Thoughts of escape during competition: relationships with goal orientations and self-consciousness

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Abstract

Objectives. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether and how goal orientation and self-consciousness are associated to tendencies of athletes to experience withdrawal thoughts.

Method. The sample consisted of 71 volleyball players who took part in the finals of the British Universities Sport Association league. Three instruments were used: The Thought Occurrence Questionnaire for Sport, the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire, and the Self-Consciousness Scale.

Results. Structural models revealed that task orientation was negatively related to thoughts of escape irrespective of game result (winning or losing), whereas ego orientation in a losing situation was positively related to experiencing such thoughts due to the self-focusing tendencies associated with an ego orientation.

Conclusion. The present results support previous findings suggesting that high task compared to low task orientations are associated with greater cognitive stability. Furthermore, it is identified that within ego orientations factors outside the control of individuals, such as normatively based criteria, may play an important role in the cognitive processes of individuals. Finally, attention is drawn to the role of self-consciousness which seems important in explaining dysfunctional cognition experienced within an ego orientation. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Competition; Thoughts of escape; Goal orientations; Self-consciousness

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Introduction

Concentration in sport has been identified as a very important feature of performance. As Singer et al. (1991) state, the ability to concentrate on the task without being distracted by irrelevant cues leads to better accomplishments. In a most emphatic fashion, Winter and Martin (1991) suggest that without good concentration, no amount of skill, fitness, or motivation is going to get athletes to their peak. Although attention has a relatively long research history, there are issues that have been neglected. Among these, one that seems of particular importance is individuals’ distractibility by self-generated thoughts. As Moran (1996) points out, despite its importance, athletes’ vulnerability to such distractions has attracted relatively little attention within the cognitive psychology framework. From a methodological perspective, Eysenck and Keane (1995) report that most of the research dealing with concentration has been concerned with attention to the external environment, ignoring athletes’ tendency to allow their thoughts to wander in spite of their efforts to keep concentration high.

In contrast, considerable research regarding thought occurrence during task performance has been conducted in educational psychology, where the term cognitive interference has been used to describe intrusive thoughts individuals experience while performing. In these settings, cognitive interference has been defined as task irrelevant, self-preoccupied thinking including components of worry over performance (Sarason, Sarason & Pierce, 1990).

Preliminary research in sport (Hatzigeorgiadis & Biddle, 2000) has identified that, among interfering thoughts, athletes sometimes experience thoughts of withdrawal. The present study focuses on this particular kind of thoughts athletes might experience while performing, in particular thoughts of escape (E-thoughts) from a competition.

Carver and Scheier (1988), based on extensive research in educational achievement settings (e.g. Carver, 1979, Carver & Scheier, 1981a, 1981b, 1984, 1986; Carver, Scheier, & Klahr, 1987), proposed a control-process model of attention, according to which experiencing withdrawal symptoms can be considered a goal-related process. In brief, they suggested that in achievement situations human behaviour is regulated in a system of feedback control. People establish goals in relation to certain values and use these goals as reference points. When intentional behaviour is displayed they monitor themselves with regard to the goals. In their attempts to move toward the goal, individuals periodically interrupt their task-directed efforts in order to assess the likelihood of achieving the goal. When, during this process, discrepancies between intended and actual behaviour are detected, Carver and Scheier postulate that the individual’s ‘response’ depends on the perceived control of individuals to complete the intended action. Thus, when they perceive they have no control over behavioural outcome and goal attainment appears unlikely, they tend to withdraw from further efforts towards the goal. They went on to suggest that when physical withdrawal from the setting is not socially sanctioned, that is when withdrawal is negatively valued as it is the case in sport, disengagement impulses are likely to be expressed psychologically, rather than overtly, in the form of withdrawal thoughts and reduced efforts.

From the above contentions it becomes apparent that experiencing withdrawal thoughts is to an important degree a goal-related process. Whether goals individuals pursue are controllable and achievable, and therefore their response to possible discrepancies between goal and performance, depends on the nature of the goals. In the present study, the phenomenon of experiencing E-thoughts is investigated in the context of achievement goal orientations theory.
To explain differences in cognitions and behaviour a vast amount of research in sport psychology has been devoted to the examination of motivational processes. Within this body of research achievement motivation has received considerable attention. One of the main theories in this domain is the ‘goal perspectives theory’ (Nicholls, 1984, 1989) which has proved to be valuable in explaining the cognitions, affect and behaviour individuals display in achievement settings (Dweck, 1992). According to the theory, two main kinds of achievement orientation have been identified in terms of the way people define success. One concentrates on learning, mastery and self-improvement, where the task is the major focus (task orientation), whereas the other focuses on normatively-based accomplishment and social comparison, where the self and the presentation of the self are the points of reference (ego orientation).

