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An Investigation of the Social Support Experiences of High-Level Sports Performers

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Abstract

Lack of consensus regarding the nature and conceptual definition of the social support construct has led to a plethora of different forms of measurement of this psychosocial variable, many with psychometric limitations. Beyond the psychometric limitations of some measures, in sport there is also a need for measures to be relevant to the specific experiences of sports performers. In order to gain a greater understanding of the social support experiences of sportspeople, 10 high-level sports performers were interviewed regarding their experiences of social support. Principles of the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach were adopted for analysis of their responses and insights. Four dimensions of support were generated, within each of which were comments relating to sport-specific support and comments relating to support not directly concerning the sport itself. The dimensions were labeled: Emotional; Esteem; Informational; and Tangible. Example quotes are given to highlight each dimension of support, and implications for intervention are derived.

An Investigation of the Social Support Experiences of High-Level Sports Performers

The potentially beneficial influence of social support in sport has led to active encouragement for sportspeople to harness this resource (e.g., Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993a; Hardy & Crace, 1991; Richman, Hardy, Rosenfeld, & Callanan, 1989). Despite such comments and despite recommendations for research into social support in sport (e.g., Hardy & Jones, 1994; I. G. Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990), empirical evidence for the beneficial effects of social support in sport has been relatively scarce. Social support has, however, been linked with group cohesion (Westre & Weiss, 1991), coping with competitive stress (Crocker, 1992), slumps in performance (Madden, Kirkby, & McDonald, 1989), burn-out (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996), vulnerability to injury (Smith, Smoll, & Ptacek, 1990) the etiology of and recovery from injury (e.g., Hardy, Richman, & Rosenfeld, 1991; Udry, 1996), leadership styles (for a review, see Chelladurai, 1993), and performance (Rees, Ingledew, & Hardy, 1999).

Like health research, measurement of social support in the sporting domain has been very varied. In summarizing the state of social support research at that time, House and Kahn (1985) wrote, “measurement in this area is still in a fairly primitive state” (p.102). The picture does not appear to be much clearer today. Vaux (1992) noted, among other points, concerns regarding the psychometric properties of social support measures and the plethora of different measures, both of which have made synthesis of findings difficult. Furthermore, there is an inherent difficulty in measuring social support, because it has no clear definition. As Veiel and Baumann (1992) noted, “if asked, almost every researcher in the field will present a more or less precise definition of support, but, more than likely, it will be different from that of his or her colleagues” (p.3). Studies assessing social support have used various terms to describe the construct (or aspects of the construct), including: network size; social integration; quantity and quality of relationships;

social resources; availability of and satisfaction with support (for reviews, see Cohen, 1988; Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988; B. R. Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990; Vaux, 1992; Veiel & Baumann, 1992). Social support has also been conceptualized as a multidimensional and a unidimensional construct (Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988). Despite all of these concerns, social support has been the most frequently studied psychosocial resource (Thoits, 1995), and has been noted alongside stress and coping as one of the three most important constructs in mental health research (Veiel & Baumann, 1992).

Despite the association with tennis performance found by Rees et al. (1999), the findings of their study were tempered by questions regarding the applied relevance to sport of the instrument they used to measure social support. Rees and associates used the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) (Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985), a measure of perceived functional social support with a confirmed factor structure (Brookings & Bolton, 1988). The basic concern in using the ISEL in a sporting setting is one of content validity; the questions posed by the ISEL relate to general everyday support issues, and do not account for the specific support issues that might be relevant to high-level sportspeople. Whilst it is undoubtedly necessary for a measure of social support to have structural validity, taking a measure directly from mainstream psychology may not help us to understand the specific support experiences of sportspeople.

The present study sought to address this issue of content validity by examining more closely the social support experiences of high-level sportspeople. It has been claimed that social support can be simply stated in the following terms: “Knowing that one is loved and cared for may be the essence of social support” (I. G. Sarason et al., 1990, p. 119). However, in sport there is a need to look at the specific support transactions a sportsperson might experience with

coaches, other players, psychologists, trainers, and friends and family in dealing with the stresses and strains of high-level sport. The structure of one multidimensional measure of social support, the Social Support Survey (SSS) (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Hardy, 1993), can be used to generate this sort of information. However, despite some validation work with college athletes, the SSS contains problematic content and structural validity issues (see Rees, Hardy, Ingledew, & Evans, in press). For example, Rees and associates questioned Richman et al.'s (1993) assumption that it is meaningful and appropriate to consider the SSS as comprising eight separate content factors, despite previous conceptualizations regarding the construct as unidimensional or comprising just three or four dimensions (for reviews, see Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988; Vaux, 1992). Confirmatory factor analyses of the SSS by Rees and associates also revealed that the items on the scales might be considered ambiguous indicators of the latent constructs, leading to difficulties in pinpointing the content factors in the SSS with certainty.

