

Research article

## Sport Psychology Service Provision: Preferences for Consultant Characteristics and Mode of Delivery among Elite Malaysian Athletes

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### Abstract

Factors relevant to the working alliance between athletes and sport psychology consultants were investigated in a sample of elite Malaysian athletes ( $n = 217$ ). The athletes represented a variety of team and individual sports, and they provided information about the perceived importance of seven consultant characteristics/behaviors as well as seven program delivery options. At a full-sample level, general preferences were expressed for consultants to lead a physically active lifestyle, regularly attend training sessions and competitions, and have prior experience as an athlete or coach. General preferences were also expressed for program content to be determined by the coach or consultant, and for regular, small doses of mental skills training to be delivered in a face-to-face context throughout the year. At a sub-group level, team sport athletes had stronger preferences than individual sport athletes for program delivery on a group/team basis, while individual sport athletes had stronger preferences than team sport athletes for having a role in determining program content. Findings are discussed in relation to dominant value themes within Malaysian society and the reinforcement of these themes within specific sport subcultures.

**Key words:** Elite athletes, mental skills training, sport psychology, cultural influences.

### Introduction

Effective delivery of sport psychology services requires that consideration be given to numerous personal, interpersonal, and situational factors. A variety of service delivery models have been developed in an effort to account for these factors (e.g., Hardy and Parfitt, 1994; Perna et al., 1995; Taylor, 1995). One of the more comprehensive frameworks along these lines has been proposed by Poczwardowski and colleagues (Poczwardowski and Sherman, 2011; Poczwardowski et al., 1998). In its original form, this sport psychology service delivery (SPSD) heuristic outlined 11 important considerations for designing, implementing, and evaluating psychological services for athletes (Poczwardowski et al., 1998). These considerations included: professional philosophy, training, and boundaries; making contact and gaining entry; preliminary assessment of needs; conceptualization of underlying issues and potential interventions; deciding on the range, type, and organization of services; implementing the program; managing the self as an element of the process; evaluating the program and the consultant; reflecting on the process and drawing conclusions; and organizing withdrawal.

In a more recent elaboration of the SPSPD (Poczwardowski and Sherman, 2011), these consultancy issues have been organized under the higher-level themes of “service foundation” and “service process”. An additional higher-order theme, “working alliance”, was also added to account for three important factors that were not part of the original model. These factors were *client variables*, *consultant variables*, and the *consultant-client relationship*. Immersion (e.g., long-term involvement, attending practices and competitions, traveling with the competitors) and goodness-of-fit (e.g., knowing the sport and its vocabulary, matching of consultant skills and athlete needs) were also acknowledged as important elements of the consultancy process. In this study, we address consultant variables and consultant-client interaction processes that may influence goodness-of-fit and therefore the effectiveness of sport psychology service delivery, but we do so from a cultural values perspective.

### Consultant characteristics and behaviors

Prior investigations have shown that, at a global level, effective consultants are those who are perceived by athletes and coaches to be professionally trained, knowledgeable and experienced, flexible in their approach, good listeners and communicators, and interested in the personal welfare of the athlete (Andersen, 2000; Lubker et al., 2012; Orlick and Partington, 1987; Partington and Orlick, 1987; Yukelson, 2001). In addition, athletes and coaches want consultants to provide concrete, practical advice that they can understand and use in specific performance contexts (Anderson et al., 2004; Gentner et al., 2004; Partington and Orlick, 1991). “Fitting-in” and genuine acceptance by the athlete or team is a crucial element of being able to provide such advice (Gould et al., 1991). Fit and acceptance, in turn, can be influenced by a number of personal qualities and behaviors such as having prior experience as an athlete or coach (Lubker et al., 2008; Lubker et al., 2012; Orlick, 1989), leading a physically active lifestyle (Lubker et al., 2008; Lubker et al., 2005), being the same gender as the athlete or the team (Lubker et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2001; Van Raalte et al., 1990), regular involvement in training sessions and competitions (Andersen et al., 2001; Poczwardowski and Sherman, 2011), and demonstrating a long-term commitment to the athlete or team (Hardy et al., 1996; Orlick and Partington, 1987; Partington and Orlick, 1987; Partington and Orlick, 1991).

