



## Using a mixed method audit to inform organizational stress management interventions in sport



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purposes of this study were twofold: to conduct a mixed method organizational-level stress audit within a sport organization and to explore recommendations for organizational stress management.

**Design and method:** Semi-structured interviews, focus groups and surveys were conducted with 47 participants (professional sportsmen, coaches, sport science support and administrative staff) who represented a professional sport organization. Content analysis was employed to analyze the data.

**Results and conclusions:** The findings indicated a wide range of organizational stressors (e.g., cultural and academy issues), appraisals and coping behaviors (e.g., emotion-focused behaviors), and stressor outcomes (e.g., emotional responses) for sport performers. Content analysis and survey data supported the categorization of stress management recommendations at both an individual- (e.g., coping education) and organizational-level (e.g., improving communication channels) for particular target groups (e.g., players, staff, team). The identification of stress audit factors and recommendations have important implications for the optimization of organizational functioning within professional sport. Consistent with organizational psychology research, applied considerations for mixed method and multi-level intervention approaches are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

The growing body of literature concerning organizational stress suggests that it may be a critical factor in determining well-being and performance development in sport (Fletcher & Arnold, 2017). Based on a transactional conceptualization (Lazarus, 1991; McGrath, 1976), organizational stress has been defined as “an ongoing transaction between an individual and the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with the organization within which he or she is operating” (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006, p. 329). For young athletes aspiring to develop within professional sport, they are typically required to manage a range of environmental demands within their sport organization, such as training load, logistics, poor team cohesion, and the prospect of being released (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Neil, 2012). The management of these organizational stressors is important for reducing the negative spillover that may occur between ongoing exposure to organizational (e.g., leadership styles, selection), performance (e.g., opponents, social evaluation), and personal stressors (e.g., parental expectations, romantic relationships); which collectively may be detrimental to well-being (Duong, Tuckey,

Hayward, & Boyd, 2015). For those performers operating in sport organizations, the successful management of organizational stress may not only facilitate the maximization of well-being and performance development at an individual-level, but it is also likely to support the effective functioning of teams and institutions at an organizational-level (Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012). Despite this, organizational stress management interventions, which aim to improve the psychosocial environment and enhance the well-being of personnel (Nielsen, Randall, Holten, & Rial González, 2010) are currently limited in sport psychology research (Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2012). This limited evidence-base is problematic for advancing sport psychologists’ knowledge of how best to develop effective organizational stress management interventions.

According to the organizational psychology literature, one of the key ingredients for increasing the likelihood of effective stress management interventions in organizations is the systematic and careful assessment of stress processes prior to intervention development (Bowling, Beehr, & Grebner, 2012). To reliably understand the context of organizational stress as a means to inform appropriate stress management initiatives, it is necessary to conduct an organizational-level

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stress audit; one that is able to identify the individual and group needs of those operating in organizations (Nielsen et al., 2010), so that initiatives can be developed to modify environmental demands and/or a person's resources. A stress audit is traditionally a generic term which describes a number of approaches which aim to identify potential environmental demands (i.e., stressors), assess which have the greatest negative impact and identify any individuals, and groups who are most at risk (Rick, Briner, Daniels, Perryman, & Guppy, 2001). Although there have been a range of measures that have been adopted for auditing stressors in organizations (e.g., Biron, Ivers, Brun, & Cooper, 2006), it has long been acknowledged that a comprehensive audit, based on a transactional stress conceptualization (Lazarus, 1991), should reflect the sequence of events and stress processes that occur across individuals in transacting with their environment (McGrath, 1976). In this way, it is believed that an organizational-level stress audit should identify key organizational stressors, appraisal and coping strategies, stressor outcomes, at risk groups, and attitudes towards available options for stress management (Dewe, O'Driscoll, & Cooper, 2010).

Qualitative research has previously explored a plethora of organizational stressors that are encountered by sport performers. From a research synthesis of 34 studies, Arnold and Fletcher (2012) identified 640 distinct stressors that were labelled hierarchically in to the following categories: leadership and personnel, cultural and team, logistical and environmental, and performance and personal issues. A host of these stressors have been linked to the identification of threat and harm appraisals (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2012), negative emotional responses (e.g., Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012), and the enactment of different coping behaviors (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2014). These findings have also been complemented by quantitative research that has shown relationships between athletes' perceptions of developmental, team, and cultural stressors within sport organizations and negative affect (Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2017). Although the findings from both methods have enabled the identification of organizational stress processes in sport and some of their relationships, it is posited that these methods in isolation may limit our ability to confidently develop tailored stress management programs for individuals and groups who operate in culturally rich organizations (Nielsen et al., 2010). In this regard, the adoption of mixed methods may facilitate a pragmatic stress auditing approach for developing stress management programs for specific organizations (Bowling et al., 2012).

