Speaking clearly: A critical review of the self-talk literature

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Abstract

The present review of the self-talk literature attempts to stimulate research in this under-investigated area. A critique of how the construct has been defined is offered. A working definition of self-talk is then presented. The nature of self-talk is then focused upon. Six aspects are covered: (a) self-talk's valence (i.e. positive–negative self-talk); (b) overtness (i.e. covert–overt self-talk); (c) frequency; (d) how self-determined the self-talk is; (e) (directional and intensity) motivational interpretations of self-talk; and (f) the functions that self-talk can serve for the athlete. Finally, applicable theories to the study of self-talk are forwarded in order to provide interested researchers with theory-based future directions for research.
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From an applied perspective, the mental skill of self-talk is frequently included as an integral component of psychological interventions (e.g. Hanton & Jones, 1999). The common use of self-talk in combination with other mental skills (i.e. the use of mental skills packages) does not, however, permit an understanding of how each of the respective aspects function in a stand-alone fashion. This lack of understanding is compounded by the, until recently, relative lack of systematic research conducted on self-talk. This is unfortunate given that individual's thoughts and self-talk are critical to both cognitive processes (Bunker, Williams, & Zinsser, 1993) and emotions (Lazarus, 1982). Inevitably problems exist within the literature. For example, researchers have employed definitions of self-talk that do not caption the full extent of the construct. The clarity of how concepts are defined has import for research and theory building. Additionally, given the importance of theory within the behavioral sciences (Kerlinger, 1986), and the fact that theories with relevance to the study of self-talk have been advanced for some

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time (e.g. Landin, 1994); the lack of theory-based research is disconcerting (Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001).

The overall aim of the literature review was to stimulate further interest and ultimately research on self-talk in both the sport and exercise domains. Given the limited development of the field, it was deemed prudent to offer an explicit comprehensive definition of self-talk as well as suitable future directions for researchers to pursue. To this end, three fundamental aspects pertinent to self-talk are covered: (a) definitions of self-talk; (b) the nature of self-talk; and (c) applicable theories to self-talk, with an emphasis on theories that have thus far not been offered as pertinent to the field.

Self-talk defined

One of the cornerstones of the social sciences is the manner in which constructs are defined. Constitutive definitions in turn have serious implications for how the respective constructs are measured (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998); that is, how variables are operationally defined. As such, if one were interested in the nature of a variable it would be problematic, in conceptual terms, to measure the antecedents or consequences of the variable and not the variable itself. The relevance of this principle is especially apt to the topic of self-talk, and is highlighted in the proceeding section. Another definition-related concern is the use of imprecise definitions. The impact of using imprecise definitions has been seen in the imagery literature. Here, imprecise definitions of the 'internal imagery' lead to the confounding of the internal visual imagery perspective with kinesthetic imagery (see White & Hardy, 1995). As a result, key aspects of previously employed definitions of self-talk will also be highlighted.

Global definitions

As with other underdeveloped areas within sport psychology, numerous definitions with varying emphases have been forwarded in the self-talk literature. These definitions range from the more infrequently proposed combining of cognitive and behavioral aspects to the more common, purely cognitive based. Theodorakis, Chroni, Laparidis, Bebestos, and Douma (2001, p. 310) illustrate an example of the former—"self-talk can be manifested in verbal or non-verbal ways, in the form of a word, a thought, a smile, a frown, etc. (Chroni, 1997)". This quote seemingly illustrates the importance of thorough and accurate constitutional definitions as the definition has apparently confounded the nature of self-talk with some of its consequences and/or associations (i.e. the non-verbal manifestations).

An example of an exclusively cognitive and frequently cited definition of self-talk originates from Bunker et al. (1993). They viewed self-talk as "anytime you think about something, you are in a sense talking to yourself" (p. 226). As a result, Bunker et al. also saw self-talk as the key to cognitive control. As Hardy, Jones, and Gould (1996) noted, this definition is rather vague and places an emphasis on thoughts in general, which makes the specific measurement of self-talk difficult. One reason for this is that such eclectic thought-oriented definitions include amongst other things, day dreams, mental imagery, and self-statements (Hardy, Gammage et al., 2001). Although, arguably, such cognitions occur together, using Bunker et al.'s definitional stance self-statements may be confounded with other phenomenon such as, mental imagery. As such, an emphasis on self-statements alone would give a (much) more specific focus for self-talk researchers to begin to better understand the construct.