COPING STRATEGIES AMONG ELITE SWEDISH FOOTBALL PLAYERS IN RELATION TO THEIR GOAL ORIENTATION PROFILES

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to investigate: (1) elite Swedish football players use of coping strategies, (2) their goal orientations, and (3) the relationship between their goal orientation profiles and use of coping strategies. Participants were 83 male elite Swedish football players. The Perception of Success Questionnaire and COPE inventory were administered to meet the objectives. Results showed a significant interaction effect between athletes’ task and ego goal orientations and their use of planning. Athletes’ with a HT/LE profile (3.06 ± 0.36; M ± SD) used frequently more planning than athletes’ with a LT/LE profile (2.59 ± 0.51). Moreover, athletes’ high in task (2.71 ± 0.37) used more problem-focused strategies than athletes low in task (2.54 ± 0.33), and athletes’ low in ego (2.31 ± 0.24) used more emotion-focused strategies than athletes’ high in ego (2.17 ± 0.27). Results are discussed in relation to previous research of achievement motivation and athletes’ use of coping strategies.

Keywords: Achievement Goal Theory, coping strategies, football players, and goal orientation profiles.
Sammanfattning

Syftet med föreliggande studie var att undersöka: (1) svenska elitfotbollsspelares användande av coping strategier, (2) deras målorienteringar, och (3) relationen mellan deras målorienteringsprofiler och användande av coping strategier. Urvalet bestod av 83 manliga svenska elitfotbollsspelare. Studiens syften undersöktes med hjälp av The Perception of Success Questionnaire och COPE inventory. Resultaten visade en signifikant interaktionseffekt mellan idrottarnas task och ego orienteringar och användande av planering. Idrottare med en HT/LE profil (3.06 ± 0.36; M ± SD) använde sig av mer planering än idrottare med en LT/LE profil (2.59 ± 0.51). Vidare använde idrottare med en hög task-orientering (2.71 ± 0.37) sig av mer problem-fokuserade strategier än idrottare med en låg task-orientering (2.54 ± 0.33) och idrottare med en låg ego-orientering (2.31 ± 0.24) använde mer emotions-fokuserade strategier än idrottare med en hög ego-orientering (2.17 ± 0.27). Resultaten har diskuterats i relation till tidigare forskning inom prestationsmotivation och idrottares coping strategier.

Nyckelord: Achivement Goal Theory, coping strategier, fotbollsspelare, målorienteringsprofiler.
Introduction

Elite athletes are exposed to a number of intense physical and psychological demands, and they use a set of cognitive and behavioral strategies in order to cope with these challenges and related stress (Crocker, Alderman & Smith, 1988; Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993). If athletes are unable to cope with these demands, it can lead to poor performance, negative affect and drop out of sport (Madden, 1995). An athlete’s use of cognitive or behavioral strategies can further be seen as the core of the coping process (Anshel, Kim, Kim, Chang, & Eom, 2001). In order to help athletes to cope with stressful events in sport, sport psychology researchers need to understand the causes of stress experienced by athletes and strategies that can be effective to deal with (Crocker & Graham, 1995; Gould, et al., 1993).

Research has shown a link between athletes’ use of coping strategies and their goal orientation profiles (GOP) (Ntoumanis, Biddle, & Haddock, 1999; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003). Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) has been the most cited approach (Roberts, Treasure & Conroy, 2007) to examine determinants of athletes’ motivated behavior in athletic contexts (Nicholls, 1984; 1989). According to AGT (Nicholls, 1984; 1989), within an individual’s personal theory of achievement, each individual has a predisposition to be either task- or ego involved. Task- and ego goal orientations have been suggested by sport psychology researchers to be antecedents of emotions, cognition and behavior (Georgiadis, Biddle, & Auweele, 2001). Investigating the coping strategies athletes use during sport competition have been acknowledged for both its theoretical and practical significance (Crocker & Graham, 1995). However, only a few studies have investigated this topic among elite athletes (e.g., Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003) and there has been little research testing theoretical frameworks regarding how athletes cope with stressful situations in sport (Crocker, Kowalski & Graham, 1998). No study has been found that has investigated the use of coping strategies in relation to GOP among elite Swedish football players. Therefore, the present study is supposed to examine the relationship between GOP of elite Swedish football players and their use of coping strategies.

Definitions of key terms

Stress and coping

Psychological stress is described as “a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 21). This definition goes beyond stimulus and response definitions that have limited utility since a stimulus only is defined as stressful in terms of a stress response. Coping has been defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141) as “…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 and Folkman further hold that coping involves efforts individuals take to cope with situations that are appraised as a potential threat. This definition by Lazarus and Folkman has three important features: (1) it suggests that coping consists of a certain amount of effort and planning, (2) coping is a conscious attempt to decrease or manage stress and (3) it emphasizes that coping is process-oriented which means that coping changes over time and in conformity with the environment in which it occurs. Lazarus (1993) further described coping as a goal-oriented process in which a person directs thoughts and behaviors toward the purpose to deal with the stressful source and manages emotional reactions to the stressor.
Coping style and strategies
When defining coping, it is important to differentiate between coping style and coping strategies (Anshel, et al., 2001). Coping style refers to an athlete’s disposition, which is a preference or tendency to engage in specific types of coping strategies in a predictable manner in response to different types of stressful events (Krohne, 1993). Coping strategies, in contrary, refers to the athlete’s attempts to cope with stressful demands and to decrease perceived stress intensity by using one or more cognitive or behavioral strategies.

Achievement motivation
Achievement motivation can be defined as “the athlete’s predisposition to approach or avoid a competitive situation” (Cox, 1998, p. 238). The term achievement is defined by Roberts et al. (2007, pp. 3-4) as “the attainment of a personally or socially valued achievement goal that has a meaning for the person in a physical activity context. Motivation can be defined as: “a process of arousal within an organism that helps, direct and sustain behavior” (Wann, 1997, p. 159). Duda and Treasure (2006) further stated that motivation is the core of sport performance and achievement, and since motivation is a social cognitive process, motivational processes are described as: ”the psychological constructs that energize, direct, and regulate achievement behavior” (Roberts, et al., 2007, p.3).

Theoretical frameworks
The transactional model of stress
Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984; 1987) transactional model of stress state that it is the person/environment interaction that causes perceptions of stress for an individual. According to the model, an individual’s emotional life cannot be understood merely from the standpoint of the individual or the environment per se. We must consider a relationship in which the person and the environment interact and create a new condition or state. Further, a key construct of this model is cognitive appraisal which refers to the evaluative cognitive processes that intervene between the stressful encounter and its significance to the individual’s well-being. This appraisal process in which human beings constantly during waking life are evaluating what is happening to them influences whether and how a person copes with demands. Lazarus and Folkman have identified two forms of appraisals, primary and secondary which have different functions and deal with different types of information. Primary appraisal refers to the motivational relevance of what is happening, more specifically, whether something has personal relevance for our well-being.

Lazarus and Folkman further holds that primary appraisal can be considered as an individual’s judgment whether he or she has any stakes in the encounter, and if so, what types. If an individual determines that the encounter has no personal significance for his/her well-being, no emotional reaction will occur. In contrary, when the encounter has relevance to the individual’s personal goals, the emotional reaction is influenced by what and how much that is at stake.

Further, if individuals decide that something is at stake in an encounter, the transactional model proposes that evaluative judgments are required whether any actions can be taken in order to alter conditions perceived as undesirable. This cognitive process is labeled as secondary appraisal and is focused on which coping options that are available to improve the troubled person-environment relationship. However, it is important to note that the classification of cognitive appraisals into primary and secondary, it does not mean that one is more important than the other, or that one comes before the other. Moreover, these terms do
not say anything regarding the content of each form of appraisal. Lazarus and Folkman, however, conclude that these terms are so well established in the literature that it would not be wise to rename these types of appraisals.

**The coping process in sport**

Below a model (Anshel et al., 2001) for understanding the coping process is presented in Figure 1. The model describes the different stages of coping following an athlete’s perception of a stimulus or event. The appraisal of the event as stressful is followed by the athlete’s use of coping strategies, and finally, the model highlights the post-coping activities of the athlete (i.e., thoughts, actions). Coping has further been classified into approach and avoidance dimensions and behavioral and cognitive sub-dimensions. Anshel et al. states that the model provides important applications for counseling athletes. First, it is helpful when explaining how athletes cope with acute stress. Second, it is valuable when improving coping effectiveness.

