

**Looking for God, Meaning, Physical Fitness and Beyond: The Religious and  
Spiritual Space in Sport Entrepreneurship**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past several years, both academic literature and the popular press have heralded a renewed interest in religion and spirituality in both entrepreneurship and sport disciplines. The search for God, meaning, and other expressions of religiosity and spirituality tends to appear embedded in a wider variety of cultural forms in the Western world, including enterprise and sport cultures. Notwithstanding the increasing awareness of the mutual impacts of religion and spirituality in the entrepreneurship and sports academic fields, attention to these topics is lacking within the sport entrepreneurship literature. In this conceptual paper, sport entrepreneurship is re-thought from its religious and spiritual dimensions, paying special attention to the fitness sector, specifically to activities related to so-called “slow fitness”. Utilizing existential philosophy from Paul Ricoeur as our theoretical framework, we reflect on this part of the fitness industry to understand the religious and spiritual space in sport entrepreneurship. In this sense, the paper provides other elements to introduce into discussions of what defines this emergent academic area.

**Key words:** sport entrepreneurship; slow fitness; religion; spirituality; Ricoeur.

## **1. Introduction**

Human beings have always felt the urge to look for perfection. This call to perfection has traditionally resonated in religious circles as a spiritual call for “holiness”. It involves the desire to look for God, to imitate the divine goodness and find fulfilment with one’s life (Hazony and Johnson 2018; Shebzuhova et al. 2018). In the contemporary Western world,

however, this pursuit of perfection often appears embedded in a wider variety of forms. The search for an entrepreneurial career that leads to success and allows a balance between life and work (Burton et al. 2016; Hollsten 2000; Hjorth 2005; Marshall 2016; Wach et al. 2018; Werner et al. 2014), or the sportification of societies with the exalted “healthism” and bodily ideals (Garnier 2013; Luitzen et al. 2015; Wiest et al. 2015) are expressions of the perfection principle with which people engage today. Although attitudes towards the sacred are not the most salient features of these trends, there seem to be porous and potentially overlapping expressions of religiosity and spirituality<sup>1</sup> that appear subtly materialized in these practices of everyday life (Ammerman, 2014; Hunt 2005; Redden 2011).

Certainly, over the past several years, academic literature and the popular press have heralded a renewed interest in religion and spirituality in both entrepreneurship and sport disciplines. For example, characteristic of the former are studies that suggest that an entrepreneur’s religion and spirituality influence entrepreneurial decision making (Balog et al. 2014; Carswell and Rolland 2004; Dana 2009, 2010; Drakopoulou Dodd and Gotsis 2007; Jackson and Konz 2006; Kauanui et al. 2008, 2010). Similarly, there has been a marked increase in writings and journals examining sport-religion/spirituality relationships (Parker and Weir 2012; Parry et al. 2007, 2011; Ponting and O’Brien 2015; Watson and Parker 2014, 2015). Notable theologians have also written about the spiritual possibilities of sport (e.g., Jürgen Moltman, Wolfhart Pannenberg), and even Pope John

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth clarifying that, traditionally, religion and spirituality were inseparable concepts. The term “spirituality” comes from the Hebrew word *ruach* (spirit, breath, wind); its origins were Christian and referred to living life under the influence of God’s Spirit (Sheldrake 2012). However, in current discourses, spirituality appears in occasions detached from its religious roots to refer to a range of behaviors that include from stoic attitudes, yoga discipline, hospitality or generosity to occult phenomena – just citing some (Stringfellow 2006). In this paper, we will refer to religiosity to include the spirituality rooted in traditional religions and spirituality as postmodern secular spirituality.

Paul II championed the role of sports as a vehicle that contributes to the harmonious and complete development of man, body and spirit (Watson 2007).

The credit the entrepreneurship and sport academic fields are giving to religious and spiritual expressions contrasts sharply with the literature on sport entrepreneurship. Since its recent inception as an area of academic research, studies have mainly characterized sport entrepreneurship in economic terms. Particularly, it has been commonplace to emphasize the role of sport-based enterprises to raise economic development through innovation, proactivity, and risk-taking initiatives (Ratten 2010a, 2011a, 2012a, 2012b, 2018; Ratten and Ferreira 2017). However, there is increasing recognition of the social dimension in sport-based enterprises (Bjärsholm 2017; Hayduk and Walker 2018; Ratten and Babiak 2010; Ratten 2010b, 2011b, 2011c), but the religious and spiritual space in sport entrepreneurship remains an enigmatic and largely unexplored domain. This conceptual paper fills part of this gap by proposing different angles to re-think sport entrepreneurship from its religious and spiritual dimensions and by providing other elements to introduce into discussions of what defines this emergent research area.

Including the religious and spiritual dimension in the study of sport entrepreneurship implies consideration of the sport entrepreneur in a holistic way. This means examining the entrepreneur not only as a person rationally on the basis of his or her intellectual capacities under the idea of “*homo economicus*”, but rather from the spiritual and bodily dimensions as well. In fact, the regards for the religious and spiritual dimensions lead us to avoid looking upon the human spirit and body as two heterogeneous sorts of things. Instead, it helps us to view them as two poles, whose respective lines of force are directed towards each other and intermingle (Frasen 1969). From this follows that the sport entrepreneur’s highest spiritual desires for perfection — in whatever form it takes — will be present in the physical activities of his or her body.