It was in light of such criticisms as the content validity, structural validity, and applied relevance to sport of many social support measures that in the present study the authors conducted interviews with high-level sportspeople. In so doing, the study sought to examine the social support resources of high-level sportspeople and the functions served by those resources. This functional aspect of support is highlighted in the concept of optimal matching between stressors and support (e.g., Cutrona & Russell, 1990), whereby specific types of social support are hypothesized to be resourced to deal with specific problems and stressors. Cohen et al. (1985) based their measure (the ISEL) on this concept of support. The present study sought to examine the experiences of high-level sportspeople by adopting an approach to analysis of the interview transcripts, involving principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and

thereby developing an understanding of the dimensional structure of support for sportspeople and the precise behaviors performed.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were ten high-level sports performers (five males, five females). For both males and females, performers from individual and team sports were chosen. To ensure the confidentiality of the performers, quotes are identified by the use of an identification letter and number in parentheses. For males, the sports were rugby (M1), tennis (M2), sprinting (M3), field hockey (M4), and gymnastics (M5). For females, the sports were badminton (F1), field hockey (F2), netball (F3), field athletics/basketball (F4), and judo/powerlifting/rugby (F5). All performers were aged between 18 and 27 and all were competing at international level.

Procedure

All performers were contacted by telephone and consented to participate in live interviews, which lasted from 27 to 50 minutes. The majority of interviews were conducted in the performers' homes. Each participant was guided through the same series of standardized open-ended questions, which were outlined in an interview guide. A series of standardized prompts was also used, when necessary. The interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and were later transcribed verbatim into A4 single-spaced text.

Interview guide. The interview guide was preceded by an introduction to the concept of social support. The introduction is outlined in the following lines:

The purpose of this interview is to try to find out about the help and support you receive as a sportsperson in dealing with the stresses and hassles inside and outside your sport.

The research literature suggests that such support may take many forms. I will just go through a few examples, so that you have a clear picture as to what I am trying to get from you.

You could get support from a coach in helping you deal with some aspect of your performance. You could get help and support from family in dealing with times when you feel a bit down. You could get help from a friend or intimate partner who gives you encouragement. You could also get financial help from someone. These are the kinds of things I would like you to tell me about. I am totally interested in anything about the help and support you get. Nothing is too trivial.

I am going to ask you various questions in order to try to get you talking about the support you have, and I shall be trying to prompt you further, as and when appropriate.

What you say during this interview is and will remain totally confidential, and your name will not be used in any way following this interview. The only reason I am using a tape-recorder is so that I can accurately recall what you say.

If there are any questions that you do not want to answer, just say so, and we will move on to another question. Please feel free to ask questions of me if there is anything you want clarifying or that you are not sure about. Finally, you are free to end this interview at any time, if you so wish.

Did you understand what I meant by support? Would you like me to go over that again for you?

The succeeding interview guide¹ contained six major questions, which were posed in order to elicit information regarding support across a broad spectrum of the sports performers' experience, and related to the sports performers' experience of stressors in sport (Gould, Horn, &

Spreeman, 1983; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993b; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). The questions were as follows: 1) Can you tell me about any help you get in dealing with the pressures of high-level sport? 2) Can you tell me about any help you get in dealing with how you feel about your sport at different times? 3) Can you tell me about any help you get in dealing with injuries and periods of rehabilitation? 4) Can you tell me about any help you get in dealing with practical matters? 5) Can you tell me about any help you get in dealing with personal issues about your life and future? 6) Can you tell me about any help you get in dealing with relationship issues? There was also a final question, which asked for any further information not already requested, but which might have been of relevance and importance to the sports performer. Following each major question was a list of secondary questions and elaboration probes, which were used, where appropriate to encourage the performers to expand on their answers and to gain a fuller understanding of their responses.

Pilot study. The study was piloted on three individuals (2 males, 1 female), also of international standard in the sports of rugby league, karate and hockey. The purpose of these pilot interviews was to ‘try out’ the interview guide, and to elucidate further on topics not covered in the questions. Following the interviews performers were asked to reflect on the content and style of questions and prompts; they were also asked to offer feedback on the interviewer’s style and the congeniality of atmosphere created during the interview. These interviews were videotaped and observed by the interviewer (the first author), the second author, and one further colleague. This process generated feedback regarding the style, mannerisms and body language of the interviewer, as well as feedback regarding the content and flow of the interview. It is possible that the use of videotaping might have been interpreted as intrusive by

the participants. However, this did not appear to prevent them from being candid in their responses to the questions asked.

