

Chapter 6

UNWANTED EFFECTS OF PERFORMANCE IN SPORT

Recep GÖRGÜLÜ¹

INTRODUCTION

Olympic pentathlete; *‘In some circumstances (e.g., anxiety, pressure), my intention is not to do the best but to avoid making a bad shot. That is when I make a bad shot. When I think about avoiding the error, I make the error’* (Bertollo, Saltarelli & Robazza, 2009, p. 252).

Unwanted thoughts and behaviour is an area of study that has been of interest to researchers as well as the practitioners in recent years (Gorgulu, 2017), whether it is to scientifically explain previously unexplainable supposed spiritual phenomena (Carpenter, 1884) to help a patient who is experiencing health problems (Freud, 1950), or to establish a theoretical model to aid and develop understanding of the production of unwanted actions (Baudouin, 1921). More specifically, in sport, it is very common to see a performer making a crucial error under certain situations. However, one particular theory that is Wegner’s (1994) ironic processes of mental control theory conceptualize these crucial errors into a particularly aggravating category: the precisely counter-intentional error (Wegner, 1994). Attempts to explain the tendency for individuals to demonstrate behaviours completely opposite to those intended has been a topic of great importance in recent sport psychology research (e.g., Gorgulu, 2017; Gray, Orn & Woodman, 2017; Barlow, Woodman, Gorgulu & Voyzey, 2016; Woodman, Barlow & Gorgulu, 2015). More specifically, Wegner (1994) explains the counterintentional movement ironies especially when given avoidant instruction as not primarily due to perceptual dysfunction, poor motor skill, or blatant disobedience (Russell & Grealy, 2008), but to control those attempts made while insufficiently cognitively resourced (e.g., high mental load, anxiety, time pressure).

Foundational to Wegner’s theory is the premise that mental control requires *two processes* in order to work effectively. These two processes defined by Daniel Wegner (1994) as the conscious operating process and the subconscious monitoring process. First, the operating process aims to create the desired state of

¹ Dr. Recep GÖRGÜLÜ, Bursa Uludağ University, gorgulurecep@gmail.com

errors are more likely to occur and what are the most appropriate applied interventions to eliminate their unwanted effects under certain conditions. Specifically, under pressure situation in team sports for example, where tactical passages of play and constant communication are fundamental for effective performance, relaying simple, positive and action based instruction (Woodman et al., 2015) to other team members may help to overcome and maintain the desired control (e.g., penalty shoot-out, a free kick at the last minute of the match). In this premise, Janelle (1999) recommended that apart from expert performers in sport, non-experts (e.g., novices) may possess some psychological techniques to deal with adversity when needed and so the use of fewer and less complex instructions may help the transition through early experiences in a competitive environment. Thus, in order to reduce or prevent from ironic performance errors in sport the inability to direct attentional resources and process that relevant information should therefore direct coaches and practitioners to provide instruction and promote better understanding.

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