



An examination of perfectionism traits and physical activity motivation

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Recent research has indicated that maladaptive and adaptive forms of perfectionism underpin fundamentally distinct cognitive and behavioral processes (Stoeber, Stoll, Pescheck, & Otto, 2008). The study of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism specific to the exercise setting has largely been neglected and may provide clues as to how healthy or dysfunctional forms of physical activity are initiated and maintained. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the associations between dimensions of perfectionism and cognitive and behavioral aspects of physical activity motivation.

Method: Structural equation modeling was used to examine the relationships between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002) and the four-factor model of physical activity motivation (Martin, in press; Martin, Tiper, Marsh, Richards, & Williams, 2006), utilizing data from 215 undergraduate students.

Results: Results supported a model in which adaptive perfectionism was positively associated with adaptive behavioral and cognitive aspects of motivation that reflected self-efficacy, planning, and persistence in physical activity. Maladaptive perfectionism was significantly associated with impeding and maladaptive motivation dimensions that reflected uncertainty about the conduct of exercise, fear of failure, and avoidance of physical activity.

Conclusions: The findings from the present study suggest that particular forms of perfectionism may predispose individuals to engage in fundamentally different cognitive and behavioral processes that may act to compromise or energize positive outcomes in exercise.

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A growing body of research provides overwhelming evidence for the biomedical and psychological benefits derived from adopting and maintaining physical activity (Bouchard, Blair, & Haskell, 2007; Fox, Stathi, McKenna, & Davis, 2006). In this context, it seems unusual that population health reports often reveal insufficient participation in regular exercise. Why do some individuals engage in physical activity with fervor while others avoid exercise and remain inactive? This is the principle question that has guided recent research on the motivational profile of the regular exerciser. Research incorporating aspects of self-determination, self-efficacy, and the theory of planned behavior, has shown that persistent exercise behavior involves the presence of self-determined motivation, value of exercise, commitment to exercise, structure, and planning (Edmunds, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006; Huberty et al., 2008; Wang & Biddle, 2001; Wilson, Rodgers, Fraser, & Murray, 2004). Self-concept and identity have also been acknowledged as key factors in the attainment of habitual exercise (Huberty et al., 2008).

Recent research in the exercise context has employed the achievement goal framework in conjunction with behavioral outcome measures to distinguish motivational profiles between the physically active and inactive groups. High task orientation, perceived competence, enjoyment, and high effort characterize the motivational profile of highly active individuals (Lochbaum, Bixby, & Wang, 2007; Wang, Biddle, & Elliot, 2007; Wang, Chatzisarantis, Spray, & Biddle, 2002). Previous research has identified these psychological and behavioral characteristics as motivationally adaptive in sport and exercise (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999; Wang & Biddle, 2001). Conversely, the motivational profile of less active groups includes low levels of autonomy, perceived competence, and boredom; seemingly motivationally maladaptive in nature (Martin, Tiper, Marsh, Richards, & Williams, 2006; Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999).

It is clear that physical activity engagement involves a complex interaction between psychological, behavioral, and social influences (Biddle & Mutrie, 2001). Experts in the field argue that, in order for studies to have any meaningful application in intervention campaigns, the study of motivation in the exercise context requires the adoption of models that incorporate cognitive-affective and behavioral dimensions (Cervone & Mischel, 2002).

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Consequently, the present study employs a comprehensive framework of motivation specific to the exercise setting that has recently been developed by Martin et al. (Martin, *in press*; Martin et al., 2006). This model of physical activity motivation is conceptualized in terms of a primary four-factor structure consisting of adaptive cognitions, adaptive behaviors, impeding cognitions, and maladaptive behaviors. The model supports Roberts' (1992) view that motivation in the physical activity domain is both diverse and related to a wide variety of psychological constructs. The measure incorporates the social-cognitive theory of achievement motivation, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations, thus forming a multidimensional, cross-theoretical, and integrated model of physical activity motivation. Specifically, adaptive cognition is conceptualized in terms of individuals' positive attitudes and orientations to physical activity (e.g., confidence in and valuing physical activity, and striving to achieve regular exercise patterns), reflecting self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and a task goal orientation (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999). Adaptive behavior is conceptualized in terms of positive behaviors and engagement with physical activity (e.g., planning, management, and persistence in physical activity). Impeding cognitions reflect processes inhibiting physical activity motivation (e.g., uncertain control, fear of failure, and self-handicapping), while maladaptive behaviors reflect reduced physical activity motivation (e.g., avoidance of exercise and disengagement).

