

Coping Responses to Failure and Success Among Elite Athletes and Performing Artists

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This qualitative study identified and categorized the coping responses to failure and success of 16 elite athletes and performing artists. Data from individual, in-depth interviews were inductively analyzed for content and yielded 36 coping strategies (as lower-order themes). The identified strategies extended descriptive lists of coping behaviors reported in the performance psychology literature. Categories in coping—such as problem-focused, emotion-focused, appraisal-focused, avoidance-focused, and failing in coping—were used to organize the results. Cross-domain comparisons revealed a number of qualitative differences, such as “greater motivational changes after failure” being reported only by athletes and “letting ego go in an attempt to improve performance” reported only by performing artists. Cross-domain studies hold promise for clarifying the psychological aspects of performance for sport psychology consultants, whose services are increasingly invited by nonsport clients. Accounts of general, domain-specific, and individual patterns in coping behaviors can guide future research and consulting efforts.

Coping responses accompany emotional responses to failure and success in performances. Individuals cope to adapt to perceived relational changes and associated emotions. In fact, appraisals of coping potential in part determine the types of emotions an individual experiences (Lazarus, 1991). Coping strategies have demonstrated a strong relationship to performance, and it is not surprising that applied sport psychologists have attempted to describe, explain, predict, and control coping behaviors (Giacobbi & Weinberg, 2000). Coping has been examined broadly in the performance psychology literature (e.g., psychological skills for performance enhancement in sport: Greenspan & Feltz, 1989; Orlick, 1986; Smith & Christensen, 1995; in dance: Taylor & Taylor, 1995; and in opera: Gertz, 1998). We assert that excellence in coping precedes excellence in performance. Lazarus (2000b) also indicated that “the right kind of coping in an important competition could lead athletes to become remotivated and,

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thereby, capable of attending and concentrating effectively to display their typically high standards of excellence” (p. 237). Just as there are individual differences in performances, there are individual differences in coping responses during performances (Crocker & Isaak, 1997; Grove & Heard, 1997). The first purpose of this research was to investigate the repertoire of coping responses used by elite performers in sport and the arts. Research on emotional responses to success and failure (Conroy, Poczwardowski, & Henschen, 2001) and on coping (e.g., coping responses to pain; Encarnacion, Meyers, Ryan, & Pease 2000) suggested that there also might be cross-domain differences in both emotional and coping response to various performance events. Thus, the second aim of this research was to explore differences in elite performers’ coping repertoires between domains.

The Broad Domain of Coping

Coping refers to “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Typically and most intuitively, coping is associated with threats and stress and, in performance, also with mistakes and failures. What is important for this study is that Lazarus and Folkman’s definition allows performance success and/or an increased record of success as potentially “taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” For example, an increasing level of one’s performance naturally attracts attention of fans or audiences and in time raises the expectations for future performance achievements. For some performers, these expectations may constitute a fundamental challenge (Lazarus, 2000b). Jackson, Mayocchi, and Dover (1998) found that Olympic gold medalists sometimes reported that success could be distressful.

Coping includes any focused attempt to manage situational demands and does not imply effectiveness or success (Compas, 1987). Four theoretical components of an integrated coping response have been described (see Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996). *Problem-focused coping* describes problem-oriented strategies directed to the environment and the self (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). *Emotion-focused coping* involves managing emotional responses to stress (e.g., exercise and relaxation) and cognitive reappraisals of situational demands (e.g., changing meaning of the situation; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). *Appraisal-focused coping* refers to appraising or reappraising stressful situations using, for example, logical analysis or situation reframing (Cox & Ferguson, 1991). Finally, *avoidance-focused coping* describes both behavioral (e.g., moving to a different task) and psychological (e.g., cognitive distancing) efforts to disengage from the demanding situation (Anshel, 1996; Endler & Parker, 1990; Krohne, 1993).

A qualitative design was selected for the present study in an effort to adequately account for the phenomenological complexity of coping. Sport psychologists (e.g., Anshel, Jamieson, & Raviv, 2001; Crocker & Isaak, 1997; Eklund, Gould, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Udry, Bridges, & Beck, 1997; Hanton & Jones, 1999a, 1999b; Park, 2000) have demonstrated that coping is a complex, individual, and dynamic process of a multidimensional nature (i.e., cognitive and behavioral attempts to influence both environment- and self-oriented variables). In addition, variability in coping responses may exist as a function of the activity, situation (e.g., failure/success), or individual variables such as gender, personality, developmental stage, and skill level used. Cultural differences in the preferred use of specific coping strategies have emerged in most recent research (Anshel, Williams, & Hodge, 1997; Yoo, 2001). Coping has been viewed as reactions (during or right after performance responses) and long-term adaptations (or strategies or purposeful actions) that can be either maladaptive or adaptive, and has been reported to be effective or ineffective, with this latter distinction seeming to be highly individual (for a more detailed discussion, see Anshel, Kim,

Kim, Chang, & Eom, 2001; or Hardy et al., 1996). The emerging conceptual picture of coping among performing artists in dancing, singing, acting, and music (e.g., Nagel, Himle, & Papsdorf, 1989; Steptoe & Malik, 1995; Talbot-Honcek & Orlick, 1998; Wilson, 1997) is equally complex (i.e., individual, multidimensional, contextual, and dynamic) and demands intense research efforts to add specificity to the main theoretical dimensions of coping.