In relation to the purposes of the present study, a major point of interest regarding goal orientations theory is the control individuals have over goal accomplishment. Within task orientation goals are self-referenced and therefore more controllable since they depend mainly on the individual. In contrast, within ego orientation goals are comparative and therefore less controllable, since factors outside the control of individuals (such as performance of others) can play an important role. According to Carver and Scheier’s (1988) model, control over goals is a significant determinant of individuals’ response to performance deficits. Thus, the examination of goal orientations can be helpful in understanding the phenomenon of E-thoughts. In particular, it would be speculated that when discrepancies between goal and actual performance occur, the higher the task orientation, the higher the possibility not to experience withdrawal thoughts because individuals are more likely to perceive that increased efforts can lead to goal attainment (control over goals). In contrast, the higher the ego orientations the higher the possibility to experience withdrawal thoughts because individuals are more likely to perceive further efforts as futile (lack of control over goals).

A personality characteristic that has been linked with Carver and Scheier’s control model of attention is self-consciousness, that is the tendency of individuals to direct attention to themselves (Scheier & Carver, 1982, 1983). In contrast to other achievement contexts, in the field of sport psychology self-consciousness is a personality characteristic that has not attracted research interest. Self-consciousness refers to characteristics like constant preoccupation with oneself, introspective behaviour, awareness of self-presentation, and concern over the appraisal of others. It consists of two aspects: (a) private self-consciousness: the focus of attention on the covert aspect of the self (e.g. inner thoughts and feelings), and (b) public self-consciousness: the focus of attention on the self as a social object, that is the self as seen by others (Feginstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). In the present investigation, as it will be outlined below, self-consciousness was examined as a mediator of the relationship between ego goal orientations and E-thoughts.

Carver and Scheier (1986, 1988) postulate that withdrawal tendencies do not only depend on the expectancies of the individual to complete the undertaken task, but also on the presence of self-focus. They suggested that increased attention directed inwards can be related to task disengagement—effort abandonment. The existence of self-focus will promote disengagement from the task when further efforts are seen as futile. When expectancies towards goal attainment are unfavourable, self-directed attention will focus on aspects of the self such as perceived deficits, self-doubts, and the ramifications of being unable to complete the goal. It is this sort of cognitive state that will lead to withdrawal thoughts and impulses to disengage from the activity. In accordance with these contentions, self-consciousness, which is described as the tendency to direct atten-
tion to oneself, was considered a possible mediator in the hypothesised relationship between ego orientation and withdrawal symptoms.

Further encouragement for the examination of the mediation hypothesis, was provided through identification of likely links between ego goal orientation and self-consciousness. In relation to the way success is conceptualised within the two types of goal orientation, ego orientation facilitates attention to be directed to the self, whereas task orientation facilitates attention to be directed to the task. Dweck (1989) and Kanfer and Ackerman (1989) have proposed that an ego orientation detracts from task performance, through increasing the likelihood that individuals focus too much attention on developing attributions regarding ability, therefore leading attention to be directed inwards. Furthermore, Duval and Wicklund (1972) suggested that increased comparisons of one’s self to standards increases the likelihood of increased self-consciousness. Indirect evidence regarding associations between ego orientation and self-consciousness have been provided by Carver, Antoni, and Scheier (1985), and also by Scheier and Carver (1983). They found self-consciousness to be related to whether participants in an experiment involving anagrams sought comparative evaluation of their performance, a characteristic typically identified within an ego orientation. Based on the above findings, we expected that ego orientation should be related to self-consciousness and such tendencies should be of importance in determining the occurrence of withdrawing thoughts.

