



Goal-directed and undirected self-talk: Exploring a new perspective for the study of athletes' self-talk



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 September 2013

Received in revised form

7 May 2014

Accepted 26 May 2014

Available online 8 June 2014

Keywords:

Thoughts

Cognitive processes

Valence

Time perspective

Activation

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The present study aimed to introduce the distinction between goal-directed and undirected thoughts used in general psychology into the automatic self-talk paradigm used in sport psychology. In particular, the purpose of this investigation was to explore the structure and the content of athletes' goal-directed and undirected self-talk.

Methods: Overall, 87 athletes participated in two studies ($n = 32$ and $n = 55$, respectively). Qualitative methods were used to analyze data, in the form of text units that were collected retrospectively through thought sampling regarding participants' self-talk.

Results: The analysis revealed differences in the structure of goal-directed and un-directed self-talk. Spontaneous, undirected, self-talk involved mostly explaining past outcomes and foreseeing upcoming events, whereas goal-directed self-talk aimed at attaining control over cognitions and activation for action. Spontaneous self-talk could be classified based on two dimensions: valence (positive–negative) and time-perspective (retrospective, present-related, and anticipatory), whereas goal-directed self-talk could be classified into two different dimensions: activation (activated states, neutral, deactivated states) and time-orientation (past, past–present, present–future, and future oriented). Furthermore, differences were also observed with regard to the person at which statements were addressed.

Conclusions: Overall, the findings attempt to explore a new perspective into the study of self-talk, which can help improving the conceptualization, creating new research directions, and enhancing the understanding of self-talk for developing effective interventions.

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What people say to themselves engaging in what is called inner speech, inner conversation, or self-talk has traditionally been seen as crucial to how they behave and perform (Ellis, 1994). Hence, it is not surprising that in sport psychology, where the term self-talk has prevailed, a considerable number of studies has focused on exploring athletes' thought content and self-statements (e.g., Hardy, 2006; Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001; Zourbanos, Hatzigeorgiadis, Chroni, Theodorakis, & Papaianou, 2009). The

present investigation sought to extend the self-talk literature in sport and explore a new perspective regarding the conceptualization and taxonomy of self-talk guided by the relevant literature in general psychology.

The conceptualization of thoughts in general psychology

Thoughts and self-talk have received significant research attention in different areas of psychology (e.g., Hart & Albarracín, 2009; Longe et al., 2010; Oppenheim & Dell, 2010). Several categorizations have been proposed to discriminate between different types of thoughts and describe the underlying structure of individuals' thoughts, such as the distinction between conscious and unconscious thoughts (Dijksterhuis, 2004), or the distinction between operant and respondent thoughts (Klinger, 1977). A categorization that seems recurrent among different lines of research

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(e.g., Christoff, 2012; Ickes & Cheng, 2011) differentiates between goal-directed thoughts, which are operant in nature, and involuntary and unintentional undirected thoughts.

Christoff, Gordon, and Smith (2011) described goal-directed thinking as a mental process deliberately employed towards solving a problem or making progress on a task. Goal-directed thinking usually occurs during reasoning, problem solving and decision making. Goal-directed thinking includes, firstly, the representation of current and desired states, and secondly, the establishment of a link between current and desired states through a series of actions which attempt to convert the former to the latter (Unterrainer & Owen, 2006).

With regard to undirected thoughts, Christoff et al. (2011) further distinguished three types: *mind-wandering*, *stimulus-independent thoughts* and *spontaneous thoughts*. According to Klinger (2009), mind-wandering, also termed task-unrelated thoughts (Christoff, 2012), would include any thought that is unrelated to the ongoing task or activity, thus unrelated to the thought eliciting situation (e.g. thinking about a movie while attending a team meeting); stimulus-independent thoughts would be related to the context of the activity, yet unrelated to ongoing stimuli a person receives (e.g., thinking about past strategic mistakes while in a team meeting); and spontaneous thoughts are unintended, non-working, non-instrumental thoughts that come to mind unbidden and effortless, which are however linked to the task or activity at hand and relevant contextual stimuli (e.g., thinking about how a suggestion was appraised by the team manager). In other words, the content of mind-wandering is unrelated to the task at hand or the situation, whereas the content of stimulus independent and spontaneous thoughts are related to the situation; nevertheless, stimulus independent thoughts do not directly relate to ongoing stimuli, whereas spontaneous thoughts are related to ongoing stimuli but they are not goal directed. Altogether, undirected thoughts have been less studied as compared to goal-directed thoughts, despite representing a common phenomenon, occupying about a third of our waking life (Christoff et al., 2011). However, recently, a growing number of researchers have acknowledged that undirected thoughts represent a relevant cognitive phenomenon that influences other cognitive aspects of human life such as attention or decision making and the relevant literature has been growing (Christoff, 2012).