Specific Coping Responses

Steptoe (1989) found that the coping repertoires of professional and student musicians included self-distraction, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, realistic situational appraisals, and using sedatives or alcohol. Steptoe and Malik (1995) reported that student actors used a variety of cognitive (e.g., positive thinking, panic/loss of control, concentration, and fear of collapse) and behavioral (e.g., relaxation/exercise, memory checking, social distraction, and self-distraction) coping responses in their performances. Orlick (1992; Talbot-Honeck & Orlick, 1998) found that successful performing artists used constructive evaluation, positive images, distraction control, keeping sight of the whole picture, positive thinking, and flexibility in their coping responses. What is worth noting is that it was researchers within the psychometric approach in the domain of sport who made significant contributions in identifying and defining major dimensions in coping.

The three major measures of coping responses in sport provide scores for participants' use of specific thoughts or behaviors that represent the four categories of coping responses (i.e., problem-focused, emotion-focused, appraisal-focused, and avoidance-focused). For example, the Ways of Coping in Sport (WOCS) checklist samples the following coping behaviors: general problem focus, seeking social support, general emotionality, increased effort and resolve, detachment, denial, wishful thinking, and emphasizing the positive (Madden, Kirkby, & McDonald, 1989). The Modified COPE samples active coping, planning suppression of competing activities, seeing social support for instrumental or emotional reasons, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, focus and venting of emotions, denial, humor, training, wishful thinking, self-blame, and behavioral disengagement (Crocker & Isaak, 1997). The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 (ASCI-28) samples coping with adversity, peaking under pressure, goal setting and mental preparation, concentration, freedom from worry, confidence and achievement motivation, and coachability (Smith, Schutz, Smoll, & Ptacek, 1995). In sport, the WOCS, Modified COPE, and ASCI-28 have been used in coping-related investigations of injury (Green & Weinberg, 2001), personality (trait anxiety; Giacobbi & Weinberg, 2000), gender differences (Crocker & Graham, 1995), and coping with stress by competitive athletes of various sports and skill levels (Crocker, 1989, 1992; Madden, Summers, & Brown, 1990; Smith & Christensen, 1995).

Although these measures have dominated the literature on coping in sport, and partial qualitative support for the dimensions of COPE was reported (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993), their representativeness of the domain of coping strategies used by athletes and strong psychometric properties (especially validity) have not been demonstrated (for a review, see Crocker, Kowalski, & Graham, 1998). In the literature on coping in performing arts, results based on coping behavior surveys with unknown psychometric properties were mostly reported (e.g., Steptoe & Malik, 1995). Additionally, it is not clear whether the content domains sampled by these instruments are relevant for related socially evaluative, motor performance domains such as the performing arts. One might expect that coping responses would be similar between these two domains, because both involve socially evaluated performances of motor skills; however, unlike sport, the evaluations of artistic performances tend to be more subjective than objective, and elite performers tend to have much longer careers in the arts than in sport (e.g., in opera; Gertz, 1998).

Purpose

Similarities appear to exist between the coping strategies used by performers in sport and the arts (e.g., both performance domains clearly appear to be multidimensional with regard to encountered demands). Conversely, differences between athletic and performing arts populations also were reported (e.g., coping responses to pain; Encarnacion et al., 2000). Unfortunately, it would be premature to draw conclusions about the degree of similarity of these domains because the content representativeness of measures used has not been established. Widespread agreement exists (e.g., Crocker et al., 1998; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993) that more descriptive data are needed before comprehensive and refined theoretical conceptualizations of coping behavior in performance can be proposed. Qualitative methodologies are well suited to respond to these descriptive research problems, especially when a performer's perspective becomes a focus of the analysis (Crocker et al., 1998; Dale, 2000; Gould et al., 1997; Hanton & Jones, 1999a, 1999b; Park, 2000). The primary purpose of this report was to identify the coping strategies used by 16 elite performers in sport and the performing arts when faced with failure or success. A secondary purpose was to contrast the strategies used in sport and the performing art to explore cross-domain differences.

METHODS

Participants

Eight males (4 athletes, 4 performing artists) and 8 females (4 athletes and 4 performing artists) voluntarily participated in semistructured, individual interviews. Athletes from team sports (basketball, football, and volleyball) and individual sports (archery, golf, gymnastics, skeet shooting, and track and field [multievent]) comprised the sample. Performing artists were recruited from the domains of dance, opera, music, and theater. The participants were considered to be elite and included all-American Division I college athletes (gymnastics, basketball, and volleyball), professional athletes (golf and football), a world-record holder (track and field), a World Championship competitor (skeet shooting), and an Olympic medallist (archery), as well as internationally (music and opera), nationally (ballet dancing and music), and regionally (acting) recognized performers in the arts.

