



Perfectionism, burnout and engagement in youth sport: The mediating role of basic psychological needs



Gareth E. Jowett ^{a,*}, Andrew P. Hill ^a, Howard K. Hall ^a, Thomas Curran ^b

^a Faculty of Health & Life Sciences, York St. John University, Lord Mayors Walk, York, YO31 7EX, UK

^b Department for Health, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK

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ABSTRACT

Recent research indicates perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings share divergent associations with athlete burnout and athlete engagement. Guided by self-determination theory, the present study examined whether these associations were explained by basic psychological needs. Youth athletes ($n = 222$, M age = 16.01, $SD = 2.68$) completed measures of multidimensional perfectionism, athlete burnout, athlete engagement, basic psychological need satisfaction and thwarting. Structural equation modelling revealed that basic psychological need satisfaction and thwarting mediated the perfectionism–engagement and perfectionism–burnout relationships. Perfectionistic concerns shared a negative relationship (via need satisfaction) with athlete engagement and a positive relationship (via need satisfaction and thwarting) with athlete burnout. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings shared a positive relationship (via need satisfaction) with athlete engagement and a negative relationship (via need satisfaction and thwarting) with athlete burnout. The findings highlight the role of basic psychological needs in explaining the differential associations that perfectionistic concerns and strivings share with athlete burnout and engagement.

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Youth athletes seeking elite status must dedicate significant physical resources to deliberate practice and maintain this level of dedication over several years in order to achieve their goal (Ward, Hodges, Starkes, & Williams, 2007). This is a challenging endeavour and the experiences of athletes who undertake it can differ considerably. For some youth athletes, this process can be psychologically rewarding and place them on a path to long-term participation in sport. However, for others, the psychological and physical demands can prove too great, fostering an experience laden with self-doubt and frustration that places them on a path to extreme disaffection. Two outcomes reflective of the potential for differing experiences in youth sport are the focus of this study, namely athlete engagement and athlete burnout.

Athlete burnout is a psychosocial syndrome characterised by symptoms of reduced athletic accomplishment, emotional and physical exhaustion, and devaluation of sport participation (Raedeke, 1997; Raedeke & Smith, 2001). It is estimated that a significant minority of athletes (approximately 6%–11%) suffer

elevated levels of these burnout symptoms (Eklund & Cresswell, 2007), with indications that aspiring young athletes may be particularly at risk (Curran, Appleton, Hill, & Hall, 2013). This is concerning given that athletes with high levels of burnout have been found to report feeling depressed, irritated, frustrated, and exhausted (Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, & Johansson, 2008). Afflicted athletes also report negative changes in their attitude towards sport, as well as an aversion to training coupled with feelings of guilt (Gustafsson et al., 2008). In accord, the symptoms of athlete burnout are tied to a number of negative experiential outcomes including anxiety, low levels of enjoyment (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006; Goodger, Gorely, Lavallee, & Harwood, 2007) and negative affect (Gustafsson, Skoog, Podlog, Lundqvist, & Wagnsson, 2013).

An alternative, altogether more adaptive, experiential state for youth athletes is captured by athlete engagement. Athlete engagement is considered a distinct, conceptually opposing, construct to athlete burnout (DeFreese & Smith, 2013). Its dimensions include confidence, dedication, vigour, and enthusiasm (Lonsdale, Hodge, & Raedeke, 2007). Consequently, athlete engagement reflects generalized positive affect and cognitions about one's sport (Lonsdale, Hodge, & Jackson, 2007). In accord, researchers have found that athlete engagement is associated with

* Corresponding author. De Grey 311, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, York St John University, Lord Mayors Walk, York, YO31 7EX, UK.

E-mail address: g.jowett@yorksja.ac.uk (G.E. Jowett).

positive cognitive and affective experiences including flow (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Jackson, 2009), higher self-regulation (Martin & Malone, 2013), better work-life balance and lower burnout (DeFreese & Smith, 2013). Given that athlete engagement and burnout reflect such contrasting youth sport experiences that could either provide a foundation for future sport participation or undermine it, an important goal for sport psychology researchers is to identify factors that may contribute to their occurrence.

1. Higher-order perfectionism, athlete burnout and engagement

Perfectionism is one factor that appears to underpin youth athlete burnout, but may also energise engagement. Perfectionism is defined as a multidimensional personality disposition that includes striving for flawlessness accompanied by harsh critical evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). A recent consensus has emerged that two higher-order dimensions of perfectionism should be differentiated, namely perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings (Stoeber, 2011, 2014). Perfectionistic concerns are defined as the pursuit of exacting standards imposed by significant others, perceived negative evaluation from others, and discrepancy between one's expectations and performance. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings are defined as the pursuit of self-imposed goals and standards accompanied by harsh self-criticism (Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000). Support for this approach is provided by factor analytical studies outside of sport in which a two factor higher-order solution has consistently emerged from existing multidimensional models (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, & Anthony, 2004; Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993).

