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Knowledge and perceptions of sport psychology within English soccer

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The aim of the present study was to examine knowledge and perceptions of applied sport psychology within English soccer. National coaches (n = 8), youth academy directors (n = 21) and academy coaches (n = 27) were surveyed using questionnaire and interview methods. Questionnaire results revealed a lack of knowledge of sport psychology that appeared to underpin some of the most significant barriers to entry for sport psychologists. These included lack of clarity concerning the services of a sport psychologist, problems fitting in and players’ negative perceptions of sport psychology. Overall, however, lack of finance was the highest rated barrier. Six barrier dimensions emerged from the interview data: negative perceptions of psychology, lack of sport psychology knowledge, integrating with players and coaching staff, role and service clarity, practical constraints, and perceived value of sport psychology. These findings were broadly compatible with the survey data, with finance emerging as a major barrier and misconceptions of sport psychology being common. Our conclusions are discussed in relation to the practical implications of the study for both applied research and the provision of sport psychology services within English soccer.

Keywords: applied sport psychology, barriers, consulting, perceptions, soccer, youth.

Introduction

The Football Association of England (FA) has recently introduced its ‘Psychology for Football’ strategy. The aim of the strategy is to increase the awareness and application of sport psychology within professional clubs, youth academies and national squads. The strategy is part of a long-term educational and service-oriented initiative to develop better players and coaches in England. A range of courses aimed at coaches, players and support staff has been developed to educate these groups in the concepts of sport psychology and, importantly, to unite them with practising sport psychologists.

To date, the use of sport psychologists within English soccer has been limited, with only five Premier League clubs employing a consultant on a contractual basis in the 2002–2003 season (Andy Cale, FA Education Advisor, personal communication). A range of potential barriers may yet prevent the successful implementation of the psychology strategy. To frame the present investigation, it is therefore necessary to turn to the extant literature on the perceptions of applied sport psychology and the barriers facing the applied sport psychologist.

In his seminal paper on consulting issues, Ravizza (1988) argued that the negative connotation attached to the term ‘sport psychology’ is the most significant barrier facing the consultant wishing to become involved with an athletic team: ‘on some level there is an awareness that principles of psychology involve examination of vulnerabilities and weakness; this threatens all but the most secure and confident athletes’ (p. 244). A lack of sport-specific knowledge on the part of the consultant was cited as the next most significant barrier facing the consultant wishing to become involved with an athletic team: ‘on some level there is an awareness that principles of psychology involve examination of vulnerabilities and weakness; this threatens all but the most secure and confident athletes’ (p. 244). A lack of sport-specific knowledge on the part of the consultant was cited as the next most significant barrier. It was argued that this knowledge is essential for gaining the trust of, and working effectively with, coaches and athletes. The final, and related, barrier was the sport psychologist’s inadequate knowledge of, and experience with, the politics of the sport environment.

It is now over a decade since Ravizza’s seminal paper first appeared and, although the field of applied sport psychology has grown and developed considerably in recent years (Anderson et al., 2002), applied sport psychologists continue to report negative perceptions of the discipline and the associated barriers that confront them. Athletes that approach a sport psychologist may fear being stigmatized by the coach or team-mates for having psychological problems (Martin et al., 1997).
Kremer and Marchant (2002) describe the status of sport psychology within Australian Rules football. Common among coaches were the beliefs that sport psychology is only for problem athletes and that it derived its value by providing a quick fix solution to these problems. Echoing Ravizza, political awareness and sport-specific knowledge were seen as critical for gaining access and integrating with the team.

Research shows that mental training concepts are often not fully accepted or understood by professional sports organizations (Ravizza, 1990). Furthermore, athletic personnel often do not distinguish between educational and clinical sport psychologists (Sullivan and Hodge, 1991). Players and coaches who lack knowledge of sport psychology concepts can confuse the effort to focus on improving the mental aspects of performance with psychiatry, hence the use of the term ‘shrink’ (Ravizza, 1990).

Partington and Orlick’s (1987) qualitative survey of Canadian Olympic coaches also revealed a widespread belief that sport psychology was only for weak or problem athletes. Yet, the coaches’ key concern was whether the sport psychologists fitted in well with the team. The consultant that ‘displayed too much self importance’ or was ‘unable to stay in the background’ (p. 100) was particularly disliked. In a further study (Orlick and Partington, 1987), Canadian Olympic athletes reported that a good knowledge of the sport was also seen as an important factor in fitting in. The issue of integration was again highlighted in Gould and colleagues’ (1991) survey of consultants, US Olympic coaches and administrators. Across the three subsamples, consultants scored lowest for their ability to fit in with the team. It was felt that sport psychologists needed to individualize delivery strategies, spend more time with athletes and increase their knowledge of the sport, focusing more on sport-specific psychological skills and strategies.