Grounded theory as a qualitative approach to data analysis. Analysis of the transcripts drew upon principles of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory primarily involves the generation of theory by induction. However, in view of the researchers' prior knowledge of the social support phenomenon, pre-conceived ideas, personal experiences and values must have had an influence on the researchers as the analysis proceeded (Charmaz, 1990; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997; Pidgeon, Turner, & Blockley, 1991), and would also have influenced the original make-up of the interview guide. This prior knowledge, so long as one is not "wedded" (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1165) to it, is actually considered an advantage in grounded theory, wherein an emphasis is placed upon the creativity and subjectivity of the researchers in building and testing new theories that are generated from the data. In the present study, prior knowledge of the subject gave the researchers a framework to aid in the interpretation of the data.

Analysis. The present study followed clear guidelines for good practice in grounded theory (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997; Pidgeon et al., 1991). Prior to detailed analysis of the data, all ten transcripts were read numerous times in order for the interviewer to familiarize himself thoroughly with the data. The ten transcripts were then entered into QSR NUD*IST 4 (Nonnumerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) (1997), a computer package designed for handling qualitative data. QSR NUD*IST 4 does not analyze the data. It is in essence a more efficient form of the original card-sorting strategy. Data can be categorized, moved and "shuffled" in a matter of seconds, as opposed to the lengthy re-writing and sorting of cards. Data from transcripts is coded and stored in "nodes." Each node can

be named and re-named. An explanation of the content of the node can be given, and memos can be written regarding the node.

Initial analysis in the present study proceeded by coding relevant sections of the text from each interview into various nodes. At this stage of analysis the primary objective was to ensure that the node titles did fit the data well. This is akin to Pidgeon and Henwood's (1997) "flip-flop" (p. 261) approach, whereby terms were changed and adjusted until fit was improved. Each node then contained one or multiple items that, together, reflected the node title. Generation and clarification of nodes then occurred by employing the constant comparative method of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby similarities and differences in the data were compared and contrasted, so that the richness of the data was fully explored.

The core analysis involved refining the node system, integrating categories and writing memos (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the present study a "free" node was created, entitled, "Project Thoughts," solely for the purpose of writing memos documenting all procedures undertaken. This memo contained information regarding, amongst other things: ideas regarding the focus and changing focus of the research; a trail of node emergence, integration, sub-division and separation; reminders of interesting and important quotes for later use in a write-up; and a flag for problematic and ambiguous concepts. This information provided a ready documentation for scrutiny and observation by immediate colleagues.

Repeated integration and sub-division of categories then continued until the coding of data no longer contributed further to the clarification of concepts and ideas. Concepts were then further refined and re-labeled, until optimum fit was reached. Finally, having explored links and differences across all node categories, node trees were drawn up to represent the analysis.

Validation. Similar to Scanlan, Stein, and Ravizza (1989), validation criteria were met through frequent discussions between the two authors. A third sport psychology researcher and applied practitioner, well trained in qualitative techniques, chose a 20% random selection of the raw quotes (30 from 153) and categorized them into raw themes (behaviors) and first-order themes (functions). 83% (25 from 30) of the quotes were correctly assigned to the raw themes (behaviors), and 87% (26 from 30) were correctly assigned to the first-order themes (functions). Finally, the researcher categorized all raw and first-order themes in a combined fashion into the correct support dimensions. 98% (93 from 95) were correctly assigned. As well as providing such traditional criteria for validity, and diagrammatic representations of the node trees, awareness was made in the present study of the advocacy of Sparkes (1998) to go beyond traditional criteria for validity and to consider such issues as authenticity, fidelity and believability. In light of Sparkes' suggestions, extensive exemplar quotes from the athlete interviews are highlighted in an effort to allow readers to judge for themselves the conclusions drawn by this study's authors.

Results

Four primary dimensions of social support were generated: Emotional; Esteem; Informational; and Tangible. Within the primary dimensions were elements that dealt with sporting issues and elements that dealt with issues that were not directly related to the sport itself. The analysis was arranged so that note was made of the specific behaviors performed by supportive others and the functions those behaviors served. The term "functions" was taken to mean the purpose served by the supportive behavior. This may have involved the buffering of a stressor or a general helping support. It may also have elucidated a potential mechanism by which the supportive behavior was operating.

