Current Status and Future Issues of Sport Psychology Consultation in Flanders

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Academic background, consultation processes, and training and support were assessed with semistructured interviews among 18 sport psychology consultants (60% of total membership) of the Flemish Society of Sport Psychology. A total of 61% of consultants were trained as clinical psychologists, most with limited sport psychology background. Assessments revealed that interpersonal relationships skills and communication (63%) and fear of failure (55%) were the most common concerns, whereas stress management (54%), enhancement of relationship and communication skills (31%), and visualization and goal setting (31%) were used in interventions. Recommendations for enhancing the development of applied sport psychology in Flanders include specialization in sport psychology at the academic level, continued sport psychology consultation training, and a better coordination between sport psychology consultants and the world of sports.

Notwithstanding the enormous growth of applied sport psychology in North America during the past 2 decades (Salmela, 1992), applied sport psychologists in Europe have been less organized and publicized (Antonelli, 1989; Biddle, 1989; Biddle, Bull, & Seheult, 1992; Isberg, 1989). The Flemish Society of Sport Psychology (VVSP; Vlaamse Vereniging voor Sportpsychologie) represents the sport psychologists in Flanders, the Flemish speaking part of Belgium. In the present article we address the role of Flemish sport psychology consultants, the services they provide, and the future needs in this field as delineated by these consultants.

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The VVSP was initiated in 1986 by clinical psychologists with the aim of stimulating applied sport psychology development, which had remained restricted in growth, largely due to the strong orientation of physical education, physiotherapy, and other sport science societies toward motor learning. The need to create a sport-psychology oriented platform led the VVSP to limit its eligibility for full membership to psychologists with a university degree in psychology, allowing coaches, physical educators, or psychiatrists to become member guests. To enhance its members’ profiles in applied sport psychology, the VVSP has provided, since 1993, a register listing of members engaged in sport psychology consultation services to (among others) the Belgian Olympic and Interfederal Committee (BOIC; Belgisch Olympisch en Interfederaal Comité). To be registered, consultants must be a full member of the VVSP and have experience working with athletes and coaches. This register provides those in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, parents, officials) with a means of contacting a psychologist who specializes in applied sport psychology.

Discussions on the status of sport psychology consultants arose in the wake of a duality between the academic opportunities and professional requirements in applied sport psychology in Flanders. Historically, academic opportunities in sport psychology were initiated during the late 1960s/early 1970s within the Institutes of Physical Education and Physiotherapy at the three major universities in Flanders (i.e., Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Universiteit Gent, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven). Taking into account that the universities’ Faculties of Psychology had shown no interest in providing students with sport psychology courses and because psychology students were not able to take classes in other academic disciplines (e.g., PE), due to limited academic mobility, academic training in sport psychology remained the privilege of PE students, excluding those in psychology. During the past decade, however, the professional requirements for applied sport psychology became increasingly restricted to those with an academic degree in psychology, not only due to the VVSP’s eligibility rule but especially because the title psychologist is protected by law for those with an academic degree in that field. Consequently, a paradoxical situation arose in which those eligible to work as applied sport psychologists could not enjoy an academic education in sport psychology. This situation led the VVSP to determine the extent to which it could play a role in training, monitoring, and stimulating its members regarding the delivery of sport psychology consultation services.

In light of the need for certification of consultants working in applied sport psychology, as witnessed by the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP), the present investigation was designed to gain insight into the sport psychology consultation services provided by consultants registered with the VVSP.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 18 VSSP members (i.e., 3 women and 15 men, M age = 37.1, 60% of total membership) who consult with athletes and coaches. Participants each received a letter about the purpose of the study and were contacted by telephone 1 week later to determine whether they would participate. All participants agreed to volunteer in the study and were interviewed in person or by telephone using a semistructured interview schedule.
Interview

The semistructured interview was based on the U.S. Olympic Committee survey for sport psychology consults (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1989, 1991) and comprised three sections of open-ended questions assessing consultants' personal characteristics and academic background, experiences with the sport psychology services they provided, and their evaluation of needs in sport psychology consultation services. The interviews, which each lasted approximately 1 hr, were taped, transcribed verbatim, and content analyzed, and the frequency of each response category was computed.

Results

Demographic and Background Information

*Demographic Information.* Of the 18 consultants, 14 (78%) were employed as psychologists on a part- or full-time basis in a non-sport-related professional setting (7 in a psychiatric department, 3 in private practice, 2 in an academic department, and 2 in an industrial setting), 3 (17%) were unemployed or retired, and only 1 (5%) worked full time as a sport psychology consultant.