To move beyond atomistic notions of sport entrepreneurs, in this paper, we propose to re-conceptualize sport entrepreneurship by introducing the notion of capable embodied spiritual beings. Invoking the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's [1913-2005] existential philosophy we reflect on this idea and shed light on the religious and spiritual space in sport entrepreneurship. Ricoeur's (1966, 1986, 1992) seminal works are well known among religious scholars (Carter 2014; Jervolino 2008; Wall et al. 2002) and his philosophical thought has also been used in the entrepreneurship (Bill and Johansson 2010; Dey and Steyaert 2015) and sport academic fields (Savage 2016; Zarowski, 2012). His works suggest that the human being has an implicit religious/spiritual dimension (Carter 2014), so that the practice of his or her actions through bodily movements expresses one of the ways in which human beings expand their religiosity/spirituality. In addition, of interest is also the classical model provided by Gartner (1985) for the study of entrepreneurship, which selectively serves as a guide to approach the mentioned ideas in the framework of sport entrepreneurship.

Due to the wide variety of sectors that are included in sport entrepreneurship — e.g., big-business competitive sport, adventure sport companies, tourism sport enterprises — in an attempt to gain clarity and focus, we narrow our discussion by referring to the fitness sector. In recent years, the link between this sector and the sport industry has been reinforced (Ratten 2018). Indeed, the very idea of physical fitness is currently experiencing a pivotal moment in the sportification of the most developed societies (Beauchemin et al. 2019; García-Fernández et al. 2018; Nash 2018). As the wellness promotion and interest in physical activity and fitness have grown, the entire fitness industry has also grown tremendously (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Weiner 2017). The International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) recently cited the great variety of practices that it encompasses, from high-intensity fitness routines such as

CrossFit, to so-called “slow fitness” with more relaxed exercises such as yoga, pilates and body balance (IHRSA 2016). Precisely, the activities included in slow fitness are becoming very popular, being one of the physical fitness activities more closely associated with contemporary religiosity and spirituality (Kercher 2018). Slow fitness activities are also increasingly related to job opportunities and therefore are opening new avenues for entrepreneurial initiatives in the sport sector (Kercher 2018). Recognition of the growth potential in this area is rising, especially in metropolitan areas (García-Fernández et al. 2018; Powers and Greenwell 2017), so that sport entrepreneurs associated with the slow fitness sector are anticipating growth in the coming years. Acknowledging this potential, we will address the fitness sector in the light of the slow fitness category.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we identify and describe key aspects in the literature on entrepreneurship and slow fitness that consider the contribution that religion and spirituality have made to extending understanding in their respective contexts. Then, a holistic understanding of human beings is presented based on Ricoeur’s philosophical works. Afterwards, drawing from Ricoeur’s philosophy and Gartner’s (1985) model, we discuss the differentiating aspects of sport entrepreneurship in the light of its religious/spiritual dimension. Finally, we conclude by evaluating the value of considering the religious and spiritual space in further studies of sport entrepreneurship.

## **2. Religion and spirituality in entrepreneurship and slow fitness: a general overview**

### **2.1. The interplay among religion, spirituality, and entrepreneurship**

Religion has had a dubious career in the domain of entrepreneurship studies. Although the first attempts to clarify the religion-entrepreneurship connection point back to Max

Weber's (2005 [1905]) seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Dana, 2009, 2010; Iannaccone, 1998; Rendtorff 2013), the religious dimension was practically non-existent at the inception of the entrepreneurship field. Weber (2005 [1905]) illustrated how rational economic values were dependent on Protestant religious values and argued, accordingly, that a rational economic organization implied a specific moral attitude that was associated with a religious faith. However valuable his work might have been, his insights were for a long time overlooked among entrepreneurship scholarship. Only at the end of the last century, did interest heighten in addressing the links between religion and entrepreneurship, with Drakopoulo Dodd and Seaman's (1998) work leading contemporary studies in entrepreneurship literature. Reductively stated, this area of research analyses the influence of the values embedded in traditional religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) in attitudes towards entrepreneurship (Anderson et al. 2000; Carswell and Rolland 2004; Gursoy et al. 2017), the entrepreneurial process (Dana, 2009, 2010; Drakopoulou Dodd and Gotsis 2007; Ferguson et al., 2014; Ramadani et al. 2015; Tracey, 2012), and new business' benefits (Balog et al. 2014; Liu et al. 2018).

The difficulties of crediting formal traditional religions in studies of entrepreneurship have not been undergone with the more recent incorporation of the spiritual dimension in the field. Rendtorff (2013) explains such different trajectories by citing the empty space for values discussion left by the decline of Protestant ethics in contemporary Western societies. In Rendtorff's (2013) view, such emptiness enhanced opportunities for new conceptualizations of spiritual values' role in organizational sciences inspired largely by Eastern mystical tradition. In this context, a renewed academic interest in the various types of formal and informal religious expressions in entrepreneurship also emerged without much hindrance (Balog et al. 2014).

Alike to the studies that analyse the religion-entrepreneurship nexus, existing studies in this stream of research analyse the role of spirituality in entrepreneurs' motivations (Judge and Douglas 2013; Kauanui et al. 2010; Pavlovich and Corner 2014). In general, the results show a connection between entrepreneurs' spirituality and the perception of entrepreneurship as a value-driven endeavour that provides them with personal meaning and wellbeing — in some cases referred to as happiness (Hollsten 2000; Sherman et al. 2016). As such, entrepreneurship is seen as a vocation that provides the entrepreneur with meaning and identity.