In the approaches presented above the perceived likelihood of attaining the pursued goal has major importance. Since the problem of experiencing withdrawal thoughts relates to less controllable goals, a relationship between ego orientation and thoughts of withdrawal is predicted. Considering the nature of goals associated with ego orientations, outcome should be a crucial factor when investigating this relationship. As Duda (1993) points out, regardless of whether a task or an ego orientation prevails, highly task or ego oriented individuals can be considered competitive. However, task in contrast to ego oriented athletes differ in the way they approach competitive situations and also in terms of the objective of the competitive experience. Despite the fact that they both are interested in winning, it is the relevant importance of the competitive outcome, and the psychological ‘damage’ associated with losing that possibly discriminates psychological responses between task and ego oriented individuals. Considering the importance of outcome related to an ego orientation, the associations between goal orientations, self-consciousness and E-thoughts were examined in relation to normative outcome, based on a win/lose distinction. This should prove important within an ego orientation, but not within a task orientation.

Hypotheses

Overall, the hypotheses were:

1. task orientation will be negatively related to E-thoughts irrespective of situation (win/loss), and
2. ego orientation will be positively related to self-consciousness which, in a losing situation will be positively linked with E-thoughts, but in a winning situation will not.
Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 71 volleyball players (50 males and 21 females) who took part in the finals of the British Universities Sport Association league. The mean age of the sample was 23.07 years (standard deviation 2.98). The mean competitive experience was 6.36 years. Only players participating for at least half of a game (on set out of 15 points) were included in the sample.

Instruments

Thoughts of escape

The thoughts of escape subscale (TOQS-E) from the Thought Occurrence Questionnaire for Sport (TOQS; Hatzigeorgiadis & Biddle, 2000) was used to assess frequency of withdrawing thoughts athletes experienced during competition. The instrument was developed based on interviews with athletes, experts’ assessment, and factor analytical procedures. The questionnaire that emerged was subsequently tested through confirmatory factor analysis. The analysis confirmed the factorial structure of the questionnaire, thus providing support for its convergent validity. Further support for its psychometric properties was provided through evidence of concurrent and discriminant validity. The scale showed moderate positive relationships with pre-competition anxiety, higher relationships with concentration disruption and negative thinking tendencies, and negative relationships with enjoyment. The TOQS-E comprises six items (e.g. ‘During the game I had thoughts about quitting’, ‘... that I do not want to take part in this game any more’). Ratings were made on a seven-point scale (1=never, 7=very often). The scale showed satisfactory internal consistency (alpha: 0.85–0.90; see Table 1).

Goal orientations

The Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ; Duda & Nicholls, 1992) was used to assess dispositional goal orientations. The TEOSQ, a well established instrument in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Descriptive statistics</th>
<th>Internal consistency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task orientation</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego orientation</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private SC</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public SC</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social anxiety</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOQS-E 1</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOQS-E 2</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOQS-E 3</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
field of sport-achievement motivation (see Duda & Whitehead, 1998), comprises 13 items and two subscales measuring ‘task orientation’ (e.g. ‘I feel most successful in volleyball when I do my very best’, ‘... I learn a new skill by trying hard’), and ‘ego orientation’ (e.g. ‘...I am the best’, ‘...I am the only one who can perform a skill’). Ratings were made on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). Internal consistency indices (alpha) were 0.72 and 0.86 for task and ego orientations respectively.

Self-consciousness

The Self-Consciousness Scale (SCS; Feginstein, et al., 1975) was used to assess the self-consciousness. Feginstein et al. (1975) constructed this scale in order to assess individual differences in self-consciousness, which they described as the tendency of individuals to direct attention inwards. Factor analysis identified three components, private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness, and social anxiety. The scale has shown satisfactory test–retest reliability, and its psychometric properties have been tested on several occasions (e.g. Bernstein, Teng, & Garbin 1986; Gould, 1986). The SCS comprises 23 items in three subscales measuring ‘private self consciousness’ (private SC; e.g. ‘I reflect about myself a lot’, ‘I am constantly examining my motives’), ‘public self consciousness’ (public SC; e.g. ‘I am concerned about the way I present myself’, ‘I am concerned about what other people think of me’), and ‘social anxiety’ (e.g. ‘I have trouble working when someone is watching me’, ‘large groups makes me nervous’). Ratings were made on a seven-point scale (1=extremely uncharacteristic of me, 7=extremely characteristic of me. Internal consistency coefficient for its three subscales were 0.75 for Private SC, 0.80 for Public SC, and 0.85 for Social Anxiety.

