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Consultant characteristics in sport psychology service provision: a critical review and future research directions

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Consultant characteristics in sport psychology service provision: A critical review and future research directions

Abstract

The sport psychology consultant's (SPC) first impression and rapport building with potential clients is vital to 'gaining entry' – the precursor to subsequent service provision. Understanding those characteristics of the consultant that influence the clients' preference and likelihood to seek psychological services contributes to the development of educational training programs for neophyte practitioners, and marketing tools for the field as a whole. This article offers a critical review of studies that have investigated the preferred characteristics of SPCs in terms of likelihood to seek services. A computerised literature search identified 17 studies representing a total of 2962 participants. The most preferred SPC was of the same gender, race, and age of the client with a high athletic background, sport-specific knowledge, and interpersonal skills. Such a consultant was lean and athletically built, physically active, possessed either an advanced degree or was certified and had experience working with diverse populations. Methodological and sampling limitations as well as future research directions are highlighted. SPCs and governing bodies are encouraged to consider these findings for training and marketing purposes.

Keywords: professional practice; characteristics; preference; perceptions

The professional practice, presentation, and personality of the Sport Psychology Consultant (SPC) have been of significant interest to sport psychology researchers for the past three decades (Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, & Walsh, 2001; Van Raalte, Brewer, Linder, & De Lange, 1990; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). One line of study within this field of research is that of SPC characteristics, and how these influence an individual's decision to seek the services of a consultant. Despite a number of characteristics being examined, one unifying factor of research is evident – the aim to produce a comprehensive “image” of the most preferred SPC characteristics.

When potential clients of sport psychology meet a SPC for the first time there are a number of characteristics that effect their perceptions of the consultant, their effectiveness as a SPC, and the likelihood to seek their services. These judgements can be made soon after initially meeting the practitioner, and examining these are important to the practitioner due to their potential enduring effect. Social psychology research suggests that individuals' intuitive judgements accurately predict job performance (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000), and that positively biased first impressions are strong predictors of both initial and long-term relationship development (Human, Sandstrom, Biesanz, & Dunn, 2012). Additionally, Gawronski, Hu, Rydell, VerVliet, and DeHouwer (2015) found that first impressions continue to dominate, even after a contradictory experience later. Thus, establishing the most desirable characteristics for a SPC to possess has become a burgeoning field of research within the sport psychology literature.

A number of desirable characteristics for a consultant to possess and which are likely to influence their interactions with clients have been suggested within allied profession research such as counselors (Lewis & Walsh, 1978; Townes, Chavez-Korell, & Cunningham, 2009) and physicians (Hash, Munna, Vogel, & Bason, 2003). These studies persistently find interpersonal skills, race, gender, body build and professional qualifications as favoured

characteristics. Recent research within sport psychology has integrated these characteristic with those that are idiosyncratic to the practice of sport psychology, such as sport-specific knowledge and athletic background (Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson II, 2008). However, despite such attention to the SPC themselves there has been a paucity of conclusive research studies or reviews that offer a comprehensive image of the most preferred consultant characteristics. The eclectic mix of characteristics that have formed different investigations also restricts the possibility of promoting a research design that addresses all key factors. Early research assessed potential clients' perceived importance of each characteristic, which led to positively skewed results for each characteristic (Lubker et al., 2008). However recent research has begun to consider the client as a consumer of sport psychology, and thus started to utilise consumer market analysis tools and methods which results in participants ranking the characteristics against one another. This shift of research design allows applied practitioners and researchers within the field to easily identify which characteristic is most influential over consumers' decision in which SPC to consult with.

The systematic discussion of consumers' preferences and perceptions of SPC's characteristics holds multiple advantages. In the first instance, an understanding of consumer perspectives will lead to a more informed consideration of the factors that predict initiation of the formal consultation process (Hamberger & Iso-Ahola, 2006). For example, the Theory of Planned Behavior proposes that an individual's behaviour is governed by their intentions, which are in part determined by an individual's attitudes (Ajzen, 1991). Hence, understanding attitudes can provide an understanding of the intention of consumers to consult with SPCs. This understanding of intention in turn allows for SPCs to better understand consumer perspectives and how to affect these in order to gain entry.

Secondly, knowledge of preferred characteristics that can be controlled by the SPC can facilitate the development of appropriate training for practitioners, as well as educational

and marketing materials designed for the consumer (Van Raalte, Brewer, Matheson, & Brewer, 1996). Practitioners can utilise this information to identify which characteristics to develop and market with this knowledge. However, the extent to which training can develop certain characteristics is limited due to their controllability. The consultant has a varying level of control over each characteristic, with little to no control over some and complete control over others. Thus, the development of appropriate training should focus on those that are controllable. When these findings are considered for consumer marketing materials, importance should be placed on those characteristics which are controllable.