There is also the preeminent idea that spirituality forms the foundation for major values and beliefs that impact the entrepreneur's perspective on their venture-related decisions (Jackson and Konz 2006; King-Kauanui et al. 2005; Nandram 2016; Pio 2010). Particular attention has been given to the spiritual entrepreneurs' leadership style and the implications of such leadership for business performance (Liu et al. 2018), adverse outcomes — including the experience of dealing with venture failure (Cope 2011; Singh et al. 2016) — or organizational culture (Godwin et al. 2016; Kauanui et al. 2008). The expression “spiritual entrepreneurs”, as used by some authors (e.g., Mukherjee 2007; Sfeir-Younis 2002), is associated with a stronger sense of responsibility to the community, business stakeholders and the environment.

Nonetheless, some scholars have also raised concerns about the emergence of a spiritual rhetoric that may only be used as an instrument to link employees to corporations (Bell and Taylor 2004; Case and Gosling 2010; Long and Driscoll 2015). Although this concern is typically associated with big companies, it is worthwhile to consider that such situations might also be reproduced in the context of entrepreneurship, and then spirituality would be nothing more than an ideological tool of management. Stated differently, the entrepreneur's identification as a spiritual person should not necessarily be construed as

being an ethical and good entrepreneur. As noted in previous studies, ethics in the entrepreneurial context require a permanent life effort (Dey 2006; Dey and Steyaert 2016).

## **2.2. The interplay among religion, spirituality, and slow fitness**

Throughout history, the ambivalences in the relationship between religion/spirituality and physical fitness have been notorious. In the antiquity, many of the activities that today are regarded as fitness were an intimate aspect of religious festivities (Simopoulos 1989) and served to spread religious values (Magdalinski and Chandler 2002). Yet there have been times in which physical fitness has been associated only with attributes that were skill-related (e.g., body composition, muscular strength, speed) (Mantell 2013), so that fitness and religion/spirituality have appeared, at least at first glance, to have little in common (Cusack 2010). However, this outlook has changed in recent times and, currently, it may be said that the contemporary West have vigorously re-embraced the equation of fitness with religion/spirituality (Deardorff II and White 2008; Worthington and Deuster 2018; Yi and Silver 2015). One of the main drivers of this shift has been the changing paradigm in both health and wellness, which has added other domains to physical exercise that is opening new avenues for incorporating religious and spiritual elements in the fitness sector (Beauchemin et al. 2019; Miragaia and Constantino 2019). Slow fitness is a good example of fitness activities related somewhat to religious faith or mystic experiences (Greenwood and Delgado 2013; Kercher 2018; Powers and Greenwell 2017). Its rising popularity is undeniable, as in 2018 it was ranked as one of the best fitness activities according to the worldwide survey of fitness trends (Kercher 2018).

Notwithstanding the increased interest in slow fitness activities among practitioners, only recently a broader conceptualization of physical fitness, encompassing its spiritual or

religious meaning, has been noted in the literature. From this perspective, slow fitness has been defined as an embodied spirituality (Greenwood and Delgado 2013; Oh and Sarkisian 2011; Pargament and Sweeney 2011; Thomas et al. 2018; Worthington and Deuster 2018). Introducing the quality of experience at a fundamental level, the human body is enacting in its role of interface in the subjective relationship between (wo)man and God<sup>2</sup> (Greenwood and Delgado 2013; Martínková and Parry 2011; Yi and Silver 2015). Thus, slow fitness represents a possible channel to reunite the physical and spiritual dimensions in sport. Body and spirit are not considered as separated entities, but rather they are recognized existing at their most integrated level as one (Martínková and Parry 2011). This means that any act of the body in the context of a slow fitness exercise can be an act of the spirit and vice versa (Greenwood and Delgado, 2013; Worthington and Deuster 2018). For example, Greenwood and Delgado (2013) have noted how some Christians understand their fitness exercises as a form of spiritual discipline in the sense of serving as an expression of a healthy love of the embodied self to God. Theological principals, such as being created in the “imago Dei” or God’s creation calling for proper stewardship might then be affirmed through the search for the optimal physical condition (Deardorff II and White 2008; Greenwood and Delgado 2013; Waters et al. 2018). Seen in this light, the concern for the physical fitness of the body is understood as a faithful response from the believer to live into the fullness, flourishing and love of God’s creation as God intended.

Nonetheless, despite the recognized potential that slow fitness practices have to unleash the spiritual element that lies in every human being (Oh and Sarkisian 2011; Pargament and Sweeney 2011; Yi and Silver 2015), it does not mean that all fitness practitioners

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<sup>2</sup> From a secular spirituality, God is also referred to with a variety of terms such as Transcendence, Spirit, Energy, Love and Life (Stringfellow 2006).

choose to instill their physical exercises with such an objective, or even that they manage to reach it. Indeed, some accounts evaluate the relationship between slow fitness and spirituality more critically, recalling the controversial relationships that both had in the past (Kristensen 2018). Thus, some practitioners might approach the physical exercises merely as an avenue for pursuit of external goods and, in this case, slow fitness might only reflect people's preoccupation with external image (Kristensen 2018; Powers and Greenwell 2017).