Practical constraints, such as money and a lack of time and space for consultations (Kremer and Marchant, 2002), may present further barriers to entry. A recent survey of the use of sport psychology services at top sporting universities in the USA revealed lack of funding to be the most common reason for not using such services (Voight and Callaghan, 2001). Gould and colleagues’ (1989) extensive survey of 47 consultants also revealed lack of funding to be one of the most significant barriers facing the sport psychologist, with the ability to provide a systematic long-term service often being compromised as a result.

Despite the need for research into perceptions of sport psychology that embraces both quantitative and qualitative methods (Sullivan and Hodge, 1991; Martin et al., 2001), few such studies have appeared in the literature. As Sullivan and Hodge (1991) explain, ‘Only through a multidimensional approach...including in-depth interviews that allow for the acquisition and interpretation of rich qualitative data, can more accurate data be obtained’ (p. 150).

In light of the FA’s Psychology for Football strategy and the growth of the field over the past decade, it appears to be an appropriate time to reassess perceptions of applied sport psychology and the barriers confronting consultants. The initial focus of the FA’s strategy is on youth academies and national youth coaches, as their influence will be critical to the long-term integration of psychology within English soccer. These groups also remain the gatekeepers for psychologists wishing to gain entry, and as such their views must be considered ahead of players and consultants, both of whom will become more important as the strategy develops further into service delivery.

The FA youth academies are attached to professional clubs and provide a regulated environment in which to identify (from the age of 9) and develop elite players of outstanding ability through a comprehensive technical and educational programme. The very best of these players will be selected to play for the England youth teams (from under 16 to under 21 years). The present study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to survey youth academy directors, coaches and national coaches regarding: (1) knowledge and awareness of sport psychology; (2) perceptions of sport psychology, including subjective evaluations of consultant services; and (3) barriers limiting the uptake of psychological services within youth academies and national squads.

**Methods**

**Stage 1: quantitative methods**

**Participants**

All 38 FA youth academies in England were surveyed, with the final sample consisting of 21 academy directors, 10 assistant directors (who all worked as coaches on a day-to-day basis) and 17 coaches. In addition, eight national coaches responsible for the England youth and senior teams participated in the project. All participants were male, ranging in age from 24 to 62 years (45.0 ± 8.3 years; mean ± s).

**Instrumentation**

A questionnaire was developed to measure respondents’ knowledge and perceptions of sport psychology. The first section contained 20 items asking respondents to rate their knowledge of a range of performance and non-performance sport psychology topics. Items were developed from a review of the existing literature on
psychology service practice and evaluation (in particular Gould et al., 1989, 1991). They were structured with the stem: ‘Mark the number that represents the knowledge you have of the following topics’. Performance topics included goal-setting, relaxation training, imagery, self-talk and team cohesion. Non-performance topics included lifestyle counselling, communication training, pain management and psychological recovery from injury. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (‘no knowledge’) through 3 (‘fair knowledge’) to 5 (‘excellent knowledge’).

The second section addressed the existence of perceptions that may prevent the integration of sport psychology within youth academies and national squads (i.e. barriers to entry). Nine barriers emerged in a review of the applied research literature, including negative perceptions of players/coaches, fitting in with the team, lack of sport-specific knowledge and time/financial constraints. Two items were developed to reflect each barrier, giving a total of 18 items, and included for example: Is there sufficient time to work with the players on sport psychology? Does the use of a sport psychologist promote the feeling that too many people are involved with the players? Do players perceive sport psychologists as being similar to ‘shrinks’? Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (‘not at all’) through 3 (‘somewhat’) to 5 (‘very much’).

To ensure content and face validity, all items were reviewed by a team of sport psychology administrators within the FA (a group responsible for the integration of sport psychology within coaching practice) and two practising sport psychologists accredited by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES). The completed version was then piloted with two national coaches and a professional club coach. Three items were reworded to better reflect the language used within soccer. No items were rejected.

**Procedure**

Questionnaires were posted to all 38 youth academy directors together with a letter explaining the nature of the research, the endorsement of the FA and the assurance of confidentiality. Each director was asked to circulate a copy to all his permanent staff. Responses were received from 55% of the academies surveyed. Questionnaires were given in person to eleven national coaches, eight (73%) of whom completed and returned them.

**Stage 2: qualitative methods**

After administration of the questionnaires and analysis of these findings, follow-up interviews were conducted on a representative sample of six academy directors and five national coaches. The aim of this stage of the research was to explore in more detail the barriers to entry identified by the questionnaire survey. Additionally, questionnaire responses were limited to experiences from within the respondent’s immediate domain, whereas interviews would allow experiences gained throughout the interviewee’s career to be explored, including those from within the senior levels of professional soccer.