It is important that the consultant characteristic literature is synthesised with a view to bringing greater clarity on what sport psychology consumers' preferences for practitioners are. This synthesis would provide a comprehensive image of the most preferred SPC, and would address highlighted difficulties designing research to study an eclectic collection of characteristics. Hence this study sets out to provide a systematic narrative review of consultant characteristics in sport psychology, and provide a critical analysis of the collated findings. A systematic narrative review adopts a narrative summary, in place of a statistical analysis, of the findings of studies in the synthesis (Rodgers, Sowden, Petticrew, Arai, Roberts, Britten, & Popay, 2009). Specifically, our goal is to locate sport psychology consultant characteristics research literature, to synthesize their findings to develop an understanding of how these characteristics can influence consumer choice, and to provide a critical analysis of the research in the area to date.

Method

Systematic narrative review

Systematic narrative reviews, also referred to as narrative syntheses (Popay et al., 2006) and systematic review with a narrative approach (Swann, Keegan, Piggott, & Crust, 2012), have been suggested to provide a mid-point between quantitative (e.g. meta-analyses)

and qualitative (e.g. meta-ethnography) syntheses (Swann et al., 2012). This approach is based on providing a narrative synthesis to a systematic review (Azulai & Walsh, 2015), that relies on the use of words and text to tell the story of the included research findings (Popay et al., 2006). It provides a powerful tool to summarise research findings for future research directions and to establish generalisability of findings (Mulrow, 1994). The systematic narrative review approach has been utilised both within allied professions (Azulai & Walsh, 2015) and sport psychology itself (Swann et al., 2012).

Search strategy

In May 2017, a computerized literature search of PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, PubMed, and SPORTDiscus was conducted using the search terms consult* (for consultant, consultation, and consulting) and either charact* (for characteristic and character), preference, perception, or effectiveness. A hand search of major sport and exercise psychology journals (i.e. International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, Psychology of Sport and Exercise, and The Sport Psychologist) and those journals including papers contained in the review (i.e. Journal of Contemporary Athletics, Journal of Sport Behavior, Journal of Sport Sciences, Journal of Sport Sciences and Medicine, and Psychological Report) was conducted to identify any papers missed during the computerised search.

Selection criteria

Papers were included if they (1) were published in an English language journal (2) were specifically regarding the characteristics of consultants and their effectiveness (3) specifically focused on sport psychology or the sport psychologist.

Selection of papers for inclusion

The titles and abstracts of the articles retrieved by literature search were screened for relevance using broad inclusion criteria (consultant characteristics). All relevant papers were

then screened using narrower criteria (sport psychology) to identify eligible papers (Figure 1).

Data extraction

During data extraction, Popay et al.'s (2006) guidance on conducting a narrative synthesis was utilised:

- Developing a theory of how the intervention works
- Developing a preliminary synthesis of findings
- Exploring relationships in the data
- Assessing the robustness of the synthesis

As interventions were not the focus of this review, the first of these elements was disregarded. Once all papers to be included in the review were identified, each was read and re-read to develop a preliminary synthesis of the findings. During this process, the findings of each study were brought together, organised, and described (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009; CRD). The data extracted from papers included information on study design and methodology, the sample under study, the country of origin, and the outcome variables under investigation, as well as the outcome of each study (Table 1). The relationships between (a) characteristics of individual studies and their findings; and (b) the findings of different studies were explored (CRD, 2009). The robustness of the synthesis can relate to the methodological quality of the included studies, including 'weighting' the findings of studies according to quality (CRD, 2009). The methodological quality of studies was assessed and described throughout the synthesis of findings.

Data synthesis

As the results of the search and review yielded only a small number of papers ($k=17$), and the characteristics measured are too diverse (CRD, 2009), a quantitative meta-analysis would not provide useful results. Instead, findings were synthesised narratively.

Results

The search of the databases retrieved 246 records. Following broad and narrow screening, seventeen papers (Table 1) were considered suitable for inclusion in the review.

Study characteristics

Country of origin. The 17 studies originated from four countries: the United States of America (USA; 9), the United Kingdom (6), Malaysia (1), and a combined sample from the USA and Japan (1).

Data collection method. Three data collection methods were utilised including: surveys and questionnaires, judged similarity tasks, and interviews. The different questionnaires employed included: characteristics of effective sport psychology consultant inventory (Lubker, et al., 2008;1), Attributes of Sport Psychology Practitioners Questionnaire (Lubker, Visek, Watson, & Singpurwalla, 2012; ASPPQ; 1), First Impression Questionnaire (Lubker, Watson, Visek, & Geer, 2005; FIQ; 1), Athlete Preference Questionnaire (Maniar et al., 2001; 1), , Attitudes Toward Seeking a Sport Psychology Consultant Questionnaire (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, & Lounsbury, 1997; ATSSPCQ; 1), Multicultural issues in sport psychology and consultation survey (Naoi, Watson, Deaner, & Sato, 2011; 1), and the Attributes of Practitioners Questionnaire (Woolway & Harwood, 2015; APQ, 1).