Procedures

The day before the start of the three-day tournament, teams involved in the games were introduced to the purposes of the project, which was described as an investigation regarding ‘what is going on in athletes’ mind during sport performance’, and were asked to participate. On the same occasion, teams that agreed to participate were given instruction regarding what was to follow and were asked to complete a questionnaire including informed consent, demographic characteristics, the TEOSQ and the SCS. During the following days athletes were asked to complete the TOQS-E immediately after the conclusion of games. Data collection took place until the semi-finals.

Results

Preliminary analysis

Descriptive statistics for all variables are displayed in Table 1. Correlations between dispositional measures, which were obtained once, before the start of the tournament, are presented in Table 2. In accordance with previous research in sport (e.g. Fox, Goudas, Biddle, Duda, & Armstrong, 1994) task and ego orientations were orthogonal. Correlations between private SC, public SC, and social anxiety were low to moderate. Task orientation revealed low negative correlation
Table 2

Correlations between dispositional variables (*p < 0.05; **p < 0.001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ego orientation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Task orientation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.24*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Private SC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Public SC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Social anxiety</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

with social anxiety. Ego orientation revealed low positive correlations with public SC and social anxiety.

Path analysis

In order to test the hypotheses regarding the relationships between goal orientation, self-consciousness, and E-thoughts, two structural models were tested (EQS; Bentler, 1995). In both models task and ego orientations were the independent variables, E-thoughts the dependent variable, and self-consciousness, a second order factor on which the three self-consciousness subscales were loaded, the mediator in the relationship between ego orientation and E-thoughts. In the first model, participants’ E-thoughts after losing a game were considered (N = 44), while in the second E-thoughts after winning a game (N = 55) were considered. The reduced sample size was due to some teams not losing any of their games and some teams not winning any of their games. For both situations, TOQS-E scores from the first winning and the first losing game were considered.

In the losing situation (Fig. 1, bold characters), task orientation was negatively associated with E-thoughts (standardised coefficient: −0.24, p = 0.05), ego orientation positively associated with self-consciousness (standardised coefficient: 0.49, p < 0.05), and self-consciousness positively associated with E-thoughts (standardised coefficient: 0.60, p < 0.05), which resulted in a signifi-

Fig. 1. The structural model for the losing (bold characters) and winning (regular characters) situations.
cant indirect relationship between ego orientation and E-thoughts (standardised coefficient: 0.30, \( p < 0.05 \)). Lagrange Multiplier (LM) test did not indicate that a direct path from ego orientation to E-thoughts should be added, which suggests that self-consciousness was a strong mediator of the relationship. Overall, 43\% of the TOQS-E variance was explained.

In the winning situation (Fig. 1, regular characters), task orientation was again negatively associated with E-thoughts (standardised coefficient: \(-0.34, p < 0.05\)), ego orientation positively associated with self-consciousness (standardised coefficient: 0.44, \( p < 0.05 \)), but the path between self-consciousness and E-thoughts was small and not significant (standardised coefficient: 0.06). Subsequently, the indirect relationship between ego orientation and E-thoughts (standardised coefficient: 0.03) was not significant. Overall, 12\% of the TOQ-E variance was explained.

