The social side of self-talk: Relationships between perceptions of support received from the coach and athletes' self-talk

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of the present research was to investigate the relationship between perceptions of received support provided by a coach and athletes' self-talk.
Design: Cross-sectional.
Method: Two studies were conducted. In the first study an instrument to assess perceptions of received support provided by the coach was developed, based on the conceptualization of Rees and Hardy (2000, 2004), and tested in a sample of athletes ($n = 888$). In the second study the relationship between perceptions of received support provided by the coach and athletes' self-talk was tested through structural models. Participants ($n = 465$) completed the social support dimensions derived from study 1 and the Automatic Self-Talk Questionnaire for Sports (Zourbanos, Hatzigeorgiadis, Chroni, Theodorakis, & Papaioannou, 2009).
Results: The results of the first study supported the factorial structure of the measure, including the dimensions of emotional, informational and esteem support. The results of the second study showed that perceptions of support received from the coach were positively related to athletes' positive self-talk dimensions and negatively to athletes' negative self-talk dimensions.
Conclusions: Overall, the results showed that athletes' perceptions of support received from the coach were related to their self-talk, thus stressing the need to further consider the role of social factors in shaping athletes' self-talk.

People often talk to themselves silently or out loud, engaging in what is called internal dialogue, self-statement, inner conversation, subvocal speech, self-verbalizations, or self-talk (Burnett, 1996). In sport psychology, *self-talk has been broadly conceptualized* as a "multidimensional phenomenon concerned with athletes' verbalizations that are addressed to themselves" (Hardy, Hall, & Hardy, 2005, p. 905). In the literature, self-talk has been mainly examined as a cognitive strategy for performance enhancement and recent meta-analytic evidence confirms the effectiveness of self-talk interventions (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Galanis, & Theodorakis, in press). Research has also explored the functions underlying the effectiveness of self-talk (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Goltsios, & Theodorakis, 2008; Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Mpoumpaki, & Theodorakis, 2009; Theodorakis, Hatzigeorgiadis, & Chroni, 2008), and recently, studies have approached self-talk research by combining different

scientific approaches, such as kinematics (e.g., Tod, Thatcher, McGuigan, & Thatcher, 2009). One line of inquiry which is relatively sparse is the examination of self-talk as thought content (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis & Biddle, 2008), and more specifically with regard to the factors that shape and influence athletes' self-talk content (e.g., Conroy & Metzler, 2004). Hardy, Oliver, and Tod (2008) in a conceptual model of self-talk considered, among other factors, the role of the coach in shaping athletes' self-talk.

The impact of the social environment in general, and significant others in particular, on individuals' cognitions has a long history in psychology (e.g., Burnett, 1996, 1999; Mead, 1912/1964). It is in human nature to have a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and to develop supportive relationships which appear to have a beneficial effect on mental health and positive well-being (for review see Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000). In the social support literature various definitions have been proposed. Cohen et al. (2000) defined social support as "the social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them by non-professionals in the context of both formal support groups and informal helping relationships" (p. 4). Bianco and Eklund (2001) in an overview of the social support

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literature proposed that a common distinction with regard to types of social support is made between perceived and received support. They described perceived support, as the anticipating of help in time of need, and received support as the help provided within a given time period. Research has been mainly focused on perceived support and received support has often been ignored (Rees & Freeman, 2007). Regarding the assessment of received support, Barrera (1986) argued that this actually involved "perceived–received support" (p. 417), that is perceptions of received support, and not actual support. Nevertheless, as Shaver (1975) notices, one's perceptions of another's behaviour are more important than the behaviour itself, because it is the perception that may have the impact and not the behaviour per se. Accordingly, in the present study, athletes' perceptions of received support provided by the coach were examined.

In the sport literature various approaches have been used for the study of social support, such as features of support networks and appraisals of social support (for review, see Bianco & Eklund, 2001). Furthermore, the effects of social support are said to operate by two means (a) directly by positively influencing cognitive and behavioural outcomes, and (b) indirectly by moderating the effects of stress on outcomes (stress buffering impact). In the present study direct links between appraisals of social support and cognitive outcomes were investigated. Rees, Ingledew, and Hardy (1999), reported significant effects of social support on "*performance components*", characterized as cognitive appraisals of feeling flat, positive tension, effective tactics and flow. Rees and Freeman (2007) revealed the beneficial impact of both received and perceived social support on athletes' self-confidence, both directly and by reducing the negative effect of stress. Finally, Freeman and Rees (2009) found that perceived support was linked to situational control and subsequently to golf performance, and also that esteem support was found to be directly negatively related to perceptions of threat and indirectly to perceptions of challenge through situational control. The above findings suggest that there is a likely link between social support and cognitions.