Characteristics measured. In terms of the consultant characteristics measured, seven investigated practitioner titles, six studies measured gender, five studies measured race and athletic background, three explored practitioner body build, attire, sport-specific knowledge, and interpersonal skills, two studies measured practitioner accreditation and physical appearance or attractiveness, and one study measured each of consultant effectiveness, consultant experience, multicultural exposure, physical activity, and age.

Participant characteristics

Across the seventeen studies, there were a total of 2962 participants. This total consisted of 2639 athletes, 115 sport psychologists, 8 coaches, and 200 non-athletic students.

The age of the participants ranged from 17 to >50, based on the eleven studies that provided this information. The gender of participants was relatively evenly split across all studies with 1426 males (48%) and 1320 females (45%; 216 [7%] were unidentified).

Outcomes

The aim of this review was to synthesize research on SPC characteristics that influence consumers' perceptions of consultant effectiveness, and to critically analyse this past research whilst providing future directions for practice and research. Following the suggestions of the CRD (2009), when interpreting these findings, more weight should be given to those more recent research studies which have addressed previous research limitations. Twelve characteristics were identified and are outlined below.

Gender. When presented with a choice over the consultant gender participants reported an overall preference for a SPC of the same gender (Lubker et al., 2008; Naoi et al., 2011; Ponnusamy & Grove, 2014). However, when forced to choose between a male or female consultant, participants preferred female consultants (Lubker et al., 2012) and rated them higher on personality traits, whilst rating males as higher on sport knowledge (Lubker et al., 2005). One study (Zakrajsek, Steinfeldt, Bodey, Martin, & Zizzi, 2013) found that a female consultant would be preferred due to a pre-existing dominance of male staff within the environment.

Gender research has shown a reluctance to ascertain why individuals report preferences for consultant gender. Gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), which appropriates a number of sex-linked characteristics to masculine and feminine individuals is one explanation posited for this gender preference. Particular feminine qualities, such as listening, caring, and empathy, are suggested to be the qualities of effective service provision, thus increasing individuals' preference for a female consultant over their male counterparts. Notwithstanding the plausibility of this hypothesis, the field of research appears to have overlooked an

alternative perspective, that of transference (Stevens & Andersen, 2007), and the perceived attractiveness of the consultant (Lubker et al., 2008). Male participants report a higher preference for female consultants than their female counterparts, as well as rating gender as more influential on their preference and perceptions of practitioners (Lubker et al., 2012). It is possible that these male participants prefer the female consultant based on their perception that a female consultant will be more attractive and attracted to themselves than a male SPC. Literature from the wider counselling and service provision domain has shown that individuals rate attractive practitioners as more competent, professional, assertive (Lewis & Walsh, 1978) and are more likely to return for further consultation (Sigall & Aronson, 1969) than unattractive consultants. However, the potential erotic feelings of clients in sport psychology service provision has received minimal attention (Stevens & Andersen, 2007).

When consulting with a team or group of the opposite gender SPCs may be more prone to experience the potential problems of explicit sexual desire and transference than allied professions such as clinical and counselling psychologists experience in one-on-one consulting. The typical sport peer group is dominated by a group of athletes who are able to use their social status to act in a manner that may not be wholly acceptable in other contexts, with the other athletes often being complicit in supporting these dysfunctional norms (Krane & Kaus, 2014).

Race. Participants reported that they would be more comfortable with a SPC of the same race (Martin et al., 1997) and rated similar race practitioners higher than dissimilar practitioners (Lubker et al., 2005). However, race was consistently rated as the least important characteristic influencing preference and likelihood to seek services (Lubker et al., 2012; Naoi et al., 2011) and was not a significant predictor of attitude towards SPCs (Hamberger & Iso-Ahola, 2006).

These findings reflect research spanning over 50 years in allied professions (Banks, Berenson, & Carkhuff, 1967) and conducted across varying ethnicities (Cimboic, 1972) which found that preference for counsellors did not exist as a function of race, and that any reported preference may be less important than other characteristics (Atkinson, Furlong, & Poston, 1986). Due to the ethnic diversity within sport, a sport psychologist is often unlikely to consult with a group of individuals from homogenous ethnic backgrounds (Martens, Mobley, & Zizzi, 2000) and racial/ethnic matches between sport psychologists and athletes can be difficult due to the small number of minority consultants (Martens et al., 2000). Hence, whilst previous research has elicited individual preferences, this is unlikely to represent the environment the SPC consults in. Exploring the interaction between diverse populations' preferences and the cultural sensitivity of the SPC to these populations may be more beneficial to applied practice within a group setting.

