

## Effective Sport Psychology Consulting Relationships: Two Coach Case Studies

**Lee-Ann Sharp**

University College Plymouth St. Mark & St. John

**Ken Hodge**

University of Otago

The purpose of this study was to investigate the components necessary for the development of an effective applied sport psychology consulting relationship between a sport psychology consultant (SPC) and a coach. To address this purpose, two SPC-Coach consulting relationship case studies will be presented. Following purposeful sampling methods, members of two SPC-Coach consulting relationships (2 SPCs and 2 elite coaches) participated in individual interviews to discuss their perceptions of effective consulting relationships. Inductive content analysis was conducted to search for common themes both within and across the two case studies (Weber, 1990). Three categories emerged with shared similarities between both case study relationships as important to the development of effective consulting relationships between SPCs and coaches; (a) SPC knowledge; (b) trust; and (c) friendship. In addition, two categories individual to each of the case study consulting relationships emerged; (d) SPC fitting in with team culture; and (e) flexibility.

**Keywords:** consulting relationships, effectiveness, coaching, knowledge, trust

The study of coaches and their practices has long been of interest to sport psychology researchers (Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan & Chung, 2002; Horn, 2002; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). Although psychological research has assisted coaches with support and development of coaching effectiveness, and has examined sources of coach stress and burnout, relatively little research has examined the personal use of sport psychology services and techniques by coaches (e.g., Gould, Hodge, Peterson, & Petlichkoff, 1987; Paquette & Sullivan, 2012). Within the sport psychology literature, coaches are considered influential individuals in athletes' lives (Fletcher & Scott, 2010; Horn, 2002; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; Partington & Orlick, 1987). It has been argued that it is the coach that the athlete typically turns to for advice, guidance, and support when they are experiencing difficulty (Bowes & Jones, 2006).

Athlete use of psychological skills and development of athlete support services has been examined extensively in the literature (e.g., Tod & Andersen, 2005; Vealey,

1994; Weinberg & Williams, 2001). However, the role of coaches as a vehicle to encourage and support the use of sport psychology techniques has only received limited research attention (e.g., Gould et al., 1987). Moreover, there are only a few investigations into the personal use and application of sport psychology techniques by coaches to enhance their coaching effectiveness (e.g., Thelwell, et al., 2008). "It is clear that coaches have special needs of their own and would benefit from psychological skills training programming specifically designed for them" (Vealey, 1988, p. 323). Despite arguing the need for sport psychology support for coaches in 1988, little progress has been made in meeting coach needs. It can be argued that there is a need to view the coach as a performer in his or her own right (Gould et al., 2002). Coaches are performers, educators, administrators, leaders, planners, motivators, negotiators, managers, and listeners, but they are also people (Vealey, 1988; Vernacchia, McGuire, & Cook, 1996). Although the demands and pressures will vary with the circumstances and environment, coaches are expected to perform their coaching duties in pressurized environments, often with their job dependent on their athletes' and teams' success. Despite this, it has been noted that coaches' needs for sport psychology support are not typically being addressed in a practical manner (Vernacchia et al., 1996).

In one of the few investigations to examine the variables that influence coaching performance Gould and

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Sharp was with the Dept. of Sport and Health Science, University College Plymouth St. Mark & St. John, Plymouth, UK at the time of this research and is now with the Ulster Sports Academy, University of Ulster, Jordanstown, UK. Hodge is with the School of Physical Education, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

colleagues (2002) surveyed 65 coaches who participated in the Atlanta and Nagano Olympic games. Coaches reported that interacting with SPCs along with keeping things focused and simple, impacted positively on their coaching effectiveness. Coaches believed that their effectiveness was enhanced with not only SPC support for their athletes before and at the Olympic games but also sport psychology support for the coaches themselves. Despite the recommendations from the participants for enhanced sport psychology support and education for coaches, Gould et al. (2002) argued that “sport psychology researchers have failed to study psychological skills for coaching effectiveness, especially at the elite level” (p. 248).

More recently, Thelwell et al. (2008) used semistructured interviews to explore the use of psychological skills by 13 elite coaches. With the aim of developing an understanding of whether, and for what purposes psychological skills were employed, all 13 elite coaches reported using some form of psychological skills. Findings indicated that coaches reported using more self-talk and imagery compared with relaxation and goal setting across a range of competition and training situations. The education and development of these skills emerged as the result of attending coach-education courses in which the importance of psychology for performance was presented. Although these findings provide some insight into the use of psychological skills by elite coaches; there is a need for a more in-depth examination of how sport psychology support should be structured and tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual coach.

One of the few discussions of sport psychology support services for coaches was the position paper of Giges, Petitpas, and Vernacchia (2004). These researchers identified the need for individualized sport psychology support services that meet their individual needs and motivations. Giges et al. emphasized the need for SPCs to assist coaches in the development of awareness of their own personal needs, as these are frequently the same as those of the athletes they coach (e.g., performance anxiety, job insecurity, coping with stress, and time management). In addition, they suggested that SPCs should assist coaches to explore the thoughts, feelings, behaviors that may be inhibiting their ability to achieve the desired performance outcome (Giges et al., 2004). In commencing work with a coach Giges et al. (2004) suggested the starting point should be the development of an effective consulting relationship or working alliance, and the building of trust between both individuals.

