

Sport Psychology in an Olympic Swimming Team:
Perceptions of the Management and Coaches

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Abstract

It has been over twenty years since research has been published on perceptions of sport psychology services in Olympic sport, and this work spanned multiple sports, had a North American focus, and did not report management's views. In this study, we resurrect this line of inquiry through the investigation of management and coaches' perceptions of sport psychology in a European Olympic swimming team. Following semi-structured interviews with 12 members of the management and coaching staff, we identified themes relating to retrospective reflections of past psychology-related services (i.e., negative previous experiences, lack of understanding, unease with service, threat to coach-swimmer relationship) and prospective projections of future psychology-related services (i.e., recognition of importance, scope of target client groups, roles with the coaches, confidentiality issues, practitioner characteristics). Within this team, sport psychology was perceived largely negatively but, despite this, the coaches and management recognized the importance and potential of the service. This apparent disparity can be explained by a range of factors, but the team culture, delivery method, and individual personalities appear to be particularly influential in this regard. To enhance the quality and receptivity of service provision, researchers and practitioners should effectively communicate with recipients of the service and consider not just what is delivered, but by whom and how it is delivered.

Keywords: barriers, effectiveness, elite, expectations, professional practice, service delivery

Public Significance Statement

This study reports coaches and management's perceptions of sport psychology in a European Olympic sport team. Sport psychology was perceived largely negatively but, despite this, the coaches and management recognized the importance and potential of a future psychology service. This apparent disparity can be explained by a range of factors, but the team culture, delivery method, and individual personalities appear to be particularly influential.

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Over the past few decades, evidence has accumulated and converged to support the effectiveness of psychological interventions to enhance sport performance (Brown & Fletcher, 2017; Greenspan & Feltz, 1989; Martin, Vause, & Schwartzman, 2005; Vealey, 1994; Weinberg & Comar, 1994). Systematic reviews have found positive performance effects for the use of mental practice (Driskell, Cooper, & Moran, 1994; Feltz & Landers, 1983; Hinshaw, 1991), goal setting (Kyllo & Landers, 1995), team building (Martin, Carron, & Burke, 2009; Rovio, Arvinen-Barrow, Weigand, Eskola, & Lintunen, 2010), self-talk (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Galanis, & Theodorakis, 2011; Tod, Hardy, & Oliver, 2011), stress management interventions (Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2012), and mindfulness-based interventions (Sappington & Longshore, 2015). Despite this compelling body of research, influential decision-makers in sport, such as managers and coaches, appear to vary considerably in their perceptions of the value of sport psychology (Freitas, Dias, & Fonseca, 2013; Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Gould, Medbery, Damarjian, & Laucer, 1999; Johnson, Andersson, & Fallby, 2011; Pain & Harwood, 2004; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991; Wilson, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sailor, 2009; Wrisberg, Loberg, Simpson, Withycombe, & Reed, 2010; Wrisberg, Withycombe, Simpson, Loberg, & Reed, 2012; Zakrajsek, Martin, & Zizzi, 2011; Zakrajsek, Steinfeldt, Bodey, Martin, & Zizzi, 2013; Zajrajsek & Zizzi, 2007) and, traditionally, the service has been underutilized in comparison with other sport science and medicine services. There is a need to understand this discrepancy between the reported effectiveness of sport psychology interventions and the actual use of psychological services in sports. The general aim of this study is to investigate this discrepancy and to explore what is required to enhance management and coaches' perceptions of sport psychology.

In attempting to better understand management and coaches' perceptions of sport psychology, researchers have tended to focus on the barriers to service provision and/or the factors associated with effective support. Over the past three decades, some consistent findings and messages have emerged from the literature. In terms of the barriers, negative connotations associated with the term sport psychology have been found to influence coaches' decisions not to engage with the service (Pain & Harwood, 2004; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Ravizza, 1988; Zakrajsek, et al., 2013). Another barrier is the perceived difficulty of evaluating the effectiveness of the service (Freitas et al., 2013; Gould et al., 1999). In a study examining Canadian Olympic coaches' assessments of sport psychology practitioners and their services prior to the 1984 Olympic Games, Partington and Orlick (1987) identified demonstrable effectiveness as a key criteria for beginning and/or retaining a practitioners' services. Similar studies with elite and youth soccer coaches and administrators have found a prevalent belief that practitioners would have difficulty integrating into the team (Johnson et al., 2011; Pain & Harwood, 2004) and that a lack of service knowledge and available interventions have acted as further deterrents to service use (Freitas et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2011; Pain & Harwood, 2004).