Athletic background. The SPC's athletic background has been reported as the second (Lubker et al., 2012; Naoi et al., 2011) and fourth (Ponnusamy & Grove, 2014; Woolway & Harwood, 2015) most important characteristic, yet it has consistently explained between 12 and 17% of variance in participants choice of practitioner (Lubker et al., 2012; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). Athletes ($M=4.71$) also rated SPC athletic background as significantly more important than SPCs themselves ($M=3.89$) on a 6-point Likert scale (Lubker et al., 2008). Collegiate coaches preferred a SPC who possessed athletic experience and the understanding of the athletic environment that this attribute provides (Zakrajsek et al., 2013).

The findings in this area appear to be unequivocal, as participants consistently prefer a practitioner with an athletic background. However, the studies listed above fail to clarify the level of athletic history. Practitioners are presented as being an athlete or not an athlete (Lubker et al., 2012) or simply as having a background as a competitive athlete (Lubker et al.,

2005; Ponnusamy & Grove, 2014). Woolway and Harwood (2015) offered three levels of previous competitive level (county, national, international) yet do not provide a ‘no athletic background’ option. This lack of clarity limits the extent to which implications can be drawn conclusively from these findings.

Practitioner title. A practitioner using the title of sport psychologist has been perceived as being concerned with mental, non-sport related issues (Van Raalte et al., 1990) and more similar to mental health practitioners than coaches by athletes (Van Raalte et al., 1996) and SPCs themselves (Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1993). However, later studies found that the sport psychologist title was associated with both sport/physical and mental professionals, but closer to the sport/physical cluster for both elite (Brooks & Bull, 1997) and university female athletes (Brooks & Bull, 1999). Participants reported they were more likely to seek the help of other individuals such as coaches, friends and family and sport counsellors before seeking the services of a sport psychologist (Maniar et al., 2001). An educational intervention aimed at increasing participants’ knowledge of professional titles, and those practitioners using different titles, resulted in the relative importance of a practitioner’s title rising from third to first most important, with the title ‘Sport Psychologist’ preferred over Life Coach and Neuro-Linguistic Programming Practitioner (Woolway & Harwood, 2015).

The findings from the practitioner title area are discouraging for the sport psychologist as individuals appear to prefer other titled individuals, except following an educational intervention. However, as Woolway and Harwood (2015) suggest, there are a number of other individuals providing psychological support to athletes utilising other titles, such as performance psychologist and elite mind-set coach. Examining how these are perceived against the Sport Psychologist title would further our understanding on this topic. Within the United Kingdom this is of particular interest as there are currently two education

and training pathways (British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences and British Psychological Society) for which an individual can gain an accreditation, however due to title protection, they are not able to utilise the same title (Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist or Sport and Exercise Psychologist, respectively), which may produce confusion within those that are not aware of the specific intricacies of the professional title and accreditation issues that exist.

Body build. SPCs that were presented as possessing a lean, athletic body build with a normal or pre-obese BMI were rated and ranked significantly more positively (Lovell, Parker, Brady, Cotterill, & Howatson, 2011), higher on personality traits, sport knowledge, and likelihood to seek services (Lubker et al., 2005), than class I and II obese, out of shape SPCs. However, it has been rated as one of the least influential characteristics for the SPC to possess (5th, Lubker et al., 2008; 6th, Lubker et al., 2012). A SPC looking physically fit and leading an active lifestyle were rated as moderately important to both athletes and SPCs (Lubker et al., 2008).

Individual athletes' perceptions of what constitutes an 'athletic body build' can differ depending on the athlete's sport, and position within that sport (Stuempfle, Katch, & Petrie, 2003). For example, an athlete whose position demands a muscular, mesomorphic body type may not perceive a lean, ectomorphic body type as an athletic body build, despite its advantages in differing sports and positions. This will skew individual beliefs regarding what an athletic body build is; hence the implications from this area of research are limited.

Attire. Participant preferences and perceptions based on SPC attire are contrasting across studies. SPCs in sports attire were rated more positively by international and national athletes (Lovell et al., 2011), and higher on sport knowledge, and likelihood to seek services (Lubker et al., 2005) than formally attired SPCs. Whereas academically dressed SPCs were rated significantly higher on personality traits (Lubker et al. 2005), and professional and staff

attired SPCs positively influenced participants perceptions and preferences for the consultant (Lubker et al., 2012). SPC attire was rated as the second least important of thirty-one consultant qualities (Lubker et al., 2008) and fourth most important of eight (Lubker et al., 2012).

