

## **Sport and Physical Activities as the Ground for Supporting Subjective Well-being**

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### **Abstract**

There is almost a global consensus over this fact that well-being is the ultimate purpose of any policy-making, especially in democratic governments. Participating in organized sports is regarded as one of the important social grounds (institutions) with the potential capability of supporting the mental health. High and long-term participation and attractive environments make organized sports a significant and positive instrument for facilitating the population level change in case of health treatments such as promoting the mental health, enhancing the emotional/social performance and the life quality related to social relationships. Taking part in sports spaces and fields or watching the sport matches create this feeling in the individuals that there is something going on that is far more important than the scores and results; as if the collective mind is given a new energy, and the individuals experience a sort of joy and happiness caused by participating in sport events or just watching them. Sports can be an attractive environment for supporting the subjective well-being, which can be realized by focusing on the importance of sports in childhood and adolescence, while supporting the subjective well-being in such periods and considering its positive effects on the future periods of life. Since subjective well-being is considered as a developmental index of societies and regarding the significant role of sports and physical activities in creating such feeling, it seems necessary that more attention be paid to sports and principled investments be done in this social institution, besides having responsible management and planning. The instances of such marks can be enumerated as the development of sport clubs, development of sport for all, building health road in public places like parks and sidewalks, and providing sports and sports facilities for all categories and groups of the society regardless of gender, age and ethnicity.

**Keywords:** Subjective well-being, Physical activities, Sports participation

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, there have been many changes in the definition of health. Currently, the health psychology is not solely focused on the negative aspects and the ways to eradicate them; rather, as it is mentioned in the definition of health provided by World Health Organization (WHO), the positive aspects of health and reinforcing them are also taken into consideration (Baum, Revenson, & Singer, 2001). The WHO enumerates the life quality indexes as happiness, life satisfaction, well-being, self-actualization, welfare, purposeful function, and full social, mental and physical well-being, so the subjective well-being is one of the main factors of life quality (WHO, 1997; cited from Farahani, Mohammadkhani, & Jokar, 2009).

Health is a dynamic state, according which the individuals adapt themselves with the changes of external and internal environments. Health is influenced by the mental, social, physical and spiritual dimensions. Hence, it is needed to consider all the health dimensions comprehensively. In addition, health has some subjective dimensions which are less considered (Kheiri et al., 2014). Frisch believes that studying the individuals' subjective well-being and promoting it, is one of the greatest scientific challenges facing the humankind, besides challenges like technological and medical developments and progresses made in wealth (Frisch, 2005). In fact, the significant characteristics that a healthy individual must have is the sense of subjective well-being (Korai Nouri, Mocrine, Mohammadifar, & Yazdani 2002).

Currently, the literature on well-being and positive psychology is increasingly on the rise. The subjective well-being is an important structure in the research on personality interpretation, and it is defined as a positive measurement of life and balance between positive and negative emotions (Ghazanfari, 2006). The nature of subjective well-being and its determining factors is of the most essential issues that humankind has always tried to discover (King, 2008).

Nowadays, all communities have gained this awareness that the subjective well-being and paying attention to the health issues, is the basis for the human's development and evolution, and they try hard to reach a desired level of mental and subjective well-being. Also, individuals with positive attitude are more popular and more successful in their education, occupation, sports and social/familial life, as Lazarus

maintains that there is a deep relation between subjective well-being and physical well-being (Sazgar, 2010).

Since people can feel happy, self-actualized and so on (which are the indexes of subjective well-being), it seems that sports can have some correlation with subjective well-being. Hence, in this paper we will discuss this important issue and also the relation between sports and subjective well-being.

### **The Concept of Subjective Well-being and its Dimensions**

One of the important concepts in the context of life quality and the positive psychology approach is the concept of well-being. Many philosophers of ethical theories, especially the Epicurean thinkers focusing on pleasure principle have discussed the concept of joy and well-being, in the history. However, it was Diener who first methodologically investigated the term "subjective well-being" and its related structures in the field of psychology in 1980, and he was the one that suggested this term to be used instead of happiness (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002; Ghasemi, Kajbaf, & Rabiei, 2011).