*Educational Background.* Of the consultants, 15 (83%) earned a university degree in psychology (11 in clinical psychology, 4 in industrial), whereas 3 (17%) earned a psychology degree in an academic institute for higher education other than a university. Another 3 (17%) earned a doctoral degree in psychology, with only 1 studying sport psychology. Finally, 1 consultant (5%) was working toward earning a postgraduate sport psychology degree in France. Before graduating, all of the clinical psychologists had completed internships averaging 6 months in length, and those in industrial psychology had internships averaging 3 months.

*Sport Psychology Experience and Professional Affiliations.* Consultants' experience was generally acquired through sport psychology seminars, congresses, informal contacts, and literature. Only 2 (11%) participants had actually done supervised sport psychology consultant work under the guidance of another consultant with a doctoral degree in the field. All consultants were affiliated with the Belgian Federation of Psychologists (BFP), the governing body of licensed psychologists in Belgium. All were registered with the BOIC. Of the 18 consultants, 7 (39%) consulted with Olympic athletes and coaches on a one-to-one basis, whereas 9 (50%) were involved in a project initiated by the VVSP and BOIC in which 35 talented young athletes (Olympic hopefuls) were screened on their psychological strengths and weaknesses related to involvement in high-level competitive sport. Another 9 (50%) taught sport psychology courses or seminars to novice, assistant, and top-level coaches of Flemish sport governing bodies (e.g., tennis, swimming, handball, volleyball, karate, judo, ju-jitsu).

Sport Psychology Consultation Services

Consultants described the type of services they provided as well as the consultation process.

*Type of Consultation Service.* Half of consultation work was generally on a one-to-one basis with athletes from individual sports, 30% with team athletes, and 20% with coaches, officials from sport governing bodies, or parents. Consultants reported that athletes were generally referred by people in
the athletes' networks (79%), whereas only 21% of consultations were initiated by the athletes themselves (see Table 1). Table 1 shows also that reasons to contact a consultant were generally more intraindividual (e.g., lack of self-confidence, heightened levels of anxiety) than interpersonal in nature (e.g., communication problems).

**Process of Sport Psychology Consultation.** On average, consultants treated five athletes/year, with an average total consultation time of 7 hr/athlete (35 hr/year). A total of 16 consultants (89%) systematically used psychological instruments and tests, and 2 (11%) stated using only interviews. Instruments were generally sport specific and consisted of the Competitie-Belevings-Vragenlijst (CBV; Competition Perception Questionnaire; Bakker, Vanden Auweele, & Van Mele, 1996), the Sport Interpersonal Relationships Questionnaires (SIRQ) (Wylleman, 1995), and situation related intraindividual personality assessment (Vanden Auweele & Verstuyft, 1990). Non-sport-specific instruments included the Amsterdamse Biografische Vragenlijst (ABV; Amsterdam Biographical Questionnaire; Wilde, 1970), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI; Hathaway & McKinley, 1967), the Zelf-Beoordelings-Vragenlijst (ZBV; Self-Evaluation Questionnaire; van der Ploeg, Defares, & Spielberger, 1980), and the Utrecht Coping List (UCL; Scheurs, van de Willige, Tellegen, & Brosschot, 1988). Assessments revealed a combination of problems related to interpersonal relationships and communication (63%), especially in the athlete-parents relationship; fear of failure (55%); problems with regulating arousal (27%); psychosomatic problems (18%); and lack of self-confidence (18%). Table 2, however, shows that a majority of counseling or intervention strategies were intraindividual (e.g., arousal level, visualization, goal setting) rather than interpersonal (e.g., relationship and communication skills, team building). Thus, even though interpersonal and relationship issues were the most common in athlete assessments, they were not usually the focus of service. Athletes were frequently evaluated via a combination of onsite observations (67%), self-reports by athletes (33%), objective performance results (e.g., times, points, distances) (27%), and feedback from significant others (6%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Frequency (percent)</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Frequency (percent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport governing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>body or club</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>Lack self-confidence</td>
<td>28.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>Stagnation/performance decline</td>
<td>23.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent(s)</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>Communication problems</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Athlete-coach</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>Increased anxiety</td>
<td>14.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical doctor</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>Psychosomatic complaints</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other athletes</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Behavioral problems</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
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'Sources refer to consultants' total cases since 1993.
(e.g., coaches, parents). Finally, consultants reported that, on average, 8 out of 10 clients assessed the counseling or interventions as effective in that they had helped the problem(s) that had led clients to seek consultation.