### Consultant-client interaction

Acceptance, goodness-of-fit, and effective delivery can also be influenced by service process variables and their impact on interaction processes (Poczwadowski and Sherman, 2011). Relevant service process issues include: the determination of program content and focus; the balance of group interaction, individual interaction, and self-instruction; and the overall structure of the intervention. With respect to program content, there is a general consensus that a predetermined, "one-size fits all" approach rarely produces optimal results (Gould et al., 1989; Hill, 1993; Whelan et al., 1995). Consequently, athlete involvement in determining intervention content has been advocated as a way of increasing perceived relevance, enhancing commitment, and achieving desirable outcomes (Hays et al., 2010; Jones, 1993; Mellalieu et al., 2009). At the same time, accurate identification of core issues (and the corresponding program elements) also requires consultant-centered judgments based on professional knowledge and experience (Gardner and Moore, 2004; Poczwadowski and Sherman, 2011). Thus, an appropriate balance needs to be obtained between these two sources of input.

Similarly, there is a general consensus that the combined use of group-level, individual-level, and self-instructional activities will contribute to effective service delivery (Anderson et al., 2004; Orlick, 1989; Perna et al., 1995; Weinberg, 1994). However, contextual and subcultural values can influence the extent to which each of these interaction modes is considered acceptable, thereby altering the appropriate mix (Hanson and Ravizza, 2003; Loehr, 1990). Finally, it is clear that effective service delivery usually involves a long-term commitment to and involvement with the athlete or team (Anderson et al., 2004; Fifer et al., 2008; Orlick and Partington, 1987). At the same time, there is evidence that benefits can be obtained either with a regular and continuous structure (Bull, 1995; Fournier et al., 2005; Galloway, 2007; Gardner and Moore, 2004) or with a cyclical structure involving a heavy emphasis on selected mental training issues at specific points in time (Blumenstein et al., 2005; Holliday et al., 2008; Lidor et al., 2007).

### Cultural and subcultural considerations

Clearly, there is considerable scope for further investigation of the consultant variables and service process variables that might influence acceptance, goodness-of-fit, and the working alliance between consultants and their clients. In doing so, contextual issues related to cultural and subcultural values should be considered (Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2012). For example, it is well known that national cultures vary on important dimensions that determine the nature and type of interaction with other individuals (Hofstede, 1997, 2001; Schwartz, 1999). Effective service delivery therefore requires a flexible approach based on people in relation to their background, experiences, and cultural identity (Martens et al., 2000). However, much of the research examining sport psychology service delivery has been conducted within a traditional Western values framework, and there appears to be an assumption that the findings will apply across-the-

board. Such an assumption may not be valid, so a broader perspective is needed (Fisher et al., 2003; Kontos and Breland-Noble, 2002; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2012). This broader perspective should include consideration of both the value orientations of the larger national culture and the value orientations within specific sport subgroups (Si et al., 2011; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2012). An important contributor to subcultural values is the nature of the sport. Differences in traditions, performance demands, and interaction requirements across sports can influence the perceived appropriateness of service delivery procedures as well as beliefs about the type of person who should be providing them (Hanson and Ravizza, 2003; Loehr, 1990; Taylor, 1995).

