

# HOW DO ATHLETES PERCEIVE THEMSELVES AFTER FAILURE?

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## ABSTRACT

After experiencing failure, athletes reflect on this event either in a self-enhancing or self-deprecating way. Very little is known about either how athletes explain failure, or about how they perceive themselves after such an occurrence. To address this issue the present study investigated whether athletes' perfectionism scores are associated with how they perceive the cause of their personal failure as well as their scores on the Better Than Average Effect (BTAE). This online study of 126 athletes found that those high in perfectionistic strivings, the adaptive component of perfectionism, attributed the cause of failure in a self-enhancing way. While athletes high in perfectionistic concerns, the maladaptive component of perfectionism, attributed failure in a self-effacing way, and also showed an antipodean relationship with the BTAE. Potential explanations for said patterns are given. Finally, theoretical, methodological and practical suggestions are put forward in order to be applied by sports psychologists, and to stimulate future research.

## INTRODUCTION

### Perfectionism

Perfectionism has been conceptualised as a personality characteristic. It is associated with people who set extremely high performance standards for and are excessively critical (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). It is a multidimensional personality trait, as it is associated with both positive and negative characteristics, processes and outcomes (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Therefore, a debate exists among researchers whether perfectionism is primarily adaptive or maladaptive (Owens and Slade, 2008). This debate extends to the field of sports (Stoeber, 2011; Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn & Stoll, 2012; Flett & Hewitt, 2005).

Stoeber and Otto's (2006) two-factor theory of perfectionism identifies 'perfectionist strivings' and 'perfectionistic concerns' as the central components of perfectionism. An athlete scoring high on 'perfectionist strivings' would be one who sets, for example, 'winning the Olympics' as a goal. Comparatively, an athlete scoring high on perfectionistic concerns would be the athlete who is extremely worried about losing, and being negatively evaluated by others. Each of these dimensions shows patterns of healthy and unhealthy traits. In the aforementioned review, perfectionistic concerns were found to be associated only with maladaptive characteristics, whereas perfectionistic strivings had mostly adaptive associations. This finding is further strengthened when the overlap between perfectionistic strivings and concerns is controlled for (Hill, Huelsman & Araujo, 2010; Powers, Koestner, Zuroff, Milyavskaya, & Gorin, 2011). A review that targeted literature on perfectionist athletes found similar results (Gotwals et al., 2012).

### Attribution Theory

In the field of competitive sports, athletes inevitably experience situations of failure and negative feedback (Harris & Eitzen, 1978). When athletes lose they try to understand and explain why it occurred. One way of investigating an athlete's self-evaluation arises from attribution theory (Weiner, 1985).

According to Weiner's (1985) attributional theory, people try to identify and explain the causes of situations. The attributions they make can be placed in three causal dimensions: locus of causality (internal / external); stability (change over time / not); and controllability (under one's control / not). Internal factors can be thought of as the person's talent, mood, effort or attitude. External factors are issues in the environment, such as other people, luck, or the easiness of a task. More specifically, individuals make a self-enhancing judgment, known as a self-serving attribution bias, when they ascribe positive outcomes to internal, stable, and controllable factors, and negative outcomes to external, unstable and uncontrollable factors (Allen, Jones & Sheffield, 2010). In other words, this bias is evident when people accept praise for their successes but do not accept responsibility for their failures (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004).

In an attempt to analyse the influence of perfectionism on an athlete's self-evaluation, this study focuses on experiences of failure, because these have been found to be critical for an athlete's overall experience of their sport (Jones & Sheffield, 2008; Hammond, Gialloreti, Kubas, & Davis, 2013; Ball, 2013).

