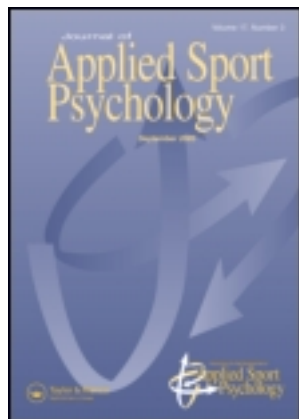


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Sport Psychology Consulting Effectiveness: The Sport Psychology Consultant's Perspective

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The aim of this study was to examine sport psychology consultants' (SPCs) perceptions of the influence of SPC characteristics on consultant effectiveness, while determining the conditions necessary for establishing an effective consulting relationship. Thirteen accredited SPCs participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic content analysis identified three characteristics of SPC effectiveness: (a) build a connection with the athlete to create positive change, (b) build a professional consulting relationship with athlete, and (c) consulting relationship meets athletes' needs. Two aspects emerged as essential for an effective consulting relationship: (a) athlete is an active participant, and (b) SPC awareness of client boundaries of confidentiality.

Within sport psychology, research concerns have been raised regarding the need for effective evaluation in this applied field (e.g., Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007; Martindale & Collins, 2007; Strean, 1998). For example, Hardy and Jones (1994) noted that evaluation is not customary within applied sport psychology settings. The evaluation of the individual sport psychology consultant (SPC) has been largely neglected in favor of assessing the methods employed by these individuals. Andersen (2000) reinforced this point stating that, "Traditionally, the burden of proof and the evidence for the effectiveness of the techniques sport psychologists use stem from models of science that pay maximal attention to the intervention and minimal attention to the human deliverer of that intervention" (p. xiv). To be able to effectively monitor the professional accountability of SPCs, it is essential that the qualities and characteristics necessary for consulting effectiveness are clearly identified.

In recent years, substantial progress has been made in identifying the qualities and characteristics necessary for effective sport psychology consulting from the athlete's perspective (e.g., Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004; Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson, 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Tod & Andersen, 2005). For example, Anderson et al. (2004) discovered that elite British athletes regarded the following characteristics to be important for an effective SPC: personable, practical advice, good communicator, knowledgeable about sport psychology, knowledgeable about the athlete's sport,

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exhibits professional skills, and honest and trustworthy. Although research that considers the athlete/client's perspective (i.e., the consumer who is being helped) is important and useful, the opinions of the SPC "practitioners" themselves would also seem to be an important source of information regarding consulting effectiveness. Based on the lived experiences of the individual SPC, these opinions would provide an alternative view of the consulting relationship, from the perspective of the consultant who is offering assistance for his or her client/athlete. However, to date only three descriptive studies have explicitly examined the SPC's perspective regarding SPC effectiveness (Gould et al., 1991; Lubker et al., 2008; Partington & Orlick, 1991). Although results from these investigations highlighted differences between client and SPC perceptions of the characteristics necessary for consulting effectiveness, there were limited discussions on what SPCs perceived to be essential for effective consulting.

In addition to the need to examine the SPC's contribution to the effectiveness of applied sport psychology, the relationship between the SPC and the athletes they are consulting with has been regarded by a number of authors as a significant component in successful and effective sport psychology consulting (Andersen, 2000; Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999). Although there is a growing body of research investigating the effectiveness of the sport psychology consultant from the athlete's perspective (Andersen, 2000; Anderson et al., 2004; Petitpas et al., 1999; Tod & Andersen, 2005), no research has explicitly examined either the athlete's or the SPC's views on how to facilitate and nurture an effective consulting relationship.

Further development of research investigating the sport psychology consulting relationship would progress if researchers considered the theories, concepts, and methodologies that inform other areas of psychology (Vanden Auweele & Rzewnicki, 2000). Considering these words of advice, the extensive research conducted in general psychology regarding the therapist-client relationship should be of considerable value in any attempt to examine the effectiveness of SPCs and the "SPC-athlete" relationship. Research in psychology has focused on three main topics in relation to the therapist-client relationship: (a) transference relationships, (b) facilitative conditions, and (c) the working alliance (Petitpas et al., 1999). Transference relationships consist of client transference and therapist countertransference and can occur in both a positive and negative manner. Transference represents "a process that occurs in psychotherapy when the client begins to respond (behaviorally, cognitively, emotionally, conatively) to the therapist in ways that resemble patterns of response to significant others in the client's life" (Andersen, 2004, p. 74). The transference process is not one way, as countertransference refers to the "process whereby the therapist begins to act and respond to clients in similar patterns as he or she has responded to significant others" (Andersen, 2004, p. 74). Research into transference and countertransference in recent years has provided a greater understanding of these relationships in sport psychology (Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). However, the influence of these relationships on consulting effectiveness and on the development of an effective consulting relationship has not yet been thoroughly investigated within sport psychology.