![Figure 1. A model of the coping process in sport. Adapted from Anshel et al. (2001, p. 48).](image-url)

**Perceived stress and cognitive appraisal** is the initial stage in the model and represents the athlete’s perception of an event or detection of a stimulus, and the stress an athlete experiences is further based on a perception. However, the exposure to an event is not regarded as stressful until the information is interpreted by the athlete as stressful, this process is called cognitive appraisal. Interpretations of harm/loss represent perceived damage or stress that has already happened. Appraisals of harm/loss are usually made when an athlete has received a reprimand or experienced injury or pain. Threat appraisals involve harms or losses that have not yet occurred but are expected (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Challenge appraisals represent an individual’s belief that mastering a stressful experience will be beneficial. These appraisals concern the anticipation that unpleasant events are a natural part of sport and must be mastered by the athlete to reach a desirable outcome (Peacock & Wong, 1990).

**Approach coping** is a strategy that occurs when an individual takes in and process unpleasant or threatening information. By using this strategy, the individual tries to improve his or her
understanding or control of the stressful event or to increase one’s resourcefulness in dealing with the event. **Approach behavioral coping** reflects an athlete’s actions taken to manage a stressful situation and involves actions such as getting new information or confrontation. **Approach cognitive coping** involves thoughts in order to achieve a better emotional status and decrease stress intensity. **Avoidance coping** is a person’s attempt to consciously turn away from the stressful event, either physically or mentally (Krohne, 1993). **Avoidance behavioral coping** can consist of strategies such as exercise (e.g., jogging, yoga) and social engineering (e.g., avoiding an individual or stressful event). **Avoidance cognitive coping** reflects strategies such as psychological distancing (e.g., “The coach is having a bad day today”), cognitive reappraisal (e.g., “I learned something today”) and rationalization (e.g., “Some days I play better than other days”). Anshel et al.’s model further describes four different cognitive-behavioral post coping processes: (1) no coping, which means that the athlete stays focused on task or shifts focus off task while remaining stressed, (2) shifting focus to external task demands with decreased perceived stress intensity, (3) appraise the effectiveness of the coping strategy and (4) cognitively reappraise the stressful event.

**Achievement goal theory**

AGT (Nicholls, 1984, 1989) initially evolved as a theoretical perspective on students’ motivation in school settings (Elliot, 2005) focusing on motivational orientations that influences students’ adaptive and maladaptive patterns of engagement. The basic assumption of AGT is that individuals are intentional, goal-oriented and operate in a rational manner (Roberts, Treasure & Balague, 1998; Roberts, et al., 2007). A central tenet of this theory is the desire to develop and demonstrate competence and also to avoid demonstrating incompetence (Roberts, et al., 2007). This desire can thereby be considered as the construct that energizes the motivational processes. The theory further holds that each individual is predisposed to be either task- or ego involved (Roberts, et al., 2007). However, according to Nicholls (1984; 1989), these two goal orientations are orthogonal which means that different combinations can exist within an individual. More specifically, an individual can have combinations such as high task/high ego, low task/high ego, low task/low ego and high task/low ego. AGT further holds that individuals’ achievement beliefs are governed by achievement goals which affect future decision-making and behavior (Nicholls, 1984; 1989). Moreover, since the overall goal of action according to AGT is supposed to be the demonstration of competence, the perception of ability thereby becomes a core variable (Roberts, et al., 1998; 2007). The theory also assumes that individuals has a need to strive for development and to feel competent which can be achieved by either demonstrating high ability or avoid demonstrating low ability (Nicholls, 1989; Roberts, et al., 2007).

**Conceptions of ability and goal involvement**

Nicholls (1984) argued that there are two different conceptions of ability, undifferentiated conception and differentiated, influencing an individual’s affective and cognitive responses to achievement striving. These two conceptions of ability share the notion that effort or learning improves task mastery. From his developmental work with children, Nicholls (1984) came to the conclusion that the development of the conceptions of ability is a process where the constructs of luck, task difficulty and effort are differentiated from ability. Nicholls further discovered that children by the age of 12 are able to differentiate effort from ability and that these conceptions of ability prove themselves in achievement contexts. An undifferentiated conception of ability means that the individual cannot differentiate ability from luck, task difficulty, and effort (Nicholls, 1984; 1989). In this first conception, an individual is assumed
to be *task-involved* which means that an individual makes judgments about his/her levels of ability and task difficulty in relation to perceived mastery, understanding or knowledge (Nicholls, 1984; 1989). Therefore, an individual’s perceived competence is directly related to how much one feels that he or she has learned. In the second conception, which is more *differentiated*, learning is not enough if the individual wants to feel competent (Nicholls, 1984; 1989). Instead, the individual makes judgments about task difficulty and ability in reference to the ability of members belonging to a normative reference group. In reference to capacity, task difficulty is based on the performance of others and high ability can only be demonstrated if success is achieved on tasks where others fail (Nicholls, 1984).

*Previous research findings*

Research on athletes’ coping strategies as well as their achievement motivation in sport has received a lot of attention in sport psychology (for reviews, see Richards, 2004; Roberts, et al., 2007). Research on coping in sport started with trying to clarify which coping responses athletes use across various sports settings (e.g., Gould, et al., 1993). A second line of investigation tried to identify which specific strategies are the most effective to cope with internal and external demands in sport contexts (e.g., Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996). However, only a few studies have examined the link between athletes’ use of coping strategies and their achievement motivation. Ntoumanis et al. (1999) and Pensgaard and Roberts (2003) are among the few researchers that have investigated this topic among athletes. The following part of this introduction demonstrates previous research findings on coping, athletes’ use of coping strategies, and achievement motivation. Furthermore, research relating these two areas to each other will be presented.

*Coping Approaches to coping*

Coping has traditionally been studied using two major approaches: (1) a style (trait) approach, and, (2) a process (situation) approach (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989; Lazarus, 1993).

*The style versus process approach*

Carver et al. (1989) claimed that certain personality characteristics can predict how an individual copes when facing adversity. This approach to coping has been considered as somewhat controversial. Carver and colleagues hold that the use of coping styles is limited, it restricts the individual to one mode of responding to a certain situation instead of providing the freedom to change responses when circumstances change.

The process-oriented approach to coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is concerned with an individual’s actual thoughts and behavior, contrary to the trait approach which emphasizes what the individual usually thinks or does. Moreover, it focuses on the individual’s thoughts and behavior within a specific context. Thus, a person’s thoughts and actions are always oriented towards certain conditions. The most significant limitation is that process-approach measures do not consider the whole person, who has certain belief systems, social connections and a particular goal hierarchy. Lazarus concludes that process measures of coping must be placed within a larger framework of an individual’s life to get a true understanding of the coping process.

To summarize these two major approaches, when measuring coping, both approaches are important since it could be argued that they represent two sides of the same coin. This
statement is supported by Lazarus (1999) which states that these perspectives complement each other and neither perspective can by itself provide enough understanding of emotion and adaptation within the coping process. Therefore, the best approach might be to combine these two perspectives in future coping research.

**Dimensions of coping**
The most popular dimensions in research on coping are: problem-versus emotion focused coping, primary versus secondary control coping, and engagement (approach) and disengagement (avoidance) coping (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Harding-Thomsen & Wadsworth, 2001).

**Problem- and emotion focused coping**
The problem- and emotion-focused dimensions represent the function of a person’s choice to either act on the stressful source or alleviate negative emotions that derive from a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Lazarus (1999), refers problem-focused coping to responses such as obtaining information, generating possible solutions to resolve the problem, and mobilization of actions to alter the stressful circumstances. The actions an individual takes may be oriented towards either the self (inner-directed) or the environment (outer-directed). Problem-solving coping is most likely to occur when an individual interprets the stressful situation as controllable (Carver, et al., 1989). Emotion-focused coping is geared at regulating the emotions connected to the stressful encounter (Lazarus, 1999). This can be achieved, for example, by avoiding thoughts about the threat or reappraising the encounter by creating a new relational meaning of the stressful situation. This occurs without changing the realities of the stressful encounter. Emotion-focused strategies involve actions such as physical exercise, relaxation, expressing feelings, and seeking social support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An individual is more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping when a problem or challenge seems uncontrollable (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

**Primary and secondary control coping**
Primary control coping refers to when an individual is oriented towards to achieve a sense of control over the environment and his or her reactions, and involves efforts directed at influencing objective encounters or direct regulation of one’s emotions (Rudolph, Dennig & Weisz, 1995, Weisz, McCabe & Dennig, 1994). Secondary control coping reflects attempts to adapt to the environment and may involve actions, such as acceptance or cognitive restructuring. The primary-secondary dimension is the only one treating coping responses and goals as distinct constructs (Compas, et al., 2001; Rudolph, et al., 1995).

