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Organizational Stressors and Competitive Anxiety in Athletes: The moderating role of psychological flexibility

WEIBING ZHANG*, SHAOHUI MA**, DI WU***, CHUNG-JU HUANG****

(*) *College of Physical Education, Ningbo University, China*
(**) *Department of Athletics, Zhejiang Fashion Institute of Technology, China*
(***) *Department of Athletics, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, China*
(****) *Graduate Institute of Sport Pedagogy, University of Taipei, Taiwan*

The importance of organizational stressors has been increasingly acknowledged by researchers studying psychosocial responses in athletes. This study examined the association between the frequency of encountered organizational stressors and competitive trait anxiety, and investigated how psychological flexibility could moderate such a relationship. Within a correlational study design, 526 athletes (M = 20.0 years) from the eastern China completed a battery of self-report measures. Data were analyzed with a regression-based moderation analysis, using the PROCESS macro for SPSS. The results revealed positive relationships between the frequency of organizational stressors and competitive trait anxiety, whereas negative relationships between psychological flexibility and organizational stressors as well as competitive trait anxiety. A reduced association was observed between the frequency of organizational stressors and worry, and between the stressor frequency and concentration disruption in athletes with higher levels of psychological flexibility, compared to those with lower levels of psychological flexibility. The findings highlight the influential role of psychological flexibility in acting as a buffer against potential negative outcomes experienced by athletes in response to organizational stressors encountered in sport settings. Where possible, sport organizations and coaches should place emphasis on changing athletes' experiences of organizational stressors and developing athletes' psychological flexibility.

KEY WORDS: Coping, burnout, Organizational stress, Resilience, performance.

Correspondence to: Di Wu, Department of Athletics, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, China18, Xueyuan Street, Xiasha Higher Education Park, Jianggan District, Hangzhou City, Zhejiang 310018, China. (E-mail: 37203937@qq.com)

Correspondence to: Chung-Ju Huang, Graduate Institute of Sport Pedagogy, University of Taipei, 101, Sec. 2, Zhongcheng Rd., Taipei 111, Taiwan. (E-mail: crhwang@utaipei.edu.tw)

Weibing Zhang is with the College of Physical Education, Ningbo University, China. Shaohui Ma is with the Department of Athletics, Zhejiang Fashion Institute of Technology, China. Di Wu is with the Department of Athletics, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, China. Chung-Ju Huang is a professor with the Graduate Institute of Sport Pedagogy, University of Taipei, Taiwan.

Introduction

Considerable attention has been paid to issues of anxiety, its antecedents and outcomes, and its associations with other psychological variables within the field of sport psychology research. Anxiety is complex, and is generally accepted to be a multidimensional construct. It can be a long-standing quality that individuals possess, or it may be a temporary condition resulting from environmental stressors. Anxiety can also consist of physiological and cognitive components; physiological manifestations include increased galvanic skin response, increased heart rate, or tense muscles, while cognitive reactions include distraction, worry, and negative thoughts (Martens et al., 1990). Performance trait anxiety is defined as a predisposition to experience high anxiety states under conditions of threat (Smith et al., 1998). Competitive trait anxiety is a sport-specific performance trait anxiety. Thus, an athlete who is high in competitive trait anxiety would be expected to experience high levels of somatic arousal and/or cognitive disruption when exposed to stressful competitive sport situations. Previous studies have documented the negative effects of competitive trait anxiety, such as reduced concentration and viewing situations as threatening, on sport performance (Dunn & Dunn, 2001; Judge et al., 2016). Recognizing what issues are related to increased levels of competitive trait anxiety is thus necessary for facilitating successful performance.

In sports context, the importance of organizational stressors has been increasingly acknowledged by researchers studying psychosocial responses in athletes. Individuals who participate in competitive sports typically face a wide range of demands that could cause increased pressure and impaired performance (Arnold et al., 2017). A category of demands that is particularly important in shaping athletes' sport experiences are those related to the organizations within which they are situated (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). Regarding the prevalence of these demands, elite athletes experience a relatively higher number of requirements associated with their sport organization compared to with competitive performance (Hanton et al., 2005). Furthermore, previous studies have investigated the intensity, frequency, and duration of organizational stressors in sport, across different levels of competition and different types of sport (Arnold et al., 2016); athletes' appraisals of organizational stressors (Bartholomew et al., 2017); athletes' responses to organizational stressors at emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal levels (Fletcher et al., 2012); the perceived impact of organizational stressors on athlete and coach burnout (Wagstaff et al., 2018); and the associations between organizational stressors and emotions and satisfaction with individual performance (Arnold et al., 2013). Recent researchers have also revealed

the moderating role of organizational stressors in the relationship between perceived esteem support and competition appraisals in collegiate athletes (Tamminen et al., 2019).