Considering the recommendations made by sport psychology practitioners and researchers regarding the positive impact the consulting relationship can have on the outcome of intervention work (e.g., Giges et al., 2004; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Sharp & Hodge, 2011), there is limited empirical research to date examining the characteristics of effective consulting relationships between SPCs and the clients they consult with. Petitpas, Giges, and Danish (1999) discussed the consulting relationship between the SPC and athlete in relation to its implications

for training future practitioners and contended that the relationship between the SPC and athlete was similar to that of the therapist and client. Considering this, these authors discussed three qualities within the therapist-client relationship: (i) transference relationships, “a process that occurs in psychotherapy when the client begins to respond (behaviorally, cognitively, emotionally, conatively) to the therapist in ways that resemble patterns of response to significant others in the client’s life” (Andersen, 2004, p. 74)., (ii) facilitative conditions, including congruence, empathetic understanding, and unconditional positive regard, and (iii) the working alliance, where the therapist and client work together to aid positive client development. Andersen and Williams-Rice (1996) raised concerns regarding the lack of attention given to transference and countertransference in an applied sport psychology setting. Since these concerns were raised, research has been conducted by Andersen and colleagues (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000; Price & Andersen, 2000; Sharp & Hodge, 2011) and through a more recent investigation into SPC self-awareness conducted by Winstone and Gervis (2006), highlighting the need for SPCs to develop an awareness of transference and countertransference within their consulting relationships and how these might be addressed. Recently, Sharp and Hodge (2011) investigated the components necessary for establishing an effective consulting relationship between the SPC and athlete, from both the athlete and SPCs perspectives. Results identified five components essential for an effective consulting relationship: (a) the athlete must be an active participant; (b) the SPC must demonstrate an awareness of client boundaries of confidentiality (c) consulting relationship is flexible; (d) consulting relationship is open, honest and respectful; and (e) contributions from both athlete and SPC. Considering the limited research that has examined the consulting relationship between the SPC and their client, there is a need to extend this research to explore the components necessary for an effective relationship between a SPC and coach.

Extending beyond sport psychology the *working alliance* has been a topic of intense theoretical and empirical interest within psychotherapy and counseling literatures (Horvath, 2006). The collaborative relationship between client and therapist in the therapeutic setting has been established as the most robust predictor of psychotherapy outcomes (Norcross, 2002); with stronger alliances being associated with more positive therapeutic outcomes (Gelso & Hays, 1998). The impact of the relationship between therapist and client appears to be independent of the type of therapy and whether the outcome is assessed from the perspective of the therapist, client, or independent observer (Horvath, 2001). This research area raises the question of why sport psychology researchers have not considered examining the “we” of the consulting relationship, in addition to the two separate “I”s or the two separate individuals in the dyad relationship.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the components necessary for the development of an

effective consulting relationship between the SPC and coach. To be able to address this purpose, two consulting relationship case studies (perceived to be effective by both dyad members) will be presented. Some have argued that there is a need for case study practice in sport psychology to advance the development of competent future SPCs (e.g., Rotella, Boyce, Allyson, & Savis, 1998). The use of case studies within sport psychology have been seen to play an “integral role in the accumulation of knowledge... and can promote the development of intervention strategies for enhancing performance and psychological well-being” (Smith, 1989; p. 11). Researchers have suggested that case study analysis is a research method that differs from other forms of investigation and demonstrates a number of strengths (Yin, 2003). A case study approach examines whole units in their totality and not aspects or variables of these units; it studies a single unit (e.g., the consulting relationship between the SPC and coach; one unit); the respondents are regarded as experts, rather than just a source of data. The lessons to be learned from these typical cases are assumed to be informative about the experiences of the average person or situation (Yin, 2003). Furthermore, the strength of applying this approach to examining the consulting relationship is the concentration on a particular relationship and studying it in its own right (Robson, 2002). Stake (2000) further argued that the value of a case study approach to practitioners is in its extension of experience.

## Method

### Participants

Two sport psychology consulting relationships were purposively sampled for this investigation. Access to the SPC was via the Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand accredited Mental Skills Trainer list. The SPC was contacted via e-mail and asked if he would be willing to participate in an individual interview to discuss one specific consulting relationship he has been involved in. The sampling criteria involved the SPC suggesting a typical sport psychology consulting relationship that they were currently involved in or had been recently involved. The SPC was then asked to contact the coach involved in the relationship and ask if he/she would be willing to participate in the current study. In addition, the SPC was asked if that coach would grant permission for the primary investigator to contact them directly. The criteria for selection as a case study included (a) the coach was coaching at an elite level, with access to the funding to use the services of a SPC; (b) the SPC was accredited with Sport and Exercise Science New Zealand (SES NZ), therefore having completed adequate training in the provision of sport psychology and mental skills training support and (c) the consulting relationship had lasted over an extended period of time (at least three months; more than a single consulting session). Two male SPCs and two male coaches from two different team sports

volunteered to participate in this study. Further details of these participants will be provided in the relationship histories.

### Data Collection

Qualitative face-to-face semistructured interviews were conducted individually with the SPC and coach, which focused on the SPC-coach consulting relationship. An interview guide was developed to ensure that the same systematic and comprehensive lines of inquiry were followed with each individual interviewed (a copy of the interview guide can be obtained on request from the first author). Following university research board ethical approval, the SPC and coach were contacted via e-mail to organize individual face-to-face interviews. Interviews were organized at a time and location suitable to each participant and were conducted by the first author who had been trained in qualitative research methodology. Specific reference was made to the issue of confidentiality, with each participant made aware that what they talked about during their interview would not be discussed with the other member of their consulting relationship. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's written consent and lasted between 70 and 90 min, generating a total of 79 single-spaced, typed pages of data.