**Engagement and disengagement coping**
Engagement coping reflects actions directed either toward the stressful source or toward one’s thoughts and emotions (e.g., seeking social support) (Compas, et al., 2001). Disengagement coping includes responses that are directed away from the stressful source or one’s thoughts and emotions.

However, both the problem- and emotion focused dimensions and the engagement-disengagement dimension has been criticized for being too broad and simplistic (Compas, et al., 2001; Carver, et al., 1989). These dimensions fail to show the complexity of distinct
subtypes of coping and therefore do not consider the fact that these subtypes can differ significantly in intentions and effects (Compas, et al., 2001).

Coping in sports
A large amount of studies have used qualitative methods to describe coping behaviors of elite athletes. One important study was the one by Gould et al. (1993) that investigated the relationship between coping strategies and sources of stress among 17 senior U.S National Champion figure skaters. After conducting in-depth interviews, Gould et al. found that athletes used different coping strategies in response to stressful encounters. It was also discovered that the athletes used both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Gould and colleagues concluded that coping is a complex process in which athletes strive at the same time to deal with both the stressful environment and distressing emotions.

Another study using a qualitative approach was the one by Holt and Hogg (2004) investigating perceptions of sources of stress and coping strategies among 10 female football players prior to the 1999 football World Cup finals in U.S.A. Using a case study approach, Holt and Hogg identified four major sources of stress reported by the athletes: (1) coaches’ communication, (2) demands of international football, (3) competitive stressors, and (4) distractions. Holt and Hogg also found that participants used different strategies depending on the source of stress which is consistent with the results found by Gould et al. (1993). Other studies employing a qualitative approach are, for example, Gould, Udry, Bridges and Beck (1997) that examined elite skiers coping with season-ending injuries, and Park (2000) that investigated coping strategies used by Korean National athletes. Qualitative studies seem to have made important contributions in order to understand coping processes among elite athletes. By investigating this topic interviewing high-performing athletes, an important element has emerged from these studies: coping is a dynamic, complex process that shifts greatly depending on the stressful encounter (Crocker, et al., 1998).

However, most studies have used quantitative measures to investigate how athletes cope with stressful demands in sport (Ntoumanis, et al., 1999). Moreover, most coping instruments have predominantly been developed for non-sport populations (Crocker, et al., 1998). In order to study the coping process, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) developed the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WOCQ). Respondents are instructed to read a series of predicates which represents a coping thought or action that individuals engage in under stressful situations. WOCQ measures two different dimensions of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Noticing the problems with the WOCQ, Carver et al. (1989) developed the original COPE inventory. Contrary to the WOCQ, the COPE inventory was developed from theoretical considerations. These include the transactional model of coping, the model of behavioral self-regulation and pre-existing coping measures. It originally consisted of 13 conceptually distinct scales but two exploratory scales (humour and drug/alcohol use) were also developed. The COPE inventory has since its development been utilized in sport settings and its qualities have been recognized by sport researchers (Crocker, et al., 1998).

Acknowledging the psychometric qualities of the COPE, Crocker & Graham (1995) developed a version of the COPE to be used in sport settings. MCOPE contains nine scales from the original COPE (e.g., active coping, seeking instrumental social support, behavioral disengagement) and three additional sport relevant scales (i.e., wishful thinking, self-blame, and increased effort). The factorial structure of the MCOPE was reasonably supported in
exploratory (Ntoumanis, et al., 1999) and confirmatory factor analyses (Eklund, Grove & Heard, 1998). The Athletic Coping Skills Inventory-28 (ACSI-28; Smith, Schutz, Smoll & Ptacek, 1995) was created in order to fill the need of reliable and valid questionnaires for sport contexts. The ACSI-28 is a trait-like instrument consisting of seven subscales measuring coping (i.e., adversity, peaking under pressure, goal setting/mental preparation, concentration, freedom from worry, confidence and achievement motivation, and coachability). However, some major issues threaten the validity of the ACSI-28. Firstly, it is not based on any theory of coping (Crocker, et al., 1998). Secondly, the ACSI-28 items may not be specific enough to measure coping itself. Thereby, it may measure general levels of psychological skills and not coping itself. Thirdly, several items in the ACSI-28 do not seem to measure coping utilization, instead they seem to measure coping efficiency. Therefore, it could be argued that the ACSI-28 has several limitations as a measure of coping-processes in sport.

Pensgaard and Ursin (1998) used the COPE inventory retrospectively to examine different dimensions of the stress experience and the following coping strategies among 69 Norwegian Olympic athletes. The results revealed that the participants primarily used problem-focused strategies (e.g., active coping, planning, seeking of instrumental social support) to cope with stressors, such as external distractions and internal/external expectations. Gaudreau, Lapierre and Blondin (2001) used a multiple measure design measuring pre-competitive, competitive and post-competitive coping responses of 33 competitive junior-golfers using the Modified COPE inventory (MCOPE; Crocker & Graham, 1995). Results showed that the coping strategies used by the athletes changed significantly across the three different time periods. These results confirmed that coping does change over time. However, results supported both process-oriented and coping style approaches of coping. Therefore, Gaudreau et al. concluded that multiple assessments of coping are necessary in order to capture its complex and dynamic nature during competition.

It appears that quantitative studies have further enhanced understanding of coping processes among elite athletes by investigating large populations. Therefore, important knowledge about athletes’ choice of coping strategies has been gained through these studies.

**Achievement goal orientation**

In reference to an individual’s goal involvement, the major concern is a person’s actual achievement behavior at the present moment. In contrary, an individual’s goal orientation refers to a person’s tendency or disposition to be either task- or ego involved. However, different researchers have used different terms for these goal orientations such as learning and performance goal orientation (Dweck & Legget, 1988), mastery and ability goal orientation (Ames & Archer, 1988) and task and outcome goal orientation (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). In this study, the terms described by Nicholls (1984), task and ego goal orientation, will be used. According to Nicholls (1984; 1989), a person’s goal orientation can be seen as a reflection of his or her subjective definition of success. Nicholls uncovered two distinct goal orientations: a task goal orientation and an ego goal orientation. A task goal orientation is linked to an undifferentiated conception of ability where an individual’s evaluation of personal performance and success is made in reference to one’s effort and mastery. Therefore, a task goal orientation is characterized by the desire to develop ability and achieve task mastery. From his educational research, Nicholls (1984, 1989) proposed that a task orientation will provide opportunities for learning, higher self-esteem and mastery-experiences.
In contrary, an ego goal orientation is linked to a differentiated conception of ability where individuals view their ability as a predetermined and uncontrollable personal attribute (Brett & VandeWalle, 1999). Further, adopting an ego goal orientation means that personal performance is evaluated by a normative reference and perceived ability is highly relevant (Roberts, et al., 2007). Individuals with an ego goal orientation are predicted to approach competitive situations and demonstrate superiority with as little effort as possible. However, Harwood, Cumming and Fletcher (2004) argued that an athlete with moderate or high levels of ego orientation can experience positive psychological responses as long as he or she has a corresponding or higher level of task orientation. Roberts et al. (2007) further stated that goal orientations should not be considered as traits or viewed as static, as they can change over time. Rather, goal orientations are dynamic cognitive schemas that can change as information about an individual’s performance is processed.

Since task and ego goal orientations differ in how competence and success are defined, it seems likely that an individual’s goal orientation will affect the person’s achievement behavior. One could therefore argue that cognitive variables (e.g., belief about success), affective responses (e.g., anxiety) and behavioral outcomes (e.g., choice of coping strategy) are influenced by an individual’s goal orientation.

