

Gender Differences in Stress, Coping and Coping Effectiveness among Competitive Shooters

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Abstract – Previous research on gender differences in stress and coping in sport has provided equivocal support for the notion that men and women appraise stress differently and exhibit different coping behaviours. The aim of this study was to examine gender differences in shooting-related sources of stress, stress appraisal, coping and coping effectiveness among competitive shooters. For this purpose, a sample of 200 national level competitive shooters (male $n = 100$, female $n = 100$) aged between 16 and 25 years (mean = 20.43, SD = 3.03) participated in the study. The results indicated that both male and female shooters cited “encountering distractive thoughts during performance” as the most stressful event during competitions. However, male and female shooters cited “technical error resulting in missing the target” and “high expectations of significant others” as the second most stressful event, respectively. Results revealed gender differences in the appraisal process indicating that females appraised the stressful situation with higher levels of stress intensity and lower levels of control as compared to male shooters. Also, significant gender differences emerged on coping sub-scales with female shooters reporting higher coping behaviour than males. Despite females reporting higher coping as compared to men, gender differences turned insignificant when the effectiveness of the same coping strategies being utilized was assessed.

Key words: Gender, Stress Appraisal, Coping, Coping Effectiveness, Shooting

INTRODUCTION

When circumstances place people in situations that tax or exceed their resources or endanger their well-being they are said to feel stressed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress is an inevitable aspect of any sport and the highly competitive nature of aiming sport, requiring utmost precision and technique, intensify the stress appraisal for performers during cut-throat competitive situations. In competitive sport, instances of stressors include committing psychological or physiological errors, experiencing pain or injuries, inability to concentrate because of distracting crowd, being affected from external events such as bad or inferior playing conditions and noticing a fellow competitor cheat (e.g., Anshel, Jamieson & Raviv, 2001a; Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & Bloomfield, 2006). Given the fact that aiming sports are sensitive to such intense pressure, demanding continuous use of adaptive coping for sport excellence, it is important for sport practitioners to increasingly improve their understanding of the underlying factors contributing towards coping and coping effectiveness under stressful situations.

In order to excel in competitive sport, it becomes imperative for athletes to expansively deploy a variety of adaptive coping strategies (Lazarus, 2000). Also, effective stress-coping in competitive sport results in enhanced performance and enriched sport experience. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) suggested that theory-guided coping interventions can only be developed, once we identify factors associated with effectiveness and ineffectiveness of coping strategies. As defined by Nicholls & Polman, 2007, coping effectiveness in sport is “the degree in which a coping strategy or combination of strategies is or are successful in alleviating the negative emotions caused by stress”. A limitation of the sport psychology literature is that very little is known about what constitutes coping effectiveness (Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Nicholls et al., 2006; Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998). Previously, researchers have tended to report the type of coping strategies used by athletes. However, just because a strategy is deployed more frequently does not necessarily mean it is more effective. Nicholls, Holt, and Polman (2005) found that coping effectiveness was related to the choice of coping strategy deployed, with certain

strategies, such as adhering to a routine, increasing concentration, and increased effort, being rated as effective strategies in golf.

An important factor that intervenes with the selection and effective use of coping strategies in competitive sport, but has not received required attention in sport research, is gender differences. To date, research investigating the effects of gender on coping of athletes is scarce and as reported in previous literature, the relationship between gender and stress-coping process in sport is found to be ambiguous (e.g., Hammermeister & Burton, 2004; Nicholls, Polman, Levy, Taylor, & Cobley, 2007) whereas other studies on coping preferences in sport failed to find differences between male and female athletes (e.g., Kowalski, Crocker, Hoar & Niefer, 2005). Previous research has directed towards males using more problem-focused coping whereas females using more emotion-focused coping (e.g. Anshel, Porter, & Quek, 1998; Goyen & Anshel, 1998; Campen & Roberts, 2001; Yoo, 2001; Hammermeister & Burton, 2004). However, opposite to this viewpoint, several studies have found partial support for this notion. For example, Crocker and Graham (1995) and Kolt, Kirkby, and Lindner (1995) found that female athletes utilize more emotion-focused coping strategies than males, for e.g., seeking social support for emotional reasons, but failed to find significant gender differences specifically in the use of problem-focused coping. Pensgaard, Roberts, and Ursin (1999) and Bebetos and Antoniou (2003), on the other hand, reported no gender differences in coping preferences in sport.

