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Enhancement Psychology

Who, as a child or teenager, has never been afraid of speaking in public or performing in front of a large audience of spectators or taking an oral question in class?

We could continue with hundreds of examples, but it is not necessary, because you will have already understood the common denominator between these situations: performance anxiety.

We cannot hide the fact that we live in a highly competitive society, which encourages ever higher performance and winning results, bordering on perfection. As shown in the examples, very often these requests are made since childhood, in contexts in which the performance is objectivable, evaluable,

through a result: a good grade in school, a victory in sport, a great musical performance, dance and so on.

Despite the theoretical differences, most of the models of psychology, even those very polarized with each other such as the analytic and the cognitivist, converge on at least these two points:

- the pursuit of performance at all costs from childhood often involves the risk of being achieved at the expense of healthy emotional, cognitive and relational development.
- The quality of relationships established in childhood (family, friends, school, etc.) can influence, for better or for worse, the individual's experience in dealing with performance.

Of course, every problem requires a solution.

Mistakenly many of the social actors propose the classic interpretation (pathogenic-homeostatic) anxiety = symptom = problem to be solved. According to this vision, lowering the standard of performance would be considered a defeat, a maladjustment, while maintaining high performance, perfectly adequate to the socially required levels, would remain the main objective. Thus, the high standard begins to be taken for granted, to be considered normal: it is imposed from the outside and must respond to the needs of rapidly changing times and social demands. With this in mind, the individual who fears not being up to the task, identifies the problem to be corrected in the anxious symptomatology, the wall to be broken down. It is not uncommon, in fact, that we psychologists (especially those who work in schools or in sports) are asked to "eliminate anxiety", or to "strengthen the psyche" of the individual so that he can reach the established goal in the best possible way.

Now, the question we must ask ourselves with intellectual honesty is: do the demands of today's society follow a logic that is respectful of the child's growth times? Is he allowed to fully go through and consolidate the experiences that are fundamental for the correct development of the Self? The reality is that, in most of today's societies, the factors that dictate the roadmap and the objectives to be achieved are conditioned by the Western social model strongly based on competition, image and profit at all costs, as if even the childhood was already inserted in a maxi business logic: an adequate baseline of performance is created to which the individual, since childhood, must adapt. Of course, following this logic only accelerates the race towards the abyss: the requests of the Society will advance more and more rapidly compared to the phylogenetic adaptations and when the average of individuals has reached the baseline, the bar will be moved even more. at the top between one generation and the next (at best!). We are witnessing a somewhat paradoxical situation: medical sciences have in fact demonstrated the evi-

dence of the epigenetic impact on the health of the individual in his adaptive functions (Bottaccioli, 2014), but we note however, on the other hand, an increasing social pressure on the individual, linked to performance requests. It should not surprise us if consequently, more and more often, there is a short circuit that leads to malfunctions or pathologies.

For the reason just described, starting from the second half of the last century, the social sciences and psychology have tried to give answers that do not go along with this logic, but that try to change the paradigm.

Empowerment and self-empowerment

The first to talk about strengthening were the political, economic and social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s. With the concept of empowerment, we wanted to emphasize the importance of making a certain group of individuals aware of their potential to express them at the highest level. Specifically, it was about the American socio-political context of those years and it referred to the possibility, on the part of minorities, to become aware of their power and rights to become active protagonists within the community.

In the 70s and 80s the term was adopted by psychology and took on a different shade of meaning, with interesting repercussions in the clinical field: the individual, to improve his psychophysical health, must first of all learn to activate his own resources. internal and exit from a logic of dependence-passivity from one's doctor or psychotherapist.

The concept of empowerment has quickly adapted to many contexts (pedagogy, companies, health and sports organizations), but here we want to focus on its application to the single individual, that is, on self-empowerment. In this case, the main concept of reference still remains today that of self-efficacy introduced by Albert Bandura. With it we mean not only the ability of an individual to be able to achieve a desired result, but also the self-awareness of having the skills to do so in full control of the current situation.

