006).

The present study aimed to assess the representations of physically active people who partake in leisure activities but have no experience in this modality. The study comprised 20 individuals between the ages of 25 and 70 years, from both genders (10 women and 10 men), who dwelled in the town of Viseu, (in the interior/centre region of Portugal). Subjects took part in semi-structured interviews (Ghiglione & Matalon, 2001). Content analysis was used for data treatment (Bardin, 2008).

The participants considered orienteering to be a utilitarian activity, within the area of nature sports. The majority had no idea that orienteering existed as an organised sport, which demonstrates the modality's newness in Portugal and the long road ahead.

The main reasons given by the participants when justifying the practice of orienteering were related to its taking place in nature, its fostering the confluence of the physical and mental dimensions, its being another choice for athletic leisure practice, which contributes to general personal growth, and that it is accessible for everyone.

Key words: representations, orienteering, leisure, physical activity, sport.

Resumen

En las últimas décadas, el número de practicantes de deporte de orientación ha aumentado de tal modo que actualmente se piensa que ya sobrepasa un millón en más de 58 países (Eccles, Walsh & Ingledew, 2006).

La presente investigación pretendió identificar las representaciones que sobre el deporte de orientación tienen practicantes de actividades físicas y deportivas diversas, en contexto de ocio, sin experiencia en la práctica de la orientación. El estudio tuvo como muestra 20 individuos con edades comprendidas entre los 25 y los 70 años, de ambos géneros y residentes en la ciudad de Viseu, Portugal. Para este estudio fueron realizadas entrevistas semiestructuradas (Ghiglione & Matalon, 2001). La técnica de tratamiento de la información utilizada fue el "análisis de contenido" (Bardin, 2008).

Los entrevistados consideran el deporte de orientación una actividad utilitaria, desarrollada en el ámbito del deporte de naturaleza. La mayoría desconocía por completo la orientación como modalidad deportiva, debidamente organizada, lo que demuestra la juventud de la modalidad en Portugal y el largo camino que aún tendrá que transcurrir.

Las razones que los entrevistados presentan a la hora de justificar la práctica de esta modalidad están relacionadas con el hecho de desarrollarse en contacto con la naturaleza, promocionar la conjunción entre las dimensiones física y cognitiva, constituirse como alternativa de práctica deportiva de ocio, que contribuye a la formación global de los individuos y es asequible a todos.

Palabras clave: representaciones, orientación, ocio, actividad física, deporte.

Introduction

Social interest in sport has increased in the last few decades and sport practice has become one of the most common forms of leisure (Lipovetsky, 2007; Van Tuyckom & Scheerder, 2010). According to Woods (2007), for about 65% of the American people, this kind of practice is part of their life style, which means that this is the mastering group in terms of sportive practice in current society. Also, the Euro barometer (2010) results reveal that 40% of the citizens of the European Union practice sports at least once a week. Among the reasons cited for this practice were health, enhancement of physical fitness, fun, reducing stress, and socialising.

According to Freitas and Tubino (2003), sports within the leisure perspective not only allow for the development of important physical features, so that health can be achieved and maintained, but also develop social bonds, such as friendship and partnership.

The search for leisure activities that do not require a certain schedule and that can be carried out around one's work schedule clearly demonstrates how society and culture have changed and consequently how sport has changed, where the practice of leisure, brought about by axiological changes, reflects the differences of this sportive practice in its various forms. Thus, we agree with Constantino (1993) when he sustains that the leisure time brought about by this social change gives birth to a new culture, where new needs, values, and lifestyles are mirrored.

Current society emphasises hedonism, the seduction of taking risks, the feeling of overcoming an obstacle and its exhilaration, individualism, the return to roots attempting to give life meaning, and consequently the search for nature and the satisfaction of ecological values (Pereira & Félix, 2002).

The sociological framework responsible for creating a "new" sport is influenced much by the development of new mentalities and behaviours (Bertrán Olivera & Bertrán Olivera, 1995), resulting in a new sportive culture (Constantino, 1993). Therefore, this brings diversity to sport as well as the mutation of other sports, with an emphasis on what is different, the excitement, and the adventure (Marivoet, 2002).

Bertrán Olivera and Bertrán Olivera (1995) share the same sentiment, mentioning that individuals nowadays have a large number of physical practices, many of them arising after an era of new demands, and others had to fit into this new society without losing their identity. Thus, since then, other sportive activities have begun to break free, which, until then, did not play a role as valid sporting offers for society.

