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Sharp, L.-A., & Hodge, K. (2014). Sport psychology consulting effectiveness: The athlete's perspective. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 12, 91-105.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2013.804285>

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Published in:
International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 12/05/2014

DOI:
[10.1080/1612197X.2013.804285](https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2013.804285)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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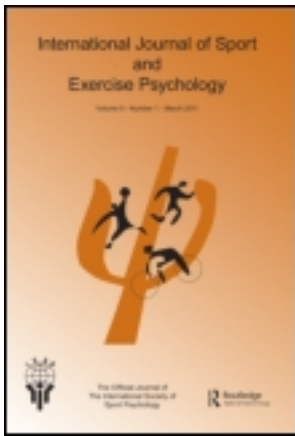
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Publisher: Routledge

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International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjjs20>

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Published online: 29 May 2013.

To cite this article: Lee-Ann Sharp & Ken Hodge (2014) Sport psychology consulting effectiveness: The athlete's perspective, *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 12:2, 91-105, DOI: [10.1080/1612197X.2013.804285](https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2013.804285)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2013.804285>

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Sport psychology consulting effectiveness: The athlete's perspective

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(Received 26 September 2012; final version received 6 May 2013)

The purpose of this study was to investigate what athletes perceived to be essential for effective sport psychology consulting and to examine athletes' perceptions of the key components of an effective sport psychology consulting relationship. Nine elite athletes participated in individual semi-structured interviews (6 males and 3 females, mean age = 32.7 years, $SD = 11.05$, mean competitive experience = 17.9 years, $SD = 9.0$) from a variety of sports (e.g. cricket, rugby, swimming, triathlon, dressage, and wheelchair rugby). Inductive content analysis indicated that three categories were essential for sport psychology consulting effectiveness; (a) sport psychology consultants (SPCs) were friendly but not a friend; (b) SPC consulting experience; and (c) athlete-centered consulting. Four categories emerged regarding effective consulting relationships: (a) flexibility; (b) open, honest, and respectful; (c) contributions from both the athlete and SPC; and (d) athlete as an active participant in the consulting relationship.

Keywords: consulting relationships; working alliance; effectiveness

Within the field of applied sport psychology, the need for effective evaluation is now one of the most pressing requirements, yet it is a need that is often overlooked (Strean, 1998). Gould, Murphy, Tammen, and May (1991) stated that, "If applied sport psychology is to develop further, greater attention must be paid to program evaluation and professional accountability" (p. 112). The evaluation of the individual sport psychology consultant (SPC) has been neglected in favor of the assessment and evaluation of the methods employed by these individuals. Defining SPC effectiveness can be problematic, because the roles and services provided by an SPC can be wide and varying. Services provided by SPCs include performance enhancement, mental skills training, counseling, therapy, mediation services, and/or a combination of all the above (Singer & Anshel, 2006). Therefore, when defining SPC effectiveness, the context in which the SPC is working should be considered (Tod & Andersen, 2005). Furthermore, involving those individuals employing the services of the SPC (i.e. the athlete) in the assessment and evaluation of the individual SPC could potentially overcome some of the hurdles in defining effectiveness. Andersen (2000) argued "Even though performance improvements are definitely linked to happiness, the real measure of how we are doing our jobs is whether the athletes and coaches are happy with us and what we offer and want to come back" (p. 19).

In their pioneering investigation into athletes' evaluations of sport psychology support services, Partington and Orlick (1987) identified a number of characteristics perceived to be essential for consulting effectiveness. The Canadian athletes involved within their investigation believed the effective consultant to be someone the athlete could relate to easily, who fitted in with all

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individuals connected with the team, provided at least several hours of individual consulting sessions throughout the competitive year, and who attended at least three competitions with the team (Partington & Orlick, 1987). Building on the work of Partington and Orlick (1987), substantial progress has been made in recent years in identifying the characteristics and qualities necessary for effective sport psychology consulting from the athlete's, team, and coach's perspective (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004; Getner, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2004; Gould et al., 1991; Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson, 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Tod & Andersen, 2005). For example, Anderson et al. (2004) found that elite British athletes regarded the following characteristics as important for consultant effectiveness: personable, practical advice, good communicator, knowledgeable about sport psychology, exhibits professional skills, and honest and trustworthy. Overall, findings from this body of research are in agreement that the characteristics of the SPC must align with those the client believes to be essential for consulting effectiveness.

The relationship between the SPC and the athletes they are consulting with has been regarded as a significant component in successful sport psychology interventions (Andersen, 2000; Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Despite the progress in identifying the characteristics of SPC effectiveness, there has been little investigation regarding the SPC–athlete relationship and the components needed to ensure its success. Poczwardowski, Sherman, and Henschen (1998) suggested that as an interdisciplinary field, sport psychology research and applied practice should look beyond its boundaries and investigate best practice from the fields of physical education, exercise science, and psychology. The extensive research conducted in psychotherapy and counseling regarding the therapist–client relationship should be of considerable value in any attempt to examine the effectiveness of SPCs in the SPC–athlete relationship.

