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Exploring Choking Experiences in Elite Sport: The Role of Self-Presentation

Denise M Hill

University of Portsmouth, England, United Kingdom

Sarah Carvell

Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, United Kingdom

Nic Matthews

Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, United Kingdom

Neil Weston

University of Portsmouth, England, United Kingdom

Richard Thelwell

University of Portsmouth, England, United Kingdom

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Author note:

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Denise Hill, Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, United Kingdom. PO1 2ER. Tel: 00-44-(0)23 9284 5163. E-mail: denise.hill@port.ac.uk.

Abstract

Objectives: The aims of this study were twofold: first, to examine the role of self-presentation within the lived-experience of choking in sport; and second, to explore whether the 2 x 2 framework of self-presentation (Howle, Jackson, Conroy, & Dimmock, 2015) holds the potential to further our understanding of acute sporting failure under pressurized conditions. Design and Method: An empirical phenomenological research design was adopted to address the research aims. Purposefully selected participants completed phenomenological interviews, which explored in detail their experiences of choking and clutch performance under pressure. The sample consisted of 9 elite athletes (6 male and 3 female) (*Mage* = 27.14; *SD* = 5.27) from a range of sports (netball, rugby union, golf, tennis, and cricket). Results: Participants reported a tendency to hold protective-agentic self-presentation motives, low self-presentation efficacy, and self-presentational concerns prior to, and during the choke. Conversely, acquisitive-agentic self-presentation motives, and self-presentation efficacy were experienced before and during clutch performances. However, alongside self-presentation, other psychological constructs also preceded and accompanied the choking experience (e.g., unfamiliarity and perceived control). Conclusion: This exploratory study is the first to identify the value of examining choking in sport through the lens of the 2 x 2 self-presentation framework, with self-presentation motives appearing to influence the choking experience. Yet, it is also evident that self-presentation may not explain all choking episodes.

Keywords: clutch, pressure, paradoxical performance, 2 x 2 framework.

Exploring Choking Experiences in Elite Sport: The Role of Self Presentation

When exposed to pressure, athletes strive to achieve optimal levels of performance. Though by doing so, some will paradoxically experience a performance decrement and fail to reach expected standards. When that decline in performance is dramatic and acute, the process is often labelled by athletes as 'choking' under pressure (Hill, Hanton, Matthews, & Fleming, 2010a; Mesagno & Hill, 2013). Hence, extensive research attention has been directed towards understanding why certain athletes maintain or even exceed pre-performance expectations under pressure, while others under-perform or choke.

There continues to be a debate regarding the operational definition of choking in sport (see Jackson, 2013; Mesagno & Hill, 2013), though the phenomenon is increasingly being described as a significant breakdown in skilled performance under pressure, caused by attentional disruption (Mesagno, Geukes, & Larkin, 2015). The two mechanisms proposed to explain such disrupted attention are distraction (e.g., processing efficiency theory, Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; attentional control theory, Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007) and self-focus (e.g., explicit monitoring hypothesis, Beilock & Carr, 2001; conscious processing hypothesis, Masters, 1992). With regards to distraction, the choke occurs when the athlete's attention shifts away from task-relevant cues. Thus, if an athlete experiences anxiety when performing under pressure, it will be processed through their working memory, which reduces their capacity to focus on, and process task-relevant information (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992). Moreover, if the athlete perceives there is a threat to the achievement of their current goal, attention is also directed towards the source of that threat. Consequently, the athlete's ability to attend to the information required for the task is reduced (Eysenck et al., 2007) and they are likely to experience choking (see Mesagno et al., 2015 for a review).

In contrast, the self-focus theories indicate that the choke is the result of the performance pressure causing athletes to experience heightened self-consciousness and anxiety. This increases the likelihood of the athlete monitoring the step-by-step control of the skill

processes (Beilock & Carr, 2001), or controlling the explicit components of that skill (Masters, 1992). Both responses lead to a breakdown in performance as they disrupt the automated processes responsible for the execution of proceduralized skills (see Beilock & Gray, 2007).

A number of environmental and interpersonal factors are suggested to moderate the likelihood of an athlete experiencing choking in sport (e.g., skill type, Beilock & Carr, 2001; team cohesion, Hill & Shaw, 2013; perfectionism, Gucciardi, Longbottom, Jackson, & Dimmock, 2010; fear of negative evaluation, Mesagno, Harvey, & Janelle, 2012; coping approach, Hill & Hemmings, 2015). However, self-presentation has been identified as a particularly important moderator, and as a result, has informed the proposed self-presentation model of choking (Mesagno, 2009; Mesagno, Harvey, & Janelle, 2011).

Self-presentation is the process by which people monitor and control how they are perceived by others (Leary, 1992). Human beings are inherently motivated to present themselves to others in a way that achieves a desired impression, and/or avoids an undesired impression (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Competitive sport provides an environment where self-presentation is pervasive, as athletes are motivated to portray an image of being mentally tough, driven, dedicated, and athletically competent, while wishing to avoid appearing unskilled, incompetent, unfit, unprepared, or unable to handle pressure (Prapavessis, Grove, & Eklund, 2004). Such self-presentational motives are understandable given that athletic outcomes such as team selection, playing time, or even sporting success are often dependent on the impression athletes offer to significant others (e.g., coaches, selectors, opponents, and media; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). However, the pursuit of self-presentational goals can exert considerable influence on an athlete's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Wilson & Eklund, 1998), including raised anxiety levels. Specifically, if the athlete becomes uncertain of achieving the desired positive impression, or avoiding an undesired impression (i.e., possess

low self-presentation efficacy), they are likely to experience anxiety (Hudson & Williams, 2001; Leary, 1992).

