Irish Athletes’ Attitudes Toward Seeking Sport Psychology Consultation

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this study was to replicate previous research examining attitudes to sport psychology consultation conducted in the US, Germany and the UK, and New Zealand. The study employed the Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised (SPA-R) questionnaire in order to examine the attitudes elite Irish athletes (N = 240) hold toward sport psychology, and also to compare these attitudes with those found in other countries. Irish athletes in this study reported a generally positive attitude toward sport psychology provision, and were also identified as being open to receiving sport psychology assistance. They reported moderately high levels of confidence in sport psychology, and indicated the lack of accessibility and availability to these services as the most important factors. Comparison of results with athletes from other countries suggested that positive attitudes toward sport psychology may be based on factors not directly associated with personal experiences of sport psychology. As the provision of sport psychology increases, practitioners need a greater understanding of athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology so they can tailor their services to best meet the needs of athletes. In order to do this, further research related to cultural and national differences is required.

INTRODUCTION
Across the globe, it is unlikely that the provision of sport psychology services has ever been greater. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of practising sport psychologists worldwide in recent years (Lidor, Morris, Bardaxoglou & Becker, 2001), as well as the establishment of more than 100 postgraduate degree programmes in applied sport psychology in no fewer than 44 countries (Burke, Sachs & Smisson, 2004). Slowly at first, and then ever more rapidly, the field has gained a position of influence in the world of sport. Applied sport psychologists are also beginning to recognize the needs of others beyond the boundaries of sport, particularly groups that can benefit from different kinds of psychological support to help them compete at the highest levels, such as business professionals and military personnel (Lavallee, Kremer, Moran & Williams, 2004).

Despite this growth in service provision, reports on sport psychology practice suggest that many coaches and athletes remain reluctant to use sport psychology (Gardner, 2001). A number of practitioners have suggested that the use of sport psychology will be influenced by the attitudes athletes hold toward the service (e.g., Leffingwell, Rider & Williams, 2001; Linder, Pillow & Reno, 1989). Indeed, using the Theory of Planned Behavior, Ajzen and colleagues have demonstrated that attitudes are influential in predicting intention to engage in a wide range of behaviours (Ajzen, 1985; 1991; Ajzen & Driver, 1992). Consequently, Martin and colleagues have suggested that researchers should seek to understand athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology so practitioners can tailor their services to best meet the needs of these athletes and increase usage (Martin et al., 2002; Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel & Lounsbury, 1997).

Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis with over 1500 athletes, Martin et al.
(2002) developed the Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised (SPA-R) questionnaire to gain insight into athletes’ perceptions of seeking sport psychology consulting. The SPA-R has a four-factor solution and has been found to be robust and stable across groups and countries. The four factors associated with attitudes toward seeking sport psychology consulting assessed by the SPA-R are: (a) Stigma Tolerance, (b) Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting, (c) Personal Openness, and (d) Cultural Preference.

Previous research supports the notion that athletes may be reluctant to seek sport psychology and potentially be viewed negatively for doing so (Leffingwell et al., 2001; Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte & De Lange, 1991; Linder et al., 1989). Research also indicates that some individuals stigmatize athletes who seek assistance from a sport psychologist because they see this behaviour as inconsistent with the mental toughness image athletes often portray, especially in macho sports like rugby and wrestling (e.g., Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson & Brewer, 1996). The Stigma Tolerance subscale assesses whether athletes believe that others will label them as having psychological problems if they use sport psychology, with higher scores indicating a stigma toward seeking help from a sport psychologist.

As well as being stigmatized, some athletes might be somewhat sceptical about the usefulness of sport psychology, and this may influence their use of the service (Bull, 1991). The Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting subscale assesses athletes’ beliefs about the usefulness of sport psychology and mental training, with higher scores indicating high confidence in sport psychology. It stands to reason that individuals need to have some confidence in sport psychology services if they are to benefit significantly from them.

In addition to being viewed negatively by others and possibly having a concern about the effectiveness of sport psychology services, some athletes may be reluctant to share personal information with others, especially persons they do not know well. The Personal Openness subscale measures interpersonal openness to try sport psychology, with higher scores indicating a lack of personal openness. This unwillingness will be a barrier to seeking and using sport psychology services (Donohue et al., 2004).

Besides the other potential barriers mentioned, people who seek assistance from others often search for someone who is somewhat similar to themselves (e.g., in terms of experience or cultural/national background). Findings indicate that some athletes prefer to work with instructors, counsellors and coaches who are ethnically and racially similar to their own perceived identity (e.g., Anshel, 1990; Yambor & Connelly, 1991). The Cultural Preference subscale measures the degree to which athletes identify with their own culture and have a preference for working with a consultant of the same cultural background. A high score on this subscale relates to a strong cultural preference.