In addition to Bandura, many other authors (Rotter, Zimmerman, Rappaport, Brusaglioni, to name a few) have further deepened the concept of self-empowerment, also developing new application models. The reference theories, however, are mainly cognitivist or cognitive-behavioral, in which the main lever is modeling and the various types of reinforcement (positive, negative) resulting from a behavior.

If we go back to the point from which we started and that is to performance anxiety and the social pressures to reach ever-increasing standards, we immediately notice that the concepts of empowerment and self empowerment are based on a great intuition: if in life we learn to put at the center our need /

desire, rather than that imposed on us by others, if we learn to become aware of our abilities and trust ourselves, we will face the situation we feared in the best possible way. Overcoming this small-big challenge will reinforce our sense of adequacy, competence and effectiveness and will create that virtuous circle capable of "empowering us", that is, expanding our psychological resources to achieve success.

This line of thinking has innovative consequences that are more consistent with the modern conception of health. In fact, an empowered individual, able to increase their skills and take control of their life, becomes self-sufficient even in identifying and achieving their goals; Furthermore, working on the enhancement of the individual means inserting it in a perspective of salutogenesis, which consists in understanding what are the (bio-psycho-social) mechanisms involved in maintaining well-being and health, rather than focusing exclusively on symptom and disease (pathogenesis). This concept that today we take (hopefully!) For granted, in those years represented an extraordinary change of perspective.

The introduction of the concept of self-empowerment, in fact, has broadened the sphere of interest and the area of intervention of psychology, allowing the development of new theoretical and applied disciplines, which focus on what an individual needs, which is already in a condition of equilibrium, to function better and better (heterostasis).

Strengths and critical areas

These theoretical intervention models focused on the health of the individual have existed for decades and yet, even today, since childhood, we are witnessing an excess of demands and expectations related to obtaining high performance at any cost. Excessive social pressure is certainly one of the causes that generates performance anxiety, but the correlation with the context alone cannot explain the phenomenon in its entirety, because the individual variables are equally important. This second point is, in our opinion, the one in which the main critical areas of the models mentioned above are present.

When acting on the individual, unfortunately, the risk could be that of continuing to focus on aspects that can bring about a change, but on a superficial and not a deep level. For example, if we refer to the contexts of which we authors have direct professional experience (sports, business, school), we often find super-motivated and / or talented people who, however, are unable to express their potential optimally, since their underlying skills could not develop adequately.

To clarify further, we can decline the discussion to one of the specific areas of our competence: the psychology of sport. In this discipline, in its applicative part, we intervene on the individual sportsman almost exclusively with Mental Training intended (according to Weinberg and Gould, 2007) as a constant and systematic training of psychological or mental skills in order to increase performance, pleasure or the degree of satisfaction in sport and physical activity.

By its very definition, it aims to intervene mainly on cognitive-emotional aspects. The consequence risks being that of neglecting the profound interrelation existing between all the planes of the person, of considering once again the individual in a fragmented way, without grasping that background of organic complexity, which is now an assumption shared by the most recent epistemological paradigms. (Bertalanffy, 1968; Bottacioli, 2005; Morin, 2000)

Neurosciences also share this epistemological approach, just think of the modern concept of neuroplasticity: "a phenomenon in which both neurons and synapses increase and which concerns sensory, motor, cognitive and emotional circuits, circuits closely integrated with each other and which is not possible untie one from the other. [...] The division between cognition and emotion is outdated: reason needs emotions and perceptions to reason" (Mc Raney, 2012; Damasio 2010 in Chiera, Barsotti, Lanaro, & Bottaccioli 2017, 71).

The person, as a complex organism, is a set of systems that give life to a whole. This means that to reach an optimal level of functioning the individual must develop every aspect that characterizes him as a psychophysical entity whose parts are in constant interdependence; if a part changes there will be repercussions on the whole and the whole, in turn, is such precisely by virtue of what constitutes it. To produce significant and lasting changes it is therefore necessary to intervene taking into account this organic and complex interaction between the whole and the parts that compose it. To do this, we believe it is essential to understand what the individual's Basic Operations are.