Researchers within psychotherapy and counseling have identified the relationship between counselor and client to be the most robust predictor of productive psychotherapy outcomes (Norcross, 2002; Sexton & Whiston, 1994). Although the components of the therapeutic relationship (working alliance, transference, counter-transference) emerged from psychoanalytic theory, developing a definitive definition of the relationship that incorporates all of its complex components has proved to be challenging. One definition proposed by Gelso and Carter (1994) states that the therapist–client relationship includes “the feelings and attitudes that therapist and client have toward one another, and the manner in which these are expressed” (p. 297). These researchers argued that the relationship consists of two parts, the technical and real aspects of the relationship. Included within the technical aspect of the relationship are the theoretically prescribed techniques used by the therapist in an attempt to bring about client behavior change. The real relationship aspect consists of the feelings, and attitudes that dyad members hold toward one another, and “the psychological connection between therapist, and client, based on these feelings and attitudes” (Gelso & Hayes, 1998, p. 17). Although explained independently, these two aspects interact and influence one another throughout the duration of the therapeutic relationship. Despite the work of Gelso and colleagues, Horvath (2006) noted that the precise nature of the relationship and how therapist and client variables affect the outcome is still a matter for debate.

Despite the considerable research regarding the therapist–client relationship within the broad fields of psychotherapy, and counseling, and considering the recommendations made by sport psychology researchers (e.g. Andersen, 2000; Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Petitpas et al., 1999; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) regarding the importance of the consulting relationship within sport psychology practice, there is a pressing need to investigate the components necessary for effective sport psychology consulting relationships. One of the few studies to explore the sport psychology consulting relationship was conducted by Lubker et al. (2008). These researchers investigated the characteristics of effective SPCs by administering the 31-item Characteristics

of Effective SPC Inventory (CESPC1) to 124 collegiate athletes (68% had worked previously with an SPC) and 80 SPCs (21% were AASP-accredited consultants) who worked with collegiate athletes in the USA. Results indicated that both athletes and SPCs believed in positive interpersonal skills (i.e. friendly, approachable, trustworthy, and maintain confidentiality) to be the most important factors for consulting effectiveness. Lubker et al. (2008) hypothesized that these interpersonal skills would have a positive effect on productive therapeutic relationships, yet this claim remained untested.

Recently, Sharp and Hodge (2011) interviewed 17 accredited SPCs to examine SPC perceptions of the influence of SPC characteristics on consultant effectiveness while determining the conditions necessary for establishing an effective consulting relationship. Results identified three characteristics of SPC effectiveness: (a) build a connection with the athlete to create positive change, (b) build a professional consulting relationship with the athlete, and (c) the consulting relationship meets athletes' needs. In addition, two aspects emerged as essential for an effective consulting relationship; the athlete must be an active participant; and the SPC must demonstrate an awareness of client boundaries of confidentiality. While these findings provide useful insight, it has yet to be seen if athletes perceive similar characteristics to be essential for establishing an effective consulting relationship.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate what athletes perceived to be essential for effective sport psychology consulting and to examine athletes' perceptions of the key components of an effective sport psychology consulting relationship. Identifying the characteristics athletes perceive to be essential for both the development of consulting effectiveness and an effective consulting relationship should enable SPCs to assess the effectiveness of their applied practice. In addition, this information should contribute to the development of a credible scientific knowledge base for the field and increased individual SPC accountability (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002).

Method

Participants

Elite athletes who had access to and had used the services of an SPC through the New Zealand National Academy of Sport system formed the participant pool for this investigation ($N = 48$; 29 males, 19 females; M age = 29.09 years). The athletes who had access to Academy resources, such as SPC services, were those who had been identified as carded through their respective sports. Carded athletes are those athletes; (a) whose performance focus is the next pinnacle sporting event, as agreed between the national sporting organization and the National Academy, (b) whose performance focus is the pinnacle sporting event immediately following the one above, and, (c) outstanding junior international athletes not identified in either of the above points, where carding will enhance their potential. These carded athletes were eligible for an allocation of funding and services (e.g. sport psychology), which had been determined by their national sport organization.

