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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF CHEERLEADERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MENTAL BLOCKS

by

ERIN LAWRENCE

(Under the Direction of Daniel Czech)

ABSTRACT

A mental block is a phenomenon in which an athlete's mind no longer allows them to perform a physical skill that was previously well-learned and automatic. This phenomenon has received attention in gymnastics and trampoline but the literature is lacking an investigation of this phenomenon in all-star cheerleading. The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of mental blocks by obtaining it from the first-person perspective of cheerleaders themselves. A purposeful sample of 8 all-star cheerleader participants was interviewed and transcriptions were analyzed utilizing qualitative analysis. Four main themes were found: 1) specific to backwards moving skills, 2) mind and body dichotomy, 3) fear of performing the blocked skill, 4) pressure and negative self-belief. From these themes, research may be conducted to determine the cause of mental blocks as well as ways to help cheerleaders overcome them.

INDEX WORDS: Mental Block, Tumbling, All Star Cheerleading, Sport Psychology

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by

ERIN LAWRENCE

B.S., Bridgewater State University, 2014

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Mental block is a term used by cheerleaders synonymous with the term lost move syndrome (LMS), which has been described as a psychological phenomenon in which an athlete is no longer able to perform a skill that was previously automatic (Day, Thatcher, Greenlees, & Woods, 2006). This phenomenon received various names including lost move syndrome (Day et al., 2006), psychological blocking (Feigley, 2009), and mental block (Maaranen-Hincks & Van Raalte, 2014). It is possible for well-established technique to be unintentionally lost by the athlete though they remain "in possession" of the appropriate motor program for the movements involved in the skill (Collins, Morriss, & Trower, 1999). No research was found on mental blocks in cheerleading. Though research has yet to be conducted on mental blocks in cheerleading, there is currently research published on related concepts in other sports. Since the individual tumbling skills required of cheerleaders are comparable to those required of gymnasts and trampolinists, research performed on these sports can potentially provide support towards extending what is known to this population (Lord, 2002).

All Star cheerleading is a competitive based sport. Athletes in this sport do not cheer on the sidelines at athletic events or support another sport team. In accordance with the rules set by the United States All Star Federation (the governing body of all-star cheerleading), teams perform a 2 minute and 30 second routine composed of synchronized tumbling, stunting, pyramids, motions, and dance (USASF, 2014). The basic components of cheerleading tumbling found in the lower levels of the sport (levels 1-4) include the round-off, back walk overs, back handspring, back tuck, and layouts (Lord, 2002; USASF, 2014). The "elite" cheerleading gymnastics skills include single and double twisting layouts and Arabians which are legal for level 5 and 6 athletes. The number of participants on an all-star team varies based on the

division and gender of the athletes on the team. Teams also are determined by the tumbling and stunting skill level of the athletes ranging from level 1 to level 6 (USASF, 2014). Teams compete their routine at numerous local, national, and international competitions throughout the season. The amount of athletes involved in this industry continues to grow each year. As of 2007, close to 1.5 million participants were competing on over 5000 teams nationwide (The Cheerleading Market, 2007). All-star cheerleaders learn and compete tumbling skills comparable to those performed by gymnasts and trampolinists. Skill development in all-star cheerleading typically occurs in a faster paced learning pattern, with a strong focus placed on obtaining skills to contribute to the team's overall scores.

Previous research of phenomena similar to a mental block has provided direction for the present study by allowing the researcher to synthesize the literature on the experiences of athletes with similar struggles. The tumbling skills affected by mental blocks have been consistently described as being well-learned or automatic prior to the development of a block (Day et al., 2006; Maaranen-Hincks & Van Raalte, 2014). In the study performed by Day and colleagues (2006), the lost skill was consistently described as being vital to the athlete's success in competition. All of the participants in the study confirmed that the skill they became unable to perform had been a well-established movement that had been approved by their coach as well as one that they had previously performed in its entirety and used in competition prior to the development of a mental block. Participants were only able to recall positive training experiences prior to developing a mental block, which demonstrates how difficult it is to predict the onset of a lost move. The importance of the effected skills described by the participants in these studies suggests that the skills cheerleaders experience mental blocks on may also be ones

that are vital to their success performing at the skill level required by their team and well learned prior to the development of the mental block.

The participants' descriptions of the skill acquisition process when first learning the "lost" move might suggest that this learning process itself may have contributed to the development of a mental block (Day et al., 2006). Two common accounts for how the lost move was learned suggesting that skills described as either learned easily and quickly, or were difficult and slow to learn, contributed to the development of the mental block. This suggests that skill acquisition that was rushed may not have allowed the athletes to develop a well-established base of learning and a slow, difficult skill acquisition process produced a disjointed learning style (Day et. al., 2006). Maaranen-Hincks and Van Raalte (2014) also examined descriptions of the gymnasts' initial skill acquisition that varied from initial difficulty to normal or easily learned. The participants were able to consistently perform the affected skills with no problem following the initial learning phase up until the onset of the mental block (Maaranen-Hincks & Van Raalte, 2014). As consistent with the findings of Day et al. (2006), the gymnasts in Maaranen-Hincks and Van Raalte (2014) described the mental block as initially affecting skills that were basic and well learned prior to the onset of a mental block (Maaranen-Hincks & Van Raalte, 2014). It has been demonstrated that skill acquisition plays a role in the development of a mental block. This suggests that the way cheerleaders learn tumbling skills may contribute to whether or not an athlete experiences a mental block during their athletic career.

Previous research has detailed common aspects of the development of mental blocks and similar phenomena in gymnastics (Collins et al., 1999) and trampoline (Day et al., 2006). According to Day and colleagues (2006), the development of mental blocks can be described in terms of "gradual fear of the move, as well as increasing competition, coach and parental

pressure, and an increase in somatic and/or cognitive anxiety, which was perceived as debilitative to performance" (p. 162). In gymnastics, Feigley (2009) has described the development of a mental block by breaking it down into three stages: inability to perform the skill, emotionally conditioned negative affect, and negative attributions about one's ability and self-worth. Both of these depictions of the development of a block convey that following the initial loss of the skill, an athlete experiences negative emotions which affect their overall sport experience. The development of mental blocks in all-star cheerleading may yield similar descriptions as found in previous studies.