Through the self-presentation model of choking, Mesagno and colleagues (Mesagno, 2009; Mesagno et al., 2011) suggested that choking-susceptible athletes are highly motivated to create a positive image, and are overly concerned about the negative judgments of others. Hence, when they have low self-presentation efficacy and doubt their ability to maintain a favorable impression during pressurized performance, they will experience high levels of anxiety, and may choke via distraction or self-focus. Namely, they become distracted by their self-presentational 'concerns', or will 'self-focus' in an ineffective attempt to manage their impression.

The tenets of the self-presentation model of choking have received tentative support. For example, Mesagno et al. (2011) found that pressure derived from an evaluative audience appears more likely to encourage choking, compared to situations where the pressure is created through the manipulation of motivational rewards. Furthermore, a fear of negative evaluation has been associated with choking through qualitative (Hill, Hanton, Matthews, & Fleming, 2010b) and quantitative research (Mesagno et al., 2012), while athletes often report self-presentation concerns prior to their choke event (e.g., Geukes, Mesagno, Hanrahan, & Kellman, 2012). Although similar concerns regarding the desire to manage their impression have been reported prior to excelling (clutch performance) under pressure (see Hill et al., 2010b), in this instance, the athletes adopted cognitively-focused coping strategies (e.g., restructuring) which managed their anxiety, and reframed their self-presentational concerns to act as motivational triggers. Therefore, it may not be self-presentation motives *per se* which encourages choking in sport, but the athlete's management of the anxiety elicited from concerns they may not reach their self-presentation goal.

Recently, a more detailed understanding of self-presentation has been gained through a proposed 2 × 2 framework (Howle, et al., 2015) which aligns self-presentation motives to the

approach/avoidance and agency/communion theoretical paradigms. The approach/avoidance constructs are central motivational drives within achievement motivation (cf. Elliot & Church, 1997), with an approach-motive orientating individuals toward positive stimuli (acquisitive), and an avoidance-motive driving individuals away from negative stimuli (protective). Conversely, the agency/communion aspect of the framework has emerged from the interpersonal behavior literature (e.g., Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008), whereby agency is a concern with task-related achievement or mastery, while communion is a focus on interpersonal relationships. Thus, the 2 × 2 self-presentation framework consists of: i) *acquisitive-agentic* (i.e., a desire to gain social approval from others in terms of physical and task ability); ii) *acquisitive-communal* (i.e., a desire to gain social approval from others in terms of interpersonal qualities); iii) *protective-agentic* (i.e., a desire to avoid social disapproval from others in terms of physical qualities and task ability), and *protective-communal* (i.e., a desire to avoid social disapproval from others in terms of their perceptions of one's interpersonal qualities) motives.

To date, few studies have adopted this framework to explore the impact of self-presentation motives on cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, and what does exist has focused on the physical activity and exercise setting. This research has found however, that acquisitive-agentic motives are often associated with task involvement, effort, persistence, task-efficacy and enhanced task performance, while protective-agency motives are more likely to lead to avoidance behaviors and a focus on failure (Howle, Dimmock, & Jackson, 2016; Howle et al., 2015). In the one study that has applied this framework to the sporting context (i.e., basketball), Howle, Jackson and Dimmock (2016) found that acquisitive motives (i.e., agency and communal) led athletes to behave in a manner that was viewed positively by an audience. This ensured that the athlete's self-presentation motives (i.e., creating a positive impression) were achieved. Conversely, those athletes with protective-communal motives, demonstrated behaviors that were largely evaluated negatively by observers, and so were

evidently self-defeating. As the 2 x 2 framework appears to have theoretical appeal, it would be advantageous to build on this research and adopt the framework to examine the impact of self-presentation on athletic outcomes, including choking.

Hence, the current study aimed to examine the lived-experience of choking in sport, through which the perceived role of self-presentation could be considered. By doing so, the study also provided an initial exploration of whether the 2 x 2 framework of self-presentation (Howle, et al., 2015) could be used to further our understanding of acute sporting failure under pressurized conditions. As the study was exploratory in nature, and the choking phenomenon is complex and conceptually under-developed (see Mesagno et al., 2015), an empirical phenomenological methodology was adopted. This approach provided the opportunity to "uncover" athletes' self-presentation motives during their choking episodes, while identifying any contextual influences on those motives.

Method

Participants

Nine elite athletes (i.e., international and professional level) from both individual and team sports, were recruited for the study. With reference to the work of Swann, Moran and Piggott (2015), all participants were "successful-elite athletes" (pg. 11). That is, they had competed at the highest level of their sport and experienced some success (albeit infrequent) at that level. The sample consisted of three female athletes from: rugby union (n = 1), golf (n = 1) and netball (n = 1). Alongside six male athletes from: golf (n = 1), tennis (n = 1), rugby union (n = 1) and cricket (n = 3). All were from within the South, and South West regions of the United Kingdom. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 36 ($Mage$ = 27.14; SD = 5.27), and they were purposefully selected for the study based on their admission they had experienced both choking and clutch performances under pressure (see procedure). Therefore, all participants were well-placed to identify the perceived cognitions, emotions, and behaviors

associated with their choke events, and reflect upon the role of self-presentation within that experience.