**Interview schedule**

The interview guide consisted of an introduction and a question protocol. Within the introduction, the researcher explained the purpose of the investigation, the format of the interview and how the results might be used. The questions contained within the protocol were based upon those used by Orlick and Partington (1987) to evaluate consultant services and covered four general areas: (1) knowledge and awareness of sport psychology (e.g. When did you first hear about the use of sport psychology within soccer?); (2) the content and delivery of sport psychology services (e.g. How much is sport psychology used within the academy? What types of activities is the sport psychology consultant involved in with the players?); (3) the effectiveness of sport psychology (e.g. To what extent do you feel that sport psychology helps the players perform better? In what way, if any, does the sport psychologist help or hinder you as a coach?); (4) perceptions of sport psychology (e.g. What do you feel is the full scope for using sport psychology in the academy?).

The purpose of the first category of questions was to introduce the topic and establish rapport while also clarifying responses made on the questionnaire to ensure that the questions had been understood and that accurate responses had been given. Two pilot interviews – with a regional coach and an academy director – were conducted and feedback received concerning the content of the interview. Although the structure of the protocol did not change, more attention was subsequently given to the interviewee’s career experience of psychology and their view of how sport psychology may develop within soccer. In all cases, the researcher probed extensively to determine the interviewee’s true opinions and to ensure that the responses obtained were as consistent as possible in terms of depth and complexity (Patton, 1990).

The interviews were conducted by a male who was trained in qualitative research methodology, had 3 years experience as a university soccer player and was an FA Level 2 qualified soccer coach.
Procedure

The interviews were conducted at the convenience of the coach/academy director, in their offices or by telephone. Although interviewing in person is preferable, the geographical spread of the participants and their other commitments made these difficult to schedule. Telephone interviews are accepted as an alternative and suitable method (Marcus and Crane, 1986) and seven of the eleven interviews were conducted in this manner. Each interviewee gave their verbal consent to have the interview recorded and confidentiality was assured. The interviews lasted 25–50 min.

Data analysis

The questionnaire data were input into SPSS (version 10) to facilitate descriptive analysis and statistical comparisons of knowledge and barrier ratings for academy directors, academy coaches and national coaches. Although no formal predictions were made, differences might be expected due to the higher level at which national coaches instruct, the differences in educational background (many academy directors have transferred from the education sector) and the variation in job roles between the groups. From the FA’s perspective, comparison data would enable the psychology education strategy to be shaped with each distinct group in mind.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and content analysed using the procedures recommended by Patton (1980) and Scanlan et al. (1989) for inductive content analysis. The process involves organizing raw verbal data into interpretable and meaningful themes and categories that emerge from the quotations (Patton, 1980). In the present study, the primary researcher achieved this by clustering quotes around underlying uniformities from which first-order themes then emerged. Common second-order themes were then identified and the hierarchical induction continued until it was no longer possible to create a new level of thematic representation. The highest level themes were labelled as general dimensions. A second researcher, also experienced in content analysis, independently validated the procedure at each stage. The first validation was conducted after the primary researcher had organized the raw data into first-order themes meaningful to him. After agreement was reached, the primary researcher organized these into second-order themes which were also independently validated. A third researcher validated the final structure before labels were agreed for each theme and dimension that emerged. Finally, deductive analysis was performed to check the validity of the inductive process by re-reading the transcripts while keeping the higher-order themes in mind to ensure they were all present. The above stages describe a generic inductive approach, evident in much qualitative analysis (e.g. Bryman and Burgess, 1994), but not labelled within one of the specific traditions of qualitative research such as narrative analysis or grounded theory (Silverman, 2000). The approach stems from a critical realist position.

Transcripts of the six academy directors and five national coaches were analysed separately so that any differences that might emerge could inform the approach of the FA’s psychology strategy towards these key stakeholders. The trustworthiness of the findings was assessed through feedback given by the users of the research (i.e. members of the FA’s psychology steering committee).

Results of Stage 1

Knowledge of sport psychology topics

With respect to the use of sport psychology, 14 of the 21 (67%) academies had used a sport psychologist and 4 (19%) academies failed to answer the question. Table 1 contains the mean knowledge levels of the academy directors (AD), academy coaches (AC) and national coaches (NC). Topics are ordered (by AD knowledge) to highlight those with the most understanding. The relative ordering of the performance topics is broadly similar for each group, with goal-setting (AD = 3.74; AC = 3.53; NC = 3.50) and team-building/cohesion (AD = 3.48; AC = 3.29; NC = 3.50) the best understood in each case. Motivation ranks next highest for both academy directors (3.23) and academy coaches (3.18), with emotional control the next highest for national coaches (3.50). Biofeedback (AD = 1.58; AC = 1.94; NC = 1.25) and hypnosis (AD = 1.42; AC = 1.41; NC = 1.13) are the least understood topics for each of the three groups.