In the hope of promoting further research into the facilitative conditions necessary for an effective therapeutic relationship, Rogers (1957) proposed six conditions essential for positive therapeutic change to occur. Of the original six conditions, genuineness, positive regard, and empathy have received the most research attention and are believed to be critical in establishing a positive working relationship (Barett-Lennard, 1962; Beutler, Malik, Alimohamed, Harwood, Talebi, & Noble, 2004). Rogers argued that if one or more of these six conditions is absent within the relationship, then constructive psychological change will not occur. In addition, Rogers believed examining these conditions in isolation fails to account for the unique dyad that exists between the therapist and client. However, the influence of these

facilitative conditions on the sport psychology consulting relationship needs to be comprehensively evaluated.

The final area of the therapist-client relationship in psychology research is that of the working alliance. This refers to the collaborative relationship between the therapist and his or her client, where both individuals are working together to address whatever concerns are impeding the growth and functioning of the client. An extensive meta-analysis of research into the working alliance revealed a positive relationship between good working alliances and positive therapy outcomes (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). Furthermore, Frank and Gunderson (1990) proposed that the success of any therapeutic endeavor is dependent on the therapist and client establishing an open, trusting and collaborative relationship. Despite the considerable research regarding the therapist-client relationship within the broad field of psychology, few studies have been conducted on this key issue within sport psychology, especially from the SPC's perspective.

Andersen (2000) believed "A large portion of the answer to why it [sport psychology] works is contained in the personality of the sport psychologist and the quality of the working alliance that develops with the athlete" (p. xv). Despite some authors promoting the influence of the consulting relationship, at present there is insufficient data regarding the facilitative conditions required for an effective sport psychology consulting relationship to justify their claims. In-depth qualitative investigation into consulting effectiveness will assist SPCs to evaluate the personal characteristics necessary for effective practice, in addition to determining the necessary conditions required for an effective sport psychology consulting relationship (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002). The first purpose of this investigation was to examine SPC's views regarding consultant effectiveness. The second purpose was to investigate SPC's perceptions of the key components necessary for establishing an effective consulting relationship between themselves and their clients.

METHOD

Participants

Within New Zealand there are 17 sport psychologists and mental skills trainers accredited with Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand (SESNZ). All were contacted regarding participation in this investigation. The title of "Sport Psychologist" is strictly limited in New Zealand to those practitioners who are Registered Psychologists and hold an Annual Practicing Certificate. For those individuals from a sport science education and training background, SESNZ introduced a mental skills trainer accreditation in 2006. For the purpose of this investigation, the term sport psychology consultant (SPC) was applied when collectively referring to both accredited sport psychologists and mental skills trainers in New Zealand. Thirteen of the 17 (9 males, 4 females) SPCs agreed to take part in the investigation. Three were accredited sport psychologists and 10 were accredited mental skills trainers. Participants' years of consulting experience ranged from 6 to 20 years (M years consulting experience = 11.1, SD = 4.7). The SPCs ranged in age from 31 to 66 years (M age = 44.8, SD = 10.6).

Data Collection

Qualitative face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each SPC. 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 their definition

and evaluation of consulting effectiveness, their perceptions of the influence of their personal characteristics on consulting effectiveness, discussions of successful and less successful consulting relationships, and examples of transference and countertransference in their consulting relationships and how these were monitored. The interview guide was pilot tested with two SPCs in training to ensure participants understood the interview questions.

Following university research board ethical approval, SPCs were contacted via email to organize individual face-to-face interviews. Interviews were organized at a time and location suitable to each participant and were conducted by the first author who had been trained in qualitative research methodology. Interviews ranged in duration from 60 min to 90 min. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's written consent. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher yielding 322 pages of data. Verbatim interview transcripts along with the researcher's preliminary interpretations were then sent to each participant for member checking.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was employed to inductively search for categories that emerged from the 13 SPC interview data (Weber, 1990). Specifically, following initial member checking processes for each interview transcript, a four-stage free flowing analytical process took place. The first stage utilized an open coding method, where the data was fractured, conceptualized and integrated to form concepts and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). This was followed closely by the second stage with careful line-by-line coding (Robson, 2002; Weber, 1990). These coding methods allowed the researcher to interact with the data to produce meaningful pieces of information to produce a set of concepts and novel relationships which adequately represented what SPCs believed to be essential to consulting effectiveness (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Throughout the course of these coding procedures categories, sub-categories and concepts emerged to describe and explain what SPCs believed essential for both consulting effectiveness and the consulting relationship. Progression through the entire data collection and analysis was aided by the researcher continually memo writing. This process was intended to help spark thinking and encouraged the researcher to examine the data and codes in new and different ways.