### Athletes

The literature presents contradictory findings when considering how athletes make attributions after experiencing victory or failure. Some have argued athletes aim to maintain

high self-esteem, and therefore make internal attributions of success and external uncontrollable attributions of failure (Biddle & Hanrahan, 1998; Gonzalez-Boto, Molinero, Martínez & Marquez, 2006; Aldridge & Islam, 2012). In contrast, others have stated that athletes make internal attributions both of success and failure, perhaps because they feel accountable and want to accept responsibility for their actions (Mark, Mutrie, Brooks & Harris, 1984; Grove, Hanrahan & McInman, 1991; Grove & Prapavessis, 1995).

#### *Perfectionist Athletes*

To date, only two studies have investigated causal attributions of situations of achievement in perfectionist athletes (Anshel & Mansouri, 2005; Stoeber & Becker, 2008). Both studies found that perfectionistic concerns were linked to self-diminishing attributions. Stoeber and Becker (2008) also showed that striving for perfection was associated with self-serving attributions.

#### **Perfectionism and Attributions of Failure in Athletes**

The aforementioned studies (Anshel & Mansouri, 2005; Stoeber & Becker, 2008) only take into account whether attributions are internal or external, and do not consider the other important components of the attribution framework: stability and controllability (Weiner, 1985; Rees, Ingledew & Hardy, 2005). It seems plausible that athletes higher in perfectionism may be self-enhancing or self-diminishing by also judging whether the cause of failure was stable or unstable and controllable or uncontrollable by them. Therefore, the prediction of the present experiment is in line with previous research conducted in perfectionists (Levine et al., 2017) and perfectionist athletes (Stoeber & Becker, 2008). The following experiment has four hypotheses, the first of which is:

*Participants high in perfectionistic strivings will show a self-serving bias by making (a) external, (b) unstable, (c) internally uncontrollable, but (d) externally controllable attributions regarding the cause of personal failure.*

The second hypothesis is:

*Participants high in perfectionistic concerns will show a self-effacing bias by making (a) internal, (b) stable, (c) internally controllable, but (d) externally uncontrollable attributions regarding the cause of personal failure.*

The present study contributes to the limited amount of research on attribution theory in perfectionist athletes by being the first to consider all components of Weiner's (1985) attribution framework. It is also the first study in the field to consider both sexes in an investigation of perfectionism and causal attributions in situations of failure.

#### **Better Than Average Effect (BTAE)**

As mentioned above, when people make causal judgments about their behaviour, they are not always objective and are prone to attribution biases (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). A reliable measure of attribution biases is the BTAE (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Holt et al., 2012). According to the BTAE, people view themselves more positively than their average peer. However, it is statistically impossible for more than fifty percent of a population to be above-average, so this suggests that in this case people have unrealistic self-perceptions (Taylor and Brown, 1988; Silvera & Seger, 2004).

The BTAE has been argued to be a valid and robust measure of self-enhancement, (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner & Vevea, 2005) because it is believed to be motivated by people's need to self-enhance (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986). According to this framework, the opposite pattern (people scoring themselves as below-average) would be indicative of self-diminishment. In addition, researchers have focused largely on trying to identify modifying variables of the BTAE. Something repeatedly demonstrated in the literature is that when people's self-worth is threatened, the BTAE is strengthened (e.g. Brown, 2012; Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003; Dunning, Leuenberger & Sherman, 1995). This finding is particularly relevant for the present study that focuses on experiences of failure, a situation in which an athlete's self-image is likely to be placed in doubt.

More specifically, the BTAE has not yet been investigated in athletes, perfectionists or, more specifically, in perfectionist athletes. This is a significant gap in the field given the different self-enhancement and self-diminishment patterns that have been suggested in these groups based on attribution theory (Anshel & Mansouri, 2005; Stoeber & Becker, 2008).