Overall, performance topics were much better understood than non-performance topics, with national coaches showing the greatest discrepancy between the two knowledge areas. One-way analyses of variance revealed no significant differences between the three groups for overall knowledge of performance topics \(F_{2,635} = 0.96, P = 0.39\), non-performance topics \(F_{2,510} = 2.14, P = 0.11\) or a combination of the two \(F_{2,1154} = 0.26, P = 0.09\).

Barriers to entry

Table 2 contains the perceptions of the academy directors, academy coaches and national coaches relating to the barriers to entry. Lack of finance was
rated highest by each group (AD = 3.35; AC = 3.26; NC = 3.42). When asked if there was sufficient funding available for sport psychology within academies, 20 (42%) respondents marked ‘1 – not at all’.

The perception that sport psychologists fail to clarify their services was the second ranked barrier for both academy directors (2.89) and national coaches (3.33). For academy coaches, a perceived lack of soccer knowledge on the part of the consultant (2.74) was the second ranked barrier. Asked whether sport psychologists generally had the required knowledge of football to work effectively, 13 (46%) academy coaches responded ‘1 – not at all’ or ‘2 – a little’. Lack of knowledge of sport psychology within academies was the third ranked barrier for all groups (AD = 2.86; AC = 2.62; NC = 2.93). Ratings of other barriers were relatively low, with all scoring below the midpoint of ‘3 – somewhat’.

### Table 1. Knowledge of sport psychology topics (values are mean ± s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance topics</th>
<th>Academy directors (n = 21)</th>
<th>Academy coaches (n = 27)</th>
<th>National coaches (n = 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal-setting</td>
<td>3.74 ± 0.82</td>
<td>3.53 ± 0.60</td>
<td>3.50 ± 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team-building/cohesion</td>
<td>3.48 ± 1.00</td>
<td>3.29 ± 0.93</td>
<td>3.50 ± 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>3.23 ± 1.06</td>
<td>3.18 ± 0.97</td>
<td>3.25 ± 0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration/attention training</td>
<td>3.19 ± 1.17</td>
<td>2.76 ± 1.17</td>
<td>2.38 ± 0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery/visualization</td>
<td>3.16 ± 1.04</td>
<td>2.88 ± 0.75</td>
<td>3.25 ± 1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional control</td>
<td>2.90 ± 1.11</td>
<td>2.71 ± 1.24</td>
<td>3.50 ± 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-talk</td>
<td>2.81 ± 1.05</td>
<td>2.71 ± 0.75</td>
<td>2.63 ± 1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation training</td>
<td>2.58 ± 0.92</td>
<td>2.35 ± 0.70</td>
<td>2.13 ± 0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence intervention</td>
<td>2.55 ± 1.15</td>
<td>2.65 ± 1.03</td>
<td>2.13 ± 0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biofeedback</td>
<td>1.58 ± 0.89</td>
<td>1.94 ± 1.06</td>
<td>1.25 ± 0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypnosis</td>
<td>1.42 ± 0.81</td>
<td>1.41 ± 0.86</td>
<td>1.13 ± 0.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-performance topics</th>
<th>Academy directors (n = 21)</th>
<th>Academy coaches (n = 27)</th>
<th>National coaches (n = 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle counselling</td>
<td>3.13 ± 1.12</td>
<td>2.94 ± 1.00</td>
<td>3.13 ± 1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication training</td>
<td>2.87 ± 1.18</td>
<td>2.82 ± 1.17</td>
<td>3.00 ± 0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology of injury</td>
<td>2.58 ± 0.81</td>
<td>2.65 ± 0.77</td>
<td>2.38 ± 1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflict training</td>
<td>2.42 ± 1.09</td>
<td>2.35 ± 0.93</td>
<td>1.63 ± 0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology of parental involvement</td>
<td>2.35 ± 1.14</td>
<td>2.41 ± 1.11</td>
<td>2.38 ± 1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>2.03 ± 1.20</td>
<td>2.00 ± 0.97</td>
<td>1.50 ± 0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>1.81 ± 0.87</td>
<td>2.06 ± 0.99</td>
<td>1.38 ± 0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>1.74 ± 0.86</td>
<td>1.53 ± 0.61</td>
<td>1.50 ± 0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Barriers to entry for sport psychologists in English soccer (values are mean ± s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier to entry</th>
<th>Academy directors (n = 21)</th>
<th>Academy coaches (n = 27)</th>
<th>National coaches (n = 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>3.35 ± 2.56</td>
<td>3.26 ± 1.80</td>
<td>3.42 ± 0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of services (SPC)</td>
<td>2.89 ± 2.25</td>
<td>2.35 ± 1.36</td>
<td>3.33 ± 1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of sport psychology</td>
<td>2.86 ± 1.34</td>
<td>2.62 ± 1.56</td>
<td>2.93 ± 1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPC integration</td>
<td>2.48 ± 1.83</td>
<td>2.29 ± 1.46</td>
<td>2.29 ± 0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perception of players</td>
<td>2.44 ± 2.33</td>
<td>2.35 ± 2.08</td>
<td>2.07 ± 1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of soccer (SPC)</td>
<td>2.32 ± 1.58</td>
<td>2.74 ± 2.32</td>
<td>1.92 ± 1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time constraints</td>
<td>2.29 ± 2.14</td>
<td>2.29 ± 1.54</td>
<td>2.07 ± 1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role clarity (SPC)</td>
<td>1.79 ± 2.25</td>
<td>1.85 ± 1.83</td>
<td>1.64 ± 0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perception of coaches</td>
<td>1.76 ± 1.98</td>
<td>1.44 ± 1.54</td>
<td>2.36 ± 2.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Abbreviation:** SPC = sport psychology consultant.
Overall, the perceptions of the groups were broadly similar, with a one-way analysis of variance revealing no significant differences between the groups ($F_{2,621} = 0.94, P = 0.41$).