Collins and colleagues (1999) provided three hypotheses for their case study which details possible explanations for a skill becoming unintentionally lost during the refinement of an athlete's technique. They believed that the lost move may have developed as a result of the athlete consciously inhibiting the movement based on residual concern over previous injuries (Collins et al., 1999). It is also possible that by attempting to exert too much conscious control when refining or changing a movement pattern, the fluid execution of the athlete's optimum motor program may be disrupted. Day and colleagues (2006) supported this suggestion made by Collins, Morris, and Trower (1999) that attempting to increase conscious control of skills that have become automatic to the individual may lead to the lost skills. This common description of the onset of a mental block was marked by a switch from automatic performance of the skill back to conscious, controlled processing. The reversal to the conscious processing of the skill was demonstrated through over-analysis as well as the use of negative psychological skills including negative self-talk and imagery which were described as contributors to the mental block. Participants noted their change in cognitions surrounding the move as including a lack of understanding of the move, a change in visual perception during the move, and increased self-

focus. In addition to these hypotheses, the final hypothesis made by Collins and colleagues suggested that for an unknown reason, the athlete became unable to access the motor program for the correct or desired movement. Based on the findings of these studies, increasing conscious control of a skill may also be a potential cause of mental blocks in all-star cheerleaders. In addition to the potential causes outlined by Collins and colleagues, researchers have discovered additional potential causes of this phenomenon.

Day and colleagues found that the pressure to perform the effected skill was identified by most participants as the main source of stress or even the reason for the lost move in elite trampolinists (2006). In addition, the notion that the cause of a mental block was an initial balk that "came out of the blue" has received support from both Maaranen-Hincks and Van Raalte (2014) and Feigley (2009). This information suggests that the pressure to perform and initial balks that "came out of the blue" may also be potential causes of mental blocks among cheerleaders.

The gymnasts interviewed by Maaranen-Hincks and Van Raalte (2014) described the duration of their mental block in terms of cycles between no problems at all and being unable to perform any backwards skills. Gymnasts' ability to perform backwards skills differed with some being able to perform the skills on some days but not others and some gymnasts being able to perform the effected skills for months prior to balking again (Maaranen-Hincks & Van Raalte, 2014). When an athlete transitions out of a period of not being able to perform the affected skill, they have described a certain "feeling" that allows them to perform that skill. This notion of a "feeling" that tells an athlete if they will be able to successfully perform a skill or not has been described by participants in studies by both Maaranen-Hincks and Van Raalte (2014) and Day and colleagues (2006). A "feeling" has also been described by the gymnasts and elite

trampolinists that helped them know when they were going to be unable to perform the affected skills. When coaches forced the gymnasts to practice the affected skill while they were experiencing that "feeling" the mental block worsened. Consistent with Day and colleagues, (2006), the pressure to perform the affected skills often caused a regression in the gymnasts' progress. Fear associated with performing the affected skill was described as being afraid of losing control of their own motor movements and balking rather than a fear of the skill itself. The commonalities between the experiences of the gymnasts and trampolinists in these studies may suggest that youth cheerleaders with mental blocks may share similar experiences.

The common reactions and feeling of the gymnasts affected by the mental blocks included "anger, frustration, and anxiety as a result of not knowing what was going on and the implications of the inability to back tumble" (Maaranen-Hincks & Van Raalte, 2014, p. 24). These reactions and feelings affected the gymnasts both during practice and outside of the gym. The suggestions from this study also supports the second phase in the development of a mental block described by Feigley (2009) that the athlete develops an emotionally conditioned negative affect. This negative effect was described in terms of anger, shame, and guilt resulting from the inability to perform a previously automatic skill (Feigley, 2009). In order to cope with the negative emotions and stress associated with the lost move, participants either adopted an avoidance or approach coping strategy though neither approach proved to be effective in dealing with a mental block. This suggests that focus should be taken away from the lost move itself and refocused on the psychological aspects of the performance to remove conscious processing from physical performance of the lost move (Day et. al, 2006).

Previous research suggests multiple examples of the lived experiences of gymnasts and trampolinists which may include some commonalities to the population of focus in this study.

Though sports such as trampoline and gymnastics involve similar experiences and tumbling skills to those involved in cheerleading, the way skills are acquired varies across all of these sports. Mental blocks have become extremely common within all-star cheerleading and negatively affects a cheerleader's sport experience. Gym owners and coaches have been conversing and searching for years to gain more information regarding mental blocks and academic literature has yet to contribute information to this conversation. To begin to advance knowledge of mental blocks in cheerleaders, it is necessary to account for the experiences of this phenomenon. In order to assess what the best way to overcome a mental block is, we must first understand what the experience entails to begin a plan for service provision. Further examination of this phenomenon may lead to research on the causes of mental blocks as well as what interventions work best for the treatment of a mental block. The current study may benefit the field of sport psychology and athletes receiving sport psychology services by providing background information regarding this phenomenon to sport psychology that they can best serve a client who may be experiencing a mental block. Athletes experiencing an enduring mental block may be more likely to stop participating in all-star cheerleading which makes understanding the experience crucial to helping the athletes stay involved in this sport and maintain their physical activity. Current sport psychology literature appears to be lacking a systematic examination of the cheerleader's "lived" experiences of mental blocks. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine this phenomenon by obtaining it from the first-person perspective of cheerleaders themselves.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Participants