Therefore, the present study aims to address this unexplored issue. As aforementioned research suggests, perfectionistic strivings will be related to a self-enhancing pattern, whereas perfectionistic concerns will not (Anshel & Mansouri, 2005; Stoeber & Becker, 2008). In line with these findings, it is predicted that perfectionistic strivings, but not perfectionistic concerns, will be associated with a self-serving pattern on the BTAE. Therefore, the third hypothesis of the present experiment is:

*Perfectionistic strivings will be associated with a self-enhancing pattern when thinking about situations of failure with athletes high in perfectionistic strivings showing the BTAE for both (a) desirable traits and (b) undesirable traits.*

Additionally, the fourth hypothesis is:

*Perfectionistic concerns will be related to a self-depreciating pattern when thinking about situations of failure, with athletes high in perfectionistic concerns showing an antithetical relationship with the BTAE for both (a) desirable traits and (b) undesirable traits.*

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The final sample comprised 126 athletes (74 male, 52 female) that have competed at various levels and were drawn from multiple sports domains. The participant's ages ranged from 16-60 (*mean age* = 22.8, *SD* = 7.1), and given that throughout the experiment participants were thinking about past experiences, the 7 participants above the age of 30 were not excluded.

### **Measures**

#### *Perfectionism in a Sports Context.*

The *Sport Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale-2* (Sport-MPS-2; Gotwals & Dunn, 2009) was used, as it measures an athlete's perfectionistic strivings and concerns in a sport setting. A domain-specific measurement was chosen because previous research has shown that athletes show different perfectionism scores across different domains and, more specifically, they show higher perfectionism in relation to their

sport (Dunn, Gotwals & Dunn, 2005). Also, scores on sports-specific measurements have been found to have more predictive power than global perfectionism measures (Dunn, Craft, Causgrove, Dunn & Gotwals, 2011). A general perfectionism scale might not have fully captured the specific variables of interest in the present study (McArdle, 2010; Dunn et al, 2011).

#### *Attributions of Failure.*

The Causal Dimension Scale-II (CDS-II; McAuley, Duncan & Russell, 1992) was used to measure the causal attribution dimensions of locus of causality, stability, and external and internal controllability.

#### *Better Than Average Effect.*

The BTAE was measured by using a shorter version of a questionnaire created by Alicke (1985).

#### **Procedure**

Most athletes were recruited online through sports pages on Facebook and a subset of 11 participants were first year psychology students at the University of Glasgow, who were awarded two course credits for their participation. Participants were sent the questionnaire and the study was completed online. They were treated in accordance with the ethical standards of the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009). Participants were encouraged to truthfully choose the option that best represented their thinking and were told that there were no right or wrong answers. The analysis was conducted using the statistics software SPSS.

## **RESULTS**

### **Perfectionism and Attributions of Failure in Athletes**

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

Means, standard deviations and internal consistency coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) were computed for perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, internal locus of causality, external control, personal control, and stability (Table 1).

**Table 1: Internal consistencies ( $\alpha$ ), means and standard deviations for perfectionism variables and attributions of failure. \* $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha.**

|                             | $\alpha^*$ | M    | SD   |
|-----------------------------|------------|------|------|
| Perfectionistic strivings   | 0.80       | 3.48 | 5.21 |
| Perfectionistic concerns    | 0.81       | 3.23 | 6.43 |
| Internal locus of causality | 0.68       | 5.84 | 4.73 |
| External control            | 0.79       | 3.17 | 5.89 |
| Personal control            | 0.79       | 6.14 | 5.37 |
| Stability                   | 0.52       | 3.63 | 4.82 |

### **Correlation and Partial Correlation Analyses**

Bivariate (Pearson's) correlations were conducted between perfectionistic strivings and all attribution theory variables (Table 2) and all were found to be non-significant. In addition, bivariate correlations were conducted between perfectionistic concerns and all attribution theory variables (Table 2). A significant positive correlation was found between perfectionistic concerns and internal locus of causality ( $r = 0.19$ ,  $N = 126$ ,  $p = 0.01$ , one-tailed). The positive correlation between perfectionistic concerns and stability was found to be significant ( $r = 0.17$ ,  $N = 126$ ,  $p = 0.03$ , one-tailed). However, the association between perfectionistic concerns and both external control and personal control was non-significant (Table 2).