Apart from providing equivocal findings, previous research that has examined gender differences in stress and coping in sport has been a-theoretical in nature where exploration of gender differences has not been the primary focus. This has resulted in methodological problems, including lack of assessment of situational factors in terms of stress intensity and perceived control over the stressor, the sources of stress, and the heterogeneity of samples (Billings & Moos, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). As suggested by Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992, it is difficult to establish whether differences in coping preferences is a result of gender differences or differences in the type of stressor. Likewise, most research pertaining to gender differences in stress and coping in sport have used heterogeneous samples Anshel, Jamieson, & Raviv, 2001a; Anshel, Jamieson, & Raviv, 2001 b; Anshel et al., 1998; Anshel & Sutarso, 2007; Crocker & Graham, 1995; Kowalski et al., 2005; & Anshel, 2006; Yoo, 2001). Sources of stress in such studies are confounded by the nature of the sport athletes participate in (Anshel & Delany, 2001). Therefore, differences in coping found in some of these studies may be due to differences in sport type, and stressor experienced rather than differences in relation to gender.

Based on suggestions from previous related literature, the current investigation aims to address

some of the limitations of past research on gender differences in stress and coping literature, by identifying common stressors for all shooters (homogeneous group of athletes) and exploring situational appraisal (stress intensity/control perceived) and coping.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to examine:

- the gender differences in perception of the most intense stressors among male and female shooters;
- coping differences in response to acute stress as function of gender among shooters; and
- the relationship between stress intensity, perceived controllability and coping styles among male and female shooters.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were purposefully sampled on the criteria that they had competed at national or international level in last 3 months. This criterion was adopted in order to ascertain that the demands of the competitive sport recently required participants to experience stress and cope effectively in order to perform successfully. A sample of 200 national level competitive shooters (male $n = 100$, female $n = 100$) aged between 16 and 25 years participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was 20.43 years ($SD = 3.03$). The participants had been shooting competitively at national and international levels for 5-10 years.

PROCEDURES

Procedures for participant recruitment were based on the purposeful sampling criteria. After receiving approval from research ethics board, four shooting coaches were sent a letter describing the study and were requested to cooperate in recruiting participants. Coaches were asked to identify shooters who would qualify for the study and to provide them with copies of consent forms. Shooters who were interested in participating returned signed participant consent forms to the coach. The coaches gave completed forms to the first author, who then invited interested shooters to fill the questionnaire.

DATA COLLECTION

Initially, a list of shooting related-stressors was developed by the researcher based on researcher's previous experience with competitive shooting and seven stress categories suggested by Gunthert, Cohen, & Armelli, 1999: (a) injury, (b) error (technical/tactical), (c) outcome (not achieving performance goals), (d) performance (technique,

fitness), (e) psychological (anxiety, confidence), (f) external factors (officials, opponent, environmental), (g) significant others (parents or coach). Subsequently, in a pilot study, this list was presented to a panel of six expert competitive 6 Indian shooters (3 male, 3 female) and 4 shooting coaches (2 male, 2 female) to see if these were valid and well formulated stressors commonly experienced by male and female shooters. They were asked to read the list of stressors and select most common stressors in shooting and to add possible stressful events that are missing in the list presented to them. Subsequently, a final list of the most common stressors was then used in the study.