At this point it is necessary to carry out theoretical clarifications on the model of neo-functionalism, which is what constitutes the basis of our training. According to this paradigm, by Basic Operations we mean "what is at the basis of our actions, which generates more specific and differentiated behaviors, thoughts, words, attitudes. It is precisely through the essentiality of the underlying operations that it is possible to take into consideration, in a truly scientific way, the globality with so many variables, with its various and complex systems that are deeply interconnected and integrated. Neo-Functionalism studies precisely these functions starting from childhood, identifying their origin in those experiences that are fundamental (Basic Experiences of the Self) so that the child, in becoming an adult, preserves the original integration, health,

well-being. , and develop all the skills necessary to face life adequately and successfully "(Functional Psychology (Theoretical Model)).

Considering these theoretical premises, the critical issues related to interventions focused exclusively on cognitive and behavioral aspects are more understandable: it is as if engineers wanted to raise a skyscraper more and more, neglecting its foundations. How can we allow an individual to grow on a solid foundation? How to be able to fully exploit individual talent, without "burning it"? Why do we believe that most self-empowerment strategies, even if improving individual potentials, fail to obtain a complete, profound and lasting result? They act mainly on the cognitive-symbolic level and, in the best of cases, also on the emotional one. This emerges clearly if we examine the key concepts on which the authors of the aforementioned strategies focus. Let's try, for example, to type empowerment and self empowerment on a search engine: we will notice that the main focuses of intervention concern the perception of success or failure; hopefulness and critical awareness (Zimmerman); the internal or external control place (Rotter); desire, positive thinkability and symbolic experimentation (Bruscaglioni). The words themselves (which we have indicated in italics) refer directly to almost exclusively cognitive characteristics. Since the theoretical model is also behavioral, it is assumed that the enhancement takes place not only on the cognitive level but, consequently, also on the emotional, postural and physiological level of the individual, when it is subjected to a continuous repetition of stimuli. real or simulated. Thanks to these experiences, the person receives positive feedback that can be crucial in strengthening the sense of self-efficacy and in the realization of one's desires.

We believe that one of the limits of these approaches is to take an assumption for granted: a person subjected to a specific stimulus, in front of which he has acted positively, is automatically able to transfer this ability to other contexts of life. In real life, in fact, we are confronted with a great variety of situations and we know well that it is not possible to face this complexity by adopting a single intervention strategy: in the concreteness of the context, unexpected and dynamics can occur that escape any prediction or simulation and that they could displace the individual. On these occasions, the risk of not being able to develop a solution strategy and of obtaining, at this point, a negative counter-feedback, due to failure, is highly plausible, which would lower the perceived sense of self-efficacy.

Enhancement Psychology

We are not denying in full the validity of the models described above: making the individual able to better manage some specific situation, working mainly on the cognitive and motivational aspects, has its proven effectiveness. We believe, however, that these approaches have the following limitations:

- low situational flexibility;
- risk of negative repercussions on previously enhanced performance;
- implementation of a superficial change, which has little lasting effects and which prevent the subject from reaching a real and consolidated functional autonomy.

For this reason, after years of work experience in different contexts, we have developed and developed (in particular in the field of sport psychology) a new model of intervention that we have called Enhancement Psychology. It falls within the scope of the so-called applied psychologies, which deal with implementing a theoretical model by declining it in real contexts in order to achieve effective results in terms of solving problems and improving the quality of life.

Enhancement Psychology is an application of the theoretical model of Functional Psychology, today called Neo-Functionalism. Developed since the 1980s, it finds its prodromes in clinical practice, in the diagnostic activity and above all in the work of observation on the evolutionary development of the self. The strength of this model lies in its integral approach: it is necessary to consider the human being as a whole and take into account the manifestations and interactions that affect the whole person (Rispoli, 2014).

Compared to self empowerment models, the Psychology of Empowerment offers an integrated growth path, which works simultaneously and indissolubly on all the various planes of the Self, not only on the Cognitive-Symbolic one, but also on the Physiological, Muscular-Postural dimensions. and Emotional in a complete, profound way and with lasting effects. This allows you to acquire or consolidate skills, which guarantee high performance efficiency within the multiple and unpredictable concrete situations that may occur in the personal and professional fields.