Although studies have found links between organizational stressors and several undesirable outcomes, little research has explicitly investigated the relationship between organizational stressors and chronic anxiety in athletes. Hanton et al. (2012) have indicated that organizational-related demands are predominantly appraised as threatening or harmful to athletes, with low perceptions of controllability, and few coping resources available. A more recent study found that organizational stressors including selection, logistics and operations were associated with symptoms of life anxiety at the within-person level in athletes (Simms et al., 2021). It is conceivable that athletes are more likely to experience depressive and anxiety symptoms when organizational events are perceived as threatening or harmful to their goal progress. Given that competitive trait anxiety is a predisposition to experience high anxiety states under stressful competitive sport situations, high frequencies of organizational stressors could be associated with increased levels of competitive trait anxiety. Based on the increasing acknowledgment of the importance of organizational stressors in sports, further empirical research is required to explore the association between organizational stressors and competitive trait anxiety in athletes.

Psychological flexibility can also be an important factor that affects competitive trait anxiety in athletes. It is the core functional concept of the acceptance and commitment therapy which emphasizes that mental health and behavioral effectiveness are affected more by how individuals relate to their thoughts and feelings than by their form (Hayes et al., 1999). Depending on this core insight, psychological flexibility is defined as the ability to stay focused on the present moment and to change or persist in one's behavior in the pursuit of goals and values based on what the situation affords (Hayes et al., 2006). When Bond et al. developed the revised 7-item Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II, a commonly used self-report measure of experiential avoidance), they proposed that experiential avoidance is inversely related to psychological flexibility. Experiential avoidance refers to individuals attempt to alter, control, or avoid experiences, such as thoughts, feelings, memories, and physiological sensations, with which individuals are unwilling to remain in contact, particularly regarding unwanted private events (Hayes et al., 2012). Accordingly, individuals who are less likely to exhibit experiential avoidance are those characterized as possessing a higher level of psychological flexibility.

Psychological flexibility should be taken into consideration while researchers examine the relationship between organizational stressors and

competitive trait anxiety. The basis of this proposition is a model of cognitive-affective stress propensity (Wofford & Daly, 1997) that predicts an individual's stress propensity or susceptibility as a moderator of the relationship between experienced stressor stimuli and cognitive-affective processing. As internal and external demands are various within sports context, psychological flexibility is important for athletes to stay focused on goal-directed cues and disengage from disruptive stimuli during training and competition. High levels of psychological flexibility are found to relate to decreased depression and anxiety, and improved quality of life in athletes (Johles et al., 2020). Therefore, athletes with a high level of psychological flexibility have the ability to cope with and regulate their cognitions and emotions in stressful situations, which may prevent from increases in competitive anxiety. Previous studies have also identified psychological flexibility as a moderator of psychological distress (Bardeen et al., 2014; Fonseca et al., 2020). For injured collegiate athletes (DeGaetano et al., 2016), psychological flexibility is associated with degrees of adherence to rehabilitation protocols. Injured athletes with a high psychological flexibility might minimize stigma and maximize participation in treatment despite discomfort because of that behavior's relevance to their values (e.g., adapting themselves to adversity). These findings suggest that athletes with a high level of psychological flexibility are able to appraise particular stressors they encounter as challenges and change their behaviors to adapt to these stressors. However, few studies have examined the moderating role of psychological flexibility in the relationship between organizational stressors and competitive trait anxiety in athletes.

