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Reprint of: Working with religious and spiritual athletes: Ethical considerations for sport psychologists☆

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ABSTRACT

With a growing number of sport performers revealing their religious and spiritual beliefs, it is becoming increasingly important for sport psychologists to recognize and appreciate the values (and value systems) to which such beliefs are attached. Using the RRICC model (Plante, 2007) as a framework for discussion, and through the lens of cultural praxis, the purpose of this article is to highlight ethical issues for sport psychologists when working with religious and spiritual athletes. The RRICC model addresses the ethical principles of respect, responsibility, integrity, competence, and concern. It is hoped that a discussion of these guidelines will help sport psychologists better navigate the often challenging landscape of working with athletes whose everyday lives and identities are grounded in religious and spiritual association.

> Just before walking over [to the Olympic final], Coach pulled me aside and we prayed together as we had done since I was in college. I had heard other athletes ask God to let them win, which I thought was ridiculous. Coach, however, simply asked God to keep me healthy and, if it was His will, to allow me to run at my best. 'God blessed me with his talent,' I thought as the prayer ended. 'His job is done, and it's up to me and me alone to win this race
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> (Johnson, 2011, p. 17).

Comments such as the above by Michael Johnson, four-time Olympic champion, highlight the importance of religious and spiritual beliefs for many sport performers. These beliefs are also reflected in the existence of organizations, such as The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Muslim Women's Sport Foundation, and the Centre for Sport and Jewish Life. In addition to such anecdotal observations, there is growing evidence in the sport psychology literature indicating the relevance of religious and spiritual values for a variety of elite athletes (e.g., Balague, 1999; Howe & Parker, 2014; Storch, Kolsky, Silvestri, & Storch, 2001; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). In a study investigating the salient psychosocial characteristics of Olympic track and field athletes, Vernacchia et al. (2000) found that religious and spiritual factors often played an important part in the athletes' sport careers. Specifically, these beliefs helped athletes react positively to occurrences such as injury and personal problems, and provided a deep meaning to their successes and failures.

Although a number of prominent psychology scholars, such as William James, Carl Jung, and Gordon Allport, were keenly interested in the relationship between psychology, religion, and spirituality (e.g., Allport, 1950; James, 1890, 1902; Jung, 1938), most professional and scientific psychologists during the past century have avoided the connection between these areas of inquiry (Plante, 2007). The recognition of religion and spirituality as topics requiring psychological attention emerged predominantly towards the latter end of the 20th century in line with the focus towards positive psychology (Lopez & Snyder, 2003). The aim of this paradigm shift has been "to ... catalyse a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Accordingly, this movement has embraced religion and spirituality and has used rigorous scientific

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methods, such as double-blind randomized controlled trials, to examine the influence of such factors on health and well-being (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). For example, within the general psychology literature, it has been found that religion and spirituality may protect individuals from the stressors they encounter, that is, they can provide people with greater psychological resilience in the face of negative life events (e.g., Peres, Moreira-Almedia, Nasello & Koenig, 2007). Given that religion and spirituality are important for the welfare of numerous individuals, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that relatively few studies within the sport psychology literature have directly examined the association between religion, spirituality, and well-being in sport performers. In one such study, Storch, Storch, Kovacs, Okun, and Welsh (2003) found that internal commitment to personal religious and spiritual beliefs was inversely associated with substance use in intercollegiate athletes. However, due to the correlational nature of the data, the authors could only speculate that some athletes may have turned to their religious and spiritual values to cope with a variety of stressors, such as injury and academic hardship.

Although work in this area is not as extensive in the field of sport psychology as it is in the general psychology literature, research exploring the experiences of ultra-marathoners (Acevedo, Dzewaltowski, Gill, & Noble, 1992), college athletes (Dillon & Tait, 2000; Storch et al., 2001, 2003), Olympians (Vernacchia et al., 2000), and Paralympians (Howe & Parker, 2014) has highlighted the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of a wide variety of athletes. These beliefs have become commonplace in the world of sport, with many athletes utilizing religious and spiritual practices, especially prayer, as a coping mechanism and performance enhancement technique (see, e.g., Czech & Bullet, 2007; Maranise, 2013; Park, 2000; Watson & Czech, 2005). A number of applied sport psychologists have also emphasized the importance of the religious and spiritual dimension when working with athletes (e.g., Balague, 1999; Gamble, Hill, & Parker, 2013; Ravizza, 2002; Watson & Czech, 2005; Watson & Nesti, 2005). In a review of the role of religion and spirituality in sport psychology consulting, Watson and Nesti (2005) addressed four main issues: (a) reconciling religion and spirituality into current athlete-centred models; (b) integrating religion and spirituality into mental skills training; (c) the relationship between religion, spirituality, and positive psychological states, such as flow and peak experiences; and (d) the utility of religion and spirituality in sport psychology counselling. More recently, Gamble et al. (2013) explored the role and impact of sport psychologists and sport chaplains within a selection of English Premiership soccer clubs. They found that sport psychologists predominantly focused on performance enhancement whereas sport chaplains primarily offered spiritual care, with both contributing to the pastoral needs of players. The impact of both disciplines within Premiership soccer remained restricted due to a number of barriers. Interestingly, to achieve greater impact within this context, Gamble et al. suggest that "future research is warranted to explore the potential of a collaborative partnership between the sport psychologist and chaplain, and how they could work more effectively with significant others (i.e., coaches and managers) to provide support to their athletes" (p. 261).