Athletes’ goal orientations
Athletes’ goal orientations has over the last decades been one of the most investigated topics in sport psychology research (Cox, 1998). Previous research on athlete’s achievement motivation has been conducted within a social cognitive perspective, (Duda & Whitehead, 1998) and AGT (Nicholls, 1984; 1989) has been important to deepen our understanding of achievement behavior. Further, examinations of individuals’ achievement motivation have highlighted the importance of the multiple achievement goals individuals adopt within competitive settings (Nicholls, 1984). The majority of studies investigating athletes’ goal orientations have used a quantitative approach. However, a few researchers such as Hayashi (1996) and Thorne and Duda (1995) have used qualitative methods.

Duda and Whitehead’s (1998) extensive review of goal orientations measurements described the early work by Ewing (1981) who conducted the first study of achievement goals in sport. Ewing developed the Achievement Orientation Questionnaire (AOQ) where respondents are requested to recall a situation in sport when they had felt successful and then rate on a 5-point Likert scale how their perception of success correlated with 15 statements (e.g., “I felt successful when I met the challenge”). However, the validity and reliability of the AOQ were not satisfactory. In later research, the Task and Ego Orientation in Sports Questionnaire (TEOSQ; Duda, 1989) was created within an educational context to measure individual differences in preference for task and ego involvement. The TEOSQ requests participants to recall an event in sport when they felt successful and to rate their agreement with task- and ego oriented statements like “I feel successful in sport when I work really hard” (task) and “I feel most successful when I score the most points” (ego). Answers are given on a 5-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The TEOSQ was shown to have acceptable reliability and internal consistency (Duda & Whitehead, 1998).

A number of quantitative studies have used the TEOSQ to measure individual differences in task and ego goal orientations. For example, Van Yperen and Duda (1999) investigated the relationship between goal orientations and beliefs about causes of success among elite Dutch football players. Results revealed that a task orientation was associated with beliefs that effort
and parental support are important to achievement in football. An ego orientation was positively related to the belief that ability or innate talent could predict success in sport. Other examples of studies using the TEOSQ is Dunn and Dunn (1999) which examined the relationship between goal orientations, perceptions of athletic aggression and sportpersonship in elite youth male ice-hockey players, and Lochbaum and Roberts (1993) that investigated the relationship between task and ego goal orientations among 296 high school students from a variety of sports. A need for a more sport-specific measure of athlete’s goal orientations resulted in the development of the Perception of Success Questionnaire (POSQ; Roberts, et al., 1998). Just as the TEOSQ, POSQ uses the stem “I feel most successful in sports when…” followed by statements such as “I overcome difficulties” and “I outperform my opponents”. Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree. Roberts, Treasure and Kavussanu (1996) used the POSQ to examine achievement goal orientations in relation to satisfaction and beliefs about success in sport. In their study on 333 undergraduate students, Roberts and colleagues found that athletes with a high ego/low task combination did not believe that effort was a determinant of success whereas athletes with a combination of high task/low ego did not consider success to be a result of external factors. Examples of other studies using the POSQ is Kavussanu and Roberts (2001) which investigated the contribution of achievement goals on moral functioning in 143 basketball players, and Hall, Kerr and Matthews (1998) that investigated the role of achievement goals on perfectionism on precompetitive anxiety in 119 high school runners.

**Athletes’ coping strategies in relation to their goal orientations**

When examining athletes’ goal orientations, contemporary research has discovered significant relationships between goal orientations and achievement cognitions and behavior (e.g., Lochbaum & Roberts, 1993). Nicholls (1989) further claimed that individuals’ high in task orientation are less vulnerable to stress. Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that these individuals engage in more problem-focused coping strategies. Other researchers (e.g., Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Legget, 1988; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007) links individuals’ goal orientations to use of coping strategies by stating that when individuals’ that see their own intelligence in a specific context as malleable they will adopt a task orientation, and a theory of intelligence as fixed will give rise to an ego orientation. When these theories of intelligence are combined with a high confidence in ability, it will produce an adaptive pattern of coping. When combined with a low confidence in ability, it will create a maladaptive pattern of coping.

Ntoumanis et al. (1999) investigated the mediating role of coping strategies on the relationship between achievement motivation and affect among 356 British athletes. Results revealed that task orientation was related to problem-focused coping whereas ego-orientation was related to avoidance and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping have further been found to be associated with more effective ways of coping, such as the experience of more positive emotions (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998). Pensgaard and Roberts (2003) in their retrospective study on 69 Norwegian athletes competing at the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer found significant relationships between the athletes’ goal orientations and their use of coping strategies. More specifically, athletes’ high in task and low in ego (HT/LE) used more active coping and social emotional support, while athletes’ low in task and high in ego (LT/HE) used more positive redefinition and growth strategies.
Summary and objectives

Previous research suggested that an athlete’s achievement motivation produces patterns of cognition, emotion and behavior (Ames, 1992), and use of coping strategies has been found to be related to an athlete’s goal orientation (Ntoumanis, et al., 1999; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003). Ntoumanis et al. (1999) further stated that athletes’ task and ego goals may be associated to different ways of coping. Since Nicholls (1984; 1989) argued that task and ego goals are orthogonal, an athlete’s use of coping strategies should be affected by the relative strength of the two goal orientations. Moreover, coping has been described as a complex, dynamic process which forces an athlete to simultaneously manage both the stressful environment and regulate worrying emotions (e.g., Gould, et al., 1993). Pensgaard and Roberts (2003) discovered a link between athletes’ achievement goals and their use of coping strategies, however, they stated that further research on this topic is needed to be more definitive. Since a limited amount of research has investigated this relationship, further research in this area seems warranted.

The objectives of the present study are to investigate: (1) elite Swedish football players use of coping strategies, (2) their goal orientations, and (3) the relationship between their goal orientation profiles and use of coping strategies.

Method

Participants

The participants in the present study were recruited from five Swedish elite football clubs competing in the two highest divisions (i.e., Allsvenskan, Superettan). The sample involved 83 male football players with a mean age of 25.10 years (SD = 4.67). Three participants were dropped from the study due to incomplete age. Participants competed at either national (n = 71) and/or international level (n = 12). Present study used an availability sample of the players present at the time for the data collection.

Instruments

COPE inventory
A Swedish version (Muhonen & Torkelson, 2001) of the original COPE inventory (Carver, et al, 1989) was administered to examine the second objective of this study (i.e., elite Swedish football players’ use of coping strategies). However, the Swedish version was modified by the researcher to make it more situation-specific. As such, the participants are instructed to choose a stressful situation they have experienced in their sport within the previous six months, and to indicate on the following scale what type of strategy they used to cope with the situation. Responses are indicated on a 4-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = “I didn’t do this at all” and 4 = “I did this a lot”. The COPE inventory is a theoretically based measurement tool having 14 distinct scales, with five scales measuring problem-focused coping (i.e., active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, seeking instrumental social support, five scales measuring emotion-focused coping (i.e., seeking emotional social support, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, denial, turning to religion), and four other scales (i.e., focus on and venting of emotions, behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement, use of drugs/alcohol).
Perception of Success Questionnaire

A Swedish version (Christensen, 2010) of the Perception of Success Questionnaire (POSQ; Roberts, et al., 1998) was used to investigate the first objective in the present study (i.e., the goal orientations of Swedish elite football players). The POSQ measures athletes’ task- and ego goal orientations and consists of six items measuring task and six items measuring ego. Each item is connected to the phrase “I feel most successful in my sport when…” followed by task or ego oriented items. An example of a task-oriented item is: “…I overcome difficulties”, and an example of an ego oriented item is: “…I beat other people”. Responses to the POSQ are given on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree. The POSQ has demonstrated satisfactory internal reliability (Duda & Whitehead, 1998) for both the task- (alpha = .81) and the ego subscales (alpha = .82).

Procedure

The data collection for the present study was conducted during April 2011. Contact was made by the researcher and a person at the Swedish Football Association (SvFF) with six elite football clubs. All clubs received information regarding the purpose and the procedure of the study. Five of these clubs agreed to participate. The researcher was only able to be present during the data collection with three of the participating clubs. The participants in the present study received information (see Appendix A) regarding their ethical rights according to the ethical principles recommended by the American Psychological Association (2010). Information was given on the first page of the survey about the main purpose and procedure of the study. Moreover, the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, their right to abort participation at any time and that there were no right or wrong answers. They also received information that they were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity and were told about that their answers would only be analyzed on a group level. Finally, the participants were informed that it was very important that they answered honestly. The participants than signed a written consent form if they agreed on these principles.

Furthermore, the researcher remained present during the data collection if participants had any questions regarding the survey and/or their ethical rights.

