EVALUATING RESEARCH INTO ATTENTION AND IMAGERY IN SPORT

Research Methods

All three studies described use experimental methods. Both Slade, Landers and Martin and Barghurst, Thierry and Holder conducted laboratory experiments. This method has the advantage of the researcher having high control over variables in the experimental setting eg. instructions, times, trials etc. This control allows for cause and effect relationships to be established and makes replication possible. However this high control is at the expense of ecological validity. Both these studies are low in ecological validity as they do not take place in an everyday environment or involve the performance of everyday tasks. The participants would have been aware that this was an experiment and may have responded to demand characteristics where they change their behaviour in some way, usually so as to cooperate with the experimenter. The study by Isaac was a field experiment which has higher ecological validity as it involved studying the participants in a more natural environment. However, the researcher was still manipulating the environment and the participants would have been aware that they were being studied.

Sampling

The participants used in these studies are all students. Students are often thought to be not typical of the general population and so it may be difficult to generalize the results of these studies to the rest of the population. For example because they are in an educational environment, students may be more used to paying attention and may be better able to use and control their imagination than non-students. The sample in the Baghurst et al study was also very small and individual differences between participants, for example in their ability to use the attentional strategies, may have influenced the results.

Usefulness/Practical Applications

These studies all show that attention and imagery can have an effect on sports performance. The Slade et al study showed that muscular activity occurs during imagery and Isaac found that mental practice of a sports skill significantly improved performance. This suggests that athletes who include imagery and mental practice as part of their training schedule may have an advantage over athletes who include physical practice only. The Baghurst et al research suggests that where we focus our attention during sports performance can have an impact on our level of performance and perhaps on our enjoyment of the activity. The results suggest that attentional strategies used during performance should be matched to individual attentional styles.