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Review article

Reflecting on the delivery of a longitudinal coping intervention amongst junior national netball players

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Abstract
Recent research suggests that appropriately-tailored interventions can assist adolescents enhance their coping skills (Frydenberg and Lewis, 2004). The present paper reflects upon the delivery of a longitudinal coping intervention utilized by junior national netball players. Reflection is focused on issues such as the rationale for the intervention, operational issues surrounding the delivery and management of the work. It is also focused on interpersonal issues relating to intervention implementation. We contend that being explicit about developmental and applied processes may enable theoretically sound and efficacious practices to be identified. In addition, unpacking operational issues related to delivery may assist applied sport and exercise psychologists in the development of related work.

Key words: Longitudinal coping intervention, time management, goal setting, problem solving, communication, emotional intelligence, adolescence.

Introduction

During adolescence, young athletes may be confronted by a series of developmental stressors (Smetana et al., 2006) whilst concurrently experiencing sporting, academic, employment and social stressors (Dugdale et al., 2002; Woodman and Hardy, 2001). The potential for these combined factors to be perceived as stressful may be exacerbated by the possibility that adolescents are still developing adaptive coping strategies and may be unable to cope with such pressures (Frydenberg and Lewis, 2004).

Coping interventions are intended to prevent participants from experiencing stress or reduce the effects of stressors (Baker, 2001). Research suggests the psychosocial development of adolescence provides opportunities for coping interventions (Compas et al., 2001; Frydenberg and Lewis, 2002). Developments in cognitive ability result in enhanced hypothetical thinking and abstract reasoning, which in turn facilitates the development and use of cognitive coping skills such as problem solving (Aldwin, 1994; Garnefski et al., 2002). The intention of coping interventions should be to facilitate and habituate adaptive coping behaviors which not only lead to enhanced coping behaviors in the here and now, but also for use in later life *[we will complete a five year post intervention review of intervention efficacy. We contend that follow up investigations of this nature contribute to scientific rigour]*. Clearly, there is a need for applied practitioners to reflect upon delivery issues and the efficacy of interventions intended to enhance the coping capacity of adolescent populations.

Reflective practice has been identified as an effective tool for increasing consultants understanding of their practice (Knowles et al., 2007). Encouraging practitioners to review experiences identifying factors that made them successful or not, facilitates the development of action plans intended to enhance future practice (Grey and Fitzgibbon, 2003). Reflecting on past practice in this way is known as knowledge-on action (Schön, 1987). Knowledge-on action is integral to effective practice as it is proposed to incorporate values, prejudices, experiences, knowledge, and social norms (Knowles et al., 2007). Gilbourne (2000) noted that highlighting personal reflection does not neglect conceptual issues, contending that individuals will read accounts of lived experiences applying their own theoretical and conceptual perspectives (Knowles et al., 2007).

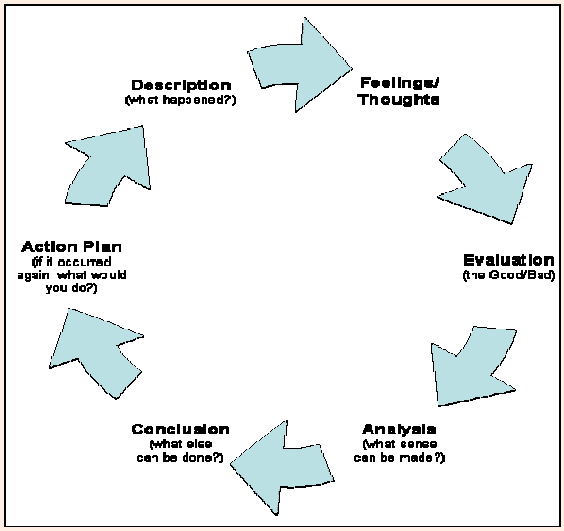

Figure 1. Gibbs (1988) model of reflection.

Formal reflective practice models can be used to guide reflection, although it is recommended these are adapted to suit individual practices (Anderson et al., 2002; Johns, 1994). The model that will be utilized to aid reflection in the present paper is that developed by Gibbs (1988). This six staged cyclic model (see Figure 1) is commonly used in sport psychology practice (Knowles et al., 2007). The Gibbs model encourages practitioners to describe an incident, and then remember their thoughts and feelings regarding this incident. Practitioners then evaluate the positives and negatives associated with the

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experience, followed by an analysis taking into account current research and theoretical propositions. To conclude, practitioners consider how they would react in similar future situations.