Procedure

Once institutional ethical approval had been gained, the research team contacted a number of elite level athletes (i.e., athletes performing at the highest level of their sport) through personal/professional networks. Additional elite athletes were then approached via snowball sampling (Vogt, 1999). The purpose of the study was explained to the athletes (via email), and they were invited to take part in the study if they had experienced (and were willing to discuss) instances where they believed they had "choked" under pressure, *and* occasions where they had experienced excellent (i.e., clutch) pressurized performance. Due to the opposing definitions of choking in the extant literature, and the phenomenological nature of this study, participants were recruited to the study if they had experienced events which *they* labelled as choking. At the start of the interview, participants were asked to consider whether those experiences did/did not align to the contemporary definition of choking (i.e., a significant decline in performance when exposed to pressure; Mesagno & Hill, 2013). In all cases, alignment was confirmed. As there is limited concern regarding the definition of clutch performances, they were defined (at the start of the recruitment process) as a superior performance under pressure (Otten, 2009).

It was stressed that to take part in the study, both the choking and clutch episodes must have occurred during the previous two years (choke: >2 times in 2 years; clutch: >4 times in 2 years) to enhance recall. While understanding/exploring the clutch performance was not an aim of the study, it was deemed necessary to compare the choking experience with its opposite case (i.e., the clutch). This approach has been adopted within previous qualitative choking research (e.g., Hill et al., 2010b), for it isolates and contextualizes the factors perceived relevant to the choking experience (only). Furthermore, this comparative process

enabled the development of information that can be used by applied practitioners to alleviate the choke and encourage clutch performance.

Recruited participants were invited to complete a face-to-face interview, and sent a preparation booklet to complete beforehand. The booklet contained questions which encouraged reflection on their most recent and/or memorable experiences of the choke and clutch performance (e.g., when did the choke/clutch occur; what were you thinking/feeling before, during and after the choke/clutch). This process aimed to stimulate the recall of events which were then explored in further detail during the interview. The booklet is available on request from the first author.

Data Collection

The study adopted an empirical phenomenological methodology (see Allen-Collinson 2016), which is concerned with generating a rich, analytical account of a lived experience (Nesti, 2004). The approach enables a detailed understanding of the phenomenon, for it requires researchers to suspend, and then challenge, "taken-for granted" assumptions about the experience (Husserl, 1989). Phenomenology aims to describe an experience as it appears to the individual, and elucidate a new and unanticipated understanding of that phenomenon. Hence, empirical phenomenological afforded the opportunity to bring further conceptual clarity to the construct of choking in sport.

Once written informed consent was gained, participants' experiences of choking and clutch performance were explored though an individual phenomenological interview - a powerful technique for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lifeworld (Nesti, 2004). While the interview schedule was designed to explore the participants' perceived cognitions, emotions, and behaviors before, during and after their choke/clutch performances, the interview delivery was relatively unstructured to encourage a naturalistic flow of conversation, and thereby align with phenomenological principles. Probes were used intermittently (i.e., "Can you tell me a little more about that?" and "Can you offer

an example?" "How exactly did that affect your performance?") to ensure that a deep understanding of the participants' experiences was gained. Each interview was conducted in person by the lead or second author, digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and lasted between 60 and 80 minutes (M = 70.88; SD = 6.75). Due to the lack of availability/access, a follow up interview with the participants was not possible. However, through the adoption of phenomenological interviews, it was evident that code saturation was reached (i.e., no new codes/themes/key issues emerged from the last 2 interviews), and meaning saturation (i.e., a full understanding of the issues gained) was *sufficiently* achieved for a study of this exploratory nature (see Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017).

Data Analysis

Following Schmicking's (2010) guidelines, and in-keeping with a number of studies within the sport and exercise psychology literature which have utilized a phenomenological methodology (e.g., Crust, Swann, Allen-Collinson, Breckon, & Weinberg, 2014; Swann, Crust & Allen-Collinson, 2016), data were analyzed through a number of phases. Firstly, phenomenological reduction (epoché) was adopted, where commonplace explanations for the choking phenomenon, and any pre-conceptions of the experience were (as much as possible) suspended by the research team. Thereafter, an explorative phase was conducted that involved reading the transcripts a number of times in order to gain immersion in the data. Initial notes were added to the transcripts which included any key words and concepts that were considered to reflect the essence of the participants' choking/clutch experience. Such notes were returned to throughout the analysis, in order to check the themes, meaning units, and dimensions constructed during the latter phases of analysis.