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods (Patton, 1990) in an effort to identify "experiential experts." Existing contacts were used to invite elite athletes to participate in the study. Additionally, snowball sampling procedures started with two existing relationships with insiders in the performing arts circles in the same geographical area to include six additional performers in the sample (see Gamson, 1995). As a result, the entry that was gained was situated in the context of initial level of trust and credibility (a recommendation for qualitative research on coping offered by Crocker et al., 1998). All invited participants agreed to be interviewed and selected a place of their choosing for the interview.

Procedures

Prior to the pilot study, the Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures. In the process of the pilot study with two female athletes, the suitability of the interview guide and format was tested. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that all interview material was confidential. Participants then provided informed consent to participate and the interview was initiated using the general interview guide approach (thus, probing and clarification questions were used when appropriate; Patton, 1990; Spradley, 1979). Two investigators were present for every interview (with the second author being the leading

interviewer consistently through all 16 interview sessions) and each offered follow-up probes specific to the information shared by the participant. No participant refused to answer any questions in the interviews. Questions explored participants' experiences regarding failing and succeeding in their respective performance domain (e.g., Talk about how you feel/what you think when you fail or succeed in something that is of an important value to you. Describe some situations in which failure has been particularly traumatic. Tell us about the event that truly established you as recognized performer in your domain.). The term *coping* was neither used nor defined for (i.e., imposed on) participants; rather, the content of their responses to the questions and probing were coded as coping behavior and inductively analyzed. Labels used to code meaning units and to name lower-order themes were kept close to the words used by the participants. The emerging higher-order themes were later grouped and labeled based on theoretical categories reviewed above (Cox & Ferguson, 1991; Endler & Parker, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The duration of the interviews ranged from 90 to 150 minutes. The interviews were videotaped and transcribed by a professional.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were checked for accuracy by the investigators, sent to the participants for their feedback (member-checking; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and, subsequently, independently read by the investigators, who identified quotations relevant to the research question for later analysis. The investigators coded the raw data together to establish the data set for analysis. One data set was established for all performers to facilitate linking of conceptually similar strategies across the different performance domains. Coded quotations were examined for a common meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Agreements about the meaning of coded quotations were negotiated based on assessment of the contextual meaning of data (Spradley, 1979); two external reviewers were consulted during the coding process. The lower-order themes emerged from these meaning units, and lower-order themes later were grouped into higher-order themes based on Spradley's (1979) recommendations for assessing the contextual meaning of data. For the purpose of this study, the primary author served as a content analyst of the coded data (performing analytical procedures outlined above) and the second author served as a peer audit (performing a role of devil's advocate and coanalyst). This approach was used as a technique to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis. The two investigators interacted four times (two e-mail contacts, phone conversation, and direct meeting) to carry out the outlined analytical procedures (no external reviewer assisted in the process of the outlined inductive analysis of the coded data). The two author-analysts used Miles and Huberman's (1994) linked subprocesses of data analysis involving (a) data reduction, (b) data display, and (c) conclusion drawing and verification; QSR NUD*IST 4 (1997) software was used to facilitate data management and data analyses.

RESULTS

Categories of Appraisal-Focused, Emotion-Focused, and Problem-Focused Coping organized 11 higher-order themes. Avoidance-Focused Coping (as a category) comprised three lower-order themes. In addition, Failing in Coping (as a category) emerged from two lower-order themes (see Figure 1). Forty-two lower-order themes emerged directly from 174 meaning units.¹

¹Hierarchically organized lists of meaning units and lower-order and higher-order themes are available upon request from the first author.

Appraisal-focused coping (8 Athletes; 8 Performing Artists [or 8/8])*Looking into the future (7/6)*

Hope (6/4)

Moving on (4/3)

Maximize performance and experience (0/4)

Keeping things in perspective (8/8)

Others' criticism wrong about my performance (2/4)

Taking perspective (5/7)

Know how to handle failure and criticism (2/4)

Fluidity in how performance outcome defined (6/7)

Interpreted poor effort as the cause of failure (2/3)

Enhanced retrospective feelings of control (6/4)

I am a vessel of art so I can let go (0/5)

Letting go helps my performance (0/4)

Art bigger than me (0/3)

Emotion-focused coping (8/8)*Controlling emotions (7/8)*

I take care of negative emotions (7/7)

Know how to control my emotions (3/2)

Success and immersion in domain help to cope with failure (1/2)

I focus on the positive (2/3)

Seeking support form others (6/5)

Gaining support from performance others (5/1)

Gaining support from non-performance others (3/3)

Sought mental training consulting (2/2)

I stay confident but humble (6/6)

Humility (3/3)

I am confident (3/3)

Experiences tell me I can be confident (3/4)