Following the psychometric examination of the SPA-R (Martin et al., 2002), the same authors examined whether these groups differed in mean responses to the subscales assessed by the instrument (Martin et al., 2004). Responses to the SPA-R by athletes from the US (n = 404; 226 males and 178 females), the UK (n = 147; 85 males and 62 females), and Germany (n = 260; 129 males and 131 females) were examined. The athletes had an age range of 18 to 27 years (M = 20.57, SD = 2.42). The results revealed significantly different attitudes overall toward sport psychology consulting. Among athletes from the US there was more likely to be a stigma associated with seeking assistance from sport psychology professionals as compared with athletes from the UK and Germany. Athletes from the UK were more confident in sport psychology consultants and less likely to identify solely with their own nationality, ethnicity or race than were the athletes from the US or Germany.

A more recent study by Anderson et al. (2004) with 112 elite New Zealand athletes found that the attitudes toward sport psychology among this sample were generally positive (Stigma Tolerance M = 2.00, SD = 0.80; Personal Openness M = 3.70, SD = 1.10; Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting M = 5.23, SD = 0.90). The athletes also expressed some preference towards working with a sport
psychologist from the same cultural background (Cultural Preference $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.00$). When compared with the mean data reported by Martin et al. (2004), it was found that the New Zealand athletes held more positive attitudes toward sport psychology as evidenced by significantly lower average scores than their counterparts from the US, the UK and Germany on the Personal Openness and Stigma Tolerance subscales, and significantly higher scores on Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting. The New Zealand athletes also scored highest on Cultural Preference, suggesting that they most strongly identified with their own culture, and expressed a preference for working with a sport psychologist from their own background.

Both Anderson et al. (2004) and Martin et al. (2004) have called for further research related to cultural and national differences (Western vs. Eastern culture [the UK vs. China] or Canada vs. the US, respectively) in athletes seeking professional help within counselling. Therefore, differences between athletes from different countries on their attitudes toward sport psychology may also be evident (Martin et al., 2004). To date, the SPA-R has not been administered among an Irish population, although general perceptions of sport psychology among athletes and coaches have been rated as important to elite Irish athletes (MacIntyre, Mahoney & Moran, 1998). It is important to examine cultural and national differences in athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology as practitioners must be aware of any variations when working with athletes of differing backgrounds. Further research using the SPA-R would be useful to provide a more precise and up-to-date perspective on Irish athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology, and to consider the influence of nationality on SPA-R scores by comparing the results with athletes from other countries. The aim of this study, therefore, was to replicate previous research using the SPA-R to collect data on Irish athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology and compare results from the Irish athletes with data collected by Martin et al. (2004) and Anderson et al. (2004).

### METHOD

#### Participants
A sample of 240 elite Irish athletes (138 males and 102 females) ranging in age from 18 to 38 years ($M = 24.55$, $SD = 4.50$) volunteered to participate in this study.

#### Materials
The Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised (SPA-R; Martin et al., 2002) questionnaire was used to determine athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology consulting. The SPA-R comprises 25 items and the following four subscales: (a) Stigma Tolerance, (b) Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting, (c) Personal Openness, and (d) Cultural Preference. Respondents were asked to individually report their attitudes about sport psychology consulting on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Psychometric analyses found the SPA-R to have adequate stability across various samples (see Martin et al., 2002). For example, test-retest procedures indicated that the SPA-R scales had coefficients of .90 for Stigma Tolerance, .83 for Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting, .71 for Personal Openness and .70 for Cultural Preference. Coefficient alphas for the SPA-R scales were found to be adequate: .84 for Stigma Tolerance, .82 for Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting, .61 for Personal Openness, and .66 for Cultural Preference. Confirmatory factor analysis produced a four-factor model that was tested using multiple groups. Specifically, the model was tested separately for: (a) male and female athletes, (b) adolescent and adult athletes, and (c) athletes from different countries. The findings of the total sample, multiple independent samples and the measurement invariance tests indicate that the four-factor model has adequate stability, and is recognizable and theoretically consistent across groups and countries regardless of cultural differences. This suggests that the items of the SPA-R form measured essentially the same factors in each group. Therefore, because of these procedures and the demonstrated reliability of the scales, improved replicability is anticipated for future samples. Thus, the SPA-R has adequate reliability and validity across these
particular groups (Anderson et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2002).

In the present study, the internal consistency estimates for the seven-item Stigma Tolerance \((\alpha = .85)\), eight-item Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting \((\alpha = .88)\), six-item Personal Openness \((\alpha = .65)\), and four-item Cultural Preference \((\alpha = .66)\) subscales were adequate, and consistent with previous findings. The responses to items on each subscale are averaged to provide four measures of attitude with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Procedure**

All members of the Irish Sports Council, the Northern Ireland Sports Council, the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland, the Gaelic Players Association, and national governing bodies of sport within Ireland who were of an elite standard (i.e., playing at the highest standard in a particular sport) were individually contacted and invited to participate in this study. Individual athletes \((N = 500)\) received the SPA-R, instructions, informed consent forms, and a stamped addressed envelope either through coaches \((n = 180;\) response rate = 52\%) by mail \((n = 230;\) response rate = 45\%), or directly from the first author \((n = 90;\) response rate = 47\%). Participants were invited to complete the questionnaire anonymously and return it. The overall response rate was 48\%, which compares favourably with other studies (e.g., 45\% for Anderson et al., 2004).

