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Predictors of competitive anxiety direction in male Tae Kwon Do practitioners: a multilevel mixed idiographic/nomothetic interactional approach☆

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine (a) affective states, proximity of competition and personality traits as predictors of anxiety direction and (b) investigate the role of personality characteristics in moderating the relationship between anxiety direction and proximity of competition and affective states.

Method: A multilevel mixed idiographic/nomothetic approach. Intensity and direction of competitive anxiety and positive (PA) and negative affect (NA) were monitored in 22 male Tae Kwon Do practitioners across a week preceding a major competition using the experience sampling method (ESM). The participants were assessed on neuroticism and extraversion. Negative and positive affect and anxiety intensity and direction were measured at three random times a day across 1 week before the competition and 1 hour pre-competition.

Results: Multilevel regression analyses revealed that cognitive anxiety intensity, positive affect, proximity to competition and extraversion were significant predictors of cognitive anxiety direction. Significant interaction effects of proximity to competition and neuroticism, and neuroticism and negative affect on cognitive anxiety direction were also observed. Somatic anxiety direction was a function of positive affect, somatic anxiety intensity, proximity to competition and the interaction effects of neuroticism and somatic anxiety intensity and neuroticism and proximity to competition.

Conclusions: A multilevel mixed idiographic/nomothetic interactional approach may substantially assist in the explanation of intra- and inter-individual differences in anxiety direction.
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Keywords: Positive and negative affect; Neuroticism; Extraversion; Multilevel linear models

☆ This study was undertaken in conjunction with a research project that tested the appropriateness of the experience sampling method for analysing the temporal patterns of pre-competitive emotions (Psychol. Sport Exer. 2 (2001) 27–45)

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Several attempts have been made to explain inter- and intra-individual variations in athletes' perception of the effects of anxiety on performance (e.g. Cerin, Szabo, Hunt, & Williams, 2000; Jones, 1995; Kerr, 1989). The present paper focusses on Cerin et al.'s (2000) process-oriented interactional model of stress, which apart from integrating current theoretical trends and research on competitive affects, offers some possible explanations for the differential appraisal of anxiety in relation to performance. As a detailed description of the model is beyond the scope of this article, the interested reader is referred to the original paper by Cerin et al. (2000).

The model assumptions that may help explain intra- and inter-variability in anxiety direction (i.e. whether anxiety is perceived as detrimental or facilitative to performance) are: (a) the experience of mixed affects is a common phenomenon; (b) competitive anxiety can be characterised by both avoidance and approach behaviour; (c) the actual and appraised effect of affects on performance is moderated by situational and personal factors; (d) athletes' reaction to competition is a process that changes over time which needs to be examined at intra- and inter-individual levels.

The experience of mixed affects

The process-oriented interactional model of stress acknowledges that the experience of mixed affects is a common phenomenon. In this respect, research has shown that people tend to experience different emotions (affective reactions to a specific event) simultaneously, even if they are of opposite hedonic tone, and particularly if their intensity is mild or moderate (Gilboa & Revelle, 1994).

This idea of mixed emotional states may partially explain why similar scores on anxiety questionnaires are associated with different directional interpretations of anxiety. In saying this, no causal relationship between affects and anxiety direction is implied. Cerin et al.'s (2000) model predicts that, in general, an affective profile characterised by mild to moderate intensity levels of threat-related affects (e.g. fear and apprehension) and affects conducive to or associated with approach behaviour and task-focussed attention (e.g. interest, excitement and enjoyment) will be perceived as facilitating performance. Conversely, affective states typified by moderate to high intensity levels of threat-related emotions and the presence of affective phenomena associated with self-focussed attention, rumination and avoidance behaviour (e.g. sadness, shame, guilt and self-hostility) will be considered debilitative to performance.

Competitive anxiety as an indicator of both approach and avoidance behaviour

The rationale for the aforementioned hypotheses stems from the fact that athletic competition is most of the time perceived as a source of approach–avoidance conflict between the need for excitement and achievement on the one hand, and fears of failure and, in some sports, injury on the other. In this scenario, the perception of threat, experienced subjectively as anxiety, may be accompanied by predominantly avoidance and task-irrelevant, or approach and task-relevant, behaviour (Carver & Scheier, 1990).

One of the factors that have been shown to covary with approach or avoidance behaviour and related affective phenomena is appraisal of the ability to cope with the source of threat (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Jones, 1995). Empirical evidence suggests that perceived inability to

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