Recent literature has also demonstrated that in secular contexts the spiritual-physical fitness connections may also emerge unintentionally (Antony 2016; Daile 2018; Felkers et al. 2016; Richert and DeCloedt 2018; Yi and Silver 2015). On the one hand, the impetus to play that comes with the repetitive movements of the body can help to transcend the base nature, bringing about an openness to God (Daile 2018; Felkers et al. 2016). Particularly, an immersion in playfulness enhances practitioners to experience the freedom of spontaneous activity detached from the bonds of worldly life but closer to the spiritual realm (Daile 2018; Felkers et al. 2016; Nesti 2007). A prominent religious voice, Joseph Ratzinger (2000), subsequent Pope until 2013, draws on the social historian Johan Huizinga's studies in his celebration of the liberating and spiritual qualities of play. Especially illustrative are Huizinga's (1955, p. 19) known words from his seminal work *Homo Ludens*: "in play we may move below the level of serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it — in the realm of the beautiful and sacred".

On the other hand, the Western adaptation of yoga, tai-chi or pilate practices, originally associated with Eastern religion and spirituality, may lead some practitioners to experience spiritual wellbeing, even though such exercises are largely practiced in general health and fitness centres as physical therapy (Pargament and Sweeney 2011). Accordingly, slow physical exercises may unexpectedly turn out to be a way to unite the

individual soul with God or to experience peace and self-transcendence through the body (Oh and Sarkisian 2011; Yi and Silver 2015).

### **3. Ricoeur's pre-hermeneutic anthropology**

More than just a preoccupation with the physical or organizational sciences, the relationship between the spirit — immaterial — and the body — material — is also a philosophical issue. Paul Ricoeur's (1966, 1986, 1992) philosophy of the will, or what has been known as his pre-hermeneutic anthropology, seems ideal for illuminating our understanding of sport entrepreneurship from a religious and spiritual perspective in the slow fitness sector. Particularly important for our purpose is his concept of “the capable human being”, which appeals to the idea of (wo)men as embodied spiritual beings.

#### **3.1. The capable embodied spiritual being**

Through the notion of “capable human being”, Ricoeur attempts to correlate the concept of capability to a particular ontological tradition in the history of metaphysics which conceives of being as dynamic rather than substantial (Carter 2014). The term “capability” designates the human power to act, the power to cause something to happen (Ricoeur 2002). By appealing to the category of possibility, Ricoeur (2002) asserts that to be human is to be capable. This category of possibility involves, for him, two parts. There is a part of desire that springs from the deepest part of the human soul — the spirit — and there is a part of strive that is manifested in bodily human action (Carter 2014; Wall et al. 2002). Human beings thus have their foundation in the bodily action but also in a lived spirituality. This conception reveals a certain metaphysical quality of human being whose identity as human lies in the effort to persevere in being that which emerges from the human spirit and is mirrored in human action (Wall et al. 2002). It points toward

the idea of constant transformation. In this sense, Ricoeur holds a dynamic conception of human beings (Carter 2014).

For Ricoeur (1966, 1986), the physical movement of the body is one of the foremost indicators of the efforts exerted to perform activities and overcome the forms of resistance that we, as humans, encounter. In his analysis of human activities, the philosopher emphasizes the connection between the effort expended to carry them out and the hindrances to fulfilling them (Carter 2014; Jervolino 2008; Zarowski 2012). These activities may require a minimum physical effort, such as talking, or may require more physical movements of our bodies, such as performing some fitness exercises or the array of actions that entrepreneurs undertake to create their new businesses. In any case, the point that Ricoeur (2002) emphasizes is that beyond the effort needed to perform the activity itself, additional efforts are required to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of our intentions and goals.

According to Ricoeur (1992), objects and other individuals around us usually restrict or hamper our efforts to accomplish the task that we set ourselves or others set for us. From this view, Ricoeur (1992) points towards a perception of human beings as inextricably embedded in relationships. In fact, for the philosopher, embeddedness becomes a constitutive aspect of being human, such that to be human is both to depend upon others and to have others depend upon oneself (Ricoeur 1992).

Owing both to dependence on context and interdependence of situated human beings, our ability to exercise our capacities becomes highly vulnerable (Carter 2014). But still Ricoeur (2002) recognizes other kinds of vulnerability that emerge not from our external relationships but from our own inner and involuntary fault. From this perspective, perfection in (wo)men, as embodied spiritual beings, involves achieving one's final end overcoming one's weaknesses; but this is something that the philosopher recognizes as

impossible to achieve in a lifetime (Carter 2014). Ricoeur's (1966, 1986) notion of "the capable human" refers thus, to both the individual's capacities — the affirmative side — and incapacities — the negative side. In this context, when one chooses, wills or acts, s/he does so as body involving voluntary and involuntary aspects (Ricoeur 1966).