One of the key benefits of conducting a mixed method stress audit is to triangulate understanding of attitudes from individuals and groups whose organizational roles may differ (Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2011). This is vital for establishing common stressful incidents for specific individuals and target groups in an organization (Bowling et al., 2012). In addition, by incorporating methods such as focus groups, individuals may be empowered to collaboratively discuss their needs with other organizational members (Kohler & Munz, 2006). This is advantageous in developing stress management interventions at an individual- and organizational-level, as members will have both individual and collective attitudes, preferences and motives. Furthermore, participatory methods, which treat members as active agents of change and encourage the commitment of management, are necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for successful organizational interventions (Daniels, Gedikli, Watson, Semkina, & Vaughn, 2017). This approach motivates groups to identify common issues and design solutions. Without the participation of various personnel, a tailored program for tackling organizational stress cannot be appropriately designed (Elo, Ervasti, Kuosma, & Mattila, 2008).

To combat the challenges of gaining as many perspectives and recommendations from organizational members as possible, researchers have called for greater use of mixed methods (Elo et al., 2008; Mazzola et al., 2011; Nielsen et al., 2010) to facilitate triangulation and complementarity of findings (Greene, 2008; Moran, Matthews, & Kirby, 2011). This is important for exploring the existence of common

organizational stress processes and intervention recommendations that may not be easily achieved from the sole adoption of quantitative or qualitative methods. Moreover, the incorporation of qualitative with quantitative methods allows for understanding of contextual issues and what matters to individuals in their own language (Daniels et al., 2017; Nielsen, Abildgaard, & Daniels, 2014). According to Bowling et al. (2012, p. 79), "research should give more attention to developing techniques used to diagnose the need for stress interventions". The current research seeks to address some of the conceptual challenges of stress audit models previously used to inform the development of organizational programs. By adopting a mixed method, the study attempts to understand sport performers' experiences of organizational stress in greater depth from the perspective of various members (e.g., sport performers, coaches, staff). This approach aims to explore the contextual and cultural complexities that are not explicitly evident in current organizational stress audit models.

Taking these points together, the primary purpose of this study was to conduct a mixed method organizational stress audit of competitive performers who operate within a sport organization. A secondary purpose was to identify stress management recommendations for performers and teams operating in this organization. The exploration of organizational stress processes and recommendations may facilitate the future tailoring of both individual- and organizational-level initiatives. This study makes a unique conceptual contribution to auditing organizational stress, by offering a mixed method framework from which organizational interventions in sport can be advanced.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research design

A mixed method design was adopted for serving the following philosophical aims. Firstly, the authors believe that it is important to integrate techniques that can more thoroughly investigate a phenomenon of interest (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011, p. 286). Gaining multiple sources of information from various individuals (e.g., sport performers, staff) is fundamental for exploring the convergence *and* divergence (cf. Greene, 2008) of organizational stress experiences for sport performers. Furthermore, the researchers sought to educate and modify an organization's current practices regarding stress management. In doing so, it was necessary to represent the democratic values and recommendations of organizational members, to progress towards participatory action in the future. To achieve this purpose, the study was founded on a pragmatist perspective with a critical realist ontology (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) whilst employing methods that parallel understanding of stress in organizations (Lazarus, 1991).

### 2.2. Participants and procedure

The organizational sample ( $N = 47$ ) consisted of staff (head coach, assistant coach, sport science support, and administrative staff;  $n = 7$ ) and a male professional rugby union academy playing squad ( $n = 40$ ). The ages of staff and rugby players ranged from 22 to 56 years ( $M = 36.71$ ,  $SD = 11.35$ ) and 15–19 years ( $M = 17.13$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) respectively. The largely male sample (i.e., 98% male) represented multiple job roles of individuals who operated on a full-time basis in this professional rugby union academy. The participating organization was selected due to the successful profile of the organization, the consistently high level of competition that the players and team operated at, and due to its close proximity to the senior professional team's training facilities. The purpose of this academy was to recruit, develop and support professional youth players' transition in to the senior team. Following institutional ethical approval, managers and head coaches of sport organizations in the United Kingdom were initially contacted by email and informed of the purposes and requirements of the research being conducted. Once consent was provided by the manager of the

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