Subjective well-being, that is the people's cognitive and emotional evaluation of their lives, involves what everyone calls happiness, peace, prosperity and life satisfaction. People with high level of well-being experience more positive emotions; have positive evaluations of their past, future, others, events and things happening to them and describe such incidents pleasant. However, the ones with lower levels of well-being evaluate the mentioned as unfavorable and experience more negative emotions like stress and depression (Peyvastehgar, 2010).

Subjective well-being has two cognitive and emotional dimensions. The cognitive dimension of well-being means the people's cognitive evaluation of their life satisfaction level, and the emotional dimension is having the maximum positive affect and the minimum negative affect (Eid & Larsen, 2008).

Subjective well-being is the scientific term for describing the way a person evaluates his/her life. People evaluate their lives according to a general judgment (like life satisfaction or the sense of self-actualization), or based on evaluations of some aspects of life (like marriage or occupation) or on the basis of the emotional feelings about the things happening to them (pleasant emotional feeling means the one that is

gained by the person's positive affect and unpleasant emotions are the ones resulting from the negative affect).

Subjective well-being is a general term which includes various evaluations of an individual of his/her life may consist of joy, sense of self-actualization and so on. The essential point here is that in subjective well-being, it is the person that evaluates his/her life not the reports, experts or the social theories and criteria, so the person is the one that reports and asks: "Is my life going on well in line with my ideas and criteria?" (Diener and Lucas, 2000).

Well-being is a complicated concept that refers to a high-quality life. The studies on this issue follow two main attitudes: 1) the pleasure-oriented hedonism which emphasizes joy and happiness and regards well-being as the way to gain joy and avoid pain; 2) eudaemonism which focuses on the meaning of life and self-realization. This school of thought sees well-being as how far a person can realize his/her capabilities. These two attitudes have brought about various types of research (Mirza Hussein, 2007). According to Huta & Ryan (2010), the hedonistic well-being is more suitable for short-term periods while the eudaemonistic one can be helpful for long-term periods, lasting more than three months. The literature of the field shows a positive correlation (average to high) between the psychological basic needs and hedonistic well-being in the environment where healthy people do sports. Furthermore, the systematic investigation of the impact of sports and physical activities since childhood to the old age, especially in prisons, has demonstrated positive impacts on the mental health (Woods, Breslin, & Hassan, 2017).

### **Sport and its Objectives**

Sport is called as a complicated issue in some resources. In its modern form, sport is a new phenomenon, and it is now thought as a refuge against the industrial communities; a refuge where the people can seek facing the life and occupational stress and problems in those countries. Joining a club now has become an accepted tradition and sport is now one of the main aspects of life. Some of the sport sociologists regard sport as the "civil religion" of the modern society.

Sport is a very effective instrument and a favorable one for reaching the following objectives:

1. Health and well-being objectives
  - Ensuring bodily health and protecting the body from disorders and diseases
  - Facilitating the body reinforcement as far as possible and keeping the balance
  - Creating vigor and coordination among the body organs in order to gain strength, speed, agility and proficiency
  - Creating resistance, and increasing the endurance and making the individuals be patient against the hardship
2. Ethical and Educational Objectives
  - Training the mind and paving the way for personal independence, patience, perseverance, and sacrifice
  - Developing positive affect and directing them toward the well-doing and bliss
  - Paying attention to self-esteem and being strong against the adversities
  - Increasing the power to make immediate, fair, economic and proper decisions
  - Developing attentiveness, comparison, and distinction and directing them toward the desired objectives
3. Mental and Social Objectives
  - Reinforcing the mind and strengthening it against the sensual whims and overcoming envy, selfishness and malice
  - Balancing the emotions and controlling states such as wrath, hatred, fear and love
  - Eradicating the mental complications caused by stress, isolation, despair and phobias
  - Gaining joy that is always necessary for one's survival
  - Developing character, intelligence and curiosity
  - Realizing the potential capacities of human beings and giving them the opportunity to exploit their inner resources
4. Kinesthetic and Skill-related Objectives
  - Acknowledging the kinesthetic capabilities and developing them, besides developing other innate abilities (Namazizadeh & Salahshour, 2008: 4-6).

Many ministries of sports and health maintain that participating sport activities is an important political objective at all the social levels. The aim of such policy is rooted in the statistics which shows that the citizens of many countries are not increasingly active in gaining the health benefits (Ruseski, Humphreys, Hallman, Wicker, & Breuer, 2014).