In phenomenological research participants must meet two criteria: they must have had considerable experience of the phenomenon in question and they must be able to describe that experience (Dale, 1996; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). To qualify for participation in this study, cheerleaders had to be currently experiencing a mental block for at least one month, and be able and willing to describe their experience in as much detail as possible. The participants in this study included eight competitive all-star cheerleaders between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. The eight participants came from five different all-star cheerleading gyms all located in the Eastern United States. A total of ten potential participants expressed interest in the study though two athletes decided not to participate. Two hundred all-star cheerleading gyms were contacted during the recruitment process. Though proposed number of participants was twenty-two to twenty-five cheerleaders, this number was unobtainable for the present study for a few potential reasons. First, recruitment began during competition season which made getting in contact with gym owners and parents of potential participants very challenging. Future studies should consider collecting data from this population during the summer to ensure maximum participation. Second, since it was competition season, gym owners and parents may have been worried about participation effecting their performance. These cheerleaders were all members of United States All Star Federation (USASF) certified All Star Cheerleading Gyms and were members of a team at that gym. To determine that each participant was experiencing a mental block, the athletes' coaches were asked to confirm that they displayed an inability to take off for (or attempt) at least one tumbling skill when previously able (Tenn, 1995a). Coach confirmation

was deemed appropriate because the coach knew the athlete before and during the mental block so they were therefore able to confirm the presence of a mental block prior to the interview (Day et al., 2006). The potential participants and their parents were already aware of the mental block prior to being asked to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

As discussed by Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, and Hayes (2004) in this phenomenological research study, the researcher will be the data collection instrument through her own interaction with participants. Since the researcher is the major instrument, it is important to gain an understanding of my own personal history as it relates to the phenomenon of mental blocks in cheerleading. Below is a description of my past experiences and my growing interest on this topic.

Currently, I am a second year master's student in Sport and Exercise Psychology at Georgia Southern University. I participated in all-star cheerleading for nine years. From my third through my seventh year of participation, I experienced multiple mental blocks on my round off, back handspring, full twisting layout. A full twisting layout (also referred to as a full) involves flipping backwards in a hollow body position (layout) while simultaneously completing a 360-degree rotation (full twist). The mental block on this skill came and went multiple times during this time period. These blocks always began by my mind telling my body to "stop" during my back handspring which lead to me rebounding and falling to my back as opposed to completing the tumbling pass with my full. I became afraid of successfully performing my full because I knew that if I threw it once I would have to throw it again. The skill itself was what I was afraid of. My experience has been that mental blocks are stressful, anxiety provoking, and emotionally taxing. It caused me to feel defeated because even though I knew my body was

physically capable of successfully completing the tumbling skill, my mind stopped me before I was able to attempt it.

To overcome my struggle with mental blocks, I tried altering the skill and the performance surface to try to increase my comfort level, work on my skill technique of performing progressions for a full twisting layout, and incorporated mental skills including imagery and positive self-talk. From my observations and conversations with other cheerleaders over the years, I have heard similar accounts of the feelings associated with mental blocks but very different accounts for how their block began and how they cope with it. Since the phenomenon of a mental block in cheerleading is something that I have experienced and seen throughout this sport, I became very interested in investigating it in a more systematic manner.

Procedure

To answer the research question of this study, phenomenological interviews were conducted with eight competitive all-star cheerleaders to determine their lived experience of a mental block.

Exploring Researcher's Bias

In congruence with the study by Post and Wrisberg (2012), in order to reveal any potential biases of the primary researcher, a bracketing interview was conducted to reveal my perceptions of mental blocks and personal experience with them. This bracketing interview also enabled me to become sensitized to any potential for imposing my own views on participants (Czech et al., 2004). Prior to conducting interviews with participants, I wrote about my personal experience in entirety then thematized the experience and recorded notions of biases that emerged. When interviewing participants and analyzing the data, I made every effort to "bracket" these biases (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Data Collection

Prior to each interview, participants and their legal guardians were given a full explanation of the nature of the study and were asked to provide written informed consent and assent. Informed consent and assent were discussed verbally over the phone to ensure they understood what signing entailed and answer any questions they had. The documents were sent to the parents of the participants and were completed and returned prior to conducting the interviews. Interviews with participants were conducted through video conferencing based on the availability and location of the participants. The participants were asked to video conference the primary researcher in a private area, without their parents present, to allow the participant to feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts about their experience. Responses to interview questions are kept confidential and participants were able to leave the study at any time without penalty. All interviews were recorded using two digital voice recorders and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Recordings were kept in a secure location until they were transcribed and were destroyed following transcription.

Interviews were conducted in a private setting to maintain confidentiality. In this phenomenological interview, participants were all asked the following open-ended question to facilitate their exploration of their experience related to mental blocks in cheerleading: "Tell me about your experience with a mental block". If elaboration or clarification of the participant's thoughts and feelings related to their experiences was needed, other questions were used (Seidman, 1991). These probing questions were used to gain a better understanding of what the participant spoke about and were framed as "can you tell me more about your experience of _____".

CHAPTER 3

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was modeled off the methodology utilized by Czech and colleagues (2004). Following each interview, recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and numbers were used to represent each participant in the text to ensure confidentiality. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by reading through while listening to the audio recording.

Focusing the Data

Clearing the text. Since conversations sometimes involve features that are not essential for understanding the meaning of the speaker including false starts, asides, and coincidental utterances, these were eliminated from the transcription (Henderson, 1992). This resulted in a transcript that preserved the speaker's meaning but was shorter and clearer to analyze.

Grouping the text. This step in phenomenological analysis involves editing protocols by organizing the material into significant statements (Czech et al., 2004). Significant statements stayed as close to the words of the participant as possible. The following suggestions from Hawthorne (1988) and Czech and colleagues (2004) for grouping the text were followed by this study.

- Decrease clutter by eliminating any parts of the conversation that are not necessary for comprehension of the text.
- Eliminate repetition by taking out repeated statements.
- Punctuate when able to without distorting the meaning of the text (condense run-on sentences and change commas to periods when possible).
- De-emphasize the interviewer (the perspective of the participant should be evident throughout the protocol).

- Enhance readability (if deletion may cause confusion for words such as “it” or “that”, specify the references for those words).

When editing was complete, the protocol was divided into significant statements that were small enough to be manageable though maintain the essential part of the participants’ message (Czech et al., 2004). The significant statements then became the primary source for further analysis and were more manageable for placing into categories.

