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Editorial: SJSEP Welcomes Conceptual Papers

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The field of sport and exercise psychology research is growing steadily, its journals receive many more submissions than they can publish and we witness significant methodological and empirical progress. The journals in the field provide an outlet for multiple types of contributions including original empirical papers, scientific reviews, rigorously described case examples of applied work, methodological advancements, and more. As in any scientific field, we need these different types of contributions to move forward. Borrowing from an inspirational visualization of the research as a craft occupation (Forscher, 1963), we need not only to make bricks (facts, individual empirical studies) but also to build edifices or buildings (explanations, theories).

Beyond scientific reviews (e.g., systematic and scoping reviews), however, scientists may experience unnecessary struggles when they set out to publish conceptual theory-building articles, perhaps because of a lack of accepted journal formats and templates for non-empirical scientific papers (Jaakkola, 2020). For example, Ph.D. students often engage in a new topic area. As their area is new, a systematic or scoping review is not viable, but they find that a paper outlining key ideas, models, and definitions could provide a solid theoretical foundation for their research. A foundation for which there is rarely space in their first empirical scientific paper. Journals may also reject conceptual papers because such papers do not fit with the aims and scope of the journal, or because reviewers judge the paper based on criteria that may be suitable for empirical papers or reviews but are misaligned with the aim of a conceptual paper. Despite the potential value of papers that develop concepts, integrate or expand theories relying neither on empirical data nor on a systematic review of the scientific literature, such papers remain a rare treat within the field of sport and exercise psychology.

In SJSEP we wish to provide an outlet for conceptual, theoretical and non-empirical contributions that are rigorous, cogent, transparent, systematically developed, and hold the potential to move our field forward. These papers play a vital role by offering fresh and innovative perspectives, challenging existing ideas, and shaping the discourse within our discipline. Beyond a mere call for such papers, in this editorial, we outline key quality criteria for conceptual papers within the context of an SJSEP article.

Jakkola (2020) suggests four types of conceptual papers – theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology and model – each with specific aims, methods and markers of quality. There are other types, and we have included position papers, consensus statements and practical advances to the list. We recommend that authors consider these types to see if one or a combination of them fit their aim.

- **Theory synthesis** seeks conceptual and theoretical integration of theories or lines of research by connecting previously unconnected ideas in novel ways. They might highlight inconsistencies in the literature and suggest a unified framework that reconciles these differences. Using summarizing and integration, such papers often aim to build coherence within a topic that has been fragmented across different research traditions. While some review of the literature is inevitable, the objective is not to review or summarize all the literature but rather to tease out its underpinnings and suggest integrations. Two notable examples are that of Wood and colleagues (2023), in which ecological dynamics, previously mainly applied to athletes, was introduced as a coherent approach in the understanding of coach learning, and that of Henriksen and colleagues (2023), in which the authors bridged the holistic ecological and athlete career discourses in sport psychology to suggest the idea of a transition environment.
- **Theory adaptation** seeks to amend an existing theory, for example because new observations or empirical findings point to inadequacies of the theory and thus call for such development. Often, amendments will draw on other theories, and authors should justify this extension and their selection of the theories used to achieve it. A notable example is a paper by Bjørndal and Ronglan (2021) who adjust the concept 'leadership by orchestration' to better suit the context of talent development by using the notion of incrementalism. As another example, the achievement goal theory in sport psychology has been adapted and expanded many times to account for new insights and developments (e.g., Elliott & Conroy, 2005).
- A **typology** aims to categorize a previously fuzzy subject by developing a coherent set of types and justifying the dimensions used to distinguish and

organize these. Typologies may inform empirical studies and applied work by reducing complexity. By delineating the key variants of a given phenomenon, typologies aim to explain and potentially predict. An example is the paper by Tjønndal (2017), in which she argues for the vital role of innovation in sport and develops a typology containing five distinct types of innovation. Another notable examples is the typology of narrative analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2009)