The present paper reflects upon the delivery of a one-year coping intervention utilized by junior national netball players. The first author kept a diary when developing and implementing the year-long intervention in order to record reflections. In order to ensure that reflections were not limited by the first authors own knowledge and understanding, and in line with the recommendations of Knowles et al. (2007), experiences were shared and discussed with the co-author and other applied sport psychology consultants. This was intended to engage wider practitioner knowledge and ensure events were not subconsciously amended during self-reflection as a result of personal beliefs and cultural norms (Anderson et al., 2004). Gibbs model (1988) was utilized to review critical incidents, the consequences of these experiences, theoretical interpretation of events, and the contribution of these reflections towards future action plans. We contend that honesty and openness when reflecting on the application of theoretically based interventions is necessary in order to advance applied practice. In offering a personal perspective on the application of coping interventions we comply with the recommendations of reflective practitioners and write in the first person (Gilbourne and Richardson, 2005). Whilst the term 'I' is used, it reflects the views of both authors.

The purpose of this article is to exemplify the potential benefits of reflective practice and offer an insight into the lessons learned during longitudinal applied research. As Gilbourne and Richardson (2005, p. 4) so eloquently suggest 'thoughts are offered with the caveat that the associations offer readers a sense of links that I intuitively make rather than connections they should share. Moreover, it is hoped and expected that others will find alternative associations'.

Rationale for the intervention

Whilst working with junior athletes I have noted common experiences relayed in the narratives offered regarding their experiences of balancing academic study with sporting demands. These narratives include the difficulties encountered when striving to attain personally meaningful goals in sporting, social, academic and sometimes work domains. Junior athletes highly committed to sport, and/or competing at national level draw comparisons against their peers and can often be heard to refer to their peers existence as 'normal', a term which implies that he/she was abnormal or unusual. In elaborating, more than one young athlete described the efforts required in pursuing multiple goals as a 'superhuman' endeavour, thereby using terms to indicate the complexity and difficulty of achieving such goals. If superhuman reflects a common language used among those athletes who aspire to achieve goals in multiple domains, then by implication, the expectation might be that the norm is failure to attain goals. My observations concur with research indicating that failure to attain personally important goals may foster negative feelings such as depression and hopelessness, reducing self-efficacy and self-esteem in that specific domain (Klein et al., 1999). In accumulating such experiences, my desire to explore ways in which such individuals could be assisted in their quest to pursue success across domains became a primary objective of my applied and research endeavours. The following reflections relate to an intervention undertaken by twelve junior national netball players (Age range 15-17 years).

Developmental considerations

I read the generic stress and coping literature intensively, a process that offered theory and empirical evidence that could be utilized to guide the construction of a coping intervention (Frydenberg and Lewis, 2000, 2002; Lazarus, 1999). However, my applied experiences were also influential in the construction of the coping intervention. My practice utilizes a mix of cognitive, behavioral and humanistic principles, but also is minded of taking into consideration client and situational characteristics (Hill, 2001). Whilst my practice will continue to evolve as I gain new experiences and knowledge, I have observed a personal shift from a desire to be in control of the consultancy agenda and climate, to encouraging clients and organisational members to assume more responsibility for change. This philosophical shift has moved towards an equal-expertise model utilizing the athlete, coach and sport scientist triad (Hardy and Parfitt, 1994). Specifically my long-standing relationship with England Netball contributed to my awareness of potentially difficult issues in terms of the politics of the organisation, and the need to involve and inform key personnel in all stages of change.

Extensive discussions took place with my co-author during the development of the intervention. It is important to acknowledge the experiences and applied approach of influential colleagues and how they compare to my own, because such dynamics would effect the development of the intervention. My co-authors research is focused on mood and emotion, and this literature, from my perspective, complements the coping literature. His perception of his consultancy style is consistent with equal-expertise model (see Lane, 2009). An explicit goal of the intervention was to publish practitioner experiences to exemplify applied issues. My co-author has published applied research and when discussing our applied ethos, principles and values, I found that his knowledge base, values and previous experiences complemented my own.

An action-learning group was formed to attain an equal-expertise model facilitating the implementation and management of the coping intervention within the England netball organisation. This group comprised members of England netball (national coach, U17 coach, Talent development manager, Senior national team sport psychologist, England Netball sport scientist) and the junior boys basketball and England Women's Volleyball coaches. It is my belief this group and the work that emanated from it, was crucial in gaining acceptance for the intervention, and helped identify and accommodate the idiosyncrasies of the sporting organisation. We contend that unless proposed interventions receive the full and open support of the sports organisation in which partici-

pants are immersed, the objectives of an intervention may be compromised (see Lane, 2009).

