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Sport psychology consultation: The attitudes of New Zealand athletes

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine New Zealand athletes' attitudes towards sport psychology consultation as no similar study has been conducted in New Zealand since 2004. Sixty-two New Zealand athletes (ranging from age-group to international-level), were administered the Sport Psychology Attitudes – Revised questionnaire (SPA-R). New Zealand athletes' attitudes towards sport psychology have become more positive since 2004. Independent group t-tests demonstrated that athletes in 2020 had significantly higher confidence in sport psychology, and significantly lower levels of personal openness and cultural preference compared to athletes in 2004. There was no significant difference found in stigma tolerance scores. Chi-squared tests were carried out on nine different categories: gender, sport type (contact/non-contact and team/individual), previous exposure, age, current competitive level, top competitive level, number of individual and group sport psychology sessions, and employment level. Non-contact sport athletes were found to have significantly higher confidence than contact sport athletes and individual sport athletes were found to have significantly higher confidence and cultural preference than team sport athletes. A trend was found with higher level athletes having greater confidence in sport psychology and national level athletes were found to have higher cultural preference than junior athletes. These findings are useful for organisations and practitioners as they provide an understanding of athletes' current perceptions and attitudes towards the field.

1. Introduction

For many, a relatively recent yet integral part of working towards optimal performance involves consulting with sport psychology consultants (SPC; Kornspan & Quartiroli, 2019). Sport psychology is defined as the psychological study of human behaviour in sport settings (Horn, 2008). In an applied sense, SPCs work with athletes and employ a variety of methods such as visualisation, self-talk, and mindfulness exercises to improve performance. Furthermore, SPCs look to engage with and address matters such as performance anxiety that can be detrimental to an athlete's mental health and performance (Martin et al., 2004). The demand for and recognition of sport psychology has risen considerably, and many organisations are now realising the

benefits of deliberately working on the psychological aspects of performance (Rooney et al., 2021).

As of 2021, there are 26 accredited SPCs through High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ) and Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand (SESNZ). This number includes registered psychologists and accredited mental skills trainers. Because sport psychology is relatively new as a formal discipline when compared to other aspects of training, there is a lack of general awareness concerning its purpose and function from athletes, coaches, and the general public (Green et al., 2012). Furthermore, although consultation with practitioners has been shown to be beneficial for athletes' performances and well-being (Kellmann et al., 2002), there can still be somewhat of a stigma and negative attitudes held towards sport psychology itself, as

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well as towards those receiving sport psychology support (Green et al., 2012).

The aim of this study was to capture and understand New Zealand athletes' current attitudes towards sport psychology. This is important as athletes' attitudes towards the field will likely determine their intention, adherence, and future use of sport psychology (Martin, 2005). Moreover, understanding attitudes will also allow programmes and services to be refined to better support the well-being and performances of athletes and could help establish a more positive and stigma free environment (Lavallee et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2004). For example, if it is known that a perception exists within a group that engagement with a SPC is inherently revealing of mental health challenges, a consultant can look to address this and ideally reduce such stigma before initiating consultation.

Zakrajsek et al. (2023) recently updated their Multidimensional Model of Sport Psychology Service Provision (M2SP2-R), which identifies various elements that influence athlete attitudes, intentions to access, and engagement with sport psychology services, and, as such, can improve practitioner awareness of such variables. Athlete attitudes has been consistently reported in the literature (e.g., Martin et al., 2004; Zakrajsek et al., 2023) as playing an important role in influencing willingness to engage with sport psychology services and demonstrates the importance of understanding current trends.

Within the literature, a range of variables have been found to influence athletes' attitudes towards sport psychology; specifically, (i) gender, (ii) sport type, (iii) nationality, (iv) previous exposure, and (v) age. For instance, it has been reported that males, along with contact sport (e.g., rugby, boxing) athletes, have generally held more negative attitudes towards sport psychology compared to females and non-contact sport (e.g., tennis, golf) athletes (Anderson et al., 2004; Martin, 2005; Martin et al., 2004; Wrisberg et al., 2009). It would seem this is due to ideas around masculinity and 'macho' cultures associated with being male and the kinds of sports that involve physical contact/collisions between athletes and higher risk of potential injury. Moreover, it seems that these environments often discourage the expression of emotion and sharing of problems and can develop a resistance to seeking help (Anderson et al., 2005; Martin, 2005).

