



The relationship between multidimensional perfectionism and psychological need thwarting in junior sports participants

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Perfectionism is thought to energise high quantities of motivation; however, its wider influence on the quality of the motivation exhibited by athletes is less clear. The purpose of this study was to examine the multivariate and univariate relationship between multidimensional perfectionism (perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic striving) and perceived psychological need thwarting. Perfectionistic concerns was assessed via sub-dimensions of socially prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental pressure and coach pressure. Perfectionistic striving was assessed via sub-dimensions of self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, personal standards and a need for organisation.

Design: A cross-sectional, survey-based design was employed.

Method: One hundred and ninety-nine junior sports participants were recruited from after-school sports clubs and completed measures of multidimensional perfectionism and psychological need thwarting.

Results: Canonical correlation analyses revealed that higher levels of perfectionistic concerns were associated with higher levels of perceived psychological need thwarting. Analogously, lower levels of perfectionistic striving were associated with lower levels of perceived psychological need thwarting. Regression analyses revealed that the relative importance of individual sub-dimensions of perfectionism differed depending on the facet of psychological need thwarting being assessed. Perceptions of parental pressure, coach pressure and concern over mistakes emerged as especially important.

Conclusion: Overall, the findings indicate that while perfectionism may contribute to high levels of behavioural investment, it may also impoverish the necessary support required for the fulfilment of psychological needs.

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The (mal)adaptive nature of perfectionism is currently the source of fervent debate (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Owens & Slade, 2008). While there is general agreement that perfectionism can energise large quantities of motivation (i.e., behavioural investment), what is less clear is whether energising participation via perfectionism is associated with any psychological costs for athletes. In order for the consequences of perfectionism to be fully understood, its wider influence on the quality of motivation exhibited by athletes must be examined. Broadly, quality motivation can be inferred by the psychological well-being, moral functioning, social relations and long-term consequences that accompany behavioural investment (see Duda, 2005). The present study sought to address this issue by examining the degree to which fundamental

psychological needs are perceived to be thwarted by multidimensional perfectionism in junior sports participants.

Perfectionism is broadly considered to be a multidimensional construct that entails features reflective of a commitment to exceedingly high standards and a preoccupation with harsh self-critical evaluation (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Contemporary multidimensional approaches are exemplified by the models developed by Frost et al. (1990) and Hewitt and Flett (1991). Within Frost et al.'s (1990) model, perfectionism is characterised by the pursuit of excessively high performance standards and an intolerance of imperfection. The model consists of six dimensions derived from the descriptions of perfectionism offered by early theorists (e.g., Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984). Four of these dimensions relate to the features of the achievement striving energised by perfectionism (high personal standards, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions and a need for organisation). The two remaining dimensions reflect the presumed origins of perfectionism in the form of parental practices (parental

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criticism and parental expectations). In sport, these two subscales have recently been supplanted by measures of coach pressure and parental pressure, which are considered more salient to the domain (Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik, 2002; Gotwals & Dunn, 2009).

Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model adopts a different approach. They define perfectionism as the perceived need, or actual requirement, for perfection. Their model emphasises differences amongst dimensions of perfectionism in terms of the individual to whom perfectionism is directed. The first of these dimensions is self-oriented perfectionism and entails exceedingly high personal standards and the tendency to engage in self-criticism. The second dimension is socially prescribed perfectionism and entails the belief that others hold an excessively high standard for one's self and withhold approval based upon the attainment of those standards. The final dimension is other-oriented perfectionism and entails the tendency to impose unrealistically high standards on others.

Although these models offer alternative conceptualisations of perfectionism, research suggests that there is a large amount of conceptual overlap between the two approaches. In particular, a number of factor-analytical studies have found that the dimensions captured by these two measures can be considered to be indicative of two higher-order dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). The two broad dimensions identified in these studies are perfectionistic striving and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).¹ Perfectionistic striving primarily involves the setting of exacting and high standards for one's self (Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000). This dimension is measured by a combination of personal standards, a need for organisation, self-oriented and other-oriented sub-dimensions of perfectionism. Perfectionistic concerns, on the other hand, involve concerns about others' unrealistic expectations and criticism, overly critical self-evaluation and the inability to derive satisfaction from success (Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000). In contrast to perfectionistic striving, perfectionistic concerns is measured by a combination of concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental criticism, parental expectations and socially prescribed sub-dimensions of perfectionism.

