Psychology of Sport and Exercise 30 (2017) 30–37

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Psychology of Sport and Exercise

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/psychsport

Enacted support and golf-putting performance: The role of support type and support visibility

Tjerk Moll [a, *], Tim Rees [b], Paul Freeman [c]

[a] Cardiff School of Sport, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cyncoed Road, Cardiff, CF23, 6XD, UK
[b] Department of Sport & Physical Activity, Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK
[c] Department of Biological Sciences, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 June 2016
Received in revised form
21 December 2016
Accepted 25 January 2017
Available online 30 January 2017

Keywords:
Esteem support
Informational support
Visible and invisible support
Performance
Self-efficacy

ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study examined whether the impact of enacted support on performance differed across type (esteem and informational) and visibility (visible and invisible) of support. It further tested whether self-efficacy mediated the enacted support-performance relationship.
Design: A one-factor (support manipulation) between subjects experiment.
Method: A fellow novice golfer — in reality a confederate — was scripted to randomly provide one of five support manipulations (visible informational support, invisible informational support, visible esteem support, invisible esteem support, and no support) to participants (n = 105). Immediately after, participants completed a self-efficacy measure and then performed a golf-putting task.
Results: The results demonstrated that participants given visible esteem support significantly outperformed those given no support and those given invisible esteem support. Participants given invisible informational support significantly outperformed those given no support. Although non-significant, the observed mean difference and moderate effect size provided weak evidence that those in the invisible informational support condition may have performed at a higher level than those in the visible informational support condition. There was no evidence that self-efficacy could explain any of these effects.
Conclusion: The results suggest that enacted support can benefit novices' performance and that it is crucial to consider both the type and the visibility of the support. Esteem support is particularly effective when communicated in an explicit and direct manner but informational support appears more effective when communicated in a more subtle, indirect manner.

Consistent with quantitative research that has observed a relationship between social support and a variety of beneficial sport outcomes (Freeman & Rees, 2008; Rees & Freeman, 2007), perhaps not surprisingly, athletes consistently cite social support as a key ingredient of their success (Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Rees & Hardy, 2000). Indeed, such findings underpin researchers' recommendations to encourage the exchange of supportive actions in performance contexts (e.g., Connaughton et al., 2008). Evidence suggests, however, that such acts of support are not always helpful. In fact, various studies in sport and social psychology have demonstrated that the influence of supportive actions is quite variable and sometimes associated with null or even negative effects on outcomes (e.g., Deelstra et al., 2003; Freeman, Rees, & Hardy, 2009; Searle, Bright, & Bochner, 2001). Given these contrasting findings, there is a need to better understand what makes supportive actions effective. In the present study, we focused on two key factors of the support process: (a) the type of the support, and (b) the visibility of the support.

Conceptualised as a situational factor (Barrera, 2000), researchers have used the term 'enacted support' to refer to the interpersonal exchanges of verbal and nonverbal supportive acts between support providers and support recipients (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004; Lakey, 2010). These specific supportive actions can be provided —the observable actions that individuals perform to help an individual (Cohen, Lakey, Tiell, & Neely, 2005; Tardy, 1985), and/or received —the recipient's perception of the receipt of support resources during a specific time frame (Uchino, 2009). As such, 'supportive' actions may be

* Corresponding author. Cardiff School of Sport, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cyncoed Road, Cardiff, Wales, CF23 6XD, UK.
E-mail address: tmoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk (T. Moll).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2017.01.007
1469-0292/

perceived by the provider or the recipient to benefit the recipient (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984) but could occur without being recognised by the provider or the recipient (e.g., Cohen et al., 2005).

When support is enacted, one might intuitively expect it to be beneficial in helping recipients cope more effectively with situational demands (Uchino, 2009)—a proposal that is supported by the positive links between enacted support and self-confidence (Freeman & Rees, 2008), as well as performance (e.g., Rees & Freeman, 2010). However, evidence from studies in sport and social psychology suggests that enacted support can also be unhelpful (e.g., Barry, Bunde, Brock, & Lawrence, 2009; Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Freeman, Coffee, Moll, Rees, & Sammy, 2014; Howland & Simpson, 2010). For example, in an intervention study in which golfers were provided with support through a focused professionally-led intervention, all golfers reported an increase in received support but only one golfer showed significant performance improvements (Freeman et al., 2009).

In light of these mixed findings, it is vital to identify factors that influence the effectiveness of enacted support. With recent studies (e.g., Freeman et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2016) revealing unique effects for different supportive behaviours, one such factor to consider is the type of support exchanged. Both the sport (e.g., Freeman et al., 2014) and social (e.g., Cutrona & Russell, 1990) psychology literature has suggested that at least four key types of support can be distinguished: emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. Given their importance across a wide range of performance domains, including sport (Rees & Freeman, 2012), the present study focused on esteem support and informational support. Esteem support has been defined as "bolstering a sense of competence or self-esteem" through, for example, encouragement and positive reinforcement. Informational support has been defined as "the provision of advice and guidance" (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322).