**Education Background and Perceived Needs**

As asked to describe what part of their academic training was most relevant to their current consultation service, consultants most frequently cited behavioral therapy (50%), communication and group dynamics (44%), systems therapy (33%), psychothriagnostics (11%), and developmental psychology (6%). Academic training with regard to behavioral (e.g., routine planning and self-reinforcement) and cognitive intervention strategies (e.g., goal setting, self-focusing, and visualization) were deemed an obligatory part of sport psychology consultants’ academic education. Consultants indicated an explicit need for formalized sport psychology training as part of psychologists’ education, including a combination of courses on theoretical and methodological aspects of sport psychology (56%), counseling and intervention strategies in a sport setting (39%), sport sciences (28%) (e.g., exercise physiology), sport organizations (11%), and use of sport-specific diagnostic instruments and tests (11%). Consultants (72%) also expected the VVSP to provide sport psychology training (e.g., seminars, symposia), stimulate and coordinate contacts with the world of sport (e.g., creating opportunities for delivering sport psychology consultation services; 57%), provide opportunities for exchanging information between its members (57%), and coordinate activities regarding academic and applied sport psychology (21%).

**Discussion**

This study was designed to identify Flemish sport psychology consultants’ backgrounds, services, and recommendations for enhancing the delivery of sport psychology consultation services. Demographic data revealed that although all consultants had earned a degree in psychology, most had not enjoyed academic or applied sport psychology training during their studies. Although consultants did

| Table 2  Counseling or Intervention Strategy Used by Sport Psychology Consultants |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Counseling/intervention strategy              | Frequency (percent) |
| Stress management                             | 25.9             |
| Communication/relationship                    | 14.9             |
| Visualization                                 | 14.9             |
| Goal setting                                  | 14.9             |
| Concentration enhancement                     | 11.1             |
| Cognitive restructuring                       | 11.1             |
| Team building                                 | 7.2              |

*Use of strategy in consultants’ total cases since 1993.*
not assess this lack in training as a major obstacle to athlete consultation, they found themselves not fully prepared. To what extent this lack in training influenced the effectiveness and quality of their services remains unclear and needs further investigation. To paraphrase Brown (1982), are sport psychology consultants really sport psychologists? The present study highlights the need for formal sport psychology training during consultants’ academic careers, supported by an accreditation scheme run by the VVSP. Using the title psychologist is restricted by law, and it seems inevitable that such sport psychology courses should be included in the academic training of psychology students specializing in sport psychology.

Considering that PE graduates are the ones who study the academic and applied side of sport psychology, the need to define sport psychology consultants in a broader way, including all those who provide consultation or mental guidance to athletes on a regular basis, clearly emerges. The need for an interdisciplinary approach to sport psychology consultancy is also reflected in the finding that consultants recommended including topics such as sports sciences in formalized sport psychology training, thus involving the fields of PE and sport physiotherapy.

This study showed also that all but 1 consultant worked with athletes for a limited number of hours/week and had some other full-time professional occupation in a nonsport setting—a finding similar to Dudink and Bakker’s (1993) data on Dutch sport psychologists. Considering that Canadian Olympic athletes’ perceptions of an effective consultant were related to sport psychologists’ accessibility (Orlick & Partington, 1987), the question remains, How much does Flemish consultants’ limited involvement influence clients’ perceptions of the consultant’s availability and accessibility? Because only very few Flemish elite-level athletes are involved full time in a sport, their expectations toward those who guide or counsel them (e.g., coach, sport psychologist) may be less demanding than those of athletes in other countries.

Findings also revealed that seeking consultation with a sport psychologist is not only a matter of the individual client but also strongly influenced by the athlete’s social network. Problems with interpersonal relationships and communication occurred most frequently, but interpersonal problems were not the mean focus of consultants’ treatment. What consultants assess is not necessarily what athletes expect or want to be treated for during consultation. Future research should clarify to what extent athletes’ wishes for sport psychology consultation may differ from what is actually provided and thus possibly influence the way that they evaluate the quality of service received.

Although the present study indicates that the situation of sport psychology consultation is similar to that in neighboring countries (e.g., part-time availability of consultants), the need for comparative research is clear. Translating and using sport psychology evaluation forms (e.g., the Consultant Evaluation Form; Partington & Orlick, 1987a) and questionnaires assessing athletes’ views on sport psychology consultations (e.g., the Athletes’ Attitudes Toward Seeking Sport Psychology Consultation Questionnaire; Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, & Louhsbury, 1997) comparable to those employed in North American research (Gould et al., 1991; Martin et al., 1997; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987b) could provide valuable, cross-cultural data on sport psychology consultants’ education, services, and effectiveness. In this way, sport psychology societies may lead the way for a pan-European initiative in which the academic opportunities and professional requirements for sport psychology consultants are readdressed and reevaluated.
References


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