The two remaining clubs received the survey by mail and sent it back to the researcher. However, the clubs had the opportunity to contact the researcher by phone if they had questions or concerns about the study. The completion time of the questionnaires ranged from 10 to 20 minutes.

Analyses

Descriptive analyses

The data collected with the questionnaires was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; version 18.0.0). Initial data analysis involved determination of reliability, and descriptive statistics were computed including means and standard deviations for the POSQ and COPE subscales. The level of significance was determined to be $p < .05$ for all statistical analyses.

Athletes' coping strategies

A within group ANOVA test of the problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping scores serving as two dependent within-subject variables was performed to investigate if there was a significant univariate effect of the difference between athletes’ use of coping strategies.
Athletes’ goal orientations
A one-way repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) with task and ego orientation scores serving as two dependent within-subject variables was conducted to investigate differences in athletes’ goal orientations. Goal orientation profiles were created by median split of the task and ego subscales of the POSQ which resulted in four different groups: Low Task/Low Ego (LT/LE), Low Task/High Ego (LT/HE), High Task/High Ego (HT/HE), and High Task/Low Ego (HT/LE).

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was also performed to investigate for differences in task and ego goal orientations among the four goal profile groups. If significant differences were detected, following Scheffe post hoc tests were conducted to find out in what way the four groups were different.

Relationship between athletes’ use of coping strategies and their goal orientation profiles
In order to investigate if there was a relationship between athletes’ goal orientation profiles and their use of each coping strategy in the COPE inventory, 2x2 ANOVA tests were conducted based on the goal orientation profiles that has been used in previous research (Roberts, Treasure & Kavussanu, 1996), with the task (high and low) and ego (high and low) orientations serving as independent variables and the different scales of the COPE serving as dependent variables.

2x2 ANOVA tests were also performed to investigate the relationship between athletes’ goal orientation profiles and the problem-focused coping strategies (i.e., active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, seeking instrumental social support) and the emotion-focused coping strategies (i.e., seeking emotional social support, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, denial, turning to religion).

Results

Descriptive statistics
Means and standard deviations (see Table 1) were computed for each of the variables in the POSQ and the COPE inventory. Table 1 is also showing alpha values for each subscale in the questionnaires (i.e., POSQ, COPE). It should be noted that several of the subscales of the COPE inventory have alpha values below .70. In general, alpha values above .70 are considered as acceptable (Cortina, 1993). Therefore, results that are related to these subscales should be interpreted with caution. Means and standard deviations were also computed for each goal orientation profile (see Table 2). Table 2 is also showing the number of participants in each of the goal profile groups.

Athletes’ use of coping strategies
The most frequently used strategies among the players in the study were active coping (2.98 ± 0.43), positive reinterpretation and growth (2.98 ± 0.48), and restraint coping (2.93 ± 0.52). The least used strategies were alcohol-drug disengagement (1.34 ± 0.55), behavioral disengagement (1.57 ± 0.53), turning to religion (1.58 ± 0.86), and denial (1.59 ± 0.49). Within group ANOVA test of the problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping scores serving as two dependent within-subject variables revealed that there was a significant univariate effect of the difference between athletes’ use of coping strategies ($F_{1,82} = 102.80$, p
More specifically, athletes’ used significantly more problem-focused coping (2.63 ± 0.36) than emotion-focused coping (2.24 ± 0.26).

**Athletes’ goal orientations**

A one-way repeated measure analysis of variance with the task (4.04 ± 0.58) and ego (4.05 ± 0.70) orientation scores serving as two dependent within-subject variables showed no significant univariate effect for the difference in athletes’ goal orientations.

Results further showed significant differences in athletes’ task orientation among the four goal profile groups (F_{3,79} = 61.96, p < 0.001, partial η² = .70). Following *post hoc* test (Scheffe) showed that the LT/LE group (3.37 ± 0.48) was significantly lower in task compared to all other groups. The LT/HE group (3.80 ± 0.19) was significantly higher in task compared to the LT/LE group and significantly lower in task compared to the HT/HE (4.46 ± 0.27) and HT/LE (4.52 ± 0.25) groups. No other significant differences were found.

Significant differences was also found in athletes’ ego orientations among the four groups (F_{3,79} = 36.55, p < 0.001, partial η² = .58). Following *post hoc* test (Scheffe) showed that the LT/LE group (3.39 ± 0.76) was significantly lower in ego orientation compared to the LT/HE (4.53 ± 0.25) and HT/HE groups (4.51 ± 0.26). Further, the LT/HE group was significantly higher in ego compared to the HT/LE group (3.56 ± 0.32). Also, the HT/HE group was significantly higher in ego than the HT/LE group. No other significant differences were found.

**Relationship between athletes’ goal orientations and use of coping strategies**

**Planning**

2x2 ANOVA tests revealed a significant main effect for the independent variable task orientation (F_{1,79} = 4.10, p < 0.05, partial η² = .05). More specifically, athletes’ high in task engaged in more planning (2.91 ± 0.48) than athletes’ low in task (2.71 ± 0.52). No significant main effect was found for the independent variable ego orientation. A significant interaction effect also emerged between athletes’ task and ego goal orientations (F_{1,79} = 4.95, p < 0.05, partial η² = .06) and their use of planning. That is, athletes’ with a HT/LE goal orientation profile (3.06 ± 0.36) scored higher on planning than athletes’ with a LT/LE profile (2.59 ± 0.51).

**Suppression of competing activities**

2x2 ANOVA tests showed significant main effects for the independent variables task (F_{1,79} = 4.39, p < 0.05, partial η² = .05) and ego orientation (F_{1,79} = 5.89, p < 0.05, partial η² = .07). More specifically, athletes high in task (2.69 ± 0.51) scored higher on this subscale than athletes’ low in task (2.41 ± 0.50) and athletes’ high in ego (2.70 ± 0.50) scored higher than those low in ego (2.38 ± 0.50). No significant interaction effect was revealed.

**Positive reinterpretation and growth**

2x2 ANOVA tests revealed a significant main effect for the independent variable task orientation (F_{1,79} = 5.03, p < 0.05, partial η² = .06). That is, athletes’ high in task (3.08 ± 0.49) reported a higher use of positive reinterpretation and growth than athletes low in task (2.87 ± 0.44). Results showed no significant main effect for the independent variable ego orientation and no significant interaction effect.
Turning to religion
Results showed no significant main effect for the independent variable task orientation. However, a significant main effect was found for the independent variable ego orientation ($F_{1,79} = 4.11, p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). More specifically, athletes’ low in ego (1.80 ± 0.99) scored higher on this subscale than athletes’ high in ego (1.41 ± 0.99). No significant interaction effect was found.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and internal consistency for POSQ and the Cope inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>POSQ</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task orientation</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego orientation</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cope</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active coping</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suppression of competing activities</td>
<td>2.55a</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restraint coping</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social instrumental</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social emotional</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redefinition and growth</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning to religion</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting of emotions</td>
<td>2.28a</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral disengagement</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental disengagement</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol-drug disengagement</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>$\pi$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-focused coping</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion-focused coping</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SD = standard deviation; $\alpha$ = Cronbach’s alpha; $\pi$ = single item; a = Item 36 was deleted from the Suppression of competing activities scale and item 16 was deleted from the Focus on and venting of emotions scale to achieve higher reliability. These items are therefore not included in subsequent analysis.

Denial
2x2 ANOVA tests revealed a significant main effect for the independent variable task orientation ($F_{1,79} = 5.45, p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$). More specifically, athletes’ low in task (1.73 ± 0.48) reported a higher use of this strategy than athletes’ high in task (1.47 ± 0.46). Results revealed no significant main effect for the independent variable ego orientation and no significant interaction effect.

Behavioral disengagement
2x2 ANOVA tests showed a significant main effect for the independent variable task orientation ($F_{1,79} = 14.04, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$). More specifically, athletes’ low in task (1.79 ± 0.59) scored higher on this subscale than athletes’ high in task (1.37 ± 0.36).
Furthermore, a tendency was found for a main effect for the independent variable ego orientation \((F_{1,79} = 3.64, p < 0.06, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04)\). That is, athletes’ low in ego \((1.73 \pm 0.59)\) reported a higher use of behavioral disengagement than athletes’ high in ego \((1.45 \pm 0.44)\). No significant interaction effect was revealed.