The purposes of this study were to identify the associations between the frequency of organizational stressors and competitive anxiety among young athletes, and to ascertain whether psychological flexibility qualities could moderate this relationship. It was expected that the frequency of organizational stressors encountered by athletes would be positively related to dimensions of their competitive trait anxiety (Hypothesis 1). A higher level of psychological flexibility qualities was also expected to reduce the extent to which the frequency of organizational stressors might influence competitive trait anxiety (Hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

A total of 556 athletes were recruited from 10 universities and 10 province-level training centers in the eastern China. The range of sports (N = 14) included individual (e.g., shooting,

athletics, gymnastics), team (e.g., basketball, volleyball, soccer), and mixed individual and team sports (e.g., table tennis, badminton, cycling). After screening data and checking which surveys were left incomplete, 30 responses were excluded. Data from the remaining 526 surveys were utilized in analysis. The sample consisted of 305 male and 221 female athletes, ranging in age from 16 to 26 years (M = 20.0, SD = 2.23), and members reported an average of 8.9 (SD = 3.60) years of competitive experience in their sports. All participants were operating within their sport organizations and performing at various levels, ranging from county (n = 105) and regional (n = 216) to national (n = 205), as they completed the survey for this study.

Procedure

After institutional ethical approval was received, permission to distribute questionnaires to athletes was sought from the center administrators and head coaches of various sports teams. The research team contacted the potential participants face to face, team by team, before practice in the meeting rooms during their competitive seasons. Participants were provided with general information about the study and assured of the confidentiality and complete anonymity of the surveys. Then, those who agreed to participate completed surveys regarding organizational stressors, psychological flexibility, and competitive trait anxiety via the online software. It took approximately 20 minutes.

Measures

Organizational stressors. The Organizational Stressor Indicator for Sport Performers (OSI-SP; Arnold et al., 2013) is a 23-item measure with subscales including goals and development, logistics and operations, team and culture, coaching, and selection. Although Arnold et al. (2013) have developed three rating scales (frequency, intensity, and duration) to delineate more clearly the organizational stressors that sport performers encounter, they also suggest that use of the frequency scale alone is appropriate if researchers wish to ask for a shorter version of the measure. Thus, for the purpose of the current study, only the rating scale of frequency was examined. Participants responded to questions on a scale of 0 to 5 to indicate the frequency of each stressor encountered (e.g., "How often did this pressure place demand on you?" 0 = *never*, 5 = *always*). Each subscale score and the total score of organizational stressors were then calculated by averaging the sum of subscale items or all the items. Acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each OSI-SP subscale were observed for the present sample: goals and development α = .73, logistics and operations α = .87, team and culture α = .85, coaching α = .79, and selection α = .70. Although some potential discrepancies were found in the support for the model structure of the goals and development factor when observing the Chinese findings (Arnold et al., 2017), the sample of this study revealed an acceptable reliability of this subscale.

Psychological flexibility. The AAQ-II (Bond et al., 2011) is a 7-item measure of psychological inflexibility and experiential avoidance. The Chinese version of the AAQ-II was used in this study and its psychometric properties is supported as a useful self-report measure of experiential avoidance in elite Chinese athletes (Zhang et al., 2014). Participants responded to questions using a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., "I worry about not being able to control my worries and feelings." 1 = *not at all true*, 7 = *completely true*). For the purpose of this study, a mean score of psychological flexibility was derived by averaging all 7 items, which were also reverse scored. Test scores on the AAQ-II demonstrated good internal consistency, α = .88, in the present study.

Competitive trait anxiety. The Sport Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2; Smith et al., 2006) is a multidimensional measure of cognitive and somatic trait anxiety in sport performance settings. This 15-item instrument consists of three subscales: somatic anxiety, worry, and concentration disruption, with 5 items in each subscale. The questions were designed to reflect possible responses that individuals may have before or while they compete in sports (e.g., "My muscles feel tight because I am nervous," "I worry that I will not play my best," or "It is hard to concentrate on the game"). For each question, participants indicated how they generally felt based on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). Each subscale score was calculated by averaging the sum of subscale items. A mean score of total competitive trait anxiety was derived by averaging all 15 items. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three subscales were acceptable for the present sample: somatic anxiety $\alpha = .70$, worry $\alpha = .87$, and concentration disruption $\alpha = .75$.