The process borne out of the analysis is shown in the following figures (please see figures 1-4), each of which is arranged in order as social support dimensions, sub-dimensions (sport, non-sport), functions (and mechanisms) and supportive behaviors and processes. Figure 1 represents Emotional support. Figure 2 represents Esteem support. Figure 3 represents Informational support. Figure 4 represents Tangible support.

Similar functions and behaviors often occur in more than one of the figures. This demonstrates how different types of support are often used to achieve the same end-point. For example, in dealing with injuries, sportspeople receive tangible help in terms of physiotherapy treatment, emotional help in terms of sympathy from others, and esteem support in terms of encouragement and reassurance. All these aspects aid the coping and recovery process and are vital aspects of the person's supportive network during rehabilitation.

As noted by Charmaz (1990), following analysis and reanalysis, and having generated the four primary dimensions, it was important at this stage to place the present results within a framework of the extant literature in the area, in order to see where and how it fits. In the present study, there were similarities between the dimensions that were generated and those noted by Cutrona and Russell (1990) to cover all aspects of social support. Cutrona and Russell, in reviewing and creating a synthesis of the research to that date, highlighted five primary dimensions from previous conceptualizations of multidimensional support. These were emotional, esteem, informational, tangible, and social integration or network support. The last of these dimensions, social integration or network support, did not appear in the present study.

In the following lines, each of these four types of support will be elucidated with reference to Cutrona and Russell's (1990) definitions and the direct quotes from the athlete

interviews. The functions and mechanisms (shown in the figures) are highlighted, along with the specific supportive behaviors.

Emotional support

Cutrona and Russell (1990) defined emotional support as “the ability to turn to others for comfort and security during times of stress, leading the person to feel that he or she is cared for by others” (p. 322). The findings of our study reflect aspects of this type of support and also reflect the concept of generalized emotional support highlighted by I. G. Sarason et al. (1990), and noted in the introduction to this paper.

Help dealing with being dropped. Whilst competing in the Far East, and having been briefly dropped from the opening side, this netball player experienced feelings of isolation, and wanted to speak to her mother, simply in order to know that she was still loved:

I'd say that's what I need when I phone from somewhere away. You know, I don't want to have to explain what's going on. I just want to say, look, I'm having a bad time and for her (her mother) just to give me a bit of support and say, just show me that I'm still loved, even outside of sport, which I need. (F3)

General help. The concept of generalized emotional support is shown here with the idea of supportive others just “being there” for both this field athlete/basketball player and this sprinter:

It's just sort of a security, knowing that they're your parents and they'll always, if you need anything, they'll always try and help. They're always there if you need to talk to them. (F4)

It's good just knowing they're (parents) there for you to be honest. They don't often know what to say, but um, it's just knowing they're around (M3).

This gymnast highlighted the benefits of simply having someone to listen to him:

I think it makes me feel better if I talk to people about stuff anyway, even whether they give me advice back or not. (M5)

Help with general sporting pressure. In dealing with general sporting pressure this netball player noted that it was good simply to be able to talk through things:

If there's anything we need, like, we always talk to each other, talk through things. I'd say that's especially since being in college, because we lived together, as well. You get so much chance to talk and get each other through things. (F3)

Help with life direction issues regarding future. This sprinter also mentioned that it was useful just to have someone to bounce ideas off, when discussing general life direction issues regarding one's future:

I think my training partners I talk to a lot. Um, [athlete's name] because...he's in the twilight of his career, he's established a career for himself. So, bouncing ideas off him is really good. He tells me kind of things I should be doing. (M3)

Help with injuries. Many issues regarding injury concerns were highlighted in this study. For example, this sprinter noted how the help he received from his college friends, whilst serving a purpose as simple as taking his mind off his injury worries, was important to him:

Close friends and stuff, people, friends at university. Yeah, they really helped. Um, they took my mind off it, really. I completely forgot about track and field for a while. (M3)

Similarly, this badminton player felt that it was comforting just knowing that other people who were important figures in the elite squad structure were concerned about her injury and rehabilitation:

[Person's name] is the big boss of the elite [squad]. And, whenever I see him, he says, how's everything going, blah, blah. I say, oh I'm injured or whatever. He'll say, have you been to the physio? Have you done this? And then when you see him, it's, how's your legs. Well, they're all interested. I suppose, because they're throwing the money into it, they want you to be 100%. (F1)

Esteem support

Cutrona and Russell (1990) defined esteem support as:

The bolstering of a person's sense of competence or self-esteem by other people. Giving an individual positive feedback on his or her skills and abilities or expressing a belief that the person is capable of coping with a stressful event are examples of this type of support. (p.322)

Examples from the athlete interviews highlighting this aspect of support are outlined below.