Following the completion of the line-by-line coding process, the third stage involved a constant comparative method, whereby categories were judged by their similarities, so that data within each category is similar to each other yet distinct from other emergent categories. Theoretical saturation was achieved once the analysis of new data fit adequately into existing categories without creating new concepts and categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the final stage, axial coding followed, whereby the process of reconstructing data that had been broken down during the open coding process began by relating the emergent categories to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Trustworthiness

A number of trustworthiness methods were implemented in an attempt to ensure accurate and rigorous findings are presented to the reader (Sparkes, 1998). First, a member-checking procedure was employed. Second, validation discussions of emergent concepts and categories between the primary researcher and an experienced sport psychology researcher independent of the analysis process occurred. Third, an audit trail of all raw-data quotes was conducted. Fourth, extensive participant quotations were included in the results. To ensure anonymity, participants were identified with "SPC" followed by a number 1 to 13 (e.g., SPC3). The results

Table 1
Emergent Categories and Concepts for SPC Views on SPC characteristics Essential for Effectiveness

Categories	Concepts
Build a connection with athlete to create positive change	• Create a change • Educate the athlete • Create a connection with the athlete • Informal relationship with boundaries
Build a professional consulting relationship	• Maintain the relationship • Be professional • Confidence • Follow good therapeutic practice
Consulting relationship meets athletes’ needs	• Knowledge of psychology and mental skills training • Skills to build a relationship • Deal with the individual athlete • Strong, balanced, and collaborative relationship

that follow are divided into two sections: (a) SPC views on SPC effectiveness (see Table 1), and (b) SPC views on the facilitative conditions necessary for an effective consulting relationship.

RESULTS

SPC Views on SPC Effectiveness

Build a Connection to Create Positive Change

The effective SPC was able to develop a connection with the athlete that enabled he or she to educate the athlete towards a positive change in behavior. This was reflected by four supporting sub-categories.

Create a Positive Change

Three SPCs indicated that an effective SPC would be able to create a positive change in the athlete with whom they worked. One SPC explained, “That they [the athlete] walk away and it [athlete behavior] improves, and they know it improves” (SPC8). In other words, as a result of working closely with the athlete, the effective SPC would be able to create a positive change in the individual’s behavior that the athlete would be aware.

Educate the Athlete

Six SPCs indicated that an effective SPC would educate the athlete they were working with about mental techniques. SPC3 commented that, “My aim . . . in any relationship with an athlete is to give them [sic] the skills that they [sic] can actually use themselves [sic]. So they can be independent of me, so they don’t actually need to rely on me.” These SPCs believed that educating the athlete would lead to greater athlete awareness of the importance of mental skills training, which in turn would lead athletes to continue to monitor their mental skills training and return to the SPC for assistance when needed. Furthermore, SPCs indicated that educating athletes would lead to their ultimate aim of athletes no longer requiring the services of the SPC, because they have the skills and methods necessary to cope on their own.

Create a Connection with the Athlete

Three SPCs specifically indicated that the effective SPC would initiate and create a connection with the athlete that they believed assisted the athlete in understanding and applying psychological techniques. SPC6 commented that, “Effective I think, if I’ve built a relationship with someone that they [sic] take on board and utilize some of the techniques and have some ongoing success with using those techniques; putting old heads on young shoulders that’s effective.” Furthermore, the connection created between athletes and SPC was such that it allowed athletes to feel comfortable opening up and discussing delicate matters with the SPC that enabled athletes to cope during their sport.

Informal Relationship with Boundaries

Six SPCs suggested that in order to create a connection between themselves and the athletes with whom they work, the relationship was more informal than most therapeutic relationships, yet still maintained professional boundaries. Sport psychology consulting sessions did not always occur in formal office settings, as SPCs indicated that they allowed meetings to take place at athlete training sessions, competitions and in coffee shops. As SPC7 explained, “I work with people in an informal way in a coffee lounge, but that [’s] still me being professional. I wouldn’t seek a personal relationship.” The concepts of communication skills and ability to connect and interact with the client emerged as key skills to create a connection and are highlighted in the following quote:

The way I communicate has to be in words and ideas that they are fully satisfied with. If we can’t communicate well together and if they don’t think I’m understand[ing], that I’m open to their ideas, then we’re not going to get to try things (SPC12).

Build a Professional Consulting Relationship

Build a professional relationship was reflective of SPC beliefs that an effective SPC would possess the ability, knowledge and confidence to build a relationship with a client that was professional. As SPC 7 explained, “If I’m on tour with a team I’m professional and I’m personable so I can have a laugh and be involved in what happens. You’ve got to be yourself at times, but there’s always one foot in the professional role.” Four sub-categories supported the category of demonstrate the confidence to build a professional consulting relationship.

Maintain the Relationship

Twelve SPCs indicated that an effective SPC would be able to create and then sustain a relationship by developing a comfortable rapport with the athlete with whom they are working. SPC12 observed that, “. . . The relationship that I have or establish with the person I’m consulting with is absolutely fundamental to [a successful] outcome.” This sub-category represented the concepts of communication skills, the ability to build rapport, the ability to show empathy and acceptance, being open and approachable, and learning about the athlete’s sport. Participants indicated that SPCs need to possess specific skills to be able to build an effective professional relationship. SPC5 argued, “Learn about counselling psychology, learn how to be a good counsellor . . . Learn about all of the underpinning models of psychology and psychotherapy. Learn about all that stuff, because it will inform your work.” Specifically, having the ability to show empathy through techniques such as mirroring, specific questioning, showing an interest in the athlete was believed to be fundamental to building a relationship. Empathy was viewed as essential if athletes were to feel comfortable sharing how they felt with the SPC; thus, the individual SPC must demonstrate understanding. SPC8 discussed the importance of empathy stating, “Empathy and understanding . . . [Letting] them feel that

whatever they've got to talk about is fine. I don't think it's going to work well if they come in to talk about something and feel they are going to be judged."