Success promotes positive feelings about self (8/6)

Felt good about myself as performer (6/4)

Felt good about myself (7/4)

Enhanced motivation after failure (5/6)

Hunger for success and improvement (5/3)

I want to show others wrong (0/3)

Problem-focused coping (8/8)*Learning and improving (8/7)*

Learned from previous failures and improved (6/5)

Analyzing what happened (6/2)

Adjustments in-situ so I can perform better (6/4)

Coping better (2/5)

I put less pressure on self (0/3)

I seek balance in life (0/3)

Increased effort (6/6)

Working harder (6/3)

Focus on my preparation (1/4)

Problem in coping is performance problem (8/7)

I should be coping well during performance (6/4)

Figure 1. Coping responses to failure and success among elite athletes and performing artists (continued on next page).

I should be coping well in my career and life (0/2)
 If I cope effectively it's a success (3/2)
 Thinking I should control more than I can (5/4)

Avoidance-focused coping (6/5)

Avoidance to protect self (3/3)
 Decreased motivation to perform (3/0)
 Decreased effort (5/4)

Failing in coping (6/6)

I am failing to cope well (6/6)
 Crying (1/4)

Note: **Category**, *higher-order themes*, and lower-order themes (with number of athletes and performing artists reporting each lower-order theme; underlined if cross-performance domain difference).

Figure 1. *Continued.*

Appraisal-Focused Coping

Appraisal-Focused Coping strategies were well represented in the participants' narratives (11 lower-order themes) and grouped around three higher-order themes, including (a) looking into the future, (b) keeping things in perspective, and (c) I am a vessel of art so I can let go. The latter theme was reported exclusively by performing artists and will be addressed in the section on cross-domain differences (a strategy employed throughout the article for all cross-domain differences that emerged from the data).

Looking into the future as a coping strategy was supported by responses from 13 participants (7 athletes and 6 performing artists) and comprised lower-order themes of hope, moving on, and maximizing performance and experience. More specifically, 10 participants hoped for good performances in the future and believed that hope lifts spirit and helps to get through tough parts in their performance. Athlete (AT) 7 stated, "I look at the future instead of the past. I always hope to do good." While dealing with failure and negative emotions, 7 performers would move on to future-oriented thoughts or tasks, as expressed by Performing Artist (PA) 11, "It was really an instruction given in a mean spirit. I did what he asked, and you move on from it." Only performing artists ($n = 4$) reported focusing on maximizing their performance.

All 16 participants attempted keeping things in perspective as a way of coping with failure, negative emotions, criticism, and success. The list of more specific coping strategies used after failure included believing that others' criticism about their performance was wrong (meaning unit: "others explanations wrong: don't try to defend," AT2), interpreting poor effort as the cause of failure ("better effort would prevent failure," AT6), and believing that they know how to handle failure and criticism ("someone tells negative, I know now is positive," PA15). Taking perspective as a coping lesson after failure for 12 performers was accomplished by recognizing that one cannot be always successful, being realistic about what to expect, and viewing one's performance from a distance ("do best but put things in perspective," AT8). In addition, the strategy of viewing oneself separately as a performer and as a person was reported as an effective coping strategy in taking perspective and was captured eloquently by AT3 who said, "I needed the comfort of my family and other things, and I didn't need archery to be my life, 100%. I didn't need to live or die by whether I won that tournament." Keeping things in perspective also referred to attending to the enhanced retrospective feelings of control (after success). Finally, 13 performers talked about the fluidity in how performance outcomes were appraised or defined in their coping responses after both failure and success.

Satisfying one's own performance standards, finding satisfaction in effort (instead of outcome), believing that not succeeding is not tantamount to failing, and shifting goals to prevent failure were examples of how participants purposefully manipulated their definitions of success and failure to cope with successes and failures in performance. In short, participants' coping attempts that focused on their appraisals helped them to distance themselves from the performance outcomes and therefore facilitated a more optimal emotional state.

Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-Focused Coping referred to performers' attempts to manage emotions that were associated with succeeding or failing. These attempts took place before, during, and after their performance and involved 14 lower-order themes reported by all 16 performers that grouped into five higher-order themes: (a) controlling emotions, (b) seeking support from others, (c) staying confident but humble, (d) success promotes positive feelings about self, and (e) enhanced motivation after failure.

Seven athletes and 8 performing artists reported their attempts to control emotions. Examples of skills for managing negative emotions included eliminating negative emotions, blaming others, not putting too much pressure on self, postponing dealing with anger, and constructively using their feelings of anxiety. In addition, the performers reported focusing on the positive ($n = 5$) and successes in their domain ($n = 3$) as ways of controlling their emotions. Three athletes and 2 performing artists gained meta-knowledge and self-efficacy concerning their emotion-focused coping skills and declared that they knew how to control their emotions (e.g., "I know that confidence decreases fear," AT2 & AT3; "fear can be good: must know 'why' of the feeling to be productive," PA9).