Six male and three female athletes ranging in age from 22 to 57 years (mean age = 32.7, $SD = 11.05$) were interviewed. All participants were Caucasian, and had a variety of educational backgrounds, ranging from High School graduates to university post-graduate diplomas. The nine athletes had competed in a variety of sports, including cricket, equestrian eventing, swimming, triathlon, and wheelchair rugby. The length of time athletes had competed in their chosen sport

ranged from 8 to 38 years (mean years participating = 17.9 years, $SD = 9.0$). All participants had or were currently representing New Zealand in their chosen sport at an International level. Competitive achievements of participants included a variety of medals in Commonwealth Games, Paralympic Games, and World Championships.

Measures

All athletes who participated in this investigation were working with or had worked with an SPC that had lasted over an extended period of time (at least three months; more than a one-off consulting session) and had previously completed an online version of Partington and Orlick's (1987) Consultant Evaluation Form (CEF), the results of which are not reported in this paper. Following completion of the CEF, all participants were asked if they would volunteer for an individual face-to-face interview to discuss their consulting relationship with their SPC. From the participants who volunteered to participate in an interview ($N = 27$), a stratified purposeful sampling method based on the results of the CEF was utilized with the aim of selecting information-rich athlete cases and capturing differences in athlete perceptions of SPC effectiveness, and the effective consulting relationship. Two information-rich athlete participant groups were created, with the first participant group ($N = 5$) comprising those athletes who rated their SPC highly on the CEF (SPC scored between 8 and 10 on each of the CEF items). The second participant group ($N = 4$; five athletes agreed to participate, however one athlete withdrew prior to interviewing) comprised those athletes who rated their SPC as less effective on the CEF (SPC scored between 1 and 7 on each of the CEF items).

Data collection procedures

This investigation involved individual qualitative, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with each athlete. Through the use of interviews, athletes were able to communicate their in-depth understanding of SPC effectiveness and the consulting relationship in their own voices, and language (Patton, 2002). An interview guide was developed to ensure that the same systematic and comprehensive lines of inquiry were followed with each individual interviewed (a copy of the interview guide can be obtained on request from the first author). Question topics included perceptions of an effective SPC, perceptions of an effective SPC–athlete relationship, and necessary components of an effective consulting relationship.

Following University research board ethical approval, athletes were contacted via email to organize individual face-to-face interviews. Interviews were organized at a time, and location suitable to the participant, and were conducted by the first author who had been trained in qualitative research methodology. Interviews ranged in duration from 60 to 75 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participant's written consent. Interviews were later transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher and yielded 283 pages of single spaced data. Verbatim interview transcripts along with the researcher's preliminary interpretations were then sent to each participant for member checking.

Data analysis

The data analysis processes employed within this investigation took place concurrently with the data collection which allowed for the development of additional questions and further data collection if necessary. The information gained through the athlete interviews was analyzed following a thematic content analysis approach (Weber, 1990). This approach classified the information

from interviews, reducing it to more relevant and manageable information units to form explanations of participant perceptions of their consulting experiences.

A four-stage free-flowing analytical procedure followed initial member checking procedures. First, open-coding enabled interview data to be broken down into meaningful blocks of information (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Second, careful line-by-line coding that was followed enabled the researchers to identify and understand the properties and dimensions of the emerging concepts of the consulting relationship (Robson, 2002; Weber, 1990). Throughout the course of these coding procedures, categories, sub-categories and concepts emerged to describe and explain what athletes believed to be essential for both SPC consulting effectiveness, and the consulting relationship. Third, following the completion of the line-by-line coding process, a constant comparative method was used to compare similarities and differences in participants accounts and experiences; incident with incident; data with category, and a category with other categories (Charmaz, 2000). Throughout the entire analysis process, memo writing was continually employed which enabled the researchers to keep track of ever-evolving concepts and complex ideas (Corbin & Holt, 2005).

Trustworthiness

In an attempt to ensure accurate and authentic findings, a number of methods were employed. First, a member checking procedure was employed that involved interview transcripts along with preliminary interpretations being sent to each participant to ensure their thoughts and experiences were being represented fairly. Second, following initial analysis of the data, the emergent concepts and categories were consensually validated with another experienced sport psychology researcher not involved in the data collection, and analysis processes. Third, an audit trail of all raw data quotes and interpretations was carried out by a third party unaffiliated with the present investigation. Finally, consistent with the recommendations made by Sparkes (1998), extensive quotations from the participants' were used in the following results sections for readers to judge for themselves the accuracy and trustworthiness of conclusions. To ensure anonymity, participants were identified with Ath (to identify that they were an athlete) followed by a number 1-9 (e.g. Ath3). The results that follow are divided into two sections; (a) athletes' views on SPC effectiveness (see Table 1) and (b) athletes' views on effective consulting relationships (see Table 2).

Table 1. Emergent categories and concepts for athlete views on SPC characteristics essential for effectiveness.

