Motivation, cognition and sport

Testing dynamic relations between perceived competence and fear of failure in young athletes

Relations dynamiques entre la compétence perçue et la peur de l’échec chez de jeunes athlètes

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Abstract

Conceptually, achievement motives are stable phenomena; however, recent evidence suggests that fear of failure (FF) levels decrease slightly as participants gain experience with an activity. One plausible explanation for this decrease in FF is that practice (and consequential reinforcement and approval from coaches) leads to increased perceptions of competence and concomitant reductions in the perceived likelihood and aversiveness of failing. Boys and girls in a recreational summer swimming program (N = 165) completed measures of FF and perceived competence (PC) at the beginning, middle, and end of a 6-week swimming season. The FF and PC measures exhibited strong and strict factorial invariance, respectively. As expected, FF scores exhibited a slight but significant decrease over the season whereas PC growth trajectories varied significantly. Neither initial levels of nor subsequent changes in PC significantly predicted the rate at which FF scores changed over six weeks. These findings indicated that changes in PC do not confound evaluations of change in FF during youth sport seasons.

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Résumé

Conceptuellement, les motivations d’accomplissement sont des phénomènes stables; cependant, des résultats récents suggèrent que la peur de l’échec (FF) diminue sensiblement au fur et à mesure que les pratiquants acquièrent de l’expérience dans une activité. Une explication possible de cette diminution est que la pratique sportive avec expérience (renforcement des entraîneurs) augmente les perceptions de compétence et réduit en même temps les éventuelles conséquences négatives de l’échec. Des pratiquants (N = 165) investis dans un programme d’été et récréatif de natation ont répondu à des questionnaires de FF et de compétence perçue (PC) au début, au milieu et à la fin du programme d’été de six semaines. Les mesures de FF et PC ont rendu compte respectivement d’une forte et stricte invariance factorielle. Comme prévu, la peur de l’échec (FF) a diminué sensiblement et significativement au cours du programme alors que la compétence perçue (PC) a plutôt augmenté. Aucune des mesures de PC au cours du programme n’a prédit significativement les changements de FF au cours des six semaines. Ces résultats indiquent que les changements de PC ne peuvent être confondus avec l’évolution des niveaux de FF pendant un programme sportif à destination de jeunes.

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1. Introduction

As an achievement motive, fear of failure (FF) is conceived as being a stable disposition that is socialized during childhood (Atkinson, 1957; McClelland, 1958). Evidence for stability can come from a variety of sources (e.g., longitudinal factorial invariance, differential stability, latent mean stability; Schutz, 1998). Consistent with theoretical expectations, research from the sport domain has indicated that FF responses exhibit a high level of longitudinal factorial invariance and differential stability (i.e., test-retest reliability) over 6–8-week periods (Conroy and Coatsworth, 2004; Conroy et al., 2003). These two independent research studies also revealed an unexpected but consistent pattern whereby latent FF mean scores decreased significantly as individuals gained experience with an activity. The reasons for this decline were not clear; however, Conroy and colleagues speculated that increases in perceived competence that accompany regular practice and feedback from coaches may be at least partially responsible for this decrease in FF. The present study tests whether youths’ initial perceived competence levels or the rate at which those perceptions changed for each individual were associated with the rate at which FF changed among a sample of youth participating in a recreational summer swim league.

1.1. Fear of failure

Historically, FF (or the motive to avoid failure) has been conceptualized as a stable tendency to anticipate shame and humiliation following failure (Atkinson, 1957). Birney et al. (1969) proposed that failure by itself is relatively meaningless and should not be sufficient to cause shame. They suggested that it was necessary to understand the perceived consequences of failure (e.g., devaluation of one’s self-estimate, non-ego punishments, reduction in one’s social value) in order to establish the reasons that individuals experience shame or anxiety.

The logic behind the Birney et al. (1969) model of FF was consistent with contemporary appraisal-based theories of emotion. Lazarus (1991) proposed that emotions arise when two necessary conditions are met. First, individuals must perceive a relational change, that is, a real or imagined change in the environment that impacts one or more of their goals. Second, individuals must appraise, or interpret, the meaning of that perceived relational change relative to the goal that is at stake in the transaction. For example, individuals who experience acute FF must have (a) perceived that failure was likely or possible in that situation, and (b) interpreted that one or more aversive (i.e., threatening) consequences are likely because of failure (Conroy, 2001). This example suggests that, although shame may be one aversive consequence of failing, it is only one possible reason for fearing failure, and other reasons could exist as well.

To identify a domain of aversive consequences of failing perceived by highly-invested performers (i.e., those most likely to experience strong emotions related to their performance), Conroy et al. (2001) interviewed elite athletes and performing artists about their perceptions of the consequences of failing. An inductive content analysis of those interviews led to the development of a preliminary multidimensional model of FF comprising 10 possible aversive consequences of failing. Conroy (2001) wrote a set of items to measure the strength of individuals’ beliefs in each aversive consequence of failing. Factor analyses reduced the domain to five aversive consequences of failing: (a) experiencing shame and embarrassment, (b) devaluing one’s self-estimate, (c) having an uncertain future, (d) having important others lose interest, and (e) upsetting important others (Conroy, 2001; Conroy et al., 2002). The correlations between these five factors could be accounted for by a single higher-order factor representing general FF (Conroy et al., 2002). Thus, FF can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct with a hierarchical structure.

This multidimensional-hierarchical structure of FF has been replicated across groups and over time (Conroy et al., 2003; Conroy et al., 2002). In longitudinal analyses the model has consistently achieved a high level of factorial invariance (i.e., equal item-factor regression coefficients and equal item intercepts across occasions) and the rank-ordering of participants has been highly consistent across time points. Both of these findings speak to the stability of FF over short periods of time. Results also indicated a slight but consistent tendency for FF scores to decrease among children, youth and college students following practice with a sport (Conroy and Coatsworth, 2004; Conroy et al., 2003). Although changes in mean levels have been slight, they are a source of concern because (a) FF should be stable over such short time periods and (b) systematic decreases can confound evaluations of interventions to reduce FF levels if investigators do not include appropriate control groups. Developmental and emotion theory suggest several plausible explanations for this decline in FF during a sport season.

1.2. Interpersonal explanations for the FF decline

Interpersonal factors have been strongly linked to FF. High FF individuals typically describe parents and instructors as

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1 Classic achievement motivation theory also included an approach-oriented achievement motive, the need for achievement; however, the present research focused exclusively on fear of failure.

2 This example of the appraisal process was based on the core relational theme for anxiety (Lazarus, 1991) rather than shame because anxiety is a strong characteristic of FF, and contemporary researchers often use test anxiety measures to assess FF (see also Elliot and McGregor, 1999). Additionally, at a conceptual level, shame is only one possible reason why individuals may become anxious about the prospect of failing (Conroy et al., 2001).
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