In this study, we focus specifically on the delivery of sport psychology services to elite Malaysian athletes, and we examine the extent to which preferred consultant characteristics and modes of delivery are consistent with general value themes within Malaysian society-at-large. At the same time, we explore the logical possibility that this consistency will be especially apparent when subcultural values surrounding the athlete's sport involvement reinforce these broader societal values. Cross-national studies have consistently shown that dominant values within Malaysian society include an acceptance of hierarchical power structures and an emphasis on collectivism rather than individualism (Hofstede, 1997, 2001; Schwartz, 1999). Notably, emphases on hierarchical structures and collectivist values have also been observed within team sport environments (Neels and Curtner-Smith, 2012). Thus, we expected a general preference for consultant characteristics that suggest formal training and/or domain-specific experience as well as delivery formats that rely heavily on the consultant's expertise and cater for group-based interaction. We also expected that these preferences would be especially evident within team sport contexts.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 217 elite athletes from Malaysia (age range = 15–35 years, Mean = 21.97, SD = 4.01) participated in the study. The sample contained 105 male and 113 female athletes representing team sports ( $n = 121$ ; hockey, soccer, basketball, netball, sepak takraw, and synchronised swimming) as well as individual sports ( $n = 96$ ; tenpin bowling, squash, cycling, athletics, shooting, and diving). The athletes had been competing at an elite level for a sustained period of time (Mean = 9.06 years, SD = 3.66), and they were receiving support from the National Sports Council of Malaysia and the National Sports Institute of Malaysia. Consequently, they had prior exposure to sport psychology consultants and the delivery of sport psychology services within elite sport.

### Instruments

Participants completed a questionnaire consisting of three parts: (a) background information (e.g., age, gender, sport, years of competitive experience, etc.); (b) the perceived importance of seven service provider characteris-

tics; and (c) the perceived importance of seven service delivery options. A single-item, direct assessment approach was used within parts (b) and (c) of the questionnaire because of a pragmatic desire to minimize time demands on the athletes and because the construct of interest (perceived importance) was a unidimensional, subjective experience. Under those circumstances, single-item measures can offer an acceptable compromise between practical needs and psychometric concerns (Robins et al., 2001).

The consultant characteristics and delivery options appearing in the questionnaire were selected on the basis of their acknowledged importance within the sport psychology literature and their inclusion in prior studies of consultant and program factors (Andersen et al., 2001; Lubker et al., 2008; Lubker et al., 2012; Lubker et al., 2005; Martin et al., 2001; Poczwadowski and Sherman, 2011; Van Raalte et al., 1990). More specifically, the consultant characteristics were: has prior experience as a coach or athlete; has formal training in psychology or a degree in psychology; regularly attends training sessions and competitions; leads a physically active lifestyle; focuses on the personal welfare of the athletes; emphasizes the teaching of mental skills; is the same gender as the athlete or team. Perceived importance was evaluated independently for each of these characteristics using a bipolar rating scale anchored by “not important” (1) and “very important” (7). The service delivery options were: content determined by the coach or consultant; content determined by the athlete or team; continual small doses of mental skills training throughout the year; heavy emphasis on mental skills training at a few points in time; delivered on a one-to-one basis; delivered on a group/team basis; delivered via self-instructional materials (e.g., handouts, manuals, CDs). Perceived importance was also evaluated independently for each of these delivery options using a bipolar rating scale anchored by “not important” (1) and “very important” (7).

### Procedure

Back-translation procedures were used to create parallel English and Malay versions of the questionnaire (Behling and Law, 2000; McDermott and Palchanes, 1994). That is, questionnaire items were first written in English, then translated into Malay, and then back-translated into English by two bilingual translators (a language teacher and a university lecturer). Differences between the original English version and the Malay version were identified, and necessary modifications were made. The translation process was repeated until consensus was obtained be-

tween the two translators that the original and back-translated versions agreed. Ethical clearance was then secured from an institutional ethics committee, and permission to conduct the study was obtained from the National Sports Council of Malaysia, the National Sports Institute of Malaysia, and the appropriate national sports organizations.

Athletes were notified about the study through sport management personnel. They then attended one of several group testing sessions. All of these sessions were held at a central meeting facility managed by the National Sports Council of Malaysia. Testing was done during a period of normal training, and group sizes ranged from 15-50 athletes. Prior to completing the questionnaire, athletes were given a description of the study, and it was emphasized that their responses would be anonymous. Participants then signed informed consent forms and completed the questionnaire, which took less than 20 minutes.

