



Meta-motivational dominance and sensation-seeking effects on motor performance and perceptions of challenge and pressure

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The current study aimed at delineating the effects of meta-motivational dominance and sensation seeking on performing challenging and boring tasks under pressure-filled conditions. Apter's (Apter, M. J. (2001). An introduction to reversal theory. In M. J. Apter (Ed.), *Motivational styles in everyday life: A guide to reversal theory* (pp. 3–35). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association) reversal theory and Zuckerman's (Zuckerman, M. (1979). *Sensation seeking: Beyond the optimum level of arousal*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum) sensation-seeking (SS) theory were used to postulate that high SS and paratelic individuals would perform better on challenging tasks in pressure-filled situations than low SS and telic individuals. They have also been hypothesized to differ on perceived pressure, challenge perception, and determination.

Study's design: Seventy-three young adults were divided into two distinct groups, telic and sensation avoiders vs. paratelic and sensation seekers, based on two distinct questionnaires. The participants performed boring and challenging tasks under pressure-filled and normal conditions in a counter-balanced order. Each performance consisted of 3-blocked trials of 10 min each. Number of completions and errors were recorded.

Results: Pressure had little to no effect on performance regardless of participants' meta-motivational dominance. Under pressure, perceived challenge was higher than under normal condition, and participants, as expected, felt more challenged when performing the apparatus task than when performing the vowel-circling task. Paratelics completed more vowel-circling and apparatus completions than did telic participants, but not to the desired level of significance.

Conclusions: It seems likely that paratelic individuals tried harder than telic individuals when put into a unique, measurable, and uncertain situation. It is likely that paratelics needing varied, novel, and challenging sensations along with playful and enjoyment felt more inclined to participate in both tasks with vigor and enthusiasm to fulfill their needs. It is suggested that it may be the intrinsic form of motivation, which paratelics possess, that allow for better performances.

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In all forms of competitive conditions, it is common to experience pressure, i.e., “an anxious desire to perform at a high level in a given situation” (Beilock & Carr, 2001, p. 701). Individuals perceiving a pressure-filled situation may in turn demonstrate fluctuations in their psychological and physiological states. However, the perception of pressure varies among individuals who acquire different meta-motivational dominance (Apter, 1984), and sensation-seeking disposition (Zuckerman, 1979). The current study examines the effect of sensation seeking and paratelic

dominance on performance and perceptions of challenge and pressure under pressure-filled and non-pressure conditions.

The psychological components of paratelic/telic dominance and sensation-seeking stem from reversal theory (Apter, 1982, 1984), which postulates that frames of mind labeled *meta-motivational states* form the makeup of human personality, and serve as the underlying basis for human motivation (Kerr, 1997). *Telic*-dominant individuals are considered to be in a serious-minded condition, generally desiring low levels of arousal. In these people, motivation is dominated by the eventual outcome or goal rather than the activity itself. *Paratelic*-dominant individuals engage in immediately rewarding, sensation-oriented, activities with often-elevated levels of arousal (Kerr, 1997). Meta-motivational dominance (Apter,

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1984) refers to the dispositional tendency of an individual to spend the majority of the time in one meta-motivational state relative to the other. It has been maintained that telic or paratelic dominance plays a role in how people perceive and cope with stressful situations, their involvement in certain types of activities, and their perception of arousal (Kerr, 1997; Kerr & Pos, 1994). However, the effect of meta-motivational dominance on motor task performance in pressure-filled environments requires further scientific evidence. Although pressure during performance may increase arousal in the performer, performers possessing different meta-motivational dominance may interpret the perceptions of this state differently. Paratelic-dominant individuals often engage in activities saturated with high arousal involving immediate gratification thus, may outperform telic-dominant people who perceive pressure and arousal as anxiety, which results in a debilitating effect on performance (Kerr, 1997). Thus, the aim of this study was to test this notion empirically. To do so, two tasks, which vary in attractiveness, one boring (e.g., circling vowels in a foreign language) and the other challenging (e.g., novel apparatus), were designed and performed by telic/sensation-seeking avoiders and paratelic/sensation-seekers under pressure and non-pressure conditions. The inherent variability in tasks and conditions was believed to elicit differences in performance and perceptions of pressure and challenge in accord with reversal theory postulation.

The meta-motivational states of mind are so powerful that a given state influences the way in which arousal-producing stimuli are perceived and experienced (Apter, 1982). It is proposed that at the point in time in which pressure is induced, the current meta-motivational state of the individual will directly determine whether the arousal induced from pressure is deemed pleasant or unpleasant (Apter, 1982). Therefore, persons' meta-motivational dominance directly impacts people's interpretation of arousing performance pressure. Individuals also are less likely to be frustrated while in their dominant state, and it is less likely for a person to incur a reversal out of their dominant state (Frej, 1999).

