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#### Abstract

The aim of this study was to replicate previous research examining attitudes to sport psychology consultation conducted in the United States, Germany, and United Kingdom (Martin, Lavallee, Kellmann & Page, 2004), and New Zealand (Anderson, Hodge, Lavallee, & Martin, 2004). The study employed the Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised (SPA-R) questionnaire (Martin, Kellman, Lavallee & Page, 2002) in order to develop an understanding of the attitudes elite Irish athletes (N=240) hold toward sport psychology and also compare these attitudes with those found in other countries. Irish athletes in this study reported a generally positive attitude toward sport psychology provision overall, and also were identified as being open to receiving sport psychology assistance, reported moderately high levels of confidence in sport psychology, and indicated the lack of accessibility and availability to these services as distinguishing factors. Comparison of results with athletes from other countries suggested that positive attitudes toward sport psychology may be based on factors not directly associated with personal experiences of sport psychology. As the provision of sport psychology increases, practitioners need to better understand athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology so they can tailor their services to best meet the needs of athletes. In order to do this, further research related to cultural and national differences is required.

### *Irish Athletes' Attitudes Toward Seeking Sport Psychology Consultation*

Across the globe, it is unlikely that the provision of sport psychology services has ever been greater. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of practicing sport psychologists worldwide in recent years (Lidor, Morris, Bardaxoglou, & Becker, 2001), as well as the establishment of more than 100 postgraduate degree programs in applied sport psychology in no fewer than 44 countries (Burke, Sachs & Smisson, 2004). Slowly at first, and then ever more rapidly, the field has gained a position of influence in the world of sport. Applied sport psychologists are also beginning to recognize the needs of others beyond the boundaries of sport, particularly groups that can benefit from different kinds of psychological support to help them compete at the highest levels (e.g., business professionals, military personnel) (Lavalley, Kremer, Moran, & Williams, 2004).

Despite this growth in service provision, reports on practice suggest that many coaches and athletes remain reluctant to use sport psychology (Gardner, 2001). A number of practitioners have suggested that use of sport psychology will be influenced by the attitudes athletes hold toward the service (e.g., Leffingwell, Rider, & Williams, 2001; Linder, Pillow & Reno, 1989). Indeed, using the Theory of Planned Behavior, Ajzen and colleagues have demonstrated that attitudes are influential in predicting intention to engage in a wide range of behaviours (Ajzen, 1985; 1991; Ajzen & Driver, 1992). Consequently, Martin and colleagues have suggested that researchers should seek to understand athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology so practitioners can tailor their services to best meet the needs of these athletes and increase usage (Martin, Kellman, Lavalley, & Page, 2002; Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel & Lounsbury, 1997).

Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis with over 1500 athletes, Martin et al. (2002) developed the Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised (SPA-R) questionnaire to gain insight into athletes' perceptions of seeking sport psychology consulting. The SPA-R has a four-factor solution and has been found to be robust and stable across groups and countries. The four factors associated with attitudes

toward seeking sport psychology consulting assessed by the SPA-R are: (a) Stigma Tolerance; (b) Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting; (c) Personal Openness; and (d) Cultural Preference.

Previous research supports the notion that athletes may be reluctant to seek and potentially viewed negatively for using sport psychology (Leffingwell et al., 2001; Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte & De Lange, 1991; Linder et al., 1989). Research also indicates that some individuals stigmatize athletes who seek assistance from a sport psychologist because they this behavior is consistent with the mental toughness image athletes often portray, especially in macho sports like rugby and wrestling (e.g., Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson, & Brewer, 1996). The Stigma Tolerance subscale assesses whether athletes believe that others will label them as having psychological problems if they use sport psychology, with higher scores indicating a stigma toward seeking help from a sport psychologist.

As well as being stigmatized, some athletes might be somewhat sceptical about the usefulness of sport psychology, and that this would influence their use of the service (Bull, 1991). The Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting subscale assesses athletes' beliefs about the usefulness of sport psychology and mental training, with higher scores indicating high confidence in sport psychology. It would follow that individuals would need to be somewhat confident in the sport psychology services provided to truly benefit from the use of the services.

