

Mental Toughness in Sport: Moving towards Conceptual Clarity and Consensus

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ABSTRACT

Although in the past three decades Mental Toughness (MT) has been very popular, recent systematic reviews of the literature reveal that its conceptualization remains vague. The definitional issues and conceptual discrepancies have been hindering both research and practice. **PURPOSE:** To add on the current state of knowledge and facilitate researchers and practitioners by collating available evidence in regards to construct definitions proposed in literature and by presenting aggregated data about their usage. **METHODS:** Studies were identified by searching the electronic databases of Embase, Scopus, PubMed, and SPORTDiscus. Only papers in the English language were included. Cases studies and papers that did not specify the theoretical framework were based upon were excluded. Two reviewers were involved in the data extraction process. Disagreements were resolved by discussion between them until consensus was reached. **RESULTS:** This review consisted of four phases: The first phase, Identification, resulted in 381 results. The second phase, Screening, which included removal of articles electronically as well as manually, resulted in 155 articles left. During the third phase, Eligibility, those 155 articles were checked via the eligibility criteria. As a result, 56 articles were excluded. Therefore, 98 studies entered the fourth and last phase, Included. From those 98 studies, 38 different definitions or conceptual platforms were identified. The results indicated that the most widely-used definitions are: (a) Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002) with 18%, (b) Clough, Earle, and Sewell (2002) with 15%, and (c) Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock (2008) with 13%. **CONCLUSION:** The inferences of these results attest on Gucciardi's (2017) conclusions. In more detail, all three popular definitions apply on the person and MT is a prominent psychological construct in situations of competing/performing against adversity/pressure. At the same time, it is apparent that the creators of those definitions and the scholars who used them in their research do not agree on whether to adopt a narrow or broad view of the construct. In accordance to the findings of Lin, Mutz, Clough, and Papageorgiou (2017), there's still a debate in the scientific community whether a multi- or uni-dimensional model should be used to conceptualize MT. As Cowden (2017) has pointed out, less variation in scope is observed in the more recent definitions. Future research, however, has to identify if/when the literature will start shifting towards using them more often. In addition, it is evident that with the popularity of MT increasing, scholars need to intensify their efforts towards agreement. Poor construct conceptualization and further confusion on what MT represents and what it does not, could continue creating issues in research and practice, such as validation of measurement tools and development of evidence-based MT-training protocols.