The relationship between athlete burnout and perfectionism:
A meta-analysis

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Abstract

In this meta-analysis, we examined the relationships between two types of perfectionism (i.e., perfectionistic strivings and concerns) and athlete burnout. A total of 18 studies in 17 articles (i.e., one article included two studies with different data sets) were included and analyzed. Random-effects models were used to test the relationships between perfectionism and burnout in athletes. The results indicated that perfectionistic strivings were negatively related to athlete burnout while perfectionistic concerns were shown to be positively related to athlete burnout. Perfectionistic strivings are functionally adaptive to burnout in athletes, whereas perfectionistic concerns are functionally maladaptive to athlete burnout. Gender significantly moderated the relationship between perfectionistic concerns and athlete burnout.

Key words: athlete burnout, perfectionism, perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, meta-analysis

Introduction

The original concept of burnout as a psychological construct emerged from health professions. Maslach and Jackson (1981) were the first to propose the multidimensional construct of burnout as a state of emotional fatigue that often causes decrease in productivity. Burnout is commonly experienced by individuals who work with other people. Burnout also manifests incompetence, negative responses toward clients, as well as lack of achievement (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, 1984). While burnout studies first focused mainly on individuals who worked in the human service industries, researchers gradually started exploring burnout syndrome in other domains (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009).

Sport environments are known to provoke athletes into emotional and physical tiredness or fatigue, mood disturbance, lack of enjoyment, loss of motivation, and, in turn, cause burnout syndrome (Ekland & Cresswell, 2007; Raedeke, 1997). Early burnout research in sport settings focused on the burnout syndrome in coaches because coaching required excessive psychological and emotional demands (Vealey, Udry, Zimmerman, & Soliday, 1992). Later, researchers observed the burnout syndrome in athletes. Raedeke (1997) first proposed the multidimensional burnout in collegiate swimmers by adopting the original definition of burnout from Maslach and Jackson (1982). Maslach and Jackson’s definition of burnout contains a depersonalization component that is described as having negative feelings and responses towards others. Raedeke replaced depersonalization with sport devaluation in order to explain the negative feelings and attitudes athletes have
towards their sports. Later, Raedeke and Smith (2001) developed the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire (ABQ) which is composed of three subscales including emotional and physical exhaustion, sport devaluation, and reduced sense of accomplishment. The ABQ has widely been used to measure burnout syndrome in the athlete population (Eklund & Cresswell, 2007).

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality trait that has been studied in the sport-specific context and is considered an important factor affecting athletes’ cognitive, affective, and behavioral functions (Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn, & Stoll, 2012). According to Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990), perfectionism is a multidimensional construct that includes a person’s striving to achieve unrealistic goals while being hypercritical of one’s own performance. Perfectionism includes personal and social components which are called self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, respectively (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Self-oriented perfectionism is defined by one’s self-criticism and success with reaching personal unrealistically high standards, whereas the social aspect of perfectionism is often described by one’s striving to meet someone else’s unrealistic expectations in the hope of gaining acceptance (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

This depiction of perfectionism was commonly accepted and used for more than two decades in various fields of study. Recently, researchers in sports psychology suggested that perfectionism can be healthy or unhealthy and, therefore, have categorized perfectionism into two dimensions: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Gotwals, 2011; Gotwals et al., 2012). These two dimensions of perfectionism focus on functional aspects of perfectionism, that is, strivings and concerns. Perfectionistic strivings can be viewed as strong determination to achieve the best results. Strivings often assist athletes with succeeding and are, therefore, considered healthy and helpful. Perfectionistic concerns are described as fear of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluations. Concerns are fueled by differences between a person’s expectations, actual performance, and athlete’s react negatively to their imperfections, and therefore perfectionistic concerns are considered unhealthy and dysfunctional. According to Gotwals (2011) both healthy and unhealthy perfectionists experience striving to reach high standards, while only unhealthy perfectionists engage in excessive perfectionistic concerns. For instance, athlete’s perfectionistic strivings are positively related to self-esteem and self-confidence in Olympic athletes (Koivula, Hasmén, & Fallby, 2002) and psychological well-being of athletes (Gaudreau & Verner-Filion, 2012), while disordered eating in elite synchronized swimmers is often positively connected to perfectionistic concerns (Ferrand, Magnan, Rouveix, & Filaire, 2007). A systematic review study by Gotwals et al. (2012) shows that perfectionistic strivings in sports are generally adaptive, but “in some instances” could be maladaptive (p. 273).

Perfectionism and athlete burnout

Several studies have examined perfectionism in relation to athlete burnout. Numerous studies indicate that certain types of perfectionism may lead to different levels of burnout. For instance, healthy and unhealthy athlete perfectionism (Gotwals, 2011) and evaluative or personal types of perfectionism (Hill, 2013) have been connected to various levels of athlete burnout. Gotwals’ investigation revealed that healthy perfectionists had lower burnout scores in comparison with doubt-oriented unhealthy perfectionists. Healthy perfectionistic participants had different levels of emotional exhaustion compared to parent-oriented unhealthy perfectionists. Additionally, healthy perfectionists had lower levels of burnout in comparison with non-perfectionists. Hill’s research also supports the Gotwals’ findings and suggests that athletes displaying evaluative perfectionism tend to have higher levels of burnout as displayed by all burnout symptoms in comparison with non-perfectionists. Furthermore, upon detailed investigation of two main dimensions of perfectionism and their relationships with athlete burnout, empirical evidence