Summarizing the Interviews

Preparing a summary. This step involved creating a shortened version of the interviews that retained vital information, words, and thoughts of the participants (Henderson, 1992). When condensing, we selected and reordered statements within each interview while still using the participants’ words (Czech et al., 2004). To do this, we followed the protocol developed by Hawthorne (1988) that was repeated by Czech and colleagues (2004).

- Identify topics- The primary researcher should study the cleared text, then mark the beginning and ending of each topic discussion.
- Gather related statements- All material relevant to a topic will be grouped together. These related statements may include specifics about the experience or may be more general comments related to the story.
- Editing- The primary researcher may shorten or combine sentences as long as the meaning of the sentence is not distorted.
- Removing additions- Any words or statements that have been marked by parentheses or brackets should now be absorbed into the summary with the marks deleted.

Verifying Summaries. This step served as a way to ensure that the summaries maintained the meaning each participant intended to express in their interview. As detailed by Czech and

colleagues (2004) participants were provided with the summaries to read and modify in order to ensure a truthful experience. This process also helped protect the meaning against any distortion due to editing. The primary researcher explained to the participant that the summary should include every point of the interview and should not alter what they intended to express allowing the participant to check for errors in the protocol or any additions they may have.

Releasing Meanings

Forming categories. The next step was to determine the patterns of commonalities across all interviews (Czech et al., 2004). To help facilitate this process, a research group comprised of the primary researcher and graduate students trained in phenomenological research were utilized to analyze the data. The following process was followed by the research group to create categories.

First, the research group gained an understanding of each individual interview by viewing each transcript as a whole and relating separate passages to the overall content of the interview (Czech et al., 2004). Next, separate interviews were related to each other to identify patterns or "global themes". Global themes were defined as Henderson (1992) in terms of capturing the figural aspects emerging from a given set of experiences. Global themes are identified across interviews but the themes must be found during the individual process (Czech et al., 2004). Themes were then clustered for each participant and then compared across participants and collapsed resulting in a master list of themes that were analyzed for similarities and grouped multiple times until a concise list of themes is developed.

Next, the data in each category was evaluated to ensure they were consistent with the headings within each category and that the separate categories were distinctly different from one

another. We then used a hermeneutic analysis to cluster thematic meanings and develop an overall thematic structure that was agreed upon by both the researcher and the research group.

Establishing Validity and Reliability

According to Dale (1996) and Thomas and Pollio (2002), to be valid, phenomenological research must produce a thematic structure supported by the data and verified by the participants. To achieve validity with this study, consensus of the research group was obtained and confirmation from participants that the thematic structure accurately reflected their experience was also obtained (Post & Wrisberg, 2002). Reliability for this study was evaluated by assuring that the thematic structure captured participants' experiences by obtaining consensus from the research group that the thematic structure represents the essence of the phenomenon of interest (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Post & Wrisberg, 2002).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

A brief description of each participant is provided in Table 1. The participants in this investigation were eight female all-star cheerleaders that were all currently competing for a USASF approved program. Three participants were currently competing on level 2 teams, four were currently competing on level 3 teams, and one was competing on a level 5 team. The following table provides a description of each participant enrolled in the present study including their age, the level team they were currently competing on, and the skills that were effected by their mental block.

Table 1. Description of Participants

#	Gender	Age	Team Level	Tumbling Skills Affected
1	Female	16	Level 3	Back handspring
2	Female	14	Level 2	Round off back tuck
3	Female	13	Level 3	Round off back tuck
4	Female	15	Level 3	All backwards moving skills following a round off
5	Female	12	Level 2	Back handspring
6	Female	15	Level 3	All backwards moving skills following a round off
7	Female	17	Level 5	All backwards moving skills following a round off
8	Female	12	Level 2	Back walkover; back handspring

The goal of this investigation was to describe the thematic structure of the experience of cheerleaders with mental blocks. After conducting, transcribing, and thematizing the interviews of cheerleaders using the previously described methodology, the experience of mental blocks could be discerned. The results presented in this section are intended to describe the phenomenon of mental blocks as perceived by cheerleaders themselves. The statements of the participants revealed four themes: (1) specific to backwards moving skills, (2) mind and body dichotomy, (3) fear of performing the blocked skill, and (4) pressure and negative self-belief. These four themes form the structure of the mental block experience for these cheerleaders. Quotes from participants are used to illustrate the experience of mental blocks in cheerleading as it emerged from their descriptions.

Theme #1: Specific to Backwards Moving Skills

The first theme that emerged from the data concerns the type of skills effected by mental blocks. Eight out of 8 participants noted that the mental block only effected the performance of backwards moving skills. Specifically, the backwards moving skills affected included back walk overs (Participant #8), back handsprings (Participants #1, #5, #8), round off back tuck (Participants #2, #3), and all backwards moving running tumbling skills beginning with a round off (Participants #4, #6, #7). Four of the eight participants also noted being able to perform standing back handsprings, standing back tucks or jump to back tucks even though they were afraid to perform those same backwards skills in a running tumbling pass (Participants #2, #3, #4, #7). The significant theme expressed by all participants was that something caused them to fear one or multiple backwards moving skills. This fear of moving backwards was described by one participant as something that prevented their ability "to go" or begin a tumbling pass: "On a bad day I step and I put my arms out and won't go. I think I'm scared of going backwards sometimes" (Participant #5). Another participant described that the fear over shadows their rational thoughts regarding their ability to perform the skill successfully: "What scares me is, I know I know how to do it but it scares me cuz', going back it kind of freaks me out cuz' I don't like going backwards" (Participant #8). The fear to perform the skills is the main emotion preventing the athlete from performing the backwards moving skill.