Categories	Concepts
Friendly but not a friend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPC was personable and non-intrusive • There were clear boundaries between the SPC and athlete about being a friend and being in a professional sport psychology role • Close friendship bonds developed as a result of traveling to competitions
SPC consulting experience influenced effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPC consulting experience influenced effectiveness
Athlete-centered consulting style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The SPC demonstrated understanding of the athlete as a person and empowered athlete independence • The SPC demonstrated knowledge and experience of the athlete's sport • The SPC developed practical psychological support that met the athlete's needs

Table 2. Emergent categories and concepts for athlete views on an effective consulting relationship.

Categories	Concepts
It was a flexible relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was an informal structure to consulting sessions • The SPC was open to the athlete contacting them outside of consulting sessions • The length and frequency of consulting sessions was flexible
An open, honest and respectful relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openness from both SPC and athlete • Trust • Respect • SPC was approachable • Boundaries of confidentiality were not clarified
Both dyad members contributed to the consulting relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributions from both individuals involved in the consulting relationship • SPC guided the direction of the work completed in the consulting relationship
The athlete must be an active participant in the consulting relationship by being open and honest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The athlete must be an active participant • The athlete must be open and honest

Results

Athlete views on SPC effectiveness

Friendly, but not friends. The category of friendly, but not friends reflected the need for the effective SPC to be personable, yet set clear boundaries for the consulting relationship. Three sub-categories emerged to support the category of SPC was friendly, but not a friend.

SPC was personable and non-intrusive. Four athletes described the effective SPC as non-intrusive, which enabled them to relate well with the athlete and which further enabled the athlete to look upon the SPC as approachable. Ath9 explained that,

He [the SPC] would be very casually dressed and just come along as he was, which I think was good for us as it makes him someone approachable and not so he's just come in from an office or something.

Athletes believed that an effective SPC appeared comfortable in a casual setting and helped the athlete to feel at ease and comfortable working with them. Ath7 explained, "I don't think this [SPC] did anything consciously [to make me feel comfortable working with him]. He just has such a nice manner with people ... he has a natural way of putting people at ease, it's just his manner."

Clear boundaries between the SPC and athletes. The effective SPC was perceived to set clear boundaries for the professional sport psychology consulting relationship that developed between themselves and the athlete they are consulting with. Five athletes explained that there was a need to have boundaries in place to ensure that the SPC could maintain a professional distance, while ensuring the athlete was clear about what role the SPC had adopted. As Ath2 states, "I would find it difficult if she [the SPC] was more of a friend than a sport psychologist. I think sometimes that can get a bit clouded, cos she's a real cool person." Furthermore, Ath5 observed that, "I think he's [the SPC] pretty good at [maintaining professional boundaries] ... Like they're your mates [friends], but then they've kind of got a bit of distance; if that makes sense."

Close friendship bonds developed. In addition, three athletes indicated that close friendship bonds developed with their SPC as a consequence of traveling together as part of a team. These athletes reasoned that these bonds developed as a result of spending extensive time together

as team members and the incidental conversations that result. As Ath1 explained, “when you’re away for 3 weeks you’re actually sort of in a personal relationship [with the SPC] anyway. Sometimes it was just me and [the SPC] having a coffee; we were talking, covering all sorts of stuff.” Furthermore, athletes believed that having social contact with the SPC outside of the consulting relationship allowed them to, “get to know you, that build up of trust in some other environment helps” (Ath8). Trust emerged as a key sub-category in athlete descriptions of the ideal consulting relationship.

SPC experience influenced consulting effectiveness. The majority of athletes (seven athletes) interviewed believed that the SPC experience was important for consulting effectiveness. These athletes commented that it was through experience that the SPC was able to discover effective practice and methods. They perceived that with experience an SPC developed a better understanding of applied sport psychology consulting best practice. Ath2 stated that, “I think the more athletes [the SPC has worked with] the better equipped they’ll always be ... You probably know more cases of best practice with athletes ... You’d be like this one [strategy/method] is best suited to your situation.” Furthermore athletes felt that an experienced SPC would be able to discuss examples of athletes they had worked with in the past (using limited details) to reassure the athlete that others had faced similar challenges.

[The SPC] said he worked with [other athletes that are coached by the same coach], but he didn’t go into details about what they’d talked about ... He was saying you’re just doing you’re apprenticeship, these guys had the same concerns, so he was telling me that to reassure me. (Ath5)

Athlete-centered consulting style. Analysis indicated three sub-categories that contributed to the effective SPC having demonstrated an athlete-centered consulting style. This emergent category focused on meeting the needs of the athlete by providing him/her with individualized psychological support and practical solutions tailored to her/his particular needs.