- **The model** paper develops and presents a working model or a new theoretical framework that predicts relationships among the concepts involved. Models may be considered as a roadmap to understand the phenomenon, and most often contain graphic visualizations. A good model can guide research (by selecting which concepts to focus on as well as their relationships) and can help present research by offering a way to structure this presentation by developing empirical versions of the model. Sport psychology has seen many helpful models, and some of them developed within the context of conceptual papers (e.g., Diment et al., 2020; Dorsch et al., 2022; Henriksen, Diment, et al., 2023)
- **Position papers** articulate a specific stance on a controversial issue within a field, supported by logical reasoning and theoretical insights. They aim to provoke thought and discussion rather than present empirical evidence. They are often written or commissioned by societies such as FEPSAC and the ISSP. Examples are many these years (e.g., Moesch et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2022; Stambulova et al., 2021)
- **Consensus statements** also take a stance on an issue or topic within the field, but they are typically the result of discussions among experts in a given field, often in the form of a think tank. Think tanks can take many shapes and forms but they are typically non-political and non-profit, consist of a mix of academics and practitioners, and serve public needs by providing recommendations to advise or put pressure on politicians, businesses or decision-makers. Examples include Storm and colleagues' (2024) consensus statement on cultural leadership, a recent consensus statement on the psychology of sport injury (Tranaeus et al., 2024) and the recent ISSP consensus statements on athlete mental health (Henriksen et al., 2019; Henriksen et al., 2020)
- **Practical advances** aim to advance applied sport psychology work. They may present intervention models, best practice guidelines or new strategies that can be used in applied sport psychology, potentially contributing to new practical approaches or lines of study within the field. They will typically not rely heavily on descriptions of specific interventions or programs (similar to other conceptual papers not relying on empirical data) but may use case examples to illustrate their use. Examples include Josefson and colleagues (2020) guide to work from a mindfulness acceptance commitment (MAC) approach in team sport settings and Henriksen's (2019) introduction to the values compass serving as a practical guide to functional analysis.

This list is not exclusive, and the different types can further be combined in different ways. These types may, however, stimulate authors to carefully reflect on the nature and aim of their paper, and the examples can serve as inspiration.

Conceptual papers should be judged on their contribution. However, more specific quality markers are important (Jaakkola, 2020; van Teijlingen et al., 2022). We hereby provide a series of quality markers, which constitute the foundation of a solid conceptual paper, and which editors and reviewers will be asked to foreground in their evaluation of such papers submitted to SJSEP. Conceptual papers:

- Should be original, insightful, and make a substantial contribution. Such contributions may include proposed working definitions, models, and typologies.
- Should aim to achieve conceptual integration across multiple theories or models. They should explicate and justify their choice of theories, models, literature streams, discourses, and concepts. Authors need to explain why and how theories were selected. Authors should demonstrate a solid understanding of existing theories and frameworks and engage critically with the literature, identifying gaps and opportunities for advancement. According to Jakkola (2020), common points of departure are a focal phenomenon (observable but not adequately addressed in current models and theories) and a focal theory (often used but not internally coherent or complete).
- Have clear chains of evidence. This includes logical and complete arguments for the proposed relationships between concepts, theories, and models. It also includes a clear structure that is well-matched to the purpose of the paper and makes the paper intuitively accessible to the reader.
- Will often be more forward-looking and focused on a topical aspect than scientific literature reviews. They may focus on the intersections between science and applied work and highlight their potential implications for policy or practice.
- Should aim to stimulate discussion and outline clear guides for future research and practice that will allow scientists and practitioners to test the ideas in research projects and/or in new practices.
- Should remain balanced and not be overly focused on the author's own work, and when relevant acknowledge potential counter arguments.
- Benefit from being written in a language that is broadly accessible, where novel concepts are defined and specialist terminology explained.

In conclusion, conceptual papers are a vital component of academic discourse. As an academic journal, SJSEP recognizes the value of conceptual papers that adhere to the established quality criteria, and wishes to ensure they receive the respect they deserve for their contribution to a vibrant intellectual community. With this, we welcome high quality coherent conceptual papers as submissions for the Scandinavian Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology. With this initiative, we hope to contribute to moving our field forward. We direct authors to further acquaint themselves with the mission and scope of the journal before submission.

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