Help dealing with pre-competition nerves and doubts. This judo player liked to have her some time teammate there to encourage and motivate her:

She'd (some time teammate) always been at competitions, well most of the time. When she was there, I liked having her there, because she'd say, come on, you know you're better than her, you can batter her, she's [rubbish], or whatever, you know. And, I'd love, I really liked having her there. (F5)

This sprinter liked to have his coach there to motivate him and get him focused and "psyched up":

I know I've got to center and focus, and you know he (coach) always reiterates that before you know as I'm going to warm up out on to the track. You know, this is your time, um, it's a war situation, you've got to stay in control. There's no point panicking,

because you won't run to the best of your capabilities. So, hearing things like that, that's really good. (M3)

This same sprinter also benefited from the coach reinforcing the positives regarding his current form:

He'll reinstate the kind of form you're in, even though, he'll (coach) just reinforce the positive for you. And it comes from a much more practical point of view. He's like, if you have any doubt he'll say, well look last week you did such and such, that shows you're in good form. (M3)

Help with injuries. At competition time, concerns about injuries were also eased by receiving reassurance from a physiotherapist:

He (physiotherapist) was working on me before the world championships, and I had an injury going into them, um, I wasn't able to run for two weeks prior to that. And, um, he was brilliant. He was working with me virtually every day. And he kept reassuring me that it was going to be okay. Um, and before my warm-up, before going into the heats and stuff, he was there, and he'd work on me, and he'd say stuff like, you know, your muscles are in the best shape they've ever been. And, you know, that probably wasn't true. But, you know, it's just kid psychology, if you hear it enough times, you're going to believe it. (M3)

Help dealing with fitness concerns. This gymnast had been concerned about regaining fitness following a trip abroad. His previous coach was someone he still spoke to and was a good source of motivation for him:

His (previous coach, contacted by telephone only) role again is just planning and um, because I think we're not in direct contact, he's more of a motivator as well. He'll try and motivate me. (M5)

Help to pull out of slumps. This tennis player described how, if he were in a slump, his parents would help to pick him up:

They (parents) usually get a feel for when I'm feeling up or feeling down. And, um, when I'm feeling up, obviously they'll keep encouraging me, but when I feel down, they'll do whatever they can to try and help me and to pick me up and to get me going again. (M2)

Informational support

Cutrona and Russell (1990) defined informational support as "providing the individual with advice or guidance concerning possible solutions to a problem" (p. 322). Examples from the athlete interviews highlighting this aspect of support are outlined below.

Help dealing with a loss of confidence. In dealing with a loss of confidence, this basketball player found it useful to receive constructive criticism from a friend who doesn't actually play basketball:

If I use this other friend who doesn't play...she can give more constructive criticism, and you know, saying what I should, she'll always say the things I should be thinking about, but I haven't picked up myself. (F4)

Help with performance concerns. In dealing with performance concerns, this netball player was helped by the receipt of specific technical and tactical feedback and coaching from her teammate:

Because she's (team-mate) in the same situation, you know, or I could come off and say, oh, I didn't play well then. What do I need to do to improve next time, she could tell me

specifically, well, you weren't driving forward for the ball, or whatever. You know, it's a lot more specific. (F3)

Help with performance catastrophes. In dealing with performance catastrophes, this tennis player took heed of the advice of former players:

I probably had a few experiences when I was younger, that I, er, totally froze in a big match or something, and you get advice from people that have been there before, and they try and help you...people like that, who've had experience, they try and help with different situations, and because it comes from them, you sort of extra listen to them.

(M2)

Help with fitness concerns. In this particular situation regarding the gymnast's fitness concerns, he received from his former coach specific informational advice about how to build up fitness patiently:

He'll (previous coach, contacted by telephone only) try and round it up by saying, right, build yourself up slowly and stuff like this. You know, make a training plan, to help keep yourself motivated and stuff like this. (M5)

Help with interpersonal problems. The concept of "putting things into perspective" arose on a number of occasions. Here, this judo player/powerlifter/rugby player described how she was helped when dealing with interpersonal problems with her family:

[My boyfriend is] brilliant. Like, he's the one I talk to about everything, really. And he always puts things into perspective, you know. If I'm upset about things, he says, don't get upset...he puts it in black and white, and says it's not that bad...If I'm upset from phoning my parents, [he] will say to me, don't listen to them, don't get upset, and it's all right again then. (F5)