The four primary factors of physical activity motivation have been shown to influence activity levels and key psychological constructs in exercise. For example, the factors have been related to flow and physical self-concept, constructs that are consistently associated with exercise enjoyment and continued involvement in physical activity (Marsh, Richards, Johnson, Roche, & Tremayne, 1994). A preliminary investigation of the motivational framework revealed a significant positive relationship between the adaptive cognitive and behavioral aspects of motivation and self-concept, flow and activity levels, whereas impeding dimensions were negatively correlated with physical activity, flow, and physical self-concept. A significant inverse relationship was found between maladaptive behaviors and the abovementioned exercise outcomes (Martin et al., 2006). While there is evidence for certain consequences associated with these motivational factors in exercise, little is known about the factors that underpin these distinct motivational-outcomes. Trait like variables such as perfectionism have consistently emerged as powerful antecedents to both positive and negative outcomes in a variety of contexts (Stoeber & Otto, 2006), and the extent to which certain aspects of perfectionism operate in conjunction with different motivational orientations warrants investigation.

Perfectionism is defined as the tendency to set extremely high standards for performance accompanied by a tendency for overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Indeed, recent research in the perfectionism field suggests that perfectionism may comprise both adaptive and maladaptive components (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2003; Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). In concordance, research on the nature and characteristics of positive vs. negative perfectionism is beginning to emerge (Flett & Hewitt, 2006). The research indicates that positive perfectionism correlates with life-satisfaction and healthy coping strategies such as actively trying to solve their problems. Negative perfectionism, on the other hand, has been found to correlate with maladaptive coping strategies that involve emotional suppression and rumination about problems (Bergman, Nyland, & Burns, 2007; Burns & Fedewa, 2005; Mitchelson & Burns, 1998).

Acknowledging this distinction, Slade and Owens (1998) proposed a dual process model that provides theoretical clarity

regarding the underlying distinctions between a normal, healthy form of perfectionism and a maladaptive, pathological form of perfectionism. At the heart of the model is the conception that the two forms of perfectionism differ in terms of behavior (approach vs. avoidance), corresponding affective states, and cognitive processes (Bieling et al., 2003; Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Recent research on the influence of achievement motivation and perfectionism in sport has identified that high perceived ability, the endorsement of an approach-orientation in goal setting, and the pursuit of high personal standards typically act to facilitate and maintain achievement striving while underpinning fundamentally adaptive cognitions and affective responses (Duda & Hall, 2001; Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Stoeber, Stoll, Pescheck, & Otto, 2008). Furthermore, in accordance with the dual process model (Slade & Owens, 1998), Flett and Hewitt (2005) emphasize that certain psychological mechanisms (i.e., approach motivation) may buffer the perfectionistic athlete from experiencing negative outcomes and facilitate performance. The study of perfectionism specific to the exercise setting has maintained a focus on the negative aspects of trait (Hall, Kerr, Kozub, & Finnie, 2007; Symons Downs, Hausenblas, & Nigg, 2004). The examination of both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism may provide clues as to how healthy or dysfunctional forms of physical activity are initiated and maintained.

The dual process model (Slade & Owens, 1998) provides a broad conceptualization of the cognitive and behavioral distinctions between the two forms of perfectionism that outlines a number of research areas. Flett and Hewitt (2006) argue that empirical investigation that examines the specific tenants of the model will further advance the perfectionism field. The integration of a trait and motivational perspective into the study of perfectionism within specific contexts, such as the exercise setting, may raise important implications regarding the nature of the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism and provide domain specific support for the dual process model of perfectionism (Slade & Owens, 1998). From a therapeutic standpoint, a more integrated approach is needed to identify changeable mechanisms on which sport psychologists could intervene to diminish the problems associated maladaptive perfectionism.

The primary aim of the current study was to examine the nature of the relationship between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism and the four-factor model of physical activity motivation (Martin, *in press*; Martin et al., 2006). Structural equation modeling was undertaken to test the hypothesis that maladaptive perfectionism is associated with maladaptive behavioral and impeding cognitive dimensions of physical activity motivation, whereas adaptive perfectionism is associated with adaptive cognitive and adaptive behavioral dimensions of physical activity motivation.

Method

Participants and procedures

The nature of the measure utilized to assess physical activity motivation in the current study necessitated the inclusion of both facilitative and impeding cognitions and behaviors related to physical activity. Hence, a selective criterion was not specified for participation in terms of current physical activity engagement. Participants were explicitly asked to think about planned physical activity outside of their team sport commitments, in order to avoid overlap of these performance domains. The sample consisted of 215 undergraduates (107 males and 108 females) enrolled in a sport science degree program at an Australian university. The mean age for this sample was 21.17 ($SD = 5.22$) years and ethnic proportions of 84.70% Caucasian, 12.60% Asian, and 2.70% other. Self-report data

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