SPC demonstrated an understanding of the athlete as a person and empowered athlete independence. Seven athletes described an effective SPC as someone who understood the athlete and empowered athlete independence. They believed that an effective SPC treated the athlete as an individual and was able to show an understanding of the athlete as a person. “Someone who’s prepared to ... spend quite a bit of time getting to know you and whatever they’re trying to teach [you] show how that applies to you” (Ath8). Furthermore, the effective SPC also encouraged the athlete to become independent of them and work on their mental skills outside of the consulting relationship. “I think an effective consultant is somebody who can give [an athlete] some tools to use when they’re on their own and not become reliant on them” (Ath7).

SPC demonstrated knowledge and experience of the athlete’s sport. The effective SPC was also perceived to demonstrate an understanding of the athlete’s situation and the challenges they faced in their sport. Ath9 observed that she preferred to work with, “someone with knowledge ... with a bit of experience especially in my sport and the competitive arena.”

SPC developed practical psychological support that met the athlete’s needs. Four athletes expressed the view that an effective SPC was able to tailor the psychological support to the needs of the individual by giving the athlete specific tools to work on in their training and competition settings. One athlete described working with his SPC; “when you’re working with him it’s very much about you, what you want to do and how to get the best out of you or the team” (Ath6). In addition, the effective SPC should ensure that advice was concrete, and practical, and that it was specific, and applicable to the athlete’s sport. As Ath5 explained, “using analogies

like imagine the sweat coming out of you ... it was bullshit. Especially in a sport like triathlon, where you're going hard you can't think about that stuff ... Just don't make it airy-fairy like that ... Make it practical".

Athlete views on the consulting relationship

The consulting relationship needs to be flexible. Three related sub-categories emerged regarding the need for a flexible consulting relationship. Athletes believed that the consulting relationship needed to be flexible regarding the amount, frequency, and length of consulting sessions, to meet the needs of those involved.

Informal structure to consulting sessions. Three athletes indicated that there was an informal structure to the meetings of an effective consulting relationship. Ath2 explained, "meetings were quite informal and we just chatted about a few things and just identified what the key issues were ... just chatting away". In addition, Ath8 commented, "He would just start chatting, he would have a blank sheet of paper in front of him and he would just start taking notes on anything I was saying and ended up with a file of notes on me."

Length and frequency of consulting sessions was flexible. Three athletes commented that the length of consulting sessions was flexible. The consulting sessions between the athlete and their SPC varied in length from 20 to 90 minutes. As Ath9 explained, "one-on-one's were probably about an hour long each, just depended on what we had to talk about." Furthermore, eight athletes indicated that the frequency of consulting sessions was flexible and determined by the athlete, "First of all I just emailed her and said 'hey I need a chat' and she was really good at getting back and said sweet when do you want to [meet]? ... Pretty much it was up to me" (Ath2); the athlete's coach, "Generally our coach [determined when we had to meet up with him]" (Ath1); or by the SPC:

The frequency [of our meetings] was infrequent, it was sort of here and there; I don't think there was any set schedule. It was usually at his offices because he was usually a lot busier than me; I sort of worked around his schedule. (Ath6)

SPC was open to the athlete contacting them outside of consulting sessions. Three athletes explicitly stated that an effective SPC was open to the athletes contacting them outside of consulting sessions. As Ath4 explained, "[The SPC] was open to you phoning if you wanted to discuss something that had come up." Furthermore, Ath9 stated, "I've been emailing him [SPC] since [our sessions] with results and questions; and he's very approachable to that."

Open, honest, and respectful consulting relationship. Athlete descriptions of the ideal consulting relationship identified an open, honest, and respectful consulting relationship that reflected five sub-categories.

Openness from both individuals. The emergent category of openness included the concepts of (a) openness and honesty between the SPC and athlete and, (b) athlete knowledge of the SPC's sporting and competitive background. Five athletes believed an effective consulting relationship to be open and honest. Indeed, Ath7 explained that, "[I think there should be] the preparedness to say I'm not sure or I don't know, or maybe you should try this and if that doesn't work maybe we can try something else." Ath6 believed the "openness and relaxed sort of atmosphere around him [SPC] was a huge bonus for the relationship". Additionally, athlete responses indicated that as a component of openness, it was important that the SPC did not tell the athlete what they think they wanted to hear and were prepared to let the other person know what was and what was not

working in the consulting relationship. One athlete reflected; “you want the [SPC] to be honest and straight up. I certainly don’t want someone who’s just placating you or saying the things they think you want to hear” (Ath4).