**Discussion of Stage 1**

Knowledge of sport psychology appears limited, particularly for topics that, unlike team-building or goal-setting, fall outside the general coaching domain. Overall, despite the differences in job role, educational background and coaching levels, a consistent picture was presented by each of the groups. Each had similar (low) levels of knowledge of sport psychology topics, supporting Ravizza’s (1990) conclusion that these concepts are not well understood in sport. Within non-performance domains, where knowledge levels were particularly low, there certainly appears to be a need for counsellors and trained specialists. Related literature has only presented importance ratings for psychology topics (e.g. Gould et al., 1991), hence there are no benchmarks from other sporting contexts with which to compare the knowledge levels presented here. However, it is hoped that the present study may provide a baseline for comparison in future studies.

A range of barriers was presented, with lack of finance emerging from the survey as the most significant. This finding echoes results from the USA, where insufficient funding was the most common reason given for not using sport psychology services in both university (Voigt and Callaghan, 2001) and professional sports (Gould et al., 1989). The perception that sport psychologists are a hindrance to the coach’s programme, and that this is the most common reason for not using their services (Silva, 1984), was completely refuted by the results of the survey. Only one individual (0.01%) perceived it as ‘5 – very much’ a problem. In this area, perceptions of applied sport psychologists appear to have moved in a positive direction over the past two decades.

**Results and discussion of Stage 2**

Stage 2 of the study built upon the results of the questionnaire, with interviews enabling a more in-depth investigation of the issues presented. As this stage focused on the barriers to entry, only academy directors and national coaches were interviewed – academy coaches are not directly involved in the employment of sport psychologists. Again, to facilitate comparison, the interview transcripts of national coaches and academy directors were content analysed separately. The same six barrier dimensions emerged from each analysis, reflecting the questions raised on the interview guide. However, different raw data and higher-order themes were evident within each group as depicted in Figs. 1–6. Each dimension is discussed below.

**Negative perceptions of sport psychology**

There was a remarkable consistency in the themes that emerged from interviews with academy directors and national coaches, as illustrated in Fig. 1. For both groups, negative perceptions were underpinned by two higher-order themes: ‘negative perceptions of sport psychology’ and ‘psychology is just common sense’. The following quote, from an academy director, encapsulated both of these themes:

> So when the sport psychologist left, the word ‘psychology’ in this place was taboo. The manager felt that these people don’t have any skills and all they do is put pieces of paper on walls with positive thinking ideas. Calls them ‘interior decorators’. But he doesn’t realize how good a psychologist he is, despite him holding no qualifications.

The need to re-label sport psychology as ‘mental skills’, ‘performance enhancement’ or ‘mental toughness’ to sell it to players emerged as a common theme. Two quotes, the first by a national coach and the second by an academy director, were very revealing:

> I still think some people fight shy of the word ‘psychology’. They’ll have people working in the clubs but they’re loath to admit that they’re sport psychologists. They’ll call them a coach or a mentor or something like that. So there’s some people who are very aware that they could be ridiculed if they call them sport psychologists, but they will encompass them under a different name. The term ‘psychologist’ is becoming more accepted in football, but is not fully accepted as yet.

> We do use psychology but we don’t call it that. We dress it up. It would be difficult employing a sports psychologist here, named as such.