Of particular interest for our purpose here is, precisely, Ricoeur's (1966) acknowledgment of a reciprocal relationship between voluntary and involuntary acts — with their moral implications — in addition to the relationship between natural (physical effort) and supernatural (spirituality or religious faith) drives. Indeed, a defining feature of Ricoeur's (2002) thinking of "capable human being" is that it is mainly motivated by his awareness of human fallibility. Ricoeur (2002) recognizes the fragility that surrounds all human beings (e.g., ignorance, selfishness) and the need for fighting it. This means to consider first the fault, understood for Ricoeur as being a moral perversion of the natural essence of human willing (Van Tongeren 2014). Second, it implies to take into account transcendence, which hides within it the ultimate origin of what is genuinely human (Van Tongeren 2014). Both aspects echo in some manner the twofold side of the entrepreneurial journey, that is, the drive to excel in the entrepreneurial activities and the difficulties that need to be overcome during the way (Cha and Bae 2010; Selden and Fletcher 2015). Transposed to our present discussion, we can see that Ricoeur's pre-hermeneutic anthropology works as an invitation to study sport entrepreneurs as capable embodied spiritual beings whose desires and strives to creating slow fitness enterprises can run into diverse kinds of difficulties. In the remainder of the paper we reflect on this argument.

#### **4. Re-thinking sport entrepreneurship from a religious/spiritual perspective and through a Ricoeurian lens**

Decisive to understanding the core of any field is a framework that is both sufficiently broad and widely accepted to incorporate its relevant elements (Gilson and Goldberg 2015; Whetten 1989). Drawing from the entrepreneurship field, sport entrepreneurship scholars have adopted the classical model provided by Gartner (1985) in his highly cited work “A conceptual framework for describing the phenomenon of new venture creation” (e.g. Bjärsholm 2017; Ratten 2012). The advantage of using Gartner’s (1985) model is that it provides a global framework that integrates the majority of variables used in the field of entrepreneurship as well as their interconnections. Gartner (1985) describes the framework in terms of four interrelated elements: the individual(s) who start the new business, the organization they create, the processes underpinning the new business’s foundation and development, and the surrounding environment.

Nonetheless, Gartner (1985) clarifies that, because of the complexity and variation in entrepreneurship, his framework should not be understood as definitive. In fact, throughout the three decades after Gartner’s (1985) work, scholars have adopted and adapted his framework by selectively engaging with Gartner’s wider variables (e.g. Bacq and Janssen 2011; Littlewood and Holt 2018). In this work, we use Gartner’s (1985) framework to inform our parameters of study, so that we will only engage selectively with his variables. As we have found in Ricoeur’s philosophical works an invitation to introducing the religious and spiritual dimensions in the study of sport entrepreneurship, we will use Ricoeur (1966, 1986, 1992) to complement Gartner (1985). In particular, to provide a different angle that extends our understanding of sport entrepreneurship premised on the slow fitness sector, we will re-think the religious and spiritual aspects that can shape the entrepreneur’s capacities and vulnerabilities to create their businesses. To these aspects we will now turn.

#### **4.1. The sport entrepreneur's capability and its influence in the characteristics of the sport-based enterprise**

Sport entrepreneurs have mainly been distinguished by the centrality in their objective and mission which is sport-related (Ratten 2012a; Ratten and Ferreira 2017). Such centrality has become a crucial aspect of sport entrepreneurs' identity, which has been described as a fluid and often contradictory process in narrative terms (e.g., Jones et al. 2017).

Particularly in the slow fitness sector, discourses from new founders have illustrated transformational stories. In many occasions, becoming a sport entrepreneur has been the culmen of a career path that has evolved from being a fitness practitioner or having a related sport background (Jones et al. 2017; Weiner 2017)<sup>3</sup>. Frequently, sport entrepreneurs have the skills to create and run work out fitness programs, which turn out to be pillars of their businesses (Wang et al. 2018; Weiner 2017). Despite that some have portrayed their entrepreneurial experience as an unplanned journey, the common point seems to be a sense of fulfilment and the attainment of personal meaning (Miragaia and Constantino 2019; Smith and Rayment 2007; Weiner 2017). Indeed, it has been noted how working with slow fitness practitioners has become a spiritual experience as much for the trainer — or entrepreneur — as it was for the practitioners — customers (Miragaia and Constantino 2019; Smith and Rayment 2007; Weiner 2017).

From a Ricoeurian perspective, in the sport entrepreneurs' life stories we might identify an affirmative expression of the “capable human being”. As noted above, with such an expression the philosopher gives credit to the inner desire that emerges from the human

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<sup>3</sup> It is worthy clarifying that, at times, this fact makes it difficult to separate the figure of the sport entrepreneur from the slow fitness practitioner, since the same person can share both roles. Specifically, in this work, we assume that the sport fitness entrepreneur is also a slow fitness practitioner, so that what is said about slow fitness practitioner's spiritual and religious dimensions is also applied to the slow fitness entrepreneur.

being — understood as spiritual embodied being — and its manifestation in the bodily actions (Wall et al. 2002). Viewed in this light and taking into account the religious and spiritual dimension of sport entrepreneurship as pivotal for its understanding, we may provide a widened definition of sport entrepreneurs as capable (wo)men. Their distinctiveness thus, would lie in considering their physical, religious and spiritual thrust to creating the sport-based business as much as their entrepreneurial capabilities. This, in some manner, goes against the traditional research focus on the entrepreneur as mental or biological persons, whose identity was premised on their psychological attributes while totally detached from their bodies, their religiosity and spirituality. A Ricoeurian perspective, by contrast, invites us to recognize sport entrepreneurs as unities of minds, spirits and bodies and, at the same time, to acknowledge explicitly the entrepreneurs' efforts through the movements of their bodies.