Turning to the factors associated with effective support services, researchers have repeatedly highlighted a range of factors that influence coaches' decisions to begin or retain the use of sport psychology services. These factors include coaches' frequent exposure to the service, positive perceptions of the value of mental skills training, and confidence in the effectiveness of sport psychology consultations (Partington & Orlick, 1987; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991; Wrisberg et al., 2010; Zakrajsek et al., 2011; Zajrajsek & Zizzi, 2007). Not only are coaches with positive sport psychology experiences more likely to use related services, they are in a position to speak favourably about sport psychology with other coaches. As Sullivan and Hodge (1991) pointed out, these personal recommendations can

influence other coaches' interest and willingness to incorporate mental skills or use sport psychology services in the future. Further, in terms of support preferences, Wrisberg et al. (2010, 2012) found that National College Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I coaches' viewed performance-related psychology interventions more favourably than holistic approaches. Research investigating Olympic-level coaches' perceptions is limited, but what is available does offer some insight into coaches' intentions towards seeking sport psychology services. Gould et al. (1991) examined US Olympic coaches', athletes' and sport psychology practitioners' evaluations of sport psychology consultant effectiveness and found that individualized programs were perceived to be a key factor in meeting athletes' needs. In addition, positive practitioner characteristics were deemed important, including exhibiting confidence, working in a non-obtrusive manner, and the ability to relate to athletes (see also Partington & Orlick, 1987; Zakrajsek et al., 2013).

To date, researchers investigating managers' and coaches' perceptions of sport psychology support services have focused on high school or collegiate sport (Wilson et al., 2009; Wrisberg et al., 2010, 2012; Zakrajsek et al., 2007, 2011, 2013), professional soccer (Freitas et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2011; Pain & Harwood, 2004), junior tennis (Gould et al., 1999), and a range of national level sports (Sullivan & Hodge, 1991), with limited attention being paid to Olympic-level sport. The two exceptions are Partington and Orlick's (1987) study of consultant effectiveness from the perspective of Canadian Olympic coaches, and Gould et al.'s (1991) evaluation of U.S. Olympic consultant effectiveness from sport psychologist, coach and athlete perspectives. However, management was not included in either sample, and these studies are now dated, spanned multiple sports, and had a North American focus. Given the influential role of management in sport, more contemporary studies of this population are required, particularly case studies in Olympic-level sport, and non-North American participants. It is also important that research addresses not only

perceptions of *previous* and *current* psychology services, but also what management and coaches would like in the *future*. The purpose of this study was to investigate management and coaches' perceptions of sport psychology in a European Olympic swimming team. More specifically, we focus on retrospective reflections of past psychology-related services and prospective projections of future psychology-related services. Despite the established relationship between psychological-related phenomenon and Olympic performance (Gould & Maynard, 2009; Rees et al., 2016), little is known about influential decision-makers' perceptions of this support service. Furthermore, if perceptions at this high level of sport are similar to those at lower levels of sport and in professional sport, it would be prudent for both the scientific field and professional practice of sport psychology to recognize and act on these views to enhance the quality and receptivity of its service provision.

Method

Design

This study was deemed best suited to a qualitative interview approach given that the research question aimed to explore subjective perceptions of the same service delivery. As Flick (2009) asserted: "the different ways in which individuals invest objects, events, experiences, and so on with meaning form the central starting point for research in this [qualitative] approach. The reconstruction of such subjective viewpoints becomes the instrument for analyzing social worlds" (p. 58). In this study, semi-structured interviews were considered particularly appropriate because the purpose was to delve deeply into the participants' experiences and their opinions of sport psychology service delivery (cf. DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Indeed, researchers in this area have stated that "scholarly work utilizing in-depth interviews with coaches is sparse" (Zakrajsek et al., 2013, p. 259), which is surprising considering that "semi-structured interviews allow for an in-

depth examination of an individual's attitudes, opinions, beliefs and values with respect to a particular phenomenon" (Purdy, 2014, p. 162).

Participants and Team

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants because it allows for the identification and selection of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about a topic of inquiry, thus maximizing the richness and depth of the data (Robinson, 2014). Given the purpose of the research, the sample consisted of a European Olympic swimming team's national performance director, head coach, senior team manager, sport science consultant, youth development manager, physiotherapist, and six coaches. The 12 participants (11 male, 1 female) ranged in age from 36 to 59 years ($M = 47$, $SD = 6.59$) and had worked in elite sport for between 4 and 33 years ($M = 18.83$, $SD = 7.69$). Collectively, these individuals oversaw the Olympic swimming team which consisted of male and female swimmers who ranged in age from 16 to 30 years.¹ The team did not attain their medal target at the Olympic Games. A sample size of 12 participants was deemed sufficient based on Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora's (2015) concept of "informational power" (p. 1). Given that this study's aim was narrow, we believe that the participants interviewed held significant information and relevance due to the sample being highly specific for the study aim, a research question underpinned by established literature, strong interview dialogue, and in-depth analysis of discourse details (cf. Malterud et al., 2015).

Procedure

¹In accordance with American Psychological Association (2010) guidelines, we limit the description of specific characteristics of the team to minimize the disclosure of confidential, personally identifiable information concerning the participants.