The work process is, therefore, multidimensional and circular, because in the Psychology of Empowerment, the intervention is based on the analysis and development of the person's basic functioning and not only on cognitive restructuring or on the teaching of standardized behavioral strategies. As mentioned above, the Fund Operations constitute the basis of the individual, what gives rise to skills and potential, but also inefficiencies or problems.

With regard to performance anxiety, for example, our model would not limit itself to providing strategies or techniques to deal with it at the critical moment, but would act on the underlying functioning that causes the anxiety itself, aiming at the reduction or total disappearance of the phenomenon. To really enhance an individual or a context, in our opinion, it is necessary to intervene starting from the foundations, just as when you want to build an ever taller building, you must first of all consolidate what supports the entire structure.

Enhancement Psychology aims to implement a process of personal empowerment that allows for full autonomy. Through specific intervention methodologies, those internal conditions are created, to the person or to the group, which allow to manage or overcome the pre-existing difficulties and to acquire a real ability to face external unexpected events.

Thanks to the strengthening of the Background Operations, the individual acquires solid adaptive skills and becomes able to apply them in multiple contexts as often as necessary, in full autonomy and safety.

Situational flexibility is in fact another strength of the Psychology of Empowerment, because it allows the individual to quickly adapt to new contexts as needed.

The achievement of these results is possible by considering "mind and body as a unicum: for modern functionalism there is no mind or body in itself, but only psycho-body functions [...] through which a person as a whole acts and interacts with himself and with the world "(Rispoli 2014 in Chiera, Barsotti, Lanaro, & Bottaccioli 2017, 71). Working on the Functions of the Self makes it possible to create a multidimensional intervention project on the individual, avoiding focusing only on the cognitive or behavioral part. This is possible thanks to the fact that, according to neo-functionalism, the "theory of Functions [...] leaves behind the concept of 'static structure', goes beyond the concept of 'system divided into parts', and embraces the entirety of person (of the living organism), which is seen as an organization of processes on all possible planes and levels [...]"

The living organism is whole and integrated, and the Functions express wholeness and are deeply integrated with each other. In fact, the person expresses himself entirely in each Function, and the Functions can each be studied in its own precise and detailed course "(Rispoli, 2004 20).

Declining the discourse to the sporting context, our approach would start from an initial assessment of the "trend of the functioning of the human organism on various levels" (Rispoli, 2004 38). In this way it would be possible to concretely intervene on the mental mechanisms (control, rationality, concentration ...) that lead to activation responses, defining a work project to optimize all the psycho-body functions, which are strictly interconnected on an emotional level (fear, anger, joy ...), physiological (breathing, autonomic system,

perceptual thresholds ...) and postural-muscular (postures, movements, strength).

When the Functions are fully integrated, they coordinate harmoniously, thus bringing the organization of the individual's Self into equilibrium. This allows the person to put his skills to good use in a lasting and repeatable way, increasing performance and self-efficacy, improving the management of potentially critical situations and determining appropriate responses to the context even in highly stressful moments.

Let's imagine that an athlete finds himself in a disadvantaged situation in the middle of a competition: he will have to react by maintaining high concentration, increasing muscular and / or cardio-respiratory performance. If the sportsman has carried out a work of strengthening on the Functions of the Self, he will be able to face the critical moment by fully updating his own being, automatically and independently relying on his own mental, bodily and emotional abilities.

