WHAT IS ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION?

'Achievement' refers to a measure of ability or attainment that reflects progress or an accomplished goal. 'Motivation' refers to the impulse or desire to behave in certain ways. 'Achievement motivation' therefore concerns the desire to do well, succeed and reach standards in one's own eyes and the eyes of others, and reflects a willingness to persist in behaviour that enables higher standards to be reached despite the possibility of failure.

Researchers such as McClelland et al (1953) and Atkinson (1964) extensively studied achievement motivation, the latter suggesting that it could be precisely formulated and calculated by measuring the desire to succeed of an individual and subtracting from it a measurement of that person's fear of failure. In most early studies, achievement motivation was measured by projective testing – for example, people were asked to create a story on a particular topic and their responses were analysed to reveal how much the themes of their stories reflected desires to succeed or fear of failure.

Atkinson regarded achievement motivation as a personality trait – differing between individuals but remaining fairly consistent within each person and thus stable across different situations they might encounter. However, it was recognised that achievement motivation interacted with situational factors, in particular:

- The difficulty of the tasks faced – measured in terms of the probability of success or failure
- The incentive value of success – measured in terms of the importance to the individual of success or failure in a particular task.

ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION AND SPORT

Achievement motivation has many implications for sporting attitudes, training and performance. For example, those showing high levels tend to show:

- **Desire for challenge** – seeking challenging opponents (i.e. those of equal or slightly higher ability) or tasks, and demanding but achievable standards or goals. Those scoring low on achievement motivation will either not seek sporting challenge at all or will choose either very easy or very hard opponents, tasks and goals (especially if high on fear of failure) so success is guaranteed or failure justifiable.

- **Concern for excellent standards and value of feedback** – meaning they may respond better to constructive criticism in coaching, training for skill acquisition and practice for skill refinement.

- **Lower fear of failure and more positive internal attributions regarding failure and success** – leading to greater persistence in sport endeavours.

- **Positive attitudes towards evaluation** – in combination with all the above factors may lead to higher standards of performance.

ATKINSON’S THEORY

Achievement motivation = Desire to succeed – Fear of failure

MARTENS’ THEORY

Sporting achievement motivation = Competitiveness (desire to seek success in sport) – Competitive trait anxiety (the desire to avoid failure in sporting competition)

EVALUATING ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION IN SPORT

Achievement motivation does not reliably predict performance in sport. Contradictory findings have been produced, probably because research shows that those high in achievement motivation are likely to choose tasks of 0.5 probability (50:50) of success (e.g. equally matched opponents), while those low in achievement motivation are more likely to choose tasks of very high or low probability of success (e.g. very easy or very difficult opponents). Factors like relative ability and attribution may be more important in predicting persistence and performance in sport.

Measures of achievement motivation often lack reliability and validity. Projective tests are of doubtful reliability and validity because of the often subjective nature of their interpretation – different interpreters can arrive at different conclusions (poor inter-rater reliability) and may in fact project their own characteristics on to others' responses (poor validity). There is also the problem of relying on self-report data (which also applies to the use of questionnaires) to measure achievement motivation since people's responses and reported attitudes may not actually reflect how they behave.

Achievement motivation is too general and complex as a concept

Cassidy and Lynn (1989, cited in Rolls and Eysenck, 1998) suggest it consists of six components: work ethic (the notion that work is 'good' in itself), pursuit of excellence, status aspiration (will to dominate others), competitiveness, acquisitiveness (desire for money), and mastery (competitiveness against set standards rather than against other people). This means that:

- People high in achievement motivation may possess these components to differing extents
- These intrinsic motives will respond differently to different extrinsic motivating factors or rewards (see intrinsic and extrinsic motivation)
- Achievement motivation may vary across different situations and sports.

- Horner (1972) suggested that fear of success is another important factor in achievement motivation, which can explain gender differences. Horner gave female undergraduates projective tests by asking them to create stories about successful female or male figures, and found around two-thirds invented negative consequences for the female figure. Because they did not tend to do this for male story figures, Horner concluded that women have a higher fear of success than men do. However, the research was based on a limited sample (a minority of women) and other studies have found men show equal (Robbins and Robbins, 1973) or higher (Pyke and Kahill, 1983) fear of success (cited in Tavris and Wade, 1990).

- Martens (1977) attempted to make achievement motivation more sport specific by suggesting that sporting motivation and performance can be more precisely predicted by comparing competitiveness (e.g. measured by Gill and Deeter’s Sport Orientation Questionnaire) with competitive trait anxiety (which can be measured by Martens's Sport Competition Anxiety Test). Sports men and women scoring high in competitive trait anxiety are more likely to show cognitive and physical state anxiety in competitive situations that will affect their performance (see Effects of Anxiety/Arousal).