Mechanism of delivery

Thelwell (2008) argued that although sport psychology interventions are proposed to benefit performance, attrition has been found to be a problem (Shambrook and Bull, 2001). The planned intervention was intended to take place over one-year, therefore, ensuring players remained cognisant of potential benefits, and continued to enjoy the process was a key consideration. I reflected on my own experiences as an applied practitioner and felt that athletes commonly cited a lack of understanding, time, support and competing priorities as reasons for not engaging with interventions intended to benefit them. Taken collectively, previous literature and my own applied experiences provided the rationale for seeking to engender a supportive environment for those players completing the coping programme (Baker, 2001). Participants were to be distributed throughout England, and I believed *[since the implementation of this intervention our knowledge of, and ability to utilize technological advances has developed. We would look to incorporate technology to a greater extent in future interventions (see Devonport and Lane, 2009 for further discussion)]* that given the duration of the intervention, this would ultimately compromise my ability to offer sufficient individual support to those undertaking the coping intervention. Whilst I would offer direct support as and when necessary, I felt the need to establish regular support local to each participant. Following extensive reading of the general psychology literature, I determined that mentoring offered a means of engendering such support. Mentoring represents a one-to-one developmental relationship where mentor and mentee work together to establish goals driven by the needs of the mentee (Linney, 1999). Mentors offer support, encouragement and assistance in attaining established goals (Hon and Shorr, 1998).

When reflecting on literature exploring the characteristics of effective mentors, it appeared that many of these characteristics are subjectively determined. In my mind this accounted for the finding that self-selected mentors are more effective and meaningful than formally assigned mentors (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). This finding reinforced my decision not to be the sole source of support for those completing the coping intervention. I worked closely with England netball to ensure that all participants engaging with the coping intervention were afforded the opportunity to select their own mentors. Without exception participants chose to self-select mentors. What became apparent as the year progressed was the contribution of mentors to the success of the coping intervention. The interpersonal skills of mentors were pivotal in motivating, supporting and challenging participants to complete and reflect upon activities provided in the coping intervention. Such skills are acknowledged as vital contributors to the success of applied sport psychology (Anderson et al., 2004).

An acknowledge limitation of the present study is that the interpersonal skills of mentors were not assessed. I wished to avoid activities that I felt might dissuade mentors from maintaining their commitment to the longitudinal intervention. Mentors were already required to complete police checks and attain England Netball and parental approval for their voluntary involvement in the intervention. I felt that completing assessments of interpersonal skills would be discouraging. I recognised however, that such competencies would be pivotal to the success of the programme. Mentors were required to model behaviors that they sought to establish in mentees. These included interpersonal skills such as active listening and communication skills, supportive behaviors, effective mood management and approachability. In one instance several months into the intervention, a mentee felt her mentor was no longer demonstrating impartiality in the guidance offered. This eroded the mentees trust in her mentor (see Devonport and Lane, in press). It is possible that assessing interpersonal skills with a view to supporting mentors in their development of personal competencies may have prevented this from occurring. Therefore, it is suggested that assessment and training opportunities should be offered as part of mentor training in future research.

When reviewing their experiences there were many stories recited by mentors and mentee's that I could relate to, which at times mirrored my own experiences. For example, one mentor expressed disappointment as she tried different strategies to encourage her mentee in becoming more talkative, each of which she perceived as failing. I was privy to the views of her mentee, in her eyes, her mentee was a source of encouragement, a 'sounding board', someone on 'her side'. Where the mentor perceived failure the mentee saw success. Incidents such as this highlighted the need to clarify and monitor expectations. In the example provided, the mentee did not perceive a need to talk more, she desired an additional source of social support. Such experiences, either my own or vicarious, have taught me valuable lessons, such as avoiding assumptions, striving for honest two-way communication, engage ongoing critical reflection and accepting that which is uncontrollable and non-harmful. In my applied work, I establish client expectations from the outset, seeking to explore motives, attainability, perceived barriers, and agree roles and responsibilities. I reinforce the importance of honest critical reflection as a contributor to an effective working relationship. I consciously endeavour not to make assumptions and feel in doing so this facilitates open and exploratory communication. As suggested by Andersen (2005, p. 295) 'sport psychologists in practice often trip over their own blind spots'. These blind sports are often caused by assumptions such as those exemplified above.

Within the intervention itself, whilst the content of some coping packs received mixed views, participants, even those who encountered problems with their mentor-mentee relationship unanimously supported the provision of a mentor. Devonport and Lane (in press) offer further information on mentoring and a detailed account regarding its use as part of the present coping intervention.