The divergent outcomes associated with perfectionistic striving and perfectionistic concerns are evident in clinical, social and educational research (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Specifically, while perfectionistic concerns appear to be a significant source of psychological difficulties, perfectionistic striving is more equivocal in that it is largely unrelated to negative consequences and, in some instances, is associated with positive consequences. Research by Dunkley and his colleagues, for example, have found that these broad dimensions of perfectionism have divergent relationships with psychological adjustment. Notably, differences between them are evident in their relationships with coping tendencies (Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000), self-esteem (Blankstein, Dunkley, & Wilson, 2008), general positive and negative affect (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010), anxiety (Bieling et al., 2004), and depression (Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2002).

To date, two studies have utilised similar broad conceptualisations of perfectionism in sport (Gaudreau & Antl, 2008; Kaye, Conroy, & Fifer, 2008). Their findings support those outside of sport and suggest that broad dimensions indicative of perfectionistic striving and concerns are associated with different forms of

motivational regulation, coping strategies and achievement goals in athletes. Research that has focused on examining sub-dimensions of perfectionism also suggests that perfectionistic concerns encapsulate features that are responsible for the negative cognitive and affective experiences of athletes (e.g., higher levels of competitive anxiety, anger, and exhaustion; Frost & Henderson, 1991; Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008; Vallance, Dunn, & Causgrove Dunn, 2006). In contrast, as found outside of sport, research suggests that perfectionistic striving largely contains the energising features of perfectionism (e.g., higher personal standards and higher performance; Stoeber, Uphill, & Hotham, 2009). However, it is noteworthy that the salutogenic effects of perfectionistic striving have yet to be established (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Self-determination theory and basic psychological needs theory

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, Ryan & Deci, 2002) is a meta-theory offering a lens through which the relationship between multidimensional perfectionism and quality of athlete motivation can be examined. Over the past decade, self-determination theory has become a popular model through which to explore motivational, performance, inter-personal and well-being related outcomes in sport and exercise (see Ryan & Deci, 2007, for a review). The foundation of self-determination theory concerns the interaction between individuals' natural organismic tendencies towards growth, integration, vitality and healthy functioning and the social-contextual environment that either nurtures or inhibits these tendencies (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Moreover, the fulfilment of basic psychological needs is thought to be central to the dialectical interplay between organism and environment. The three fundamental needs within self-determination theory are autonomy (feelings of volition, choice and self-directedness), competence (perceptions of being effective) and relatedness (feelings of belonging or connectedness to others) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

According to basic psychological needs theory, a micro-theory of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the optimal conditions in which organismic tendencies are enacted are defined by the satisfaction of the three innate psychological needs. The fulfilment of these needs, in turn, are purported to lead to positive psychological consequences, such as better quality, more autonomous, motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This is because when psychological needs are satisfied the organismic activities of the individual are given full opportunity to flourish (Ryan, 1995). Research in a variety of life domains (e.g., work, health and exercise) has provided support for the assertions of basic needs theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similar findings are evident in sport where researchers have found support for the beneficial effects of psychological need satisfaction. For example, higher levels of psychological need satisfaction has been found to predict higher levels of subjective vitality, autonomous motivation and positive affect in athletes (e.g., Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008; Hollebeak & Amorose, 2005; Reinboth & Duda, 2006).

Researchers in sport have recently turned their attention to examining need thwarting. The frustration, or thwarting, of psychological needs is thought to lead to negative psychological consequences, such as lesser quality, more controlled, motivation and ill-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This is because when needs are thwarted, the natural organismic activities of the individual are inhibited (Ryan, 1995). As recently described by Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, and Thøgersen-Ntoumani (2011), need thwarting entails more than perceptions of lower levels of need satisfaction. Instead, it is characterised by perceptions that psychological needs are obstructed and *actively* undermined. In accord, the three

¹ The terms perfectionistic striving and perfectionistic concerns have been used here instead of other previously adopted terms (e.g., personal standards perfectionism and evaluative concerns perfectionism) because we believe the current labels more clearly convey the notion that these are broad dimensions of perfectionism, rather than forms or types of perfectionism.

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