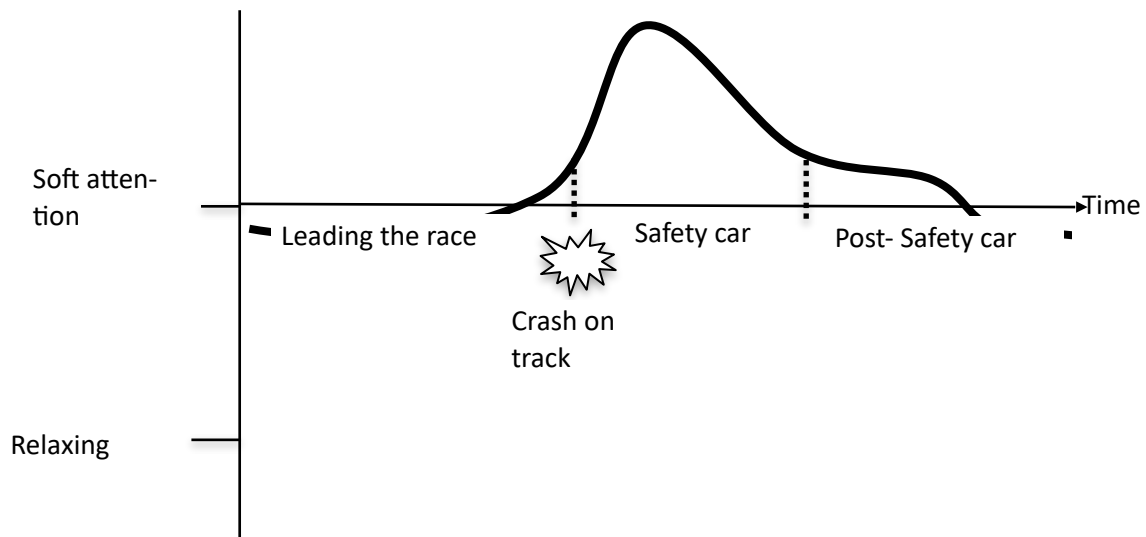
We further decline the discussion with two examples relating to sports practice and the business context.

Example 1: Motor racing driver (formula car race)

Let's think about how many contextual and situational variables can affect a Formula race, variables that can strongly affect both individually and in general competition: accidents, safety cars, mechanical breakdowns, climate changes, pit-stop problems, driving errors and so on. The Formula car driver is forced by the situation, by the circumstances to react promptly, constantly changing his state of self. He must quickly and constantly draw on his own resources to effectively deal with the external situation. When, as in the example of figure 1, a driver is almost in "solitary", perhaps because he is in first place with a great gap from his pursuers, in this specific case it is not necessary to maintain a Maximum Concentration, just modulate the "attention (or vigilance) "at a level that is defined as" soft attention "

Fig. 1 - Adjustment of the Concentration Function to the context of motor racing

Maximum —
concentration



Configuring your vigilance on this level allows the driver on the one hand not to waste too much mental energy and on the other not to make driving mistakes. But if due to an accident in the rear the safety car should enter the track and regroup the group, then it becomes crucial for our driver to be able to quickly bring his "vigilance" function from the "soft attention" level to the "maximum concentration" level.

Example 2: manager or entrepreneur leading a work group.

The task of a leader of a work group is not only to provide directives but, above all, to better manage human resources in order to achieve results. Fortunately, we are overcoming the mentality that a group can only be successful if its members conform to the leader's way of thinking. We have seen, in fact, that a team works much better and works with greater motivation when the peculiarities, abilities and skills that each one brings as a dowry are enhanced. Therefore, among the tasks of a good leader, knowing how to grasp and stimulate these ideational and emotional specificities becomes fundamental. To manage such complexity and enhance his human resources, he will have to have a very wide range of functions: for example, he will have to be able to pass from a directive to a supportive mode, from being a determined guide to leaving room for the decisions of the group, from controlling and monitoring the work of the group to delegating and trusting the members of the group after having grasped their maturity and skills.

Fig. 2 - Example of a good functional performance of the leader of a group who must direct and make decisions, but also listen to improve decisions