The next phase involved identifying codes (e.g., concepts/points of note) in the data, followed by grouping common codes into themes. To ensure the themes contained relevant codes, they were constantly compared, re-visited throughout the analysis process, and evaluated alongside the initial notes made on the transcripts. Thereafter, themes were

transformed into meaning units, to provide a coherent description of the phenomenon. Those meaning units were read critically to establish how each unit differed, and confirm they provided a representation of the participants' choking/clutch experience. Finally, the descriptive meaning units were analyzed to construct their psychological meaning, and where appropriate, clustered further into dimensions to illustrate common/opposing features of the choking/clutch episodes across the sample. While predominantly inductive, this process of analysis included deductive aspects as data were also examined though the lens of the 2 x 2 self-presentational framework. Moreover, rather than fixed and sequential, such phases of data analysis were completed iteratively (see Schmicking, 2010) and independently by the first and second author.

Trustworthiness of the Data and Findings

Through the adoption of a relativist approach, and the rejection of universal criteria (see Burke, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2017), the research team sought to construct a robust and authentic account of choking in sport through criteria relevant for the context/aim of this study. Thus, 'rigor' was achieved through strategies which maintained allegiance to the phenomenon under study (Levitt, Morrow, Wertz, Motulsky, & Ponterotto, 2016). Firstly, phenomenological interviews were completed with information-rich participants, which offered detailed descriptions and meaningful insights into the choking experience. This process was supported by exploring the opposite case (clutch performance), and facilitating the identification of characteristics associated with choking (only). In addition, the third member of the research team (who was not involved in data collection/analysis) acted as a critical friend throughout the study. As this individual was aware of the research aims, though not directly involved in the data collection/analysis, they were able to act as a dispassionate "sounding board", where they were able to question and challenge the first and second author's analytical decisions and interpretation/explanation of the data (see Smith & McGannon, 2017). This process encouraged reflexivity, epoché, and transparency of research

decisions (Tufford & Newman, 2010), while also enabling the first and second authors to co-construct the themes, dimensions, and descriptive narrative. Moreover, through an evocative representation of the data, a coherent and meaningful reflection of the choking phenomenon has been offered, which contributes to the empirical literature, and offers resonance (see Tracy, 2010) for applied practitioners working with athletes vulnerable to choking.

Results

To present a holistic and authentic representation of the choking phenomenon, and address the research aims, the findings are presented in three sections: i) the psychological factors perceived to precede the choke (i.e., the process of choking); ii) the psychological factors associated with the choke (i.e., during the acute performance failure event); and iii) the perceived consequences of the choking experience (i.e., post-choke). The specific role/influence of self-presentation will be reported within each section. To highlight/reinforce factors specifically relevant to the choking process and the choke event, comparison with the clutch experience will occur where appropriate.

Preceding the Choke

Unsurprisingly, very high levels of *perceived pressure* were noted by all participants prior to the choke. It tended to be caused by their desire to perform well during an event of importance, including those where the rewards were considerable (i.e., financial, selection for teams, and high prestige), and/or when the performance expectations (from self and others) were extremely high. As an example, Sophie [rugby union] explained her choking episode occurred while competing in a prestigious tournament (i.e., World Cup) on home soil, “It was extra pressure [because] it was the biggest tournament…and at home. All the fans wanted to see us win…I wanted to play well for the fans, and we were expected to do well…It all became too much for me.” However, high levels of perceived pressure also preceded participants’ clutch performances, and so the nature/source of that pressure (i.e., stressor

properties) and the psychological response/appraisal of that pressure is likely to have determined the performance outcome.

Participants also revealed *low expectations* prior to the choke, as they doubted their ability to reach their achievement goals (i.e., winning/team selection). For the most part, this was attributed to a recent slump in form, poor preparation, injury, and in particular, low self-confidence. As explained by Richard [cricket]: "Because of this bad run of form I had been on, I felt terrible in myself. I knew I would fail, and so I did." In contrast, all participants noted high expectations prior to excelling under pressure, which was the result of high-quality preparation and recent successful performances. When recalling a clutch performance, Stuart [cricket] explained, "I had come off a good run of scores and felt in good touch…I knew I would play well. So, I just went in and played positively." All participants also reported that the uncertainty associated with managing the demands of an *unfamiliar* situation, often preceded a choke. Sophie [rugby union] described this finding further:

> I remember waking up in the morning having no idea how to treat this game…I was thinking it is not just a World Cup game, it's a final, which I had never experienced before…I had this internal battle with myself about how I was going to manage it all before I even got to the ground...It was this unknown that I couldn't handle and it led to my worst performance ever, at the absolute wrong time.

Of interest, when recalling clutch performances, participants indicated the use of 'proactive' coping strategies, (e.g., researching the course/team/opponents), to minimize the likelihood of unfamiliar situations arising. As an example, Hannah [golf] offered the following summary:

> I completed the practice round to familiarize myself with the layout of the course…and then created in my mind potential scenarios that may crop up during the [competitive] round…I had a clear game plan in my head of how I wanted to play the round, but I was also prepared if it went wrong. Nothing unexpected could then happen, and faze me.