Intervention content and corresponding rationale

The coping intervention was implemented over three stages: 1) Setting up the intervention; 2) Profiling the

player and 3) Developing coping competencies. Stage-One outlined the programme aims, trained mentors in the use of mentor packs, and identified interpersonal skills (such as effective communication, approachability and use of feedback) that would facilitate a mentor's role. Stage-Two utilized profiling forms to identify players forthcoming personal commitments to help establish balanced lifestyle and set goals. Stage-Three focused on the development of five coping, or coping related constructs using dedicated coping packs. These included: 1) planning and time management; 2) goal-setting; 3) emotional intelligence; 4) problem solving and 5) communication. Each pack will be reflected upon individually, but first, I will reflect on stages one and two of the coping intervention.

The benefits of the action-learning group came into fruition when setting up the coping intervention. We had gained the support of England Netball for the proposed intervention. The Talent director had been instrumental in gaining ethical approval from England netball, and the Performance Director formally approved the project. This is particularly important as the Performance Director is responsible for overseeing the strategic development of England Netball in all areas, from performance through to research. Arguably, as a result of their involvement with the action learning group, and also as a result of the support offered by the Performance and Talent Director, national coaches, the national squad sport psychologist and sport science support officer all offered practical and informational support for the intervention. England netball personnel co-ordinated communication with players and parents inviting them to take part in the intervention. They allocated time at national squad weekends affording me an opportunity to explain the purpose and content of the intervention. Coaches were present and offered their backing for the intervention. It became clear to players, and importantly parents, that this was an England netball endorsed project. Of the forty players in attendance at the national squad weekend (under seventeen and under nineteen), twelve wished to take part in the coping intervention. I reflected upon this outcome with the Talent Director who suggested that with one exception, those she felt would most benefit from participation had in fact volunteered.

I spent a great deal of time and effort researching the coping literature when developing the coping packs and corresponding resources. What was quickly apparent was the lack of detail regarding intervention content in published research. This is not helpful when trying to develop and implement applied research. The information I produced to guide the content of the intervention was a hybrid produced from journal extracts, self-help books, and resources used by myself and other applied practitioners. Mentors commented on the level of detail offered within information packs provided. They found such detail reassuring on the one hand, but on the other hand for some mentors, the cumulative size of the resource packs was initially perceived as intimidating. As a result of my desire to provide resources intended to develop the confidence of mentors in supporting players, I felt that on occasion I had overcomplicated concepts that could be presented more simply. I had done so by anticipating every eventuality and trying to provide guidance accordingly. Using an anecdote, this is rather like reading the possible side effects of painkiller tablets. The list is long and daunting, but in reality these side effects very rarely occur.

The second stage of the intervention involved profiling each player. I felt this exercise would help mentors better understand the commitments faced by their mentees. Talented Individual Needs Assessment (TINA) forms utilized by the Youth Sport Trust were modified for use with players to establish their commitments and corresponding resources across domains. For example, in the school TINA form players conversed with teachers to identify forthcoming commitments such as coursework dates or exams. They also identified mechanisms of support the school could offer such as tutorial support, financial support, or coursework extensions. Whilst this activity fulfilled the aim of developing a better understanding between mentor and mentee, it was considered by some players as being paperwork intensive. Previous research has identified the need for brevity in measures used with athletes (Lane, 2007).

Beckmann and Kellmann (2003, p. 338) reviewed their experiences in encouraging athletes to complete and review interventions and suggested 'athletes hate paperwork'. This issue was to become a recurring theme when identifying those factors that contributed to, or undermined the efficacy of the coping intervention. That said, sufficient benefits were identified by participants to justify the retention of a profiling stage in some form for future use.

Planning and time management

Planning and time management activities were intended to help players pursue and manage multiple goals by constructing a plan of action (Schwarzer and Taubert, 2002). They were also intended to promote balance in lifestyle and activities undertaken by participants. Basic recommendations regarding the content of interventions intended to enhance time management skills emerged from the literature. These were as follows; the effective planning of time is an essential first stage in time management, the second stage of keeping to schedule is also important which includes the development of self-commitment strategies (Francis-Smythe and Robertson, 1999; Koch and Kleinmann, 2002). The time management pack sought to address these recommendations by including activities such as identifying deadlines, immovables and priorities; identifying time wastage; identifying personal time, using checklists, and improving accuracy of time estimation. Information gathered when profiling participants during Stage Two of the intervention was used by mentor and mentee to facilitate these activities. All participants were provided with a large (A2) laminated wall planner, which enabled them to visually record commitments for the forthcoming month. These were identified according to commitment type including competition, training, academic, work and social commitments. This had the advantage of affording a means of quickly assessing the balance of commitments between different domains.