Data Analysis

The data were initially analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) and correlations. Then, a one-way MANOVA was used to examine the differences in the organizational stressors between competition levels, gender, and sport types. Furthermore, a simple moderation analysis was conducted to examine whether the relationship between organizational stressors and competitive trait anxiety varied in magnitude in relation to differing levels of psychological flexibility. The PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was used to test indirect effects for significance at different values of the moderator (i.e., psychological flexibility), with 1000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals. This regression-based path analytic framework allows the input of data and the configuration and estimation of two-way interactions in moderation models. In addition, further regression analyses were conducted to identify the predicting effects of the organizational stressor subscales on the mean score of total competitive trait anxiety while controlling for psychological flexibility.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all study variable dimensions are presented in Table I. Positive relationships were found between the frequency of organizational stressors and competitive trait anxiety subcomponents ($r = .23 \sim .45$, $p < .01$), providing support for Hypothesis 1. Psychological flexibility was negatively related to the frequency of organizational stressors ($r = -.36 \sim -.47$, $p < .01$) and competitive trait anxiety subcomponents ($r = -.31 \sim -.37$, $p < .01$). Previous research has suggested that athletes performing at different levels of competition encounter specific stressors from their sport organizations (Arnold et al., 2016). However, our result indicated that no differences in organizational stressors were found among county-, regional-, and national-level athletes, Wilk's Lambda = 0.97, $F(10,1036) = 1.63$, $p = .09$. Also, there were no differences in organizational

TABLE I
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Key Study Variables Among Chinese Athletes.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. OSI-SP frequency	-									
2. OSI-SP frequency G & D	.86	-								
3. OSI-SP frequency L & O	.92	.72	-							
4. OSI-SP frequency T & C	.89	.69	.74	-						
5. OSI-SP frequency Coaching	.80	.61	.68	.73	-					
6. OSI-SP frequency Selection	.80	.70	.63	.70	.61	-				
7. Psychological flexibility	-.47	-.41	-.42	-.42	-.36	-.38	-			
8. Somatic Anxiety	.39	.38	.35	.35	.25	.32	-.37	-		
9. Worry	.39	.45	.29	.35	.24	.38	-.31	.56	-	
10. Concentration disruption	.36	.33	.35	.33	.23	.27	-.32	.67	.58	-
M	1.57	1.90	1.42	1.51	1.27	1.84	5.49	2.19	2.80	2.23
SD	0.88	0.91	0.89	1.16	1.27	1.22	1.20	0.52	0.66	0.51

Note. OSI-SP = Organizational Stressor Indicator for Sports Performers; G & D = goals and development; L & O = logistics and operations; T & C = team and culture; All correlation coefficients are significant ($p < .01$).

stressors between gender, Wilk's Lambda = 0.98, $F(5,520) = 1.51$, $p = .12$, and sport types, Wilk's Lambda = 0.99, $F(10,1036) = 1.45$, $p = .22$. Further moderation analysis was conducted regardless of gender, competition level, and sport type.

MAIN ANALYSES

Table II shows the simple moderation results. Psychological flexibility did not moderate the association between organizational stressors and somatic anxiety, $F(1,522) = 2.54$, $p = .11$. However, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported by the indication that psychological flexibility moderated the relationship between organizational stressors and worry, $F(3,522) = 38.03$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .18$. For every 1-unit increase in psychological flexibility, there was a 0.19 decrease in worry, $b = -0.19$, $t(522) = -4.05$, $p < .001$, and for every 1-unit increase in stressor frequency, there was a 0.10 increase in worry, $b = 0.10$, $t(522) = 4.98$, $p = .164$. The interaction between psychological flexibility and stressor frequency was $b = -0.05$, $t(522) = -2.51$, $p < .05$, $f^2 = .01$. Interaction slopes for stressor frequency predicting worry showed that at low levels of psychological flexibility, worry scores increased by 0.31, $b = 0.31$, $t(522) = 6.69$, $p < .001$; this was compared with athletes who reported high levels of psychological flexibility, for whom worry scores increased by 0.16, $b = 0.16$, $t(522) = 3.72$, $p < .001$. When using the Johnson-Neumann (JN) technique, this study identified one value of psychological flexibility as the point which demarcated the region of significance of the effect of organi-

TABLE II
Moderation Snalysis with Organizational Stressors Predicting Worry and Concentration Disruption and Psychological Flexibility Tested as Moderators.