Following institutional ethical approval, potential participants were approached, informed of the purpose of the study, and invited to participate in an interview. All of the potential participants accepted the invitation, and a mutually convenient time to meet and conduct the interview was arranged. The participants were interviewed individually and all of the conversations were digitally recorded in their entirety.

Interview Guide

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a semi-structured interview guide² was developed to allow a series of open-ended questions to be asked while maintaining flexibility according to responses (King & Horrocks, 2010). This approach enabled the discussion to be co-created by both the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview guide was divided into five sections. Section one provided participants with information about the purpose of study, informed him or her of their right to withdraw at any time, and confirmed that his or her identity would be anonymized. Participants provided informed consent in section two, and section three comprised a number of preliminary questions which enabled the interviewer to build rapport with the participant. The questions in section four were developed following a review of the related literature (e.g., Gould et al., 1991; Partington & Orlick, 1987), and focused on both the participants' perceptions of previously delivered sport psychology services (e.g., "Have you got any observations to make about the last Olympic cycle?", "Can you describe the areas of sport psychology that you think worked well and could be built on?"), and their perceptions of an optimal future service (e.g., "Can you think of any key priorities going forward?", "What characteristics and qualities do you think that a sport psychologist should possess to be effective?"). Responses were followed-up with non-directive prompts or short periods of silence to encourage further development and to clarify

² The interview guide is available from the corresponding author.

answers (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). In the final section, participants were invited to add any further relevant information.

Data Analysis

The interviews ranged in duration from 46 to 76 minutes ($M = 64$, $SD = 8.07$) and were transcribed verbatim yielding 238 pages of double-spaced text. The transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012), which is a method of identifying, analyzing and reporting common patterns across datasets (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, the first author repeatedly re-read the transcripts and used exploratory coding to note information of interest. A journal was used to record initial ideas about the messages conveyed in the transcripts, such as the participants' varied views of confidentiality in service delivery. Next, lower-order themes were developed and refined through the exploration of patterns within the initial notes, for example "fear of service." Connections were then made between themes to produce higher-order themes which described clusters of similar lower-order themes. For example, reliance on practitioner, fear of service, and social stigma were grouped under the higher-order theme "unease with service." Next, similar higher-order themes were grouped into overarching general dimensions. In the final stages, the general dimensions, higher-order and related lower-order themes were further reviewed and refined to accurately reflect the data set as a whole. As part of the data analysis procedures, the first and second authors reviewed all the codes, lower-order and higher-order themes, and general dimensions. Although there were some discrepancies about certain categorizations, agreement was reached through a process of critical and constructive discussion.

Rigor

This study used Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for establishing quality qualitative research: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f)

significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. This research should be considered a worthy topic due to the case study approach that allowed for a comprehensive insight into an Olympic swimming team's experience. Rich rigor is demonstrated by the appropriateness of the interview sample given the purpose of the study, and by a thorough explanation of the data analysis procedure. To achieve sincerity, a reflective diary was kept throughout the study to maintain a reflexive stance (Smith, Sparkes, & Caddick, 2014). Credibility was maintained as the researchers repeatedly checked the themes against each individual transcript to ensure they were developed from the data (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Resonance refers to the extent to which the reader is meaningfully influenced by the research. The results are presented using a combination of rich quotations and visual hierarchical trees to promote an appreciation of the complexity of the issues under investigation (Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012). The significant contribution of the research may be judged according to its theoretical (e.g., offering a new and unique understanding) and practical significance (e.g., offering implications for practitioners). Ethical standards were maintained by following American Psychological Association guidelines on ethical research standards (American Psychological Association, 2010), by obtaining institutional ethical approval, and continually reflecting on the methodologies used. Finally, it is believed that the study was meaningfully coherent as the stated purpose was met using an appropriate method that aligned with the research paradigm.

Results

The results derived from the data collection and analysis procedures represent the collated responses from all 12 participants. In total, 146 initial codes arose from the transcripts, reflecting the participants' experiences and perceptions of sport psychology services. These codes were categorized into 26 lower-order themes, and then grouped further into nine higher-order themes. These were subsequently divided under one of the following

two general dimensions: retrospective reflections of sport psychology, and prospective projections of sport psychology.

Retrospective Reflections of Sport Psychology

The general dimension of retrospective reflections of sport psychology refers to the participants' perceptions of previous engagement with the service (see Figure 1). This general dimension consists of four higher-order themes: negative previous experiences, lack of understanding, unease with the service, and threat to the coach-swimmer relationship.