It emerged that SPC's sporting background assisted SPC effectiveness through understanding and the ability to empathize with the challenges the athlete faced in his or her sport. Three SPCs indicated that athlete knowledge of the SPC's sporting and competitive background aided their consulting effectiveness. SPC2 explained that, "I think my height is a giveaway. Being rather tall they assume I've played basketball, volleyball or netball . . . And I think that maybe gives me some credentials with them." With particular reference to working in New Zealand, one SPC stated, "It's easier when people know that you've played sport to a high level . . . My background's been rugby and cricket . . . New Zealand rugby has a kind of a currency with it [rugby is the national sport in New Zealand, with considerable social status], that's important, even though I played a long time [ago]" (SPC7). However, this individual warned, "[Sporting experience] makes a difference and you can add it to whatever else you bring. But you can't rely on that, [with every athlete you work with]" (SPC7). Additionally, seven SPCs reflected that a personal sporting background aids their personal understanding and ability to empathize with athletes about the sporting challenges they face. As one SPC stated, "I do think it's important that I understand what it's like to compete; I could not imagine doing my job without having been [a competitive athlete] and continuing to compete" (SPC12). This SPC believed that experience as a competitive athlete enables the SPC to understand the challenges athletes face in the competitive environment.

Be Professional

Seven SPCs indicated that the effective SPC would act in a professional manner. SPC13 explained that, "To be an effective sport psych consultant you need to know what you're talking about." This category included the five supporting concepts of knowledge, adaptability, a grounded approach, transference and countertransference are inevitable in the consulting relationship, and peer supervision and support. SPC4 explained knowledge as, "In order to practice effectively I think you need to have psychologist skills and professional background, ethical codes, codes of practice [and] a framework under which to assess people and to treat people."

SPC descriptions of professionalism in the consulting relationship indicated that transference and countertransference were inevitable when consulting with athletes. Developing an awareness of the reactions of both dyad members, while also dealing with and managing these reactions, were believed to be key SPC attributes to ensuring consulting effectiveness. Three SPCs claimed that transference and countertransference were inevitable within any relationship and therefore they should be anticipated by the SPC. In addition, six SPCs commented on the importance of being aware of and identifying the feelings they themselves may have for the athlete or the athlete may have for them. SPC12 believed that, "It's important to identify them [feelings], in that it's important to do something immediately. Because otherwise it will undermine an effective working relationship."

SPC responses were mixed regarding the influence of transference and countertransference on the consulting relationship. SPCs perceived transference and countertransference to have both a positive and negative influence on the consulting relationship. Three SPCs believed that transference could have a positive influence on the consulting relationship. SPC7 believed that, "There are some positive things about [transference], because it helps to speed up relationships. You can warm to somebody and suddenly you're relating to them [sic] in a different way because there's an automatic connection with them." In comparison, three SPCs commented that transference can have a negative effect on the consulting relationship. These individuals commented that as a result of athletes viewing the SPC as an older wiser figure,

someone to whom they can look up to, the consulting relationship cannot be balanced. The athlete may not believe his or her contribution to the relationship is of significance or will not feel comfortable to raise issues of concern as he or she may believe the SPC has a greater knowledge. SPC1 explained, “[Transference] can have negatives as well. In terms of someone treating you like their [sic] older brother and then you are offering advice. It’s creating a power dynamic which may mean that they [sic] are less likely to raise issues of concern.”

SPCs were aware of the potential issues raised by transference and countertransference within the consulting relationship, given that the sub-category of peer supervision and support was seen as essential for effective SPC practice. Four SPCs thought that peer supervision and support was an important forum for SPCs to discuss their personal practice and issues that may arise in consulting relationships. In addition, seven SPCs believed that supervision and support were critical to ensure that their practice was effective by, “talking to people who are doing similar work” (SPC12). They believed this enabled them to take on board suggestions from other practitioners that helped to improve their own practice. The format for supervision and support varied among these SPCs, with some indicating they had set formal arrangements in place, where they met with an individual or a group on a regular basis. Although organized on a regular basis, there was no set structure to these meetings; rather, the aim was to help the SPC to reflect on his or her personal practice. In contrast, six SPCs indicated that they had no set arrangements made with a peer regarding supervision and support. Rather they contacted the individual, or a variety of individuals, as and when they felt the need arose to discuss professional matters.

Confidence

Seven SPCs explained that confidence was essential for an effective SPC: “A certain degree of confidence; you want to be able to not only [show] a belief in your own ability but be able to display that to other people, because often they come to you wanting assistance and if you don’t show that then it won’t facilitate a trusting relationship” (SPC1). Confidence includes the concepts of honesty and trust. SPC8 argued the importance of honesty from both dyad members and stated that, “Honesty from both sides just has to be there; otherwise, that does affect rapport. If one party feels the other isn’t being honest, then the solutions become a bit more prescriptive, because you aren’t sure about the feedback you’re getting.” Equally important was trust, with SPC12 reflecting that, “[The athlete] would have to trust me and I’d have to trust them [sic] . . . They might tell me things that they [sic] are embarrassed about and usually it’s the third session before they say some things that they think might be embarrassing.”

