



Perfectionism, self-determined motivation, and coping among adolescent athletes

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To investigate the sequence of relations between dimensions of perfectionism, autonomous and controlled motivation, and coping (Study 1) or exerted effort (Study 2) during training.

Design: Cross-sectional (Study 1), short-term longitudinal (Study 2).

Methods: In Study 1, participants were 333 Greek adolescent athletes (M age = 15.59 years, SD = 2.37) from various sports; they were assessed with respect to their dimensions of perfectionism, perceived competence, self-determined motivation, and sport-related coping skills. In Study 2, participants were 63 adolescent athletes (M age = 14.40 years, SD = 1.58) participating in a three-week summer basketball camp; they first were assessed with respect to their perfectionism, perceived competence, and self-determined motivation and then, for consecutive times after daily training, with respect to their situational self-determined motivation and the effort they invest during training.

Results: In both studies, structural equation modeling revealed that personal standards were positively related to both autonomous and controlled motivation and that concern over mistakes were uniquely related to controlled motivation. In turn, autonomous motivation, as compared to controlled motivation, was linked with better coping (Study 1) and more effort (Study 2).

Conclusion: Athletes with high personal standards are more likely to report effective coping or to put more effort if they become (or remain) autonomously motivated. In contrast, athletes with concerns over mistakes are more likely to exhibit controlled motivation and, in turn, to report poorer coping skills or to put less effort compared to autonomous motivated athletes.

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How do people in general and athletes in particular, cope with demanding tasks? How much effort do they invest in challenging situations? These are interesting questions because coping and effortful behaviors are necessary for athletes to effectively deal with demanding situations like preparation for an important game or the game itself. In this respect, previous studies have identified perfectionism as a likely antecedent of effective coping (e.g., Gaudreau & Antl, 2008; Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010) because effective regulation of one's behavior, and hence effective coping, may be due to one's perfectionistic standards (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & O'Brien, 1991).

A useful theoretical framework to understand the associations between perfectionism dimensions and effective coping is the self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Indeed, several studies conducted in sports and physical activity contexts have evidenced that self-determined motivation is related to both perfectionism (e.g., Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; McArdle & Duda, 2004) and coping (e.g., Amiot, Gaudreau, & Blanchard, 2004). Interestingly

however, only one study has adopted the SDT perspective to investigate, concurrently, the interplay between self-determined motivation, perfectionism, and coping (Gaudreau & Antl, 2008).

We aimed to extend this line of research by examining to what extent quality of motivation as defined by SDT (i.e., autonomous motivation and controlled motivation – see Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006), could partly explain the relations between two dimensions of perfectionism (i.e., personal standards and concerns over mistakes), and coping (Study 1) or exerted effort (Study 2) among adolescent athletes. Herein we conceived effort as a manifestation of effective coping strategies (Tenenbaum, 2001) because coping implies effort and because athletes' efforts during training or competition reflect coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To get a better view of these relationships, we also took into account athletes' perceived competence which is related to both perfectionism (McArdle, 2010) and coping (Skinner & Edge, 2002).

Self-determined motivation in sports

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) assumes that individuals satisfying their psychological needs of autonomy,

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competence, and relatedness become (or remain) autonomous motivated. In contrast, individuals failing to satisfy these three basic psychological needs are expected to exhibit controlled motivation. *Autonomous motivation* refers to activities that athletes voluntarily undertake because they either find them interesting and enjoyable (intrinsic motivation), or fully internalize them in their own self (integrated regulation), or internalize them to some considerable degree because they consider them personally important (identified regulation).

In contrast, *controlled motivation* (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) implies motivated behaviors for activities that athletes are coerced to undertake because of some intrapsychic (introjected regulation) or interpersonal psychologically pressuring reasons (external regulation). Controlled motivation, as opposed to autonomous motivation, reflects low degree of self-determined motivation because behavior is governed mainly by mandates and directives rather than by one's willingness and choice (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Several studies in physical activity and sport contexts have shown that relative to controlled motivation, autonomous motivation is positively linked with desired outcomes such as self-reported intentions (Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2003), active participation during PE classes (Ntoumanis, 2005), extracurricular physical activity behavior (Hagger, Chatzisarantis, Culverhouse, & Biddle, 2003), self-esteem, health-related quality of life (Standage & Gillison, 2007), persistence (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001), sportspersonship (Vallerand & Losier, 1994), daily well-being (Gagné, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2003), and less burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005).