This accords with the literature on perceptions of sport psychology, in particular Ravizza’s (1988, 1990) arguments regarding the negative connotations of psychology. The notion that psychology is just common sense was mentioned by over half of the interviewees, despite there being no question directly related to it on the interview guide. The idea was expressed by short remarks and captured as raw data themes, including: ‘most of psychology is little more than common sense’, ‘there’s good psychology without a psychologist’ and ‘we use sport psychology unknowingly’. This reveals a somewhat disparaging attitude towards applied sport psychology and sug-
Fig. 1. Negative perceptions of sport psychology.
suggests a lack of knowledge concerning what the field constitutes. Kirschenbaum and colleagues’ (1993) finding that coaches often believed that anxiety and distress were best treated with ‘ice-packs and kind words’ reflects this attitude.

**Knowledge of sport psychology**

The themes captured by this dimension relate strongly to those presented in the section above. As depicted in Fig. 2, common to both interview groups were the misconceptions that sport psychology was only for problem players, and that strong players would not benefit from it. The following quotation was representative of the raw data themes expressing these notions and illustrates how the value of sport psychology could be endorsed while deflecting the suggestion that it could benefit strong players, or as appeared in this case, the interviewee:

> Some are very strong characters and probably need very little, but there are an awful lot that are probably not that strong and so when problems occur they need somebody to help them through those problems.

That the sport psychologist may be similar to a psychiatrist – the term ‘group therapy’ was used – and that sport psychology was more relevant to other, mainly individual, sports were themes expressed only by national coaches. These findings support Partington and Orlick’s (1987) survey of coaches in which similar notions were espoused, and Kremer and Marchant’s (2002) reflections on the misconceptions of sport psychology within Australian Rules football. National coaches were also far less confident of the ability of players to understand sport psychology and were adamant of the need to present the concepts simply – ‘dumb down the concepts’, ‘keep things simple’, ‘not all footballers are the brightest’ – and relate everything back to the sport. Overall, the data suggest that knowledge of sport psychology is limited within the professional game, which presents a major barrier to its integration. As one academy director stated, ‘There is an awareness of it but to be perfectly frank we haven’t got the expertise here’.

**Integrating with players and coaching staff**

Twelve separate and wide-ranging first-order themes, depicted in Fig. 3, emerged to illustrate this theme. Academy directors felt strongly that sport psychologists must have the character to deal with the soccer environment and the ‘banter’ of players, particularly within senior professional soccer:

> [The psychologist] didn’t particularly have the strength of personality to deliver the quality of performance expected in the soccer club, especially in the culture. I think you have to be able to deal with the inevitable banter and players’ witty repartee. It’s the culture of professional footballers.

Staff within the game were also reported as being sceptical of ‘academics’ and ‘highly trained scientists’. This supports Partington and Orlick’s (1987) finding that Olympic coaches negatively rated the ‘ivory tower researcher’ who imposed time-consuming tests that bore little resemblance to the game. It was also emphasized that the sport psychologist can’t be too theoretical when presenting information. Valued char-
characteristics and skills included a ‘skilful questioner and listener’, the ability to ‘relate to young people’, ‘present clearly’ and ‘deal with people as individuals’. These findings also echo those of Partington and Orlick (1987), although the present survey of traits was by no means comprehensive.

Results from the questionnaire indicated that a lack of soccer knowledge on behalf of the sport psychologist might present a greater barrier for academy directors and coaches than national coaches. Yet, during his interview, it was a national coach who expressed the opinion that professional playing experience may be a necessary prerequisite to integration. No other interviewee took this position, with a good knowledge and appreciation of sport in general seen as sufficient to gain credibility and fit in. This made it possible to understand sporting issues and draw comparisons that would make sense to players.

I’ve worked with one guy who had been an international rower and immediately he announced that to the group in front of him and they all suddenly sat up and took notice. I think that is part and parcel of it, the sporting credibility of that person, and if you haven’t got that it will limit the ability of what you can deliver.

In the only reported instance of a sport psychologist clearly not integrating with the players and coaches, the director felt it was because he only wanted to work with the top players and was there to satisfy his own rather than the team’s needs. Orlick and Partington’s (1987) profile of the consultant who displayed too much self-importance fits with this finding.

Role and service clarity
As depicted in Fig. 4, service clarity was not an issue for academy directors or national coaches, with both groups appearing to understand what a consultant can and can’t do. This contrasts with Kremer and Marchant’s (2002) findings from within Australian Rules football, in which there existed the widespread belief that sport psychology could provide a quick fix. Academy directors appeared to appreciate the time it could take to effect change within individuals and the team, and this fitted the development philosophy of academies. Role clarity, on the other hand, did present a problem for one academy director, who indicated that the psychologist had not respected on not understood the requirements of the role:

Now I wanted him to deal with younger players. To help them get themselves strong in their heads... We had one or two discussion groups with him, but we got the feeling that he was only putting those sessions on to satisfy the fact he would do some work with the Academy... Somebody should have said, we want you to work with the young players to boost their confidence, but they never got any help.