Table 2

Means and standard deviations for the four goal orientation groups for the Cope subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Low task/low Ego ((n = 22))</th>
<th>Low task/high Ego ((n = 18))</th>
<th>High task/high Ego ((n = 28))</th>
<th>High task/low Ego ((n = 15))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task orientation</td>
<td>3.37*</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>3.80*</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego orientation</td>
<td>3.39*</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>4.53*</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active coping</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>2.59*</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suppression of competing activities</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restraint coping</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social instrumental</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social emotional</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redefinition and growth</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning to religion</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting of emotions</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral disengagement</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental disengagement</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol-drugs</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-focused coping</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion-focused coping</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SD= standard deviation. *\(p<.05\)

Problem-focused coping

2x2 ANOVA tests found a significant main effect for the independent variable task orientation \((F_{1,79} = 4.62, p < 0.05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06)\). More specifically, athletes’ high in task \((2.71 \pm 0.37)\) used more problem-focused strategies than athletes low in task \((2.54 \pm 0.33)\). No significant main effect for the independent variable ego orientation and no significant interaction effect were found.

Emotion-focused coping

2x2 ANOVA tests revealed no significant main effect for the independent variable task orientation. However, a significant main effect was found for the independent variable ego orientation \((F_{1,79} = 6.17, p < 0.05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .07)\). More specifically, athletes’ low in ego \((2.31 \pm 0.24)\) reported a higher use of emotion-focused coping than athletes’ high in ego \((2.17 \pm 0.27)\). No significant interaction effect emerged.
No significant results emerged for the following subscales: active coping, restraint coping, seeking instrumental social support, seeking emotional social support, acceptance, focus on and venting of emotions, mental disengagement, and alcohol-drug disengagement.

Discussion

The objectives of the present study were to investigate (1) elite Swedish football players use of coping strategies, (2) their goal orientations and (3) the relationship between their goal orientations and use of coping strategies. Previous studies (e.g., Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003; Roberts, et al., 1996) have expressed a need for future research to further investigate the interactive effect of task and ego goal orientations. Therefore, this study has examined this relationship among Swedish elite football players in order to bring deeper understanding regarding this avenue of research.

Summary of research findings

Primary results showed that the most frequently used strategies among the players in the study were active coping (2.98 ± 0.43), positive reinterpretation and growth (2.98 ± 0.48), and restraint coping (2.93 ± 0.52). The least used strategies were alcohol-drug disengagement (1.34 ± 0.55), behavioral disengagement (1.57 ± 0.53), turning to religion (1.58 ± 0.86), and denial (1.59 ± 0.49). Results further revealed that athletes’ used significantly more problem-focused coping (2.63 ± 0.36) than emotion-focused coping (2.24 ± 0.26).

Moreover, no significant differences were found between athletes’ task and ego goal orientations. However, results showed significant differences in goal orientations among the four goal profile groups. Additionally, significant main effects for the independent variable task orientation emerged for (1) planning, (2) suppression of competing activities, (3) positive reinterpretation and growth, (4) denial, and (5) behavioral disengagement. Also, significant main effects were revealed for the independent variable ego orientation for (1) suppression of competing activities, and (2) turning to religion. Finally, significant main effects also emerged for problem-focused coping in general (task) and emotion-focused coping in general (ego), and a significant interaction effect was found between athletes’ goal orientations and use of planning. More specifically, athletes’ with a HT/LE profile reported a higher use of planning than athletes’ with a LT/LE profile.

Athletes’ use of coping strategies

The investigation of the athletes’ use of coping strategies revealed that the most frequently used strategies were active coping, positive reinterpretation and growth, and restraint coping. These results are in line with the study by Pensgaard and Roberts (2003). The least used strategies among the athletes were alcohol and drug disengagement, behavioral disengagement, turning to religion and denial which is in line with the results found by Muhonen and Torkelson (2001). However, the study by Muhonen and Torkelson was conducted on a non-sport specific sample. Since competing at high elite level can put an athlete under a lot of pressure, it seems reasonable to argue that it has the potential to create several stressful situations. Therefore, athletes need to employ several cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage these stressful events (Crocker, et al., 1988; Gould, et al., 1993). Moreover, football can be considered as a sport where the athletes are exposed to a number of threats and challenges which they have to cope with. For example, taking a penalty kick in an important game such as the World Cup final can certainly be perceived as...
extremely stressful for the athlete. It therefore seems crucial for a football player to be successful that he/she can engage in effective coping strategies. However, a strategy that is successful for one player might not be successful for another. Thus, it can be argued that personal beliefs and motives of athletes play a crucial role when trying to identify what kind of strategies that can be effective for each of them.

Active coping was one of the most frequently used strategies and involves taking direct actions in order to remove the stressor or amend its effects and can be considered to be a problem-focused coping strategy (Carver, et al., 1989). It also refers to an individuals’ active process to increase one’s effort to cope with the source of stress. Since elite sport potentially can create a number of demands for an athlete, is seems likely that these demands can put an athlete under a lot of pressure. One can also argue that there is a lot at stake in these encounters for athletes competing in elite sport. Thus, these encounters should have high motivational relevance for the athlete. For example, one player might receive information that scouts from professional clubs abroad will attend a game to evaluate his/her performance. An appropriate coping strategy in this situation might be to use active coping.

Another strategy that received high scores from the participants was positive reinterpretation and growth which means that a person is aiming at managing distress emotions rather than to actually cope with the stressful event (Carver, et al., 1989). Although positive reinterpretation and growth is regarded as an emotion-focused coping strategy, it can guide an individual to continue or to resume problem-focused coping processes. This strategy might be appropriate to use when an athlete perceives a stressor as uncontrollable. The athlete could, for example, view the stressor from a different perspective and try to find something positive in that particular situation. Restraint coping can be seen as both an active strategy and a passive strategy (Carver, et al., 1989). One reason that this strategy received high scores among the participants might be that elite athletes know that it is important to be patient in football games. For example, if a team concedes a goal already after a few minutes, it can create levels of stress among the players. As such, an appropriate strategy in this situation might be to be patient and not act prematurely.

Anshel et al. (2001) divided coping into approach and avoidance coping. Since failure to cope with stressful demands in sport can lead to poor performance and negative affect (Madden, 1995), one could argue that approach as well as avoidance coping might be beneficial coping strategies for a football player. Football can be regarded as a sport where athletes need to make quick decisions, and distraction from a stressful event may therefore be an appropriate strategy when little time is available to make a reflective response. Other effective avoidance coping strategies might be cognitive reappraisal (e.g., I really made some progress today) or rationalization (e.g., I played bad this game but next game I will perform better).

However, there is a risk that athletes engage in maladaptive coping strategies such as drug or alcohol abuse. Since alcohol and drug disengagement was the least used strategy among the participants one might argue that abuse of drugs and/or alcohol can be considered as something an athlete engages in when nothing else seem to work. Thus, athletes that score high on this subscale, might need help from a sport psychologist to return to more adaptive coping strategies. However, if an athlete has a severe drug or alcohol problem, this athlete should be referred to professionals with proper education and experience.
Other strategies that received low scores from the participants were behavioral disengagement, denial and turning to religion. Behavioral disengagement refers to an individual’s attempts to reduce his/her efforts to cope with the stressor (Carver, et al., 1989). The participants’ low scores on this subscale might not be surprising since the sample only involved elite athletes. Successful elite athletes have been found to be strongly committed, determined (Krane & Williams, 2006) and more highly motivated to perform well (Mahoney, Gabriel & Perkins, 1987). Henceforth, it seems reasonable to argue that elite athletes are less likely to give up their attempts to reach goals with which the stressor is interfering. Denial is defined as when an individual refuses to believe that the stressor is real or attempts to act as though the stressor does not exist (Carver, et al., 1989). The low scores on this subscale are similar to those found by Muhonen and Torkelson (2001) and might reflect that elite athletes realize that they must accept the stressor and have to deal with it in order to be successful in their sport. The opposite of denial is acceptance and it seems reasonable to argue that acceptance is a more functional and effective coping strategy. An athlete who accepts the reality of a stressful experience is probably more committed to deal with the stressor and more likely to be successful in his/her coping attempt.

Turning to religion refers to an individual’s tendency to turn to religion when experiencing stress (Carver, et al., 1989). The fact that this strategy received low scores was not surprising given the fact that Sweden is one of the most secularized countries in the world (Rydving, 2008).