We are witnessing the rise of new sports and different ways of practicing ancient sports and much of that practice takes place in nature. Constantino (2006:43) states that "water, earth, and sky transformed themselves into a great gym." This author further conveys that surfing and windsurfing, body boarding, skateboarding and climbing, walking, hang gliding and competing in triathlons are some modalities of the new era. Hence, nature turned itself into the vital partner in some sportive modalities.

These sportive modalities arise as an answer to the need for being in touch with nature as well as for the search for sensations and emotions beyond the daily routine and towards the will of finding new states of mind within a desacralized and secular society, paving a new way for carrying out one's free time (Miranda, Lacasa & Muro, 1995).

The sport of orienteering fits into these activities. In this sportive modality, competitors perform on a course in an unfamiliar terrain, with mandatory control points (Dias & Dantas, 2004). The competition area is prepared beforehand and detailed in an orienteering map, and it should be performed in the least time possible. The characteristics of the competition area drive the competitors mentally and physically, and the ability to choose the best route, combined with speed performance, defines the winner (Cych, Krompiewska & Machowska, 2011).

As a sport, orienteering began around 1850 in Scandinavia and was meant at first to be an activity of essential training for war purposes; later it grew into a leisure activity which ties contact with nature to an intense physical and mental activity (Ferreira & Filho, 2003).

The last few decades have seen an increase in practitioners and it is thought that nowadays there are over a million participants in more than 58 countries (Eccles, Walsh & Ingledew, 2006).

Portugal has also witnessed growth in the number of participants. In 1996, there were 670 active participants, and by 2010 there were about 2320 (Pordata - Bases de Dados Portugal Contemporâneo, 2011). This number comprises hundreds of practitioners of all ages, who enroll themselves in the novice rank on competition weekends, where events are held for everybody and without competitive purposes (Federação Portuguesa de Orientação, 2009).

Both the Portuguese Orienteering Federation and its affiliated clubs have been very active, which has given rise to the increased number of orienteers and to the growth of this modality as a valid choice for those who want to practice leisure physical activity in nature.

Due to the scarcity of research studies and studies based on international data (whether from national or international organisations), together with our solicitations to the Orienteering Portuguese Federation technicians and clubs throughout the country, we are inclined to agree with Leumann (2009) who stated that Orienteering holds many interesting subjects and has many questions yet to be answered.

Seiler (1994), after analysing the research carried out on Orienteering Sport on the Spolit data base of the Federal Institute of Sport Science, states that between 1984 and 1994 only 220 research studies were produced. However, the social dimension of the sport of orienteering attracted few researchers, and just 6 papers were found concerning this subject. Thus, this author argues for the need for more studies about this sportive modality, in order to provide more information for researchers and for participants. Among the studies to be carried out, he highlights those focused within the social dimension and the usage of qualitative methodologies.

Currently, a relevant inquiry arises about assessing the way individuals perceive the sport of orienteering. Specifically, several questions arise: Why are there more and more individuals practising this modality? What kind of experiences are they having during these activities? What are the reasons for choosing this modality? What are the advantages for their socialisation, growth, and wellness? How is this modality seen by those who have never practiced it?

According to the Social Representations Theory by Moscovici (1984), a representation is the reproduction of what an individual or group values, which gathers a certain meaning and becomes part of that individual's or groups' social reality (Charry Joya, 2006).

Moscovici (1984) considers social representations as one of the ways to perceive the real world, which is limited to its foundations and consequences. These comprise a set of opinions, explanations, beliefs, values, and attitudes shared by a group of individuals about a phenomenon and that are expressed by their thoughts, feelings, and deeds.

Social representations are complex phenomena that must be carefully studied, as they enable us to understand the systems of thought which support social practices (Molina, Silva & Silveira, 2004).

Following this guideline, this study is carried out within an exploratory context, employing qualitative methodology, with the potential to enable data collection to help to better understand the meaning, perceptions, and values participants express concerning orienteering.

Thus, this research aims to highlight the represen-

tations of orienteering participants (who are inexperienced in its practice) within this leisure contexts.