### Analysis and Interpretation

An inductive content analysis was conducted on data collected during the coach and SPC interviews to search for common themes between dyad members (Weber, 1990). This approach involved classifying the information from the individual interviews, reducing it to more relevant and manageable information units to form explanations that reflected the detail, evidence, and examples provided by participants during the interviews. The confidentiality of participants was maintained in the following results section by altering the sport in which the coach coached and editing identifying sections of the dialogue.

### Trustworthiness

A number of trustworthiness methods were implemented in an attempt to ensure accurate and rigorous findings are presented to the reader (Sparkes, 1998). First, a member checking procedure was employed. Verbatim interview transcripts along with the researcher's preliminary interpretations were then sent to each participant for member checking. Each participant was asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcript and researcher's interpretations, and to confirm that their thoughts and experiences were being accurately represented. Second, validation discussions of emergent concepts and categories between the primary researcher and two experienced sport psychology researchers independent of the analysis process occurred. Third, an audit trail of all raw data quotes was conducted by the second author. Fourth extensive participant quotations were included in the results.

## Results and Discussion

First, a brief history of the consulting relationship will be provided. For the purpose of this investigation the two case study consulting relationships will be identified as CS1 and CS2. As often is the case in qualitative investigations, the description and interpretation of data are closely related. With the aim of avoiding repetition and guided by the emergent categories, the results and discussion sections are integrated. Three emergent categories with shared similarities between both case study relationships will be discussed first: (a) SPC knowledge; (b) trust; and (c) friendship. In addition, two further emergent categories specific to each of the two case study relationships will be discussed; (d) fitting in with team culture (CS1); and (e) flexibility (CS2; see Table 1).

### Consulting Relationship History

**Case Study One.** This consulting relationship consisted of a male SPC (SPC1) and a male coach (C1), who coached a national wheelchair team sport. SPC1 was aged 34 years old, was British, had completed a master's degree in health and exercise psychology and had 10 years of experience working with coaches and athletes in the SPC role. C1 was 46 years old, was "New Zealand European" and had been coaching the national squad for a number of years, during which time the squad had achieved gold and silver medals at a number of pinnacle world sporting events. C1's appointment as national team coach was his first coaching appointment at an elite level. During C1's own playing career as a member of the national wheelchair team sport, he and his teammates achieved bronze and silver medals at a number of world pinnacle sporting events.

**Table 1 Case Studies Emergent Categories and Concepts**

Categories	Concepts
SPC knowledge	Knowledge of client's sport
	Knowledge of the client
	SPC knowledge of sport psychology theories and techniques
Trust	SPC needs to gain client trust
	Confidentiality is essential
Friendship	Common interests
	Open communication
	Need for clear boundaries
Fitting in with team culture	SPC must be embedded in the team
	SPC must show understanding of the team
Flexibility	Flexibility in format
	Flexibility in consulting approach

The consulting relationship between C1 and SPC1 had been ongoing for five years. Both dyad members indicated that the relationship was "We work very well together, I think it's very successful" (C1). Both relationship members explained that the relationship was formed as a result of a recommendation from the former coach of the national team. "We went right back to basics really... what are our values, what does it mean to be a [member of the national wheelchair team?] What's important, what are we striving to do, what defines a [member of the national wheelchair team?]" (C1). At the time of the interview the role of SPC1 had changed in the buildup to a major international pinnacle event from working with C1 and his athletes on mental skills training to also working with C1. "Coach mentoring upfront... I worked on his coaching skills. [He was a] very naïve coach... It was more around different approaches to performance enhancement and performance and being clear on objectives" (SPC1). Throughout the consulting relationship C1 described SPC1 as, "A sounding board, he was sort of like my right hand man".

**Case Study Two.** This consulting relationship consisted of a male SPC (SPC2) and male coach (C2) who coached a senior club rugby side and was a member of a provincial rugby high performance coaching team. SPC2 was 42 years old, from a "New Zealand Middle Eastern" background, had completed a PhD in sport psychology and had 7 years of experience working with athletes and coaches in the SPC role. C2 was 33 years old, from a "New Zealand Fijian" background and had been coaching formally for three years; during his own rugby playing career the coach had captained his national rugby team in two world pinnacle rugby events.

The consulting relationship between SPC2 and C2 started as a result of C2 seeking assistance from SPC2 for work he was doing with the players in his senior club side. SPC2 explained, "I think because he had been associated with high performance rugby and the networks. He wanted to utilize the same facilities that the high performance guys were using [for his club rugby team]". The consulting relationship had been ongoing for 12 months; C2 believed the focus of the relationship was, "Initially team-focused. But then the relationship became more focused on what my needs were [as a coach] and he became a sounding board and someone to reflect my ideas upon, get ideas bounced back". However, during the consulting relationship C2 was appointed to the coaching staff of the senior provincial rugby team. This appointment meant that he was no longer eligible to coach at a senior club level and resulted in the consulting relationship changing to one where SPC2 was working on an individual basis with the coach and not his players.

C2 described his consulting relationship with SPC2 as successful. Success was defined as, "The improvements I've made in myself because of it and the impact that the direction he's given me and the results it's had on the team." However, the coach also noted that there were still things within the relationship that needed to



be improved and developed. This sentiment was also commented on by SPC2 who rated the success of the consulting relationship a seven out of ten. Nevertheless, SPC2 explained the consulting relationship as, “A bit sporadic. I guess having been used to working with high performance [people] there wasn’t the attention to detail I would’ve liked. I would’ve liked to have done things differently but was sort of constrained by what he wanted rather than what he needed.”