In addition to being viewed negatively by others and possibly having a concern about the utility of sport psychology services, some athletes may be resistant to share personal information to others, especially those they do not know well. The Personal Openness subscale measures interpersonal openness to try sport psychology, with higher scores indicating a lack of personal openness. This unwillingness will be a barrier to seeking and using sport psychology services (Donohue, et al., 2004).

Besides the other potentially barriers mentioned people who seek assistance from others often search for someone who is somewhat similar to themselves (experience, cultural, and national background). Findings indicate that some athletes prefer to work with instructors, counselors, and coaches who are ethnically and racially similar to their own perceived identity (e.g., Anshel, 1990;

Yambor, & Connelly, 1991). The Cultural Preference subscale measures the degree to which athletes identify with their own culture and have a preference for working with a consultant of the same cultural background. A high score on this subscale relates to a strong cultural preference.

Following the psychometric examination of the SPA-R instrument (Martin et al., 2002), the same authors attempted to determine whether these groups differ in mean responses to the subscales assessed by the instrument (Martin, Lavalley, Kellmann, & Page, 2004). Responses to the SPA-R by athletes from the United States ( $n=404$ ; 226 males & 178 females), United Kingdom ( $n=147$ ; 85 males & 62 females), and Germany ( $n=260$ ; 129 males & 131 females) were examined. The athletes ranged in age from 18 to 27 years of age ( $M = 20.57$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ). Results revealed significantly different attitudes overall toward sport psychology consulting. Athletes from the United States were more likely to have a stigma toward seeking assistance from sport psychology professionals than were athletes from the United Kingdom and Germany, whereas athletes from the United Kingdom were more confident in sport psychology consultants and less likely to identify solely with their own nationality, ethnicity or race than were the athletes from the United States and Germany.

A more recent study by Anderson, Hodge, Lavalley, and Martin (2004) with 112 elite New Zealand athletes has indicated that the attitudes toward sport psychology among this sample were generally positive (i.e., Stigma Tolerance  $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.8$  and lack of Personal Openness  $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ; Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting  $M = 5.2$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) and the athletes expressed some preference to working with a sport psychologist with the same cultural background (Cultural Preference  $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ). When compared to the mean data reported by Martin et al. (2004), it was found that New Zealand athletes had a more positive attitude toward sport psychology as evidenced by significantly lower average scores than United States, United Kingdom, and German athletes on the lack of Personal Openness and Stigma Tolerance subscales, and significantly higher scores on Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting. The New Zealand athletes also scored highest

on Cultural Preference suggesting that they most strongly identified with their own culture, and expressed greatest preference for working with a sport psychologist from their own background.

Both Anderson et al. (2004) and Martin et al. (2004) have called for further research related to cultural and national differences (Western vs. Eastern culture [United Kingdom vs. China] or Canada vs. United States, respectively) in seeking professional help within counseling (Furnham & Andrew, 1996). Therefore, differences between athletes from different countries on their attitudes toward sport psychology may also be evident (Martin et al., 2004). To date, no previous administration of the SPA-R in Ireland has been found, although general perceptions of sport psychology among athletes and coaches have been rated as important to elite Irish athletes (MacIntyre, Mahoney, & Moran, 1998). It is important to examine cultural and national differences in athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology as practitioners must be aware of any variations when working with athletes of differing backgrounds. Further research using the SPA-R would be useful to provide a more precise and up-to-date perspective of Irish athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology, and consider the influence of nationality on SPA-R scores by comparing the results with athletes from other countries. The aim of this study, therefore, was to replicate previous research using the SPA-R to collect data on Irish athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology and compare results from the Irish athletes with data collected by Martin et al. (2004) and Anderson et al. (2004).

## Method

### *Participants*

A sample of 240 elite Irish athletes (138 males and 102 females) ranging in age from 18 to 38 years ( $M = 24.55$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ) volunteered to participate in this study.