The potential reason for the inability to perform backwards moving skills was elaborated on by a participant as resulting from a fear of not knowing what is behind you:

> "Anything that involves me going backwards, that's what makes me afraid. When you're tumbling backwards you don't know what's behind you, you don't know if you might miss something." (Participant #6)

Though the reason for mental blocks only affecting backwards moving skills has not yet been determined, the statements of a two participants in the current study suggested that a potential reason may be the inability to see where they are going. Two participants (Participants #1 and #6) elaborated on this idea by providing information about why they are able perform forward moving tumbling skills. They were comfortable with performing forwards tumbling skills because they possessed ability to see where they were going during those skills, which is something they cannot do when tumbling backwards. The following quote details this difference between comfort level of forwards and backwards skills:

> "Anything going forwards I'm alright with that but if it has me going back, then I'm afraid to do that. I'm okay with that because I know what's in front of me. I know everything is right there and it will be fine." (Participant #6)

Another participant also explained their perspective of this difference stating: "it's just backwards skills. I'm not scared to do a punch front or front walkover which is strange to me but I guess I see where I'm going" (Participant #1). The ability to see where they are going seems to be an important determinant of whether or not they are comfortable performing the skill. As stated by all participants, backwards moving skills were the only ones effected by these cheerleaders' mental blocks. Other participants only noted which skills were effected by their mental block but did not elaborate further on the matter of tumbling backwards. In summary, the only tumbling skills that were effected by mental blocks for the cheerleaders in this study were skills that traveled backwards.

Theme #2: Mind and Body Dichotomy

The second theme conveys the internal struggle experienced by the cheerleaders in regards to the performance of the blocked skill. All eight of the participants described a dichotomy between their mind and body; they knew their body was capable of physically performing the blocked skill and at the same time, their mind would not allow them to perform it. In the words of one participant, "your mind is like "you can't" but your body says "you can do it"" (Participant #6). Another participant described this experience in terms of feelings of being able to and not being able to perform the skill: "I feel like, when I try to do something, my brain tells me to stop. Even though maybe I can feel like I can do it, when I start to do it I feel like I can't" (Participant #3). Though the body knows how to perform the tumbling skill, the mind is not easily persuaded to perform the skill: "My mind just tells me not to go. I try to make myself go but it doesn't happen" (Participant #5). The mind-body disconnect was also described by a participant in terms of a battle between their mind and body: "my mind tells me "you're not good enough" but my body tells me I can but my mind is disagreeing with it it's like having a big argument" (Participant #8). Though the athletes are aware that their bodies know how to successfully complete the skill, fear continues to hold them back from completing the skill. This was further described by the following quote from participant #1:

> "I know I can do it and I can see myself doing it in my head but when I go to do it, I can't, I can't go. My head tells me "don't do it". I try to go for it but my head just tells me "no you can't do it". I know I can do it, it is very obvious so I just get scared and I can't do it." (Participant #1)

The experience of the mind-body disconnect was further described by participant #4:

> "I'm just standing wherever I am like in the corner or in the front of the mat, I'm just standing there thinking to myself "I can do it" but then I get to set and I go to throw it and

> I just stop. My brain is like "you're not doing this, there's no way, I can't do it" and it's just complete and utter fear" (Participant #4)

The athlete's knowledge of their physical ability is not overpowering the thoughts of fear or doubt in their minds. This knowledge of physical capability comes from their continued ability to successfully perform the tumbling skill by themselves on a modified surface such as a tumble track or trampoline (Participants #1, #3, #7, #8). They maintain the understanding that their body has retained the necessary programming to perform the skill and their mind prevents them from allowing their body to perform the skill without a spot on the floor. In this study, the constant belief by the participants that they could perform the move was a stable characteristic. All eight of the athletes spoke about the fact that they were still able to perform the blocked skill on a trampoline or with someone spotting them. This confirms that though their body remained physically capable of performing the skill and they remained aware of that, their mind was still unable to allow them to perform the skill.

Theme #3: Fear of Performing the Blocked Skill

All eight of the participants described their mental block in terms of fear of one or multiple backwards moving skills. The way this fear was development was not consistent across all participants but there were three common causes described by the participants: the fear came out of the blue (Participants #1, #2, #5, #8), the fear resulted from seeing other people fall or get injured while tumbling (Participants #3, #4, #6), or the fear resulted from falling themselves (Participants #4, #7). In all eight cases, the athletes' fear to perform the blocked tumbling skill contributed to their mental block. Participant #7 described being scared to tumble as follows:

> "Well I am scared to tumble, so it is hard for me because I am trying to do my skills and I just can't get myself to do it. And then everyone around me, like everyone on my team, is progressing and getting new skills but I can't because I am scared" (Participant #7).

Another participant also described both the psychological and physiological events associated with their fear to tumble:

> "Your heart starts beating real fast, and you just start thinking about that. But my coach he would tell me "don't think about it" but me not trying to think about it makes me think about it even more. So just like really nervous and you don't wanna do it and like you start having a mental breakdown and it is like really scary" (Participant #6).

The participants in the study were not always aware of the reason for their fear to perform the affected skill. The following participant was able to perform the skill in a standing form but something caused them to fear performing the skill attached to a running tumbling skill: "I can still do back handsprings it's just like running tucks but like standing tucks I'm still fine with. It was weird cause like I guess just like doing something into it just made me, scared to do it but like since I didn't have to do anything into a standing tuck it was fine" (Participant #2).

Six of the eight participants talked about their fear in terms of being scared to fall (Participants #2, #3, #4, #6, #7, #8). This athlete's fear of falling was so strong that it even affected her confidence in her ability to perform the blocked skill with a coach spotting her:

> "When I get a spot it like, sometimes it will help me but like sometimes I'll just have to make sure and sometimes I'll just like pause and then try to do it, like act like I'm gonna do it and not do it and even with a spot it still kinda scares me because I'm afraid that

> they're gonna let go and I'm just gonna have to do it by myself and try to get myself over so I don't fall on my face" (Participant #8).

Other participants also described their fear to perform the blocked skills as resulting from seeing someone else unsuccessfully perform a tumbling skill either at their gym or on the Instagram page "Cheer Fails". One athlete described this feeling as follows: "I'm scared of falling, like I know I've never fallen before but like it really started when I saw this one girl fall on her neck and she had to go to the hospital and then I was scared of it ever since" (Participant #3). Participant #4 described this same experience as follows:

> "I'd watch some people tumble and they'd do an incomplete pass, they'd do like a round off back handspring get scared for a tuck, do the tuck and just fall on their face. And then I'd get scared like "what if that's me?". And I watch, I went on this account on Instagram like "cheer fails" like when people like fall on their face and its' funny but then I watched it before practice one day and that whole practice I couldn't tumble cause I was scared that was going to happen to me" (Participant #4).

