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Anger rumination: an antecedent of athlete aggression?

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Abstract

Objectives. The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between anger rumination (the propensity to think almost obsessively over past experiences that have provoked negative affect in the form of anger) and athlete aggression. It was predicted that high levels of anger rumination would be associated with an increased propensity to aggress.

Method. A questionnaire comprising the Anger Rumination Scale (Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001), aggression and demographic questions was distributed to 305 male and female competitive athletes of varying ability who represented several team and individual sports.

Results. Principal component factor analysis revealed a single rumination factor rather than the four-factor solution previously described. No differences in Anger Rumination Scale score were found between males and females, team and individual sport players or competitive level. Provocation and anger rumination were significantly correlated with athletes' reported aggressive behaviour. Aggression was higher in males compared to females. Type of sport was also related to incidence of aggression; athletes who participated in individual sports reported lower levels of aggression than athletes who played team sports.

Conclusions. It was concluded that provocation and anger rumination were significant predictors of subsequent aggression and suggestions for preventing rumination, such as thought stopping and thought switching, were made.

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Introduction

Sport brings individuals and groups together in direct competition. Direct competition can often lead to conflict and, as with many conflicts between competing individuals or groups, attempts

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at hierarchical resolution may involve the use of aggression (Leith, 1982). Baron and Richardson (1994) define aggression as ‘...any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment (p. 7)’. Behaviour may be verbal or physical and must be directed at another person rather than an inanimate object. Throwing one’s racket to the floor or cursing one’s poor play would not be categorised as aggressive behaviour; rather, they would be signs of frustration or anger.

When assessing aggressive behaviour in sport, however, the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned aggression must be recognised (Kerr, 1999). Kerr argues that only unsanctioned aggression is cause for concern and points out that many sports have incidences of aggression that are tolerated or informally accepted. Such behaviours, once accepted, become sanctioned even though they do not comply with the official rule structure. In soccer, for example, it is common practice for players to argue with officials. Tolerance of aggressive behaviour simply because it is common does not justify its use nor does it alter the fact that the recipient is often motivated to avoid such behaviour. Therefore, the definition of aggression adopted in this report will follow that suggested by Baron and Richardson with the addition of official endorsement. That is, aggression in sport is any behaviour, not recognised as legal within the official rules of conduct, directed towards an opponent, official, team-mate or spectator who is motivated to avoid such behaviour. This definition assumes, naturally, that behaviour is intentional and, potentially, reflects both hostile and instrumental aggression (Husman & Silva, 1984). Instrumental aggression is included within this definition because the intent to cause injury, which the recipient is unlikely to welcome, is present; however, not all instrumental aggression need fall within the definition. In the pugilistic sport of boxing, for example, where attempts to harm the opponent by punching are integral (instrumental) to the combatants’ success, biting, head butting or kicking an opponent would be considered aggressive acts. Additionally, informally sanctioned behaviour such as arguing with officials would also be considered aggressive if the official rules of the game identify it as unacceptable.

Research examining the antecedents of aggression has led to the development of a number of theories. By far the most popular models used to examine aggression in sport are Frustration-Aggression (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), Frustration-Aggression revised (Berkowitz, 1965, 1969, 1989; Baron & Richardson, 1994) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973). The Frustration-Aggression theory typifies early attempts to explain aggressive behaviour. As with many theories of behaviour its roots were firmly embedded in drive theory (Hull, 1951; Spence & Spence, 1966; Spence, 1956). Dollard et al., proposed that frustration resulted from the blocking of goals or desires and that the build up of frustration inevitably led to the behavioural expression of frustration through aggressive actions. It was the insistence of inevitability that led to the revision of this theory by, amongst others, Berkowitz (1965). Berkowitz pointed out that not all people respond to frustration with overt aggression; rather, situational cues and learned responses contribute to the probability of aggressive behaviour. We would not expect a Bishop to attack a parishioner with his crosier, for example, regardless of how frustrated he became with his flock. Berkowitz (1983, 1989) subsequently added cognitive factors to his model allowing emotional responses and personal motivation to contribute to the propensity for aggressive behaviour.

The proposition that aggressive behaviour can be learned was championed by Albert Bandura’s (1973, 1983) Social Learning Theory. Whilst acknowledging the role of physiological, genetic and motivational factors (Baron & Richardson, 1994), Bandura stressed the importance of learned

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