Enhanced motivation and seeking support from others were two other important coping strategies developed to deal with failure reported by 11 performers. Performers in both sport and the arts reacted to failure with hunger for success and improvement. Alternatively, only performing artists ($n = 3$) were motivated to show others wrong, and 5 athletes compared with only 1 performing artist sought social support from performance others such as coaches, teammates, traveling partners, or a boss. Performers from both domains reported seeking support from among nonperformance others (e.g., family members and friends) and seeking mental training consulting.

Emotion-Focused Coping also occurred as a response to success. Successful performances were reported to help participants at being confident ($n = 6$), at maintaining their confidence level ($n = 7$), and at developing positive feelings about them as performers and people ($n = 14$; "knowing I had an impact on the performance domain," PA9 & PA13). The performers also reported being able to draw confidence from memories of these positive emotional states during later performance difficulties. For example, performers sometimes reminded themselves that they were talented so they could cope emotionally with negative emotions associated with failure or age-related performance decrements ("I can still contribute to the profession," PA9). Interestingly, 3 athletes and 3 performing artists described their need to stay humble after success as a lesson learned from their parents; the function of this strategy appeared to involve maintaining performance consistency. PA9 described the dialectic between confidence and humility as follows:

Sometimes when I've had a really successful show where I was like, "Wow! Is this bubble going to burst?" it makes me want to reach back and be as normal as possible, as soon after the curtain comes down, because I don't want to get caught up in that cloud. I don't want to get caught up in an ego thing. I'll tuck it away and put it in my little box of shows I'll never forget. But I also don't want to get an ego about it.

Problem-Focused Coping

Participants also attempted to cope with failure by targeting their weaknesses and strengths to solve problems and raise their level of performance. Specifically, Problem-Focused Coping comprised higher-order themes of (a) learning and improving, (b) recognizing that a problem in coping was a performance problem, and (c) increasing effort. The latter theme will be addressed in the section on cross-domain differences.

Learning and improving after failure were reported by 15 participants and occurred with the physical/technical aspects of performance as well as with respect to their coping skills (or psychological aspects). Fifteen participants described their learning from previous mistakes and failures by analyzing what happened in poor performances, using others' feedback and criticism, and learning about their performance domains and themselves as performers and people. For example, PA11 provided an interesting perspective on learning how to learn from show reviews to improve performance and noted, "You get great reviews and you get some not so great reviews and I think the trick is taking what you can positively out of it and discarding the rest." Another problem-focused strategy that surfaced in participants' narratives was labeled as "adjustment in-situ so I can perform better" (6 athletes, 4 performing artists). Specifically, concentrating more (e.g., "every step matters," AT1) and solving problems (e.g., "read body to know when to back off," AT3) were thought of as effective coping skills to be used during a performance. Learning from analyzing what happened was reported by 4 athletes and 2 performing artists; for 2 athletes and 5 performing artists, learning took place within coping itself, and 3 performing artists sought balance between their personal and professional/artistic lives (another set of findings indicating a group difference).

Interestingly, in response to an interview question about failing in the performance domain, and later in response to a question about anger and performance, 15 participants clearly expressed their strong expectations of coping well. For them, a problem in coping was a performance problem. Although this belief was not a coping strategy per se, four lower-order themes emerged from 39 raw data points to indicate the belief that coping is simply an inherent part of their performance, just like other aspects such as physical, technical, and strategic or artistic. These lower-order themes were I should be coping well during performance ($n = 10$); I should be coping well in my career and life ($n = 2$, performing artists only); if I cope effectively, it's a success ($n = 5$); and thinking that I should control more than I can ($n = 9$). If their intended and expected effective coping did not occur during performance they would react with anger at self, shame, anxiety, or fear. For instance, PA16 noted,

I get angry at myself sometimes. Just frustrated because I feel like I didn't live up to the situation. I just felt a little bit under. Like I wasn't listening as well as I could have, or I wasn't all there, you know I was 99% there, but there was one little thing missing. So sometimes I get down on myself because of that.

Avoidance-Focused Coping

Six athletes and 6 performing artists described Avoidance-Focused Coping. Three lower-order themes supported this result: (a) avoidance to protect self, (b) decreased motivation to perform, and (c) decreased effort. Three athletes and 4 performing artists talked about protecting themselves emotionally by avoiding certain emotions ("anger can ruin things so hide it," AT6; "avoid fear to avoid paralysis," PA11), avoiding people from whom they might expect demobilizing criticism (e.g., "I don't want people to know why I am upset," PA9), and not facing failing (e.g., "bottled anger and cried," AT3; "avoid facing mistake," AT1). Only ath-

letes ($n = 3$) reported decreased motivation to perform in response to failure (“I don’t care,” AT7; “Won’t try,” AT1). Finally, performers in both sport ($n = 5$) and arts ($n = 4$) pointed out decreased effort as a coping response. Specifically, participants mentioned not practicing, not preparing well, and giving poor efforts as ways of avoiding full engagement in preparation assignments, performance tasks, or both.