With regards to *self-presentation*, the data revealed participants experienced acquisitive-agentic *and* protective-agentic self-presentation motives before each of their choke events. Thus, they appeared intent on demonstrating their competence/ability to others in order to receive praise, admiration, and/or selection for a team (i.e., acquisitive-agentic), though also wanted to avoid exhibiting athletic incompetence and thereby receive negative judgement (i.e., protective-agentic). Stuart [cricket] summarized this finding by recalling, "I mainly wanted to impress, but I also didn't want to look shit and get stick [criticism]." Ben [rugby union] also offered a summary of his acquisitive- and protective agentic motives prior to taking a conversion (kick) that would win the game (if successful):

> I was thinking, 'if I get this kick I could win the game for the team. Then I'll get all the glory and my coach, team mates and parents will be proud'…He'd [the coach] left me out [of the team] a few times during the season, and it made me really angry. He'd given me this run in the team through the quarters, semi's and then final. So, I didn't want to appear nervous or out of my depth. I didn't want to give the coach reason to regret his decision.

Importantly, data revealed that regardless of whether an acquisitive- or protective-agentic motive was held, the participants began to experience lowered self-presentation efficacy as the "critical moment" approached. That is, they were unsure whether they would reach their self-presentation goal(s), and experienced self-presentation concerns and raised levels of anxiety as a result. For example, Rachel [netball] reported:

> My head coach and selectors were watching, so I went into the game wanting to impress…I was desperate to get in the World Cup squad. But, once the game began, I began doubting myself. Worried I wouldn't play well and they [selectors] wouldn't think I was good enough to get in the team. My nerves went sky high.

Similarly, Richard [cricket] described how his concerns regarding a protective-agentic goal influenced his anxiety levels prior to a choke:

> I was sick of being criticized because of my recent bad run of form…So I went into the game basically trying to show them I was not rubbish. But my confidence was shot [low] and when I got out there, I wasn't sure I could play well enough to prove them wrong. I then experienced this fear…

Of interest, participants identified they held acquisitive-agentic motives prior to their clutch performances, and were confident of achieving this self-presentation goal. Indeed, such motives/goals often acted as a motivational trigger. Stuart [cricket] suggested:

> Prior to the [clutch] game, I knew I was being judged by fellow players and watched by people…I wanted to impress so they saw me as a good player - and I knew…I had a good chance. So, I was sharper during the warm-up to make sure I was in my best shape before the game.

Richard, [cricket] added, "I wanted to show I deserved to be playing…I believed that I deserved a new contract. This made me work hard in training to prove myself, and made me really focus before and during the game."

During the Choke

High levels of *debilitative anxiety* were experienced by all participants during the choke, which consisted of cognitive and somatic symptoms (e.g., self-doubt, fear of failure / re-injury, tension and shaking). Stuart [cricket] explained:

> It was my first time playing for XXXX [international team], and I was very, very nervous. It was a big occasion and because of the nerves I was worrying about what shots to play. The doubt stayed with me and I kept playing terrible shots that soon got me out.

Moreover, Carl [tennis] provided a vivid account of how debilitative anxiety affected him and his performance during the choke:

> This anxiety comes up to you, and hugs the shit out of you…It doesn't let you move, doesn't let you blink. It over-powers everything and destroys any confidence you've built...Because it's so strong and it's got you so deep, it is the only thing you are thinking.

> My arm tightens, as though someone had shocked me…Like somebody has put my arm in a cast…and I'm glued to the ground….

While the participants suggested they also experienced anxiety during their clutch performance, they indicated it was less intense, and perceived as facilitative. This shift towards a positive appraisal of anxiety often appeared dependent on the participants' level of self-confidence. As explained by Sophie [rugby union]:

> [During the choke] I was very nervous and edgy…I felt everything was forced, and I was making loads of mistakes. I just wanted to get away from the game as there was nothing I could do about it…During the [clutch rugby] game, I had nerves, but the difference was I was very confident, so I saw any nerves as positive energy. That made me focus on the task, and on beating XXXX [the opposition].

All participants acknowledged they had a lack of *perceived control* over their emotions and/or performance during a choke. Hannah [golf], explained:

> I hit a bad shot on the 7th and it put me out of my comfort zone. I suddenly felt I was not in control of myself or game, and I began rushing. The shots went from bad to worse…and I choked and felt that I couldn't recover. Choking to me, is basically me escalating out of control.

Carl [tennis] offered a comparison of how his perceived sense of control differed between a choke and clutch performances:

> [During the clutch] I'm am in so much control that everything is like water. I feel formless. I feel like I can mold myself around the ball however I want. I feel as though I can create any opportunity that I want from that position. But the choke…you feel...helpless. You don't have any control anymore because you have shut down.

Furthermore, *distraction* was considered by all participants to act as a key factor during the choke. For the most part, they suggested their focus was directed towards their anxiety, the likely outcomes/consequence of the performance (i.e., winning or losing), self-

presentation motives, and the fear of re-injury. Ben [rugby union] described how he became distracted by thoughts of success and self-presentation motives when he choked during a highly-pressurized penalty kick:

> I remember going through my usual [pre-performance] routine but I didn't have a clear thought process. I was almost doing it for show. I was aware and thinking about the fact that I was exaggerating everything to show to others that I was not nervous, even though I was bricking myself…I didn't focus on my kicking spot on the ball. I was thinking, 'get this kick over and I will be the hero'. I wanted to see that ball go over, so I looked up. It caused me to shank the ball along the ground. And that was that.

