

Sport Psychology as an Agent of Cultural Deconstruction: Challenging Gender and Disability Stereotypes through Performance and Participation

Carlos Díaz-Rodríguez¹, David Abel Díaz-Pérez², Rafael Jaén Pozo³, Fernando Martínez-López^{4*}

¹ Faculty of Psychology, University of Oviedo, SPAIN; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5110-2352>

² Faculty Business and Tech, University Alfonso X El Sabio, Madrid, SPAIN; <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8854-614X>

³ Faculty of Economics and Business Sciences, Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, SPAIN Rey Juan Carlos University (URJC); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9977-9567>

⁴ Faculty of Economics and Business Sciences, Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, Spain. ORCID: <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i2.2078>

*Corresponding Author: fernando.martinezp@urjc.es

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ABSTRACT

Sport is a powerful cultural institution that not only reflects but also reinforces societal norms, especially those related to gender and ability. Traditional sport psychology focuses on individual performance and often overlooks broader socio-cultural contexts. This article advocates a critical shift toward a Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) model grounded in cultural praxis to realize sport's potential as an agent of social change. Using an intersectional and deconstructive framework, we explore how CSP-informed interventions can actively challenge and dismantle deeply rooted cultural stereotypes about gender and disability. We illustrate how psychological strategies can decenter the 'feminine ideal' and redefine hegemonic masculinity, while also supporting Para-athletes in navigating the ableist gaze and fostering competence-based self-representations. Additionally, we highlight the essential role of interdisciplinary education and corporate responsibility, particularly within the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to enable cultural transformation. By positioning athletes as agents of cultural change and engaging in systemic transformation, sport psychology can transcend its traditional focus, becoming a key discipline in the global movement for inclusion and social justice.

Keywords: Sport Psychology, Cultural Studies, Gender Stereotypes, Disability, Social Change, Deconstruction, Intersectionality, Education, Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

INTRODUCTION

Sport is a powerful cultural institution and a global phenomenon that both reflects and shapes societal values (Ryba et al., 2024). Although often praised as a universal language and a tool for inclusion, sport also serves as a space where cultural norms—particularly those around gender, ability, and identity—are strictly enforced and reproduced (Ryba et al., 2024; Blodgett et al., 2014). Traditionally, sport psychology has focused on optimizing individual performance, primarily within a narrowly defined Western and able-bodied framework. This "mental game" approach often overlooks the broader socio-cultural context that significantly affects athletes' experiences, well-being, and their access to sport.

This article argues that for sport to fulfill its celebrated potential as an agent of social change, the discipline of sport psychology must transition from a purely performance-oriented model to one of cultural deconstruction and social praxis. Drawing on the critical framework of Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP), this paper critically examines

how psychological interventions, when contextually and critically applied, can actively challenge and dismantle deeply entrenched cultural stereotypes related to gender and disability. Specifically, we explore how CSP can be leveraged to foster inclusive environments, redefine notions of athletic identity, and empower marginalized athletes to become agents of change within their communities. By focusing on the intersectional experiences of gender and disability, this analysis seeks to provide a theoretical model for a more socially responsible and transformative sport psychology. This perspective aligns with the core mission of the Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change (JCASC), which seeks to explore the dynamic relationship between culture and processes of social transformation (Schley et al., 2019; Tanne, 2024; Van Tuan, 2025).

Theoretical Framework: From Mental Game to Cultural Praxis

Traditional sport psychology, rooted in the positivist tradition, has primarily sought to identify universal psychological principles governing athletic performance (Blodgett et al., 2014). This focus on the individual and the internal 'mental game' often leads to a decontextualized understanding of the athlete, neglecting the influence of cultural structures, practices, and conceptions that promote or inhibit athletic development (Blodgett et al., 2014). Critiques highlight that this mainstream approach often inadvertently reinforces dominant cultural narratives, particularly those of hegemonic masculinity and able-bodied superiority, by failing to question the systems within which performance is measured and valued (Ryba et al., 2024). This reinforcement of dominant cultural paradigms is a central concern for cultural analysis, which seeks to challenge Eurocentric and dominant narratives, particularly those that hinder the advancement of marginalized identities (Schley et al., 2019). The need for a critical lens is underscored by analyses of how cultural systems, even in the digital age, can perpetuate myths and power structures (Anamofa et al., 2025).

Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) emerges as a critical response, advocating for a shift from a mental game to a cultural praxis model (Blodgett et al., 2014). CSP challenges the universality of psychological constructs and insists on a contextualized, culturally responsive approach. The core tenet of CSP is that culture is not merely an external variable but is constitutive of the athlete's psychological experience.

CSP aligns with the goals of cultural deconstruction, which seeks to expose the underlying power structures and binary oppositions embedded within cultural practices (Ryba et al., 2024). In this context, sport psychology becomes a tool for social critique and transformation, rather than just performance enhancement. By adopting an intersectional lens, CSP can illuminate how categories like gender and disability co-condition experiences of marginalization (Seal, 2012; Bennett et al., 2022). This framework provides the necessary theoretical grounding to analyze how psychological interventions can be intentionally designed to disrupt cultural hegemony in sport. The need for this critical analysis is echoed in the broader cultural studies literature, which examines how cultural systems influence and respond to social change (Rahman & Anika, 2025; Kohli, 2018).