Follow Good Therapeutic Practice

Furthermore, SPCs reflected that they had learned it was essential to follow good therapeutic practice. Ensuring SPC practice was based on solid theoretical approaches, and continued listening to the client, which helped SPCs to structure their consulting practice and in turn encouraged consulting effectiveness. As SPC2 noted, “I learned that good therapeutic practice is the way you need to go. [Be] patient and steady and [develop] good solid ideas of where you need to go with this person. [And] being willing to think outside the box.” Within this sub-category, SPCs discussed the professional awareness that the effective SPC must possess to work with the individual athlete. SPC11 discussed the difficulty in admitting that he may not be the right SPC to work with a client and stated that, “The harder stuff is recognizing that you could [possibly] be the wrong person, on reflection I’d have been better to refer that person to a female sport psych/mental skills trainer who maybe could’ve gained her trust quicker.”

Consulting Relationship Meets Athletes' Needs

The category of building a consulting relationship that meets athletes' needs was reflective of SPC responses regarding the professional skills and methods essential for an effective SPC. This category developed from four emergent sub-categories.

Knowledge of Psychology and Mental Skills Training

Six SPCs indicated that having the knowledge of both general psychology and mental skills training was essential to enable the individual SPC to understand a wide variety of consulting approaches. This sub-category shows similarities with the concept of specific knowledge within the sub-category of be professional but expands further to include the need for knowledge of psychology and mental skills training. This training and educational background would provide the SPC with the knowledge to choose the most appropriate approach that would best meet the needs of the individual athlete. Furthermore, this sub-category also included SPC knowledge of a variety of consulting approaches and a willingness to learn new approaches to enhance their consulting effectiveness. One SPC said that, "I think flexibility in your approach and openness to strategies and willingness to always learn new strategies is very important" (SPC2). Also included was SPC knowledge of their individual role and responsibilities. This knowledge would ensure that the SPC maintained professionalism throughout the consulting process. SPC12 explained, "It's incredibly important that the professional doing the consulting understands their [sic] role and their [sic] own values and what they [sic] believe about sport and the other people you are consulting with. I think it's fundamentally important that they [sic] maintain their [sic] professionalism." Finally, the SPC must possess self-reflective knowledge of what they [sic] do and do not know. Specifically, the SPC must be willing to refer on to other professionals when the athlete requires assistance that is outside of the SPC's area of expertise.

Skills to Build a Relationship

Six SPCs indicated that the skills to develop a relationship were essential for an effective SPC. These skills were also a sub-category of build a professional relationship. In addition to those discussed previously, these skills included communications skills and the ability to connect and interact with the client. SPCs believed these skills would enable athletes to provide the SPC with feedback regarding the information that had been given to them. SPC7 stated the following:

Whilst there's the relationship, there are also communication skills within that . . . There's the ability to have empathy and communicate empathically, which is the basis of listening . . . The ability to respect the other person and to be able to communicate that respect. The ability to be fairly concrete in what you do.

Deal with the Individual Athlete

SPCs also indicated that the ability to deal with the individual athlete was essential. The effective SPC would be able to individualize his or her approach to identify and meet the needs of the individual athlete.

Strong, Balanced and Collaborative Relationship

Seven SPCs commented on the need to establish a collaborative relationship with the athlete. Specifically, the SPC must put the "... customer first, so you know athlete first and therefore their [sic] needs and establishing rapport and a safe relationship is the best thing" (SPC4). In addition, "it's a relationship that has to have, really at its best two people working

Table 2
Emergent Categories and Concepts for SPC Views on an Effective Consulting Relationship

Categories	Concepts
Athlete needs to be an active participant	• Openness • Commitment
Show awareness of who the client is and of the client's boundaries of confidentiality	• Build a relationship with the SPC • Awareness of who the client is • Coach involvement • Discussions remain confidential

together rather than one person doing the work and one person being worked on as it were in that way" (SPC7). The SPC should also make athletes aware that they have a shared input into the relationship (similar to the active participant category which follows).

SPC responses indicated that the development of a balanced, collaborative consulting relationship progressed through a number of stages. SPC10 argued that "Definitely more at the beginning it is you [the SPC], education and then the application is them leading it, you advising kind of thing." However, SPCs further indicated that as the consulting relationship progressed, they expected the athlete to take more control and ownership over the direction the relationship took. However, SPC12 cautioned that . . . My aim is that it's balanced, but I understand that that takes a little bit of time . . . And generally it takes a bit of work, because they're not used to it. I'm used to it taking time to work (see Table 2).

SPC Views on the Consulting Relationship

Athlete Needs to be an Active Participant

In addition to the SPC contributing skills and expertise to the consulting relationship, SPCs perceived that the athlete must demonstrate commitment and openness to building a relationship with the SPC. SPCs perceived it essential that the athlete was open and committed to building a consulting relationship with the SPC.