## Results

### Consultant preferences

**General preference hierarchy:** Full sample descriptive statistics for the perceived importance of consultant characteristics are presented in the first three columns of Table 1. Three aspects of these results are noteworthy. Firstly, most of the selected characteristics were viewed as important by the athletes, with six of the seven qualities receiving average ratings above 5.5 on a seven-point scale. The only exception was “same gender”, which was viewed as relatively unimportant and received the lowest average rating (3.85). Secondly, the general preference hierarchy essentially consisted of three tiers, with the top five qualities statistically equivalent ( $p$ -values for all pairwise  $t$ -tests  $> 0.05$ ), personal welfare emphasis representing a middle tier [ $t(216) = 3.05$ ,  $p = 0.003$  vs. formal training in psychology], and consultant’s gender representing a third tier [ $t(216) = 9.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$  vs. personal welfare emphasis]. Finally, it is interesting that, overall, these athletes attached significantly more importance to a mental skills emphasis from the consultant than an athlete welfare emphasis [ $t(216) = 4.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ].

**Sport subculture influences:** Subgroup descriptive statistics for the perceived importance of consultant characteristics are shown in the last six columns of Table 1. A two-way MANOVA was used to determine if these characteristics were influenced by type of sport (individual versus team) or the athlete’s gender. Although not of primary interest in this study, the gender factor was

**Table 1.** Consultant characteristics preferred by elite Malaysian athletes

Type of Service Delivery	Full Sample			Interactive Sports			Coactive Sports		
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Regularly attends training and competition	217	6.13 <sup>a</sup>	1.10	121	6.17	1.12	96	6.08	1.08
Leads a physically active lifestyle	217	6.05 <sup>a</sup>	1.12	121	6.18*	1.08	96	5.88*	1.14
Emphasizes teaching of mental skills	217	5.97 <sup>a</sup>	1.02	121	5.93	0.98	96	6.03	1.07
Has prior experience as a coach or athlete	217	5.94 <sup>a</sup>	1.33	121	5.90	1.45	96	5.98	1.17
Has formal training (or degree) in psychology	217	5.90 <sup>a</sup>	1.16	121	5.98	1.07	96	5.81	1.26
Emphasizes personal welfare of the athlete	217	5.52 <sup>b</sup>	1.62	121	5.30*	1.76	96	5.79*	1.38
Is the same sex as me (or my team)	217	3.85 <sup>c</sup>	1.93	121	3.95	2.02	96	3.73	1.81

Significant differences between full sample means are indicated by unique letters (a, b, c). Significant differences between the interactive and coactive subgroups are indicated by asterisks (\*).



**Table 2.** Service delivery preferences for elite Malaysian athletes.

Type of Service Delivery	Full Sample			Interactive Sports			Coactive Sports		
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Continuous, small doses of MST all year long	217	5.64 <sup>a</sup>	1.25	121	5.64	1.32	96	5.64	1.18
Delivered by a consultant on a group / team basis	217	5.59 <sup>a</sup>	1.31	121	5.86*	1.16	96	5.26*	1.41
Program content determined by the coach or consultant	217	5.58 <sup>a</sup>	1.22	121	5.70	1.18	96	5.43	1.25
Delivered by a consultant on a one-to-one-basis	217	5.40 <sup>a</sup>	1.33	121	5.31	1.40	96	5.50	1.24
Heavy emphasis on MST at a few points in time	217	4.92 <sup>b</sup>	1.66	121	4.97	1.75	96	4.86	1.55
Self-instruction via manuals, CDs, etc.	217	4.66 <sup>b</sup>	1.56	121	4.65	1.55	96	4.68	1.57
Program content determined by the athlete or team	217	4.22 <sup>c</sup>	1.75	121	3.92*	1.86	96	4.59*	1.53

Note. Significant differences between full sample means are indicated by unique letters (a, b, c). Significant differences between the interactive and coactive subgroups are indicated by asterisks (\*).

included as an independent variable to account for variance that might be attributable to that factor. Results revealed a significant multivariate main effect for sport type, Wilks' Lambda = 0.935,  $F(7, 207) = 2.06$ ,  $p = 0.049$ . The multivariate main effect for gender was not significant, Wilks' Lambda = 0.961,  $F(7, 207) = 1.20$ ,  $p = 0.31$ , nor was the multivariate interaction between gender and sport type, Wilks' Lambda = 0.950,  $F(7, 207) = 1.55$ ,  $p = 0.15$ .