Results further showed that athletes’ reported a higher use of problem-focused coping than emotion-focused coping. This result was not surprising since previous research (Crocker & Graham, 1995) has suggested that elite athletes must use a number of problem-focused strategies to be successful in sport. It has also been found that athletes have a stronger preference for problem-focused coping than for emotion-focused coping (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998). With reference to these results, it is interesting to discuss why athletes prefer problem-focused coping strategies. One possible reason might that elite athletes are likely to have a high confidence in ability. Several researchers (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Legget, 1988; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007) stated that an individual’s theory of intelligence in combination with high confidence in ability will activate an adaptive pattern of coping. Therefore, it can be argued that the preference for problem-focused coping among the participants in this study is a result of viewing their intelligence as either malleable or fixed in combination with having a high confidence in ability.

Finally, in reference to athletes’ post coping processes, the choice to not use a coping strategy can be argued to be common among elite football players since the game of football often puts a player under time pressure which requires quick decisions and immediate actions. Therefore, it seems likely that many players are restricted from using a coping strategy and thus remains stressed.

**Athletes’ goal orientations**

Results from the present study found no significant differences in athletes’ task and ego goal orientations. This is contradictory to previous studies (e.g., Christensen, 2010; Cumming, Hall, Harwood & Gammage, 2002; Harwood et al., 2004; Hodge & Petlichkoff, 2000) where participants scored higher on the task subscale than on ego. However, the results from this study are supported by a recent study by Madsen & Roness (2010) which also did not found a
significant difference between athletes’ goal orientations. Therefore, it is interesting to discuss why the athletes in the present study did not differ in their task and ego goal orientations. The mean responses for the athletes’ ego orientations were substantially higher than in the review by Duda and Whitehead (1998) but perhaps not surprising since the sample in this study involved only elite athletes. According to previous research (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003), elite athletes often score high on both the task and ego subscales in goal orientation measures, such as POSQ and TEOSQ. Nicholls (1989) stated that an individual’s level of ego involvement increases when he or she approaches evaluative conditions and interpersonal competition. Thus, it could be argued that athletes performing at an elite level are highly ego oriented and are focused on winning and achieving good results. Ego oriented athletes are further predicted to approach competitive situations (Roberts, et al., 2007) and to adopt an external criteria for success. Therefore, one could argue that these athletes experience a lot of pressure from fans, media and sponsors which drive these athletes to remain ego-oriented. This might explain the high scores on the ego-subscale of the POSQ.

The fact that participants in this study scored high on both subscales of the POSQ lends support to Nicholls (1989) notion that goal orientations are orthogonal, one can possess a high level of task and ego orientation at the same time. In reference to goal involvement, it has been a common view among researchers that an individual cannot be task and ego involved at the same time (Harwood, Hardy & Swain, 2000). There has by no means been reached consensus on this issue and Nicholls was never clear on this matter. He initially stated that if a person’s level of ego involvement increases, task involvement will be weakened (Nicholls, 1989). But later in the same text, Nicholls claimed that states of goal involvement do not exist in isolation. An individual can alternate between states and different combinations of them. As such, it seems that whether an individual can be task and ego involved simultaneously still needs to be clarified.

The present study revealed significant differences in task and ego goal orientations among the four goal profile groups. Thus, it seems that the classification into the four groups was successful. Also, it should be noted that the group with the most participants were the HT/HE group (n = 28). However, this group only involves 33 per cent of the total sample. Therefore, although the task and ego means in this study was relatively high, it is important to acknowledge individual differences in goal orientations when discussing athletes’ achievement motivation.

Relationship between athletes’ goal orientation profiles and their use of coping strategies
Results from the present study revealed main effects for the independent variables task and ego goal orientations for several of the subscales in the COPE. Moreover, a significant interaction effect emerged between athletes’ goal orientations and their use of planning. That is, athletes high in task and low in ego engaged in more planning than athletes low in task and low in ego. Significant main effects also emerged when examining athletes’ use of problem-focused coping strategies (i.e., active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, seeking instrumental social support) and emotion-focused coping strategies (i.e., seeking emotional social support, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, turning to religion, denial).

Previous research investigating athletes’ goal orientation profiles in relation to their use of coping strategies (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003; Ntoumanis et al., 1999) showed that athletes’
choice of coping strategies is related to their task and ego goal orientations. More specifically, having a high task orientation was associated to a more frequent use of problem-focused coping strategies and a high ego orientation was linked with a more frequent use of emotion-focused strategies. The present results of athletes’ goal orientation profiles in relation to their use of coping strategies support the findings of previous research. That is, significant differences emerged between different goal orientation profiles and use of coping strategies. However, although the ANOVAs showed that the means were significantly different, the effect sizes were small to modest. The partial Eta squared ranged between .05 and .15 which means that the factors task and ego orientation by themselves only accounted for a small percent of the overall (effect+error) variance. One must therefore be careful when drawing conclusions from these results.

Results from the present study showed that athletes’ with a HT/LE goal orientation profile used more planning than athletes’ with a LT/LE profile. Planning refers to when an individual is thinking about how best to cope with a problem (Carver, et al., 1989). Previous research have found that a high task orientation is associated with more adaptive achievement strategies, thus, these results may indicate that athletes high in task are more prone to use planning as a coping strategy than athletes low in task. Moreover, these results may also reflect the fact that a high task orientation has been linked with beliefs that hard work, effort and persistence are antecedents of success (Lochbaum & Roberts, 1993, Roberts, et al., 1996). Thus, highly task oriented athletes can be predicted to engage in more adaptive coping strategies such as planning. It is also interesting but perhaps not surprising to note that athletes low in task score higher than athletes high in task on the denial and behavioral disengagement subscales. Both these subscales can be considered as maladaptive coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989). Since task oriented athletes have been found to exert effort, focus on their own performance and persist in the face of failure (e.g., Lochbaum & Roberts, 1993), results from the present study therefore support previous research on athletes’ achievement motivation and use of coping strategies (e.g., Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003).

In reference to previous research on athletes’ goal orientations and coping strategies (e.g., Ntoumanis et al., 1999), one could argue that the achievement goals (self-referenced or other-referenced) an athlete adopts to will affect that athletes choice of coping strategy.

**Problem- versus emotion-focused coping**

The results from this study revealed that athletes’ high in task used more problem-focused coping than athletes low in task. This is not surprising since previous research (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003; Ntoumanis et al., 1999) has found that a high task orientation is linked with a high use of problem-focused coping. However, contradictory to what could have been expected, athletes’ low in ego reported a higher use of emotion-focused coping than athletes’ high in ego. This result was surprising since high levels of ego orientation normally are associated with emotion-focused coping (Ntoumanis et al., 1999). Therefore it is interesting to discuss why this result was found. One possible reason for this result might be that all participants compete in a team sport (i.e., football). It can be argued that team sport athletes are exposed to different stressors than individual sport athletes. Moreover, Park (2000) stated that team sport athletes need more coping strategies than individual and dual sport athletes. For example, football players must rely on teammates to reach success and may not get as much attention from the coach as an individual athlete. According to Holt and Hogg (2004), team sport athletes are involved in a number of competitive and noncompetitive interactions.
with their teammates. One situation that certainly can create levels of stress for a football player is the battle for a place in the starting eleven. For example if a player knows that several scouts from professional clubs abroad will attend his/her next game, that player might experience high levels of stress if the player is uncertain whether he/she will be in the starting eleven.

Another reason for this unexpected result might be that the players were instructed to choose a stressful situation they had experienced within the last six months. Thus, it can be argued that main season games have a bigger potential to create stressful situations than pre-season games. It is therefore plausible that many players chose situations that happened in the end of previous season where many teams play important games to either win the league or to avoid relegation. Therefore, it can be argued that these games can create stressful situations that seem uncontrollable for a player. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980), an individual is more prone to use emotion-focused coping when a stressful event is appraised as uncontrollable. Hence, even if a player with a low ego orientation has a preference for using problem-focused coping, these important games might create stressful situations which force him/her to use emotion-focused coping instead.