Openness

Seven SPCs indicated that athletes needed to demonstrate openness to working with the SPC. One SPC stated that the athlete needed to be " . . . open and willing to work on whatever it is" (SPC1). SPC13 explained why the athlete needed to bring this openness, "They need to be reasonably open minded, because there will be things that they've never contemplated doing" (SPC13). SPCs also believed that athletes needed to be open to working on the skills and methods discussed within sessions, outside of consulting meetings. SPC6 discussed that, "It's like I'm a shop keeper; I've got an array of tools which I'll explain how they can use. I'll teach them how to use it, but they've got to engage with that and take it and practice it." Additionally, two SPCs specifically stated that the athlete, " . . . Needs to be there off their own bat [their choice]; if they've been sent by a coach or somebody else, quite often there's a few barriers to break down and that's not effective" (SPC13).

Included within the sub-category of openness, SPCs discussed the concept of athlete honesty. Results indicated that SPC honesty and trust were essential for consulting effectiveness and were discussed previously as sub-categories of confidence and personal skills essential for an effective SPC. In addition, seven SPCs suggested that to improve the consulting relationship the athlete must give the SPC feedback on the work completed during consulting sessions. In

particular, SPC11 noted that, “I think feedback is really important, whether or not what you [the SPC] are doing is working for them and what they’re doing for themselves is working for them, so that you can adapt.”

Commitment

Eight SPCs indicated that the athlete must demonstrate commitment while in the consulting relationship. Clear links can be made between this sub-category and the earlier sub-category of openness. However, commitment is representative of athlete engagement in the consulting process. Commitment is also reflected by, “A willingness to learn . . . and a commitment to trying” (SPC4) and also that the athlete must be “. . . Willing to work on whatever it is [the SPC and athlete have agreed to focus on]” (SPC1).

Build a Relationship with the SPC

Six SPCs suggested that the athlete had to be willing to build a relationship with the SPC. In view of this, SPCs believed that the athlete needed to feel comfortable and relaxed while working with the SPC. Additionally, the sub-category of build a relationship emerged as an essential skill for an effective SPC. SPC5 explained that, “I want them to feel comfortable and relaxed, and comfortable about coming back.” As a consequence of the athlete feeling comfortable, these SPCs believed that athletes would be more willing to “. . . Share their ideas and goals [with the SPC]” (SPC12).

Correspondingly, to be willing to build a relationship with the SPC, the SPCs suggested that the athlete must see value in working with the consultant. Athletes must observe, “A perceived value of what you [the SPC] might offer and often that comes from and through the relationship you’ve built with other athletes, [as] whether they’d be willing to consider that” (SPC1). Furthermore, SPC13 believed, “Quite often they’re [athletes] there because they recognize that there’s something that you can offer them that [is] beneficial. I think that’s something that’s really important for the consulting relationship to develop.” Seven SPCs believed that the athlete must be an active participant in order to improve the consulting relationship. SPC3 explained, “I always say to athletes I’ll give you some stuff, suggest some strategies, [but] you have to implement [it. And] you have to take them on board and change them to fit you.”

Show Awareness of Who Your Client is and of Their Boundaries of Confidentiality

Analysis indicated that SPCs must demonstrate awareness of who their client is and of their boundaries of confidentiality in order to facilitate consulting effectiveness. This awareness was essential as the client who was in the one-on-one consulting session with the SPC may not have been the person paying for the service; it may have been the client’s National Sporting Organisation that paid for the SPC’s services. Therefore, it is important that the SPC determines who the client is and the boundaries of confidentiality. This category has close links to the sub-category of professional boundaries, yet SPCs’ responses indicated the need for a specific awareness of boundaries for confidentiality in order to ensure consulting effectiveness.

Awareness of Who the Client Is

Four SPCs indicated that SPC awareness of who the client is was essential for discussions about the athlete with the athlete’s coach. SPC responses revealed that this can be a problematic area for the SPC as it could be argued that the funder of the consultation process has a right to know what services are being provided for the funder’s money.

Coach Involvement

Four SPCs stated that they would discuss athletes performance with their coach as they believed there was no reason why this should be hidden from the coach as it was easily observable outside of consulting sessions. However, these SPCs also indicated that if issues arose that involved athletes' coaches they would encourage the athletes themselves to discuss the issue directly with their coaches. If athlete personal issues were discussed between the SPC and athlete within consulting sessions, they remained confidential. SPCs argued that there was no need for the client's coach or support network to be made aware of any personal issues the client may have discussed in consulting sessions. As a result, SPCs believed that it was important these individuals were made aware that personal issues would not be discussed outside of the boundaries of the consulting relationship.

Discussions Remain Confidential Unless the Athlete Indicates Otherwise

In contrast, seven SPCs suggested that discussions between themselves and the athletes they were working with always remained confidential, unless the athlete indicated otherwise. As SPC4 clearly stated "... Confidentiality is confidentiality. It's only breached under my ethical code, which is safety essentially." These SPCs indicated that unless the athlete gave the SPC permission to discuss matters with the coach, all topics discussed during consultations remained confidential.