It appears that there are some cultural elements and differences regarding the shaping of attitudes towards sport psychology. As of 2005, it appeared that, overall, New Zealand athletes held more favourable attitudes than athletes from Germany, United States, and Ireland (Lavallee et al., 2006). Overall, athletes that have had positive previous experiences had more favourable attitudes toward sport psychology consultation compared to those without experience or negative previous experiences (Anderson et al., 2004; Ildefonso et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2004; Martin, 2005; Wrisberg et al., 2009). Finally, the research regarding the impact of age is varied, with Martin (2005) finding difference between high school and college athletes, whilst Anderson et al. (2004) and Shaw (2018) did not find any such differences. Overall, the literature shows that there are many aspects that can affect the attitudes of athletes towards sport psychology. It is important for organisations, coaches, and support staff and SPC themselves, to be aware of these aspects and potential tendencies so that they can implement strategies within their provision of services to mitigate,

as much as possible, likely challenges and, ultimately, provide the best possible support for the individuals in their care.

2. Methods

This research was assessed by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee and deemed as low risk (notification number: 4000023030).

2.1. Participants

A convenience sample of 62 New Zealand athletes (female $n = 35$, male $n = 27$) from five different age groups, 18 – 20 years ($n = 30$), 21 – 23 years ($n = 18$), 24 – 26 years ($n = 4$), 27 – 29 years ($n = 4$), and 30+ years ($n = 6$) were involved in this study. This study was exploratory and convenient in nature, therefore although small this sample size was deemed appropriate. The participants competed in a range of sports, including, cricket ($n = 23$), rugby ($n = 13$), athletics ($n = 10$), netball ($n = 3$), cycling ($n = 2$), soccer and hockey ($n = 1$), and other ($n = 9$). Participants were a mix of top international ($n = 1$), international ($n = 14$), national ($n = 34$), junior ($n = 8$), and none ($n = 5$). Thirty-one participants (50%) had previously had an individual session with a SPC, and 47 participants (76%) had attended at least one sport psychology/mental skills workshop.

2.2. Questionnaire

To measure athletes' attitudes towards sport psychology, the Sport Psychology Attitudes – Revised (SPA-R) was used. The SPA-R is a Likert scale questionnaire that was developed by Martin et al. (2002) to improve the validity and reliability of the Attitudes Towards Seeking Sport Psychology Consultation Questionnaire (ATSSPCQ; Martin et al., 1997) that had been primarily used from 1997 to 2002. Their analysis revealed factorial validity for use with a range of athletes (male/female; adolescent/adult) and has been used in various studies since. The SPA-R includes a 10-item demographics section to capture age, gender, level of sport, and previous exposure to sport psychology and mental skills. The remainder of the SPA-R consists of a four-factor model involving a 7-point Likert scale for each of the four factors to determine an individual's overall attitude towards seeking sport psychology consultation. These four factors are (i) stigma tolerance, (ii) confidence in sport psychology consulting, (iii) (lack of) personal openness, and (iv) cultural preference. The mean for each factor is determined by summing the scores and dividing by the number of items (e.g., an average score of higher than 5 for stigma tolerance illustrates the individual has concerns with the stigma associated with seeing a SPC). A high score in confidence in sport psychology illustrates the individual has high confidence in the field and believes it is useful. A high score in (lack of) personal openness indicates a lack of personal openness and unwillingness to share personal information. A high score in cultural preference indicates an individual would prefer a consultant of their own culture, race, or ethnicity.

2.3. Procedure

Key gatekeepers (i.e., coaches/managers) of various sporting organisations/teams were approached regarding the study, four of

which (Auckland Cricket, Harbour Rugby, Massey University Academy of Sport, HPSNZ) agreed to distribute a link to an online survey (carried out through Qualtrics.com) and information sheet to athletes via email. This link invited athletes to anonymously take part in a sport psychology attitudes questionnaire that would help deepen understanding of current attitudes towards sport psychology with the aim of utilising such insights to improve services in the future.