Partial-correlations were conducted between perfectionistic strivings and all attribution theory variables, while controlling for perfectionistic concerns (Table 2). The partial correlation between perfectionistic strivings and personal control, while controlling for perfectionistic concerns, revealed a significant negative correlation ( $r = -0.16$ ,  $N = 126$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ; one-tailed). All other partial-correlations were found to be non-significant (Table 2).

Furthermore, partial correlations were conducted between perfectionistic concerns and all attribution theory variables while controlling for perfectionistic strivings (Table 2). When controlling for perfectionistic strivings a partial-correlation showed a significant positive association between perfectionistic concerns and internal locus of causality ( $r = 0.19$ ,  $N = 126$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , one-tailed). All other partial-correlations were found to be non-significant (Table 2).

**Table 2: Correlations and partial correlations between perfectionism variables and attributions of failure. \* $p < 0.05$ , one tailed.**

|                             | Pearson's Correlation     |                          | Partial Correlation       |                          |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
|                             | Perfectionistic strivings | Perfectionistic concerns | Perfectionistic strivings | Perfectionistic concerns |
| Internal locus of causality | 0.05                      | 0.19*                    | -0.04                     | 0.19*                    |
| External control            | -0.02                     | 0.11                     | -0.08                     | 0.14                     |
| Personal control            | 0.12                      | 0.05                     | -0.16*                    | 0.12                     |
| Stability                   | 0.11                      | 0.17*                    | 0.03                      | 0.13                     |

### **Perfectionism and the BTAE in Athletes**

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

Means, standard deviations and internal consistency coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) were computed for perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, and BTAE scores, for both desirable and undesirable traits (Table 3).

### **Correlation and Partial Correlation Analyses**

It should be noted that typically the BTAE is analysed using between subjects designs (e.g. Brown, 2012). However, the present study used Spearman's rank correlation analyses in order to respect the continuous distribution of the

perfectionistic variables (Bissonnette et al., 1990; MacCallum et al., 2002; Altman & Royston, 2006), rather than using arbitrary cut-off points to create two subgroups of perfectionists (adaptive, maladaptive).

**Table 3: Internal consistencies ( $\alpha$ ), means and standard deviations for perfectionism variables and BTAE variables. \* $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha.**

|                           | $\alpha$ | M    | SD   |
|---------------------------|----------|------|------|
| Perfectionistic strivings | 0.80     | 3.48 | 5.21 |
| Perfectionistic concerns  | 0.81     | 3.23 | 6.43 |
| BTAE (desirable traits)   | 0.90     | 0.27 | 0.77 |
| BTAE (undesirable traits) | 0.90     | 0.45 | 1.10 |

Spearman's correlations were conducted between perfectionistic variables and the BTAE measurements (Table 4). There was a significant positive correlation between perfectionistic strivings and the BTAE for undesirable traits ( $r = 0.19$ ,  $N = 126$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , one-tailed). Furthermore, perfectionistic concerns showed a significant negative correlation with the BTAE for desirable traits ( $r = -0.18$ ,  $N = 126$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , one-tailed). All other correlations and partial correlations conducted were found to be non-significant (Table 4).

**Table 4: Correlations and Partial Correlations of Perfectionism Variables with the BTAE. \* $p < .05$ , one tailed.**

|                           | Spearman's Correlation    |                          | Partial Correlation       |                          |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
|                           | Perfectionistic strivings | Perfectionistic concerns | Perfectionistic strivings | Perfectionistic concerns |
| BTAE (desirable traits)   | -0.12                     | -0.19*                   | 0.06                      | -0.14                    |
| BTAE (undesirable traits) | 0.19*                     | 0.14                     | 0.11                      | 0.07                     |

