



# The role, benefits and selection of sport psychology consultants: Perceptions of youth-sport coaches and parents

Richard C. Thelwell<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jade Wood<sup>a</sup>, Chris Harwood<sup>b</sup>, Toby Woolway<sup>b</sup>, Judy L. van Raalte<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Portsmouth, UK

<sup>b</sup> Loughborough University, UK

<sup>c</sup> Springfield College, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Applied sport psychology  
Consultant roles  
Consumer preference  
Professional training

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** With practitioners needing to be ‘more things to more people’, it is essential to understand third-party consumer perceptions of the role and benefits of sport psychology consultants (SPC), and the characteristics that may influence such services being sought.

**Design:** A qualitative thematic analysis approach was used in Study 1 and a cross-sectional conjoint analysis approach was employed in Study 2.

**Methods:** In Study 1, 22 participants (11 youth-sport coaches, 11 parents) took part in semi-structured interviews to investigate, a) understanding the SPC role, b) the benefits of seeking the services of an SPC, and, c) the salient characteristics of an SPC that would influence judgments on preference and likelihood to seek consultant services on behalf of their athlete/child. In Study 2, a total of 115 participants (51 youth-sport coaches, 64 parents) rated 32 practitioner profiles generated from Study 1, with a conjoint analysis employed to determine the relative importance of SPC characteristics.

**Results:** SPCs were viewed by youth-sport coaches and parents as practitioners who can help athletes enhance their performance and well-being, which would be of benefit to athletes. The SPC attribute most important to coaches and parents was interpersonal skills, with a preferred SPC profile also including a high level of experience and training, and a known reputation.

**Conclusions:** SPCs are viewed by youth-sport coaches and parents as experts regarding performance enhancement and well-being. SPCs with strong interpersonal skills, extensive experience and training, and a known reputation are preferred by coaches and parents. Findings reinforce the importance of educating those responsible for the ongoing development of athletes to the role and benefits of SPCs, and for SPC training to ensure that interpersonal skills development opportunities are available.

With the increased focus on quality assurance procedures associated with the practice of sport and exercise psychology consultants (SPC), researchers have attempted to gain a more detailed insight to: a) the development of appropriate training and supervision programmes for SPCs (Eubank, 2016), b) characteristics associated with effective practitioners (Lovell, Parker, Brady, Cotterill, & Howatson, 2011), and, c) the processes associated with gaining entry to consult with clients (Hamberger & Iso-Aloha, 2006). Researchers have also explored the selection of SPCs (Morris, Alfermann, Lintunen, & Hall, 2003) and marketing of SPCs to potential client groups (Woolway & Harwood, 2015). Additional research that explores perceptions of SPCs from the point of view of coaches, and in particular, youth-sport coaches and parents may be valuable.

Following initial qualitative work, researchers have empirically

examined the perceived characteristics of effective SPCs (e.g., Lubker, Watson, Visek, & Geer, 2005) with Lubker, Visek, Watson, and Singpurwalla (2012) using conjoint analysis to determine the relative importance of the characteristics of effective SPCs in relation to each other. In attempting to understand why ‘potential clients’ make one choice over another, sport psychologist profiles from combinations of eight attributes (gender, race, interpersonal skills, body build, attire, athletic background, professional status, sport knowledge) were combined to create ‘sport psychologist profiles’ with the results from the 464 college athletes suggesting professional status to be the most influential attribute (23%), followed jointly by athletic background and interpersonal skills (14%), then sport knowledge and attire (12%). With regard to professional titles, Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson, and Brewer (1996) found that the professional title ‘sport psychologist’ was

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [richard.thelwell@port.ac.uk](mailto:richard.thelwell@port.ac.uk) (R.C. Thelwell).

perceived as a non-sport profession. Apparently, the term “sport” had little impact on modifying perceptions of the title ‘sport psychologist’ as a psychological one, although it should be noted that Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, and Walsh (2001) found the inclusion of the term ‘sport’ in the title ‘sport psychologist’ enhanced individual’s willingness to access services. Further exploration of the effects of SPC credentials by Lubker et al. (2012) indicated SPCs described as having an advanced degree as being preferred to those without any credentials.

To combine the analysis of credentials and titles whilst also investigating whether education about the use of titles and associated credentials impacts consumer attitudes and preferences for consultants, Woolway and Harwood (2015) examined perceptions of three professional titles (sport psychologist, life coach, and neuro-linguistic programming), a range of other practitioner characteristics, and the extent to which a brief intervention impacted these preferences. Such titles, whilst reflecting clear differences in terms of training and accreditation requirements, are frequently sought after within the sporting domain. Having been asked to provide preferences of the three professions, the athlete participants were then provided with short educational vignettes designed to enhance understanding to what the professions were, and the training requirements for each. Using conjoint analysis to assess the relative importance of practitioner attributes pre- and post-intervention, interpersonal skills emerged as the most important attribute prior to intervention, irrespective of professional title. However, post-intervention an increased salience in professional title was reported. Collectively, the findings reinforce the importance for SPCs, and the broader applied sport psychology community to educate consumers with the requisite information to their education, training, credentials and roles to ensure they are approached by those seeking sport psychology support, as opposed to alternative professions that may be less appropriate.