Two hundred participants (male $n = 100$, female $n = 100$), who had competed at national or international level in the last three months, completed the questionnaire. After gathering demographic and general shooting information (e.g., shooting discipline, events of participation, training facilities available) participants were asked to choose the most stressful situation out the seven possible options that they may have experienced during their shooting competitions. In order to assess each participant's perception of controllability over the experienced stressor, a horizontal visual analogue scale was used. Following this, participants completed the 48-item modified COPE (MCOPE; Crocker & Graham, 1995) based on the most stressful situation selected by the shooters. Out of twelve coping strategies, problem-focused coping comprised of active coping, seeking social support for instrumental reasons, planning, suppression of competing activities, increasing effort; emotion-focused coping included seeking social support for emotional reasons, humour, venting of emotion, self-blame, wishful thinking emotion-focused coping; and avoidance coping comprised of denial, behavioural disengagement. Each item is scored on a five-point scale starting with to use 'not at all/ very little' (1) to use 'very much' (5). The score for each subscale is calculated by adding the scores of the questions related to the scale divided by the number of items. Thus, all questions were answered in reference the most stressful event selected by each shooter. The time needed to complete the questionnaires was approximately 20 minutes.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed using IBM SPSS statistics version 22 for Windows. Mean, standard deviations and internal consistency were calculated prior to statistical analysis. To assess the homogeneity of the sample an independent t-test was first conducted to explore whether the male and female shooters differed in age and years of experience. Frequency cross-table were used to determine the most cited stressful event by male and female shooters. An independent-sample t-test was conducted to assess stress appraisal, coping and coping effectiveness among male and female

shooters. To differentiate the levels of stress reported, male and female shooters were separately categorized as low, medium or high in stress intensity and perceived controllability using three-way percentile split. Furthermore, multivariate analysis of variance was conducted using the gender (males and females), stress intensity (low, medium, high) and perceived control (low, medium, high) as the independent factors. The twelve coping strategies of the Modified COPE were entered as the dependent variable.

RESULTS

Sources of stress were determined using frequencies (see Table 1.1). Specifically, the frequencies show the most cited stressful events by male and female shooters. The results indicated that both male ($n = 44$, 44%) and female ($n = 49$, 49%) shooters cited psychological stressor (*encountering distracting thoughts during performance*) as the most stressful event. However, male ($n = 41$, 41%) and female ($n = 35$, 35%) shooters cited error (*technical error resulting in missing the target*) and significant others (*high expectations of significant others.*). Both male and female shooters cited injury (*experiencing physical pain due to injury or fatigue*) as the least stressful event during competitions. Figure 1.1 shows the graphical representation of sources of stress among male and female shooters. Table 1.2 shows the average scores and standard deviations for perceived stress, stress intensity, perceived control and the coping sub-scales separately for male and female shooters.

Table 1.1: Frequencies for sources of stress among male and female shooters

| Stressors | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|--------------------|------|-----|--------|-----|-------|-------|
| | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| Error | 41 | 41% | 22 | 22% | 63 | 31.5% |
| External Factors | 13 | 13% | 17 | 17% | 30 | 15% |
| Injury | 1 | 1% | 5 | 5% | 6 | 3% |
| Outcome | 14 | 14% | 8 | 8% | 22 | 11% |
| Performance | 9 | 9% | 21 | 21% | 30 | 15% |
| Psychological | 44 | 44% | 49 | 49% | 93 | 46.5% |
| Significant Others | 25 | 25% | 35 | 35% | 60 | 30% |

Table 1.2: Mean and (standard deviations) for stress intensity, perceived controllability, coping and coping effectiveness separately for male and female shooters