In addition, openness was also reflected in athlete knowledge of the SPC’s personal sporting and competitive background which was perceived to help the athlete relate to the SPC. Three athletes specified that athlete knowledge and awareness of the SPC’s personal sporting and competitive background was irrelevant. These athletes believed that because the main focus of the consulting relationship was on the athlete, the sporting and competitive background of the SPC was of no importance. In comparison, the majority (six) of athletes indicated that athlete knowledge and awareness of the SPC’s personal sporting and competitive background helped them relate to the SPC. Athletes noted that although the SPC did not use personal anecdotes about their own personal competitive experience, they believed being made aware of how other athletes the SPC had worked with had coped with similar situations was beneficial. Ath2 reflected that, “I think it’s good to [know SPC background and hear what other athletes they have worked with have gone through]; it helps you put things in perspective and see ways that you could actually have used strategies to help you.”

Trust. Five athletes believed trust to be essential within an effective consulting relationship. Athletes believed that there, “should be a lot of trust in the [consulting] relationship” (Ath2). Athletes reasoned, “that trust, and respect, and those kind of confidentiality boundaries, and parameters” (Ath3) and their awareness of the boundaries of confidentiality are essential for the relationship, and would affect their ability to trust, and talk openly with the SPC. However, as one athlete warned, the SPC has, “got to develop, and earn the trust of their people by not being too intrusive to begin with” (Ath7).

Respect. Four athletes reported that respect was important for the ideal consulting relationship. “I think the consulting relationship should be respectful and in some ways it’s like the relationship you have with your coach” (Ath3). Athletes indicated that the SPC should be “a person you respect” (Ath5). Respect for the SPC comes with “knowledge of what they’ve done, you might have a bit more respect for what they’ve done and a bit better understanding of them” (Ath4). In addition, athletes commented on the need for SPC respect for the athlete, specifically, “[Someone who] is respectful and can relate to [the athlete]” (Ath3).

SPC was approachable. Two athletes also indicated that the effective consulting relationship included an SPC who was approachable, friendly, and who they felt they could talk with freely with. Links can be made between this sub-category and the earlier sub-category of SPC characteristics *SPC was personable yet non-intrusive.* However, in the current context athletes believed that an approachable SPC would positively affect on the consulting relationship. For example, Ath6 observed that, “I think what worked with [SPC] is [that] he is just one of the guys. You feel like you could just talk shit [chat about a range of issues] with him.” Furthermore, Ath 9 noted that, “interest and involvement are key. You see a mental skills coach who’s enthusiastic about what you’re doing, interested and onto it, I think that makes a huge difference.”

Boundaries of confidentiality were assumed. Further analysis of athlete responses indicated that the boundaries of confidentiality were assumed for the effective consulting relationship. SPC confidentiality had been automatically assumed by seven athletes. Ath2 reflected that, “I don’t think we ever talked about [confidentiality], I think it was just a given.” Specifically, the SPC had never discussed the boundaries of confidentiality for the consulting relationship and as such the athlete assumed that everything discussed within consulting sessions would remain confidential. In comparison, one athlete indicated that there had been a break in confidentiality between himself and his SPC during the consulting relationship. Ath6 explained:

I do remember one instance when I was talking to [the SPC] about something and it got back to the coach. I remember being pretty pissed about that ... I just think it was the fact that it happened [boundaries of confidentiality were broken] and I talked to him about that ... It didn't turn into a big issue, he just apologized.

In contrast, only one athlete explained that their SPC had taken time to reassure them about the boundaries of confidentiality when they had been discussing delicate topics within consulting sessions. "When I had the team anxiety he said this will remain in the room, but I want you to tell me [if you want me to be there with you]" (Ath1).

Both dyad members contributed to the consulting relationship. Two sub-categories emerged regarding the contributions from the athlete and the SPC to the consulting relationship.

Contributions from both individuals involved in the consulting relationship. Two athletes reported that both the athlete and SPC made contributions to the consulting relationship. Ath 5 believed, "our contributions were probably pretty even while we worked together." Furthermore Ath9 perceived,

We were very much equals. He [SPC] would give examples of his experience, and then I would go on. He would give advice and stuff, he didn't come across as a teacher; it was a lot more casual, laid back than that.

SPC guided the direction of the work completed in the consulting relationship. Although both members of the consulting relationship made individual contributions to the consulting relationship, two athletes believed that it was the SPC who primarily guided the work completed during the consulting relationship. As one athlete explained, "[The SPC] would sort of lead the conversation at times, he would ask questions like how you were feeling, like give me some direction when I was talking to him" (Ath9). Furthermore, through the guided questioning the SPC would, "work towards me giving the answers, the solutions to my own problems ... But he would always throw concepts at me or provide advice when needed" (Ath6). Clear links can be made with the category of athlete/client-centred discussed previously; that is, the theme that the SPC guides the work conducted during the consulting relationship to meet the specific needs of the individual athlete.