This is the consultant characteristic with the most equivocal findings as student-athlete participants have reported a preference for a SPC in sport attire (Lovell et al., 2011), professional and staff attire (Lubker et al., 2012), and academic attire (Lubker et al., 2005). Hence, understanding exactly which attire athletes prefer is confounded.

The methodological approach of attire research within sport psychology has failed to avoid a limitation encountered in early counselling literature (Littrell & Littrell, 1982). The practitioner's attire is not given further definition or contextualized meaning than the title they are given in survey instructions. The terms 'sports', 'formal', and 'academic' attire may represent different clothing styles to individuals in different contexts. For example, the SPC works with a very different population of individuals than allied professions, and with the professionalization of sport, tracksuits and athletic attire may be considered as professional attire as opposed to trousers and a shirt (Lovell et al., 2011). This lack of clarification of attire categories limits the interpretation of findings, whereby a difference in findings may only exist due to the varying ways in which participants perceive attire categories. Research within counselling psychology has tackled this limitation by clearly clarifying dress codes (Littrell & Littrell, 1982) and this serves as a recommendation for future research in this particular facet of sport psychology research.

Sport-specific knowledge. A high level of sport-specific knowledge, including having competed and worked within the specific sport, is consistently rated as moderately important (Lubker et al., 2008). Within later consumer research sport-specific knowledge was ranked fourth most important (Lubker et al., 2012) and second pre- and third- most important

post educational intervention (Woolway & Harwood., 2015) when ranked against other characteristics. Having competed in and having previous experience in the sport was rated significantly higher by athletes than SPCs themselves (Lubker et al., 2008).

Whilst sport-specific knowledge is researched as an independent characteristic, early definitions inherently linked it to a practitioner having an athletic background. In more recent studies (Lubker et al., 2012; Woolway & Harwood, 2015) sport specific knowledge is more clearly defined as “the practitioner’s ability to speak your sport’s language and the depth of his/her knowledge of both the demands of your sport and the specific mental skills required for development and performance” (p. 173, Woolway & Harwood, 2015). However, this may be too simplified a definition as it is presented as simply knowledge of the sport, whereas it may be more of a deeper understanding of the sport that is desired. This deeper understanding may evolve from having an athletic background in the same sport, again inherently linking the two characteristics.

Interpersonal skills. Positive interpersonal skills were rated as the fourth highest SPC quality out of thirty-one elements (Lubker et al., 2008), the most important and influential characteristic pre-educational intervention (Woolway & Harwood, 2015), and the second most important characteristic, explaining fourteen percent of preference variance in Lubker and colleagues (2012) study. Whilst the role of interpersonal skills was superseded by professional title in Woolway and Harwood’s study following their educational intervention, the relative importance of interpersonal skills (i.e. variance) remained stable across time-points. Characteristics associated with interpersonal skills (trustworthiness, energy, personality, confidence) were viewed as desirable by collegiate coaches (Zakrajsek et al., 2013).

Whilst persistently reported as one of, if not the most important characteristic, interpersonal skills as a broad construct have been researched in a manner that does not

inform the field of applicable findings. This characteristic is defined as “the ability of the consultant/practitioner to use his or her personality (e.g., approachable, respectful, caring) to build a positive working relationship with athletes and coaches” (p. 173, Woolway & Harwood, 2015). However, examining individual perceptions to interpersonal skills with such a broad definition limits the applicability of the findings. Interpersonal skills can encompass a wide range of very differing skills, from the approachable, respectful, and caring of Woolway and Harwood to empathy, acceptance, and genuineness of Rogers (1957). Due to this lack of clarity surrounding what actually constitutes interpersonal skills; it is difficult for the applied practitioner to identify the essential skills necessary to effectively consult.

Accreditation. A SPC that was certified to work with athletes on mental skills was rated higher than whether they possessed an advanced degree in performance enhancement (Lubker et al., 2008), whereas in a later study, participants rated possessing an advanced degree as more preferred than a certified/licensed practitioner or one with no credentials (Lubker et al., 2012). SPC accreditation was rated as the most important characteristic in determining participants’ choice of consultant (Lubker et al., 2012), yet the fifth most preferred characteristic by elite Malaysian athletes (Ponnusamy & Grove, 2014). Coaches stated that direct training, maintenance of professional boundaries, and credentials were required, yet noted their lack of awareness related to actual credentialing in sport psychology (Zakrajsek et al., 2013).