	b [LLCI, ULCI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Worry				
Constant	3.52 [2.96, 4.08]	0.29	12.26	.000
Frequency of stressors	0.10 [-0.16, 0.37]	0.14	0.77	.164
Psychological flexibility	-0.19 [-0.29, -0.10]	0.05	-4.05	.000
Frequency of stressors × psychological flexibility	-0.05 [-0.11, -0.01]	0.02	2.51	.012
Concentration disruption				
Constant	2.88 [2.45, 3.32]	0.22	12.96	.000
Frequency of stressors	0.09 [-0.11, 0.30]	0.11	0.87	.383
Psychological flexibility	-0.16 [-0.23, -0.09]	0.04	-4.32	.000
Frequency of stressors × psychological flexibility	-0.05 [-0.08, -0.01]	0.02	2.41	.016

Note: LLCI = lower limit of 95% confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit of 95% confidence interval. Bootstrap sample size = 1000.

zational stressors on worry: $M = 3.51$. For those participants with $M \geq 3.51$, the higher levels of organizational stressors they perceived the lower levels of worry they reported. In all cases, organizational stressors could not predict worry when psychological flexibility was below 3.51 (*Figure* 1a).

In addition, psychological flexibility moderated the relationship between organizational stressors and concentration disruption, $F(3,522) = 36.16$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .17$. For every 1-unit increase in psychological flexibility, there was a 0.16 decrease in concentration disruption, $b = -0.16$, $t(522) = -4.32$, $p < .001$, and for every 1-unit increase in stressor frequency, there was a 0.09 increase in concentration disruption, $b = 0.09$, $t(522) = 0.87$, $p = .383$. The interaction between psychological flexibility and stressor frequency was $b = -0.05$, $t(522) = -2.41$, $p < .05$, $f^2 = .009$. Interaction slopes for stressor frequency predicting concentration disruption showed that at low levels of psychological flexibility, concentration disruption scores increased by 0.22, $b = 0.22$, $t(522) = 6.02$, $p < .001$; this was compared with athletes who reported high levels of psychological flexibility, for whom concentration disruption scores increased by 0.10, $b = 0.10$, $t(522) = 3.14$, $p < .001$. The J-N technique identified one value of psychological flexibility as the point which delimited the region of significance of the effect of organizational stressors on concentration disruption: $M = 3.75$. For those participants with $M \geq 3.75$, the higher levels of organizational stressors they perceived the lower levels of concentration disruption they reported. In all cases, organizational stressors could not predict concentration disruption when psychological flexibility was below 3.75 (*Figure* 1b).