In summary, fear was the main contributor to the inability to perform tumbling skills for the participants in this study. Though the reason for the fear was unique to each individual, common fear patterns were described within the interviews. Fear was the result of each participants' personal experience with tumbling but greatly affected each and every one of them.

Theme #4: Pressure and Negative Self-Belief

The final theme expressed across all eight of the interviews was that the inability to perform blocked tumbling skills was associated with negative self-beliefs. All eight athletes experienced feelings of anger, disappointment, and frustration as a result of having a mental

block. Two participants also expressed that not being able to perform their blocked tumbling skills made them feel upset with themselves. One stated that: "It just makes me feel, really upset with myself" (Participant #5). A second participant elaborated on the reason for being upset with themselves: "It makes me feel like I'm upset with myself cause I know I can do it but it's just like I can't do it" (Participant #6).

The negative self-belief resulting from the mental block also lowered the participants' confidence in their ability to perform their tumbling. One participant explained how having a mental block affected her self-confidence associated with her sport:

> "It makes me feel like, like I'm not good enough and also it makes me feel that like I'm never gonna get anywhere in cheerleading and I love to cheer and I just, it makes me feel sad because it makes me feel sad and angry because I work so hard and it just and I know I work hard and everybody else knows I do but it just makes me feel sad because I know I can do it, but my body I mean my mind is telling me that I can't" (Participant #8).

Another participant expressed their feelings of anger and disappointment associated with the inability to attempt the blocked skill. "I feel really disappointed in myself and sometimes I try to do it again, but a lot of times I just get mad at myself" (Participant #3). The feeling of disappointment was also elaborated by Participant #4:

> "It makes me feel awful like I'm disappointed in myself because I know I can do it and I know I can do better than it. It makes me feel like I let my coaches down and I let my teammates down because I don't tumble in the routine, due to I just can't. My teammates and my coaches get frustrated because we need those tumbling points too and the more people that tumble, I think everybody on my team does at least tumble except me and like

> whether it's a toe hand spring or whatever and it just makes me like, I could do that but I can't. I just get so frustrated and disappointed in myself." (Participant #4)

Four of the eight participants in this study also expressed that they were experiencing some internal or external pressure associated with their mental block. The feelings of pressure contributed to their negative self-belief in their ability to tumble. The following quote details the effect of internal pressure to perform the blocked tumbling skill:

> "You feel like you can't do it anymore and you just feel like giving up. When I have my block, I am under a lot of pressure. I felt like I have a really heavy backpack on my shoulders every time I walk into the gym" (Participant #2).

Another participant felt feelings of guilt associated with the pressure to perform the blocked skill: "I feel like at times I do just because I feel guilty that I can't do it, but I feel like more than anything I pressure myself to do it, cause like I know I can" (Participant #1). Participants talked about experiencing external pressure from other people including their parents, coaches, or teammates. The following quote details the effect of external pressure from parents and coaches on their overall experience of a mental block:

> "I got a lot of pressure on me from other people because I felt like, it wasn't only effecting me and it was effecting like, like for example my mom whose really into cheerleading and like the coaches would try to get me to do it and they didn't understand why I was scared either so it wasn't just me that it is effecting and it also made me feel left out" (Participant #7).

The pressure to perform the blocked tumbling skills from the athlete themselves and from parents and coaches was a result of the mental block. In summary, the participants' mental

blocks and the internal or external pressure to perform blocked skills negatively affected their feelings of self-worth.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The intention of this study was to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of mental blocks in which a cheerleader loses the ability to perform a skill that was previously automatic. Interviews were conducted to explore the experiences of all-star cheerleaders currently experiencing the phenomenon of a mental block. The analysis of the interview transcripts led to the identification of four themes detailing the experiences of the participants during their mental block: (1) specific to backwards moving skill, (2) mind and body dichotomy, (3) fear of performing the blocked skill, and (4) pressure and negative self-belief. The findings of the current study were consistent with the findings of previous research studies.

Backwards moving skills are essential components of cheerleading routines. For each level, certain skills are required to be performed in routines in order for teams to score well. All eight of the participants in this study experienced mental blocks on backwards moving skills necessary for the level team they were on. This finding of the current study was consistent with the expectations of the study as well as the finding of Day and colleagues (2006) that the affected skills were consistently described as being vital to the athlete's success in competition.

Participants in the current study all expressed the experience of a disconnect between their minds and bodies. Though the athletes understood that they remained "in possession" of the appropriate motor program for the movements involved in the skill, their ability to access that motor program had become unintentionally lost. This finding was consistent with the findings of Day and colleagues (2006) and Collins and colleagues (1999). In the present investigation, the

constant belief by the participants that they could perform the move was a stable characteristic. The athletes stated that they were still able to perform the blocked skill on a trampoline or with someone spotting them. This confirms that their body remained physically capable of the movements involved in the skill they are experiencing a block on.

All eight of the participants in the present study discussed how the fear attempting the skill contributed to their inability to perform it. Fear was expressed as the main emotion associated with the mental block and the main contributor to the inability to overcome the block. All eight of the participants also described emotionally conditioned negative affect and self-beliefs associated with their mental blocks. These emotions included anger, disappointment, frustration, and feeling upset all resulting from the experience of the mental block. Though only four of the eight participants specifically spoke about the pressure to perform, the emotions expressed by the participants in the current study alluded to feelings associated with pressure. The aspects of this theme were congruent with the findings of Day and colleagues (2006), Maaranen-Hincks and Van Raalte (2014), and Feigley (2009), in that the development of mental blocks in cheerleading involves a gradual fear of and inability to perform the move, emotionally conditioned negative affect, and pressure to perform the lost move.