Six SPCs believed that it was important to involve coaches in the consulting relationship. Involving the coach in the consulting relationship enabled the coach to assist the athlete in applying the methods and skills learned in consulting sessions to training and competitive situations. As SPC7 discussed, "... Sometimes getting the coach along can be quite useful, because the coach can understand what you're on about and can try to put it into practice as well." Moreover, involvement of the coach helped the coach to feel connected to the consulting relationship and ensured that the coach did not feel threatened by the work carried out by the SPC.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the SPCs' perspective regarding the characteristics of an effective SPC and the facilitative conditions necessary for an effective consulting relationship. Results indicated a number of important emergent categories that should be considered by SPCs in order to better inform their applied practice. Although these categories were defined and explained independently, some show similarities and substantial overlap. This overlap reflects the interrelated complexity of evaluating the effectiveness of applied sport psychology practice and further highlights the need to recognize the contribution the SPC makes beyond the sum of their characteristics and competencies.

Our findings highlighted that effective SPCs were seen to demonstrate confidence to build a professional, respectful relationship with their athlete and had the knowledge to develop and sustain a relationship with athletes that met their needs. The category of knowledge represented the concepts of communication skills, the ability to build rapport, the ability to show empathy, being open and approachable, and learning about the athlete's sport. These emergent concepts have previously been discussed by researchers in relation to key characteristics athletes believed to be essential for consultant effectiveness (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004; Gould et al., 1991; Orlick & Partington, 1987). Moreover, these results provide support for one of the few investigations which included SPCs' views on consulting effectiveness (Lubker et al. 2008), who reported both athletes and SPCs perceived effective SPCs to possess positive

interpersonal skills (e.g., friendly, approachable, trustworthy). Furthermore, SPCs perceived SPC's sporting background to aid effectiveness through empathetic understanding. In one of the few discussions of empathy in the sport psychology literature, Fifer, Henschen, Gould, and Ravizza (2008) commented on the importance of demonstrating empathy in the consulting relationship. These authors believed that empathy was essential as it helps "... the athlete know you care before they [sic] care what you know" (p. 357). Although demonstrating empathy was viewed as being essential, how the SPC communicated this empathy to the client needed to be clarified. Specifically, the present study highlighted that empathy could be demonstrated via techniques, such as mirroring, specific questioning, and showing an interest in the athlete as a person, not just as an athlete/client. The development of these techniques early in the careers of SPCs, through specific counselling skills training, would perhaps assist practitioners to develop effective consulting relationships.

Effective SPCs also believed empathy could be demonstrated through an understanding of their client's sport. Understanding the physical, technical and tactical aspects of the client's sport was viewed as being central to the SPC developing an empathetic understanding of the challenges faced by their client. Andersen (2006) made similar recommendations for SPCs when starting work with a client. He recommended that doing one's homework and consulting with coaches would aid sport-specific knowledge development. Recently, Lorimer and Jowett (2009), in one of the few studies to explore empathetic accuracy within a sport context, found that the dynamics of the interactions between the coach and athlete were a key function of how well they perceived each other's thoughts and feelings. Their results should be considered by SPCs as they revealed that coaches and athletes did not always have the same focus during sessions and that coaches needed to ensure that feedback processes were in place to ensure both individuals understood the focus of sessions (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). Therefore, SPCs perhaps need to ensure that they are working with their client to achieve the same goal and that they both have a shared focus throughout each session in their consulting relationship.

SPC responses also indicated that in order to effectively create a professional consulting relationship, the effective SPC must be aware that transference and countertransference are inevitable within the sport psychology consulting relationship. Results from the present investigation provide a novel insight into SPC experiences of transference and countertransference; specifically, SPC perceptions were mixed regarding the influence of transference and countertransference on the consulting relationship. Just as many SPCs believed it had a negative influence on the relationship as a positive influence. The positive influences on the consulting relationship were perceived to increase the speed at which the relationship developed due to the members enjoying some positive transfer. Although the negative influences were perceived as the potential for a power imbalance, developing as a consequence of the SPC being viewed as an older wiser figure, and someone to look up to, the client's contribution to the relationship was viewed as being of lesser significance.

Awareness of and monitoring transference and countertransference can be developed through SPC training and peer supervision (Stevens & Andersen, 2007; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Developing awareness of and monitoring the influences of transference and countertransference through peer supervision and support would ensure the SPC and the consulting relationship are not negatively influenced by either construct (Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Supervision is an important, if not essential, aspect of the training and development of practitioners in sport psychology (Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998; Silva, Conroy, & Zizzi, 1999; Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). Although Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) argued that a good quality supervisory relationship is instrumental in fostering a developmental approach to experiences during the early stages of professional development, there are limited

recommendations made for the provision of supervision throughout the continued careers of SPCs.