Our research focused on Viseu, a town in the interior centre region of Portugal. This town was chosen because: i) taking into consideration that in the large urban centres, individuals regularly practice sport (Van Tuyckom & Scheerder, 2010), it is important to assess the reality outside of those centres, regarding constraints and opportunities for sportive orienteering practice; ii) the regular practice of orienteering in this town differs from the national trend, as the number of regular participants has kept steady for the last 5 years (Clube de Orientação de Viseu, 2010) although orienteering is one of the sportive modalities with a good supply of activities offered (Calão, 2003).

This research is an exploratory pilot study, which may contribute to the knowledge of orienteering practice within the context of leisure in Portugal. The information gathered from some directors and technicians of the Portuguese Orienteering Federation justifies this study because, as they told us, this subject needs further research due to many unknowns. Furthermore, the data collection from some databases confirms this information.

Methodology

This study focused on 20 individuals, who were regular participants of several sportive physical activities within the leisure context but who were inexperienced in orienteering practice. They were aged between 25 and 70 years, they represented both genders (10 women and 10 men), and they dwelled in Viseu. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the participants (Creswell, 1994; Ghiglione & Matalon, 2001).

The interview guideline was framed keeping in mind the methodological demands determined by several authors (Bogdan & Birklen, 1994; Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1998; Ruquoy, 2005), and it took into consideration the purpose of the research, trying to identify the perceptions, meanings, and images individuals have about orienteering, as well the importance they give it.

After outlining the first version of the interview guideline, it was assessed by an expert panel in the area of sport science, specifically, in orienteering. After reviewing their suggestions, the guideline was applied with suggestions from the research, and then the reformulation of some questions took place. After revisions, the final version of the guideline was finally approved.

The interviews were performed by us, between October 27th and November 30th, 2010. They were duly authorised by the interviewees, taped and transcribed, and this transcription was the analysis *corpus*. Content analysis was the data analysis technique (Bardin, 2008), and later categories were defined.

The analysis technique and the data treatment that were employed were content analysis (Bardin, 2008; Guerra, 2006). A heuristic function was favoured, as the research is exploratory in nature, given the lack of studies within this sportive modality. Thus, and after reviewing the *corpus*, the categorisation took place (Bardin, 2008; Ghliglione & Matalon, 2001).

Utilising as reference the study's purposes, the units for analysis were determined (Bardin, 2008; Ghliglione & Matalon, 2001): a) the unit that was registered was the sentence; b) the context units were composed of the interviews; c) the chosen enumeration unit was numeric.

The categories were submitted to other researchers to fulfil the accuracy guidelines as well as the validation process (Ghliglione & Matalon, 2001; Pereira & Leitão, 2007).

Analysis of the empirical results

Orienteering Concepts

Our research attempted to assess the beliefs held by the individuals on orienteering. Overall, the answers demonstrated *unawareness* of this modality (Chart 1).

The sport of orienteering began more than a century ago and its path has been shaped by its constant growth and development, in its several domains, and we verify that there are still individuals that have no knowledge or awareness of the fact that orienteering is a sportive modality, as evidenced by the following statements:

"As a sportive modality, I do not practice it, I don't have any idea, I know little of it..."

Besides I didn't know that it was possible as a sportive modality...it was new for me...I never thought about orienteering existing, for instance, at School, as being a modality to practice."

"I am not familiar with it, never heard of it."

"Not very good. I have the idea that it might be connected with running, but I know nothing of its characteristics and what the goal is."

This opinion, when coming from our interviewees, might be firstly linked with the poor knowledge they

held about orienteering as a sportive modality. In fact, many people have little knowledge of this sport due to its recent history, although it is current in a growing phase.

Effectively, orienteering is still emerging in the country, as its widespread practice has only occurred for a few decades. Civil society saw orienteering for the first time in 1980, and in 2003 it was spread to the masses regularly through channel 2 of Portuguese Television (P.T) (Aires et al., 2011).

The following categories concerned the statements' uniformity, the utilitarian activity, and being a nature sport.

Regarding the *utilitarian activity*, a strong involvement and a strong connection to this activity's usefulness (like a resource, something handy and essential in the individuals' daily routine) was confirmed. Thus, their statements confirm: *"orienteering is my own orientation in a certain place"*; *"Orienteering eventually helps us to get to certain places faster ..."*

Seen as a basic requirement for the performance of several chores in their daily routine, orienteering is understood as a vital "tool" in people's lives, being used according to their needs and interests (Rabadán de Cós, 2008). It is a powerful resource available to these individuals, enabling them to commute in urban environments, as well as involving their ways of communication, aiming to reach a certain place or perform a specific task (Vinãmbres Mínguez, 2008a).