Finally, multiple-sample analysis was calculated to test the moderation hypothesis. The multiple-sample analysis allows investigation of moderation hypotheses through examination of path differences in identical models tested in different conditions (Bentler, 1995). In the model specification the investigated paths are constrained to be equal and the analysis reveals whether the constraints should be released or not, that is whether the paths are statistically different or not. Accordingly, the paths between task orientation and E-thoughts, ego orientation and self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and E-thoughts were constrained to be equal for the winning and the losing situation, that is, it was hypothesised that for the two situations these path coefficients were not statistically different. The LM test indicated that the fit of the model would improve significantly (\( \chi^2 \) increment: 7.74, \( p < 0.05 \)) if the constraint for the path between self-consciousness and E-thoughts was released, suggesting that the relationship between these variables was significantly different for the two conditions. After the constraint for the self-consciousness/E-thoughts path was released, the LM test indicated that no other constraint should be released, while the fit indices improved suggesting that this multiple-sample model represented the data better than the previous one. The fit indices for all four models are displayed in Table 3.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether and how experiencing E-thoughts while competing is related to athletes’ goal orientations and self-consciousness. According to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fit index</th>
<th>Model 1*</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 )/degrees of freedom</td>
<td>9.36/9</td>
<td>4.90/9</td>
<td>23.92/21</td>
<td>14.41/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probability for ( \chi^2 )</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>0.991</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.958</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>LISREL GFI</td>
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<td>0.972</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>0.956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRMR</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.134</td>
<td>0.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Model 1: losing situation; model 2: winning situation; model 3: multiple-sample analysis 1 (all paths constrained); model 4: multiple-sample analysis 2 (self-consciousness/E-thoughts path released).
expectations, task orientation was found negatively related to E-thoughts. However, it should be noticed that the magnitude of the relationship was moderate to low and in the losing situation only marginally significant. Carver and Scheier (1988) postulate that even when discrepancies between goals and performance are detected, individuals perceiving they have control over the pursued goals and favourable expectancies regarding goal attainment will respond to such discrepancies with increases in effort. Within task orientation goals are self-referenced and therefore more controllable. Therefore, when individuals identify discrepancies between goals and performance, it is likely that they perceive that greater efforts can bring them closer to their goals. In such cases, withdrawal symptoms are not experienced.

As already mentioned, the magnitude of the relationship between task orientation and thoughts of escape (especially in the losing condition) was relatively low. Two explanations could be supported. First, that there should be occasions when self-referenced goals, despite being more controllable, are not always achievable, in which case withdrawal symptoms might be experienced. Second, that low task orientations alone (in comparison to low task orientations accompanied by high ego orientations) should not necessarily be linked to experiencing withdrawal symptoms, in which case the relationship is reasonably weakened. Since analysis of interactive effects was not performed stronger arguments cannot be made and firmer conclusions cannot be drawn. Further analysis of interactive effects and examination of prevailing goals, which were not included in the present study, can provide additional evidence regarding the discussed issues. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the nature of task goals helps avoiding withdrawal symptoms.

The results also revealed a relationship between ego orientation and E-thoughts, and this relationship was mediated by self-consciousness. On one hand, ego orientation was related to self-consciousness. As one would expect, considering the comparative conceptualisation of ability, ego orientation had stronger (even though moderate) correlations with public self-consciousness and social anxiety, rather than private self-consciousness. However, following Baumeister’s (1984) approach, the investigation was oriented towards a measure of self-consciousness that would take into account all of its elements combined, on the basis that private, public and social aspects of the self could contribute in the explanation of the relationship between self-consciousness and cognitive patterns. Specifically, as Baumeister (1984) indicated, increased awareness of one’s performance seems to denote a private self-consciousness, while public self-consciousness and social anxiety may increase one’s sensitivity to pressure situations such as a sport competition. Overall, the path analysis revealed that ego orientation was positively related to self-consciousness, while task orientation was not significantly associated to tendencies to focus attention on one’s self.

On the other hand, self-consciousness was related to E-thoughts in the losing situation, but not in the winning, suggesting that under unfavourable situations, the self-focusing tendencies of individuals are activated, resulting in thoughts of withdrawal. Studies investigating the effects of self-focused attention to behaviour have supported that it can result in increased efforts when the desired goal appears to be attainable (Carver & Scheier 1981a), but can also promote disengagement when further efforts are seen as futile (Carver & Scheier 1981b). Based on such findings, Scheier and Carver (1982) suggested that decreased efforts associated with self-focus under unfavourable conditions are due to mental withdrawal from the performed tasks. Research in educational settings has shown that mental disengagement can be indicated through off-task think-
ing (e.g. Carver & Scheier, 1982). Furthermore, Gallassi, Frierson, and Sharer (1981) found that during a test situation mental disengagement was expressed, as reported retrospectively, in the form of frequent thoughts concerned with escaping from the situation. The results of the present study are in line with these findings, indicating that under unfavourable conditions self-consciousness was related to E-thoughts.

The above associations between ego orientation and self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and E-thoughts resulted in a relationship between ego orientation and E-thoughts. In particular, it was revealed that in the losing situation, ego orientation was positively linked to reporting E-thoughts. Within ego orientation goals are comparative and therefore less controllable. Considering Carver and Scheier’s control process model, when discrepancies between goal and actual behaviour are identified, lack of control over goals will lead to impulses to disengage from further efforts towards goal accomplishment, and such impulses are expressed in the form of withdrawal thoughts.