Although the literature presented thus far has contributed a great deal to consumer perceptions of SPC effectiveness, it is reasonable to assume that the information does not fully reflect the way athletes engage in consultation with SPCs. This is despite such interest dating back to the 1990s where, upon the emergence of sport psychology services, Taylor (1994) provided insightful commentary to the ethical issues associated to the use of the term ‘sport psychologist’, and offered guidance to how practitioners should operate within their competence boundaries. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that the reality for many athletes is that the selection of an SPC is influenced by other gatekeepers who operate within the sporting environment and at a youth level; coaches and parents. Such a view reinforces recent suggestions that parent and coach behaviours influence, for example, athlete decision-making and motivational orientation within youth-sport contexts (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavalley, 2014; Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017).

On this point, researchers have examined the perception held of SPCs by coaches, and their intentions to use such services. For example, in their survey of NCAA Division 1 coaches, Wrisberg, Loberg, Simpson, Withycombe, and Reed (2010) reported most coaches as willing to encourage their athletes to seek support from an SPC. However, although coaches favoured the role of an SPC to be full-time, less than half of those sampled supported the view that SPCs should be present in training and competition environments. Further to this, Zakrajsek and colleagues have completed a programme of work examining the perceptions, preferred use, and perceived benefits of SPCs from the perspective of NCAA Division 1 coaches and athletic trainers. In their initial work, Zakrajsek, Martin, and Zizzi (2011) reported high school football coaches who were confident in, and open to engaging with the outcomes of working with an SPC, to be more likely to consider recommending the use of an SPC. Elaborating on this further, Zakrajsek, Steinfeldt, Bodey, Martin, and Zizzi (2013) examined NCAA Division 1 coaches’ perceptions and use of SPC services with key outcomes focusing on the importance of the SPC and coach to be on the ‘same page’, and the degree to which the SPC can meet the coach expectations; who

they are (e.g., experience), what they do (e.g., provide value), and how they do it (e.g., accessibility). In the first of two studies involving NCAA Division 1 Athletic Trainers, Zakrajsek, Fisher, and Martin (2016) reported an inability of more than 50% to describe sport psychology, with those who could, perceiving it as a mental tool primarily focused on performance enhancement. In a final study, Zakrajsek, Martin, and Wrisberg (2016) reported athletic trainers with positive experiences of working with SPCs to be more likely to seek the services of such individuals to assist with the injury-rehabilitation process, and view the benefits of SPCs in a more favourable light. What is obvious from the aforementioned studies is the focus on coach perceptions of SPCs and the absence of parental experiences and perceptions of SPCs, despite their key role in youth-sport.

Despite the advances about how coaches perceive, and use, SPCs, less is known about how this takes place within a youth-sport environment, or indeed, about how parents perceive SPCs. This is despite some preliminary insight from researchers who have provided commentary to how parents and coaches may play an influential role in the delivery of sport psychology (e.g., youth sport consulting model; Visek, Harris, & Blom, 2009). With the above in mind, it is reasonable to suggest that although an emerging knowledge base demonstrating how SPCs can inform athlete consumers exists, little is known about how youth-sport coaches and parents perceive SPCs.

The current work used a mixed-methods approach across two unique, yet inter-related study parts to gain a more detailed insight to gatekeeper perceptions of SPCs. Given the overarching research question to elicit gatekeeper perceptions to SPCs, study 1 used a qualitative approach with subsequent thematic analysis, designed to elicit from youth-sport coaches and parents how they describe SPCs in terms of a) understanding the SPC role, b) the benefits of seeking the services of an SPC, and, c) the salient characteristics of an SPC that would influence judgments on preference and likelihood to seek consultant services on behalf of their athlete/child. The goal here of the final part being to generate SPC profiles based on gatekeeper insights. To understand gatekeeper perceptions of SPCs across a broader sample, the second study used a quantitative conjoint analysis to examine the SPC profiles generated from Study 1, and to identify the relative value related to aspects of the descriptions.

## 1. Study 1 - method

### 1.1. Participants

A total of 22 participants (11 youth-sport coaches and 11 parents) were recruited for the study. All coaches (male = 10, female = 1;  $M$  age = 36.1,  $SD$  = 11.2) were full-time coaches (minimum 2 years) of team (cricket,  $n$  = 5; football,  $n$  = 2) or individual sports (athletics,  $n$  = 1; boxing,  $n$  = 1; tennis,  $n$  = 2). The parents (male = 8, female = 3;  $M$  age = 47.5,  $SD$  = 5.7) had children who were involved in either team (cricket,  $n$  = 2; football,  $n$  = 3) or individual sports (boxing,  $n$  = 4; tennis,  $n$  = 2) at a level where they were within a professional organization (e.g., academy level) or national governing body (e.g., youth national structure). Participants were only eligible for participation in the study if they had no previous experience of using SPC services.

### 1.2. Data collection

**Interview guide.** An interview guide was developed by members of the research team who held more than 75 years of combined experience and were Health and Care Professions Council Registered Sport and Exercise Psychologists and/or British Association of Sport and Exercise Science Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientists and/or Association for Applied Sport Psychology Certified Consultants. The interview guide was developed following a review of the literature that examined consumer preferences of SPCs, knowledge of SPCs, and SPC attributes.

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