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# The use of self-talk during elite cricket batting performance

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ABSTRACT

*Objective:* The purpose of this study was to qualitatively investigate the use of self-talk during cricket batting performance through an innovative approach that allowed for within performance responses to be examined.
*Design and method:* Five elite cricketers were interviewed alongside edited video footage of their batting innings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth information and explanations about the participants' use of self-talk during each critical incident.
*Results and conclusions:* The findings of this study highlighted the use of instructional and motivational self-talk as a fluctuating continual narrative that enhanced skill execution, self-efficacy and focus of attention, whilst reducing performance anxiety. In particular, the athletes described the effectiveness of self-determined self-talk on their performance. Specifically, they advocated self-talk that narrowed their attentional focus and redirected their thoughts to performance-related cues during periods of declining performance.

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The past two decades has seen an increased interest in the role of 'self-talk' on sports performance (Theodorakis, Hatigeogiadis, & Zourbanos, 2012), with the earliest anecdotal evidence from this area dating back to the 1970s in which both researchers (e.g., Mahoney & Avener, 1977) and coaches (e.g., Gallwey, 1974) observed athletes using self-talk for a variety of purposes. Since these early reports, various terms have been used to describe what athletes say to themselves such as automatic thoughts, internal dialogue, and self-statements (Theodorakis et al., 2012). In an attempt to conceptualize this construct, Hardy (2006) argued that sport-specific self-talk should be grounded within 'self-statements' that are directed at sports performance. More specifically, Hardy's working definition viewed self-talk as: (a) verbalizations addressed to self, (b) multidimensional in nature, (c) open to interpretation by virtue of its content, (d) somewhat dynamic, and (e) instructional and/or motivational for the athlete.

Given the complexity and multidimensional nature of self-talk, it is not surprising that Hardy (2006) also revealed a multitude of dimensions associated with the nature of self-talk. Of these dimensions, the majority of research surrounded the valance of self-talk (e.g., Dagrou & Gauvin, 1992; Van Raalte et al., 1995) dividing it into two broad categories: positive and negative self-talk (Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001). Positive self-talk consists of praise used to encourage, direct attention, and enhance persistence (Weinberg, 1988), whereas negative self-talk is seen as detrimental to performance through its association with anxiety production (Hamilton, Scott, & MacDougall, 2007; Moran, 1996; Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, & Kazakas, 2000). Despite the facilitative and debilitative connotations of self-talk, research has provided equivocal findings on the valence of self-talk on performance (Hardy, 2006). In light of this, it has been suggested that previous studies may have confused the content of self-talk with its impact on performance. Based on this suggestion, future research has been guided to distinguish positive and negative self-talk via the content rather than the impact on performance (Theodorakis et al., 2012).

Despite some confusion surrounding the valence of self-talk, there is substantial evidence that self-talk can serve a variety of purposes for athletes (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, & Theodorakis, 2007). Research has shown self-talk to have the ability to regulate cognitions and arousal (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis, Theodorakis, & Zourbanos, 2004), acting as a motivational tool (e.g., Thelwell & Greenless, 2003) or a behavioral prompt (e.g., Landin & Herbert, 1999). Focusing on the effects of self-talk on skilled performance, early descriptive research indicated that athletes use self-talk extensively to aid their performance (Mahoney & Avener, 1977). In an attempt to verify these reports, more contemporary qualitative studies have adopted observational techniques (e.g., Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, & Petitpas, 1994; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Brewer, & Hatton, 2000). Van Raalte et al. (1994) observed the use of self-talk during tennis performance, finding that negative

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self-talk was used extensively as opposed to the infrequent use of instructional self-talk and positive self-talk. Based on these findings, it was concluded that some individuals may be prone to expressing self-talk more than others and that positive self-talk was more likely to be internalized and thus immeasurable.

Building on this research, Hardy, Gammage, et al. (2001) explored the use of athletes self-talk by examining the "four W's" (what, where, when, and why). Their findings showed that self-talk was used most frequently before and during competition and consisted of largely positive thoughts for the purpose of skill development, strategy, confidence, and drive. Despite the validity of these findings and the contribution to knowledge of previous descriptive studies, the use of more alternative methodologies (e.g., video recall) has been advocated to further enhance the assessment of athlete self-talk (Theodorakis et al., 2012).

The evidence from descriptive research has highlighted the variety of functions that self-talk can serve (e.g., Hardy, Gammage, et al., 2001). In an attempt to build on this, scholars have explored the moderating effects of self-talk on performance (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2007). More specifically, experimental research has demonstrated the facilitative effects of self-talk on task performance (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2004, 2007; Perkos, Theodorakis, & Chroni, 2002). Indeed, self-talk has been suggested to function as either instructional or motivational for behavior (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 1998). Instructional self-talk comprises of technical information intended to prompt and aid technical execution, tactical decisions, and attention control (Theodorakis et al., 2000). Whereas motivational self-talk is considered as a confidence-building tool that can increase persistence and effort (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2007). Focusing on the use of instructional self-talk, Landin (1994) drew upon Niddeffer's attentional framework when suggesting that self-talk can facilitate performance through refining attention to task specific information.