Results and related theoretical frameworks

The present study was based on the theoretical frameworks of the Achievement Goal Theory (Nicholls, 1984, 1989), Lazarus and Folkman’s transactional model of stress (1984, 1987) and Anshel et al.’s (2001) model of the coping process in sport. First, AGT was used to investigate athletes’ goal orientation profiles. Results provided conceptual support of the AGT, since athletes scored high on both subscales of the POSQ which lends support to the notion that an individual can be high in both task and ego orientation. AGT served well to discuss results of the present study in relation to previous research in athletes’ achievement motivation. Second, the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987) served to understand the transactional relationship between the individual and the environment. It was very useful in order to understand the links between primary and secondary appraisal and coping. Third, a model of the coping process in sport (Anshel, et al., 2001) was used as a guide to understand the complexity and dynamic nature of the coping process. Results of this study provided further support for the models by Lazarus and Folkman and Anshel and colleagues. That is, results showed that athletes do use a number of coping strategies to cope with stressful situations in sport. In conclusion, the frameworks used in the present study served very well to understand and discuss results from the present study in relation to previous research findings.

Methodological reflections

Measuring athletes’ coping strategies

The present study used the situation specific version of the COPE inventory (Carver, et al., 1989) in order to measure athletes’ use of coping strategies. The COPE inventory is well used in sport settings to measure athletes coping strategies (Crocker et al., 1998). Although not sport specific, the COPE inventory is regarded as the best quantitative measure to investigate the coping strategies of athletes (Gould, et al., 1993), and is therefore thought to be well suited for this study. However, the present study used a retrospective design to measure athletes’ use of coping strategies. Hence, the recall from the participants might have been
affected by time. The timeframe of six months was however thought to be the best solution since the participants just started their seasons when the data collection was conducted. Thus, if a shorter timeframe had been used, the participants would have been limited to recall stressful situations only from pre-season games which could be argued not to be as stressful as main-season games.

Measuring athletes’ goal orientations

The POSQ (Roberts et al., 1998) was administered to measure athletes’ goal orientations. During the data collection, no questions were asked about this part of the survey which should mean that the questionnaire was easy to understand for the athletes. Results from the present study affirmed the acceptable reliability of the measure. The completion time of the POSQ ranged between 5 and 10 minutes. The present study used a median split of the task and ego orientation subscales to create the goal profile groups (i.e., LT/LE, LT/HE, HT/HE, HT/LE) in order to investigate if there was a relationship between athletes goal orientations and their use of coping strategies. The decision to use a median split instead of cluster analysis which might be the best method to create goal profile groups (Hodge & Petlichkoff, 2000) was made due to the small sample size and recommendations by Pensgaard and Roberts (2003). Therefore, this method is regarded by the author to be the most suitable for this study.

Reliability

Alpha coefficients for the COPE inventory ranged from $\alpha = .52$ (Suppression of competing activities) to $\alpha = .91$ (Turning to religion). As a general guideline, alpha values above .70 are considered to be acceptable (Cortina, 1993). However, as Cortina points out, one must compare the alpha value with the number of items in the scale. Since the COPE inventory consists on only four items per scale, alpha coefficients for the scales that are above .60 can be judged as adequate (Cortina, 1993; Muhonen & Torkelson, 2001). Thus, only three scales (i.e., active coping, suppression of competing activities, acceptance) showed alpha coefficients under .60 and are therefore not within the acceptable range. These low alpha values, however, means that analyses and interpretations of results related to the above mentioned scales must be judged with caution. Results from the present study showed acceptable reliability in terms of internal consistency for the POSQ with alpha coefficients of $\alpha = .78$ for the task subscale and $\alpha = .83$ for ego.

Examining athletes’ goal orientations in relation to use of coping strategies

Based on previous research (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003), separate 2x2 ANOVAs with the different coping strategies serving as dependent variables and athletes’ goal orientations serving as independent variables were performed instead of a MANOVA. This means that the risk of making a type 1 error is larger than 5 percent for each ANOVA performed. Thus, this fact must be taken into consideration when judging the significance of the results from the present study.

Limitations

As already mentioned above, the present study employed a retrospective design to measure athletes’ coping strategies. In these designs there is a risk that memory distortions can alter athletes’ recall of such events. Thus, athletes’ perceptions of emotions connected to these situations might be affected. However, since practical difficulties make it hard to measure athletes’ coping strategies during or immediately after a competition, participants were provided with appropriate instructions (e.g., to choose a situation that were stressful and
personally relevant). Therefore, the results of the present study have provided important knowledge in this area of research.

Applications
Following the results of the present study, there is a relationship between athletes’ goal orientations and their use of coping strategies. Thus, since this is the first study that has investigated this relationship among Swedish elite football players, the results of the present study should be of interest to practitioners working in the field of sport. Moreover, since previous research has identified different contextual factors in the team environment as major sources of stress (Holt & Hogg, 2002), practitioners (e.g., coaches, sport psychology consultants) should therefore help athletes to identify potential stressors in their sport and educate athletes in ways to cope with these stressors. Furthermore, practitioners should acknowledge individual differences when working with athletes. When educating athletes on how to cope with stressful demands, it is important to be aware of the different motives and beliefs that athletes bring with them into the athletic context. This knowledge is important when trying to determine what type of coping strategy that might be effective for a particular athlete.

Finally, in reference to athletes’ goal orientations, practitioners should be aware that a high ego orientation is not necessarily bad in terms of athletic performances. With that in mind, it is important that practitioners are aware that a high ego orientation might be beneficial for an athlete as long as it is combined with a high task orientation.

Directions for future research
In line with previous research (e.g., Ntoumanis et al., 1999; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003), the present study revealed that there is a relationship between athletes’ goal orientations and their use of coping strategies. This has provided important knowledge for practitioners and others involved in sport. However, future research in athletes’ achievement motivation should devote more attention to the role of goal involvement in athletes’ motivational patterns. Gernigon, d’Arripe-Longueville, Delignières, and Ninot (2004) stated that, although goal involvement has a significant role when determining achievement behaviors, it has been largely neglected in research about athletes’ achievement behavior. By further investigating athletes’ goal involvement states, the question whether an individual can be task and ego involved simultaneously might be answered. Although the findings by Gernigon et al. (2004) showed that goal involvement states can emerge and fluctuate according to different situation determinants, more research examining the dynamic nature of goal involvement is needed. Consequently, the validity of goal involvement measures needs to be confirmed. Gernigon et al. suggested that this can be achieved by using either experimental or correlational measures.

Furthermore, in reference to coping, a vast of research (see Crocker et al., 1998 and Richards, 2004 for reviews) has come to the conclusion that elite athletes use a number of strategies to cope with stressful situations in sport. However, a question that is important for future research is to measure the effectiveness of these strategies and thus to identify which of the strategies an athlete uses is most effective in terms of stress reduction and performance enhancement. Also, in their review about coping measurements in sport, Crocker et al. (1998), state that all of the quantitative instruments mentioned in their article have fundamental weaknesses such as poor reliability and validity when used on sport populations. It therefore
seems crucial for future research to further develop and validate sport-specific coping instruments.

Moreover, to overcome the difficulties of measuring coping strategies by retrospective designs, future studies should assess how athletes cope with stress on different occasions during a competitive season in direct relation to a stressful competitive event in order to reduce the risks of memory distortions and participants aggregating their responses. Finally, the design of the present study did not allow the possibility to draw any causal conclusions. Future investigations should therefore try to assess if athletes’ use of coping strategies is related to and causes changes in their levels of stress, performance and achievement motivation. One way to achieve this might be to conduct experimental studies.
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References


List of appendixes

Appendix A: Information and written consent form for athletes
Informationsbrev och förfrågan angående medverkan i en enkätstudie med syfte att undersöka individuell motivationsorientering och användandet av coping-strategier i idrott.

Hej!


Det finns inga rätt eller fel svar på frågorna i enkätorna. Svara därför så ärligt som möjligt på frågorna! Enkätorna besvaras individuellt.

Studien är frivillig och du kan när som helst, utan att ange orsak avbryta din medverkan!

Dina svar kommer att analyseras på gruppnivå och därmed kommer du att förblı anonym.

Med vänliga hälsningar

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**Informerat Samtycke**
Jag har informerats om studiens syfte, om hur information samlas in, bearbetas och publiceras. Jag har dessutom fått tillfälle att ställa frågor, samt fått dem besvarade. Jag är även medveten om att mitt deltagande är frivilt och att jag när som helst kan avbryta deltagandet utan att ange orsak.

**Datum:**______/_____ 2011

**Namnteckning:**_______________________________

**Namnförttydligande:**_____________________________