For slow fitness practitioners, bodily movement is an important meaning-making resource (Wiest et al. 2015). But it is also for the sport entrepreneur (Nash 2018; Weiner 2017). This may be thought as more self-evident in our approach of sport entrepreneurship, because for slow fitness entrepreneurs the bodies are often embedded in their business ideas. However, as the entrepreneurship literature has normally overlooked the body by taking it for granted (Poldner et al. 2019), there is the risk that studies in sport entrepreneurship replicate the theoretical evolution of its parent-field at this respect. As a result, the body may run the risk of ending up disregarded in sport entrepreneurship writings. Our point here is, therefore, that by following Ricoeur's (1966, 1986, 1992) philosophy of the will it is possible to set out the body more clearly. Indeed, Ricoeur (1966, 1986, 1992) helps us to see the body not as an object but in its subjective and spiritual substance. In this context, bodies can be understood as instruments for fully materializing sport entrepreneurs' capacities through their businesses, being also the

space for expressing their spirituality/religiosity. In fact, by considering the sport entrepreneur as an embodied spiritual being, we are regarding body and spirit as one integrated vital part of his or her identity. Put it differently, we are describing the sport entrepreneur's identity premised on his or her lived spirituality and bodily experience.

In addition, the bodily spiritual immersion allows us to strengthen what sport entrepreneurs already deem important in their lives, noting how it shapes, direct or indirectly, the characteristics of the organizations they create. Rooted in a passion for slow physical fitness, these sport entrepreneurs often distance themselves from the rational economic logic that emphasizes the values of profit as the common thought in the business world. Instead, their approach is closer to what has been coined as "lifestyle entrepreneurship" (Marcketti et al. 2006). The primary motivation thus, is not driven by economic gain. Rather, a lifestyle aspiration is what leads sport entrepreneurs to the transition of their sport practices into a business enterprise (Nash 2018; Weiner 2017). Particularly, understanding slow fitness as an embodied spirituality (Greenwood and Delgado 2013; Oh and Sarkisian 2011; Pargament and Sweeney 2011; Thomas et al. 2018; Worthington and Deuster 2018), the slow fitness sector can render sport entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial career one prominent vehicle of making spiritual and moral gains<sup>4</sup>, contributing to their well-being, fulfillment, and happiness (Cusack 2010; Marcketti et al. 2006). Moreover, entrepreneurs' religiosity/spirituality, along with the personal enjoyment that often drives their lifestyle entrepreneurship, is prone to be more clearly mirrored in the business culture (Godwin et al. 2016; Kauanui et al. 2008, 2010). Playfulness thus acquires a greater relevance in a logic of corporation that may become less akin to a regulative system than to the spontaneity that surrounds the practice of a sport and the spiritual experience (Daile 2018; Felkers et al. 2016; Nesti 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that, in some cases, it may be difficult to identify whether slow fitness enterprises have much religious or spiritual value. Yet, this does not deny its potential to become a means of spiritual growth.

In summary, according to the previous discussion, we can affirm that an emphasis on the religiosity/spirituality and embodiment of sport entrepreneurs and their businesses can help us to introduce a range of problems or elements to the field of sport entrepreneurship that expands previous conceptualizations. This involves, on the one hand, the consideration of sport entrepreneurs' body and spirit as part of their identities and drivers of their entrepreneurial initiatives. On the other hand, it implies an understanding of business as mediums to find meaning, joy and even God. Therefore, considering the religious/spiritual dimension in the framework of slow fitness entrepreneurship and adopting a Ricoeurian perspective, we summarize the anterior arguments in the following propositions:

Proposition 1 (P<sub>1</sub>): Sport entrepreneurs' identity is premised on the notion of capable embodied spiritual being, which emphasizes their lived spirituality and bodily experience.

Proposition 2 (P<sub>2</sub>): Sport businesses' distinctiveness is premised on being lifestyle enterprises that function as spaces to express entrepreneurs' spirituality/faith through their bodily actions.

#### **4.2. The sport entrepreneur's vulnerability in the entrepreneurial process and environment**

Research in entrepreneurship is grounded not only on the study of the entrepreneur and his or her business; the entrepreneurial process and the environment in which it takes place are equally important aspects (Gartner 1985). Specifically, the entrepreneurial process has traditionally been defined as a sequential process integrated for several stages — including opportunity recognition, analysis, exploitation, business creation and growth (Werbel and Danes 2010). Previous studies have noted the rational entrepreneurial

orientation that is required for developing this process by emphasizing planning as a proper strategy to develop new ventures (Timmons and Spinelli 2004). Researchers in sport entrepreneurship have recognized the influence of this rational posture (Ratten 2010a; Ratten and Ferreira 2017).