| Stress | Male | | Female | | | | | |
|--------|--------------|------|--------|------|----------------------|------|--------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | | |
| SI | 8.47 | 0.74 | 8.78 | 0.73 | | | | |
| SC | 3.73 | 1.07 | 3.38 | 0.92 | | | | |
| Coping | Coping Usage | | | | Coping Effectiveness | | | |
| | Male | | Female | | Male | | Female | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| | AC | 4.47 | 0.12 | 4.54 | 0.19 | 4.46 | 0.16 | 4.38 |
| SIR | 3.60 | 0.23 | 3.66 | 0.21 | 3.35 | 0.23 | 3.44 | 0.24 |
| PL | 4.28 | 0.22 | 4.35 | 0.20 | 4.16 | 0.21 | 4.10 | 0.20 |
| SCA | 4.43 | 0.24 | 4.31 | 0.24 | 4.15 | 0.25 | 4.13 | 0.23 |
| IE | 4.54 | 0.19 | 4.63 | 0.30 | 4.55 | 0.19 | 4.45 | 0.31 |
| PFC | 21.31 | 0.49 | 21.49 | 0.51 | 20.66 | 0.58 | 20.49 | 0.56 |
| SER | 3.98 | 0.36 | 4.15 | 0.35 | 3.95 | 0.34 | 4.07 | 0.30 |
| HM | 1.47 | 0.31 | 1.63 | 0.40 | 1.18 | 0.22 | 1.22 | 0.26 |
| VE | 3.73 | 0.16 | 3.76 | 0.19 | 3.63 | 0.19 | 3.71 | 0.22 |
| SB | 3.63 | 0.16 | 3.67 | 0.15 | 3.14 | 0.20 | 3.20 | 0.23 |
| WT | 3.64 | 0.18 | 3.72 | 0.22 | 2.91 | 0.21 | 2.90 | 0.25 |
| EFC | 16.45 | 0.51 | 16.91 | 0.64 | 14.81 | 0.70 | 15.10 | 0.91 |
| DN | 2.87 | 0.57 | 3.06 | 0.56 | 2.89 | 0.3 | 2.96 | 0.36 |
| BD | 2.28 | 0.30 | 2.31 | 0.30 | 2.29 | 0.29 | 2.30 | 0.28 |
| AVC | 5.15 | 0.61 | 5.37 | 0.63 | 5.18 | 0.42 | 5.26 | 0.49 |

(M=mean, SD=standard deviation, SI=stress intensity, SC=stress control, AC=active coping, SIR=instrumental social support, PL=planning, SCA=suppressing competing activities, IE=increasing effort, PFC=problem-focused coping, SER=emotional social support, HM=humour, VE=venting emotions, SB=self-blame, WT=wishful thinking, EFC=emotion-focused coping, DN=denial, BD=behavioural disengagement, AVC=avoidance coping)

An independent-sample t-test (see Table 1.3) was conducted to compare stress intensity, perceived controllability, coping and coping effectiveness among male and female shooters. Results revealed significant gender differences on stress intensity ($t_{200} = 2.967, p = .003$) and perceived controllability ($t_{200} = 2.479, p = .014$) with female shooters found to be reporting higher perception of stress intensity and lower perceived controllability over stressor, as compared to male shooters. Also, significant gender differences for active coping, seeking instrumental support, planning, suppressing competing activities, increasing effort, emotional social support, humour, wishful thinking and denial emerged on coping subscales. In all instances, female shooters rated the coping behaviour higher than males, except for suppression of competing activities which revealed higher coping behaviour in males as compared to females.