### *Procedure*

All members of the Irish Sports Council, Northern Ireland Sports Council, Sports Institute for Northern Ireland, Gaelic Players Association, and National Governing Bodies of Sport within Ireland who were of an elite standard (i.e., playing at the highest standard in a particular sport) were

individually contacted and invited to participate in this study. Individual athletes (n=500) received the SPA-R, instructions, informed consent forms, and a stamped addressed envelope either through coaches (n= 180; response rate = 52%), by mail (n= 230; response rate = 45%), or directly from the author (n=90; ; response rate = 47%). Participants were invited to anonymously complete and return the questionnaire. The overall response rate was 48%, which compares favourably with other studies (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004).

### *Materials*

Through various psychometric procedures, the SPA-R was also found to have adequate stability across various samples (see Martin et al., 2002). For example, test-retest procedures indicated that the SPA-R scales were .90 for stigma tolerance, .83 for confidence in sport psychology consulting, .71 for personal openness, and .70 for cultural preference. Coefficient alphas for the SPA-R scales were .84 for stigma tolerance, .82 for confidence in sport psychology consulting, .61 for personal openness, and .66 for cultural preference. Confirmatory factor analysis produced a four-factor model that was tested using multiple groups. Specifically, the model was tested separately for (a) male and female athletes (b) adolescent and adult athletes, and (c) athletes from different countries. The findings of the total sample, multiple independent sample and the measurement invariance tests indicate that the four-factor model has adequate stability, recognizable and theoretically consistent across groups and countries regardless of cultural differences. This suggests that the items of the SPA-R form measured relatively the same factors in each group. Therefore, because of these procedures and the demonstrated reliability of the scales, improved replicability is anticipated for future samples. Thus, the SPA-R has adequate reliability and validity across these particular groups (Anderson et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2002).

In the present study, the internal consistency estimates for the 7-item Stigma Tolerance ( $\alpha = .85$ ), 8-item Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting ( $\alpha = .88$ ), 6-item Personal Openness ( $\alpha = .65$ ), and 4-item Cultural Preference ( $\alpha = .66$ ) subscales were all consistent with previous findings. The responses

to items on each sub-scale are averaged to provide four measures of attitude within a range of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### *Data Analysis*

In order to compare results from the Irish athletes with data collected by Martin et al. (2004) and Anderson et al. (2004), a series of planned comparisons using independent group t-tests with Bonferroni corrections were undertaken and effect sizes calculated using Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1977).

### Results

Descriptive data for the SPA-R for elite Irish athletes was calculated and a generally positive attitude toward sport psychology was reported in comparison to other samples. There was a moderate score on the Stigma Tolerance subscale ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=.65$ ) indicating a positive attitude. The Personal Openness subscale had a low score that displayed a generally positive attitude ( $M=3.4$ ,  $SD=.73$ ) and general willingness to openly discuss issues with professionals. A moderately high score in the Confidence in Sport Psychology subscale ( $M=4.24$ ,  $SD=.59$ ) was obtained, indicating a positive attitude toward sport psychology. Additionally, Irish athletes did not express a very high preference for working with a sport psychologist from the same cultural background ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=.82$ ), indicating a low cultural preference.

A series of independent group t-tests with Bonferroni corrections revealed that Irish athletes scored significantly lower on the Personal Openness and Confidence in Sport Psychology subscales than athletes from New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States, and Germany samples, and also reported significantly higher scores on the Stigma Tolerance subscale than athletes from these countries. The Cultural Preference subscale for Irish athletes scored lower than the samples of athletes from United States, New Zealand and Germany, but higher than athletes from the United Kingdom (see Table 1). Through examination of the effect sizes, all of the differences were deemed to be moderately or highly meaningful, except for the difference between Irish and German athletes on the Cultural Preference and Confidence in Sport Psychology subscales (Cohen, 1977).

## *Discussion*

The results of the SPA-R questionnaire suggest that the Irish athletes in this study were open to using sport psychology. Additionally, the research indicates that this openness is regardless of the cultural background of the sport psychologist. Comparison of results from the Irish sample with the mean data collected from athletes from New Zealand, (Anderson et al., 2004), United States, Germany and the United Kingdom (Martin et al., 2004) reveal that Irish athletes held a generally positive attitude toward sport psychology as evidenced by significantly lower scores on the lack of Personal Openness subscale.