Similarly, Rachel [netball] emphasized how her fear of re-injury had interrupted her usual game-focus during a choke, "It [focus] was on my injury. I was thinking about how anxious I was and making sure I didn't re-injure myself. I couldn't think about the game…So I was missing catches and simple passes and not defending well." In contrast, during their clutch performances, participants identified they were able to remain focused on the task through the use of strategies including process goal setting, performance routines, and cue words/triggers. Sophie [rugby union] offered an example of this finding:

> When I played really well I implemented a successful game plan, by setting three or four goals where I focused on certain technical and tactical information. This removed the emotional factor and made me stay more focused [on the task]…Took the pressure off…and I performed the best I ever had with a clear mind.

However, such strategies were less evident during the choke. As an example, Daniel [cricket] stated, "I didn't go out there with a game plan…my mind felt cluttered. I was so focused on the fact we were losing, that I forgot to focus on how we could win…It effected my decisions and I screwed up."

In terms of *self-presentation*, eight of the nine participants indicated they *normally* held protective-agentic motives during the choke. As an example, Daniel [cricket] recalled: "I

knew he [the coach] didn't think I was as good as the other players…and didn't think much of my ability. Throughout [the choke], I just focused on avoiding looking as bad as he thought I was." Similarly, Hannah [golf] stated, "I remember thinking over that shot [choke], 'don't shank' 'don't shank' [a very bad shot]…'just don't embarrass yourself and look like an idiot in front of everyone." Ben [rugby union] also identified protective-agentic motives during a choke:

> I was nervously fiddling with the [rugby] ball to set it up for the kick. I was taking so long to get it on the tee right. I stepped back, but it wasn't right. I should have gone back to correct it, but I didn't want to come across as nervous, and not in control of the situation. As I was taking so long, I was conscious that people would be thinking, 'what is he doing'. I was thinking 'god I am looking stupid here, just get it over."

Critically, the eight participants confirmed that because they were uncertain of achieving their self-presentational goal (i.e., protective-agentic) they experienced concern/anxiety, and then avoidance behaviors, which were both associated with the choke. Hannah [golf] explained:

> [During the choke] I was spending so much energy worrying. I was worried about what they [crowd/selectors] were thinking. Worried I would embarrass myself. I rushed the shot as I wanted to get away from that situation because I was over the ball, knowing I wouldn't hit it well, and thinking they would think I was rubbish.

The data also revealed that during their clutch performances the (same) eight participants tended to hold acquisitive-agentic motives, that they were confident in achieving. For example, Joe [golf] recalled:

> Normally, I want to, and quite enjoy, trying to impress people. On this occasion [clutch], I saw that more and more people were coming over to watch me play...I believed I could impress them, and so one of the reasons I exceeded my expectation on that occasion, was because I had the confidence to just carry on playing well and impress them all.

While Carl [tennis] indicated self-presentation motives during the choking process (before the acute performance failure), he reflected that each choke (and there were several) did not contain any cognitions, emotions and behavior related to self-presentation/impression management. After exploring this finding in depth with Carl, he concluded:

> The choke itself is about me. At that point, I don't care about others, or what they are thinking about me. I care about what I'm thinking about me. What I am going through. It [the choke] is all about me. Focusing on me, and my expectations of myself. It's all in my head as I am just fighting myself.

After the Choke

The choke was perceived as a *significant drop* in performance, "absolutely rubbish" and "a complete disaster." When describing their choking experiences, two of the participants identified that they perceived that the choke differed from other under-performances. When asked to explain this point further, Carl [tennis] identified:

> There is an astronomical difference between my choke and an under-performance. For an under-performance, I feel uncomfortable from the start. I don't feel right. But I will go back to the basics…make the opponent play…try different things…focus on what I do best. I think of it as a problem-solving situation. Its poor tennis, but I try to find a way through, and may even win. A choke is when I feel this intense pressure…zooming down on me…on my weakness. And I have so much negative emotions that they cause everything to shut down. For that instant, every thought of anything positive cannot get through that barrier. My mind won't allow it. I can't handle that moment. It breaks me.

Similarly, Hannah [golf] explained that, "the choke is the most destructive shot I've ever played…it's definitely a different feeling to a bad shot. I can park the bad shot and move on. I can't do that after [a choke], as it's so damaging to my confidence."

All participants experienced *negative affect* after the choke, including "disappointment," "devastation," and "anger." For some participants, such emotions dissipated over a short

period, and informed a positive learning experience. As describe by Richard [cricket], "I was devastated [after the choke] but I use it for motivation and training…If I ever get into that [pressure] situation again, I know that's not how to deal with it. I can make sure it won't happen again." However, for five participants, the negative affect influenced their behavior in the longer term. For example, it caused Stuart, Hannah, Joe, Ben and Carl to experience a temporary loss of motivation towards their sport, a decline in their career standings, and in one case [Stuart] a withdrawal from the game (NB. he returned to play cricket at a lower level). Stuart explained:

> It [the choke] was a complete disaster to be honest…they kept playing me but that didn't give me time to mentally recover, so my career fell off a cliff…I hated cricket…I just gave up in the end. I wallowed in my own self-pity for about a year.

Finally, all participants identified they experienced *self-presentational concerns* after a choke, for they became highly anxious about receiving negative evaluation from significant others. Hannah [golf], recalled:

> When I choked, I was worried about what certain people thought and didn't want to be judged negatively especially by my sponsors…I was so embarrassed by what happened and worried what my coach would say…I actually called my coach to explain…and wrote a blog to help others understand why what happened, happened.