Life direction issues. In discussing life direction issues, this netball player was helped to consider her options regarding her future:

I've been having so many problems trying to decide what to do next year now with college, and like before coming out tonight I sat and talked to my mum for a while about it. You know, considering going away to England to do physio. And so I think I'd always talk to her, just because I know she'd always tell me the truth, and she'll be really open and say, these are the pros and the cons of both sides of whatever argument it is. And like I said, I prefer that. (F3)

Tangible support

Cutrona and Russell (1990) defined tangible support as “concrete instrumental assistance, in which a person in a stressful situation is given the necessary resources (e.g., financial assistance, physical help with tasks) to cope with the stressful event” (p. 322). Examples from the athlete interviews highlighting this aspect of support are outlined below.

Help with injuries. In dealing with the stressful experience of injuries, this rugby player described the benefits of great treatment support, organized by his club:

We're attached to a health scheme through BUPA (private health scheme), and one of the physios attached to the club works for BUPA. So, if any of the boys need any operations or whatever, it's done straightaway. There's no waiting, nothing to be paid for...it's the best part of the club, actually. (M1)

This tennis player also had everything organized and paid for by the National Governing Body:

I broke [my wrist] just playing a match, and then I went, the [National Governing Body] paid for me to go to Harley Street (in London) and get an X-ray and see a hand specialist...He said it was broken, and gave me this thing, and then I went back a month

later, and he told me to take it off, it should be fine, but, yeah, the [National Governing Body] organized that. (M2)

In this example, the gymnast described the help with injuries in terms of planning of the rehabilitation by the physiotherapist:

It was niggling me and getting worse. I had to go up to Coventry to have a cortisone injection in my wrist. And, um, I found him to be very good in terms of planning the rehabilitation of the injury, sort of thing, because he was a gymnast himself. (M5)

Reduce worries about practical matters. Worries about practical matters, such as funding general transport, paying for training and competition travel, and arranging financial deals with sponsors were all seen as an important concern. As such, the athletes were helped by the receipt of specific tangible support in this respect. For example, this badminton player was supported financially by the elite national squad system in conjunction with official sponsors, set up for that country's top sportspeople:

I get a car. So, that allows me to train, well, go to all the tournaments in this country. The petrol and everything I have to pay for myself, but then I get with the elite [squad], the grant, I get all the mileage and everything. (F1)

This sprinter had a personal sponsor who helped with some of his expenses, when training away from home in warm weather conditions:

I've been helped by a gentleman called [person's name] for, well, the whole of my athletics career. He's, um, helped pay for various warm weather training trips. Um, for example, last year I went to California for three months, and he paid for the hire car for the whole duration. So, stuff like that has been invaluable. (M3)

This tennis player had all of his equipment and clothing deals arranged and managed by his agents:

[My agents] deal with...racket deals that I have, or clothes deals, or, for instance, at Wimbledon I wore a patch on my shirt - they organized that. So, they try and make life easy, so I don't have to worry about those sorts of things. I can just play tennis. (M2)

Recalling his early days touring the tennis circuit as a junior, this tennis player also acknowledged the help and support, simply in terms of being driven everywhere by his parents:

Without them (parents) it would be quite hard. Because, obviously they started me up, they paid for everything at the start, and drove me everywhere and stuff. So, without them, I wouldn't have started. (M2)

Alleviate pressure and leave me free to concentrate. In this situation, this powerlifter described a scenario wherein she entered her first competition (the national championship), unaware of the procedure of the event and the general needs of the competitor. She was then helped by a person there, who has since become her regular aide. This help, she felt, took the pressure off her and left her free to concentrate. With that same person she went to the world championships, where she placed second:

It took the complete pressure off me, worrying about my knee-wraps, worrying about what weight I was going to lift. Like, after every lift you do you have to put a card in saying your next lift. Like, I couldn't even think what my next lift was. But he was doing it all for me, and he took so much pressure off me, that all I concentrated on was my lift. And to be honest...I don't think I would have won it if he hadn't been there, because I would have been panicking about what to do next. And, but I was so calm, and I was thinking, all I have to do is lift this, and just go through the technique, and he was going

through the technique with me, and it was brilliant, and I think to be honest that's why I won it. (F5)

Discussion

The fifth dimension described by Cutrona and Russell (1990) is social integration or network support, and is taken to represent a person “feeling part of a group whose members have common interests” (p. 322). Whilst some issues did arise in our study that would intuitively deal with social integration or belonging, to use Cohen et al.’s (1985) terminology, this dimension is taken to reflect more casual friendships. In our study, comments that appeared to involve issues of belonging or being socially integrated, for example “they’re always there for me,” were subsumed under the emotional dimension.