Failing in Coping

The elite performers were very open and honest in sharing instances of failure in attempted coping. Description of the coping strategies they used would be incomplete without presenting their experiences with inability to cope effectively. The following quote from the interview with AT2 is a powerful reminder of an intuitive notion that even elite performers do not always cope well:

And that hit me when I realized I was out of control with my emotions. I knew I was scared to death and I couldn’t make myself not scared. And I walked up there and I was like, “God I don’t want to be here, I’m so scared.” I felt completely, 100% out of control. I had very rarely ever in my life felt that way. I didn’t know how to stop it from happening.

Twelve participants reported direct experiences of failing in coping perceived right on the spot, thus reflecting their own judgment (not the judgment of the analysts). Four performing artists and only 1 athlete reported crying after their performances. Other examples of failing to cope well were captured in the lower-order theme that was labeled I am failing to cope well and included performing poorly, experiencing helplessness, failed attempts to cope well, making more mistakes through intensified self-analysis, being unable to leave a mistake behind, not being consistent, and losing perspective on one’s role in a performance.

As surfaced above, examination of the emerged lower-order themes revealed similarities between athletes and performing artists considered as groups with regard to the reported coping strategies. Interestingly, there were 18 emerging qualitative differences between the two groups of participants that are worth further exploration.

Elite Performers in Sports and Arts: Group Comparison

Responses of both athletes and performing artists were entered into a single data set to reduce the likelihood that differences between domains would be due to variations in the language performers in each domain used to describe the same phenomena. Although qualitative research typically does not favor inferences based on frequencies, we adopted a very conservative quantitative criterion to facilitate the identification of cross-domain differences. This section will report cross-domain differences in the participants’ coping strategies that either (a) reflected a numerical difference of three or a numerical ratio of two to one with regard to the number of participants reporting a particular lower-order theme or (b) were reported only by members of one performance domain. Although these criteria do not indicate “significance,” we believe they suggest important questions that should be examined in future research.

In the area of appraisal-focused coping, only performing artists ($n = 4$) talked about looking into the future (after both success and failure) with the intention to maximize performance (e.g., “not slopping through because I can,” PA 9; “don’t want to be less than I can,” PA14) and maximize performance experience (“make the most out of the moment,” PA13). Twice as many performing artists ($n = 4$) as athletes reported that others’ criticisms about their performance were wrong and, therefore, that they were motivated to prove others wrong. This

finding may reflect differences in how performance is evaluated in the arts (i.e., subjective criteria in the arts via audience or reviews) and sport (i.e., objective criteria in sport via time or score). Another interesting cross-domain difference was noted in the area of ego involvement. As mentioned above, I am a vessel of art so I can let go was a third appraisal-focused coping strategy and the only higher-order theme (among 11) that was supported by narratives of performing artists exclusively ($n = 5$). Performing artists reported their beliefs in the benefits of letting their ego go ($n = 4$). Because they believed that their performance domain as an art form was more powerful than them as people, they allowed the artistic essence to express itself through them as vessels in the form of high-level performance ($n = 3$). PA16 stated:

I realized that the more selfless I can be in my art, the more honest I can be to that character. That catapults whatever happens between me and the audience even more. If I can just let the ego go, then I can just be so much better than I can when I'm worried about who's watching me or why.

Consistent with the interpretation of more objective evaluative criteria in athletic performance outlined above, in emotion-focused coping we found that athletes were not afraid to get feedback from experts in their performance domains (gaining support from performance others) because the experts' evaluations could not change (i.e., worsen) objective measures of their performance. Alternatively, only performing artists ($n = 3$) wanted to show others wrong, thus showing an increase in motivation aimed at influencing other people's evaluations of their artistic performances. PA12 synthesized it in the following way: "I had a bad show. So I fumed about it and of course I was like 'Goddamn that bastard! I'm going to show him, when they give it back to me.' Which was what I did." Finally, more athletes ($n = 7$) than performing artists ($n = 4$) reported feeling good about themselves as persons (a difference not identified with respect to "feeling good about self as performer").

Differences in problem-focused coping included two lower-order themes that were collectively labeled as increased effort. Increased effort after failure referred to working harder (6 athletes, 3 performing artists) and focusing on preparation (1 athlete, 4 performing artists). Despite our best efforts to bridge the linguistic gap between performance domains, this apparent difference in response frequencies between performance domains may be due to linguistic differences while referring to the same coping strategy: increased time spent on preparation and increased intensity of their practice ("perfect unnoticeable things," PA14; "got out of downward spiral by practicing," AT7). However, a difference that cannot be easily attributed to variations in language was that analyzing what happened as a learning strategy was reported by 4 athletes and 2 performing artists. This difference may be due to athletes' greater openness to seek social support from among experts in their sport, typically leading to an opportunity to process technical aspects of performance. Alternatively, performing artists provided more frequent reports concerning coping better in their respective performance domains. Seemingly, they considered this kind of learning to be an important portion of performance behavior to be shared during the interviews. Examples of coping better meaning units included "keep self fit to prevent illness" (PA10) and "learned to be more optimistic" (A3). Further, following years of experience, 5 performing artists learned to put less pressure on themselves as a way of coping with performance stress ("stopped waiting for something to go wrong," PA9; "try best and realize I can't always be perfect," PA13) and were able to focus on their enjoyment instead ("learn to enjoy bad days," PA9; "don't judge good or bad, enjoy the music," PA13). Again, only performing artists ($n = 3$) reported seeking balance between their personal life and work (i.e., performance and practice) as a coping strategy. PA13 captured it as follows:

Music is something I do, it's something I'm blessed with, a talent. And I'm fortunate to be able to do that, especially in terms of generating an income or a salary. But that's not everything in my life. I also enjoy jumping on my Harley and going for a ride. I enjoy photography. I enjoy coming home simply to be with my cat.

Consistent with this quest for balance in life seems to be another cross-domain difference under the category of problem-focused coping—namely, the performing artists' assertion that they should be coping well in their career and life ($n = 2$). This lower-order theme provided additional insight into the participants' interpretations of coping as a form of performance. For example, PA14 stated, "And the anxiety can come if I feel that it's out of control. If I'm just not in control of keeping a balance in my life." Finally, with regard to avoidance-focused coping, we found one cross-domain difference: Only the elite athletes ($n = 3$) reported a decrease in their motivation to perform after failure.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study examined the repertoire of coping strategies used in response to performance stressors (i.e., failure or success) among elite athletic and artistic performers. The prevalence of unprompted coping strategies in narratives about emotional responses reported in this article provided empirical support for Lazarus's (2000a, 2000b) notion of the natural situational link between the emotions and coping in performance situations in a variety of performance domains. The repertoire of coping strategies described prior to, during, and after performance events was very wide and individual (Gould et al., 1997; Grove & Heard, 1997; Lehrer, Goldman, & Strommen, 1990). Also, elite performers used these strategies in combination (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Hanton & Jones, 1999a). Studies targeting an integrated coping response (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993) specifically are needed to identify effective combinations of coping skills used by elite performers to deal with a range of performance issues (e.g., success, failure, injury, and career termination).

Participants' reports provided data on specific skills and strategies used to cope with performance stressors. These coping responses were classified within broad categories such as appraisal-focused, problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-focused coping. These categories in coping have been developed by general psychology researchers (e.g., Cox & Ferguson, 1991; Endler & Parker, 1990; Krohne, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and have been commonly used by sport psychologists. Appraisal-focused coping responses identified in the present study overlapped with previous findings related to emphasizing the positive (Madden et al., 1989), positive reinterpretation and growth (Crocker & Isaak, 1997), thought-control (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993), realistic appraisals (Steptoe, 1989), blasé attitude and positive thinking (Steptoe & Fidler, 1987), and role redefinition (Frederickson & Rooney, 1988). Unique aspects of appraisal-focused coping documented in the present research included fluidity in how the performance outcome was defined and artistic performers' belief in the creative power of a respective art domain allowing them to let go (or become a vessel of art) while performing.

Problem-focused coping included previously documented strategies such as active coping, planning, and training (Crocker & Isaak, 1997); general problem-focused coping (Madden et al., 1989); increased effort and resolve (Madden et al., 1989); and behavioral strategies (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993). Unique elements of the problem-focused coping domain identified in the present research included participants' perceptions of the role of coping with emotions in performance. Fifteen participants viewed coping as a major part of their performance: Effective coping with emotions was an essential and inherent part of the performing craft. Par-

ticipants in both sport and the arts targeted several emotions as problems that needed their immediate attention and optimal solutions (e.g., reduction, elimination). Consequently, this type of coping was categorized as problem-focused rather than emotion-focused coping. Further, it appears that, among elite performers, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping might be phenomenologically and conceptually related. Thus, our data provide additional support for Bompa's (1999) distinction of psychological preparation as one of the four fundamental areas of sport training and performance (i.e., physical, technical, theoretical, and psychological).

The domain of emotion-focused coping in the present study included previously documented responses such as general emotionality (Madden et al., 1989), focus on and venting of emotions (Crocker & Isaak, 1997), acceptance (Crocker & Isaak, 1997), emotional control strategies (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993), psychological techniques (Wesner, Noyes, & Davis, 1990), using anxiety as a stimulant (Mahoney & Avenier, 1977), and seeking social support (Crocker & Isaak, 1997; Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Madden et al., 1989). Unique aspects of emotion-focused coping documented in our research included participants' belief in their ability to handle emotions well and balancing out confidence and humility to ensure consistent preparation and performance.