Athletes must be active, open and honest participants. Athletes must be active participants in the consulting relationship. Eight athletes commented that they were expected to be "active participants" (Ath3) within the consulting relationship and expected to work on developing their mental skills both inside and outside of the consulting sessions. Athletes commented that, "I think its one of those situations where you're only going to get out of it what you're going to put into it" (Ath7) and "you've got to be willing to actually do stuff and try new things, you need to be open to that, to work with [SPC] trying new ideas to get the results" (Ath9). Furthermore, these athletes were personally responsible for implementing strategies or completing set tasks outside of consulting sessions and for providing the SPC with feedback regarding their success. Ath6 explained:

[My SPC] expected me to think for myself. He wasn't going to give me the answers; [and] that would piss me [off] because often I'd go in there looking for something and often he would turn the question around so I had to provide the answer ... He expected me to go in and work with him and not just go in there and be babysat. He expected me to find the information myself.

Athletes must be open and honest in the consulting relationship. Four athletes indicated the need for athletes to be open and honest with the SPC about any issues that were bothering them, the progress they were making with the tools and strategies they were using and “just being honest about what works and what doesn’t” (Ath3). As Ath9 explained, “[The SPC expected] me to be open, honest and frank; cos you can only get improvement in these things if you are [working on them], there’s no point hiding behind [excuses].” Similarities exist with the previously discussed category of open, honest, and respectful consulting relationship. Specifically, the need is for both individuals to be open and honest in their communications with each other.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate what athletes believed to be essential for effective sport psychology consulting and to examine athlete perceptions of the key components necessary for establishing an effective consulting relationship. No differences were noted in the characteristics perceived to be essential for consulting effectiveness between those athletes who rated their SPC as effective versus those who rated their SPC as less effective on the initial online CEF. The components identified by athletes who rated their SPC highly as necessary for an effective consulting relationship were also identified as desirable by those athletes who rated their SPC less effective. Previous research has examined the influence of the personal characteristics of SPCs on consulting effectiveness, but has largely failed to consider the influence of the consulting relationship (e.g. Anderson et al., 2004; Getner et al., 2004; Gould et al., 1991; Lubker et al., 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Tod & Andersen, 2005). Results from the present investigation complement the existing literature on characteristics of effective SPCs, as well as identify a number of unique characteristics and conditions perceived to be essential for effective consulting relationships.

Results from the current investigation highlighted the need for the SPC to be friendly but not a friend with the athlete. Specifically the SPC had to be personable with the athlete, to allow bonds of friendship to develop while maintaining clearly identified professional boundaries to ensure this friendly behavior did not extend beyond the consulting relationship. Poczwardowski et al. (1998) argued that SPCs should address professional and ethical codes of conduct when approaching client issues and relationships. Although friendly and personable behavior aids effective interaction, the development of rapport, and helps the SPC in gaining a detailed understanding of the athlete as a person, athletes perceived it to be essential that the SPC maintained professional boundaries throughout the course of a consulting relationship. If occasions arise where boundaries become blurred, the SPC should seek immediate advice and/or support through peer support, and supervision. Sharp and Hodge (2011) argued that SPC supervision should extend beyond the training and development of new SPCs, rather they believed it an essential tool to monitor consulting effectiveness and challenges to ethical boundaries while also a key element to SPC continuing education. Further research is needed into SPC adherence to ethical codes and the possible issues that arise when professional boundaries are not maintained, in addition to determining what are the characteristics of an acceptable and ethical sport psychology consulting relationship.

The effective SPC was also perceived to adopt an athlete-centered approach. This approach included the characteristics of the SPC treating their client as an individual, demonstrating a clear understanding of the individual as a person and as an athlete, individualizing the psychological support program and individual consulting sessions to meet the client’s needs, and the ability to build a rapport with the client. These findings reinforce the increasing number of SPCs who have argued “that improving an athlete’s capabilities in the sporting context begins, and is

facilitated by, the growth and improvement of the athlete as a human being” (Friesen & Orlick, 2010, p. 227). These empirical findings appeared to support the personal consulting reflections of both Halliwell (1989) and Ravizza (1990) who argued that by providing consulting sessions that focused on the needs of the individual client the SPC would be more effective. Furthermore, Ravizza (1990) argued that meeting client needs cannot be accomplished through packaged mental skills training programs. Even in team environments, the mental skills training program must be individualized to meet the individual’s needs. By meeting the individual athlete’s needs and ensuring the athlete had all the necessary psychological skills, and methods to work independently of them, the SPC was perceived to be empowering athlete independence and avoiding athlete dependence. Although working independently, the athlete could potentially return to the SPC to develop or improve their psychological techniques whenever they believed it was necessary. McCann (2000) believed there were two reasons why the SPC should encourage client independence. First, he believed that the field of sport psychology is harmed from guru-fixation; when the SPC is believed to have some sort of secret, magical techniques that they apply to their clients. The client is not likely to benefit from working with this individual because the guru is often seen to take the credit for client performance successes, while also creating athlete dependence. In addition, the present investigation highlighted the need for both dyad members to be perceived to contribute to the consulting relationship, rather than just the SPC guru. Second, on a more practical level, there is often a need for the SPC to create client independence to enable the SPC to work effectively with a number of other clients.