### **Sport and Subjective Well-being**

It is now more than two decades that the impact of sport has gained the attention of many researchers, as sport affects the society both as a component of education system and as a source of entertainment (Amiri, Mohammadi, & Barari, 2015).

One of the important social environments (institutions) with the potential power for supporting the mental health is participating in the organized sport (Hajkowicz, Cook, Wilhelmseder, & Boughen, 2013; Swann et al., 2018). Organized sport can be defined as an activity which includes physical exercise or skill, which is organized and has an organization for education or competition presented by a club or association beyond the school hours (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Swann et al., 2018). If such activity is well-organized, then the sport can enhance the emotional and social performance, the life quality related to health and protective factors such as self-esteem, positive social relations and well-being (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Holt, 2016; Holt et al., 2017; Swann et al., 2018). As a result of such strong physiological, mental and social advantages, participating in organized sports can protect teenagers and younger adults from the suicide thoughts and attempts. In fact, the teenagers who quit the organized sport, suffer from mental disorders 10 to 20 percent more than their athletic peers (Swann et al., 2018).

The scholars and state policy-makers often ignore the difference among health, welfare, happiness and subjective well-being (SWB) which shows that health, happiness and SWB are correlated (Rasciute & Downward, 2010; Ruseski et al., 2014). Sport participation was reported to have both positive (e.g., therapeutic) and negative (e.g., stressful) effects on mental health, particularly at higher standards of competition (Swann et al., 2018).

While health is often regarded as a full physical and mental soundness, some believe that such definition is more related to happiness rather than to health (Saracci, 1997; Ruseski et al., 2014).

Both terms, "health and happiness", define rather different life experiences whose relations are not fixed nor eternal. Distinguishing health from happiness is so difficult as any disorder in happiness can be regarded as a health problem (WHO, 2005; Ruseski et al., 2014).

Borooah considers good health as the most important resource for happiness, in which health is determined through self-evaluation or the lack of any health problem (Ruseski et al., 2014). The proper life style like having breakfasts or participating in regular physical exercises is directly related to mental health (Chen et al., 2005; Ghafouri, 2017).

Policy-makers currently have determined the importance of SWB as a political objective. In England, the coalition government has asked the Office for National Statistics to think about the proper actions for SWB. This is the echo of ex-president Sarkozy in the defense of Joseph Stiglitz's idea which says: economic welfare is not measured by GDP; rather it is related to SWB. Hence, the information on various factors effective on SWB has become increasingly important (Pawlowski, Downward, & Rasciute, 2014).

Since sport has different political and social impacts on national and international areas (Ghaedi, 2014; cited from Malakutian, 2009), and also as the sport's social function is formed in developing and consolidating the social relationships from childhood, adolescence to older ages which includes character formation, showing latent talents, and mental, logical and social developments (Hosseini-Abrishami, 2004). We can say that sport is a sociocultural phenomenon that affects social institutions, groups and elements which means that the sport achievement is generally a public index (Shahbazi, Salami, Sadeghi, & Shirzadi, 2016).

## **DISCUSSION**

Sport gradually gained a special position in the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture and now in 21<sup>st</sup> century, this gradual progress has become more accelerated. Now, in the social space and collective life, there are some places and moments marked by sports. The instances of such marks can be enumerated as the development of sport clubs, development of public sports, building health centers in public places like parks and sidewalks. According to the facts and figures, allocating some time to sports during

the week by people in recent years shows the higher level of attention to mental and physical health in the industrialization era.

There is a mutual relationship between sport and society. Sociologists emphasized the impact of society on sport, meaning that sport reflects the sociocultural relationships in the society; however, recently the researchers have been seeking to investigate the impact of sport on society which is another dimension of such correlation (Rahmani Firoozjah, Sharipour, & Rezaei Pasha, 2011).

Sport is generally becoming a central political objective for states, due to the importance of health care systems, and also because of the significance of economy (Pawlawski et al., 2014). Correct and regular sport exercises as an important part of a person's daily life can be effective in community's health and influential in doing social responsibilities and duties (Dadashi, 2000).