Deconstructing Stereotypes: Gender and the Athletic Body

The sporting arena remains a key space where gender stereotypes are culturally reinforced. Female athletes often encounter stereotypes portraying them as weaker, while their achievements tend to be framed more by appearance than by athletic skill (Moneysmartathlete, 2023). In contrast, male athletes face strict norms of hegemonic masculinity that discourage emotional expression and vulnerability.

Interventions informed by Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) can directly counter the cultural pressures pushing female athletes to conform to the "feminine ideal." Psychological techniques such as self-efficacy training and fostering an athlete-centered identity encourage female athletes to value competence and strength above external approval (Bennett & Thompson, 2025). By emphasizing intrinsic mastery and physical capability necessary for high performance, sport psychologists can shift media attention away from appearance, challenging the narrative that equates female worth with aesthetics rather than achievement. This deconstruction through performance represents a powerful catalyst for social change, paralleling shifts seen in other cultural spheres, including women's changing economic roles (Kohli, 2018; Yuhendri et al., 2025).

For male athletes, CSP supports dismantling toxic masculinity by creating space for emotional literacy and vulnerability. While traditional sport psychology prioritizes emotional control as essential for performance, a cultural praxis approach acknowledges this control's potential cultural harm. Normalizing the expression of stress, fear, and doubt, and promoting relational skills and team cohesion beyond aggressive competition, allows sport psychology to foster healthier, more inclusive definitions of masculinity. This cultural shift is critical for addressing mental health struggles prevalent in elite sports, often worsened by pressures to appear invulnerable (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). Managing and understanding emotions—emotional intelligence—is a core psychological skill supporting both performance and well-being, especially under pressure (Sánchez-Cabrero et al., 2022; Vivas et al., 2023).

Deconstructing Stereotypes: Disability and the Ableist Gaze

Sport serves as a crucial cultural battleground for challenging the ableist gaze—the dominant cultural perspective that frames disability as a deficit or a tragedy (Liu et al., 2025). While the Paralympic movement has increased visibility, media coverage remains disproportionately low, often reinforcing stereotypes by focusing on 'inspiration' rather than athletic competence (Liu et al., 2025; Trainor et al., 2023). This perpetuates the idea that sport participation for people with disabilities is an exception, not a norm.

Athletes with disabilities often navigate a paradox: their high performance can challenge stereotypes of physical incapacity, yet the spectacle of disability sport can sometimes reinforce the public's focus on their difference (Bantjes et al., 2019). CSP is vital here, as it helps athletes manage this complex identity. Psychological support focuses on fostering a strong, integrated athlete identity that transcends the medical model of disability and embraces the social model (Martin et al., 2020). By centralizing the athlete's narrative and agency, sport psychologists help them internalize success as a measure of competence, rather than as a source of 'inspiration' for the non-disabled public. The analysis of how marginalized identities advance within cultural systems is a key area of inquiry for this journal (Schley et al., 2019).

Psychosocial factors are crucial in enhancing the well-being of Para-athletes, complementing the physiological aspects of their training (Liu et al., 2025). CSP interventions, such as tailored goal-setting, coping strategies, and team cohesion building, are applied within a cultural context that recognizes systemic barriers and discrimination (Alexander et al., 2024). By creating a supportive sport-cultural milieu, sport psychology helps athletes develop resilience against societal stigma and institutional discrimination, transforming the sport environment into a space of validation and empowerment (Trainor et al., 2025). The capacity for problem-solving and creative decision-making, which are central to tactical performance in sport, are also essential skills for navigating these complex social and cultural challenges (Díaz-Rodríguez & Pérez Córdoba, 2024).

Scaling Cultural Praxis: Education, Interdisciplinarity, and Corporate Responsibility

The transformative potential of CSP cannot be fully realized without its integration into educational, institutional, and corporate structures. The challenge of cultural deconstruction requires a systemic approach that engages all stakeholders in the sporting ecosystem.

The complexity of contemporary societal challenges, including those related to inclusion and equality in sport, demands educational approaches that overcome traditional disciplinary barriers (Repko, 2008; Annelin & Boström, 2024). Interdisciplinary learning emerges as a strategic response, integrating diverse perspectives from sport sciences, physical training, and psychology to address multifaceted problems (Cuong et al., 2023; Maral, 2024).

In the context of sport psychology, this involves joint educational experiences where future psychologists and sport scientists collaborate on practical cases combining personality study, psychological intervention, and sports training (Díaz-Rodríguez & Pérez Córdoba, 2024). This approach not only optimizes performance but also cultivates essential transversal competencies such as authentic leadership, effective communication, and empathy (Díaz-Rodríguez & López-Barbeta, 2024). These skills are fundamental for navigating the cultural and epistemological diversity required to advance authentic and enriching collaborations (Zhou & Amaral, 2025). By fostering a systemic learning approach, higher education prepares professionals who are not only technically competent but also critically reflective and socially committed, ready to drive innovation and change processes (Meadows, 2009; Evenddy et al., 2023). The ability to integrate emotional intelligence (Sánchez-Cabrero et al., 2022) and problem-solving skills (Díaz-Rodríguez & Pérez Córdoba, 2024) within this interdisciplinary framework is key to preparing professionals who can effectively challenge cultural norms and promote inclusion.