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study provide support for the hypotheses that athletes higher in perfectionistic strivings will show a self-serving attribution bias, whereas those high in perfectionistic concerns will show a self-diminishing one. The significant negative association between perfectionistic strivings and personal control proposes these athletes viewed past failure as something beyond their own personal control, and felt they were not to blame, similarly to findings by Aldridge and Islam (2012). An explanation of why athletes high in perfectionistic strivings showed this self-enhancing

pattern arises from Bandura's (1991) diffusion of responsibility theory, according to which, the presence of others might make the athletes feel less responsible for their actions. This is particularly relevant for athletes competing in team sports because they can place the blame of failure on their teammates (Hanrahan & Cerin, 2009). However, even in individual sports, the athletes could be minimizing their own accountability by believing failure was caused by something out of their own control; for example, a biased referee.

The self-serving attributional bias holds an adaptive function in that it can help protect athletes from the psychological harm that could be caused by failure (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Raglin, 2001; Jones, & Sheffield, 2008; Hammond, Gialloretto, Kubas, & Davis, 2013). Research has consistently shown that individuals who self-enhance experience increased wellbeing (Sanjuan, Perez, Rueda, & Ruiz, 2008; Sagar & Stoerber, 2009), minimize their negative self-views, and retain high self-esteem (Blaine and Crocker, 1993; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Therefore, it is plausible that they show more resilience after defeat (Hanrahan & Biddle, 2008), and will be more optimistic about succeeding in the future (Taylor & Brown, 1988). It is also likely that they will retain higher motivation and engagement in their sport (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012).

Furthermore, a significant positive correlation was found between perfectionistic concerns and both internal locus of causality and stability. This attributional pattern infers that athletes high in perfectionistic concerns explain failure based on unchangeable factors such as lack of ability (Weiner, 1985). Therefore, they might be more prone to mental health issues, such as anxiety and/or depression. This explanation arises from the idea that these clinical populations have shown the same self-depreciating attributional pattern outlined above (Luten, Ralph & Mineka, 1997; Lepasovic & Lepasovic, 2009; Jackson, Sellers & Peterson, 2002; Martin, 2006).

Two theoretical models provide support for the aforementioned idea. The vulnerability model proposes that highly self-critical perfectionism predicts depression and anxiety over time (McGrath et al., 2012; Gilbert, Durrant, & Mcewan, 2006; Einstein, Lovibond, & Gaston, 2000). Secondly, according to the perfectionism diathesis-stress model, when perfectionists engage in highly stressful situations they are more likely to develop depressive and distress symptoms (Chang & Rand, 2000; Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Mosher, 1995; Lynd-Stevenson & Hearne, 1999). This model seems particularly relevant for the field of elite sports, in which athletes often encounter highly stressful situations, such as competitions.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the opposite direction in the causal link is also possible. It might not be the case that having mental health issues led the athletes to a pessimistic way of thinking, but that a pessimistic attributional style makes them more prone to mental health issues. According to the revised helplessness theory by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978), the causal explanations that people make about negative events can lead to the development of depressive symptoms; and, if these were combined with stable attributions, depression would persist for a long time.

Furthermore, a negative association was found between perfectionistic concerns and the BTAE for desirable traits. This finding suggests that athletes high in perfectionistic concerns rated themselves as being significantly below their perception of what is average regarding desirable traits. This finding could also be explained by considering the aforementioned association between perfectionistic concerns and mental health. Similar to athletes high in perfectionistic concerns, depressed and anxious individuals show an

antithetical relationship with the BTAE (Brown, 1991, 2007; Marshall & Brown, 2007; Taylor and Brown, 1988, 1994; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage & McDowell, 2003).

Additionally, maladaptive perfectionist athletes who set high, hard-to-achieve performance standards (Hanchon, 2010) are extremely critical of themselves, and do not forgive even small mistakes (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Rice & Ashby, 2007). Therefore, these athletes are more often exposed to situations of failure because small mistakes might be perceived as an instance of failure (Frost & Henderson, 1991). Thus, experiencing more situations of failure and engaging with them more negatively could result in them having lower self-acceptance (Hamachek, 1978) and self-esteem (Ghahramani, Besharat & Naghipour, 2011).

