"Strawpersons," Selective Reporting, and Inconsistent Logic: A Response to Kimiecik and Harris’s Analysis of Enjoyment

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In introducing their article “What is Enjoyment? A Conceptual/Definitional Analysis With Implications for Sport and Exercise Psychology,” Kimiecik and Harris (1996) state their hope that the paper might serve as “a catalyst for more in-depth discussion about conceptualization and measurement of enjoyment as it pertains to the study of people’s experiences in sport and exercise settings” (p. 248). Unfortunately, Kimiecik and Harris’s arguments are based on an unclear and, at times, distorted interpretation of the research that has been previously conducted in this area. Thus, the value of Kimiecik and Harris’s work in terms of facilitating future research and discussion on the topic of sport and exercise enjoyment is very much compromised. In this commentary, I will specifically address the limitations and inaccuracies contained in the Kimiecik and Harris article.

Kimiecik and Harris (1996) outlined three purposes for their paper:

1. Review the prevalent definitions of enjoyment espoused by sport and exercise psychology researchers and discuss the conceptual and measurement implications
2. Propose a working definition of enjoyment as flow and compare enjoyment/flow with other related constructs
3. Present implications of their suggested definition of enjoyment for past and present enjoyment research in sport and exercise psychology

I shall comment on their contributions in each of these three areas.

Definitional/Measurement History of Enjoyment

A major limitation of the Kimiecik and Harris’s treatment of the first purpose is summarized by their own words: “Perhaps we are misinterpreting Wankel’s definition, but this only clarifies our point about the ambiguity involving the en-
enjoyment construct in sport and exercise settings” (p. 251). Since when is it accepted scholarship to misinterpret someone else’s work as long as it makes your point? In a number of cases, Kimiecik and Harris have either misinterpreted or inaccurately reported aspects of my research in order to build their case. I shall address a number of these.

First, with respect to the Wankel and Kreisel (1985a) study, Kimiecik and Harris pose the question “how can the underlying factors of enjoyment be determined if it is not established a priori what enjoyment is?” (p. 249). What exactly is meant by this? Does it mean that the researcher must impose his or her definition on the respondents? Although Kimiecik and Harris seem to imply that an a priori definition is valuable in and of itself (e.g., they state that the research of Scanlan and colleagues [Scanlan, Carpenter, Lobel, & Simons, 1993; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Scanlan & Simons, 1992; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1989] “has added to the understanding of positive affect in sport because they have clearly defined enjoyment in such a way,” p. 250), this is not a generally accepted perspective. On the other hand, if Kimiecik and Harris mean that respondents must understand what is being asked of them so that they can respond in a meaningful way, I fully concur.

In our research efforts initiated some 20 years ago into the factors underlying youth sport enjoyment (Wankel & Kreisel, 1985a, 1985b; Wankel & Pabich, 1982), we did considerabale preliminary open-ended interviewing of young sport participants about their sport involvement and their feelings about it. A common observation from these interviews was that, when asked, respondents were nearly unanimous in indicating that they liked playing sports. When asked why they liked playing or what they liked about playing their sport, a frequent response was “I don’t know, I just like it” or “because it’s fun.” A number of specific reasons for liking sport were also volunteered, and the most important of these were incorporated into the Minor Sport Enjoyment Inventory. The interviews and the accompanying informal interaction with these young sport participants convinced us that (a) they understood when we asked them whether they enjoyed or liked playing their sport (i.e., there was a meaningful shared understanding of what we were asking) and (b) a number of specific factors were identified as affecting their enjoyment or liking of sport.

Based on this research, our practical interest in obtaining information about which factors might be most important in contributing to positive/enjoyable sport experiences for youth led us to conduct the study reported in Wankel and Kreisel (1985a). Kimiecik and Harris question whether the study was addressing “components of enjoyment” or “factors underlying enjoyment.” We were not concerned with such differentiations. We simply took the responses from the interviews with the children together with factors identified in previous literature as affecting enjoyment and incorporated them into a scale to empirically test their importance. Kimiecik and Harris state about our work,

Wankel and Kreisel (1985) used the “Minor Sport Enjoyment Inventory” made up of 10 factors hypothesized to underlie enjoyment for children participating in hockey, baseball, and soccer. The items that were ranked most highly were intrinsic or process factors, such as personal accomplishments or improving the skills of the game. Knowing this, however, does not tell us much about the factors underlying enjoyment; it does tell us that children value accomplishment and improvement in sport settings. (p. 249)