Both dyad members referred to one critical point that impacted on the consulting relationship. C2 explained that he had applied for the top coaching position in the provincial rugby high performance unit and went to SPC2 looking for him to challenge his insecurities about the application. SPC2 reflected:

He said to me I want you to be brutal, I want you to be really honest. I said to him, you did this really well and you did this really well and he said no. No I want you to tell me what I need. I said I can’t do that ‘cause it goes against everything I believe [SPC2 believed that with his assistance C2 would be able to work on providing his own solutions].

C2 clarified what he wanted from SPC2, “I wanted him to challenge me in my insecurities rather than provide me security in them. And I [C2] said to him afterwards, look I don’t want you to do that again. I think maybe his understanding of me needs to be a little better.” Both dyad members indicated that the relationship was able to move forward from this critical moment by both members being more direct with each other.

Both case study relationships shared a number of similarities; first the consulting relationship had been on-going over a period of time, highlighting the potential cyclical nature of the relationship, specifically a consulting relationship that is perceived to be good is likely to last longer therefore potentially allowing for better intervention outcomes. Both consulting relationships saw the role of the SPC broaden from their initial work with the coaches’ athletes to the coach as an individual. This finding supports Neff’s (1990) contention that the longer the SPC is involved with a client there will be an increase in the chances of success as a result of their role broadening and strengthening. Based on coaches’ perceptions of the positive impact the SPCs had with the coaches’ athletes it appears that both coaches perceived potential benefits for their coaching from working with the SPC to improve their coaching performance. Consequently they both expanded the role of the SPC to include working with them ‘as a sounding board’. As C1 explained, “It saddens me that we still have coaches in a number of sports who feel they have to do everything and that no one else could possibly add value to their programs. They’re just missing out on so much.” The consulting relationships between the SPCs and the athletes coached by these coaches continued despite the development of the consulting relationship between each coach and the SPC. While alert to the potential problems of working for

two clients (i.e., athlete & coach), SPC1 believed he was able to adopt this dual consulting role as he explained, “He [C1] was clear that there were areas of discussions with the athletes that potentially I wasn’t going to be able to discuss with him.” While adopting dual roles SPC need to maintain “professional relationships by respecting boundaries and understanding roles and responsibilities of all members of an organisation becomes an ethical mandate” (Gardner, 1995, p. 168).

As a result of the diverse training backgrounds of most SPCs, a wide variety of roles and services can be offered by SPCs to the athletes and organizations within which they work (Gardner, 1995). This variation in roles and services gave both SPCs in these case studies some freedom to develop and define their own unique role, while also commencing work directly with the coach. Furthermore, in their work with the coach both SPCs were able to assist in the development and understanding of personal strategies to assist the coaches in working toward their personal and professional goals (Giges et al., 2004; Vernacchia et al., 1996).

## SPC Knowledge

All dyad members perceived SPC knowledge as a key component of their consulting relationship. Three sub-categories emerged in support of SPC knowledge; (a) knowledge of the coach’s sport; (b) SPC knowledge of the coach/client; and (c) SPC knowledge of sport psychology theories and techniques.

**Case Study One.** SPC1’s knowledge of C1’s sport (wheelchair team sport) was minimal at the start of the consulting relationship. As C1 explained SPC1 knew very little about the sport initially: “You wouldn’t toss him a cap with coach written on it and say go coach the boys. We certainly wouldn’t get him to ref a game.” SPC1 also indicated that his knowledge of the sport was poor, but believed that his openness about this helped both his developing knowledge of the sport and the consulting relationship to strengthen. He stated that, “I needed to learn quickly so one of the biggest helps with that was admitting how little I did know.” SPC1 believed that regularly attending team trainings and competitions helped develop his knowledge and show his support and commitment to the team.

Lack of SPC previous knowledge or experience of the client’s sport has been argued by previous researchers to be an advantage to developing an effective consulting relationship (Anderson, Miles, Robinson & Mahoney, 2004). Athletes have previously viewed this lack of knowledge to “enable the SPC to provide a fresh and objective perspective” (Anderson et al., 2004, p. 266). However, Orlick and Partington (1987) believed it was essential for the SPC to be prepared to learn about the sport in which the client competes, in order for the relationship to grow and to ensure its continued development.

McCann (2000) believed that a collaborative consulting relationship should allow for give-and-take

of knowledge between the SPC and their client (who may be the senior partner in the relationship). He also believed that greater collaboration could occur as a result of the SPC sometimes admitting, "I don't have a solution to your problem. Perhaps we can work together and think of one?" (p. 210). Both case study members discussed the shared learning journey they had experienced during the consulting relationship. "I would say that we've grown together so that now we've probably moved beyond the teacher-pupil thing to equal mentors" (C1). Both members believed they learnt something from each other; as the SPC was learning from C1 about the wheelchair team sport, disability sport and the services he could provide, and the coach was also learning about himself and his coaching skills from the SPC. Furthermore, SPC1 believed that as a result of the consulting relationship he developed a greater "understanding of human rights on a bigger global level and the role that able-bodied [people] play in labeling people [as] disabled." McCann argued that this collaborative, partnership approach typically develops as the SPC gains a greater understanding of the requirements and demands of the client's sport.