In line with this, Kingston and Hardy (1997) advocated the use of holistic process goals to offset using the explicit rules of motor control that are associated with inhibited motor function. Indeed, holistic process self-talk focusing on broad movement outcomes has been favored instead of process instructional self-talk directed at the minutia of technique (Kingston & Hardy, 1997). Similarly, much of the research has postulated that the effectiveness of self-talk content is dependent on the targeted motor skills (i.e., gross or precision movements; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2007; Theodorakis et al., 2000). Given that "certain self-talk cues are more effective than others" (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2007, p. 241), future research addressing the conflict that exists over which type of self-talk is most effective for more complex motor skills may be beneficial (Hardy, Oliver, & Tod, 2009).

Scholars have highlighted the value of self-talk across a variety of skills and sports (e.g., Cutton & Landin, 2007; Johnson, Hrycaiko, & Halas, 2004; Landin, 1994; Perkos et al., 2002). Of these studies, much of the research has implemented interventions on team based invasion games (e.g., Johnson et al., 2004; Perkos et al., 2002). For example, the purpose of Johnson et al.'s (2004) study was to examine the effectiveness of teaching youth footballers self-talk and to gain insight into the perceptions of self-talk on performance. The results demonstrated improved soccer shooting accuracy through the mechanisms of attentional control and confidence. Similar studies have assessed the effectiveness of self-talk in more individualized sports such as water polo (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2004, 2007). In particular, Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2007) found that attentional focus was perceived as the major function of self-talk on novice swimming performance.

Despite these findings enhancing knowledge on the functions of self-talk on specific sports skills, there are a number of design issues to consider upon the evaluation of the self-talk research (Hardy et al., 2009). The first issue refers to the types of performers used as participants. With much of the literature employing students or novices as participants (e.g., Hardy, Hall, & Alexander, 2001; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2004; Theodorakis et al., 2000), understanding of the use and influence of self-talk on the elite sports performer is limited. The second issue questions the ability for athletes to specifically recall their use of self-talk through the use of prescribed post-intervention questionnaires (Van Raalte et al., 2000) and interviews (e.g., Johnson et al., 2004; Landin, 1994). The final issue concerns the limited amount of research that has focused on the use of self-talk throughout competitive performance (for an exception, see Hardy, Hall, & Hardy, 2004). Such issues create the rationale for future research to examine the psychological requirements of elite athletes across a variety of different sports during competition (Thelwell, Weston, & Greenless, 2007).

Building upon Thelwell et al. (2007) argument for research to explore a variety of different sports, cricket provides an under researched area within sport psychology. Of the few studies conducted within the psychology of cricket, scholars have tended to explore the skills necessary for repeatable performances (Bawden & Maynard, 2001; Thelwell & Maynard, 2002), the demands placed on cricketers' (Thelwell et al., 2007) or investigated the development of mental toughness within cricket (e.g., Bull, Shambrook, & Brooks, 2005; Guicciardi, 2011). More specifically to the use of mental skills in cricket, self-talk has been reported as fundamental during batting performance (Thelwell & Maynard, 2002). These findings coupled with the plethora of demands encountered during batting performance (Thelwell et al., 2007) build toward the argument that cricket is predominately a 'mental' game, worthy of more attention (Weissensteiner, Abernethy, Farrow, & Gross, 2012).

In sum, it is apparent that there is a dearth of rich qualitative research that has explored the in-competition use of self-talk within an elite sporting context. Indeed, those studies that have tried to obtain information regarding the use of self-talk during performance have done so via the use of post-intervention interviews (e.g., Johnson et al., 2004; Landin & Herbert, 1999). Despite useful contributions to the self-talk field, future research has been advised to adopt methods to reduce the inaccuracies associated with the retrospective recall within such interviews (Theodorakis et al., 2012). This study, therefore, provides a qualitative methodology that enhances the ability for athletes to accurately recall the use of self-talk throughout performance. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate the use of self-talk during cricket batting performance through a procedure that promoted recall through self-confrontational interviews (Smith & Harwood, 2002).

## Method

### *Research design*

To address the purpose of this study, a procedure was adopted to systematically select participants based on their performances during competition. Based on this selection, six critical incidents for each participant were collated onto a DVD, representing a highlights package of the most important events during the cricket batsman's innings. Subsequently, the DVD package was used in self-confrontational interviews to provide vivid recollections of their use of self-talk during several incidents throughout their innings.

### *Participant selection*

The scarcity of research investigating elite athletes' use of self-talk formulated the sampling rationale for this study. Consequently, a professional English County Cricket Club was approached

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