Within the higher-order theme of negative previous experiences of sport psychology, the participants recalled several unsatisfactory interactions with the service. The previous sport psychology practitioner's motives for engaging with the team were questioned by some: "he became attached to what he perceived were the best swimmers purely on the basis of enhancing his own reputation" (Participant 6). This selective nature of the service led to the perception of a hierarchy of importance: "he was with the big names, and we [a coach and his swimmer] didn't have access [to the sport psychologist]. There's never been a psychology policy for people like us" (Participant 7). The perceived effectiveness of the input prior to the Olympic Games was limited with the anticipated benefits and outcomes of professional interactions sometimes not being met:

He [the sport psychologist] used to sit and have fluffy nice chats with the individual and made them feel better. Now, that for me, is not good, planned, intervening, performance-impact psychology. If you want a nice fluffy chat, sit down with a group of friends or your coach and do that. We shouldn't be paying an expert just to have nice conversations (Participant 1).

The higher-order theme of lack of understanding refers to the participants' overall knowledge of psychology and their perception of its likely impact. Sport psychology was viewed by the majority of participants as a common sense discipline that coaches could

deliver themselves: “I really do think [a sport psychologist] can teach me how to do 75% of it” (Participant 7). The service was thought by some to be too vague and that “psychology is a bit [vague] isn’t it?” (Participant 10). A few thought that sport psychology should only be used to solve problems, and it was not thought to be of value as a core service:

I don’t want to use a sport psychologist for the sake of using a sport psychologist . . .

If your pool goes green, then you shot dose it with chlorine. I want sport psychology to be a shot dose; I want it to come in and have an impact. It’s like you wouldn’t see the physiotherapist if you weren’t injured (Participant 5).

Within the higher-order theme of unease with service, some of the participants described a fear of sport psychology. There was a belief that some swimmers would become dependent on the practitioner: “I am also very wary of, and worried about, sport psychologists becoming a crutch. And [swimmers] not being able to manage without them” (Participant 9). The prospect of discussing vulnerabilities and having “someone poking around in my head” (Participant 8) left some individuals feeling “wary” (Participant 11) and uncomfortable. Some perceived a social stigma surrounding the discussion of emotional highs and lows:

As a nation, we are still a bit uneasy to say “are you alright?” We tend to [continue] as though nothing’s really happened. If someone has a bit of a downer, you feel a bit uneasy and you tend not to talk about it. Instead you say, “you’ve got a big day tomorrow” (Participant 11).

The higher-order theme of threat to the coach-swimmer relationship refers to feeling that some sport psychologists might want to “take over” (Participant 10) from coaches. There could be a perceived challenge to the coach’s authority if the sport psychologist did not work in partnership with him or her, and the ultimate rejection of the service if the swimmer did not receive consistent messages from the coach and practitioner:

Some of the coaches are going to say “no” to sport psychology, or they are only going to let the psychologist in a limited amount. They are afraid that the swimmers are going to get a different message from the psychologist. Coaches are going to say, “I want you to do it this way, my way.” Then the psychologist might say, “I’m going to do it this way.” Then the coach is going to go, “oh don’t interfere with my swimmer” (Participant 4).

Prospective Projections of Sport Psychology

The general dimension of prospective projections of sport psychology refers to the participants’ perceptions and desires for a future service (see Figure 2). This general dimension consists of five higher-order themes: recognition of importance, scope of target client groups, role with coaches, confidentiality issues, and practitioner characteristics.

Within the higher-order theme of recognition of importance, participants spoke of the successful implementation of sport psychology across other sports. The majority of the participants’ had the belief that sport psychology is a crucial element of success at elite level: “if you’ve got two athletes and every physical attribute is the same, they’ve all done the same training, the one that wants to win the most, the one that thinks they can win, they’re the one that will win” (Participant 8). A few of the participants’ recognized the importance of sport psychologist’s helping their athletes to develop the coping skills and strategies required for the Olympic Games:

I know sport psychologists are important because you watch athletes that can swim a great time under no pressure, and the minute you put them in a pressure situation, they lose it. We went into the Olympics with a lot of chances to win medals and we got a lot of fourths and fifths. Now I’m not sure that that much changed in terms of the athletes’ physicality; something must have changed mentally (Participant 11).

Within the higher-order theme of scope of target client groups, the majority of the participants discussed a range of individuals and groups in an Olympic Swimming team that could benefit from working with a sport psychology practitioner. A role with the management team was identified to ensure the vision and supporting messages were being effectively communicated throughout the organization. A role was also highlighted with support staff to help them to communicate effectively with the swimmers, enhance their own “psychological performance” (Participant 10), and manage stress. Another identified role was with the senior swimmers and “one-on-one individual performance stuff” (Participant 2) was felt to be the optimal main delivery method. There were contrasting views about which swimmers should have access to sport psychology. Some of the participants felt the service is a “specialist area” (Participant 1) and only for “top swimmers” (Participant 5), while others thought that all swimmers should be fully supported:

[Swimmer] wasn't perceived to be a 'big hitter' before London. Even [swimmer's coach] didn't think [swimmer] was going to win a medal, and [swimmer] won a gold medal. So the little guys can be just as important when it comes to winning medals (Participant 8).