Both C1 and SPC1 commented on the need for the SPC to have knowledge of sport psychology theories and techniques, in addition to being able to deliver the message effectively to those who they were working with. As C1 explained, "[The SPCs] need to know how to deliver the message and the skills that they're looking to equip the athletes and coaches with, in a way that's effective. So they've got to be able to deliver [i.e., communicate effectively]." SPC1 also commented that knowing how to deliver the message aided SPC effectiveness, he stated that, "knowing that you can make a difference and knowing that it doesn't matter how arrogant or macho they think they are, you can still help them."

**Case Study Two.** In comparison, both members of case study two believed SPC2's knowledge of the coach's sport to be a "key factor in the start of the relationship" (C2). The coach commented on SPC2 having both played and coached rugby at a competitive level, he explained, "If you've got some runs on the board [experience] as a player then there's an unspoken baseline that you've achieved already, you don't have to try and prove yourself in any other way, cos you've been there and done that". Similarly, SPC2 believed that his knowledge and insight into rugby was very useful as it added to the development of the consulting relationship: "[Knowing] what players go through helps. You go, like x and they're like yeah and they've been through x." Researchers have previously argued that through demonstrating knowledge and experience of the athlete's sport, the SPC will gain their respect (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998). CS2 provides support for the need to extend sport knowledge to the role of the coach as well. In addition, having knowledge and understanding of the sport may also aid the SPC in understanding the struggles and problems that arise during training and competition

(Anderson et al., 2004). However, SPC2 did warn the following:

I've see lots of people operate in sports where they know lots about it and cross that boundary into coaching. I have actually caught myself doing that a couple of times with rugby players. Where I've had to go, I shouldn't have said that, that's me coaching. So I think it's really important that the coach and the athlete, and the coach in particular do know [that you are not a coach].

C2 explained, "Rugby was a starting point and we moved away from rugby to discuss other issues that were common amongst other high performance sports and he drew examples from other sports and coaches that were particularly useful for me" (C2). However, SPC2 viewed his knowledge of the high performance sport environment as "Probably the biggest issue with our relationship" as the C2 perceived SPC2 to have more experience within this environment and therefore viewed SPC2 to be the senior member of the consulting relationship. This led to SPC2 feeling frustrated as he felt that the coach wanted answers and because SPC2 had worked with high performance coaches previously the coach thought that he would be able to tell him what they do and what would make him a better coach. C2's perception that SPC2 was the senior partner in the relationship, with more experience at working in high performance sport environment, was an issue for SPC2 and adds weight to McCann's (2000) recommendations of adopting "a partnership approach (which) allows for give and take feedback to the SPC, and plenty of flexibility" (p. 210).

As with the previous case study relationship, C2 believed it essential that SPC2 needed to demonstrate knowledge of sport psychology theories and techniques. He explained that as a player himself he had bad experiences working with a number of unaccredited (i.e., noncertified) individuals, who had passed themselves off as SPCs, but who were not knowledgeable. He believed knowledge of sport psychology theories and techniques are important as, "I'm someone who always wants to know why, I don't want someone to sell me short on the 'why', I want to know there's some depth of understanding." In a recent study of SPC views on effective sport psychology consulting Sharp and Hodge (2011) reported that SPC knowledge of both general psychology and mental skills training techniques was essential to enable the individual SPC to understand a wide variety of consulting approaches. Having this underlying knowledge was believed to be essential to assist the SPC to choose the most appropriate approach that would best meet the needs of the individual client.

Finally knowledge of the client and their needs was regarded as an important component of an effective consulting relationship by both CS2 members. C2 believed it was essential for the SPC to understand the coach with whom they are working "what makes him tick;" the environment in which the coach was working and the

pressures and demands placed upon him. However, C2 indicated that this was an area that the current relationship with his SPC could improve upon. While Giges et al. (2004) advocated for the need to be mindful of the personal needs of the coaches that SPCs are working with; the current findings provide empirical support for the importance of adopting this consulting approach when working with coaches.

In addition, Giges et al. (2004) argued that knowledge is a primary source of respect and that it is unsurprising that high performers in most fields approach expert practitioners to provide them with the knowledge they require to excel. Within the SPC context it is unsurprising that coaches would approach SPCs to develop and improve the mental aspects of their coaching, therefore it is essential that SPCs have the necessary level of knowledge of sport, psychology, and the coaches' needs.

## Trust

The category of trust emerged as key to an effective consulting relationship within both case studies and was reflective of the mutual trust that existed between the coach and the SPC. Members of both case studies commented that they trusted the other member in the consulting relationship. SPC1 commented, "Gaining trust... I think that develops into a relationship that then gives you permission to then explore other areas." Trust included the subcategories of (a) the SPC needs to work to gain client trust; and (b) confidentiality is essential.

**Case Study One.** SPC1 believed there was a need to develop the coach's trust throughout the consulting relationship. SPC1 believed trust was gained through not promising more than you could deliver. He stated that, "I'm not over-promising and just being clear on how the relationship is going to work... It's built on trust and that's part of saying what you can do, when you can do it and not over-promising and under-delivering". The coach described his trust in the SPC as, "Letting the experts do their thing... I like to very much give people their responsibility and that's what their skill is; give them the free rein". This finding supported Gardner's (2001, p.37) assertion that "Earning trust and becoming accepted as an insider is a process not an event." Similarly, Ravizza (1988) believed that gaining a thorough understanding of client needs and clearly explaining the psychological support services that can be provided aided the development of a trusting relationship.