In sport, researchers examining perfectionistic concerns and strivings have found support for their distinction. Perfectionistic concerns tend to be positively related to maladaptive outcomes and negatively related to adaptive outcomes. For example, Gaudreau and Antl (2008) found that perfectionistic concerns shared a positive association with avoidance-based coping strategies and shared an inverse association with life satisfaction in athletes. Perfectionistic strivings, on the other hand, exhibit a mixed pattern of association with intrapersonal outcomes in sport (see Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn, & Stoll, 2012 for a review). For instance, numerous studies indicate that perfectionistic strivings are associated with indicators of both well- and ill-being (see Gotwals et al., 2012), integrated and non-integrated motivation (Appleton & Hill, 2012), learning and outcome goals (Stoeber, Uphill, & Hotham, 2009) and activity dependence and performance (Hall, Hill, Appleton, & Kozub, 2009; Rasquinha, Dunn, & Causgrove Dunn, 2014).

Perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings also differentially correlate with athlete burnout. Here, a number of studies indicate that perfectionistic concerns share a positive association with athlete burnout, whereas perfectionistic strivings are inversely associated, or unrelated, to the syndrome (e.g., Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2009; Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008; Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Murray, 2010). In the case of athlete engagement, no study has to date examined its interplay with perfectionism dimensions. Yet research among employees alludes to a pattern of relationships which opposes the perfectionism–burnout relationships. Specifically, Childs and Stoeber (2010) recently found that higher perfectionistic strivings corresponded with higher work engagement, whereas higher perfectionistic concerns corresponded with lower work engagement. On the basis of extant research, then, multidimensional perfectionism appears to be an important factor in the onset of both burnout and engagement.

A next step in understanding the interplay of perfectionistic

concerns and strivings, with athlete burnout and engagement, is to identify potential mediating processes that link the constructs. Several mediating variables in the perfectionism–burnout relationship have been identified. This research has predominantly been aligned with the stress-based model of athlete burnout (see Smith, 1986), which emphasises the balance between perceived demands and resources. In this literature, researchers have found that coping strategies (Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010), and factors which influence athletes' appraisals of athletic demands (e.g., unconditional self-acceptance, Hill et al., 2008; validation seeking, and growth seeking, Hill, Hall, Appleton, et al., 2010) mediate the perfectionism–burnout relationship in youth sport settings. While these studies provide useful insight into this process, these variables are limited inasmuch as they may not account for the perfectionism–athlete engagement relationship, which is likely to be underpinned by more than the absence of stress (i.e., just because a youth athlete has low levels of stress and anxiety, doesn't mean that they will be highly engaged). In addition, the perfectionism–burnout relationship is likely to be explained by more than stress (i.e., stress-related variables are likely to be only one of multiple explanatory processes). Therefore, a more encompassing approach which extends this stress-based approach is required.

2. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002) is an organismic framework of human motivation that offers explanations for both the perfectionism–engagement and perfectionism–burnout relationships in youth sport. According to self-determination theory, optimal functioning (e.g., engagement) is the result of dispositional and environmental factors that provide support for behavioural integration (i.e., when behaviour aligns with one's interests). Behavioural integration is fostered by perceived satisfaction of innate basic psychological needs. These include needs for autonomy (viz. a sense of personal agency), competence (viz. a sense of effectiveness within one's environment), and relatedness (viz. a sense of belonging and connection with significant others) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the same vein, though, humans are also vulnerable to maladaptive functioning (e.g., burnout) when dispositions or environments are antagonistic to behavioural integration (i.e., when behaviour and one's interests conflict). Antagonism to behavioural integration is underpinned by a thwarting of the basic psychological needs, encapsulated by perceptions of heteronomy, incompetence, and rejection. Accordingly, self-determination theory offers a useful lens through which to view the processes by which perfectionism might evoke engagement or burnout in youth sport.

Taking heed of self-determination theory, recent research suggests that different levels of behavioural integration mediate the perfectionism–burnout relationship. For example, in study with youth athletes, Jowett, Hill, Hall, and Curran (2013) found that a controlled motivation composite consisting of poorly integrated forms of behavioural regulation (viz. introjection and external) mediated the positive association between perfectionistic concerns and athlete burnout. Conversely, an autonomous motivation composite consisting of well-integrated forms of behavioural regulation (viz. intrinsic, integrated and identified) mediated the negative association between perfectionistic strivings and athlete burnout. In addition, other recent work has highlighted low levels of amotivated behavioural regulation, in particular, as a further mediator of the perfectionistic strivings–burnout association among youth athletes (Appleton & Hill, 2012). Given that behavioural integration and subsequent well-or-ill-being occurs via basic psychological needs, a next logical step in this line of enquiry is to examine the mediating role of basic psychological needs in the

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