Related to the paratelic motivational dominance conceptualization is the concept of sensation seeking, which is the "need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical and social risk for the sake of such experiences" (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 10). Although paratelic dominance refers to a motivational tendency, and sensation seeking is regarded as a stable personality trait (Zuckerman, 1979), both refer to similar and complimentary motives to engage in tasks, which vary in the amount of perceived threat and risk. The purpose of this study is to test the notion that people high in sensation seeking and paratelic dominance, are more likely to perform well on motor tasks under elevated performance pressure. Sensation-seeking and paratelic-dominant individuals are more likely to perceive performance pressure as pleasant and enjoyable rather than as a negative, anxiety-evoking phenomenon. Therefore, these individuals are less likely to allow over-arousal to re-allocate task attention, resulting in better performances under high-pressure conditions. In contrast, pressure-filled environment is expected to evoke perceptions of high pressure in telic-dominant and sensation-seeking avoiding people, leading to a performance decline in line with reversal theory postulation (Apter, 1984). However, the inherited *challenge* of the task may play a major role in mediating this causal effect. Paratelic-dominant people are expected to outperform telic people on tasks, which are perceived as challenging under high pressure, while telic-dominant people are expected to outperform paratelic ones under low-pressure and routine tasks, which provide them safe haven for operation (Kerr, 1997).

Numerous studies pertaining to pressure concluded that pressure induces a response of focus on task process in athletes, and in turn interfering with the standard performance automaticity,

resulting in a decrement in the desired task outcome (Baumeister, 1984; Beilock & Carr, 2001; Lewis & Linder, 1997). Five situational variables, suggested by Baumeister and Showers (1986), may serve as the underlying causes for feeling pressure and inward focus of attention during performance: competition, reward contingency, punishment contingency, ego relevance, and presence of an audience. Explicit competition refers to that in which the participant is clearly aware that his/her performance is being compared to at least one other individual (i.e., any setting in which scoring takes place). Competition can induce pressure, which in turn may provoke choking (Baumeister, 1984; Church, 1962; Seta, Paulus, & Risner, 1977). As pressure may also be a product of motivation to succeed, this may warrant decrements in performance under certain circumstances. Reward and punishment contingency have also been shown to increase motivation for success. Baumeister (1984) found that a monetary reward for a successful performance actually promoted failure of the task more than in a situation where reward was non-granted. Effects of punishment contingencies, however, have mixed effects on performances. The fourth situational factor, which increases pressure, is increased ego relevance. Under evaluative conditions, such as sport competition, performances are almost always considered a determinant of self-worth (Baumeister & Showers, 1986). Finally, the presence of an audience, considered to be strongly related to ego relevance, functions as a situational characteristic, which increases performance pressure. Numerous studies have shown decrements in performance due to audience effects (Baumeister, 1984; Paulus, Shannon, Wilson, & Boone, 1972). Simply having people present in the room while participants played video games was sufficient to observe decreases in performance, while gymnasts showed decrements in performing after being told they were going to have an audience present. Distraction-conflict theory also describes this phenomenon; drive is mediated by the presence of an audience in which the performer shifts attention from the task itself to the audience attention (Sanders & Baron, 1975). Cottrell (1972) suggested that the presence of an audience works to trigger evaluation apprehension, which in turn causes the individual to focus on the self, resulting in a decrement in performance. These factors were used to induce pressure in participants performing two tasks in the current study.

Although meta-motivational dominance research has shown positive linkage between specific states and concurrent experiences and behaviors, little effort has been taken to investigate the associations between paratelic/telic dominance and sport performances. Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, and Dobbin's (1987) study revealed that moderate amounts of stress were beneficial in paratelic-dominant individuals, as it was perceived as challenging and enjoyable, while experiences absent of stress promoted feelings of boredom for these people. In a subsequent video game playing task administered by Martin et al., the variables of evaluation and competition were manipulated to induce mildly stressful and non-stressful situations. Paratelic-dominant participants scored significantly higher during the mildly stressful situation than in the non-stress situation, and telic-dominant individuals scored higher in the non-stress situation than in the stressful situation. Thus, meta-motivational dominance together with perceptions of tasks' characteristics (e.g., challenging, boring, frightening, etc.) plays an integral part in an individual's engagement in high-arousal activities, and the perceptions of felt arousal. It is believed that these perceptions not only influence how much a performer enjoys the activity, but how well is he/she expected to perform under pressure.

The main purpose of the study is to assess and compare telic and paratelic-dominant individuals on the perception of pressure and motor task performance under high and low-pressure-filled

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