Without exception the planning and organisation

pack was positively received by participants offering an enthusiastic start to the coping intervention. Most participants volunteered for the intervention because they felt their planning and organisation skills could be enhanced. All participants completed pack activities and the wall planner was highlighted by mentors and mentees as an effective resource to facilitate the development of planning and organisational skills. All mentors and mentees commented on personal gains and competency development resulting from pack activities. There was a great deal of enthusiasm conveyed in monthly diary entries received from mentors and mentees. This was corroborated with telephone conversations with participants. Participants appeared to enjoy the interaction with mentors and reported experiencing tangible, social, cognitive and emotional benefits from pack completion. For example, they had made significant others more aware of their combined commitments and consequently attained more flexibility and support from school, work or club/school netball teams. Mentees had generated more free time to use as they wished, and felt more confident in managing commitments. This produced positive emotional and cognitive shifts including increased satisfaction, motivation, calmness and happiness. I felt that a positive start for mentors and mentees was important for the success of the intervention. Early experiences can be pivotal in determining motivation for ongoing participation (Shambrook and Bull, 2001). On a personal level it was rewarding to listen to mentors and mentees enthusiastically highlighting personal gains resulting from pack completion.

Goal setting

Coping has recently been re-conceptualised as involving a proactive approach towards the achievement of self-imposed goals and personal growth, as opposed to being exclusively reactive (Snyder, 1999; Snyder and Lopez, 2002). Consequently, it was considered important to develop goal clarity amongst athletes to facilitate the identification and use of appropriate coping resources for goal attainment. Goal setting theory suggests that much of behavior is motivated toward the achievement of goals (Locke and Latham, 1990). It is suggested that goals enhance motivation through a cognitive process. The process of setting a goal identifies the standard of performance required for success. Once the perceived challenge of the goal is known, this leads to the activation of personal resources to increase effort and achieve success (Bandura, 1990, 1997). The goal-setting pack sought to help players set goals that adhered to the SMARTER principles (Specific, Measurable, Agreed and Achievable, Relevant and Recorded, Time-phased, Exciting and Reviewed; Weinberg et al., 2001). Task sheets offered guidance on identifying long-term, intermediate and short-term goals, and strategies for goal attainment. An aim was to establish goals that were personally meaningful, challenging, and sequential where confidence to achieve longer-term and more difficult goals would increase through the achievement of short-term goals (Klein et al., 1999).

Seeking to implement SMARTER principles produced a great deal of paperwork. Players recorded short, intermediate and long-term goals, in addition to strategies for goal attainment. Whilst participants felt that they were considering personal goals in more detail and utilized social support more effectively in facilitating goal attainment, they expressed frustration with the intensity of record keeping. Furthermore, one participant observed that goal setting had made her more aware of her weaknesses and occasions where she was failing to achieve targets. She noted that this made her more anxious, a phenomenon reported previously in the literature (Lane et al., 1995). Record keeping when setting and monitoring goals should act as a reminder of goal based activities and offer an opportunity to acknowledge success. Such record keeping will evoke negative affective responses where it reinforces goal failure. This has clear implications regarding the importance of goal management.

In monitoring this intervention, it emerged that setting specific and difficult goals for complex tasks may inhibit performance by encouraging a focus on the desired outcome rather than the most effective strategies to reach that point (Locke and Latham, 1990). This point highlights the importance of feedback regarding task performance. Latham and Locke (1991, p. 226) suggest that 'goals and feedback together are more effective in motivating high performance or performance improvement than either one separately'. In some instances feedback regarding task performance was not always forthcoming or highlighted sufficiently. In particular, one player experienced difficulties in establishing short-term task goals that contributed to her long-term outcome goal. She sought feedback from others regarding the goals she had set, but found that they lacked the experience or knowledge to be able to offer guidance and assistance. In future implementation of this intervention I will look to simplify the recording of goals and ensure that feedback regarding goal attainment is frequent and task focused. The wall planner used in the planning and time management pack was perceived to be a great success amongst mentors and mentees. One player felt that a visual representation of goals in a simple form would be motivational and offer a daily reminder of goal pursuits. I will look to implement this recommendation in future applied practice and research.

Emotional intelligence

Salovey and Mayer (1990; p. 189) defined emotional intelligence as 'the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions.' Lazarus (1999, 2000) emphasised the importance of considering emotions in stress and coping research suggesting that where there is stress, there are also emotions. These emotional responses occur as the stressful event unfolds and influence continuing reappraisals and exchanges between the individual and the environment (Riecherts and Pihet, 2000). Using the definition of emotional intelligence provided by Salovey and Mayer (1990), emotional intelligence is a set of abilities that can be enhanced through guided training. It was considered important to develop an individual's awareness of emotions, their impact, and strategies intended to regulate them.