Multicultural exposure. In the one study that has investigated the consultants’ exposure to a number of cultures within previous consultations, Japanese (3.86) and American (3.51) athletes rated experience working with diverse populations as the most important consultant characteristic influencing their likelihood to seek the services of a SPC on a 6-point Likert scale (Naoi et al., 2011).

This characteristic has only been the subject of one research study, making the generalizability of the findings limited. In addition, this study fails to clarify how many other cultures the desired SPC would have had experience of consulting with, and whether it is preferred if these cultures are similar to that of the sample.

Physical activity. Malaysian athletes rated the importance of the consultant being physically active to their likelihood to seek services high ($M=6.05$) on a 1 (Not very important) to 7 (Very important) Likert scale (Ponnusamy & Grove, 2014) and the second most important to the sample.

Physical activity may be regarded by participants as both a sign of athletic background and as a precursor to possessing an athletic body build. Hence the research finding from the one study on the characteristic is confounded by similar limitations to both athletic background and body build. The level of physical activity is not clarified, which in addition to individuals' perceptions of what constitutes being physically active differing, renders the term physically active as an unknown quantity.

Additionally, whilst a practitioner's physical activity can be presented within a profile constructed for research purposes, it is a characteristic that is unlikely to be known to a potential consumer. It is likely that the only information consumers would have access to regarding physical activity level is the practitioner's body build, and the individual's interpretation of body build as previously discussed.

Age. Athletes from multiple cultures would prefer to seek the services of a consultant who was close in age to themselves (Naoi et al., 2011). However, this characteristic is considered less important than others measured.

The implications of these are limited as only one study has examined this characteristic. However, it is important to note that 'close in age' is not clarified in terms of

what ‘close’ means. Individual perceptions of what close entails may differ, and the age range for ‘close in age’ may vary significantly.

Discussion

The purpose of this review paper was to synthesise research on SPC characteristics that influence potential clients’ perceptions, preferences, and their likelihood to seek professional services. Understanding the important characteristics can lead to a more informed prediction of the initiation of the formal consultation process (Hamberger & Iso-Ahola, 2006), as well as facilitating the development of training for practitioners, and educational and marketing materials for consumers (Van Raalte et al., 1996). The results of this review process serve as prompts for a number of critical discussion points both for advancing this field of research and improving practitioner awareness in terms of their services.

Overall, when the reviewed studies are collated, with particular regard to more recent research utilising novel and improved methodological techniques, the most preferred SPC was of the same gender, race, and age to the individuals with whom they would consult, with a high athletic background, sport-specific knowledge, and interpersonal skills. They were lean and athletically built, physically active, possessed either an advanced degree or were certified and had experience working with diverse populations.

Consultant characteristics can be placed on a continuum of controllability ranging from age, race, and gender to the consultant’s sport-specific knowledge and attire. The reviewed studies here show that whilst individuals may prefer someone of the same gender and race as themselves, these characteristics were consistently ranked as the least important when ranked with other characteristics. Therefore, those characteristics which are controllable are most pertinent for the applied practitioner. The characteristic that was persistently ranked as one of the most important was ‘high interpersonal skills’, potentially

encompassing qualities such as empathy, approachability, and caring, however a lack of clarity as to the definition and qualities of high interpersonal skills is lacking. It is these qualities that are influential in building rapport; itself posited as one of the most important characteristics of an effective service provider (Campbell, 2009; Lubker et al., 2008). Possessing an athletic background indicates that the SPC has the ability to “walk the walk in the sport environment” (Lubker et al., 2005). Lubker and colleagues (2012) suggest that an athletic background naturally coalesces with greater interpersonal skills and rapport building, hence improving the effectiveness of the consulting relationship. Additionally, and perhaps just as intuitively, participants report a preference for a SPC with the ability to ‘talk the talk’ of their sport, represented by a high sport-specific knowledge. This characteristic means that the practitioner understands the language of sport (Lubker et al., 2005; 2008) and its specific technical, physical, and psychological aspects (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004).

An educational intervention targeting the consumers’ knowledge of sport psychology and other competing professions (Woolway & Harwood, 2015) elicited a significant positive change in consumers’ perceptions of the sport psychology title. This follows the repeated finding of research that the SPC title carries stigma (Ravizza, 1988) and can lead athletes to encounter derogation (Linder, Pillow & Reno, 1989) and in turn other-titled professionals are preferred to the SPC (Van Raalte et al., 1990; Van Raalte et al., 1996). This suggests that when marketing the field and oneself as a consultant, the intricacies of the profession, such as protection of title, the training routes that are required, and the techniques and methods utilised by SPCs should be highlighted, especially in relation to competing service providers.

General Limitations

Through interpreting the findings of the reviewed studies, it is important to cast a critical eye over general limitations in the current body of work. We identify and discuss what we believe are the most significant points below.