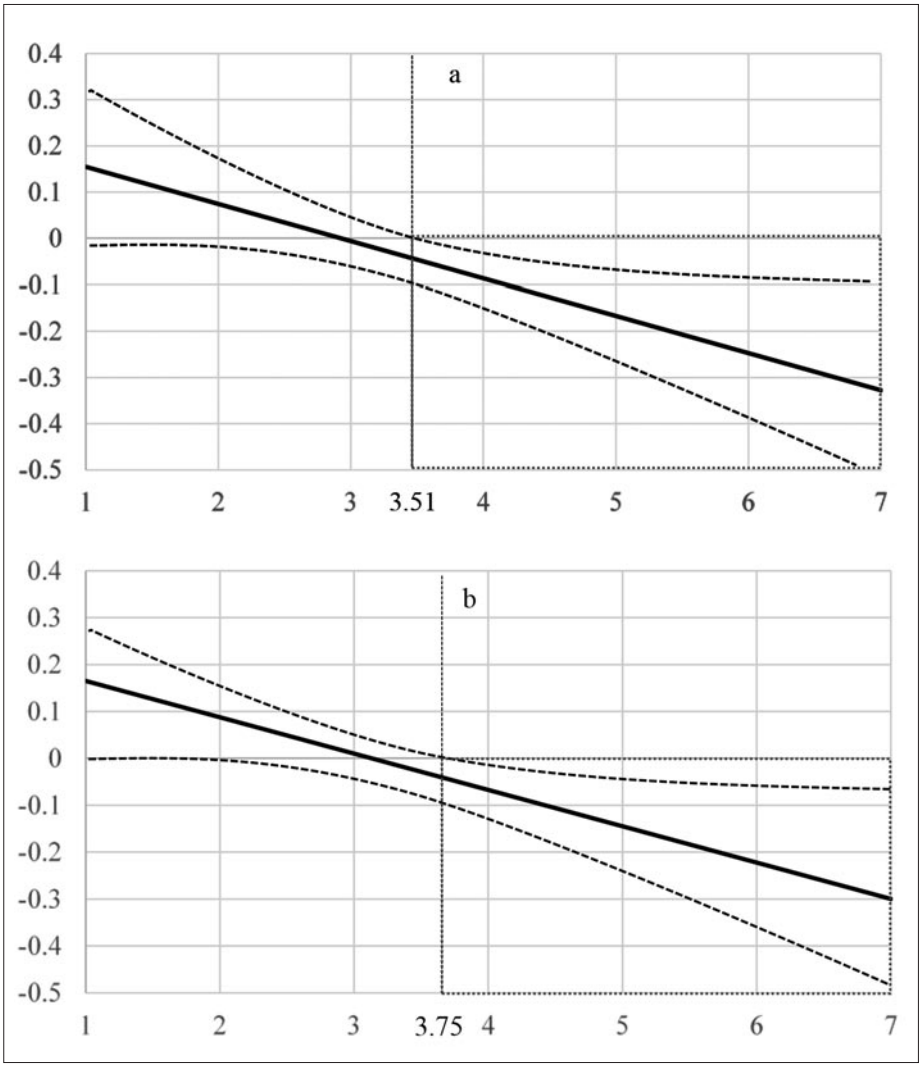

Fig. 1. - Plots of Johnson-Neymann technique results for the moderation effects of psychological flexibility on organizational stressors as focal predictors of cognitive anxiety. Note. Y axes refer to the magnitude of conditional effects of organizational stressors on worry (a) and concentration disruption (b). X axes refer to the values of moderator (psychological flexibility). The solid lines represent conditional effects of organizational stressors on these two aspects of cognitive anxiety. The dotted lines illustrate the 95% CI for those conditional effects. The dotted rectangles refer to the regions of psychological flexibility (moderator) where the association between a given frequency of organizational stressors and a given aspect of cognitive anxiety is statistically significant.

A further analysis was then conducted to examine the contribution of each organizational stressor subscale. After the influence of psychological flexibility was controlled for, the stepwise regression analysis showed the goals and development subscale to be a significant predictor of the mean score of total competitive trait anxiety, $\beta = .36$, $t(522) = 9.60$, $p < .001$; however, the team and culture, coaching, logistics and operations, and selection subscales were not.

Discussion

This study provides a novel empirical investigation into the relationship between organizational stressors, psychological flexibility, and anxiety within a sports context. Hypothesis 1 was supported, in that it was shown that the frequency of organizational stressors was positively correlated with competitive trait anxiety in young athletes. Furthermore, Hypothesis 2 was also partially supported, as the study illustrated that the frequency of organizational stressors experienced by athletes interacted with psychological flexibility to predict competitive trait anxiety subcomponents, such as worry and concentration disruption, after simple moderation analysis. That is, the results suggest that the effect of the frequency of organizational stressors on cognitive anxiety was significantly reduced in athletes with higher levels of psychological flexibility compared to those with lower levels.

The frequencies of organizational stressors were positively associated with each subcomponent of competitive trait anxiety. The results are consistent with those of Kristiansen and Roberts (2010), who reported that external stressors related to the perceived novelty of the competition's size and weather could lead to distraction, anxiety, and low self-confidence during the competition week in young athletes. It is worth noting that young athletes may experience more demands associated with organizational stressors than with competitive ones. One possible explanation for this is the fact that organizational stressors are more environmentally diverse and temporally unstable than competitive stressors (Hanton et al., 2005). The findings from the present study therefore support and extend empirical links between encounters with organizational stressors and a variety of emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal responses in sport performers (Bartholomew et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2012). Using the J-N technique, this study found that athletes with a higher level of psychological flexibility reported a more significant reduction in cognitive anxiety when encountering higher frequencies of organizational stressors, in comparison to when experiencing lower frequencies of organi-

zational stressors. Psychologically flexible behavioral patterns have been associated with health benefits, including the etiology, maintenance, and treatment of maladaptive behavior; psychological well-being; and quality of life (Gloster et al., 2017; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Wolgast, 2014). It is possible that athletes who exhibit more psychologically flexible behavioral patterns are more likely to perceive organizational stressors as opportunities for personal and skill development instead of seeing them as threats. Those who are psychologically inflexible tend to utilize a default strategy, such as avoidance, in response to situations perceived as threatening, which may commonly lead to cognitive anxiety.