However, Ricoeur's (1966, 1986) existential philosophy and his notion of "the capable human being" poses the issue of the hindrances to the human (bodily) action and his or her lived spirituality. Thus, a description of the entrepreneurs in Ricoeur's (1966, 1986) terms prompts us to rethink the conventional rational assumptions of the entrepreneurial process. Although recent entrepreneurship scholars' agendas have been more cautious with the cognitive limitations on entrepreneurs' rationality (Lerner et al. 2018 Mansoori and Lackeus 2019), Ricoeur's (1986) acknowledgment of the human's vulnerability sets out before us the problem of consciousness itself. His emphasis on the interactionist and dynamic embodied spiritual nature of the individual leads us to recognize the entrepreneurial process as an enigmatic practice of (un)folding, rather than a rational exercise of accumulating information, resources and preparing plans. This view of the entrepreneurial process radically contrasts traditional perspectives that put the entrepreneur's logic at centre stage without considering his or her context (Steyaert 2007), neither his or her spirituality or religious faith (Sherman et al. 2016; Singh et al., 2016; Tracey 2012). It also facilitates a move beyond the limited conception of the entrepreneurial process as a number of actions that the entrepreneur performs to a notion of entrepreneuring (Steyaert 2007), in which the individual's capacity to cause or embrace what finally happens is stressed.

Academic literature and popular press have shown many examples of sport entrepreneurs who entered their entrepreneurial careers as a result of contingencies that were transformed into an entrepreneurial activity (Andreasson and Johansson 2014; Weiner

2017). Most of these discourses, however, focus on the role of physical and material contingencies (e.g., suffering an accident while being a professional sport wo(man), losing a job). Yet a Ricoeurian perspective allows us to take a religious/spiritual position and understand the entrepreneurial process, especially, as a result of the entrepreneur's openness to the other.

In entrepreneurship research, the influence of the entrepreneur's relationships in the entrepreneurial process is receiving increasing attention not only in the light of the idea of the "spiritual entrepreneur" (Mukherjee 2007; Sfeir-Younis 2002) but also under the conception of entrepreneurship as an embedded socio-cultural process. An embedded perspective redirects regard to a more contextualized view of entrepreneurship (Greenman 2013; Welter 2011). As a result, it re-establishes concerns with the social, religious, cultural, and symbolic positions of places, and the ways in which they can positively affect the new business creation. Analogously, we can argue that embeddedness also plays a role in sport entrepreneurship within the slow fitness sector, so that environmental forces and the entrepreneurial process end up influencing one another. However, reassessing these influences from Ricoeur's (1992) view allows us to consider more clearly the imprint of these environmental factors on the sport entrepreneurs from their relational and embodied spiritual nature. Specifically, borrowing the concept of human being from Ricoeur (1966, 1986, 1992), we may understand the entrepreneurial process in sport-based enterprises as relational processes in which sport entrepreneurs need others not only at the natural level (e.g., family, key customers, banks) but also at the supernatural level (according to a religious faith or spirituality). Relations then become significant not just as an instrumental means of achieving some rational ends but for their moment-by-moment openness to, and appreciation of, other persons. In this sense, the capable sport entrepreneur also becomes vulnerable and fragile.

Therefore, adopting a Ricoeurian perspective helps us to move the argument from the abstract environmental forces towards personal encounters. It also allows us to change from an exclusive natural level to the supernatural one by including the metaphysical quality of sport entrepreneurs as human beings. According to Ricoeur (1992), to perform a concrete action (wo)men must call upon all their powers and capability. But the point is that such powers and capability lie between the deep-seated spiritual personal core and the body (Ricoeur 1992). Thus, in Ricoeur's (1992) sense, the term *contingency* may be understood somewhat differently from the common entrepreneurial discourse. It becomes more associated with events, processes and properties that may occur in our inner/external environment at natural/supernatural level. From each environment and level may emerge something that vulnerates, somehow, the initial human capability to act while calling for a continued response to the other. In this respect, Ricoeur (1992) reminds us that the response to the other is essentially about the articulation of spirituality/religiosity in practice. It involves roles that express something of the uniqueness of the person and his or her particular part in the relationship to others and to God (Ricoeur 1992).

If we transpose the previous discussion to our main concern here, we may argue that the capable sport entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial process in the slow fitness sector is better explained as a function of their interaction with others. Indeed, fitness entrepreneurs' commitment to assist others have been noted in previous literature (Bird 2015; Jones et al. 2017; Weiner 2017). But the point is that taking Ricoeur's (1992) thoughts on the notion of "capable human being", we may also well expect that the religious or spiritual dimension plays an important role in such relational entrepreneurial process. All this may recall in part the recent academic interest in integrating collaborative endeavors in the entrepreneurial process through the notion of "value co-creation" (Grönroos 2012). However, the study of the entrepreneurial co-creation has generally been restricted to the

value that results from joint activities by parties involved in direct interactions (Grönroos 2012). A religious/spiritual perspective, in contrast, appeals to a wider viewpoint: the understanding of co-creation as a process that is also open to the relationships between the individual and God. Thus, taking as a starting point the religious/spiritual dimension within the slow fitness sector and addressing it through a Ricoeurian lens, we suggest the following propositions:

Proposition 3 (P<sub>3</sub>): The entrepreneurial process in sport entrepreneurship is premised on the sport entrepreneurs' personal encounters with others, including God.

Proposition 4 (P<sub>4</sub>): The environmental variables affecting sport entrepreneurship include inner/external forces at natural/supernatural level.

## **5. Final remarks and directions for future research**

Sport entrepreneurship is becoming an increasingly significant domain of enquiry. The recent body of work has extended the management sport discourse to incorporate problems from the entrepreneurship field (Ratten 2010a, 2012a, 2018). As the emergent academic area of sport entrepreneurship evolves and matures, it can benefit from the insights derived from a broad array of theoretical traditions and, in fact, multidisciplinary approaches have been encouraged (Ratten 2010b, 2012b).