The support dimensions that were generated in this study also showed some similarities with Richman et al.’s (1993) three primary dimensions in the SSS. These are emotional, informational, and tangible support. However, it was not clear that the four dimensions in the present study should be further broken down as in the SSS to eight dimensions. For example, in this study, issues concerning the SSS dimensions of listening support, emotional support, emotional challenge, and reality confirmation were subsumed under the Emotional support dimension. Issues concerning SSS task appreciation were subsumed under the Esteem support dimension. Issues concerning SSS task challenge were subsumed under the Esteem support and Informational support dimensions. Finally, issues concerning SSS personal and tangible assistance were subsumed under the Tangible dimension.

The importance of having good social support was highlighted in the present study. For example, the closing comments from one participant, an international tennis player, included the following:

I think for me, if I were never to make a breakthrough, it wouldn't be through [a lack of] support....I've had a lot. I think, when you've done something good, and people tell you you've done something good, it gives you a lift and gives you a little kick and makes you want to do something good again. I think it would be difficult if you were just totally on your own and never had anyone really helping you out and giving you support, basically. I think it's a big difference....I can't see how you can totally do it on your own... You do need encouragement and advice, and, good times, bad times, you need people to help you out. I think it's pretty hard to do it without them. (M2)

The importance of support in keeping the sportsperson focused and preventing doubts is shown in the following:

But, I think I always respect my mum's decision more than anyone else's. Like, if I didn't have my mum's support on something, I'd always doubt what I was doing, always. I've always found that. I can't rest, unless I know she's behind what I'm doing. (F3)

There were also comments highlighting the sense of security provided by the knowledge that supportive others were there, if needed. The following comment expands on this concept, highlighting the sense of security provided by the knowledge that these supportive others were there, as always, at the competition site, providing a familiar situation for this sprinter:

A lot of sports psychologists say that you should do things that are familiar to you, um, prior to a big competition, so that you feel relaxed and at ease with yourself. And, you know, that *is* [italics added] a build up of a familiar routine. You know, having those kind of people there, that *is* [italics added] a familiar routine to me. So, just knowing that they are there, you know, you think that everything is under control. Everything is the way it should be. (M3)

The importance of social support is often most clearly demonstrated in the inverse of support, namely isolation. Isolation has been noted as possibly exerting a greater negative effect on depression than does social support exert a positive effect (see Cohen, 1988). Isolation from social support may also lead to a greater susceptibility to injury and to non-adherence to rehabilitation programs (e.g., see Udry, 1996). In the present study, isolation from all four dimensions of social support was considered negative. In dealing with injury, this netball player reflected the issues of isolation raised in the studies of Gould, Udry, Bridges, & Beck (1997) and Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey (1997):

I did feel quite isolated during that. Because it was out of season, as well, I wasn't in contact with people like the team manager or um or...the physio, who I'd normally talk to, if I had something like that....I couldn't understand it. That was one of the hard things.... Because she's always been so caring, I couldn't understand why she was like that then....And, you know, it just put a lot of pressure on me, then, starting college, as well, knowing that I wasn't fit. Like, I sat out of my first few practical lectures, and I just felt, like I said, that I wasn't getting any support to get me better, until the coach discovered that I was still injured. (F3)

The potentially deleterious effects of isolation on performance are shown in the following quote from a badminton player, who cannot afford to have her coach travel with her full-time. Often she links up with another National squad, whose coach will help her, providing she's not playing one of his players. When the latter occurs, she experiences problems, such as the following:

Um, well I go with the [other National team], and I know all them. So, it's not, I'm not totally on my own. I'm with, half with the team. But, I'm really outside of that. Um, I

suppose I feel fine. It's just, when it comes to, if the coach doesn't speak to me before I'm playing somebody he's coached, or, then, that's when I feel, oh my God, I'm on my own. And that's when I start, all negative thoughts come into my head. That's really when it's, you know, I don't like that. (F1)

Whilst the results of this study suggest a positive role for social support, it cannot be said that all references to social support were positive. Some comments reflected a negative aspect of social support. For example, one field hockey player sometimes experienced problems at matches, stating: "My parents obviously help, they support, they come and watch me, which sometimes can be a hindrance, because it can be off-putting" (F2).