Irish athletes scored highest on the Stigma Tolerance subscale and lowest on the Confidence in Sport Psychology subscale comparatively, suggesting that this positive attitude may be based on factors not directly associated with personal experiences of sport psychology. Despite having the highest Stigma Tolerance score among the five countries, the Irish athletes' scores suggest that they do not perceive a stigma attached to working with a sport psychologist, which is contrary to Leffingwell et al. (2001) who found that athletes in the United States reported the fear of being stigmatized as being the primary reason for not seeking sport psychology assistance. Irish athletes scored low on the Cultural Preference subscale suggesting that they identified with cultures other than their own. This finding is not surprising due to the predominantly unique racial situation within Ireland, where settlements of people of different races are only a recent trend.

The differences between Irish athletes and other nationalities were all judged to be meaningful with large effect sizes on the Stigma Tolerance subscale and medium effect sizes on lack of Personal Openness subscales, except for difference between Irish and New Zealand athletes on the Personal Openness subscale. A large effect size was reported between Irish and New Zealand athletes on the Confidence in Sport Psychology subscale and a medium effect size between Irish and New Zealand athletes on the Cultural Preference subscale. All other effect sizes were reported as being extremely small (Cohen, 1977).



Some limitations should be noted when interpreting the results of this replication. The sample used was not a random representation of athletes from Ireland, leading to possible threats to external validity. Moreover, athletes selected the sport that they primarily participated in at their respective level. However, some athletes indicated that they had competed in more than one sport and/or type of sport during their life (i.e., physical contact and physical non-contact). Therefore, it is possible that greater rigidity in gender typing of sport activities may be demonstrated by athletes participating in only physical contact or traditionally masculine sports (Sabo, 1988).

As the practice of sport psychology has entered an age of accountability (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002), a number of issues related to athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology consulting need to be addressed in the future. For example, information is needed regarding how variables such as personality type and athletic maturity influence attitudes about seeking sport psychology help. Athletes who compete at higher levels may possess more favorable attitudes toward seeking consultation than their lower level counterparts. Further, there may be within-age group variation and within-ethnic/racial group variation, in addition to within-sport group preferences that exist for consulting (Kontos & Breland-Noble, 2002). Moreover, longitudinal studies investigating changes in help-seeking attitudes and behaviors need to be conducted (Leffingwell et al., 2001). Multicultural training and understanding the social contexts of a particular sport could help sport psychology practitioners improve athletes' and coaches' receptiveness to consulting.

In conclusion, this study has replicated and extended previous research investigating athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology. The findings provide an insight into the attitudes of elite Irish athletes, and suggest that they have a generally positive attitude toward using sport psychology and compare favorably against athletes from other countries. It is important that practitioners understand athletes' attitudes toward sports psychology so that services can be tailored to best meet their needs.

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Table 1

*T-Test Analyses and Effect Size Calculations Comparing Irish with New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States, and German Athletes.*

Scale	Country																	
	Ireland (n=240)		New Zealand (n=112)		t	ES	United Kingdom (n=147)		t	ES	United States (n=404)		t	ES	Germany (n=260)		t	ES
Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean			SD	Mean			SD	Mean			SD	Mean		
Stigma Tolerance	3.97	0.7	2.00	0.8	24.3**	0.80	2.49	0.8	19.6**	0.70	2.76	1.0	16.3**	0.57	2.49	0.9	20.6**	0.67
Personal Openness	3.51	0.7	3.70	1.1	2.8*	0.10	4.33	0.9	10.7**	0.45	4.42	0.9	14.6**	0.49	4.21	0.9	11.1**	0.40
Cultural Preference	3.09	0.8	3.92	1.0	8.4**	0.41	2.66	1.2	3.9**	0.20	3.47	1.3	4.4**	0.17	3.08	1.3	0.2	0.01
Confidence in Sport Psychology Consulting	4.25	0.6	5.23	0.9	12.2**	0.53	4.69	0.9	5.9**	0.28	4.63	1.0	5.5**	0.22	4.38	1.0	1.9	0.08

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$