One issue however, that has been remained relatively under-explored concerns the link of self-determined motivation to perfectionism and coping processes. Investigation of these likely links deserves further consideration because both perfectionism (e.g., Flett & Hewitt, 2006) and coping (e.g., Skinner & Edge, 2002) are also considered important determinants of motivational outcomes such as goal attainment and life satisfaction (Gaudreau & Antl, 2008) and positive and negative affect (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999). In this respect, SDT provides a helpful framework to better comprehend the psychological processes that may explain the relationship between perfectionism and coping processes (or exerted effort) in sport, and specifically, the indirect perfectionism–coping (or perfectionism–effort) relationship via autonomous and controlled motivation.

Perfectionism and self-determination

Perfectionism reflects the setting of excessively high standards of performance that coincides with disproportionately critical evaluation of one's performance (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Perfectionism can be either maladaptive or somewhat adaptive depending on whether the implementation of disproportionate high standards coexists with undue self-critical evaluation concerns (Frost et al., 1990; Hamachek, 1978). Specifically, maladaptive perfectionism may imply concerns over mistakes, doubts about actions, socially prescribed criteria, and over-awareness of discrepancy between actual and expected high-level standards performance (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

In contrast, relatively adaptive perfectionism (i.e., more adaptive compared to concerns over mistakes but not always adaptive compared to absence of perfectionism— see Flett & Hewitt, 2006) involves, mainly, the setting of high personal standards. In their extensive review, Stoeber and Otto (2006) showed that compared to concerns over mistakes, personal standards are not always detrimental, presumably because strivings for attaining such standards also entail higher levels of competence beliefs (Stoeber,

Hutchfield, & Wood, 2008). Instead, personal standards may be positively associated with desired motivational outcomes in educational settings (see Stoeber & Rambow, 2007), especially once concerns over mistake are statistically controlled for. Similar results were obtained from studies conducted in sport contexts. For example, relatively adaptive perfectionism dimension such as personal standards were positively related to hope of success and internal attributions for success (Stoeber & Becker, 2008), better performance (Stoll, Lau, & Stoeber, 2008), less burnout (Lemyre, Hall, & Roberts, 2008), and higher levels of mastery-approach and performance-approach goals (Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik, 2002; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2005; Stoeber, Stoll, Pescheck, & Otto, 2008), – although some studies showed that personal standards are associated to ego goals rather than mastery goals (Lemyre et al., 2008).

In contrast, after taking into account individuals' relatively adaptive perfectionism dimensions, maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., concerns over mistakes) were found to be positively related to ego goals among athletes of various sports (McArdle & Duda, 2004) and to be inversely related to positive outcomes such as self-esteem (Gotwals, Dunn, & Wayment, 2003), goal attainment and performance satisfaction (Lemyre et al., 2008), and peer acceptance (Ommundsen et al., 2005).

Collectively, these findings denote that different perfectionism dimensions can have different implications for athletes. An important question then is why do different dimensions have different implications in sport? One way to help answer this question is to understand the processes that may explain the relationship between perfectionism dimensions and outcomes. Considering that perfectionism has important motivational implications, it seems prudent to examine the role of motivational regulations (i.e., autonomous and controlled motivation) when investigating the relationship between perfectionism dimensions and coping or between perfectionism dimensions and effort¹.

A few studies have already showed a link between perfectionism and self-determined motivation. Using a sample of university students Stoeber, Feast, and Hayward (2009) found for instance that self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., an internally motivated form of perfectionism reflecting beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect is important and is characterized by setting excessively high standards) and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., an externally motivated form of perfectionism reflecting beliefs that others have high standards for oneself and that acceptance by others depends on attaining these standards) were positively related, respectively, to more and less self-determined motivation and similar findings were obtained by Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) in a similar population sample. Likewise, only two studies in the sport context have examined to what extent perfectionism is related to self-determined motivation. McArdle and Duda (2004) were the first to investigate this issue in sport contexts. Using a sample of adolescent athletes of various sports, McArdle and Duda found personal standards to be positively correlated to both autonomous (i.e., intrinsic and identified regulation) and controlled motivation (i.e., introjected and external regulation) and concerns over mistakes to be positively correlated to controlled motivation (see also Gaudreau & Antl, 2008).

This pattern of relations comes as no surprise because high personal standards may equally lead to either autonomous or controlled motivation depending on whether such personal standards are perceived as a challenge or as a should-be level of performance that one has to attain in order to prove one's self-

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