Such self-presentational concerns also detrimentally affected Hannah's attitude towards her golf "Because it was so embarrassing, I did not want to go near my [golf] clubs…I needed repair time. I needed to be away from that environment where I thought people were negatively judging me."

Interestingly, by choking under pressure and failing to provide a desired impression, a number of participants noted their future self-presentation motives were affected. Richard [cricket], elaborated this point:

> There was quite a few of my family and friends watching [when I choked], and I felt I'd let them down. I had always tried to impress them, and was really disappointed that I played so badly…I often reflect on that performance, because since that day, my main focus is to never play that badly and embarrass myself again.

Discussion

The aims of this study were to examine the lived-experience of choking in sport, and identify the perceived role of self-presentation within the phenomenon. Consequently, it also aimed to offer an initial exploration of whether the 2 x 2 framework of self-presentation (Howle, et al., 2015) could provide an appropriate lens to investigate choking further.

It was found that high levels of perceived pressure, low expectations, unfamiliarity and self-presentation motives were experienced by the participants prior to the choke. Thus, with each participant having the capacity to choke and excel when exposed to pressure, the findings indicate that holding low expectations when under pressure, and/or entering an unfamiliar pressurized situation may increase the likelihood of choking. With both factors noted previously as antecedents of choking in sport (Gucciardi et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2010b), it remains the case that strategies which increase athletes' goal expectations and minimize unfamiliarity (e.g., simulated practice and proactive coping) should be used by athletes to alleviate choking in sport (Hill, Matthews, & Senior, 2016; Oudejans, & Pijpers, 2010). With regards to self-presentation motives, both acquisitive- and protective-agentic motives preceded the choke for all participants. However, during the choke itself, the majority tended to hold protective-agentic self-presentation motives. Accordingly, this study provides support for the proposed role of self-presentation within choking in sport (Mesagno, 2009; Mesagno et al., 2011), while also being the first to identify that specifically, protective-agentic self-presentation motives may be associated with the choke. Moreover, while a causal relationship cannot be confirmed through a qualitative study of this nature, it can be inferred through previous research that such protective self-presentation motives may have encouraged the

participants' reported avoidance behaviors (e.g., rushing; Lochbaum & Gottardy, 2015), which in turn was likely to have increased their vulnerability to choke under pressure (Hill & Hemmings, 2015; Jordet & Hartman, 2008; Jordet, 2009). Therefore, this exploratory study builds on the work of Howle and colleagues (Howle, Dimmock et al., 2016; Howle, Jackson et al., 2016; Howle et al., 2015) who also found that within the physical activity/exercise setting, protective-agentic self-presentation motives can lead to negative behaviors and adverse performance outcomes.

Another important finding regarding self-presentation motives, was the low self-presentation efficacy experienced by the participants prior to, and during the choke. Thus, the uncertainty of achieving their motive to avoid negative judgment/evaluation from others contributed to the participants' raised anxiety levels (Leary, & Kowalski, 1990) and elicited their choking episodes (Mesagno et al., 2011). Therefore, the current study indicates that the 2 x 2 self-presentation framework can provide a useful lens to examine the choking experience, for protective-agentic self-presentation motives were frequently associated with choking in sport, with acquisitive-agentic self-presentation motives normally accompanying clutch performances. Furthermore, a lack of self-presentation efficacy (regarding protective-agentic motives) provided a meaningful contribution to the high levels of anxiety that encouraged choking under pressure.

Of course, it is necessary to note that firstly, one participant failed to identify any self-presentation motives/concerns during his choking events. Secondly, there were other reported factors that would have contributed to the high level of anxiety experienced (i.e., unfamiliarity/low achievement expectations; Cerin, Szabo, Hunt, & Williams, 2000) and promote the debilitative appraisal of that anxiety (i.e., low self-confidence). Thirdly, very low levels of perceived control were revealed as a key aspect of the choking process/event, which was unrelated to self-presentation. Indeed, the psychological construct of perceived control continues to be identified in choking research as an important and discrete component of the

experience (Mesagno et al., 2015). Finally, while agentic self-presentation motives were evident throughout the participants' narrative, communal motives were not apparent. Although this finding differs to that of Howle, Jackson et al. (2016), it should be noted that within their quantitative study, participants were undergraduate students who had yet to form social bonds (they had only met as a class twice), and were novice/intermediate performers of the chosen task (basketball). In this context, it unsurprising that the communal motives measured in their study (i.e., being seen as likeable, supportive and empathetic) were important to the participants, though this is less likely to be the case for the elite athletes interviewed within the current study. Thus, it remains necessary to examine further, the role of communal self-presentation motives within the elite sport setting. Accordingly, although it evidently holds promise, further research is required to establish the extent to which the 2 x 2 self-presentation framework could provide a comprehensive account of all choking episodes.