Various studies have examined the effects of these two types of support in a variety of achievement contexts. Although esteem support has led to poorer performance (Baumeister, Hutton, & Cairns, 1990; Tardy, 1994), it has generally been linked to a number of favourable outcomes including self-confidence (e.g., Freeman et al., 2014) and performance (e.g., Deelstra et al., 2003; Searle et al., 2001; Thorsteinsson, James, & Gregg, 1998), and has been widely regarded as the most effective form of support in achievement contexts (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Rees & Freeman, 2012). Indeed, various researchers have noted that receiving esteem support may be beneficial because positive feedback and expressions of belief can foster individuals' (a) sense of control and (b) belief in their capabilities to successfully execute a specific task (i.e., their self-efficacy; Bandura, 1997). In contrast, although informational support has been positively associated with performance (Tardy, 1994), it has frequently had no effects upon self-confidence and performance (Freeman et al., 2014; Searle et al., 2001), and worse still, detrimental effects upon self-esteem and distress (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Nadler, Fisher, & Ben-Itzhak, 1983; Uno, Uchino, & Smith, 2002). Although the focus of informational support may be on helping recipients to meet task demands (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Shrout, Herman, & Bolger, 2006), its receipt may in fact undermine an individual's sense of control and evoke/reinforce feelings of incompetence and inefficacy by communicating one's inability to deal with a certain stressor/situation (Shrout et al., 2006; Trobst, 2000).

The majority of self-report or experimental studies examining the effects of enacted support have focused on supportive actions recognised by the recipient. Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler (2000) argued that it is particularly these direct, explicit or 'visible' acts of support that risk increasing a recipient's sense of incompetence and inefficacy. They suggested that support acts that are accomplished without being visible to the recipient, so called 'invisible support', might avoid these potential costs (Bolger et al., 2000). According to Bolger et al. (2000), there are two ways in which supportive acts can be invisible. First, acts of support may occur completely outside of the recipient's awareness. Second, invisible support may involve a provider purposely communicating support in such a skilful and indirect manner that, although a recipient may be aware of the communication, he/she does not consider it to be *support*. Because the recipient does not interpret the act as support, it may minimize the negative psychological reactions associated with receiving direct, explicit support. For example, a golfer (provider) may give a fellow golfer (recipient) putting advice (visible support). Although intended to help, the advice could undermine the fellow golfer's sense of competence and efficacy, thereby negating the potential benefits of the advice. When the golfer (the provider) conveys the same point to the recipient but as an idea that all golfers should consider, the costs associated with the direct provision of the advice may be avoided and the advice may be more effective.

A number of studies have examined the influence of support visibility in performance domains (e.g., Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000; Shrout et al., 2010). For example, in a daily diary study, Bolger et al. (2000) found that partner support in the week leading up to an acute stressor (an important exam) was beneficial for the examinees' emotional responses (e.g., depressed mood and anxiety) on days when partners reported providing support but examinees did not acknowledge receiving support (invisible support). Other studies have examined how support visibility influenced emotional and physiological responses to delivering a speech in a laboratory setting (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Kirsch & Lehman, 2015). For example, in three separate experiments, Bolger and Amarel (2007) examined the influence of visible and invisible support on the emotional reactivity of students prior to a speech task. Visibility of support was especially important when informational support was provided: Invisible informational support reduced emotional reactivity (relative to visible and no support), but visible informational support was either ineffective or led to increased emotional reactivity. Bolger and Amarel (2007) found that these divergent effects of invisible and visible information support on emotional reactivity were mediated by the recipients' self-efficacy. That is, participants receiving visible informational support felt less efficacious and in turn more distressed than those receiving no support. Those receiving invisible informational support felt more efficacious and subsequently less distressed than those in the no support condition. Bolger and Amarel (2007) also examined the effects of visibility upon emotional support (with their emotional support manipulation also including elements of esteem support). Although invisibly providing emotional support seemed most effective for lowering distress levels, its effects were far less distinct, with no distress differences emerging between the invisible emotional support and the no support condition. Furthermore, participants' distress levels in the visible emotional support condition did not differ from those in the no support condition. Bolger and Amarel (2007) did not examine whether invisible emotional support would benefit self-efficacy. In a laboratory based study which observed support interactions between couples discussing a personal goal, Howland and Simpson (2010) found no benefits of invisibly provided emotional support (including "positive feedback", p.1881) in relation to recipients' self-efficacy whereas it did improve recipient's mood.

These findings support the idea that invisible support may be superior to visible support in reducing emotional and physiological responses immediately prior to a performance task and that it may be particularly important for informational support. Furthermore, they provide initial evidence for the mediating role of self-efficacy