There was a very strong desire for sport psychology input with the coaching staff, which included the need for psychological services to support their own well-being and performance: “the lifestyle affects the way that you do your job . . . there is an impact. 'Cause I'm divorcing at the moment and that's clearly linked to swimming. So there's definitely an impact on the people who think they can handle it” (Participant 8). To enhance the service delivery to swimmers, it was thought that coaches should receive education in psychological skills training so they are “able to compliment some of the messages being delivered” (Participant 1). There were differing views as to the best delivery method of psycho-education to coaches. There was typically a resistance to traditional learning

methods: “the coaches have got to be looking the wrong way when you slip the knowledge or the strategies in” (Participant 5). Although some felt that emails detailing the practical “bullet points” (Participant 9) of articles would be beneficial, others preferred practical workshops with follow-up bespoke mentoring:

Workshops with mentoring afterwards. Because most coaches are the kind of people who learn from doing. I think that if you bombard coaches with emails they won't read them, if you give them newsletters they won't read them, I think if you sit and lecture them they will fall asleep. If you have a workshop, you can get people talking about what they are doing and you get them learning through interaction (Participant 8).

In the higher-order theme of confidentiality issues, the participants discussed the level of confidentiality that they perceived was needed for an effective sport psychologist-swimmer relationship. Some of the participants' felt the coach should not be involved in the sport psychologists' relationship with the swimmer and that a strictly confidential relationship was considered essential to enable the swimmer to speak candidly: “that swimmer needs to know that they can say what they want to say. I don't think I've got a right to know. I would see the relationship with a psychologist and that swimmer in the same way that I would see a doctor and a swimmer” (Participant 7). Other participants felt that the coaches needed to be aware of the majority of issues affecting the swimmer in order to build and maintain a successful coach-swimmer partnership:

I'm not saying I want to be involved in all the meetings, but I want to be kept in the loop. I want to know because, if you came to work with an athlete for an hour, then you go, I've still got them for another 24 hours of training that week. And I need to know which areas are they're delicate in, which areas they need to be picked up, and which areas to push them. For me, if the psychologist met the swimmer, we [the

coach and sport psychologist] should then discuss it so I could then follow what they said (Participant 11).

Within the higher-order theme of desirable practitioner characteristics it was felt by some that to establish “respect and credibility” (Participant 11) the sport psychologist should be as committed to the swimmers as the coaches are. It was generally believed that a sport psychologist must have positive interpersonal skills, be highly approachable, and be able to “communicate very well with the swimmers” (Participant 4). Swimming knowledge and experience was highlighted by some as an aid that would support collaborative work with the coach and help with the delivery of consistent messages to the swimmer: “I think it would be good if they have some knowledge of swimming. If they have a history of swimming they can then reinforce race or training-specific information back to the swimmer” (Participant 4). A few of the participants also felt that a sport psychologist’s motivation for engaging with a swimmer should be driven by a genuine interest in the swimmer and his or her development:

It’s very important to put the right people in front of the right people, for the right reasons. The right reason being athlete development and *not* the need to be needed, the bolstering of my own CV, or the chance to work with this person because that will get me a better job two years down the line (Participant 5).

Discussion

We used semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to investigate management and coaches’ perceptions of sport psychology in an Olympic swimming team. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to report a case study of a European and predominately individual-oriented Olympic sport. It is also the first study to augment retrospective reflections of previous and current psychology services with prospective projections of future psychology services. At this juncture of the paper and before discussing the study’s results, it is worth briefly reflecting on the timing and context of this research. The interviews were

conducted following an Olympic Games where the team's results had not met expectations. As part of their review of performance, the National Governing Body (NGB) approached the authors to conduct an independent study of the sport's psychology service at the Olympic Games. Given the team's underperformance and disappointment, it is important that the largely negative perceptions of the service that are reported in our findings be considered with possible performance-related attributional bias in mind. Notwithstanding this issue, we believe that in supporting this study the NGB and its staff have displayed considerable maturity and foresight. Conducting a rigorous review of a service is, in our opinion, the foundation for positive progress and enhanced effectiveness. Indeed, allowing the findings of this study to be disseminated in a peer-reviewed journal enable a wide range of management, coaching, and support services to benefit from the lessons learned. With these points in mind, we turn to the main findings and implications of this study. Although the nine higher-order themes and 26 lower-order themes share some similarities with previous non-Olympic-level sport research in this area, at least four relatively novel findings have emerged in comparison with previous Olympic-level sport research in this area.