The conceptualization of self-talk in sport psychology

In the sport self-talk literature, Theodorakis, Hatzigeorgiadis, and Zourbanos (2012) distinguished two main research paradigms: one addressing the effects of self-talk as a cognitive intervention strategy (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis, Galanis, Zourbanos, & Theodorakis, 2014; Latinjak, Torregrosa, & Renom, 2010a), and another seeking to describe and explore athletes' automatic self-talk (e.g., Hardy, Gammage, et al., 2001; Hatzigeorgiadis, 2002; Zourbanos et al., 2009). The latter focuses implicitly on both goal-directed and undirected thoughts.

From the early days of self-talk studies in sport, athletes' automatic self-talk was divided into positive and negative (e.g., Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, & Petitpas, 1994). Traditionally, self-talk that assists athletes staying appropriately focused in the present, not dwelling on the past and neither projecting too far in the future, was considered positive (Weinberg, 1988). In contrast, inappropriate, irrational, and counterproductive or anxiety provoking statements were labeled as negative self-talk. Hardy, Gammage, et al. (2001) argued that the dimension of self-talk valence (i.e., positive/negative self-talk) should refer to the content solely and not to the effects of self-talk, because positively and negatively

valenced self-talk can have either facilitating or debilitating performance effects (Theodorakis et al., 2012). Another differentiation between different types of self-talk has been made between instructional and motivational self-talk (Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, & Kazakas, 2000). Instructional self-talk refers to statements involving some sort of direction for action, whereas motivational self-talk, which has been paralleled with positive self-talk, involves positively phrased statement addressed to oneself, such as psyching-up and confidence building. Finally, Hardy, Hall, and Alexander (2001) explored self-talk and affective states in sport coming up with a two-dimensional structure of self-talk based on valence and intensity (which ranged from extremely demotivational to extremely motivational). However, this two-dimensional structure was not based upon empirical evidence but on the affect grid (Russell, Weiss, & Mendhelson, 1989).

Our understanding regarding the content and structure of self-talk has been advanced through the development of research instruments assessing athletes' self-talk. Initially, Hatzigeorgiadis and Biddle (2000) developed the *Thought Occurrence Questionnaire for Sports* (TOQS), which described three types of negative self-talk: worries related to performance, thoughts of escape and task-irrelevant thoughts. More recently, Zourbanos et al. (2009) developed the *Automatic Self Talk Questionnaire for Sports* (ASTQS), a more inclusive measure of athlete's self-talk, describing four types of positive self-talk (motivational/psych-up statements, confidence building statements, instructional/concentration statements, and anxiety controlling statements); and four types of negative self-talk (worries, statements about disengagement, statements about somatic fatigue, and irrelevant thoughts). Despite being more comprehensive, and including self-talk statements that can be described as goal-directed or undirected, such a distinction has not been made based on the ASTQS.

Most closely related to the goal-directed-undirected distinction, Hardy, Oliver, and Tod (2009) differentiated between sport-oriented and sport-unrelated statements. In the matter of sport-orientated statements, Hardy noted an overlap between strategic self-talk (intervention cues) and automatic thoughts and concluded that "such self-statements occur automatically or in a more deliberate manner" (p. 38). In sum, to the best of the authors' knowledge, a clear distinction between goal-directed and undirected self-talk, has yet to be considered in sport psychology.

The present research

In this study we sought to combine the goal-directed/undirected thoughts framework from general psychology with the automatic self-talk paradigm used in sport psychology. Thus, our main purpose was to explore the structure and content of undirected and goal-directed self-talk in sports.

Following Gross's (2002) recommendations, emotion concepts were used to help participants recalling a variety of sport situations and the thoughts that occurred to them, or the instructions they gave themselves in such situations. According to Gross, emotions arise in situations that are important to an individual and which can be easily and precisely recalled. Besides, previous research has evidenced that in these emotion-eliciting situations, a high level of cognitive performance is desirable (Richards & Gross, 2000). Therefore, it was considered that the use of emotion-eliciting situations would facilitate athletes recalling and describing with reasonable accuracy their self-talk. The use of emotion eliciting situations was expected to further facilitate the purposes of the study because such situations require some sort of emotional regulation. According to the model of emotion regulation outlined by Gross (2001), self-talk in the form of self-directed instructions is typically used for emotional regulation processes.

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