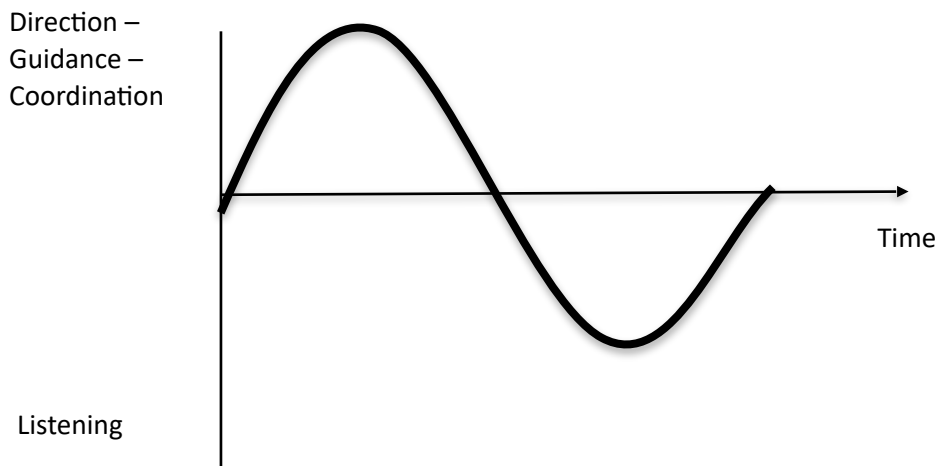
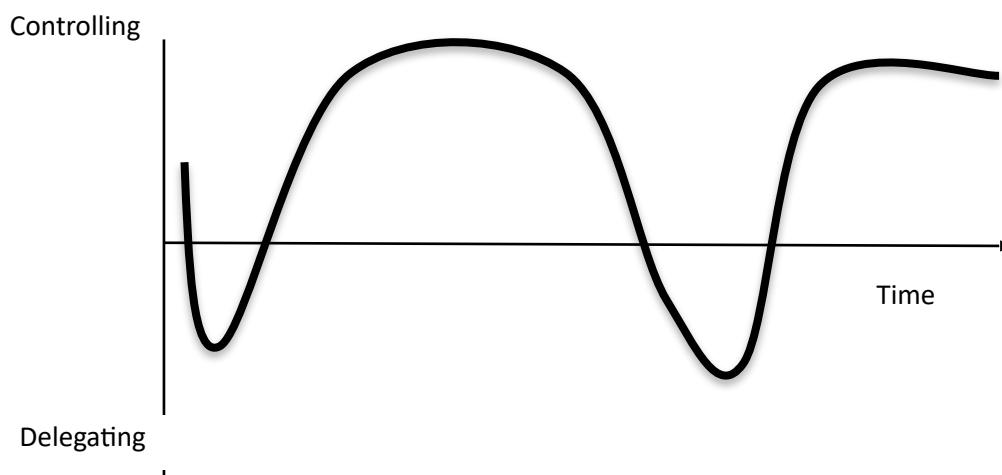


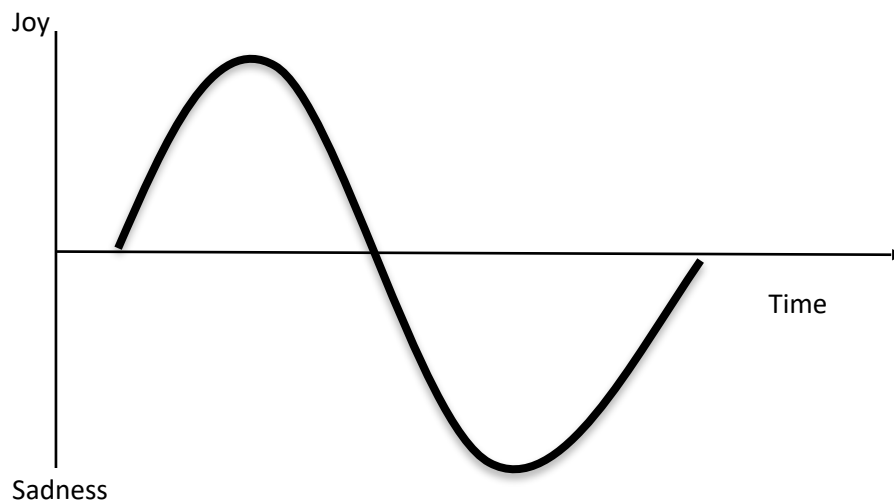
Fig. 3 - Example of a group leader who has extreme control over everything and fails, if not rarely, to delegate tasks by entrusting himself to the group.