2.4. Statistical approach

All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS software for windows (IBM SPSS 311 Statistics 20, NY, USA). Descriptive values were obtained and reported as means and standard deviation (SD). Given that much of the data was categorical, and that Levene's test and the Shapiro-Wilk Test provided > 50% significant data, data was analysed with a Chi-Squared Test and independent group *t*-tests. Validity for sample size was determined by checking against the result of Fisher's Exact Test. Cohen's *d* was calculated as a measure of effect size. Significance was accepted as $p < 0.050$.

3. Results

Table 1 compares the results of the current study from 2020 with those of Anderson et al. (2004) who conducted the last study of similar nature in New Zealand. These results show that in 2020, New Zealand athletes overall still hold positive attitudes towards sport psychology and still somewhat prefer working with SPCs of the same cultural background as themselves. Independent group *t*-tests demonstrate that athletes in 2020 have significantly higher confidence in sport psychology ($t(141.74) = 2.911, p = 0.004$) and lack of personal openness ($t(137.56) = 4.855, p = 0.001$); and significantly lower in cultural preference ($t(118.03) = -2.942, p = 0.004$). There was no significant difference found in stigma tolerance scores ($t(128.74) = 1.043, p = 0.299$).

As part of our analysis, gender, previous exposure, age, and highest competition level were also examined; however, no significant differences were found and therefore respective tables have not been included here.

Table 1: Stigma Tolerance (ST), Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting (C), (Lack of) Personal Openness (PO), and Cultural Preference (CP) amongst cohorts of New Zealand athletes in the current study and Anderson et al. (2004).

| Scale | 2020 | 2004 | <i>d</i> |
|-------|-------------|--------------|----------|
| ST | 2.13 (0.78) | 2.00 (0.80) | 0.16 |
| C | 5.61 (0.78) | 5.23 (0.90)* | 0.45 |
| PO | 4.42 (0.90) | 3.70 (1.00)* | 0.76 |
| CP | 3.43 (1.08) | 3.92 (1.00)* | 0.47 |

Notes: Values are mean (SD). * $p < 0.010$

As seen in Table 2, the findings suggest that non-contact sport athletes held significantly higher confidence levels than contact sport athletes. Looking at Table 3, individual sport athletes have

significantly higher confidence in sport psychology and cultural preference compared to team sport athletes. Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference between athletes' confidence in sport psychology at different competitive levels; national level athletes also had significantly higher cultural preference compared to junior athletes.

Table 2: Contact vs non-contact.

| Scale | Contact | Non-contact | χ^2 | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|-------|-------------|-------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| ST | 2.16 (1.10) | 2.09 (1.33) | 44.0 | 40 | 0.307 | 0.06 |
| C | 5.49 (1.24) | 5.80 (1.09) | 63.6 | 42 | 0.017* | 0.27 |
| PO | 4.55 (1.52) | 4.38 (1.72) | 37.8 | 38 | 0.479 | 0.10 |
| CP | 3.46 (1.74) | 3.41 (1.80) | 36.8 | 34 | 0.342 | 0.03 |

Notes: * $p < 0.050$.

Table 3: Team vs individual.

| Scale | Team | Individual | χ^2 | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|-------|-------------|-------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| ST | 2.56 (1.29) | 1.82 (1.05) | 36.5 | 40 | 0.627 | 0.63 |
| C | 5.64 (1.16) | 5.87 (1.11) | 64.9 | 42 | 0.013* | 0.20 |
| PO | 4.44 (1.65) | 4.49 (1.68) | 39.8 | 38 | 0.389 | 0.03 |
| CP | 3.40 (1.74) | 3.56 (1.90) | 49 | 34 | 0.047* | 0.09 |

Notes: * $p < 0.050$.

Table 4: Current level.

| Scale | Top intl | Intl | Nat'l | Jr | χ^2 | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| ST | 1.00 (0.00) | 2.07 (1.39) | 2.02 (1.15) | 2.61 (1.14) | 93.0 | 80 | 0.152 |
| C | 6.62 (0.74) | 5.68 (1.22) | 5.51 (1.28) | 5.66 (0.89) | 119.2 | 84 | 0.007* |
| PO | 4.33 (2.34) | 3.35 (1.72) | 4.19 (1.64) | 5.04 (1.29) | 65.3 | 76 | 0.803 |
| CP | 3.25 (2.63) | 3.79 (1.77) | 2.96 (1.63)* | 4.09 (1.59)* | 109.2 | 68 | 0.001* |

Notes: Top intl, Top international; Intl, International; Nat'l, National; Jr, Junior. * $p < 0.050$.