The significant multivariate effect for sport type was a function of univariate differences on two characteristics: "leads a physically active lifestyle" and "emphasizes the personal welfare of the athlete". Inspection of means alongside univariate  $F$ -ratios revealed that team sport athletes had a stronger preference than individual sports athletes for consultants to model a physically active lifestyle,  $F(1, 213) = 4.31$ ,  $p = 0.039$ . On the other hand, team sport athletes were *less* concerned than individual sport athletes about having a consultant who placed a strong emphasis on their personal welfare outside of sport,  $F(1, 213) = 5.27$ ,  $p = .023$ .

### Service delivery preferences

**General preference hierarchy:** Full sample descriptive statistics for the perceived importance of various delivery formats are presented in the first three columns of Table 2. Analysis of these data indicated no significant difference in the general preferences for delivery on a one-to-one basis versus a group/team basis,  $t(216) = 1.69$ ,  $p > 0.09$ . However, significantly weaker preferences were expressed for self-instruction via CDs, manuals, and similar resources compared to consultant-based delivery in either a one-to-one format,  $t(216) = 6.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , or group/team format,  $t(216) = 7.79$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . In addition, significantly stronger preferences were expressed for program content to be determined by coaches or consultants rather than by the athletes themselves,  $t(216) = 8.87$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and for mental skills training to take place continuously throughout the year rather than at a few selected points in time,  $t(216) = 5.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

**Sport subculture influences:** Subgroup descriptive statistics for the perceived importance of consultant characteristics are shown in the last six columns of Table 2. A two-way MANOVA was used to determine if these characteristics were influenced by type of sport (individual versus team) or the athlete's gender. Again, the gender factor was not of primary interest but was included as an independent variable to account for variance that might be attributable to that factor. Results revealed a significant

multivariate main effect for sport type, Wilks' Lambda = .889,  $F(7, 207) = 3.34$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . The multivariate main effect for gender was not significant, Wilks' Lambda = .951,  $F(7, 207) = 1.51$ ,  $p = 0.16$ , nor was the multivariate interaction between gender and sport type, Wilks' Lambda = .944,  $F(7, 207) = 1.75$ ,  $p = 0.10$ .

The significant multivariate effect for sport type was a function of univariate differences on two delivery preferences: "program content determined by the athlete/team" and "delivered on a group/team basis". Inspection of means alongside univariate  $F$ -ratios revealed that team sport athletes had stronger preferences than individual sport athletes for program delivery on a group/team basis,  $F(1, 213) = 11.08$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . In contrast, individual sport athletes had stronger preferences than team sport athletes for program content being determined by the athlete/team,  $F(1, 213) = 9.20$ ,  $p = 0.003$ .

### Discussion

Given the relevance of consultant variables and service process considerations for effective delivery of mental skills training (Poczwardowski and Sherman, 2011), the present study investigated these issues from the perspective of elite Malaysian athletes. Consideration of this perspective is important because of a heavy reliance on the perceptions of Western athletes in the sport psychology literature, the strong influence of cultural factors on values and interaction processes, and the acknowledged need to maximize goodness-of-fit in consultancy activities (Hofstede, 2001; Poczwardowski and Sherman, 2011; Ryba et al., 2013; Si et al., 2011).