The emotional intelligence pack utilized a three-stage process (Cherniss and Goleman, 2001) of compe-

tency development, starting with preparation for change. As emotional competencies are mainly demonstrated in social interactions, participants were encouraged to involve those who regularly interacted with them. This was to provide multiple ratings from different perspectives, e.g. parents, coach, team-mate, teacher etc. In addition to this information, participants completed Bar-On's Emotional Quotient Inventory: Short (EQI:S) (Bar-On, 2002) and results were compared with population norms to identify strengths and areas for development. During the second training phase, activities were developed with a view to strengthening emotional and social competencies. These activities were adapted from those recommended by Bar-On (2002), and participants selected those they deemed most appropriate. The third-stage was the transfer and maintenance of learned skills. Mentors were encouraged to help players reflect on any activities completed in applying and developing emotional intelligence, and identify barriers and facilitating factors for continued development.

This pack marked the half way stage in the coping intervention, and also corresponded with a busy period in the netball season. Some players did not complete the pack, the reasons offered being; a) no longer involved with national netball, b) problems with mentor-mentee relationship, and c) did not see a need for it. One mentor felt unequipped to guide her mentee through the pack activities. This was attributed to the emotional content of reflections which she felt bordered on psychoanalysis. Those players completing this pack felt that it had helped them manage their emotions in anticipating and managing difficult events. Two mentees identified this pack as being the most helpful pack as it challenged them to consider issues they had previously not explored. They felt that their interpersonal skills, including emotional regulation, had improved, and valued these outcomes in terms of their application in a team sport environment and toward general career development.

In order to assist mentors in identifying areas for development with mentees, I evaluated each players results from the Bar-On EQI:S (Bar-On, 2002). Whilst there is an adolescent version of this measure I opted to use the version validated for use with adult populations. My rationale was that the measure used was validated for use with ages 18-plus and some participants were nearing this age. Furthermore, players were competing against adults to attain their goal of competing in the national squad, and as the England Volleyball coach noted within an action learning meeting, in order to enhance performance 'we are trying to get an adult mindset in a child's body'. However, as a consequence of using the adult measure mentees typically scored below population norms for most subcomponents. In relaying this information back to participants I was careful to place the results in context and acknowledge the limitations of the data. I was conscious of the need to convey information sensitively and coherently. I selected and recommended practical activities for developing socio-emotional competencies that I felt were most appropriate for each participant. I was careful to empower the mentor and mentee in determining if, when and how to action these suggestions. Mentor and mentee noted that this measure and the feedback provided by myself was very useful as an awareness raising exercise. They reported finding the practical advice helpful in providing a clear focus to the mentor-mentee relationship when working through this pack.

Problem solving

In developing problem solving skills, some awareness of the complexities of the task is required, and understanding these complexities is a prerequisite for solutions (Cummins et al., 1988). An individual will struggle to solve a problem if they remain unaware of its relative complexities, unless, of course they solve it by chance. When engaging in problem solving, different types of knowledge are applied. Domain knowledge (principles) is used to mentally represent the problem and identify solution steps or actions that may be relevant for the problem. It interacts with strategic knowledge (heuristics, systematic approaches to problem solving), which is used to identify solutions that are most likely to lead to the goal state. Metacognitive knowledge is used to monitor the selection and application of solutions by keeping track of progress toward the goal state (van Gog, Paas and van Merriënboer, 2005). Huitt's (1992) four-stage process of problem solving incorporates the development of domain, strategic and metacognitive knowledge. As such this model was utilized in the coping intervention to enhance a player's ability to adopt a careful, analytical, planned, and systematic approach to the solution process (Huitt, 1992). The Input-Stage focussed on gaining a better understanding of a problem or situation. The Planning-Stage involved selecting a solution perceived as most suitable for solving the problem by identifying the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. During the Output-Stage, a solution was implemented, and the Review-Stage evaluated the efficiency and effectiveness of a solution.

The problem solving pack was highlighted by mentors as being personally beneficial. They personally utilized the pack in order to work through problems they anticipated in their day-to-day lives and in working with their mentee. Given the cognitive nature of activities contained within this pack, it appeared most suitable for older participants. Those participants aged 15-16 years at times struggled with the concepts presented and explored within the pack. Recall that hypothetical thinking and abstract reasoning facilitates the development and use of problem solving (Aldwin, 1994; Garnefski et al., 2002). It is possible that younger athletes had not yet developed these skills sufficiently. For future use with young athletes, I intend to simplify the activities to more appropriately match their stage of cognitive development. I will do this by specifying problem solving strategies that are commensurate with the stage of cognitive development. For example for those athletes in mid-adolescence I would utilize thinking aloud as a problem solving strategy. Here the mentee verbalizes a problem and potential solutions while the mentor listens in detail for errors in thinking or understanding. This provides a supportive environment in which mentees can test understanding and ideas. For those individuals in late adolescence more challenging strategies could be utilized such as taking another's perspective. Taking another person's point of

view requires meta-cognitive skills that may not be fully developed in mid-adolescence.