A fairly accurate definition of SWB is as follows: a wide range of phenomena which includes emotional reactions, satisfaction and a general evaluation of one's life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, p 277). This conceptualization has two different components (Diener, 1994): The emotional part which refers to the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect; and a cognitive part. The emotional component is the evaluation of the emotions and feelings' pleasure level, while the cognitive one is the evaluation based on the information about how much one's life corresponds his expectations and ideals. Schwartz and Strack (1999) have defined subjective well-being as the individual's current evaluation of his/her happiness. This evaluation is often expressed by emotional words; as when the subjects are asked about the subjective well-being, they usually reply: "I feel good" (Hallmann, Breuer, & Kühnreich, 2013).

There is almost a global consensus over this fact that well-being is the ultimate purpose of any policy-making, especially in democratic governments. The main question is that how we can gain well-being. Among those politicians and consultants of policy-making that are more considerate, there is a sense that we must ask ourselves to what extent the economic activities and other social activities have been useful in creating well-being. In any case, well-being can be a function of economic activity, but it is clear that this relationship is not simple as



there are some other variables that intervene (Seaford, 2013; cited from Aghababa'i, 2015, p 51).

The most popular factor in case of SWB is the income. Diener (1984) and Tella, MacCulloch, and Oswald, (2001) proposed that the household income is positively correlative with subjective well-being and happiness. Cross-sectional studies (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004; Shields and Price, 2005) and panel studies (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010; Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Frijters, 2004) have confirmed these findings. This shows that the people with higher levels of welfare are happier. In order to explain this finding, Pawlowski et al. (2014) refer to Frey and Stutzer (2002) who maintain that having a fair amount of income affects the subjective well-being created by the people's relative judgment. However, other studies show that people with lower levels of welfare, have higher national satisfaction compared to life satisfaction (Morrison, Tay, & Diener, 2011). Occupational status also positively influences the happiness level (Kavetsos & Szymanski, 2010; Pawlowski, Breuer, & Leyva, 2011) and it shows that employed people are happier than the unemployed. In addition, a positive correlation was found between good education and welfare (Kavetsos & Szymanski, 2010; Shields and Price, 2005) which was not odd considering the positive effect of income on happiness. Nevertheless, it was clear that education has nothing to do with subjective well-being (Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & Diener, 1993). Also, it was found that factors such as gender (Pawlowski, Downward, & Rasciute, 2011; Spiers & Walker, 2008) and race (Diener et al., 1993) has no considerable impact on the subjective well-being (Hallmann et al., 2013).

Generally, SWB literature argues that the profit can be related to the consumption-oriented social relationships. Social relationships can form with consumption (relationship goods) whose consumption directly increases the others' individual profit (Pawlowski et al., 2014).

In recent years, SWB has been regarded as one of the development indexes of countries and even some resources, consider it superior than the GDP. Countries with higher levels of quality of life and scientific progresses have higher scores of SWB and of course, the participation level of physical activity (of recreational type) is higher in the mentioned countries (Medadi Nansa & Ghafouri, 2017).

## CONCLUSIONS

Logically, the decision to do a sport activity must be related to the SWB increase in the individuals besides maximizing the rational profit. Nevertheless, it is also related to the relational element of this activity. For instance, the competitive sport participation often takes place in official groups, although voluntarily and organized in most cases. Even non-competitive sport participation often needs some teammates. In addition, according to the data collected from the European Commission's Standard Euro-barometer survey (2010), 25 percent of the respondents said that "being with friends" was one of their main reasons for participating in physical activities .

Such interpersonal activities can be in the form of watching live broadcast of sport events as a part of a crowds. It is argued that the crowd space somehow consists of the main product which is the professional sport. There is this belief that such social domain of event consumption can affect the sport results (contributing to the home concepts and influencing the officials). As it is acknowledged that success can increase the sport events attendance, and it can also be inferred that some amount of SWB can be attributed to the sport performance which is also influenced by the sport consumption. In any case, the argument here is that the social pride can be a demonstration of (useless) value or hosting sport events and succeeding in them (As it was mentioned above), and it can be related to this concept that a good feeling and pride caused by sport achievements are SWB's main components (Pawlowski et al., 2014).

