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Competitive anxiety responses in the week leading up to competition: the role of intensity, direction and frequency dimensions

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Abstract

Objectives: To investigate the symptom responses associated with competitive anxiety through a fine-grained measurement approach. Incorporating dimensions of intensity, perceptions of direction, and frequency of intrusions, possible time-to-event changes were assessed with respect to the between-subjects variable of skill level.

Method: Male athletes ($N = 82$), separated into two skill classifications (club $N = 45$ vs. national $N = 37$), completed the competitive state anxiety inventory-2 (CSAI-2) modified to account for the dimensions of intensity, direction and frequency at five precompetition times (1 week, two days, one day, 2 h, 30 min).

Results: Multivariate analysis of variance (skill level \times time-to-competition) with follow-up analyses indicated main effects for skill level and time-to-competition with no interactions. For skill level differences, national athletes were more facilitative in their interpretation of the symptoms associated with cognitive and somatic anxiety. For change-over-time effects, intensities of cognitive and somatic anxiety increased and self-confidence decreased between 2 h and 30 min precompetition. Frequencies of cognitive anxiety increased from seven to two days, one day to 2 h and 2 h to 30 min precompetition; frequencies of somatic anxiety increased from seven days to two days and 2 h to 30 min pre-event; frequencies of self-confidence increased from seven to two days.

Conclusions: Findings support the notion of measuring the separate dimensions of symptoms associated with competitive anxiety and emphasise the importance of assessing these constructs as processes that unfold over-time.

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Introduction

The stressful nature of elite sport, and the competitive environment surrounding it, places many demands on participating athletes (Jones, 1995). The examination of athlete's behavioural, and emotional responses to such stressors has developed into a focal area of sport psychology with many researchers interested in assessing anxiety responses of athletes to competitive events (Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Accordingly, the multidimensional conceptualisation of competitive anxiety and the development of the competitive state anxiety inventory-2 (CSAI-2; Martens, Burton, Vealey, Bump, & Smith, 1990) have been identified as major developments within the field. These developments have led to a plethora of research assessing athletes levels (i.e. intensity) of competitive anxiety in relation to factors such as situational antecedents, the temporal patterning of the subcomponents and the anxiety performance relationship (see Woodman & Hardy, 2001 for a review).

Although this vein of research has contributed greatly to our understanding, additional dimensions of competitive anxiety have been proposed, such as directional perceptions (i.e. the interpretation of the symptoms associated with competitive anxiety as being either facilitative or debilitating towards performance; Jones, 1995; Jones & Hanton, 2001). Empirical research supporting this distinction has been provided in studies examining variables such as skill level (Jones, Hanton, & Swain, 1994; Jones & Swain, 1995), competitiveness (Jones & Swain, 1992), antecedents of competitive anxiety (Hanton & Jones, 1997), sporting performance (Jones, Swain, & Hardy, 1993; Swain & Jones, 1996), gender differences (Perry & Williams, 1998), hardiness (Hanton, Evans, & Neil, *in press*), and the temporal patterning of anxiety subcomponents (Wiggins, 1998). Specifically, the direction scale of the modified CSAI-2 has shown greater sensitivity in identifying the above individual and situational variables in comparison to the intensity dimension. Further, qualitative research (Hanton & Jones, 1999; Hanton & Connaughton, 2002) has provided additional justification for the notion of directional perceptions.

Although the identification of such dimensions is encouraging, further areas within the study of responses associated with competitive anxiety require attention. Specifically, stress researchers note that "The essence of stress, coping and adaptation is change...unless we focus on change we cannot learn how people come to manage stressful events and conditions" (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; p. 150; cf. Lazarus, 1999). Therefore, if stress is embodied as a process that unfolds over time, researchers should be aware that the emotional responses to it (e.g. competitive anxiety) are likely to be characterised by change due to the ever fluctuating environment the athlete faces (Cerin, Szabo, Hunt, & Williams, 2000; Cerin, Szabo, & Williams, 2001; Lazarus, 1999). This proposal emphasises the importance of examining athletes' responses to competitive stress through process-orientated (i.e. change-over-time) research designs (Cerin et al., 2000; Lazarus, 1999).

Although researchers have examined the 'intensity' of stress responses in the time leading up to competition (Hall, Kerr, & Matthews, 1998; Jones, Swain, & Cale, 1991; Martens et al., 1990), limited research attention has been given to assessing how the different dimensions of anxiety unfold over time. Investigation on such a theme was initiated by Wiggins (1998) through a pre-

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