At a behavioral level, these elite Malaysian athletes expressed strong preferences for consultants to lead a physically active lifestyle, to regularly attend training sessions and competitions, and to emphasize the teaching of mental skills in their interactions with them. Interestingly, although the athletes clearly believed it was important for consultants to be concerned about their personal welfare outside of sport (mean rating of 5.52 on a seven-point scale), a practical emphasis on mental skills training was seen as even more important than an emphasis on personal welfare. From a personal background perspective, prior experience as an athlete or coach was considered important, as was formal training in psychology. The consultant's gender was *not* considered to be important.

These consultant-focused findings are strikingly similar to those obtained in studies of athletes from Western cultures. More specifically, Lubker and colleagues

(2008) found that North American collegiate athletes also believed prior experience as a sport performer was an important consultant characteristic, and that being the same gender as the athlete or team was relatively unimportant. In addition, North American collegiate athletes viewed advanced training and an active lifestyle as important personal characteristics of the sport psychology consultant (Lubker et al., 2008; Lubker et al., 2012). Although we certainly agree with others who have emphasized the importance of cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills for sport psychology practitioners (e.g., Ryba et al., 2013), our findings suggest that there may also be a number of cross-cultural similarities in the consultant characteristics that are needed to gain entry, achieve acceptance, and communicate effectively with athletes and teams.

At the same time, there was evidence of culturally-bound influences on service delivery preferences. Specifically, one of the strongest delivery preferences was for program content to be determined by the coach or consultant, and the weakest preference was for athlete input into program content. On the surface, these preferences appear to be inconsistent with existing evidence and guidelines for best practice. As mentioned earlier, athlete involvement in the determination of program content has been advocated as a way of increasing perceived relevance, enhancing commitment, and achieving desirable outcomes (Hays et al., 2010; Jones, 1993; Mellalieu et al., 2009). Similarly, individualizing the elements of mental skills training is espoused as an important aspect of effective sport psychology consulting (Anderson et al., 2004; Gould et al., 1989). It is important to note, however, that these suggestions are based primarily on evidence obtained from Western athletes whose cultural milieu is more egalitarian than hierarchical and more individualistic than collectivist. Malaysian society, on the other hand, is strongly hierarchical as well as collectivist (Hofstede, 1997, 2001; Schwartz, 1999). Against that backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that, overall, Malaysian athletes would defer to authority figures for decisions about program content, and that they would prefer consultant-centered delivery rather than self-instruction. It is also interesting to note that, when subcultural influences (i.e., sport type) were taken into account, the strongest preference expressed for any delivery option was for consultant-centered delivery on a group basis by athletes operating within team sport environments. We suspect that was the case because these environments tend to emphasize values that are consistent with the hierarchical and collectivist values of Malaysian society-at-large (Neels and Curtner-Smith, 2012).

## Conclusion

In summary, the results of this investigation contribute to the sport psychology literature by: (a) identifying the consultant characteristics and service delivery processes considered most important by elite athletes from a non-Western culture; (b) highlighting both similarities and differences in these preferences compared to athletes from other societies; and (c) reinforcing the relevance of se-

lected immersion elements (e.g., season-long involvement, attending practices and competitions) and goodness-of-fit elements (e.g., consultant's tacit knowledge of sport) acknowledged in the revised SPSD heuristic. The findings are, of course, specific to elite athletes from Malaysia and should not be generalized to athletes from other non-Western countries. The classic limitations of self-report methodologies such as response sets, context effects, primacy and recency effects, and impression management must also be acknowledged (Paulhus and Vazire, 2007). Despite these limitations, further research utilizing similar protocols and directly comparing the responses of Western and non-Western athletes appears warranted and could provide additional information about the importance of cultural considerations for the effective delivery of sport psychology services.

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### Key points

- Consultant characteristics and program delivery methods have an impact on the effectiveness of sport psychology services.
- Preferred consultant characteristics and preferred methods of delivery may be affected by cultural and subcultural values.
- Elite Malaysian athletes prefer consultants to lead a physically active lifestyle; to regularly attend training/competition; and to have prior experience as an athlete or coach.
- Elite Malaysian athletes also prefer that the coach or consultant determine program content, and that mental skills training take place in a face-to-face context throughout the year.

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