Performance Anxiety and Mental Load in Student Athletes: A Research Proposal

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Background

- Student Athletes (S-As) experience unique stressors including: athletic performance, training and team dynamics (Santos et al., 2020)
- NCAA data: significant portion of athletes reported feeling overwhelmed and feeling mentally exhausted (Radford, 2023)
- To fully understand impacts on performance, scientists have become more increasingly interested in load management
  - Physical and mental loads that cause stress, create changes in well-being, impact performance (Fuster et al., 2021.)

Gaps in Literature

- Physiological load = well established with markers that help to understand and predict performance
- Psychological/emotional/cognitive load is less understood relative to performance and injury (Mellalieu et al., 2021)

Purpose

- To track psychological load in student-athletes as "total environmental demand" (i.e., psychological, sport, and life load; Mellalieu et al., 2021) across a semester
- Explore possible correlations with performance and performance anxiety
  - Hypothesis 1: Higher load = lower self-rated performance
  - Hypothesis 2: Higher load = greater self-rated performance anxiety

Methodology

- Longitudinal design, self-report
- Participants: One team of S-As
  - Coach and IRB approval
- Method:
  - Brief self-assessment, every Monday, one semester
  - 7 load questions
    - Psychological, sport, life load
    - Psychological distress
    - Team, performance, personal demands (Mellalieu et al., 2021)
  - 3 performance anxiety questions
    - Psychological, emotional, behavioral
  - 4 self-reported performance
    - Motivation, injury, recovery, being in shape (Saw et al, 2016)
- Proposed analysis: bivariate linear mixed model

Implications

- Addresses gaps identified in literature (including need for brief measurement tool of mental load)
- Findings could help to serve athletes and coaches in an under-resourced environment (i.e., use questionnaires and focus on lived experience to address load management, rather than expensive equipment)
- Contributing to best practices in mental health are essential in 2024, based on NCAA findings

Limitations

- Low power due to lower expected N – Need to be cautious in our conclusions
- Study will be limited to one team/sport (i.e., not generalizable)

References

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