Furthermore, whilst some espouse the benefits of a varied social support network, some feel distinctly protective of expressing their feelings openly, when this can be seen as a weakness. This field hockey player stated:

The only people I felt really happy about talking to was my parents. You talk to coaches, you talk to other players. I just felt that people have an ulterior motive as to what you're saying. I mean, my parents were very good, in so far as they gave me a lot of room to sort of be myself. It's, but at the end of the day, they're the only people you can turn to. I mean, as I said earlier, coaches are okay. But, you always say, if you have a problem, and you go to the coach, you always feel that you're, um, giving something away. You've got a weakness somewhere. (M4)

Conclusions

The present study highlights social support as a multidimensional construct as opposed to a unidimensional one. Different types of support were received for helping to deal with different problems and stressors. For example, emotional support was used in dealing with being down

about sport, and esteem support was used to help pull out of a slump. Different types of supportive help were also sometimes used, in dealing with the same problem. For example, in dealing with injuries, use was made of tangible, emotional and esteem support. Finally, as is evidenced in the node trees, similar types of support were used for helping to deal with different problems. Sometimes the supportive behavior served a specific functional purpose. Whilst the quotes in the paper do not necessarily make it clear, this supportive behavior was sometimes received from various people and sometimes received from the same person or organization. In replying to a question about the nature of the different support received, one netball player replied, “Depends what the problem was” (F3). This is consistent with Cutrona and Russell’s (1990) notion of matching stressors with the correct support.

In light of the findings of the present study, future research will involve the construction of a measurement device based on the raw quotes of the performers. This could then be used to elucidate the mechanisms by which the support might be working. These mechanisms have been highlighted as a fundamentally important area for social support research, but have so far received little attention (e.g., see Thoits, 1995).

The present study has important implications for sports performers and all those involved with sports performers. It needs to be recognized that important others can play a crucial role in the life of the performer, and that the consequences of performers being isolated from support are damaging. Therefore, the oft-hailed toughness ideal that sportspeople should feel they must “go it alone” in their pursuit of success and not seek out social support in times of need is out-moded and potentially very limiting. Performers should, in fact, be encouraged to be proactive in their use of social support (e.g., Richman et al., 1989), and both performers and coaches should be helped to understand that such action is not a sign of weakness (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996).

The results of the present study might lead important others to the conclusion that they should actively give support. Herein lies a problematic issue, in that un-skilled others are often poor providers of support, basing their understanding of what the individual needs solely on intuition. For example, Lehman, Ellard, and Wortman (1986) noted that others can provide unhelpful support by trying, among other things, to minimize the importance of an event, avoid open communication about the event, criticize attempts at coping, encourage quicker coping, and give inappropriate advice. Interventions might, therefore, focus upon providers to improve the quality and aptness of the support they provide. However, in view of the comment by one participant that it is often great “knowing they’re there for you,” interventions might also focus upon helping performers to fully understand how they can maximize the support that is available in their network of supportive others, and learn the skills necessary to be proactive in using this resource. The concept of matching stressors with support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) implies that performers might be taught to recognize their needs, to understand that specific problems and stressors require specific types of support to help deal with them, and to seek out appropriate supportive exchanges to help deal with those needs (Richman et al., 1989). In this respect, as applied practitioners, we could provide a context for empowering individuals. Certainly, intervention work in social support is different from most other types of applied practice, in that the beneficial effects of social support per se are not received from direct contact with the practitioner (except in the case of the athlete needing psychological support); the beneficial effects are realised through the performer’s subsequent interaction with his or her social environment (Gottlieb, 1992).

The present study sought to examine sport-specific social support by adopting principles of the grounded theory approach to analyze athlete interviews. This analysis highlighted the

multidimensional nature of social support, revealing four primary dimensions: Emotional; Esteem; Informational; and Tangible. Linked to these were specific behaviors performed by others, and the functions served by these behaviors. As well as documenting support for issues not directly related to sport, this study has provided an insight into supportive experiences that are directly relevant to the performance of sport.

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Footnote

¹A copy of the interview guide is available upon request from the first author.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Flow-chart, representing support dimensions, sub-dimensions, functions (and mechanisms) and supportive behaviors for Emotional support.

Figure 2. Flow-chart, representing support dimensions, sub-dimensions, functions (and mechanisms) and supportive behaviors for Esteem support.

Figure 3. Flow-chart, representing support dimensions, sub-dimensions, functions (and mechanisms) and supportive behaviors for Informational support.

Figure 4. Flow-chart, representing support dimensions, sub-dimensions, functions (and mechanisms) and supportive behaviors for Tangible support.