The first original finding relates to management and coaches expressing fears that swimmers would develop a reliance on a practitioner. Although an aim of sport psychology practice is to make clients ultimately more independent, it is perhaps nonetheless understandable that concerns exist about excessive dependency on services in this area. Firstly, it may be that due to a lack of competence and/or questionable ethics, a practitioner either unconsciously or consciously makes a client more reliant on him or her. Secondly, within psychotherapy, dependent individuals have been found to have increased levels of depression, anxiety disorders, and psychosomatic disorders (Bornstein & Bowen, 1995). According to Weiss (2002), fears surrounding dependency are situated within the sociocultural context of Western society which views dependency as weakness and promotes

self-reliance. However, the notions of dependency and independence are not straightforward, and individuals do not ‘get over’ dependence to become independent (Guntrip, 1969; Celani, 2010). Rather, client interactions should represent “a healthy balance between dependency and connectedness on the one hand, and for autonomy and independence on the other” (Bornstein & Bowen, 1995, p. 531) and practitioners should continually reflect on how their motives and development affect their professional relationships.

Another finding from this study relates to a fear of discussing weaknesses and a perceived social stigma attached to the discussion of emotion. These findings resonate with Ravizza’s (1988) reflections of providing sport psychology support in which he observed that the majority of athletes are apprehensive of services in this area due to the exploration of vulnerabilities and weaknesses. A possible explanation of this finding is that many individuals do not enjoy discussing perceived weaknesses with others. Given the preponderance of males in our sample, another possible explanation for the unease with the service may be gender role socialization (Lindsey, 2015). There is evidence suggesting that males are socialized to believe that they should not admit weaknesses or discuss problems (Levant, 2011) and that socialization in sport results in males learning to accept adversity in silence (Kidd, 2013). Thus, some males may associate masculinity with extreme stoicism and may experience difficulties with emotional self-disclosure. As Verdonk, Seesing, and de Rijk (2010) put it: “the ideal man is a winner. A real man is not a whiner” (p. 6).

This study is one of the first within the perceptions of sport psychology literature to find a need and desire for practitioners to work with coaches to support their performance (cf. Partington & Orlick, 1987) and personal well-being. Although the primary role of a coach is to optimize athletes’ performances, some commentators have argued that coaches should be considered performers in their own right (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002) and that coaches’ own psychological needs should be supported (Giges, Petitpas, & Vernacchia,

2004). In terms of their coaching performance, sport psychologists have the potential to educate coaches about psychosocial-related principles and how they can apply principles in their practice. This support may be via formal, non-formal and informal routes, but in our opinion to be most effective is likely to involve situated collaborative reflection within a well-developed mentoring relationship between the coach and a psychologist. Turning to coach well-being, the demanding and stressful nature of sports coaching is well-documented (Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Thelwell, Wagstaff, Rayner, Chapman, & Barker, 2017) and practical recommendations for managing coaches' stress and enhancing their well-being are available (Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Giges et al., 2004). However, our findings suggest that although coaches need and desire support in this area, it does not always appear to be forthcoming.

An interesting and somewhat contentious finding to emerge from this study was a lack of consensus about issues relating to confidentiality. Some of the participants were in favor of a transparent relationship between the practitioner, swimmer and coach to align goals and behaviors. Previous research findings have also indicated that some coaches want practitioners to discuss athlete consultations (Pain & Harwood, 2004; Zakrajsek et al., 2013). Conversely, however, some of the other participants in this study felt that confidentiality should be upheld between the practitioner and swimmer to facilitate a trusting and effective relationship (cf. Glosoff, Herlihy, Herlihy, & Spence, 1997). Andersen, Van Raalte, and Brewer (2001) asserted that without the assurance of confidentiality, athletes might feel hesitant about disclosing sensitive information which is required for a practitioner to work effectively. Hence, our findings indicate that confidentiality is a contentious issue and that practitioners should be aware that perceptions of their service may be associated with management and coaches' expectations in this area.

Given that this study focuses on the psychology-related services of a single European Olympic swimming team, it is not appropriate to make inferences about the profession of sport psychology as a whole or to generalize the findings to all Olympic teams. It is interesting and important to note, however, that psychology-related services are not universally positively perceived in Olympic sport, despite the recognition of psychology as being ‘crucial for success’ and the evidence supporting the effectiveness of psychological interventions to enhance sport performance (cf. Brown & Fletcher, 2017). Although the reasons for this are varied, an important factor in elite level sport appears to relate to expectations of sport psychologists’ competence. To elaborate, high achievers in sport (Gould & Maynard, 2009) and other performance domains (Jones & Spooner, 2006) are extremely demanding of those they work with and typically expect their coaches and support staff to exhibit high levels of expertise. Because sport psychologists vary in their competence (and in their goodness-of-fit within a sport organization), it is perhaps inevitable that sometimes discrepancies between expectations and delivery exist.