In accordance with the present findings, research in educational settings has shown that when ego orientation prevails, outcome is an important determinant of individuals’ cognitions (Dweck, 1989). For example, Diener and Dweck (1978, 1980), in experiments involving cognitive tasks, examined thought content under conditions of success and failure in relation to goal orientation. Under the success condition all participants reported their thoughts to be related to problem-solving strategies. Under the failure condition ego oriented participants engaged in negative self-evaluative cognitions, whereas task oriented participants focused again on problem-solving strategies and instructions to sustain effort and concentration to the task.

From a broader perspective, the present results support the notion that high task orientations are associated with cognitive stability and more motivationally ‘adaptive’ responses. Furthermore, high ego orientations have been described as more vulnerable and associated to ‘maladaptive’ responses (Duda, 1993; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), especially when such orientations are not accompanied by high task orientations (Hardy, 1997; Harwood, Hardy, & Swain, 2000). These differences in cognitive patterns could be attributed to the way individuals with different goals understand achievement. For task orientation where achievement is defined in terms of effort, learning, personal improvement and mastery, individuals can have greater control over their goals. In contrast, for ego orientation where achievement is defined in terms of normative comparison and outperforming others, individuals’ control over comparative goals is importantly lesser. Outcome and success, when judged in a winning/losing distinction, depends on factors outside the individual, such as the performance of the opposition and in the case of team sports, as in the present investigation, to the performance of other individuals within the team, and the team as a whole. The lack of control that characterises the pursuit of comparative goals makes ego orientation more vulnerable at the cognitive level and therefore more liable to negative cognitions, such as withdrawal thoughts.

Even though the present study offers some interesting and useful results, there are certain shortcomings that should not be overlooked. First, the thought-sampling technique that was used. Assessment of thought occurrence based on self reports allows an insight into individuals’ experiences and conscious thoughts. Despite the appeal arising from its face validity, this approach in not free of problems. As Kendall and Korgeski (1979) state, people are not always aware of the processes in their own minds, and in addition retrospective self reports cannot always be considered accurate, since they are dependent on memory. Even though this perspective may uncover
relationships between psychological constructs, it is unlikely that this approach alone can produce a thorough understanding of the mechanisms by which withdrawing thoughts function. Nevertheless, since the purpose was to make a field study in a real performance situation without interfering with the competitive environment, a retrospective design was warranted.

A second possible shortcoming concerns the use of the Self-Consciousness Scale. Even though the scale has been previously used in the field of sport and exercise psychology (e.g. Martin, Craib, & Mitchell, 1995; Steinhardt & Macklem, 1991), to the knowledge of the author, its psychometric properties have not been tested in a sport sample. The size of the present sample did not allow the examination of a full structural latent model to test the validity of the instrument. However some, although little, supporting evidence regarding the integrity of the scale was provided through the structural model whose fit did not object the hypothesised structure. Furthermore, despite the fact that the scale has not been tested in a sport setting, there was no reason to be suspicious of its use since the purpose was to assess a personality characteristic.

Third, considering the analysis used, another limitation of the present study involves the relatively small sample size. Structural equation modelling is a statistical technique that requires a larger ratio between sample and parameters to be estimated in order to produce confidently trusted results. However, since this technique is recommended when examining moderating and mediating relationships (Baron & Kenny, 1986) as in the present study, it was preferred. Despite these shortcomings, the present findings, having the advantage of a real-setting study can be considered valuable preliminary evidence, which can promote further research for a better understanding of the investigated issues, thus providing further and more robust insights into the topic of E-thoughts athletes experience during competition.

As cognitive theorists suggest negative thinking during task performance is mostly a function of what is going on in the competition (Carver, 1996). It is not the dispositional characteristics of individuals that trigger such thoughts, but the cognitive frame of mind of the individual during competition and quality of performance that generate them. However, the present findings suggest that under unfavourable situational conditions athletes with certain characteristics are more likely to experience thoughts of escape. Task orientation was negatively related to thoughts of withdrawal during competition, irrespective of winning or losing, whereas ego orientation in a losing situation was connected to such thoughts due to the self-consciousness. Future research could further enlighten the issue of withdrawal symptoms athletes experience during performance, which despite its importance has been overlooked in the sport psychology literature.

References