Avoidance-focused coping strategies reported in this study were previously identified as ignore/block things out (Jackson et al., 1998); avoidance and isolation (Gould et al., 1997); detachment, denial, and wishful thinking (Madden et al., 1989); suppression of competing activities, wishful thinking, behavioral disengagement, denial, and self-blame (Crocker & Isaak, 1997); and creating a private world (Fredrickson & Rooney, 1988). Finally, failing in coping was an issue for 12 out of the 16 elite performers interviewed in this study and was previously reported in the literature as a problem in high-level performance (e.g., Crocker & Isaak, 1997; Wills & Cooper, 1988). The responses classified in the present research as failing in coping replicated previous findings that performers sometimes rely on negative strategies (Wills & Cooper, 1988) or maladaptive coping (Jackson et al., 1998) and can be subject to panic, loss of control, and a fear of collapse (Steptoe & Malik, 1995).

A number of researchers (e.g., Gould et al., 1997; Krohne, 1993) suggested that universal patterns of coping might not exist, and that most commonly used taxonomies of coping behavior (i.e., problem-focused and emotion-focused; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) may oversimplify the issue. Indeed, we encountered a number of conceptual challenges referring to classification of certain coping strategies that did not fit neatly into a single category (see Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993). For example, taking perspective (e.g., "can't win everything," AT6) could be categorized as both emotion-focused coping (during and after performance) and appraisal-focused coping (for future performances and retrospective evaluations of one's career). This finding suggested phenomenological continuity (unity) of appraisals and coping, as reported by 16 performers interviewed in this study. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress as well as Anshel's et al. (2001) and Hardy's et al. (1996) models of coping in sport support this finding in that coping outcomes are accounted for in one's appraisals of the stress, thus leading to a circular nature of appraisals-coping outcomes relationships. Clearly, the insights of circular nature of coping responses coincides with Lazarus's (2000c) suggestions to use holistic and in-depth analytic designs in research on coping. By extension, there appears to be a need for descriptive accounts of individuals' complex and multifaceted coping responses, because these responses reflect deep meaning structures embedded in a unique set of a person's experiences (see also Eklund et al., 1993).

Findings from this study expanded the descriptive list of coping strategies and skills reported by performers in the sport and performing arts psychology literatures. Sport psychologists attempting to deliver performance-enhancement services to nonsport performers (e.g.,

Hays, 2000, Taylor & Taylor, 1995) may benefit from cross-domain comparisons of coping responses. Meaningful differences between performance domains were noted in our results (17 out of total of 42 lower-order themes). For example, athletes reported greater motivational changes (i.e., both increase and decrease in motivation to improve and succeed were reported) than the performing artists, who did not report decreased motivation as a coping strategy. Although some of these qualitative group differences may be attributed to differences in language used by performers of various domains to name the same phenomenon (e.g., working harder vs. focusing on preparation), other differences seem to have more solid experiential substance (e.g., letting ego go to improve performance through an unblocked expression of pure art form). In either case, sport psychology consultants delivering performance-enhancement services to nonathletic performers should consider domain-specific examinations of the performance demands, language, and other attributes of respective subcultures. Our findings strongly support a definite need for further research aiming at understanding cross-domain differences. The degree of descriptive specificity accomplished in this project can help consultants to assist performers in exploring new coping strategies or enhancing existing coping skills.

Strengths of this project involved the in-depth, inductive nature of data collection and analysis (see Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992). Rich details in the data (especially on the level of lower-order themes) and careful content analysis provided a high resolution in understanding coping strategies used by the 16 elite performers that went beyond preconceived categories. Additionally, this study represented one of the first attempts in the sport psychology literature to compare performers from both sports and performing arts.

One concern with the present study was the limited scope of external validity. Only two types of situations were considered: performance success and failure. It will be important to establish whether athletic and artistic performers use other strategies in other aspects of their performances (e.g., in response to injury). Another methodological concern involved the retrospective nature of participants' accounts (see Hanton & Jones, 1999a; Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Beck, 1997). Smith, Leffingwell, and Ptacek (1999) seriously challenged the value of retrospective data in studying coping. For example, their participants (students who were facing a major test) in their distal (i.e., retrospective) reports overestimated the extent of daily coping compared to proximal (i.e., daily) accounts. The present research was not concerned with specifying exactly which strategies were used at specific times; rather, our interest was in expanding the description of the repertoire of coping strategies available to participants. The descriptive (as opposed to explanatory or predictive) nature of this study reduced concerns about temporal inaccuracy associated with recalled coping attempts. Future research should consider microanalytic, day-to-day, holistic approaches that have been recommended by Lazarus (2000c) to enhance findings in the area of stress and coping.

We hope that researchers will continue to explore and classify coping behaviors used by elite performers in different performance domains. Such research would add clarity to our understanding of the relative contributions of context and individual differences to variability in performers' coping responses. Performers' appraisals regarding coping effectiveness also need to be examined in future research. Prospective designs would be a valuable complement to the existing retrospective data. Cross-domain studies hold promise for clarifying the psychological aspects of performance for sport psychology consultants whose services are increasingly invited by nonsport clients.

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