The experienced SPCs (i.e., with 11.1 mean years consulting experience) involved in this investigation believed continued peer supervision and support were essential tools for facilitating and monitoring effective consulting practice. These SPCs believed that on-going peer supervision was an important process that offered a forum for them to discuss ideas. However, the amount, frequency and structure of this supervision and support varied from an “on-call” chat with a friend, to a regular meeting with a supervisor or support group. These findings mirror those of quantitative investigations monitoring the amount of supervision undertaken by SPCs in the U.K. and U.S.A. which found that less than 10% of accredited SPCs undertook regular, structured supervision (Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker, 2004; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). SPCs should be reminded that supervision is not just for students; it is an essential tool to monitor consulting effectiveness in addition to an important element in the continuing education of all SPCs. Continued supervision allows the SPC to develop self-awareness, respectability, accountability and quality control (Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Despite this, recommendations for the amount, frequency and structure for supervision are conspicuous by their absence in codes of practice for SPC-accrediting bodies (e.g., Association of Applied Sport Psychology [AASP], British Association of Sport and Exercise Scientists [BASES], Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand [SESNZ]) and should be addressed in future research.

The present investigation highlighted that the effective sport psychology relationship maintained professional boundaries in typically informal settings. This finding supports previous reflective discussions by applied practitioners (e.g., McCann, 2000). Consulting sessions between the SPC and client were found to not always take place in formal office settings; sessions often occurred at athlete training sessions, competition venues and coffee lounges. Although centered on meeting client needs, these relaxed informal environments enabled clients to feel comfortable talking to and opening up to their SPC. Although informal in structure and location, these relationships were believed to maintain the necessary boundaries for professional practice (e.g., following and maintaining codes of conduct, ethical codes and boundaries of practice). Findings from the present study supported Henschen’s (in Fifer et al., 2008) contention that working with athletes in informal settings, such as hotel lobbies, coffee shops and at training sessions, although not ideal, greatly enhances SPC credibility with their client(s). McCann (2000), in his discussion of “doing sport psychology at the really big show” (the Olympic Games), commented on the need for SPCs to learn how to consult with clients in less than ideal conditions. He stated that the SPC needed to, “Learn to perfect the ski-lift consult, the bus-ride consult . . . the confidential session in public places such as hotel lobbies, parking lots and trainers’ tables. These catch-as-catch-can consulting encounters are realities for a sport psychologist in most competition settings” (p. 211). However, results from the present investigation reinforce the need to maintain professional boundaries in these informal settings to ensure consulting effectiveness. Furthermore, in such informal settings there is a greater need for SPCs to clearly define their roles, responsibilities and boundaries than if they were working in a formal clinical setting (Andersen, 2000).

These results highlight the informal and complex nature of working within the sport environment. Specifically, the SPC should be aware of who their clients are and of their boundaries of confidentiality. All SPCs who participated in this investigation were Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand accredited and as such were accessible as providers to the New Zealand Academy of Sport as either accredited sport psychologists or mental skills trainers. Working within this structure can create problems for the individual SPC regarding the identity of his or her client. Is the SPC accountable to those providing payment for their services and if so how does the SPC maintain the individual client’s boundaries of confidentiality? As

accredited members of SESNZ, the individual SPC was professionally bound to adhere to the SESNZ Code of Ethics, which clearly states that, “SESNZ members do not disclose information obtained professionally to any third party without the informed consent of the subject” (Retrieved December 10, 2009, from <http://www.sesnz.org.nz/about/ethics.html>). Considering this, it could be argued that the client is the individual attending the consulting sessions, but the SPC may also be required by the sporting organization (who is paying for the service) to provide an explanation of the services provided. The complicated nature of working within this elite sport network was highlighted by a number of SPCs who found maintaining the boundaries of confidentiality to be problematic; one SPC argued that whoever was funding the consultation process had a right to know what services were being provided for their money. Despite this, Gould (in Fifer et al., 2008) commented that clients will test their SPCs to see if they will maintain the boundaries of confidentiality, a process that will help the client develop trust in the SPC-athlete consulting relationship. It is essential that practitioners have supervision in place to ensure issues that arise regarding challenges to confidentiality can be discussed and resolved.

Finally, these SPCs advised other consultants to establish a strong collaborative relationship, which was based on good therapeutic practice. Findings indicated that the effective consulting relationship involved a collaborative approach. Both relationship members made a balanced contribution to the relationship, with results indicating that relationships in which athletes contributed little and expected the SPC to tell them the answers and what to do to improve their performance, were less effective. Tod and Andersen (2005), while discussing the importance of collaborative relationships, believed that SPCs need to acknowledge that the athlete they are working with has expert knowledge of their sport, and consequently should take time to learn about the sport from the athlete's viewpoint. Taking the time to learn about the athlete's sport should enhance the development of the SPC's empathetic understanding of the client, which links back to the earlier discussions on building a professional consulting relationship. Furthermore, McCann (2000) believed that the collaborative consulting relationship should allow for give-and-take between the SPC and his or her client (who sometimes may be the senior partner in the relationship).

The results of this investigation must be interpreted in light of its methodological strengths and limitations. One of the strengths of this investigation was the level of experience and accreditation of the participants. All these SPCs held Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand accreditation either as a sport psychologist or mental skills trainer and had over 10 years applied sport psychology consulting experience. Although the inclusion of only New Zealand SPCs may be viewed as a limitation of this investigation, the in-depth nature of the findings allows readers to draw conclusions regarding the application of these findings for their own practice. The generalizability and extension of our findings can only improve and be further extended following the inclusion of additional examples of consulting effectiveness.

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