Scholars such as Mead (1912/1964) and Vygotsky (1986) addressed the role of social environment on the formulation of individuals' self-talk. The above social-cognitive theorists propose that individuals' interactions with the social environment, and in particular significant others' behaviour directed at them, influence the way individuals view themselves and respond to stimuli through internalization processes. Although direct evidence is sparse, some interest regarding self-talk antecedents has been exhibited in educational psychology. Specifically, research has revealed relationships between significant others' statements and children's positive and negative self-talk, and the influence of self-talk on self-concepts and self-esteem (Burnett, 1996, 1999). Furthermore, the relationship between social environment and cognitions has been also considered in health psychology. According to the social cognition hypothesis (Lakey & Drew, 1997) relationships with others and availability of support influence thoughts experienced by the individuals.

In the sport literature, Conroy and Coatsworth (2007) raised the potential role of internalization, the developmental process through which young athletes accept and integrate the coach's beliefs and behaviours into their own sense of self, as a mechanism explaining coaching influences on athletes. They explored, based on a cognitive-interpersonal model, self-talk as a mediator in the relationship between coaching behaviour and athletes fear of failure and found that coaching behaviour was indeed related to changes in athletes' self-talk. More specifically, perceived coaching behaviour of control or blame increased athletes' level of self-control or self- blame, respectively. These findings provided preliminary evidence, but also a useful framework, for the investigation of coaching influences on athletes' self-talk.

Hardy et al. (2008) proposed a conceptual model for the advancement of self-talk research. Their model postulates that personal and situational factors influence athletes' self-talk, which in turn has an impact on cognitive, motivational, behavioural and affective mechanisms, and subsequently sport performance. According to the model one of the situational factors that may influence athletes' self-talk is coaching behaviour, aspect of which is social support. Indeed, Zourbanos, Theodorakis, and Hatzigeorgiadis (2006), in a preliminary study, showed that coaches' esteem support was related to athletes' positive self-talk, and Zourbanos, Hatzigeorgiadis, and Theodorakis (2007) reported that positive and negative statements by the coach were related to athletes' positive and negative self-talk respectively. Finally, Zourbanos, Hatzigeorgiadis, Tsiakaras, Chroni, and Theodorakis (2010) in a multi-method examination of the relationship between coaching behaviour and athletes' self-talk supported through experimental evidence that the coach may have an impact on athletes' self-talk. They found that supportive coaching behaviour can reduce negative self-talk and negative coaching behaviour can reduce athletes' positive self-talk. The above empirical evidence provides a reasonable ground for the relationships of coaching behaviour and social support with athletes' self-talk and encourages further and more thorough investigation.

Based on the theoretical postulations of Lakey and Drew (1997), Conroy and Coatsworth (2007), and Hardy et al. (2008) and the evidence presented above, the present study aimed to examine more elaborately the relationships between perceptions of received support provided by the coach and athletes' self-talk. Two studies were conducted. The first aimed to develop a measure suitable for the purposes of the investigation, reflecting the social support dimensions from Rees and Hardy (2004) in the Greek language. The second aimed to examine the relationships between perceptions of received social support and athletes' positive and negative self-talk.

Study 1

In an attempt to construct a sport specific social support measurement, Rees and Hardy (2000) identified four components of social support, namely emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. Following Rees and Hardy's (2004) suggestions about adjusting the social support scales to the population and the situation being assessed, the purpose of the present study was to develop in the Greek language a measure reflecting dimensions of social support received by the coach.

According to Rees and Hardy's (2004) conceptualizations, emotional support is defined as someone always being there for the athlete, listening and giving moral support, esteem support involves instilling the player with the confidence to deal with problems and pressure, and informational support refers to advice and instructions with regard to technical problems. Finally, tangible support has been conceptualized as support in the form of material aid, such as financial assistance, products and gifts (Rees et al., 1999) and instrumental assistance such as necessary resources to cope with the stressful event (Rees & Hardy, 2004). Considering that the coach is usually not a person providing material support, tangible support was not considered. Overall, a measure reflecting the dimensions of informational, emotional and esteem support was composed and tested.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 888 athletes (368 females and 520 males) with a mean age of 18.48 years ($SD = 4.76$). They were recruited from track and field ($n = 206$), handball ($n = 172$), swimming ($n = 151$), wrestling ($n = 112$), soccer ($n = 84$), basketball ($n = 90$)