In this paper, we argued that a more nuanced conception of sport entrepreneurship, one that considers the religious and spiritual dimensions, was necessary to develop and refine understanding of the process involved in sport entrepreneurial initiatives and to advance theory development. The broad awareness by entrepreneurship and sport management scholars of the mutual impacts of religion/spirituality in entrepreneurship and sports had not been transformed in a more focused attention on these topics within the recent sport

entrepreneurship literature. In this sense, this paper may be considered as both a matter of exploration and intensification in the evolution of the maturity of the area of sport entrepreneurship, which remains in a period of experimentation. As in any period of experimentation, studies in sport entrepreneurship are still living in the moment of the play of ideas, open to diverse influences. In this context, our attempt to develop the conceptual development of sport entrepreneurship by considering the unexplored domain of religion and spirituality should be seen as modest, because it was thought to initiate a conversation rather than conclude it. In fact, while we are opening doors to consider the religious and spiritual space in an area of sport entrepreneurship – fitness-related businesses –, we also had to make a choice that implied a reduction within the variety of activities included in the fitness industry. Narrowing the discussion to sport entrepreneurs within the slow fitness sector allowed us to perceive more easily some of the religious and spiritual aspects that can be embedded in sport entrepreneurship. However, this, undoubtedly, limits the exploration and makes our conclusions modest. In addition, we also must be cautious against exaggerated expectations about the religious and spiritual dimensions in sport entrepreneurship. As noted earlier, at times, it may be complex to recognize the truly religious or spiritual factors involved in sport-business enterprises. Nonetheless, keeping these limitations in mind, a modest exploration can also effect an intensification. In particular, relating entrepreneurship in the slow fitness sector to its religious and spiritual dimensions can generate insights, ideas and concepts that may be applied to sport entrepreneurship research. Moreover, by applying Ricoeur's (1966, 1986, 1992) philosophical approach to our discussion, we provide an alternative means to reflect on sport entrepreneurship from an uncommon angle and with an uncommon terminology within this academic field. Specifically, the application of Ricoeur's (1992, 2002) concept of "capable human being" to the development of slow fitness enterprises

has helped us to sketch a picture of sport entrepreneurship as a combination of both purposeful attitudes – which has mainly been mirrored in the traditional research that gives preeminence to the economic side – and non-purposeful attitudes – where the transcendental and spiritual side enters. The main insights in this paper have been set out in 4 propositions that are illustrated in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1]

The first important idea – illustrated in the inner circle in Figure 1 – is that the entrepreneurs' religious/spiritual identity and the kind of enterprise created in the slow fitness sector are inextricably intertwined. Concretely, the capable embodied spiritual being, with whom we identify sport entrepreneurs (P<sub>1</sub>), finds space to reflect their lived spirituality and bodily experience in their sport-based lifestyle enterprises (P<sub>2</sub>). The second – illustrated in the external circle in Figure 1 – involves the acknowledgement of entrepreneur's encounter with the other as part and parcel of the entrepreneurial process (P<sub>3</sub>); but also, the connection of such encounter with the inner/external, natural/supernatural environmental forces and levels to influencing the entrepreneurial process (P<sub>4</sub>).

In summary, our approach has served us to move away from a viewpoint premised on the physical, rational or economic side and towards an understanding of sport entrepreneurship as a whole experience of entrepreneurs' body, spirit and mind. Seen from this perspective, one of the major contributions of this paper is to shed light on the importance of the religious and spiritual dimensions for the study of sport entrepreneurship. This recognition may contribute by promoting new agendas, highlighting new variables to study and increasing enthusiasm for possibilities that may modify the long-term outlook of sport entrepreneurship. Specifically, a focus on the sport entrepreneurship's spiritual and religious dimensions under a Ricoeurian perspective can

serve to bring back some topics that have generally been cast aside from the entrepreneurship and sport entrepreneurship studies, such as the playfulness in the organizational context or the role of the body and embodied experiences in the entrepreneurial process. In addition, since the sport entrepreneur as a capable embodied spiritual being implies a relational being, future works may go further and consider what this means in terms of the sport entrepreneur's ethical responsibility. Additionally, analyzing the concepts seen here from an empirical perspective is another area in which further research is needed. A quantitative or qualitative study with actual entrepreneurs would be quite interesting.

There are also research opportunities associated specifically with the study of the slow fitness business sector in the frame of its religious/spiritual dimension. For example, it may be interesting to study the career path followed by slow fitness entrepreneurs -in many cases self-employed individuals - and the influence of their religiosity and spirituality in the entrepreneurial process, especially in terms of overcoming challenges. Going further on the analysis of entrepreneur's religious/spiritual practices in sport fitness activities, it would also be interesting to analyse how such practices inform entrepreneurs' commitment to others, for instance, in terms of enabling them to achieve their goals (e.g., health, physical fitness, spiritual growth). Comparing cases of fitness entrepreneurs who confess a Western religion/spirituality with those who follow an Eastern religious tradition may also bring important insights on the role of religion/spirituality in sport entrepreneurship. Finally, studies that explore the role of spiritual capital may also provide important insights, as well as discussions premised on some of the conclusions that emerged from this paper but applying them to other fitness or sport activities.

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Figure 1. Sport entrepreneurship from a religious/spiritual perspective and through Ricoeurian lens