4. Discussion

The results from this study show that New Zealand athletes' attitudes towards sport psychology consultation have become more favourable overall since 2004 (Table 1). Athletes have higher confidence in sport psychology and less cultural preference when working with a SPC. However, somewhat surprisingly, it is also important to note that over the last 16 years, athletes' level of openness to sport psychology consultation has declined, and there was no significant change in perceived stigma from working with a sport psychologist.

Athlete confidence in sport psychology has likely improved since 2004 due to the increasing knowledge and research that has

been conducted regarding sport psychology in recent years (Kornspan & Quartiroli, 2019). Such research has provided new information, techniques, skills, and an increased awareness of the benefits of integrating sport psychology principles, including potential contributions towards athletes, coaches, and teams. It appears that this knowledge has filtered down from researchers and academics to SPCs and, finally, to coaches and athletes, which has improved confidence and overall integration. As a case in point, in recent years, HPSNZ has integrated education modules on sport psychology into various coach education programmes. It is highly likely that such work has been improving awareness and attitudes and, as such, may be having a positive impact on normative and control beliefs which have been highlighted (e.g., Zakrajsek et al., 2023) as being important with regards to shaping overall attitudes and behaviours. Confidence in the field is considered as a key predictor of intention to utilise sport psychology services (Zakrajsek & Zizzi, 2007). Moreover, Anderson et al. (2004) found confidence to be the only of the four factors to significantly predict intention to engage with a SPC. Therefore, this improved confidence in sport psychology is an important development as it may lead to more athletes seeking proactive and/or remedial psychological support.

It would be expected this improved emphasis and integration would also improve athletes' openness to sport psychology consultation. Furthermore, we have seen a major shift recently in the nature of the discourse around psychology and mental health, both in general populations as well as sport settings (Souter et al., 2018). Additionally, many sport organisations have improved access to both support and education. However, this does not seem to have yielded a significant shift in overall attitudes in New Zealand. In fact, athlete openness towards sport psychology consultation has decreased since 2004. It is important to acknowledge however that this finding could potentially be due to the high percentage (21%) of world class athletes in the study conducted by Anderson et al. compared to 1.6% in this current study. World class athletes typically have greater access and exposure to sport psychology support, often resulting to greater openness to consultation (Marin & Boone 1996). This higher proportion of world class athletes in the study conducted by Anderson et al. (2004) may have led to higher levels of personal openness due to greater exposure to sport psychology, compared to the current study where no significant correlation was found between previous exposure and attitudes.

The competitive level of athletes significantly impacted both their confidence and cultural preference. No significant difference in confidence was found between specific competitive levels; however, an overall significant effect was found. Again, this is likely due to the small sample size for top international-level athletes in this study. Although there was no significant difference in confidence between competitive levels, a trend can be seen with greater competitive levels having higher levels of confidence. Martin and Boone (1996) attributed a similar finding in their study to higher level athletes having more exposure to sport psychology, and therefore greater appreciation and understanding of the importance of psychology. However, Anderson et al. (2004) examined competition level and attitudes towards sport psychology and found no significant differences.

The recorded decrease in cultural preference is likely found due to the increase in multiculturalism within New Zealand. As a country, New Zealand has a reputation as a modern and culturally

diverse country (Smits, 2011). Over the last two decades, multiculturalism and ethnic diversity within New Zealand has been increasing and is seen as one of the nation's strengths (Simon-Kumar, 2020). Such growth may encourage New Zealanders to have more interactions and contact with individuals from other cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Intercultural contact has been found to lead to higher levels of intercultural competence, which means individuals will have an improved ability and openness to communicate, function, and work effectively with people from other cultures (Schwarzenthal et al., 2020). Moreover, the importance of practitioners considering cultural elements and tailoring their delivery and interventions accordingly has been highlighted (e.g., Hodge et al., 2011) and may be having a positive impact on how the field is perceived. Therefore, athletes in 2020 would likely have lower levels of cultural preference compared to athletes of 2004.