Regarding the *nature sport* category, it was highlighted by some interviewees. Thus: *"It is a nature sport. When speaking about orienteering, that is the image that first appears, practised in nature..."*, *"Orienteering practice is more connected with nature"*.

Chart 1. Categories concerning concept of Sport of Orienteering.

Categories	Frequency
Unawareness	11
Utilitarian activity	7
Nature sport	7

Chart 2. Reasons for practicing Sport of Orienteering.

Categories	Frequency
Contact with Nature	7
Harmony in physical and cognitive dimensions	6
Alternative leisure sportive practice	5
Individual growth	3
Can be practised by anyone	3

This idea is not only conveyed by these quotes, but it can also be obtained through contact with orienteering participants when performing our activity as the local orienteering club technician. This is one of its main features (Marujo, Marujo & Núñez, 2007; Navas Trujillo, 2009), something that is currently more and more valuable, thus attracting an increasing number of participants.

Representations of orienteering practice

It likewise seemed extremely important to become familiar with the reasons our interviewees have for practicing the sport of orienteering.

The most valuable category was that orienteering allows an intense and permanent *contact with nature* (Chart 2).

As a modality that takes place, essentially, in natural settings, orienteering is seen and valued by enabling direct contact with nature.

"[it] has direct contact with Nature (...) people can enjoy the natural social contact, see trees, hear birds sing while practising sports"

"It is also important, because we are practicing sports, to be in contact with nature."

"It is practised in open air, and more and more open air activities are valuable".

For this group of individuals, the value of orienteering can be understood by the phenomenon of increased urbanisation, by the shortage of green spaces, the high pollution levels, the population growth, and to the mechanistic and routine style of current life, which drive the individual to search for contact with nature (Pereira & Monteiro, 1995).

Also, the studies developed by Cych, Krompiewska and Machowska (2011) and Strangel (1996) reach the conclusion that one of the main reasons cited by the participants to practice orienteering is the contact with nature.

Sportive practices within the leisure context (in addition to their contribution to wellness, to physical fitness improvement, and consequently, to health improvement, relaxation, and reducing stress), are said to take Man back to Nature, as an escape to an environment that is more and more urbanised all the time (Marivoet, 2002).

It is important to highlight the growing interest in environmental issues that have been taking place for a few years (Maguire et al., 2002). Keeping in mind that this modality uses nature as its setting, participants must adopt a behaviour which contributes to the

balanced and sustainable development of natural ecosystems.

Another idea that was valued quite highly by the interviewees is that this modality allows for *harmony between the physical and cognitive dimensions*.

"It is also a more cognitive course, beyond the physical part, but the cognitive feature is very important".

"We are in contact with nature, walking or running and also practicing memory and mental abilities".

"Maybe, in most other modalities, there is a more physical component, but not here; this is a mixture... physical and also intellectual."

As a matter of fact, orienteering is a very demanding modality which demands both physical and cognitive performances from the participant (Seiler, 1994). Concerning the cognitive component, which sometimes is considered more important than the physical one, sight, memory, and concentration are emphasised (Cych, Krompiewska & Machowska, 2011; Cych, 2007; Dias & Dantas, 2004; Eccles, Walsh & Ingledew, 2006).

This sportive modality enables its practitioners the opportunity to face the physical challenge of running, and simultaneously, decide the route, which requires decision making in regards to interpreting the map and navigating with the compass (McNeill, Wright, & Renfrew, 2006). Hence, cognitive processes are required to read a map, to conceive a model from the map of how the terrain is, compare it with the real terrain, check terrain features, and relocate (Seiler, 1990).

The other most highlighted reason is this modality's feature as *an alternative leisure physical activity*.

Therefore: *"I think it is very important because it helps us to do more exercise..."*, *"I think it is important, because we are able to work out in nature."* *"I should say that I choose orienteering because it helps us have a sport to practice..."*

The sport of orienteering is seen and understood by this group as more than a sportive activity to practice that presents its very own features. Orienteering is well accepted and included in the large group of recreational sportive activities, and is therefore valued. The group recognises all the features that enable orienteering to be considered a sport, according to the terms set forth by the Commission of the European Communities: "... all forms of physical activity which, through organised or occasional participation, endorse to express or enhance fitness and mental wellness, designing social relationships or obtaining results on competitions at all levels" (2007:2).