The causes of the mental blocks cited by participants in the current study include it "came out of the blue" (as consistent with Day and colleagues [2006] and Maaranen-Hincks and Van Raalte [2014]), fear of falling, and fear following watching someone else unsuccessfully perform a tumbling skill. The review of previous research suggested that increasing conscious control of a skill is a potential cause of mental blocks. This concept was not prevalent in the current study. Not one cheerleader in the current study alluded to this idea that increasing conscious control over the performance of a tumbling skill caused them to develop a mental block. The increase

in conscious thoughts regarding the performance of the skill occurred following onset of the block in this investigation. Though an increase in conscious thought regarding the mechanics of the skill was not the cited cause of a mental block, a unique cause was expressed by two participants in this study. This cause was watching "cheer fail" videos in which cheerleaders fall performing tumbling skills. Though many athletes may watch these videos for entertainment, "cheer fails" may potentially be hurting athletes' confidence in their own ability to perform tumbling skills as a result of vicarious experience. Vicarious experience is a source of self-efficacy, an athlete's belief that they can successfully perform a skill, which suggests that the negative vicarious experiences expressed by the cheerleaders in the current study may be contributing to their inability to perform the skill (Bandura, 1997). Though these athletes expressed the knowledge that their body could physically perform the tumbling skill, watching these videos potentially lowered their self-efficacy or belief that they could perform the skill without falling like the cheerleaders they watched on social media. It is important that coaches and gym owners are informed of the dangers associated with "cheer fails" Instagram and social media accounts to ensure these videos do not influence the performance of their athletes.

The current research study contained certain limitations. The small sample size of eight participants limits the findings. Since each athlete has their own unique experience, interviewing a higher number of participants may uncover more significant themes then found by the present study. Another limitation was the age range of the participants in the current study. Though the age range of twelve to seventeen was comparable to the samples in previous research studies of similar phenomenon and sports, the developmental differences of participants may have affected the descriptions provided regarding their experience. Recruitment and data collection for this study were conducted between the months of November and March which limited participation

and ability to get in touch with gym owners and parents due to competition season being in full swing. For future research with this population, it is suggested that researchers conduct data collection between the months of May and September to hopefully receive a higher rate of participation.

With new information provided about the experience of cheerleaders with mental blocks, further research is still necessary to help cheerleaders prevent and overcome mental blocks on their tumbling. Unlike previous research of similar phenomena, the athletes in the present study did not discuss the way they acquired the blocked skills. Further research may provide important information for cheerleading coaches about how to guide the skill acquisition process of their athletes to prevent or limit the amount of mental blocks developed by the athletes in their programs. Establishing the factors leading to mental blocks is needed to help athletes avoid the negative consequences associated with a mental block. Being able to predict the development of a mental block would be advantageous for coaches and sport psychology professionals working with cheerleaders experiencing a mental block. The best way to get through a mental block still has not been discovered. Further research must also be conducted on how to overcome mental blocks. Finding effective interventions for mental blocks in cheerleading will help coaches and sport psychology professionals work with athletes on moving passed the block.

The findings of this study can be used by coaches and sport psychology consultants to better understand the experiences of the cheerleaders affected by the condition. Understanding their experience will help coaches and sport psychology consultants to help athletes overcome the mental block. Future research that focuses on how to overcome a mental block is still needed as well as research that focuses on gaining a better understanding of how mental blocks occur.

Research on how to prevent a mental block from occurring would also be beneficial to helping this population perform successfully in their sport.

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APPENDIX A

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the cheerleader's experience of mental blocks in their sport from an existential phenomenological perspective. This objective will be accomplished by attempting to understand the mental block experience as free of judgment, socially constructed labels and preconceived notions as possible. The primary research question for this study is: What is the lived experiences of mental blocks for adolescent competitive cheerleaders?

Limitations

With any study there will be limitations. In this study, the small sample size limits the findings. With a higher number of participants, we may find more significant themes. Also in relation to the small sample size, a limitation of this study is the risk of someone dropping out of the study. This lowers the number of participants which may influence what themes were found to be significant. Finally, all participants may not put forth maximum effort into the study.

Delimitations

The sample population for this study encompasses only one sport, cheerleading. This sample also only looks at adolescent cheerleaders between the ages of 14 and 18. Finally, this study limits its research to participants who currently are experiencing mental blocks or are only one month out from experiencing a mental block.

Definitions

- Mental Block: A psychological phenomenon in which an athlete is no longer able to perform a skill that was previously automatic (Day et al., 2006).

- Balking: Pulling out of the attempt of a skill (Bradshaw, 2004).

Assumptions

We assume that participants provided honest, accurate, and detailed responses to the interview questions asked by the researcher. We also assumed that our sample is representative of the target population. Finally, we assumed that participants enrolled in the study have chosen to participate because they want to.

APPENDIX B

Chase, M. A., Magyar, T. M., & Drake, B. M. (2005). Fear of injury in gymnastics: Self-efficacy and psychological strategies to keep on tumbling. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 23(5)*, 465 475.

The purpose of this study was to examine female gymnasts' fear of injury, their sources of self-efficacy, and the psychological strategies used to overcome their fears. Participants in this study included 10 female gymnasts ages 12 to 17 years old who had all participated in competitive gymnastics as well as experienced some type of injury during their career. The researchers collected data through a structured interview guide to uncover their gymnastic experiences specifically in relation to injury. Data was analyzed through an inductive content analysis which allowed patterns, categories, and themes to emerge from the transcribed interviews.

The results of this study indicated that gymnasts feared injury because they were afraid of being away from their sport. They were fearful of the difficulty recovering their conditioning and skills in returning from an injury as well as afraid of being unable to practice or compete during their injury. The sources of self-efficacy described by the gymnasts included aspects of past performance experience such as success, consistency and communication with significant others. The examples of psychological strategies used to overcome their fears of injury included mental preparation (e.g. imagery, relaxation), just "going for a skill" and their coaches' influence. This study contributes to the current study by describing the experiences of a fear of injury which may potentially be a common factor of mental blocks in cheerleading.

Collins, D., Morris, C. and Trower, J. (1999). Getting it back: A case study of skill recovery in an elite athlete. *The Sport Psychologist, 13*, 288–298.

