Application of Social Cognitive Theory on Disordered Eating

Habits among Female Figure Skaters

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Eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa, are currently prevalent among female athletes due to an increasing focus on "body image", especially in aesthetic sports like figure skating, which will negatively affect both mental and physical health. Although personal factors are inevitable, social factors should also be considered. Therefore, the social cognitive theory is applied to explain why figure skaters develop eating disorders in their careers.

Social cognitive theory is a theory to explain humans' adaptation and change of behaviours based on a diverse cultural environment. (Bandura, 2002). The main idea of the social cognitive theory is that a person's behaviours can influence and be influenced by social environment and personal characteristics. (Bandura, 1977) Therefore, the social cognitive theory is a multifaceted social transmission model to explain social influences on individuals in different ways. The process of learning and adapting behaviour in the social cognitive context contributes to several important cognitive processes. Observational learning, outcome expectancies, and self-efficacy (Crocker, 2016) will be discussed in this paper.

Bandura is the founder of social cognitive theory, who defines these constructs in his papers. Observational learning is an advanced capacity that humans evolved to learn and change their behaviours by observing others' behaviours. (Bandura, 2003). Also, humans' behaviours can also be observed by others. If the person modelling the behaviour is considered to be emulated (i.e., celebrity or championship), people will be more likely to adopt the behavior. (Bandura, 1977). Observational learning might affect behaviours in both positive and negative ways. Positive reinforcement will improve

Individual's performance, but bad models will lead to negative behaviors. For example, Anderson (2007) found that violent interactive video games increase aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Bandura (1989) proposed that people's behaviours are also based on outcome expectancies, which are the anticipated positive consequences following behaviours. The anticipation of positive and desirable consequences will result in the adoption of behaviours, while the anticipation of negative consequences will result in avoidance of behaviours. Outcome expectancies can not only be developed by personal experience but also by vicarious learning, thus social factors can influence the person's outcome expectancies. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief of their capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments. (Crocker, 2016). If people felt that they have the capability to accomplish the behaviour, they will be more likely to do it. On the other hand, if the people believe that their behaviour is hard to achieve, it is less likely for them to complete their behaviour. This belief is related to personal experiences, vicarious learning, others' verbal persuasion and people's psychophysiology state. (Crocker, 2016)

At the Winter Olympics in South Korea in 2018, talented figure skaters Gracie Gold quit the sport permanently due to eating disorders. This event gives us a warning that many skaters are having trouble dealing with eating disorders. The news article "Eating disorders: the dark side of figure skating" interviewed some of Gracie's peers trying to dig into the reason for disordered eating in female figure skaters. The news article shows that many skaters are feeling stressed to maintain a stereotyped body shape, which is "slim, small and streamlined", but they always keep quiet about their worries to avoid

appearing weak. Darina Manta said she also got disordered eating in her first couple years of competing as a figure skater. The pressure of disordered eating, according to the news article, results from such factors as the skater herself, peers, coaches and competitions. The skaters aspire to pursue perfectionism and feel that the public want them as female athletes in the sport to have a slimmer and perfect body shape. Many female figure skaters even compared their weights with the weights of medalists from other countries. Peers might also give them pressure because they might be criticized as "too heavy to be lifted". Besides, coaches, according to skaters, always argue that the body shape of skaters is closely related to performance and coaches tend to say that "fat don't fly", which means that some jumps can only be executed when athletes are slim enough. Furthermore, some female athletes are nervous about their curves through puberty and try to starve themselves to "hold back biology". However, these girls require large amounts of energy and calories for training and competition. Starving can only increase the possibility of injuries and this disorganized behaviour of female athletes might also influence male athletes' attention to their own body shape in the restricted diet as well.

Female figure skaters are influenced by the social environment through observational learning. According to Joe, a Team USA figure skater, an unprecedented number of people are talking about mental health issues in skating. Through observational learning, skaters can learn the disordered eating behaviours, thus exposure to disordered eating in peer groups is associated with an increased possibility of disordered eating habits. Besides, according to the news article, there are numerous stories that female figure

skaters, competing in singles, have had their weights compared with those of medalists from other countries. The prevalence of disordered eating habits in the elite figure skating field is influencing many more talented female figure skaters to start disordered eating behaviour to achieve a lighter body weight.

Also, disordered eating habit is highly linked to the outcome expectancies, which are also influenced by the social environment. In the female figure skating field, the outcome expectancies are slimmer and more streamlined body shape, better performance and greater possibility to be competitive. These outcome expectancies can be shaped by peers, coaches and social constructions. Coaches and peers' words are important in shaping athletes' outcome expectancies. Johnson, the team USA figure skater, said that many coaches tend to link athletes' body weight to their performances and have a saying that "fat don't fly". They believe that if athletes are beyond a required range of body weight, they are not able to execute jumps. Those competing in peers might also be commented on by their peers that "they are too heavy to be lifted". Besides, social construction also plays a role in shaping the skaters' outcome expectancies. Figure skating is a kind of aesthetic sports, which largely depends on the public's aesthetic value. The social construction of aesthetics is of great concern to athletes. What Kareena said, when talking about her disordered eating experience, "I felt I had to achieve this standard of what female athletes in the sport should look like", shows that the social environment is shaping her goals. As an aesthetic sportswomen, female figure skaters' tend to believe that their performances are linked to their body shape. More streamlined body shape will result in a higher possibility of success. For professional female skaters, their

performance in their careers means their success, money and fame, thus their outcome expectancies will even be linked with their careers, which leads to a higher motivation of disordered eating behaviours.

Finally, self-efficacy also influence disordered eating habits. Pinto et al. (2006) define two factors to reflect the core reason for eating disordered behaviour. Normative eating self-efficacy is the confidence to have normative eating behaviours without emotional distress, while body image self-efficacy is the confidence to maintain a realistic body image without pursuing thinness. Female figure skaters worry that their physical appearances will influence their execution of jumps and pursue thinness to achieve the standard of what female athletes in the sport should look like. Karina said that many figure skaters are terrified about the puberty state when their body starts to fill out and have curves. Some skaters even didn't have a period for a year due to disordered eating, thus they are low in both of two types of efficacy.

This paper explains the prevalent disordered eating behaviours in figure skating field from a social cognitive perspective, aiming at understanding the social influence on female figure skaters' behaviours. Observational learning, outcome expectancies and self-efficacy constructs are utilized for analysis. The social pressure from peers, coaches, and the whole society is pushing female athletes to harm themselves through disordered eating. It is time for the society to pay attention to the body image issue in aesthetic sport and make a change.

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