**Data Analysis**

In order to compare results from the Irish athletes with data collected by Martin et al. (2004) and Anderson et al. (2004), a series of planned comparisons using independent \(t\)-tests with Bonferroni corrections were undertaken and effect sizes calculated using Cohen’s \(d\) (Cohen, 1977).

**RESULTS**

Descriptive data for the SPA-R for elite Irish athletes was calculated and generally positive attitudes toward sport psychology were reported in comparison with other samples. There was a moderate score on the Stigma Tolerance subscale \((M = 3.94, SD = 0.65)\) indicating a positive attitude. The Personal Openness subscale had a low score that displayed a generally positive attitude \((M = 3.51, SD = 0.73)\) and general willingness to discuss openly issues with professionals. A moderately high score on the Confidence in Sport Psychology subscale \((M = 4.24, SD = 0.59)\) was obtained, indicating a positive attitude toward sport psychology. Additionally, Irish athletes did not express a very high preference for working with a sport psychologist from the same cultural background \((M = 3.05, SD = 0.82)\), indicating a low cultural preference.

A series of independent \(t\)-tests with Bonferroni corrections revealed that Irish athletes scored significantly lower on the Personal Openness and Confidence in Sport Psychology subscales than athletes from New Zealand, the UK, the US and Germany, and also reported significantly higher scores on the Stigma Tolerance subscale than athletes from these countries. On the Cultural Preference subscale, Irish athletes scored lower than the samples of athletes from the US, New Zealand and Germany, but higher than athletes from the UK (see Table 1). Through examination of the effect sizes, all of the differences were deemed to be moderately or highly meaningful, except for the difference between Irish and German athletes on the Cultural Preference and Confidence in Sport Psychology subscales (Cohen, 1977).

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the SPA-R questionnaire suggest that the Irish athletes in this study were open to using sport psychology. Additionally, the research indicates that this openness exists regardless of the cultural background of the sport psychologist. A comparison of the results from the Irish sample with the mean data collected from athletes in New Zealand (Anderson et al., 2004), the US, Germany and the UK (Martin et al., 2004) reveal that Irish athletes held a generally positive attitude toward sport psychology as evidenced by significantly lower scores on the Personal Openness subscale.
Irish athletes scored highest on the Stigma Tolerance subscale and lowest on the Confidence in Sport Psychology subscale comparatively, suggesting that this positive attitude may be based on factors not directly associated with personal experiences of sport psychology. Despite having the highest Stigma Tolerance score among the five countries, the Irish athletes’ scores suggest that they do not perceive a stigma attached to working with a sport psychologist. This is contrary to Leffingwell et al.’s (2001) finding among athletes in the US that the fear of being stigmatized was the primary reason for not seeking sport psychology assistance. A large effect size was reported between Irish and New Zealand athletes on the Stigma Tolerance subscale and medium effect sizes on the Personal Openness subscale, the only exception being the difference between Irish and New Zealand athletes on the Personal Openness subscale. A large effect size was reported between Irish and New Zealand athletes on the Confidence in Sport Psychology subscale and a medium effect size between Irish and New Zealand athletes on the Cultural Preference subscale. All other effect sizes were extremely small (Cohen, 1977).

Some limitations should be noted when interpreting the results of this replication. The sample used was not a random representation of athletes from Ireland, leading to possible threats to external validity. Moreover, athletes selected the sport that they primarily participated in at their respective level. However, some athletes indicated that they had competed in more than one sport and/or type of sport during their life (i.e., physical contact and physical non-contact), and thus may have different attitudes toward sport psychology provision in different sports. It is also possible that greater rigidity in gender typing (i.e., physical/non-physical dichotomy) of sport activities may be demonstrated by athletes.
participating in only physical contact or traditionally masculine sports (Sabo, 1988).

As the practice of sport psychology has grown and become more professional (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney & Robinson, 2002), a number of issues relating to athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology consulting need to be addressed in the future. For example, information is needed regarding how variables such as personality type and athletic maturity influence attitudes about seeking sport psychology help. Athletes who compete at higher levels may possess more favourable attitudes toward seeking consultation than their lower level counterparts. There may also be within-age group variation and within-ethnic/racial group variation, in addition to within-sport group preferences that exist for consulting (Kontos & Breland-Noble, 2002). Moreover, longitudinal studies investigating changes in help-seeking attitudes and behaviours need to be conducted (Leffingwell et al., 2001). Multicultural training and developing an understanding of the social contexts of a particular sport could help sport psychology practitioners improve athletes’ and coaches’ receptiveness to consulting.

In conclusion, this study has replicated and extended previous research investigating athletes’ attitudes toward sport psychology. The findings provide an insight into the attitudes of elite Irish athletes, and suggest that they have generally positive attitudes toward using sport psychology and compare favourably with athletes from other countries. It is important that practitioners understand athletes’ attitudes toward sports psychology so that services can be tailored to best meet their needs.

REFERENCES


Lidor, R., Morris, T., Bardaxoglou, N. & Becker,