Trust was also perceived to be a function of confidentiality within case study one. Both dyad members revealed that although confidentiality was never formally discussed they both believed that, "If you didn't honor confidentiality then you'd be breaching your relationship and it would not be the right thing to do..." (C1). SPC1 explained how he developed trust through ensuring confidentiality, "They can talk to you and know that's where it will go [i.e., no further], unless they give you permission to do otherwise. I don't think I've ever broken that trust

and I think that's important." Despite the boundaries of confidentiality not being explicitly identified between the SPC and coach in this case study; some authors have argued that there is a need for SPCs to clearly define their roles, responsibilities and boundaries to assist the development of a trusting, effective consulting relationship (e.g., Sharp & Hodge, 2011).

Furthermore, the boundaries of this consulting relationship and the evolution in SPC1's dual-role working with the coach and his athletes created a challenge for SPC1 and his need to respect confidentiality in relation to discussions about team athletes with the coach. C1 explained that, "Even though they [the athletes] knew that our [SPC coach] relationship was pretty tight, they knew that if they said something to [SPC1] in confidence, he would maintain that, and only deliver to me what I needed to know from a coach perspective. I would never push it, I would never say 'come on mate, give us the real goss [gossip/information] here.'" "The potential challenges to confidentiality in this relationship were unsurprising when considering the dual role the SPC adopted when working with both the coach and his athletes. This case study provides a brief but novel insight into the challenging and complex nature of adopting multiple roles with coaches and their athletes. Some dual relationships are unavoidable and in themselves are not unethical (Younggren & Gottlieb, 2004). However, Hays (2006) advises practitioners to consider whether any particular relationship or action is, or might be, exploitative or harmful to those you are working with when adopting dual roles. In some situations, it has been suggested that, "rigid maintenance of a singular role or relationship could potentially become unhelpful, harmful, or destructive" (Hays, 2006, p. 228). Therefore, SPCs should be aware of the potential challenges and expectations that they may be faced with, in adopting dual roles and ask themselves, "Whose needs are being met through working together?" and "Is there a risk of exploitation or harm to the client?" Furthermore, ensuring that adequate peer support and/or supervision is in place for the SPC to discuss and resolve any challenges to confidentiality that may arise is essential (Andersen, 2000; Sharp & Hodge, 2011).

C1 discussed the need for openness within a consulting relationship to assist with the development of trust. He stated that, "You've got to really open yourself up, I'm not too sure how many people could really do that. He knows my soul inside out. I don't have any problems with that, I trust him with my life." Such a willingness to self-disclose should allow SPCs to gain a more detailed understanding of the coach and their motives and to provide individualized feedback and assistance for their development (Giges et al., 2004).

**Case Study Two.** C2 commented that SPC2's professional approach to the consulting relationship enabled him to trust him completely. C2 believed his trust in SPC2 was developed through SPC2's behavior; he stated that, "I've got no reason not to trust him, I think in his manner he demonstrates the ability to trust."



Furthermore, C2 discussed that once trust was developed within the consulting relationship he was able to open up fully with SPC2. He explained, "I didn't want to share my inadequacies or doubts with my team and management in ways that would weaken my credibility. I wanted to talk about them [my doubts] with someone I knew I could trust and who could help me through them." Trusting relationships have been shown to encourage clients to openly discuss private, interpersonal, and environmental factors that influence their performance (Halliwell, 1990).

Both case studies highlighted the need for the SPC to demonstrate trustworthy behavior by listening to what the coach had to say, discussing the boundaries of confidentiality early in the relationship, and constantly reaffirming with the client that what they were discussing in consulting sessions would go no further. The development of trusting consulting relationships allowed members from both case studies to communicate freely and honestly with one another.

Both SPCs who participated in this investigation were SESNZ (national sport science organization) accredited/certified as "Mental Skills Trainers." As accredited members of SESNZ the individual SPC was expected to adhere to the SESNZ Code of Ethics. The SESNZ Code of Ethics explains that, "SESNZ members do not disclose information obtained professionally to any third party without the informed consent of the subject" (Retrieved May 10, 2012, from <http://www.sesnz.org.nz/Membership/>). Despite this, both coaches implied that the boundaries of confidentiality were assumed and had not been explicitly clarified by the SPC. Considering the length of time both consulting relationships had been ongoing, the explicit discussion of confidentiality may possibly have been forgotten by both coaches. However, this does highlight the need for SPCs to continually clarify and reassure confidentiality with their clients. In addition, SPC1 explained how he found the boundaries of confidentiality had been challenged by C1. Gould (in Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008) commented that clients will test their SPCs to see if they will maintain the boundaries of confidentiality, a process that will help the client develop trust in their SPC.

## Friendship

Three of the four case study participants believed that their consulting relationship had expanded to a friendship as a consequence of working closely together. Although friendship was not viewed as an essential component of an effective consulting relationship, it was perceived to be a bonus that helped to make their consulting relationship more effective. In support of the friendship theme, the subcategories of (a) common interests, (b) open communication, and (c) the need for clear boundaries emerged.

**Case Study One.** The category of friendship was discussed by both members of case study one. C1 stated that, "We're probably mates [friends] more now than coach-sportpsych, and that's grown [from] just I suppose

working together." Furthermore, SPC1 commented that C1 is, "an incredible man, he's a good friend to me and the wife and kids and everyone. He's a good guy". Both dyad members commented that common interests were a key aspect of their consulting relationship extending to the development of a friendship. SPC1 explained that, "Common interests, common passions, you know common dislikes... We seemed to be on the same page on all of those things."