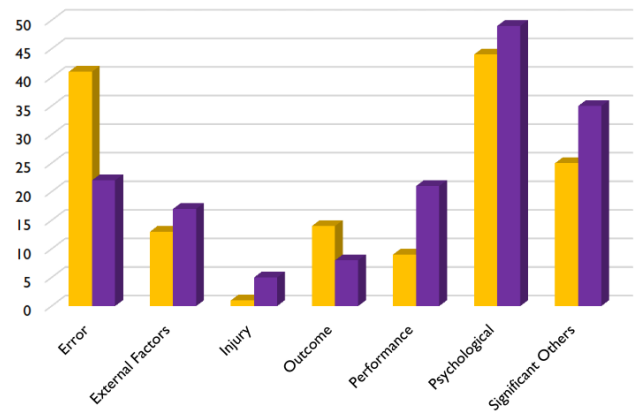


Figure 1.1: Sources of stress among male and female shooters

Table 1.3: Independent Sample t-test

| | t | | Sig. (2-tailed) | |
|-----|--------------|------|----------------------|------|
| SI | 2.967** | | 0.003 | |
| SC | 2.479** | | 0.014 | |
| | Coping Usage | | Coping Effectiveness | |
| | t | Sig. | t | Sig. |
| AC | 3.489** | .001 | 2.515* | .013 |
| SIR | 1.999* | .047 | 2.668* | .008 |
| PL | 2.276* | .024 | 1.820* | .070 |
| SCA | 3.285** | .001 | .591 | .555 |
| IE | 2.386* | .018 | 2.734 | .007 |
| PFC | 2.556* | .011 | 2.052 | .041 |
| SER | 3.487** | .001 | 2.733* | .007 |
| HM | 3.094* | .002 | 1.184 | .238 |
| VE | .998 | .319 | 2.588* | .010 |
| SB | 1.490 | .138 | 1.891 | .060 |
| WT | 2.718* | .007 | .077 | .939 |
| EFC | 5.689** | .000 | 2.572* | .011 |
| DN | 2.434* | .016 | 1.509 | .133 |
| BD | .713 | .477 | .244 | .807 |
| AVC | 2.560* | .011 | 1.240 | .217 |

*p < .05; ** p < .01

In respect to coping effectiveness, overall males were found to be reporting higher coping effectiveness of problem-focused coping (active coping and planning) whereas females reported seeking instrumental social support and venting of emotions as more effective coping strategies.

Table 1.4 provides the results of the MANOVA with gender (male, female), stress intensity (low, medium, high) and perceived control (low, medium, high) as the independent factors; and twelve subscales of the MCOPE as the dependent variables. Results revealed significant main effect for gender (Wilks' $\lambda = .830, p < .01$). However, no interaction effect for gender and stress intensity (Wilks' $\lambda = .874, p > .05$) or gender and perceived controllability (Wilks' $\lambda = .865, p > .05$) was found. The follow-up analysis for the gender main effect for showed significant differences for active coping ($F_{200} = 3.962, p < .05$), planning ($F_{200} = 4.902, p < .05$), increasing effort ($F_{200} = 6.593, p < .05$), emotional social support ($F_{200} = 5.053, p < .05$), humour ($F_{200} = 4.260, p < .05$) and wishful thinking ($F_{200} = 3.832, p < .05$). In all

instances, the female shooters rated coping behaviour higher than the males.

Table 1.4: Relevant MANOVA results

| | Wilks' λ | p |
|---|------------------|------|
| Gender main effect | .808* | .000 |
| Gender x Stress Intensity | .869 | .448 |
| Gender x Perceived Controllability | .897 | .767 |
| Gender x Stress Intensity x Perceived Controllability | .899 | .105 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

The main purposes of the present investigation were to determine the most intense stressful event among male and female shooters, to examine coping differences in response to acute stress as a function of gender and to assess the relationship between stress intensity, perceived controllability and coping styles among male and female shooters.

First, this investigation was designed to determine stressors among male and female shooters. The results indicated that both male and female shooters cited "*encountering distractive thoughts during performance*" as the most stressful event during competitions. Perhaps one of the reasons psychological stressor is considered most unpleasant is that the nature of shooting sport allows the mind to wander. Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1992) on interviewing members of the U.S. Olympic wrestling team regarding the 1988 Summer Olympics at Seoul, found that when athletes performed successfully their thought patterns were characterized by either absence of thought to thoughts related to their strategies or technique. However, when the athletes were performing unsuccessfully, they admitted to having thoughts that were not related to the task and thoughts of self-defeating negative nature (Gould et al. 1992). According to Boutcher (2008) focusing attention on task-irrelevant information while attempting to perform well-learned skills in a competitive situation may impair performance. Therefore, a valuable suggestion for practitioners working in the area of aiming sport would be to recognize the significance of distractive thought patterns. They may want to teach additional psychological skill techniques to cope with distractive thoughts during sport performance.