So why do the Functions allow greater adaptation to situational variability? This is possible thanks to the specific characteristics that distinguish them and which we indicate below (Rispoli, 2014):

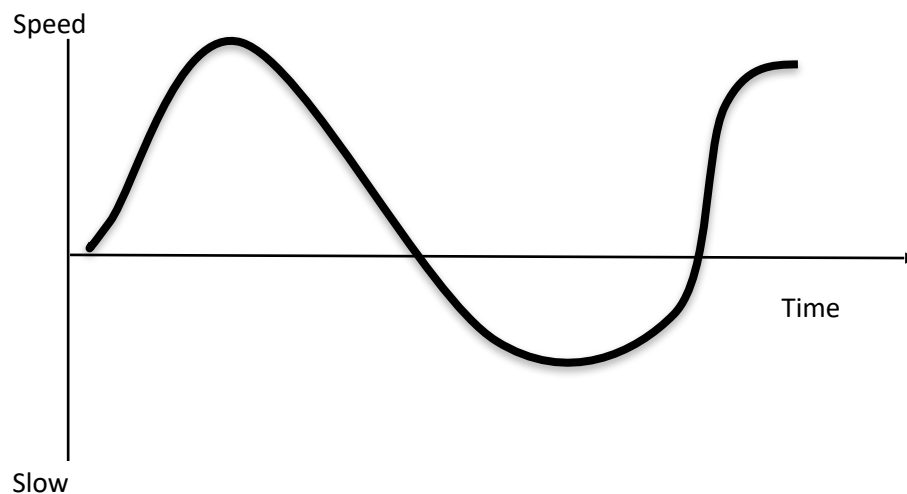
- the Range (or amplitude): all the Functions have an alternating trend within a range (amplitude) between two polarities (eg activation-calm, joy-sadness, speed-slowness, anger-strength). The more complete and intact the ranges available to the individual, the more potential he has in life. Being performing does not at all mean remaining constantly in the average of the Function, but it consists in the possibility of reaching both one and the other polarity.

Fig.4 – Full Range (Rispoli 2004, 60)



In figure 4 "we have represented the trend over time of a Function that has remained intact and complete" (Rispoli 2004, 59)

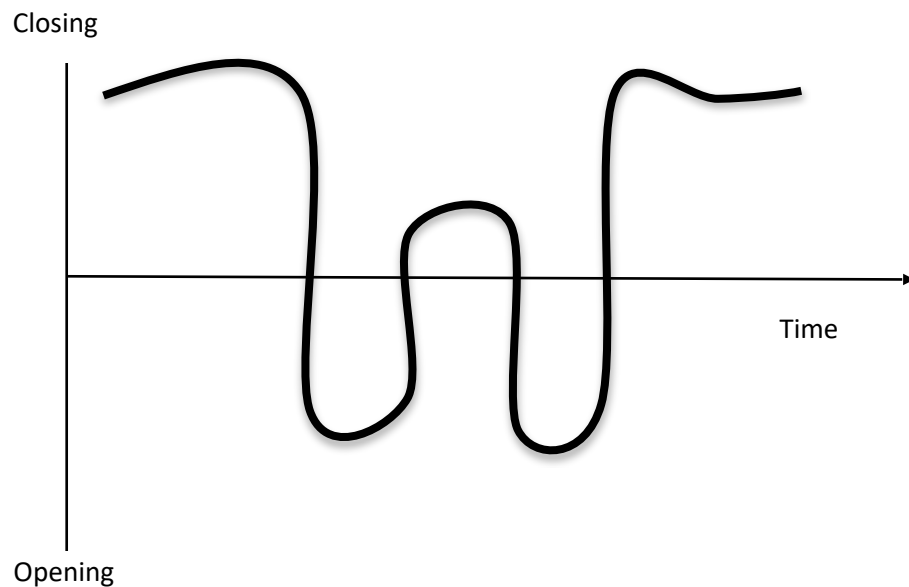
Fig.5 – Limited range (Rispoli 2004, 60)



In figure 5 "one of the possible alterations in the performance of the Functions consists in the decrease of the range" (Rispoli 2004, 59)