Both individuals indicated that open and regular communication between dyad members helped develop their friendship. In the case of this consulting relationship both members lived in different cities in New Zealand and only met during training camps and competitions. As a result contact was primarily via e-mail and telephone, C2 stated that, "I'm too lazy to email him, [so] I just pick up the phone and ring him, [but] email when I have to. Communication is good and if he's busy he'll ring me back and vice versa." Considering the different locations this did not hinder the communication that flowed openly between both individuals, as both members were invested in maintaining open lines of communication. The emergence of this category highlights the need for clients within sport psychology consulting relationships to be aware of the need for them to be committed to and actively participating within the consulting relationship. Although previous research has highlighted the need for athletes to be invested to and willing to work within consulting relationships (e.g., Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011; Sharp & Hodge, 2011), the current findings provide further support for the need for the coach (client) to be actively invested to the consulting relationship. Sexton and Whiston (1994), in their empirical review of counseling relationships, stated that the relationship with the client, and general characteristics such as relationships with family members have been found to strongly influence the development of the working alliance.

**Case Study Two.** C2 believed a personal friendship with SPC2 was needed for an effective consulting relationship, as he believed it would help both dyad members to gain a better understanding of each other. C2 identified a personal friendship with SPC2 as having a positive influence on the consulting relationship. He explained that, "I'd say we have a friendship. I could sit down and have a chat with the guy anytime and have a laugh; you know it doesn't have to be professional, it can be personal." C2 believed that friendship with SPC2 allowed him to open up on a personal level as well as a professional level which in turn assisted SPC2 in gaining knowledge of C2 and his working environment.

In contrast, SPC2 indicated that he did not have a friendship with the coach. He argued that friendship with a client is detrimental to SPC effectiveness, as the SPC becomes too emotionally involved with the individual and the consulting relationship. Despite these contrasting views on friendship both dyad members discussed the sharing of "war stories over a few beers" and "going to watch rugby matches together." By sharing these



experiences together these dyad members created a close bond that was interpreted differently by each member of the consulting relationship. Previous research has highlighted the need for SPCs to demonstrate positive interpersonal skill (e.g., friendly, personable, approachable, trustworthy behavior) as this aids effective interaction, rapport and empathy between the SPC and their client (Lubker, Visek, Geer & Watson, 2008; Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Although the present case study provides support for the need for the SPC to demonstrate these interpersonal skills, it does highlight the way in which clients can interpret these skills differently to the SPC. There is a need to again ensure that clear boundaries are in place to ensure this friendly behavior does not extend beyond the consulting relationship. Poczwardowski et al. (1998) argued that SPCs should employ both professional and ethical codes of conduct when approaching client issues and relationships. If occasions arise where boundaries become blurred the SPC should seek immediate advice and or support through peer support and supervision.

Considering Poczwardowski et al.'s (1998) recommendations, both case study members also identified the need for boundaries in the relationship. C2 indicated the need for "a line where the personal relationship stops and the professional relationship starts... There needs to be a distinction of where that is and [where] the professional part of the relationship is." This view was also supported by SPC2; he explained that the ability to be fully involved within a team, yet still maintain boundaries and a professional distance was essential to effective practice. The SPC explained how he had talked to the coach about the need for boundaries:

He's still at an age where he can go drinking with the players. He's Fijian and we had a few Fijians [on the team] who had a few Kava sessions [a kava ceremony is a traditional Fijian ceremony and social event where Kava (an alcoholic drink) is consumed] and he said to me come to the Kava. I said, 'Look I'd love to but I have to have some boundaries.' I like to be part of the team but I have to have some boundaries.

### **Fitting in With Team Culture: Case Study One**

Both C1 and SPC1 commented that fitting into a team culture was essential for any SPC to create a successful consulting relationship. C1 stated that:

I've learnt that I wouldn't let just any [SPC] work with my team. I only go for people who I think would fit in. I'm sure there's going to be those out there that would just [not be appropriate], because my boys are pretty well tuned [know what they want] and they'd just simply scare them off.

In support of fitting in with team culture two sub-categories emerged: (a) SPC must be embedded in the

team; and (b) SPC must show understanding of the team protocols and operating procedures. To fit in with the team culture C1 believed it was essential that SPC1 be embedded within the team and not work with them on isolated occasions. He commented that it was key that the SPC was, "Part of the team family... He would be on our bench [during the game] and with the team touring. He would come to camps and do stuff with the camps, so they were seen as being part of the [wheelchair team sport] program." In the case of SPC1, "He's part of the team, he just happens to be the guy that does mental skills. He's part of that [wheelchair team sport] family, he's passionate about the [wheelchair sports team]." In addition, SPC1 believed his gender and physical presence helped him to fit in with the team culture; he commented that; "It's a macho environment in the quadriplegic [wheelchair sport] environment. There's a lot of testosterone that doesn't go anywhere, 'cause of the disability. [Being male] helped to connect and fit in... being a big rugby player helped as well."

