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Please reference this paper as:

Rees, T., Ingledew, D. K., & Hardy, L. (2005). Attribution in sport psychology: Further comments. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 6, 213-214.

doi:10.1016/J.Psychsport.2004.09.004

Attribution in sport psychology: Further comments

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Submitted: 22nd September, 2004

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Submitted: 22nd September, 2004

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In our original article (Rees, Ingledew, & Hardy, 2005), we outlined the complex and subtle role of attributions in sport psychology. In the process, we hoped to inspire a regeneration of research inquiry into this important topic. We therefore welcome any comments on our article, including those of Faulkner and Finlay (2005).

Noting a mismatch between research and practice in sport psychology, we suggested that the demise of attribution research may have been because sport psychologists have been researching the wrong variables and asking the wrong questions. We urged consideration of four attribution dimensions, concluding that research should focus primarily on the central issue of controllability attributions, together with how controllability attributions generalise across time (stability), situations (globality), and people (universality). We stated that a range of quantitative and qualitative methods can contribute to attribution research, offered some implications for practice, and discussed the social context of attributions.

The general premise of Faulkner and Finlay (2005) appears to be that, rather than studying attributions as cognitive entities, attributions should be studied as conversational devices. From this perspective, attributions are a game of words, slippery and unreliable, carefully deployed but lacking substance. In contrast to Faulkner and Finlay, we prefer to treat what people say with considered respect. We accept that people demonstrate biases, temper what they say, and protect themselves, but fundamentally what people say reflects what they are thinking. Consequently, we contend that attributions can and should be studied as cognitive entities. The best way to do this is at the level of attribution dimensions.

There are many purposes of research, one of which is to arrive at generalisable conclusions. Nothing that Faulkner and Finlay (2005) have written changes our understanding that attribution dimensions offer the best chance of achieving this. To date, research focusing upon attribution dimensions has produced many insightful findings. We

believe that it has the potential to produce many more, if the focus is upon perceptions of controllability and how they generalise.

Another purpose of research is to provide the basis for effective interventions. As in clinical psychology (Försterling, 1988), so in sport psychology, attribution dimensions appear to offer the soundest basis for effective interventions. Attributions are labile. People can think in attribution dimension terms. By encouraging people to clarify their often cluttered thinking, they can be helped to arrive at a reflective appraisal that they themselves find constructive.

The transcripts that Faulkner and Finlay (2005) present are a good illustration of how cluttered attributional thinking can be. Faulkner and Finlay want to study this clutter. We want to study how this clutter can be tidied up.

References

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