Sport achievements are important for people of different income levels and therefore, no particular difference was found here. Like the findings in case of pride and honor caused by sport achievements, the variables like sport experts and sport participation had positive and significant impact on the perceived happiness when the German athletes succeeded in international sport events. Again, this finding can be justified by participation in sports. It is also of importance that the government and politician be aware of the fact that all the society members do not benefit from the sport achievement to the same extent. The results especially show that investment in elite sports and scouting talents can be used as a political instrument for social integration (Hallmann et al., 2013).

The wide literature of the determining factors of SWB (from all the used data in the analysis) has been investigated by Dolan, Peasgood, & White, (2008) and Frey (2008). Since these investigations are done in the experimental literature on the direct impact of sport on SWB, it shows the high importance of SWB in politics.

Most of the studies are focused on the impact of sport participation or physical education on SWB. For instance, Becchetti, Pelloni, and Rossetti, (2008) has investigated the German SOEP - Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) to show that SWB increases by the increase of attendance in social gatherings, attending the cultural programs, participating in sport, doing voluntary actions, attending churches or other religious organizations. Lechner (2009) showed the considerable positive impact of sport participation on men's SWB and its ignorable effect on women, using an adaptive estimator in GSOEP data. In contrast, Huang and Humphreys (2012) demonstrated the positive significant impact of sport participation on SWB of both genders using the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data. This correlation has been widely confirmed for the inactive Korean population. Other studies also show that the sport's effect on SWB may depend on the type of sport, having or lacking social interaction and the people's age (Pawlowsky et al., 2014).

Swann et al., (2018) in a research titled "Youth's Sport as a Ground for Supporting the Mental Health", maintain that sport can be the main entertaining program for teenagers in many cases, which means that there is a special tendency toward this domain through which the mental health can be improved compared to other fields teenagers deal with (like school) (p 62). The present study shows that the therapeutic interventions should be done in sport environment (for instance in sport clubs) via special and suitable sport contents.

Also, through the investigations, it has been demonstrated that the sport exercises have beneficiary psychological effects such as high levels of general well-being, positive mood and lower levels of depression and stress (Kashtidar, Behzadnia, & Imanpour, 2013).

Prolonged exposure, high participation rates, and engaging environments make organised sports an important medium to facilitate population level change in health and healthy behaviours such as the promotion of mental health (Hajkowicz et al., 2013; Swann et al., 2018).

Medadi Nansa and Ghafouri (2017) in a research under the title of “Sport and Subjective Well-being” showed that from the theoretical point of view, sport consumption can be easily linked to social interactions and therefore, it would have direct impact on SWB. Also people can realize their inner latent capabilities by participating in sport activities, showing their true nature while getting something beyond joy and happiness, and since these cases are among the parameters of SWB, then the level of SWB can be increased by taking part in sport, watching it or hosting international sport events. It seems that participating in sport fields and spaces or watching sport matches, gives this feeling to the individuals that something is going on which is far more important than the sport results, as if a new energy is inoculated to the collective mood, the type of energy that can be given to every single individual. Also, the social rules and differences seem less important and a novel reinforced social feeling is created in the society, by which everyone feels happy and exuberant caused by the participation and watching a sport event.

Considering the things mentioned, sports can be an attractive environment for supporting the subjective well-being, which can be realized by focusing on the importance of sports in childhood and adolescence, while supporting the subjective well-being in such periods and considering its positive effects on the future periods of life. Since subjective well-being is considered as a development index of societies and regarding the significant role of sports and physical activities in creating such feeling, it seems necessary that more attention be paid to sports and principled investments be done in this social institution, besides having responsible management and planning.

### **Suggestions for Future Studies**

Considering the current theoretical domain and the results of the present study, we can present the following research suggestions and attitudes which can pave the way for the future studies:

1. Comparing the role of sports in childhood, adolescence, adulthood and middle age in the improvement of subjective well-being in old age
2. Comparing the role of educational, recreational, championship and professional sports in improving the subjective well-being
3. Investigating the positive and negative impacts of sport on mental health

4. Investigating the role of subjective well-being in sport achievements
5. Comparing the subjective well-being resulting from team, individual sports, contact and non-contact sports
6. Comparing the subjective well-being among coaches, athletes, spectators, and elite athletes' families

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