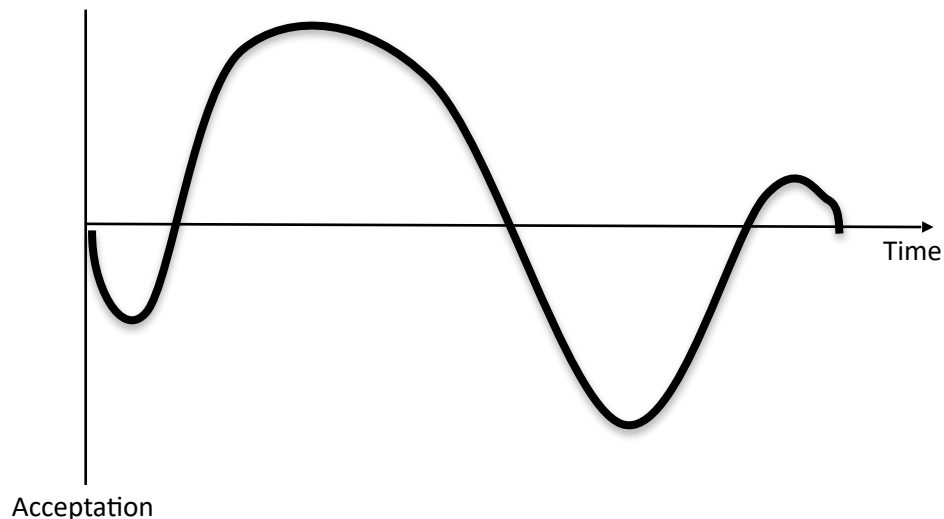
- Modularity: consists of the person's ability to move from one pole to another several times, continuously. It represents the time spent in certain parts of the Function: "a lack of modularity leads to a preponderance of one polarity over the other (as the figure clearly shows)" Rispoli 2004, 60-61) and a poor ability to adaptation to the variability of situations.

Fig.6 – Low modularity (Rispoli 2004, 60)



- Mobility: refers to the speed with which one is able to move from one pole of the Function to another and is closely related to modularity. In the presence of poor mobility it is difficult to quickly abandon a mode of operation if the context requires it. Returning to the example of working on an athlete, restoring the mobility of the Functions means making him able to react to a sudden unfavorable situation, so as to "change gear immediately, not get stuck in the previous condition" (Rispoli, 2004, 61) .

- *Fig.7 – Scarce mobility* (Rispoli 2004, 61)



Strengthening the Functions of the Self therefore allows the person (regardless of the scope of application) to acquire and consolidate multiple adaptability skills, useful for facing the complexity of reality, because, as Rispoli states, the living organism is "an organization of Functions that change passing from one condition to another, from one functional organization to another" (Rispoli, 2014 31). Functions are not learned strategies, but levels of organization through which the entire individual expresses his performance.

Conclusions

With the psychology of empowerment, we intend to include a new model of integrated mental training in the current panorama of applied psychologies, which is part of the health genesis. It offers the possibility to act in a profound, multidimensional and lasting way on the individual, making sure that he or she becomes fully capable of managing complexity not only from the performance point of view, which, in this case, is our specific field of intervention, but in a plurality of contexts (personal, social, family, work).

The intense and continuous experience of work that we have carried out since 2014 has allowed us to bring the theoretical construct of Functional Psychology into sports practice. We have thus succeeded in giving birth to a specific mental training intervention protocol aimed at preparing professional sportsmen or young aspiring athletes: motorsport drivers (one of which is currently in Formula1 or winners of world touring championships), young tennis players, sailors, footballers, shooters (including an Olympic medal winner). In the intervention methodology we have included the use of various specific instruments (biofeedback, neurofeedback, digital proprioceptive tablets, etc.), thanks to which we were able to collect valuable psycho-physiological data on the basis of which to customize the intervention, objectify the results achieved and measure ongoing progress.

We can therefore say that, starting from those years of empirical practice, the Psychology of Empowerment has gone from being a theoretical construct to its natural location within applied psychologies.

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