Beyond the academic sphere, the private sector, particularly health and sport companies, plays an increasingly pivotal role in driving or hindering social transformation. These entities, through their marketing, sponsorship, and product development, significantly influence the cultural representation of the athlete's body and identity.

A CSP-informed perspective necessitates that sport psychologists engage with these corporate actors to advocate for ethical practices that align with principles of cultural deconstruction. Companies that invest in sport-for-development (SFD) programs or sponsor Para-athletes are not merely engaging in philanthropy; they are making a public statement about cultural values. However, this involvement must be critically examined to ensure it promotes genuine social change rather than mere "sportswashing" or the commodification of marginalized identities.

The corporate sector's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), provides a powerful framework for this engagement. Sport and health companies have the power to:

- **Normalize Diversity and Advance SDG 5:** By featuring diverse athletes (gender, ability, ethnicity) in their global campaigns, they can accelerate the deconstruction of traditional stereotypes and directly contribute to gender equality. The cultural impact of these representations is immense, echoing the importance of visual and cultural narratives in social change (Van Tuan, 2025).

- **Invest in Inclusive Infrastructure (SDG 10):** Funding accessible facilities and research into adaptive technologies for sport directly reduces inequalities.
- **Promote Mental Health Literacy and Well-being (SDG 3):** Integrating mental health support and emotional intelligence training (Sánchez-Cabrero et al., 2022) into their corporate wellness and athlete programs, thereby challenging the culture of invulnerability in sport and promoting well-being for all.

The alignment of corporate strategy with the SDGs, driven by the critical insights of CSP and supported by educational initiatives, creates a powerful synergy for cultural deconstruction and social transformation.

Sport Psychology as a Tool for Cultural Transformation

The ultimate goal of a CSP-informed practice is to move beyond individual change toward cultural transformation. This involves recognizing the athlete not just as a performer, but as a potential Agent of Change (Wallace & Gamble, 2025).

Sport psychologists can facilitate this transition by incorporating social justice and advocacy training into their practice. By helping athletes articulate their experiences of marginalization and success, they are empowered to challenge cultural prejudices in broader society (Wallace & Gamble, 2025). When athletes speak out against ableism or sexism, their voices carry significant cultural weight, transcending the confines of the sports field to influence public opinion and policy (Ryba et al., 2024). This is the essence of cultural praxis: using the psychological skills developed for performance (e.g., confidence, communication) to effect social change.

Cultural deconstruction in sport also requires systemic change within the sporting ecosystem itself. This includes:

- **Challenging Institutional Discrimination:** Working with governing bodies to dismantle historical beliefs that people with disabilities are incapable of sport participation (Humankinetics).
- **Promoting Inclusive Media:** Advocating for media coverage that portrays female and Para-athletes with the same focus on skill, strategy, and competitive intensity as their male, non-disabled counterparts.
- **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Collaborating with cultural studies scholars, sociologists, and policymakers to ensure psychological interventions are embedded within a broader strategy for social inclusion and equality (Ryba et al., 2024). This interdisciplinary approach is critical to understanding the complex temporalities of cultural change (Tanne, 2024).

The shift from a narrow focus on performance to a broad commitment to cultural praxis positions sport psychology as a vital discipline in the global movement for social justice, aligning its goals directly with the transformative mission of the Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that a critical shift—from the traditional, performance-focused "mental game" to a Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) model grounded in cultural praxis—is essential for sport psychology to fulfill its potential as an agent of social change. Through an intersectional and deconstructive lens, CSP offers the theoretical and methodological tools necessary to challenge cultural hegemony within sport.

We have demonstrated how interventions guided by CSP can actively dismantle deeply rooted gender stereotypes by promoting athlete identity over aesthetic ideals and normalizing emotional vulnerability among male athletes. In terms of disability, CSP assists athletes in navigating the ableist gaze, fostering self-representations grounded in competence and aligned with the social model of disability, thereby transforming sport into a space of empowerment. Moreover, we highlight that integrating CSP principles into educational programs via interdisciplinary learning and engaging with corporate social responsibility, particularly within the framework of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is essential for sustaining cultural deconstruction throughout the sporting ecosystem.

The implications of this shift are significant. By positioning athletes as agents of cultural change and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, sport psychology transcends its traditional scope. It evolves from optimizing individual performance within existing structures to actively transforming these systems, making sport a more equitable and inclusive reflection of society. Future research should explore empirical evaluations of CSP interventions' impact on reducing implicit bias and promoting social advocacy among athletes and sports organizations. This dedication to cultural praxis ensures sport psychology's relevance extends beyond elite performance, making it vital to the broader project of social justice.

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