



A description of self-talk in exercise

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Abstract

Objectives. To examine the use of exercise-related self-talk. Specifically, the four Ws — where, when, what and why — of self-talk used by exercise participants were examined.

Method. Exercisers ($n=164$) who indicated they used self-talk were asked where, when, what, and why they used their self-talk using an open-ended questionnaire. Over 95% of exercisers reported using self-talk with moderate frequency.

Results. Exercisers used self-talk most often at their exercise location, during exercise. They reported using short phrases, neutral self-talk, and referred to themselves in the second person most frequently. Self-talk was used for both motivational (i.e., mastery, arousal, and drive) and cognitive (i.e., skill-specific and general) purposes.

Conclusions. These results provide a basis for developing a framework for exercise-related self-talk research. © 2001 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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For both researchers and applied consultants, the study and use of mental skills such as attention control training, goal setting, imagery, relaxation, and self-talk, are important areas in the field of sport psychology (Ramsay, 2000; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). However, in the exercise domain, many of these same skills have received little, if any, consideration. Nonetheless, they seem to hold substantial promise for influencing exercise behaviour (Ramsay, 2000). Goal setting has received some attention and its use has been advocated by personal trainers and popular fitness magazines (e.g., Neporent, 1994; O'Brien, 1995; Shepherd, 1998). The limited research conducted indicates that goal setting may positively influence exercise behaviour (e.g., Boyce & Wayda, 1994; Gallucci, 1995). Another mental skill that researchers in the exercise domain have recently

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started to examine is exercise imagery. Exercisers report the frequent use of imagery (Hausenblas, Hall, Rodgers, & Munroe, 1999), and their use of imagery is related to their exercise behaviour (Gammage, Hall, & Rodgers, 2000). While this initial research on exercise imagery is promising, additional work is required to fully understand how imagery affects exercise behaviour.

One of the mental skills for which no research has been conducted in the exercise domain is that of self-talk. Typically, self-talk has been defined as occurring anytime one thinks about something (Bunker, Williams, & Zinsser, 1993). However, there are several limitations to this definition. First, it focuses on thought content, and not statements made to oneself (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996). Consequently, this definition is vague, and difficult to operationalize as it can include any type of thought, such as mental imagery. Hardy et al. (1996) have subsequently suggested that a more precise definition put forth by Hackfort & Schwenkmezger (1993) is preferable. Hackfort & Schwenkmezger (1993) defined self-talk as “an internal dialogue [in which] the individual interprets feelings and perceptions, regulates and changes evaluations and convictions, and gives him/herself instructions and reinforcement” (p. 355). This definition is more functional and emphasizes the importance of language, which is influential in the development of thinking, and therefore action. Unfortunately, most research in the area of self-talk has tended to focus on the former more vague definition, which has limited the development of the area (Hardy et al., 1996).

One domain in which self-talk has been investigated is sport. This research has tended to focus on the influence of positive versus negative self-talk on performance. Unfortunately, the results have been equivocal with regards to which is better for performance. While experimentally-based research has lent support for the contention that positive self-talk improves performance (e.g., Dagrou, Gauvin, & Halliwell, 1992; Van Raalte et al., 1995; Weinberg, Smith, Jackson, & Gould, 1984), field-based research has yielded less definitive results. Highlen and Bennett (1983) found that athletes reported that negative self-talk may actually improve performance, while Dagrou, Gauvin, and Halliwell (1991) and Rotella, Gansneder, Ojala, & Billing (1980) found positive and negative self-talk did not differentially influence performance.

An alternative approach within the sport psychology literature has been the examination of the effects of instructional self-talk (e.g., Ziegler, 1987). Instructional self-talk has been found to be beneficial for tennis players' volleying (Landin & Hebert, 1999) and ground stroke skills (Ziegler, 1987), as well as for 100 m sprinting (Mallett & Hanrahan, 1997). More recently, Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, and Kazakas (2000) extended this approach by examining the influence of instructional versus motivational self-talk on various motor skills. They found both self-talk strategies to be effective at improving performance. However, instructional self-talk was found to be more effective than motivational self-talk for fine motor skills, with both motivational and instructional self-talk being equally effective for motor skills requiring strength and endurance (Theodorakis et al., 2000).

Given that self-talk has not been examined in the exercise domain, the first step was to establish a solid descriptive foundation on which to conduct explanatory and predictive studies (Kerlinger, 1986). This step is particularly important since there seems to be a lack of theory in the sport self-talk literature regarding how self-talk may influence performance. This lack of theory-based research may stem in part from the fact that no description of self-talk in exercise has been undertaken. One approach to establishing such a descriptive foundation has recently been employed for mental imagery. Munroe, Giacobbi, Hall, and Weinberg (2000) asked athletes four

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