Another idea that was referred to is the contribution of orienteering practice to *the growth of the individuals*. Participants convey that this modality, far beyond other benefits, allows for the development of several types of knowledge and constitutes a useful learning opportunity for everyone. Hence:

“To know how to read a map, to know how to read the hurdles, etc. is growth, on differing levels, that we obtain when practicing this modality.”

“... Learning from other areas related to orienteering... which is an element that enriches us...”

The sport of orienteering is positioned within the perspective of a leisure activity, and (in addition to other requirements) meets the condition for individuals' full development, promoting new forms of learning and useful knowledge for their development as citizens.

Also, Mendonça (1987) recognises its formative value, seeing unique features in the many subjects that surround it, enabling not only the coaches but also the participants to develop diverse knowledge from different areas, which, consequently, can be used on a daily basis.

This perspective of orienteering might also be closely connected to its recognition and pedagogical value at the scholar level. Being a part of the Physical Education curricula allows for the teaching of nature values, its protection, and interweaving with a set of disciplines and knowledge areas (maths, geography, physical environmental studies, etc.). Hence, *“it is very important for students' development. It is fundamental for them to get one's bearings.”*

Under this perspective, Madeira and Vidal (1993) find the practice of orienteering to be a “praxis”, when conveying knowledge within the school setting, as it enables the development of a set of abilities towards youngsters' overall growth. Also, Vinãmbres Mínguez (2008b) points out that the high cognitive component which is needed to read the map, in addition to the mastering of useful skills for other activities, endows the participant with the development of autonomy within natural settings. Therefore, all these groundings justify the importance of this sportive modality within the students' curricula.

Our interviewees also valued orienteering *as a modality for all people*.

Orienteering, with its features and specifications, allows all individuals to take part in its practice, without exception, regardless of their age, fitness, or aims. This is highlighted throughout their quotes:

“I think that this modality is a modality targeting all ages. It is [appropriate] for the little ones to the oldest...”

“... I find it very interesting because we can practice it with the family. We can practice a sport within a group or just with the family and I think it is complete at this level.”

“I think that it is an activity that, eventually, may be practiced within several levels. The easiest level [is] for people who want a leisure sport and contact with nature, but also for those who want competition, it is be extremely demanding.”

Orienteering is enhanced through its ability to gather individuals from various generations with different aims and interests. This statement is in agreement with Lipovetsky's (1994) when he claims that currently we are facing a decay of obligations, effort, rigour, discipline, and work, among others. Individuals search for activities and new sensations effortlessly, always aiming for fulfilment. However, the idea remains that more than the effort, what is important is to *feel* the search for maximum pleasure, within what we are doing (Pereira & Félix, 2002).

On the other hand, contrary to other sportive modalities, for orienteering practice, exceptional physical fitness is not required. It can be practised by people of different ages and purposes, and it can be adapted therefore to each one's demands and expectations (Ferreira, 2002).

The sport of orienteering can be understood as a low-intensity sportive practice that is available to everyone, embraces several practice levels, and each individual can chose their pace (walking, running) to reach the course's end.

Conclusions

This research aimed to highlight the participants' representations of several sportive physical activities, concerning the sport of orienteering (within the context of leisure), and the participants had no prior experience with orienteering practice.

The concepts expressed by the interviewees about the sport of orienteering are connected with a daily activity, as a vital resource for the development of personal and professional activities, unfolded within a nature sport. The subject that was highlighted the most was the fact that several individuals had no knowledge about orienteering as a sportive modality, which displays its newness in Portugal, and the work that remains, so that it can be recognised as a massive sportive cultural practice.

The reasons given by the interviewees to justify this sportive practice are linked with the fact that

this modality takes place in nature, enables harmony between the physical and cognitive dimensions, is an alternative leisure sportive practice that contributes to the individual's well-rounded growth, and it can be practised by anyone.

This study aimed to contribute to a subject in which very little research has been carried out. Although this study has limitations, we believe that the aforementioned trends cited by the interviewees

should be taken into consideration by the institutions that promote and support the sport of orienteering, in order to fit their many interventions as well as to help them keep in mind the interests and wishes of current and future participants and populations. Lastly, we believe there is a need for more research studies to be done in order to collect more data about a modality with so much potential though it is forgotten in some sport science research areas.

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