Although further work is required before religion and spirituality is integrated into service delivery (Crust, 2006), sport psychologists clearly need to be aware of the associated values and beliefs of athletes. Drawing on 25 years of practitioner experience with elite sport performers, Balague (1999) stated that "spirituality or religion is often a big part of many athletes' lives" (p. 91) and asserted that if sport psychology interventions do not consider athletes' religious and spiritual worldviews "... the likely outcome is not only that the intervention will not work, but that we lose the trust of athletes by showing that we do not understand something that is at the core of their identities and values" (p. 92). To illustrate, Balague suggested that some forms of positive self-talk may not be appropriate for religious and spiritual athletes since it may sound like bragging and conflict with principles of humility.

Moreover, during the last decade or two, there has been an increased awareness of cultural diversity in sport and calls for culturally informed sport psychology research and practice (e.g., Hanrahan, 2010, 2011; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Schinke & Moore, 2011; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). At the heart of this emerging area of cultural sport psychology (CSP) is the notion of cultural praxis. Cultural praxis, introduced in sport psychology by Ryba and Wright (2005, 2010), is "a critical discourse" and "an attempt to broaden the epistemological spectrum of theory and practice in the field" (2010, p. 3). This approach challenges culture-blind theories, research, and practice, and moves the sport psychology field from decontextualized knowledge to a new way of thinking about athletes as constituted by various discourses and identities (Ryba et al., 2013). A number of sport psychology researchers have put forward various ethical considerations in relation to culture and diversity, particularly religion and spirituality. These include: multicultural competence (Ryba et al., 2013), training and education (Watson & Nesti, 2005), referral systems (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001), and professional boundaries (Watson & Czech, 2005). Despite acknowledging these ethical issues, scholars have yet to systematically explore this pertinent area of enquiry. This is in contrast to other fields of psychology, especially psychotherapy, which have countless texts and articles dedicated to ethical considerations when working with such clients (see, e.g., Barnett & Johnson, 2011; Gonsiorek, Richards, Pargament, & McMinn, 2009; Plante, 2007; Yarhouse & VanOrman, 1999).

Plante (2007) employed the RRICC model to highlight ethical issues with religion, spirituality, and psychotherapy integration, an approach that is readily applicable to ethical codes across the world. It was developed to highlight the primary values supported in all ethics codes associated with various mental health professions in the United States and abroad (Plante, 2004). RRICC stands for the values of respect, responsibility, integrity, competence, and concern, with the model acting as an easy-to-use framework to highlight the values outlined in the British Psychological Society's (BPS, 2009) *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (hereinafter referred to as *Ethics Code*). Using the components of the RRICC as a framework for discussion, and through the lens of cultural praxis, the purpose of this article is to explore the ethical issues arising when working with athletes who profess religious and spiritual allegiance. In view of our country of residence and due to the similarity in ethical principles to the RRICC model, the focus on the psychologist's code from BPS's (2009) *Ethics Code* will be used as a point of reference.

Definitions

Although the terms religion and spirituality have often been used interchangeably, researchers have attempted to define both constructs (e.g., Hill & Pargament, 2008; Hill et al., 2000; Hyman & Handal, 2006). Hyman and Handal (2006) explored the concepts of religion and spirituality by asking religious professionals (Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, Islamic imams, and Jewish rabbis) to define the two terms. To summarize these findings, religion was considered to be something concerned with external and objective organizational practices about a higher power that one performs in a group setting, whereas spirituality was defined as an internal, subjective, and divine experience. Hill et al. (2000) defined spirituality as "the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and