C1 also commented that to fit in with the team culture the SPC needs to show an understanding of the team, its players and staff members to operate effectively. "I make decisions based on how the team operates. I work hard on trying to make sure that the staff who work with the team, believe in the team. If they don't and they don't fit in it impacts on their effectiveness" (C1). SPC1 commented that to fit in with team culture SPCs must be prepared to support the team by being prepared to fulfill multiple roles/tasks as needed. SPC1 stated that:

Doing whatever it takes to work with the team and be part of that team. Whether that's transferring them in and out of cars, or taking them to the toilet. You just roll your sleeves up and do it... Show you're prepared to do more than just the glamour.

Both dyad members in CS1 highlighted the importance of the SPC fitting in with the team's culture. This was achieved by SPC1 being embedded in the coach's competitive environment and demonstrating an understanding of the team, its members and the team dynamics. A number of authors have previously discussed the importance of assessing the subculture of the sporting environment in which the SPC is working; the people, team members, and the support and management staff that the SPC may have possible interactions with (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011; Ravizza in Fifer et al., 2008). CS1 provides clear examples of how SPC1 went about 'fitting in', while also highlighting the need for the SPC to ensure that adequate time is allowed to develop this awareness and understanding of team culture that would enable her/him to work effectively within a team environment.

### **Flexibility: Case Study Two**

The need for flexibility within the consulting relationship emerged as an essential component of SPC effectiveness

for both SPC2 and C2. Two subcategories emerged in support of flexibility; (a) flexibility in format; (b) flexibility in consulting approach. This consulting relationship was described by both individuals as being informal, with consulting sessions being flexible in structure, content, and location. Both individuals indicated that consulting sessions occurred in a number of different locations, with the content of consulting discussions being determined by either the situation the coach was in, or by what the coach wanted to discuss. C2 commented that he would speak with SPC2 when the opportunity arose, "I'd go out to his office... [or] we'd have a beer after training. Occasionally I'd go and see him at home, have a cup of coffee and a chat. If he was there at half-time, depending on the flow of the game, I'd say 'well, what do you think?'"

Considering the multiple roles and many demands placed on coaches the need for flexibility within the consulting relationship was unsurprising. If SPCs are going to provide psychological support for coaches, they must be aware of the need for the consulting relationship to be flexible in structure, content, length, and location in order for session to be flexible to ensure the coach's needs were met.

SPC2 discussed how he felt that he had to adapt his consulting approach to be more flexible when working with C2. He explained that, "I'm very structured in the way I work. I do lots of CBT [Cognitive Behavioural Therapy], lots of pencil paper stuff and [Coach 2] didn't take to that very well and I struggled then." However, SPC2 indicated that as a result of the consulting relationship he learnt to be adaptable and work in less than ideal conditions (from his perspective). He explained one example where he was asked to consult with C2's team, "I said where am I going to do it, have you got a projector? Nah, it's just a white board; the guys will be eating some dinner at the same time, you're going to have to show them [demonstrate the mental skills training method]." In their pioneering research into SPC effectiveness Orlick and Partington (1987) found that poorly rated SPCs typically demonstrated a lack of flexibility. These individuals were found to be inflexible in their approach to meeting individual client's needs and imposed the methodology they wanted to use. Similarly, in his discussion of the development and implementation of mental skills training for professional baseball players, Ravizza (1990) commented on the need for flexibility. He believed that flexibility allowed him to adjust to situations as they arose, which was especially important in the professional baseball environment where changes in management and players were a regular occurrence. As he stated, "In every situation there is the ideal way to do your job, and then there is reality" (p. 331).

## Summary

These two case study relationships provided novel insights into applied consultancy work with coaches in addition to gaining an understanding of the com-

ponents necessary for the development of an effective consulting relationship between a SPC and coach. Results indicated the need for the SPC to possess knowledge of psychological theories and techniques, to develop a good knowledge and understanding of the needs of the client, and to develop an understanding of the sport environment in which the coach operates. In addition, trust was found to be a key component to an effective consulting relationship between the coach and SPC; and trust was established through clarifying the boundaries of confidentiality and regularly reaffirming those boundaries with the coach. While friendship was not perceived to be an essential component of an effective consulting relationship friendship was believed to have evolved between the SPC and coach in both case studies. This finding highlighted how the interpersonal skills demonstrated by SPCs can be perceived by clients as friendly behavior and therefore further highlighted the importance of ensuring professional and ethical boundaries are maintained at all times.

Findings from the present investigation will be of interest to sport psychology practitioners who are currently working with coaches or interested in working with coaches. Practitioners should consider how best they can effectively develop the consulting relationship and the trust between themselves and the coach/client they work with. In addition, consideration should be given to how they can best fit in with the culture of the sports they are working with through appearing flexible in their working practice. Results need to be considered in light of the methodological strengths and limitations. The investigation reflects two consulting relationships between two male coaches and SPCs from team sports in New Zealand and therefore cannot be expected to be representative of all consulting relationships between coaches and SPCs. Specifically, consulting relationships between female coaches and SPCs and mixed gender relationships may raise a number of different relationship elements that are not represented within the current case studies; therefore, caution should be taken when considering the application of the current findings to these relationships. Future research should consider the potential impact of the gender of dyad members on the consulting relationships between coaches and SPCs. In addition, both coaches within the case studies presented requested the services of the SPCs and were receptive to the services offered. Further research is needed to examine the variety of scenarios through which the SPC comes to work with the coach. Finally, more research is needed into the sport psychology support services provided to coaches at all levels of sport. Both the SPCs faced numerous challenges with regard to their boundaries of practice. Considering this, there is a need for further exploration of the ethical challenges SPCs face which also highlights the need for SPCs to have (peer) supervision in place to help individuals deal with these challenges.

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