A primary observation to draw from this review relates to the sampling characteristics of the studies examined. Eleven of the seventeen studies reviewed utilised a student population, with a number of these specifying that the sample were non-athletes. Student-athletes are unlikely to be the individuals seeking the services of a practitioner at their level of competition; instead this responsibility is likely to fall to coaches, managers or athletic directors, thus making the findings from this particular population more relevant to the applied SPC. In addition, non-athletes do not represent the population of individuals that would consult with a SPC, rendering these findings less practically or ecologically relevant to the SPC.

Participants' intention to actually seek and initiate sport psychology service is also problematic when interpreting these findings. The majority of participants within the reviewed studies are considered as prospective consumers, they are not reported as actively seeking or interested in the services of a SPC. It is likely that as this data has not been reported, study designs did not set out to ascertain this information. This is an important weakness to the body of research as the participants may not have accurately responded to the measures due to having a low individual interest in the subject, and potentially having had no prior thoughts regarding this topic. In addition, the participants' previous experiences with SPCs are minimally reported. Individuals who do not have experience of a consulting relationship and the processes involved clearly possess a different knowledge base and mind-set to those whose perceptual preferences are influenced by prior consultant experience. Woolway and Harwood (2015) found that individuals' previous experience with a life coach negatively affected their ratings of SPCs compared to those with no previous experience.

Therefore, whilst studying the virgin preferences of prospective consumers can help practitioners to understand how to best market themselves to a population of similar demographics, it is arguably more salient for researchers to scrutinize the perceptions of past or presently active consumers vis a vis the consultant characteristics that would be influential in any subsequent practitioner-based decision making.

The limitation highlighted within the physical activity findings highlights a limitation that can be extended to other characteristics. Whilst some factors can be easily presented as part of a practitioner profile created for research materials, they may not be so easily perceivable by consumers. Whilst characteristics such as gender, race, attire, and body build are readily available cues to individuals, other characteristics such as multicultural exposure, physical activity, and accreditation are unlikely to be as readily available and may never be discussed between consultant and client. This limitation extends the suggestion that it is most valuable to research those controllable characteristics where information is readily available to the consumer.

Implications

The findings of this review offer several implications for the field of applied sport psychology and professional practice. Due to the methodological limitations highlighted above, practical implications should be considered with caution. However, the implications provided here are in particular regard to the findings of more recent research that has attempted to address the limitations of previous research.

Practitioners who consult under the title of “Sport Psychologist”, and their accrediting bodies, such as the Health and Care Professions Council (in the UK) and the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, should consider the implications highlighted here and evaluate how to best centrally market the profession to consumers. To promote a regulated field of psychological support more effectively, it appears to be prudent, as past studies have

illustrated (e.g., Lubker et al., 2012; Woolway & Harwood, 2015), for associations to proactively reinforce the quality assured training that sport psychologists receive, in comparison to competing professions providing psychological services.

In addition to the central marketing of sport psychology services by accrediting bodies, it makes good business sense for individual practitioners to ethically market themselves to potential clients and consumers of sport psychology. The messages from this review suggest that SPC's should endeavour to proactively communicate the differences between themselves [and their academic background] and the less regulated (or less professionally recognised) fields of practice. The findings relating to titles demonstrate the need to promote the benefits of and differences between sport psychology and allied fields. Self-presentation of the Sport Psychologist, with regards to attire and body build, should also be considered when approaching a client, and throughout the continuation of the consulting relationship. The importance placed on sport-specific knowledge by participants indicates the importance of the SPC undergoing familiarisation with the sport that they will be working with, and placing greater emphasis on this during self-marketing and in the initial stages of rapport building (Lubker et al., 2012).

To propagate and act on knowledge of consumer preferences, academic and certification programmes in sport psychology should incorporate such knowledge as components related to the business and practice of consulting. The importance of developing qualities such as interpersonal skills should be highlighted, alongside the importance of how individual practitioners interact with consumers and clients, and how this can positively or negatively affect their consulting relationships. The early inclusion of these fundamental elements in student-practitioner training programmes would ensure neophyte SPC's are equipped with knowledge, 'know how' and 'show how' (Miller, 1990) in the art of gaining entry into formal consultations with athlete and coach clients.

522 **Future Research Directions**

523 In concluding this review, there is a number of further research recommendations
524 beyond those already noted, that we believe would serve as opportunities for applied
525 researchers interested in this domain of consumerism in sport psychology.