Effective communication

Helping people utilize communication to obtain personal goals enables them to develop a host of positive personal qualities including increased emotional intelligence and self-efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1997; Bedell and Lennox, 1997). Communication skills include abilities to initiate conversations, maintain social interactions, express thoughts and feelings to others, and accurately comprehend the expressions of others. As people develop communication skills that are effective in obtaining rewards from the environment, they begin to have positive expectations of success and control, and efficacy expectations rise accordingly (Bandura, 1997).

Communication interventions tend to involve a range of different activities. Recurring principles include; active listening, helping individuals tell their stories, and increasing participation in decision making (Rivers, 2005; Sullivan, 1993). Most communication skills training emphasise the performance of specific behaviors rather than the assessment and adaptation to individuals. In the development of a communication intervention, it is necessary to emphasize awareness as flexibility is paramount in communication. The communication pack presented activities adapted from those previously proposed by Rivers (2005) and Anderson (1993). The pack began with exercises intended to facilitate active listening, initiating conversations and explaining intent. To facilitate practice, mentors and mentees were encouraged to use role-play to re-enact or rehearse a range of communication scenarios. These included confrontations, asking for support, conversations that went well, and conversations that did not go well. Role-play provided an opportunity for mentees to test their communication skills, seeking advice and feedback in a non-threatening environment. Thereby, role-play helped develop their confidence in applying new communication strategies in day-to-day encounters.

This was the last pack to be completed by participants following ten months of coping based activities. For many, this pack was due for completion at a time when they were completing academic examinations (UK awards: General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) or Advanced Level) and coursework. Possibly due to a combination of these factors this pack was the least utilized. Many players maintained that they continued to meet with and value their mentor and the activities completed. All players noted that the mentor-mentee relationship progressively evolved becoming more flexible, less formal and more tailored to the immediate needs of the mentee. For many mentees during the exam period their preference was for mentors to maintain an interest in their general well-being. At first I was disappointed that more players had not engaged with the communication pack. Fuelled by comments made by those who did not complete the pack that the corresponding activities sounded useful, I wished that more players had completed it. However, as I teased through the wealth of information provided by mentors and mentees, this sense of disappointment dissipated.

Those individuals who completed pack activities typically utilized it as and when they perceived a need for it, as opposed to the scheduled time for completion. For example, one player wished to move clubs and used the communication pack to consider how she would approach this subject with the coach. In such instances players commented that the pack offered different perspectives, helped guide the rehearsal of challenging conversations and developed confidence. Furthermore, many players and mentors resolved to continue their mentoring partnership beyond the formal mentoring period. The packs were described as resources to visit as and when required, but most importantly, each and every mentor and mentee used positive affective terms when summarising their experiences. These included terms such as fun, enjoyable, nice, reassuring, supportive, challenging, and interesting. When asked if the coping intervention should continue to be offered to players the response was a unanimous yes, remove some of the paperwork, but yes. As an applied practitioner I strive for the generation of positive affective states associated with the work I do. This coping intervention and the mentors that delivered it, helped achieve this objective. On reflection I could not be disappointed with the outcomes of this programme if the mentors and mentees expressed satisfaction and enjoyment.

Monitoring and evaluation of coping and coping interventions

I expressed from the outset my desire to complete research that had longevity in terms of the value and benefits afforded to the organisation and participants. Very early on, this set in motion an inner conflict whereby I sought to pursue the scientific rigour and experimental control that many journals demand for publication, whilst at the same time aspiring to develop an intervention that participants would enjoy and value. On the one hand, I believed experimental control and scientific rigour would require regular psychometric testing and diary completion to assess the impact of the intervention. On the other hand, I knew from experience that participants dislike excessive paperwork. I felt I required some way of monitoring the progress of participants. I was conscious of minimising the time required for athletes to complete questionnaires, so I sought out measures of coping and emotional intelligence that possessed acceptable validity and reliability, that were also concise in nature. Lane (2007) suggested that brevity is an important consideration when selecting measures for use with athletes. The two measures selected were the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) and the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory: Short (EQI: S; Bar-On, 2002).