Furthermore, psychological flexibility could buffer the relationships between the frequency of organizational stressors and worry, as well as between the frequency of organizational stressors and concentration disruption. Instead, psychological flexibility could not moderate the association between the frequency of organizational stressors and somatic anxiety. According to the matching hypothesis (Davidson & Schwartz, 1976), some types of stress-management techniques are more effective than others in counteracting particular symptoms of anxiety. For example, cognitively based anxiety management techniques are supposed to reduce cognitive anxiety levels more than somatically based techniques. A possible explanation for our findings is that individuals with high levels of psychological flexibility constantly utilize flexible thinking and values-driven actions to deal with stressful events. These psychologically flexible strategies are similar as cognitive restructuring techniques that are typically beneficial to manage cognitive anxiety (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Conversely, somatic relaxation techniques such as progressive muscular relaxation are more effective to those individuals who feel tense and excessive perspiration from being somatically anxious. This study provides further evidence for the potential of psychological flexibility to help athletes promote facilitative responses in the face of diverse organizational stressors. In other words, this finding suggests that psychological flexibility can act as a buffer to protect individuals from the harmfully or negatively cognitive influences of stressful events.

In terms of the organizational stressor subscales, it is noteworthy that one of the five OSI-SP subscales, goals and development, individually contributed to performance anxiety after psychological flexibility was controlled for. This finding has commonality with previous studies (Arnold et al., 2017; Arnold et al., 2016), which have reported that the dimensions of some organizational stressors (goals and development, team and culture) were positively related to negative affect. Given that the subscale of goals and development evaluates stressors from goals, training, and injuries, athletes may

experience decreased performance satisfaction and increased anxiety when they are unable to achieve their goals, meet the requirement of their training schedule, or are injured (Simms et al., 2021). Spector et al. (2000) have proposed a mechanism according to which exposure to high frequencies of organizational stressors tends to increase individuals' negative affect; this mechanism therefore appears applicable to our findings. The findings from this study have potential implications for future research, suggesting that different dimensions and types of organizational stressors may be associated with different aspects of physical and psychological ill-health. Additionally, sport performers competing at national or international levels have been found to experience a significantly higher frequency of both goals and development stressors than those competing at regional and lower levels (Wagstaff et al., 2018). Given no differences in organizational stressors between athletes with different competition levels were reported in the present study, future research might attempt to examine the influence of competition levels on the stressor-anxiety relationship when recruiting an international level of athletes.

The main limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature, which precludes evaluation of temporality and causality regarding the influence of psychological flexibility on the stressor-anxiety relationship. For this reason, we would encourage researchers to examine the longitudinal, predictive role of psychological flexibility in the stressor-anxiety relationship, in addition to replicating the main findings presented here using independent samples. A second limitation relates to the exclusive reliance on self-reported rating scales, which raises the issue of measurement error associated with systematic response tendencies. Readers should therefore note the limitations of this study when drawing conclusions from these data. Finally, we could not exclude the possibility that psychological flexibility may be a mediator between organizational stressors and competitive trait anxiety because psychological inflexibility was found to mediate the inverse association from mindfulness to burnout syndromes in junior athletes (Zhang et al., 2016). The possible mediating effects of psychological flexibility on the relationships between organizational stressors and athletes' anxiety symptoms need to be further investigated.

Conclusion

In summary, our results corroborate and extend theory and research that links stressors and competitive trait anxiety in athletes, and they illustrate the

role of psychological flexibility in this relationship. This study supports the notion of organizational stressors as background variables that may impact athletes' predispositions to competitive anxiety, thus broadening the scope of research on organizational stressors in sport. Alongside this, the findings offer a novel empirical examination of psychological flexibility as a moderator of the organizational stressor-anxiety relationship, and significantly contribute to extant mechanistic knowledge on the subject. The present findings provide practical information for coaches and sport organizations. They can attempt to change athletes' experiences of organizational stressors and to develop interventions supporting psychological flexibility, which might benefit athletes' mental well-being in sport organizations. Additionally, there is a need for future research that assesses the influence of psychological flexibility on other well-being and performance outcomes in the stress process, as well as the efficacy of psychological flexibility in building interventions at intra-individual, inter-individual, and environmental levels to regulate athletes' competitive anxiety.

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