Findings from the current investigation indicated that the consulting relationship between the SPC and their client must be flexible; flexible in structure, content, length, and the location of consulting sessions. Furthermore, if the SPC is to tailor the consulting relationship to meet the needs of the client, consulting sessions need to be adaptable to ensure their needs are met. In their pioneering investigation, Orlick and Partington (1987) noted that poorly rated SPCs demonstrated a lack of flexibility; that is, inflexibility in their approach to meet individual athlete’s needs and the techniques used to meet those needs. Furthermore, Ravizza (1990), in his discussion on the development and implementation of psychological support for professional baseball players, commented on the need for a flexible consulting approach. This flexibility allowed him to adjust to situations as they arose, because in the professional baseball environment, changes in management and players were a regular occurrence.

These results provided a novel insight of athletes’ perceptions of contributions to the consulting relationships. Specifically, both the SPC and the athlete were believed to contribute to the development and effectiveness of the consulting relationship. To date, research within sport psychology has focused on the individual SPC’s contributions to the consulting process through examining the education and training of practitioners in psychological theory and techniques. However, recently, Sharp and Hodge’s (2011) investigation into SPC perceptions of consulting effectiveness, reported that SPCs believed that there was a need for the athlete to be an active participant in the consulting relationship. Their results noted that those consulting relationships, in which the athlete contributed little and expected the SPC to tell them what to do to improve their performance, were perceived to be less effective. Similarly, results from the present investigation explored the athletes’ contribution to the relationship in greater depth. Specifically, participants believed that the athlete needs to be committed to actively participating, and working on their psychological skills both inside, and outside of consulting sessions. The athlete was viewed as being personally responsible for implementing strategies or completing tasks set outside of consulting sessions that were devised within sessions. Furthermore, the athlete should provide the SPC with feedback regarding the effectiveness of the agreed upon strategies.

The emergent findings from this investigation are supported by the psychotherapy and counseling literatures. Specifically, Sexton and Whiston (1994), in their empirical review of counseling

relationships, concluded that client factors (e.g. the relationship with the client, pre-treatment symptomatology, and general characteristics such as relationships with family members) have been found to influence client participation in the development of the working alliance between counselor and client. Furthermore, Bergin (1997) argued that the client must be an active partner in the psychotherapy therapeutic alliance, because client contributions have been shown to be as important as that of the therapist in producing change.

Conclusion

The findings from the current investigation produced a number of unique findings and detailed information regarding athletes' perceptions of SPC effectiveness and the key components necessary for establishing an effective consulting relationship. These elite athletes believed that the effective SPC should be friendly, but not a friend while also maintaining professional boundaries. Moreover, athletes perceived an effective SPC to be someone who used an athlete-centered style and who individualized the psychological support to meet the athlete's needs. The personal characteristics identified by athletes for consulting effectiveness shared similarities and overlapped with those components perceived to be necessary for an effective consulting relationship. Specifically, athletes indicated that the consulting relationship should be flexible regarding the amount, frequency, and length of consulting sessions. The consulting relationship should be open, honest, and respectful, while allowing participants to demonstrate friendly behavior, but still maintaining professional boundaries. The relationship should involve contributions from both members, while the athlete must be aware that they need to be an active, open, and honest participant.

The results of this investigation should be interpreted in light of its methodological strengths and limitations. First, the inclusion of only New Zealand athletes could be considered a limitation; however, the elite level at which these athletes competed and their extensive experience working with SPCs within the New Zealand academy network should be considered a strength. Second, although the small sample size of athletes involved within this study was a limitation, the in-depth nature of the findings allowed readers to draw conclusions regarding the application of these findings for their own practice. Third, athlete's appraisal of their relationship with the SPC may potentially be influenced by many factors. However, by gaining an understanding of these athletes' beliefs of the competencies of the SPC with whom they are working provided the reader with a richer nuanced perspective of the processes undertaken within the consulting relationship. Finally, as with most qualitative studies, the concept of empirical generalizability does not apply. However, the findings presented allowed the reader to draw upon those characteristics and conditions necessary to develop their personal consulting effectiveness. The current investigation has highlighted the need for further research regarding the sport psychology consulting relationship, the necessary conditions needed for effective practice, athlete contributions to the consulting relationship, and challenges regarding the ethical boundaries of the consulting relationship. Consideration of these emergent characteristics should aid the development of SPC effectiveness and the SPCs' ability to meet the needs of their individual athlete-clients.

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