Furthermore, this study also found non-contact sport athletes to have significantly higher confidence in sport psychology consultation compared to contact sport athletes. Similar results were found from Martin et al. (2004) and Martin (2005). It is believed that such attitudes are due to many contact sports (e.g., rugby, boxing) involving, and encouraging, aspects such as intimidation, toughness, and power, all of which are values commonly associated with masculinity and still prevalent in many communities (Martin, 2005), including sport. Ultimately, it has been shown that environments that nurture such ways of thinking can reduce the likelihood of athletes holding positive attitudes towards sport psychology consultation and also nurture a perceived stigma surrounding help-seeking in general (Steinfeldt et al., 2009).

Differences were also found between athletes that compete in team sports and individual sports. The results indicated that individual sport athletes had higher confidence in sport psychology, which has been found in previous work (e.g., Rooney et al., 2021). In their study, Rooney et al. attributed this difference to individual sport athletes having to rely exclusively on themselves and, therefore, engaging in greater psychological development in order to optimise performances and, as a result of such work, perceiving mental training as being beneficial (Rooney et al., 2021).

Interestingly, although team sport athletes reported lower levels of confidence in the field, findings suggested that these participants have lower levels of cultural preference (Table 3). Team sports are social practises where athletes are required to develop relationships and work with individuals of different ethnicities and cultures for the success of the overall team (Elling & Knoppers, 2005). As alluded to earlier, this would likely cause team sport athletes to develop higher levels of intercultural competence which may influence cultural preference (Schwarzenthal et al., 2020). National level athletes were found to have significantly lower cultural preference compared to junior athletes. According to Martin and Boone (1996), a lower cultural preference for national athletes would be expected because they found that attitudes towards sport psychology improved as competitive level gets higher. However, this also means that cultural preference should continue decreasing to international and top international level athletes, which was not found. This may have been due to this study having too few international and top international athletes to find an effect. It is important for

practitioners of sport psychology and mental skills to take these variables into account when working with athletes.

Although this study did have some significant and worthwhile findings, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. The most significant being the small sample size which can lead to false positives, as well as findings that are not representative of the targeted population. The current study also used a convenience sample and, therefore, may not accurately reflect these sports and athletes. It is also important to note that this study also had a much higher percentage of younger athletes taking part with 77% of participants being aged 23 or under. Because age has the potential to affect athletes' attitudes towards sport psychology (Martin, 2005), the findings from this study may not be generalisable to athletes over this age-group. Furthermore, the majority (81%) of athletes in this study were involved in team sports. Similarly to age, previous research (e.g., Rooney et al., 2021; Wrisberg et al., 2009) has shown that team and individual sport athletes overall have different attitudes surrounding sport psychology. Therefore, results from this study may be most appropriate to team sport environments.

In summary, this study re-examined and extended research on New Zealand athletes' attitudes towards sport psychology from 16 years earlier by Anderson et al. (2004). It was found that New Zealand athletes still hold positive attitudes towards sport psychology overall and these attitudes have improved since 2004. New Zealand athletes were found to have low levels of stigma associated with seeking sport psychology consultation, high levels of confidence in the efficacy of sport psychology, moderate levels of personal openness and low to moderate levels of cultural preference. Both confidence in sport psychology and cultural preference have improved overall since 2004. However, although we have seen improvements, it seems as though personal openness has declined, and, as such, did not fit with the overall trend. This decrease in athletes' personal openness is potentially due to some of this study's limitations, such as the lack of international-level athletes and the relatively small sample size.

There is a limited amount of research with inconsistent findings regarding aspects that could affect an athlete's attitudes towards sport psychology. Further research is needed to establish a more complete picture of such elements. For instance, this could include utilising a truly elite sample, and considering all variables within the M2SP2-R (Zakrajsek et al., 2023). This would provide a more complete understanding of current trends in attitudes, to inform programme development and ensure that our athletes are being provided with sport psychology services that they trust, as well as operating within environments where they feel safe to engage with such support.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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