Confidentiality was highlighted as a significant issue by two national coaches. They did not appear to understand or were not satisfied with the ethics of

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**Fig. 3. Integrating with players and coaching staff.**
confidentiality. For these coaches, the lack of feedback clearly limited the value of sport psychology.

Yeah, I think if you're working with them, your first contact is with the player, and if you put that contact with somebody else, you're not really going to know what's happening. They might say, 'I don't want to speak with you, I want to speak with the psychologist'. But as a coach you wouldn't know what was happening.

**Practical constraints**

Five of the six academy directors interviewed (see Fig. 5) stated that financial constraints restricted their use of sport psychology services. The use of sport psychologists on a part-time or voluntary basis was reflective of this and not a single academy reported employing a full-time psychologist.

If I had the cash as an academy director I would certainly have a sport psychologist. I have dabbled a bit with one or two psychologists who have come in on a voluntary basis but I think now...there's just no cash available.

Sport psychology was seen by some as having a lower priority than fitness training or other directly performance-related specializations. When working to limited budgets – the current reality at most academies – psychology was reportedly the first specialization to be dropped. Lack of finance for psychology has a knock-on effect at international level. National coaches felt that players’ lack of exposure to sport psychology at clubs (both senior and youth levels) made them less receptive and less likely to adhere to the psychological programmes that were introduced.

Time constraints were an issue for national coaches, and this highlighted how the teaching of mental skills separately from physical skills may pose particular problems for national squads:

Unless we're in a major championship, you’ve only got them for two, three or four days maximum. And all that time is geared to getting them either fit from the league game they played the day before, or trying to get them to play the way you want them to play three days later. Certainly with the seniors it’s a nightmare, because commercially they’re required to do certain things.

Within academies the emerging themes suggest that where sport psychology was valued, time would be found to include it in player development programmes.

**Perceived value of sport psychology**

Another potential barrier that emerged in interviews relates to the value those within soccer place on sport psychology (see Fig. 6). Coaches and academy directors felt that the benefits of sport psychology were difficult to prove in terms of actual performance, but other variables did indicate its effectiveness, as one academy director highlighted:

I think that performance improvements are difficult to quantify but in terms of increased motivation or confidence levels, then yes. In terms of it being actually transferred on to the pitch, then it is not that clear, but if you take an assessment of body language for example...it is there for all to see...the general tenor and atmosphere within the group has vastly improved as a result of the group work we did last year.

It does, however, appear that that applied sport psychologists need to do more to demonstrate the value of their work to those within soccer and other sports:
...if you measure success as producing a group of well-rounded individuals who have a smooth progression into the first team, then I will see that as a success, but the problem is with sports psychology that specialists will have to define how you measure success. You need to educate people on the benefits of sport psychology and lead them to understand what success actually is.

Recent discussions in the evaluation literature support the director’s criticism: ‘practitioners must take responsibility for evaluating and documenting their effectiveness’ (Anderson et al., 2002, p. 433). As the quote also points out, this information must then be disseminated if it is to have an impact in the sporting world.

Academy directors had a good appreciation of the scope of sport psychology. A range of potential areas for its application were captured by raw data themes, including ‘lifestyle issues’, ‘the psychologist should work with the whole staff’, ‘players get distracted at 16/17’, ‘players go from having no money to lots of money’, ‘they are all good enough technically’.

The barriers identified in the present study are presented in Fig. 7. The left-to-right ordering illustrates the stage at which each barrier appears to exist – from value considerations and practical constraints external to the organization that prevent entry to and limit the extent of the work, to internal role clarity, integration and delivery issues.

The internal barriers are all underpinned by the knowledge of sport psychology within soccer, and the knowledge of soccer (and sport) held by the consultant. If a club or academy has many internal barriers – for example, if players are hostile to psychology, or they do not see a clear role for the psychologist – these may prevent entry into the organization. The links between perceived value, finance and time illustrate the issue of prioritization.

**Implications for sport psychologists**

The present study raises a number of significant issues for applied sport psychologists. First, although the value of sport psychology is becoming more widely acknowledged, the concepts and language of sport psychology
remain unfamiliar to many. Wherever possible, examples given should relate directly to the experiences of athletes, using language appropriate to the sport. As one national coach reflected, ‘If you can dumb down the terminology and not the concepts, then you’ve got a bit of a chance’. Halliwell’s (1990) suggestion that presentations should be liberally embellished with anecdotes of professional athletes’ use of sport psychology appears wise.