This case study describes the design, execution, and evaluation of an intervention to help an elite javelin thrower recover the optimum technique when well-established technique has been unintentionally lost. It compares the performer's technique at a recent major championship to their technique prior to the introduction of the intervention. Based on the hypothesized reasons for the lost skill, the intervention incorporated was built around the need to increase the participant's awareness of the positions that he currently adopted during the throwing action, with an emphasis on increasing his comfort and confidence with his previous, more technically correct, positions. The hypotheses involved in this study provided direction for previous research on the phenomenon of mental blocks. It contributed to the current study by suggesting that a lost move may be caused by changes in the thought process during the technique refinement of a skill. These possible contributions allowed my expansion of research to determine what precious studies have found as potential experiences of athletes with mental blocks.

Czech, D. R., Wrisberg, C., Fisher, L., Thompson, C., & Hayes, G. (2004). The experience of Christian prayer in sport- An Existential Phenomenological Investigation. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 2,* 1-19.

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of prayer in sport by obtaining it from the first-person perspective of Christian athletes themselves. Co-participants in this study included 9 former NCAA Division I Christian athletes. Data was collected through interviews which asked participants to describe their experience of praying before, during, or after competition. Results of this study revealed four themes that seemed to characterize these athletes' experiences of prayer in sport including: *Performance Prayers; Prayer Routine; Thankfulness;* and *God's Will.* The findings of this study support and expand previous research suggesting that ritualistic activity has a powerful influence on athletes, athletes use prayer stress management

coping mechanism, and athletes differ with respect to their preferred prayer style. This study includes recommendations for coaches and sport psychology consultants as well as researchers interested in using phenomenological methodology. This study contributes to the present study by providing complete instructions for how to complete a phenomenological investigation of the lived experiences of athletes.

Day, M. C., Thatcher, J., Greenlees, I., & Woods, B. (2006). The causes of and psychological responses to lost move syndrome in national level trampolinists. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 18*(2), 151-166.

The purpose of this study was to examine the psychological causes of and responses to lost move syndrome (LMS) in elite trampolinists. Participants in this study included 15 males (n = 6) and female (n = 9) national grade 1-2 competitive trampolinists who had suffered LMS within the previous twelve months. The mean age of participants was 15.2 years (SD = 5). Data was collected by the primary researcher through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was based on previous research and included topics such as emotions attached to the syndrome, information processing changes, their focus during the move, and significant relations.

Results of this study revealed that despite positive experiences prior to the start of LMS could be traced back to the initial skill acquisition (i.e. skill acquisition that was difficult or unfavorable, or that was easy or quick) and a gradual increase in pressure from various sources (i.e. pressure to retain or improve competition grade, pressure to not disappoint their personal coach, or parental pressure). Participants expressed that their coping strategies were unsuccessful due to the current lack of knowledge surrounding LMS. The study also provides suggestions for sport psychology consultants working with athletes suffering from LMS. This study provided the

current study with background information regarding the potential causes of mental blocks as well as an operational definition for mental blocks.

Lord, J. (2002, January 1). Cheerleading "Gymnastics" What makes cheer gymnastics different? (C. Calvert, Ed.). Retrieved April 14, 2015, from https://usagym.org/pages/home/publications/technique/2002/7/cheergymnastics.pdf

The purpose of this article was to explain the similarities and differences of cheerleading "gymnastics" to gymnastics gym owners. It describes the gymnastics skill sets required of cheerleaders, the difference in the technique of the athlete's arm position, how skills are set to specific musical counts in cheer, the synchronization of multiple athletes in cheerleading and the body differences between cheerleaders and gymnasts which influence the skills. This article is relevant to the present study because it allows me to compare cheerleaders to other populations such as gymnasts. Since there is no research about mental blocks in cheerleaders, the similarities of cheerleading and gymnastics skills helps me understand the research of this phenomenon other similar sports.

Maaranen-Hinkd, A., & Van Raalte, J. (2014). *Mental blocks in performing backward moving skills in gymnastics.* Retrieved from Springfield College Database.

The purpose of this study was to determine the common experiences of youth gymnasts experiencing mental blocks on backwards skills. The interviews conducted for this study yielded common themes among their experiences before, during, and after the first balk that started their mental block. The first balk typically came out of the blue, and the gymnasts experienced cycles of being able to perform the affected skills and experiencing a block again. Gymnasts agreed that they experienced a "feeling" that told them they would be unable to perform the skill and coach pressure to practice during that feeling would worsen their mental block. This article is relevant

to the present study because it details the common experiences of youth gymnasts with mental blocks on backwards tumbling skills. Given the lack of research on this phenomenon in cheerleaders, this study presents examples of common experiences that may be similar to those experienced by cheerleaders.

Post, P. G., & Wrisberg, C. A. (2012). A phenomenological investigation of gymnasts' lived experience of imagery. *The Sport Psychologist, 26*(1), 98-121.

The purpose of this study was to determine the lived experiences of sport imagery in female collegiate gymnasts. Participants for this study included ten female collegiate gymnasts (age range from 19-25 years old) who were either currently competing at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I level or had competed within the past two years. Participants also had used imagery throughout their competitive experience, and were willing to describe their experience in as much detail as possible. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured phenomenological interviews with each participant and analyzed by the primary researcher and a research team.

The qualitative analysis of the data produced a final thematic structure consisting of the following five major dimensions: *preparing for movement; mentally preparing; feeling the skill; controlling perspective/speed/effort;* and *time and place.* The findings of this study suggest that these gymnasts' imagery was an active process that included perspective (internal and external), effort (automatic, intentional, and unintentional), and speed (slow and real time). This study expanded previous research by introducing reports of the gymnasts' ability to manipulate the speed of images for multiple purposes, their addition of abbreviated body movements to their imagery to enhance the feel of the experience, the ability to correct mistakes in an imaged performance, and the imaging of upcoming pieces of a sequential skill during execution. The findings of this study

extended sport imagery research and provided suggestions for sport psychology consultants working with elite gymnasts. This study was relevant to the research of the present study because it serves as a template for how to conduct a phenomenological investigation within a similar population to the one being explored.