Although it is not appropriate to generalize the findings of this study to all Olympic teams, it is possible to transfer some applications, implications and learnings to specific Olympic teams. It remains critical that sport psychologists develop contextual intelligence (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005), involving effective strategies to gain entry (Ravizza, 1988) and to build the collaborative relationship (Ivarsson & Anderson, 2016), to improve perceptions of psychology-related services. In terms of the specific findings discussed in this section, some of the main implications are that psychologists should continually reflect on how to optimally balance dependence and independence in their client relationships, that a supportive culture of emotional disclosure should be cultivated, that psychologists should support coaches’ well-being and performance, and that team members’ expectations of confidentiality issues should be discussed, potentially resolved, and agreed prior to service

delivery. Regardless of these specific recommendations, an overarching message to emerge from this study is that psychologists require training and development in deportment and relationship competencies with a view to enhancing client receptiveness (cf. Fletcher & Maher, 2013, 2014).

The results of this study should be interpreted in the light of several methodological strengths and limitations. A notable strength of this research is, in our opinion, the high ecological validity, in the sense that the data reflects the participants' perceptions of real-world experiences in Olympic swimming. The novel inclusion of management, together with the focus on a single European Olympic team, provides noteworthy organizational- and cultural-related nuances within the findings. Notwithstanding these strengths, our limited description of specific characteristics of the team to protect participant confidentiality (cf. American Psychological Association, 2010) has restricted the available contextual information for the reader and thus his or her ability to interpret the findings of this study. Another limitation is that the swimmers within the team were not sampled. The swimmers were an integral part of the team and it would be highly informative to gather their perceptions and to compare and triangulate them with the coaches' and managers' perceptions. Future researchers in this area should explore multiple stakeholders' perspectives of sport psychology services, either within a single study or across a series of studies.

Given that sport psychology researchers have been conducting intervention studies for decades, it is surprising that there are no studies specifically focused on developing sport psychology practitioners' contextual intelligence. The findings of this and other research emphasize that it is not just *what* constitutes an intervention that is important, but *how* it is delivered and received. Hence, it would seem sensible for future researchers to attempt to enhance and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies to gain entry and to build the

collaborative relationship in sport contexts. Typically, sport psychology intervention researchers focus on the outcome evaluation of intervention effectiveness, such as changes in relevant psychometrics; however, another method is process evaluation which explores the context, implementation, and appraisal of an intervention and helps in the interpretation of the outcome results (Oakley, Strange, Bonell, Allen, & Stephenson, 2006). Rather than focusing on the results of an intervention (i.e., did it work or not?), the focus is on how the intervention was delivered and received, with particular attention paid to any changes or nuances that unfold across settings and/or over time (Nielsen, Randall, & Albertsen, 2007; Randall, Griffiths, & Cox, 2005; Saksvik, Nytrø, Dahl-Jørgensen, & Mikkelsen, 2002). Although some sport psychology intervention researchers have used social validation to determine satisfaction with an intervention (cf. Page & Thelwell, 2013), we are not aware of any examples of (a more complete) process evaluation of intervention research in the sport psychology literature, despite its clear potential empirical and practical significance.

This study is the first to provide coaches and management's perceptions of sport psychology in a European Olympic sport team. It is also the first study to address not only perceptions of previous and current psychology services, but also what management and coaches would like in the future. What is clear from the findings is that, within this particular team, sport psychology was perceived largely negatively but, despite this, the coaches and management recognized the importance and potential of a future psychology service. This apparent disparity can be explained by a range of factors, but the team culture, delivery method, and individual personalities appear to be particularly influential in this regard. To enhance the quality and receptivity of service provision, researchers and practitioners should effectively communicate with recipients of the service and consider not just what is delivered, but by whom and how it is delivered.

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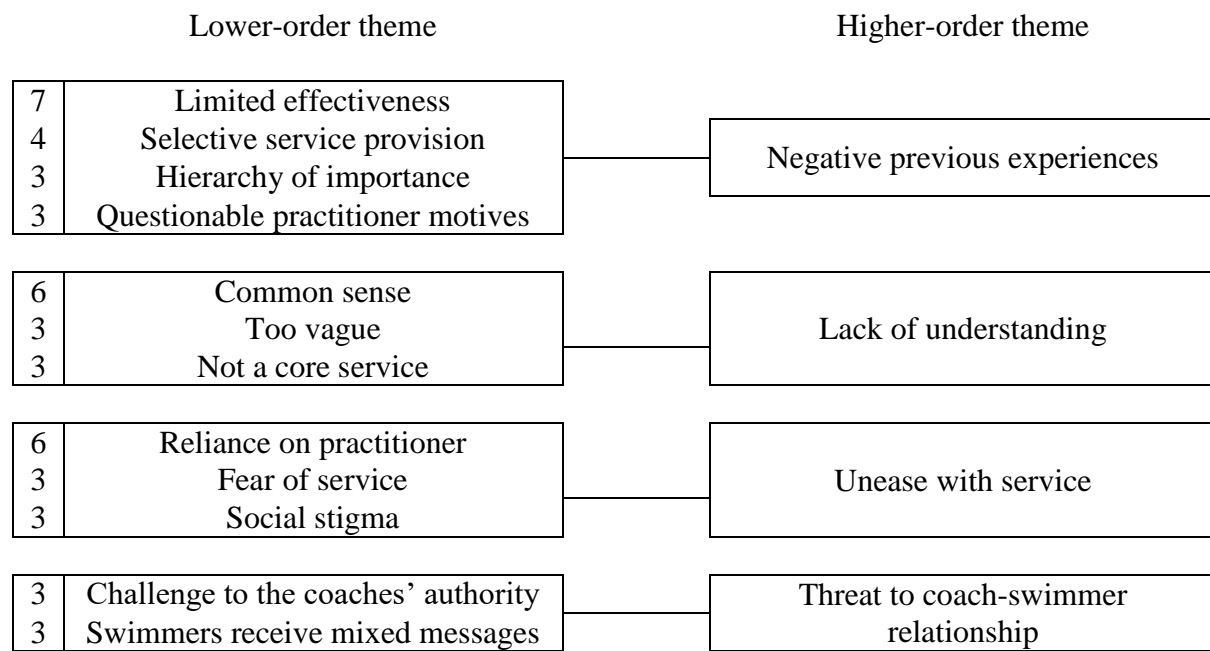


