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Social desirability and relations between goal orientations and competitive trait anxiety in young athletes

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine the impact of a social desirability response set on relations between goal orientation and performance anxiety in youth sports.

Design: Correlational field design.

Method: Data assessing goal orientation, performance anxiety, and social desirability were obtained from male ($n = 106$) and female ($n = 75$) adolescent athletes (Mean age = 12.1 years; SD = 1.3 years).

Results: Female athletes reported significantly higher levels of task orientation and lower levels of ego orientation and concentration disruption, than males. As predicted, ego orientation was positively correlated with all indices of performance anxiety in males and females. Task orientation was negatively associated with all indices of performance anxiety in males but only concentration disruption in females. Social desirability was negatively related to ego orientation in males and females, and positively related to task orientation in females, but not males. Performance anxiety was negatively related to social desirability in females, but not males. Controlling for social desirability attenuated the observed relations between goal orientations and performance anxiety in females, but not males.

Conclusions: These results suggest the importance of incorporating measures of social desirability when studying psychosocial variables with either positive or negative connotations. Our results suggest that social

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desirability may contribute to relations between goal orientation and anxiety in athletes, particularly females.

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Introduction

Achievement goal theory (e.g., Ames, 1984; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1989) holds that the demonstration of ability is the primary intent of individuals in achievement settings (e.g., education, business, sport). Research from this perspective examines how individuals define success (or failure), judge their level of ability, and assign meaning to achievement endeavors (Nicholls, 1989). To explain an athlete's goal directed behavior, achievement goal theory posits that there are two predominant states of goal involvement, namely *task* and *ego*, that serve as key antecedents for reported differences in motivational behavior and cognitive and affective responses (Nicholls, 1989). Individuals who are in a state of task involvement adopt a self-referenced notion of success, believing ability to be demonstrated through developing new skills, putting forth maximum effort, and improving one's performance. Conversely, when an individual is in a state of ego involvement he/she adopts a normative conception of ability and believes ability to be demonstrated through favorable comparisons with others. When ego-involved, the focal concern is with social comparison; thus, success is experienced only when an individual perceives his/her performance to surpass that of others, or when he/she performs equally well but exerts less effort (Nicholls, 1989).

Although much has been written about task- and ego-involvement,¹ most of Nicholls' work and subsequent investigations in the sport domain have focused on and assessed one's dispositional *goal orientation* (cf. Duda & Whitehead, 1998). The term *goal orientation* is used to reflect the tendency of an individual towards adopting task and ego involvement (Nicholls, 1989). Research examining young athletes' achievement goal orientation has typically employed self-report measures, such as the Perception of Success Questionnaire (POSQ, Roberts, Treasure, & Balague, 1998) and the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ, Duda, 1989). Studies have consistently found task orientation to be positively associated with adaptive psychological and behavioral responses in young athletes (see Duda & Whitehead, 1998; Roberts, 2001). Athletes who possess high levels of task orientation generally report high levels of satisfaction, challenge, enjoyment, and investment. In contrast, athletes who report high levels of ego orientation generally report a more negative psychological and behavioral profile.

Researchers employing self-report measures of goal orientation in sport have largely ignored the issue of social desirability. Defined as "the need for subjects to obtain approval by responding in a culturally appropriate and acceptable manner" (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960, p. 353), social desirability poses a major concern to researchers attempting to obtain valid data from self-report

¹In the extant literature, the terms *Task* and *Ego* (Nicholls, 1989) are often used interchangeably with the terms *Mastery* and *Performance* (Dweck, 1986; Ames, 1992). Aligned with the work of Nicholls (1989) and the majority of past work in sport (cf. Duda, 2001) the terms *task* and *ego* will be used in the present paper.

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