The second most stressful event reported in results differed for both male and female shooters. Male shooters cited error (*technical error resulting in missing the target*) whereas females reported significant others (*high expectations of significant others*) as highly stressful. Among men, stress resulting from an inability to achieve performance goals points towards the high-strung competitive nature of shooting sport involving cut-throat competition. Each shot requires utmost precision and

technique in order to survive the competition. Given that high level of competition is an uncontrollable event from the player's perspective, it is important to teach players to cope with such event positively by trying to minimize its negative effects. Roth and Cohen (1986) suggested that when the stressor is uncontrollable, avoidance or passive coping seems to be more adaptive than active coping. Therefore, practitioners may want to consider dynamic nature of perceived controllability for each competition before assisting shooters in effective use of adaptive coping. Female shooters, on the other hand, were found to be concerned about the significant others during competitions. These findings suggest that "*high expectations of significant others*" is the second most cited stressor among females and the third most cited stressor, collectively. It indicates that parents and coaches may be highly involved in the shooters' sport experience. Therefore, practitioners may want to consider education for parents and coaches to reduce the pressure they put on athletes. Both male and female shooters cited "*experiencing physical pain due to injury or fatigue*" as the least stressful event during completions.

Thus, the identification of sources of stress has important implication for analysing differences in coping behaviour. When male and female shooters were combined in a single group, "*encountering distractive thoughts during performance*" was the single most cited stressful event. Sport practitioners may take the present findings into consideration to reassess the role of psychological factors in shooting performance and accordingly devise an all-inclusive training plan addressing both physiological and psychological needs of competitive shooters.

An independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare stress intensity and perceived controllability among male and female shooters. Results revealed significant gender differences on stress intensity and perceived controllability indicating that as compared to males, female shooters appraised the stressful situation with increased stress intensity and lower perception of control. These findings are quite similar to that of Tamres et al. (2002) who found that females appraised the stressful situation with higher levels of stress intensity in six out of eight studies on gender differences in achievement situations. Furthermore, the findings of the current study have revealed that overall females were higher on coping usage in absolute terms as compared to males. However, the results of the present study showed an absence of significant interaction between gender, stress and control suggesting that when male and female shooters appraise the stressor similarly in terms of stress intensity and perceived control, they do not differ in preferred coping strategies. Therefore, it is believed that the higher levels of stress intensity and lower levels of perceived control might contribute to differences in coping preferences. In support to this idea, Thoits (1991, 1994) also contended that the

differences in stress appraisal process results in females using coping expansively.

Another interesting finding emerged highlighting the obscurity of a lesser explored area of coping effectiveness. Despite females reporting higher coping as compared to men, gender differences dissipated when the effectiveness of same coping strategies being utilized was assessed. However, overall males were found to be reporting higher coping effectiveness of problem-focused coping (active coping and planning) whereas females reported seeking instrumental social support and venting of emotions as more effective coping. It is therefore believed that more frequent use of any coping strategy does not necessarily mean that it is effective in alleviating negative effects of stressful situation. As pointed out by Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Nicholls et al., 2006; Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1998, a limitation of the sport psychology literature is that very little is known about what constitutes coping effectiveness. Therefore, further investigation into coping effectiveness is suggested.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, results of the present study reveal that factors such as gender and appraisal process influence an athlete's use of coping strategies. With the findings reported here, it would be valuable to consider gender differences in coping preferences. However, it would be more important to also assess the client's cognitive appraisal process before developing coping skills. Unquestionably the use of coping strategies in sport will likely be dependent on many more factors such as age, skill level, personality, etc.; additional research is needed that considers interactions between these factors and the factors reported here. Failure to consider the effect of variables such as those reported here may lead to superficial conclusions about athletes' coping behaviour.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE/FUNDING

The authors declared that they received no financial support for their research and/or authorship of this research paper.

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