526 As previously stated, the predominant population of study participants have been
527 prospective individuals that have little or no experience of consulting with a sport
528 psychologist, and are potentially not in a position to employ a practitioner. Thus, future
529 research should investigate the preferences and perceptions of those that do have experience
530 in employing a SPC, and how their experiences have shaped these perceptions. This
531 population that are directly responsible for the hiring of SPCs, the “gatekeepers” to
532 consulting, hold key information regarding what it is that influences them to hire one
533 individual over another. These are the individuals that employ SPCs for their athletes and
534 coaches, from positions such as Performance Director, Athletic Director and Academy
535 Manager. It is often these individuals that must first experience and approve of the SPC
536 before consultancy can begin within the elite sport environment. Conducting research of this
537 manner would increase the practical relevance of findings as this would extend our
538 knowledge to a novel population that hold such important and powerful roles in relation to
539 the SPCs business and career. Understanding the experiences of such individuals and how
540 these have impacted upon their future hiring practices and considerations of sport psychology
541 support will allow the profession to understand how to better market themselves specifically
542 to this important set of consumers.

543 Furthermore, it is important to note the predominance of research sampling
544 populations from western cultures. Only two of the 17 studies sampled individuals from
545 outside of the USA and the UK. With the development of sport psychology, it is suggested
546 that future research adopts a cross-cultural perspective. Such findings will help to inform the

547 preferences for consultants in cultures where professional accreditation programs are
548 continuing to develop. In addition to sampling from cross-cultural populations, future
549 research should examine consultant characteristics that may be influenced by culture. These
550 may include the SPC's fluency in their first and second language, their regional accent,
551 dialect and pronunciation of their second language.

552 A further focus of future research should be to conduct research that acknowledges
553 and addresses the methodological flaws that hamper the interpretation of these findings, for
554 instance a lack of clarification and definition regarding consultant attire. In doing so this field
555 of research would be more significant and practically relevant to the applied practitioner. The
556 methodological techniques utilised within further characteristic research should adopt the
557 view of the client, whether it be coach, athlete, performance director, or other significant
558 other, as a consumer and the research tools that are available in this context. Early research
559 asked participants to simply rate how important and desirable each characteristic was with no
560 relational data collected. However later research has adopted market analysis tools such as
561 conjoint analysis (Lubker et al., 2012; Woolway & Harwood, 2015) to identify the ranked
562 importance of each characteristic to the consumer. This has shifted the focus of research from
563 all characteristics to those that are deemed most important, and has displayed that simple
564 rating may mislead individuals as to the importance of certain characteristics such as race.
565 Continuing research in the current vein would provide the field with a more rigorous
566 understanding of where focus should be placed when marketing themselves and the
567 profession.

568 Research to date fails to elicit the extent to which characteristic preference predicts
569 initiation of consultation, and whether these preferences affect actual choice of consultant.
570 Assessing individuals' perceptions and preferences for practitioners based upon their
571 experience of descriptive and photographic material elicits automatic evaluations (Gawronski

et al., 2015) of the practitioner. Thus, the extent to which these evaluations are enduring and accurate are crucial to the validity of translating these findings to the applied field. Social psychology research suggests that individuals' intuitive judgements accurately predict job performance (Ambady et al., 2000), and that positively biased first impressions are strong predictors of both initial and long-term relationship development (Human et al., 2012). Additionally, Gawronski and colleagues (2015) found that first impressions continue to dominate, even after a contradictory experience later. Despite these previous findings, sport psychology research should endeavour to assess whether this occurs within our field to assess the practical and long running relevance of these findings. Performing longitudinal studies that measure individuals' preferences, and how these affect future and actual interactions with SPCs, would determine whether there is an enduring and significant effect of these preferences.

Future research in this field should also attempt to examine more assiduously why participants tend to prefer a female consultant. Gender schema theory is the predominantly utilised theoretical explanation for these findings, however this has not been explored within sport psychology, and it is posited here that transference may act as a key influence in this preference. Past research has presented practitioners as either male or female – a design which does not allow for the researcher to distinguish whether there is a preference for feminine qualities as outlined by gender schema, or because of a perception that the female consultant will be more physically attractive than the male consultant. To address this, research methodology should alter the way they present practitioners. By presenting a practitioner that possesses gender related qualities (Bem, 1981) that are either masculine, feminine, or both, researchers would be able to distinguish whether it is gender schema that affects consumers' preferences.

Concluding remarks

The current review outlines the findings to date from studies that investigate SPC characteristics and their effect on consumers' preferences and perceptions. Several recommendations for applied practitioners are drawn, especially in relation to more recent research that has begun to utilise novel methodological techniques which alleviate limitations from past research. However, the body of research does indeed hold a number of inherent methodological and sampling flaws that we encourage future researchers to address alongside pertinent and thoughtful research questions that advance this important professional area of sport psychology.

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774 **Table 1** – Summary of study characteristics

775 **Figure 1** – Search results flow diagram