Figure 1. Perceptions of sport psychology in an Olympic swimming team: retrospective reflections. A frequency analysis is provided to illustrate the number of participants mentioning each lower-order theme.

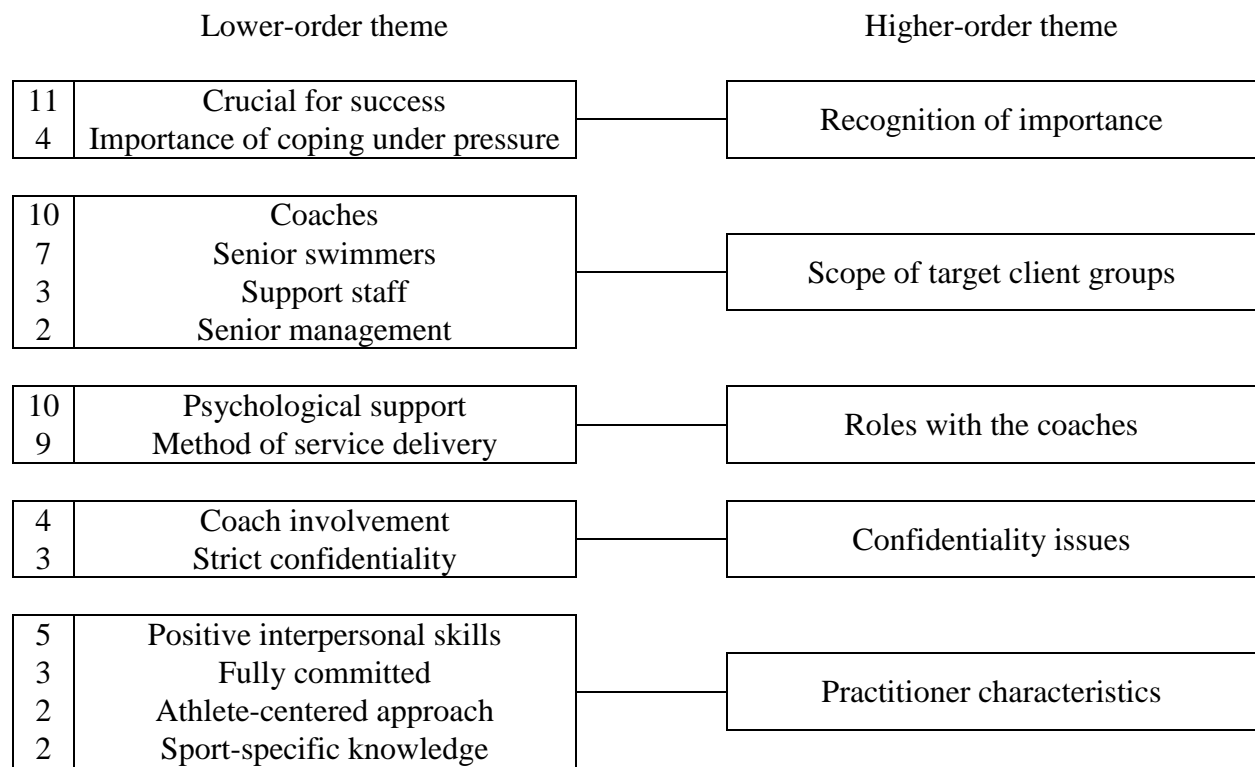


Figure 2. Perceptions of sport psychology in an Olympic swimming team: prospective projections. A frequency analysis is provided to illustrate the number of participants mentioning each lower-order theme.