The acceptance of the sport psychologist by the coach is also important to the success of any programme. Since coaches appear to view themselves as amateur psychologists, they may welcome consultants who actively seek their input. Moreover, since they spend more time with the players than any other party, their influence on them cannot be ignored. The dual-role debate did surface during interviews, with academy directors and national coaches revealing very different opinions. Themes emerging from the interviews suggested that national coaches appreciated the importance of addressing mental training during physical practices. They were also keen to emphasize the advantages of the coach-psychologist, particularly in his or her ability to address psychological principles in the language of football.

Academy directors, on the other hand, appeared keen to stress the problems with the coach-psychologist concept. They felt that a trained specialist was needed to address psychological issues, since the coach may ‘lose his identity’ and was ‘less likely to secure the attention of players’. Confidentiality was also seen to be important for the players to open up’, and a coach could not ensure this. Sullivan and Hodge’s (1991) survey, in which only 37% of coaches felt they adequately met their athletes’ psychological needs, supports the directors’ view. Two of the national coaches, however, felt that consultants should provide feedback on their sessions with players and, as Murphy (1995) points out, not doing so may undermine his or her position with the management staff. Confidentiality remains a difficult issue for sport psychologists working within English soccer and clarifying a position up-front may help to avoid confusion.

Implications for administrative bodies

An education and awareness programme targeting coaches in particular, but also aimed at players and academy directors, may help to remove the negative connotations of sport psychology and expose some of the misconceptions that exist. Emphasizing to coaches that although they may already use psychology effectively in their coaching practice, there is still much to be gained from developing these skills in a structured manner. Financial restrictions make coach education the most practical means for introducing sport psychology at present. As the economic climate improves, clubs should be better primed to introduce sport psychologists who, according to the interviewees in the present study, would be able to work to maximum effect in tandem with the coach.

It may be prudent to address such a programme at academies in the first instance. As players become more familiar with sport psychology at youth level, they...
Knowledge and perceptions of sport psychology

should begin to accept it as a natural part of their development process. As a greater proportion of these players are then represented at senior level, the acceptance of sport psychology will improve without the need for any direct intervention. Such an arrangement should in turn benefit the provision and acceptance of sport psychology at national level.

The first major practical outcome of the FA’s psychology strategy has been the launch of training courses designed to introduce the concepts of sport psychology to football coaches, parents, psychologists and players. Levels 1 and 2 of the course syllabus cover the psychology of learning and development, while levels 3 and 4 centre on the psychology of performance. This programme will certainly raise the awareness of sport psychology within the game and is an important first step. The psychology content of the FA’s coaching qualifications is also being increased, which will ensure that all coaches receive a grounding in sport psychology. A placement scheme at youth academies for trainee sport psychologists, organized in association with BASES, also represents a financially viable way to integrate psychologists within football. It remains to be seen whether the impact of the strategy is as hoped, but it appears that the FA is addressing the issues of most relevance.

Implications for applied sport psychology research

The sample used in the present study was limited to academy directors, academy coaches and national coaches. Future studies are needed that include players, administrators and consultants. Although the study did provide some insights into perceptions within the senior professional game, replicating the present investigation using senior club coaches and managers would provide an interesting comparison. A more thorough evaluation of consultant services (e.g. content, delivery styles, hours per week) would also build on this study.

Combining quantitative and qualitative strategies within the present study helped to provide a more complete picture of the status of sport psychology in soccer. The interview data broadly supported the survey findings, with finance emerging as the main barrier, and lack of sport psychology knowledge/misconceptions common. Direct quotations provided a credible grounding for the survey data and enabled a more pragmatic reflection on the barriers and what was required to overcome them. Again, few differences existed between the three groups of respondents.

Finally, it should be recognized that those most likely to respond to the questionnaire were those with a knowledge of sport psychology and, arguably, with favourable attitudes towards the discipline. The social desirability of particular responses – especially with the FA endorsing the survey – may also have skewed the data towards a more positive picture.

Conclusions

The present study has revealed a range of barriers faced by sport psychologists wishing to work within English soccer. Of these, lack of finance was identified from the quantitative data and interview themes as the most important barrier. Knowledge of sport psychology was limited among the majority of those surveyed and misconceptions regarding the nature of the discipline were common, presenting consultants with further obstacles to the successful implementation of support programmes. Despite the continued success of sport psychology across the globe, negative connotations of the field still exist, particularly within sports such as soccer that have tended to resist change. If the FA’s psychology strategy can deliver the appropriate education to the football community in England, and if consultants can continue to demonstrate their worth within the challenging culture of soccer, the barriers will begin to be overcome.

References