The 28 item Brief COPE comprises 14 scales including: Active coping; Planning; Positive reframing; Self-distraction; Acceptance; Using instrumental support; Using emotional support; Religion; Venting; Denial; Behavioural disengagement; Substance use; Humor; and Self Blame. Participants were asked to identify the extent to which they had been doing what each questions states, not on the basis of whether it seemed to be working or not. For example, the extent to which ‘I’ve been getting help and advice from other people’. Questions were answered using a four point likert scale (1 = I haven't been doing this at all; 4 = I've been doing this a lot). Internal

consistency coefficients for the Brief COPE scales range from .50 (Venting) to .90 (Substance use). All exceed .60 except for Venting, Denial and Acceptance.

The 51 item EQI: S (Bar-On, 2002) assesses five areas of emotional intelligence including 1) Intrapersonal skills (self awareness and self-management); 2) Interpersonal skills (social awareness and interpersonal relationship skills); 3) Stress management skills (the ability to manage and control emotions so they work for the individual not against them); 4) Adaptability (coping with situations and solving problems as they arise); and 5) General mood (the emotional skills that maintain motivation and positive outlook). Participants are asked to identify the extent to which each statement on the questionnaire was true of them. For example, 'It's hard for me to understand the way I feel'. Questions were answered using a five point likert scale (1 = very seldom, or not true of me; 5 = Very often true of me, or true of me). Internal consistency coefficients for the EQI scales by age and gender, range from .76 to .93 with the exception of the positive impression scale (.51 for 50 and over age group). Test-retest reliabilities range from .46 to .80 for the EQI scales. The short version of the EQI takes approximately 15 minutes to complete and is proposed to be well suited for group use and repeated testing (Bar-On, 2002).

Participants were asked to complete questionnaires every two months for the duration of the coping intervention. Collectively this took approximately 25 minutes to complete. Participants were also asked to complete monthly diaries that recorded their experiences with the coping activities undertaken and the intervention in general. Early on in the intervention, participants expressed frustration with the paperwork they were being asked to complete, specifically the questionnaires and TINA forms. Although no-one overtly objected to the reflective diaries, the return rate was poor, and as such, implied that athletes found them to be a chore as opposed to developmental and beneficial.

For my part I was not sufficiently confident in straying from the positivist and post-positivist paradigms that arguably dominate the published sports literature (Biddle et al., 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Following much debate and discussions with my co-author, colleagues and England netball personnel I resolved to collect questionnaire data at squad weekends whereby athletes were allocated time to complete the questionnaire under the supervision of coaches. I did this on two occasions, at the beginning of the intervention and half way through. This meant I received a full complement of completed questionnaires from the outset and at the halfway stage. At the end of the intervention the netball season had finished and as such I relied upon athletes completing and returning questionnaires from home, thereby reducing the return rate significantly. As an alternative to monthly diaries, I contacted mentors and mentees by phone and e-mail every three months and at key phases (for example transition to a new coping pack). Following participants consent, I recorded the key issues identified and discussed during correspondence. I found that reducing the demands placed on mentors and mentees in providing a written reflection of mentoring activities enhanced their enjoyment of the process. Furthermore, increasing the frequency of personal contact between mentors, mentees and myself enhanced relations and afforded an opportunity for clarification, reassurance and encouragement.

Conclusion

The present paper reflects upon the delivery of a longitudinal coping intervention utilized by junior national netball players. The research was embedded in work designed to enhance the coping skills of adolescent players, a rationale that the sporting organisation bought into. The intervention involved establishing an action-learning group in order to facilitate an equal-expertise model (Hardy and Parfitt, 1994). We contend that unless proposed interventions receive the full and open support of the sports organisation in which participants are immersed, the objectives of an intervention may be compromised. The intervention itself was implemented over three stages: 1) Setting up the intervention; 2) Profiling the player and 3) Developing five coping competencies. Although results indicated that the intervention was effective, caution is urged regarding the generalisability of this model. We suggest that the key finding within the present study is the notion that intervention-based research requires the sport organisation to buy into the value of the work. Applied research must also accommodate the idiosyncrasies of the organization. We suggest that practitioners maintain reflective diaries whilst conducting applied work to aid the exploration and recall of operational and procedural issues. Future research could utilize data from reflective diaries to identify factors associated with effective applied sport psychology delivery.

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Key points

- This paper exemplifies the potential benefits of reflective practice and offers an insight into the lessons learned during longitudinal applied research.
- We conclude that intervention-based research must accommodate the idiosyncrasies of an organization and requires the sport organisation to buy into the value of the work.
- Whilst thoughts and associations are offered, readers are encouraged to consider these and alternative associations.

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