While not the main aim of the study, it was also ascertained that in accordance with previous qualitative research (Hill et al., 2010a; Hill & Shaw, 2013), participants indicated their choking episodes occurred through distraction, rather than self-focus – with the dominant source of distraction being self-doubts/concerns regarding whether self-presentation motives and achievement goals would be attained. Therefore, it remains uncertain whether individuals are unable to identify and recall the complex attentional disruptions associated with self-focus (Beilock, Wierenga, & Carr, 2003), or whether athletes vulnerable to choking are more likely to become distracted when exposed to "real-world" levels of pressure (see Oudejans, Kuijpers, Kooijman, & Bakker, 2011). After all, much of the empirical support for the self-focus theories has emerged from experimental research which manipulated the self-focus condition and/or failed to expose athletes to very high levels of pressure (see Hill et al., 2010a for a review).

In addition, this study offers tentative support for the claim by Mesagno and Hill (2013), that choking *may* differ from an under-performance in terms of underpinning cognitions,

emotions and outcomes. While such differences were identified through interpretative research methods (in this, and previous studies), researchers should acknowledge the phenomenon labelled by athletes as 'choking' is often *experienced* and described as distinct from other performance failures.

Finally, it also important to reflect on the short and long-term effects of choking on the participants within this study. For some, the choking experience was used to inform and improve future performances (Gucciardi et al., 2010). However, for most, the impact was detrimental and led to lowered motivation and even withdrawal from the sport. In addition, self-presentation motives became increasingly protective (i.e., protective-agentic) following the choke, which paradoxically could increase the likelihood of future performance failures. Consequently, the athletes' response to choking deserves further research attention, in order to establish how athletes can use the event as a constructive, rather than destructive experience.

Conclusion, Applied Implications and Future Research Directions

Overall, the 2 x 2 framework of self-presentation (Howle et al., 2015) appears to provide an appropriate lens to examine the choking phenomenon, for self-presentational motives and self-presentation efficacy are evidently involved in eliciting anxiety, distraction, and choking. Thus, the study is the first to indicate that athletes should avoid protective-agentic self-presentation motives and adopt acquisitive-agentic motives during pressurized sporting performance. This will in turn, alleviate choking and increase the opportunity for clutch performance. It has been established that low levels of expectancy can trigger avoidance/protective goal involvement (Elliot, 1999), especially if the individual is concerned their behavior may elicit negative evaluation from others that would affect detrimentally their self-worth (Morris & Kavussanu, 2008). Therefore, practitioners should aim to increase athletes' goal expectancies through the construction of a motivational climate that promotes approach-mastery goals (i.e., process/self-development goals; Morris & Kavussanu, 2009),

and through the use of strategies such as rational emotional behavior therapy (REBT; Turner & Barker, 2014), which contest the underlying beliefs that have led to the low expectations and protective-agentic motives.

However, by exploring choking and clutch experiences holistically, this study has revealed that self-presentation may not provide a complete explanation for the phenomenon, and other determining factors must be considered alongside the construct. Of importance is self-confidence and perceived control, which were both ubiquitous characteristics of the participants' choking narrative. Low self-confidence was related to the raised levels of debilitative anxiety associated with the choking process, whereby a lack of perceived control over themselves, their performance and anxiety, was a prominent feature of the choke itself. Therefore, strategies which address self-confidence and perceived control (e.g., pre-performance routine, process/holistic goals, cognitive restructuring, reflection; see Hill, Hanton, Matthews, & Fleming, 2011) should be utilized by athletes who are vulnerable to choking when they perform under pressure.

In terms of future research, it would be beneficial to build on the current exploratory study and establish in more detail, the interactive effects of self-presentation motives, self-presentation efficacy, anxiety and distraction during episodes of choking. However, such work should consider the limitations present within the current study, with the most pertinent being the reliance on participant recall of choking/clutch events. It is accepted that the participants were vulnerable to recall bias, and may not have been able to recognize or articulate complex cognitions and emotions (see Beilock et al., 2003). Though, it should also be recognized that the memory of important events remains largely intact (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993) and this information-rich sample did provide a persuasive pattern of cognitions/behaviors that occurred before, during, and after their choking episodes. Nevertheless, it would be of benefit for researchers to collect data much closer to the time of the event (e.g., think aloud, Eccles & Arsal, 2017; electronic diaries, Jamison, et al., 2001) or

at the very least, utilize simulated recall (e.g., Neil, Wilson, Mellalieu, Hanton, & Taylor, 2012).

It is also likely to be of value for future research to examine the role of self-presentation motives within the choking in sport process, alongside the athlete's achievement goals. Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens and Mouratidis (2014) have recently provided a compelling argument that in order to explain fully an individuals' functioning in an achievement environment, it is necessary to consider their achievement/competence-based goal (i.e., the what/direction of behavior) alongside the motive for that goal (i.e., the why/reason for that behavior). This is due to the mounting evidence that behavioral and performance outcomes can be predicted with greater accuracy if both the achievement goals and motives underlying those goals are examined concurrently. Thus, researchers should consider whether the athlete's self-presentation motives can determine their likelihood of choking in sport, when analyzed alongside their achievement/competency based goals.

Thus, through the holistic examination of the choking experience, the results of this exploratory study have provided further support for the important role of self-presentation within acute performance failure. The study is also the first to identify the potential of utilizing the 2 x 2 self-presentation framework to examine choking in sport further. Finally, through the findings of the study, we have endeavored to identify the necessary and appropriate direction of travel for future researchers wishing to develop conceptually the choking in sport phenomenon.

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