Suprisingly, perfectionistic strivings did not show the anticipated relationship with the BTAE. This this may relate back to the design of the experiment, where athletes were asked to compare themselves with an average athlete, rather than a specified person. Thus, it is not known whom the athletes compared themselves to. If the athletes had in mind someone they like or admire, it would make sense that the effect of the BTAE was weakened. Athletes who score high on perfectionistic strivings might make more favourable judgments of others overall because they are more happy in themselves and do not feel the need to put others down.

These findings conclude that perfectionism in sports is a multifaceted characteristic with both positive and negative aspects. This evidence contradicts previous research suggesting that everyone shows the BTAE, especially after being primed to think about failure (e.g. Brown, 2012). Also, it contradicts research which argued that perfectionism, as a whole, is a debilitating characteristic for athletes (Flett & Hewitt, 2005; Hall, 2006; Greenspon, 2000; Blatt, 1995). Instead, the present study found that if athletes who have high perfectionistic strivings manage to disentangle themselves from perfectionistic concerns, this will benefit both their training and competitions (similar to Lundh, Saboonchi and Wangby, 2008). Therefore, the present findings highlight the importance of studying athlete's individual differences, and have practical implications for sports psychologists and coaches.

There have been no studies so far exploring the effectiveness of programmes trying to reduce perfectionistic concerns in athletes. However, there are self-help guides designed for people with clinically high levels of perfectionism (Antony & Swinson, 2009; Shafran, Egan, & Wade, 2010). These techniques could be applied to the field of sports psychology to design appropriate interventions for athletes high in perfectionistic concerns. Another worthwhile idea would be to try and change the attributional style of athletes with high perfectionistic concerns, potentially via cognitive-behavioural training (Parkes & Mallett, 2011), group discussion (Wright, Luus, & Christie, 1990), and other techniques (Jackson, Hall, Rowe, & Daniels, 2009; Le Foll, Rasclé, & Higgins, 2008; Celano, Hazzard, Campbell, & Lang, 2002). It also seems plausible that athletes would change their attributions of failure after positive feedback from their coaches (Wilcox, 2015).

Despite the important theoretical, practical and methodological contributions of the present study, it should be noted that it is not without limitations. Regarding the measurement of perfectionism, future research could incorporate peer accounts to triangulate the level of perfectionism of these athletes (Flett, Besser, & Hewitt, 2005), thus countering issues such as social desirability effects (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Also, in order to guarantee that the athletes are thinking of an average

athlete when completing the BTAE scale, future studies could devise a descriptive vignette of this athlete.

Furthermore, the current study focused on situations of failure, given their importance for an athlete's well-being and performance (Ball, 2013; Hammond et al., 2013; Jones & Sheffield, 2008; Butt & Molnar, 2009). It was advantageous that the athletes were thinking about real-life situations (Stoeber & Becker, 2008), however, the present research could be taken one step further by also taking into account the impact of successful experiences. This line of research would create a more holistic understanding of attribution biases and would help clarify whether athletes which score highly on the perfectionistic variables self-enhance or self-diminish both after success and after failure in their sport.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the aim of the present research was to explore whether athletes high in perfectionistic variables display attributional biases in order to either self-enhance or self-depreciate. In line with the hypotheses, athletes with high perfectionistic strivings showed a self-serving attribution bias by perceiving failure as not being under their own personal control. On the other hand, again as anticipated, athletes with high perfectionistic concerns showed a self-effacing attributional bias because they considered failure to be stable and caused internally, and additionally, because they showed an antipodean relationship with the BTAE. These findings contribute to the better understanding of perfectionism in sports and, more specifically, to the self-enhancement and self-diminishment tendencies of athletes that score highly on perfectionistic variables.

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