



Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sports Studies

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology
and Leisure Studies, Special Edition from the Inaugural
Global Congress on Sports and Christianity*

Article 3

12-6-2017

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Recommended Citation

Egli, Trevor J. and Fisher, Leslee A. (2017) "Christianity and Sport Psychology: One Aspect of Cultural Competence," *Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sports Studies*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jcskls/vol4/iss1/3>

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Christianity and Sport Psychology: One Aspect of Cultural Competence

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Abstract

There is currently a dearth of literature relating to how applied sport psychology practitioners might work with a Christian sportsperson (Czech et al., 2004, Egli et al., 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide practical suggestions for sport psychology practitioners based on relevant research related to Christianity and sport psychology as well as personal and professional experience. We first explain the various sport psychology roles before providing a brief review of literature. Studies related to Christian athletes, Christian coaches, Christian prayer within sport, and sport psychology consultants' experiences of spirituality are presented. Lastly, the authors include four practical steps for sport psychology practitioners who may encounter Christianity within their consulting relationships. These include: (a) education, (b) intake interview, (c) integrating Christianity into mental skills training, and (d) collaboration and/or referral.

Keywords: Christianity, sport psychology, Christian athlete, Christian coach, cultural competence

Introduction: Personal Positioning of Trevor

The amalgamation of the Christian faith and sport is not a new concept to us as authors. For example, for Trevor – who is both a Christian and an athlete – he has always attempted to view the sport he was participating in through a Christian perspective. This meant that he saw his behavior as a reflection of his Christian identity. This view influenced how he handled sport success and failure. It made him think of the language he used during competition and how he treated his teammates, coaches, and opponents. He also used Christian spiritual practices, such as prayer and scripture memory, to help keep him focused on this perspective. However, it was not always easy for him to do this well; in fact, he left his sport halfway through college because it was the first time in his athletic career that he could not demonstrate the Christian character he desired – in fact, he lost the sense of joy in a sport he had loved his whole life. Reflecting back on his experience as a Christian athlete, he believes it would have been beneficial to work with a sport psychology consultant who was aware of this part of his identity. More specifically, if he was able to experience a sport psychology consultant who worked from a Christian framework, he is not sure whether he would have left his collegiate sport experience.

Following his undergraduate education, he pursued a master's degree in sport psychology. During his training, he encountered the collision of his Christian faith and sport engagement. While he was no longer the athlete trying to understand how these worlds came together, he was a graduate sport psychology consultant working with a Division I college athlete who was interested in using her own Christian faith within her sport performance.

Because of her identity as a Christian and her interest in including that in their work together, Trevor would use Bible verses occasionally or reference her favorite athlete, Tim Tebow, a professed Christian athlete and top collegiate football player at the time. Over time, he felt their work together did not seem as productive as it once was; he asked her if there was anything she wished they could improve on and what she liked about their time together. Her response was simple: she appreciated and enjoyed when Trevor included Bible verses in their sessions. Following this conversation, he included a Bible verse each time they met and discussed how her faith affected her as an athlete. She confided that she believed this Christian practice had a positive impact on their consulting relationship and made their time more effective. Reflecting back on his time working with her, Trevor wishes that he would have been able to utilize research on the topic of working with this particular group, as he often wondered how he might have changed his approach. In addition, his sessions with this particular athlete were video-recorded and used for peer supervision. Although the athlete found integrating her Christian faith with sport psychology consultation was helpful, Trevor's sport psychology student peers were not as accepting. After watching a session, he was quickly bombarded with a plethora of questions related to the relevancy of faith and whether or not what he did as a consultant was appropriate. However, after reflecting on the video, a peer of Trevor's approached him later that evening and told him that he believed what Trevor was doing was an effective strategy for that athlete. He also mentioned that he was unsure what he would have done with that same athlete since he was not very comfortable with the Christian faith.

In this paper, we first briefly describe the roles and titles of sport psychology professionals. Then, we provide an overview of current research pertaining to Christianity and sport psychology. We close with suggestions regarding how sport psychology consultants might approach working with Christian sportspersons moving forward. We believe that this information could be relevant to sport psychology professionals who may be working with Christian athletes in the future.

Understanding Sport Psychology Rolesⁱ

There are two types of sport psychology consultants. Those primarily trained in kinesiology – with additional coursework in psychology/counseling - seek to “educate athletes and exercisers about psychological skills and their development” (Weinberg & Gould, 2015, p. 6). Ultimately, this entails working with sportspersons on performance-related issues such as regulating emotions, proper focus and concentration, confidence levels as well as other mental and physical challenges within the sporting context. Those primarily trained in clinical/counseling psychology – with additional coursework in sport science and a psychology license - can treat mental and emotional disorders. Other terms for SPCs include *educational sport psychology specialists* (Weinberg & Gould 2015), *mental coaches*, *performance enhancement consultants*, or *mental performance consultant* (AASP, 2017a).

A sport psychologist differs from a SPC as s/he is “trained in clinical or counseling psychology to provide individual or group therapy relative to a broad range of behavioral and emotional issues” (AASP, 2017a). Therefore, a sport psychologist is competent to treat mental

and emotional disorders but also has training and experience in sport science. In order to use the title of *psychologist or clinical sport psychologist*, s/he must be licensed through a state board in the United States (Weinberg & Gould, 2015).

Christianity and Sport Psychology

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) has recently put a greater emphasis on the importance of cultural competence and diversity training, as it is now required for anyone seeking to become a certified sport psychology consultant (CC-AASP)(AASP, 2017b). Culture can include race, ethnicity, language, knowledge, religion, and among other evolving aspects (Blodgett, Yungblut, Schinke, & Hanrahan, 2009); however, for the purpose of this article, we focus on one particular culture, the Christian religion. Stevenson (1991) was one of the first researchers to study the experiences of elite Christian-athletes in sport. He interviewed 31 athletes who were involved in the Christian organization Athletes in Action (AIA) about their identities as both a “Christian” as well as an “athlete.” Based on their perceived behaviors and understandings of their Christian faith within sport, the athletes were placed into one of three role-identity types. The first type was the segregated group, which was for athletes who separated their identity as a “Christian” and as an “athlete.” The second type, and largest group of participants within the study, was the selective type. These athletes included their Christian identity within sport, but also accepted the norms of sport, which oftentimes took priority over their Christian values. For example, they would be accepting of violence within their sport if it would benefit their performance and/or team. The last type was the committed type, which was represented by those athletes whose Christian faith was their dominant role-identity in all settings, including sport. Those athletes within this group still found it difficult to not be impacted by the dominant culture of sport, which led to some leaving sport altogether. These findings demonstrate that Christian athletes utilize a variety of role-identity methods. Stevenson (1991) attributed this to the maturity of an athlete’s Christian faith based on his/her level of integration within sport; in other words, Stevenson posited that less spiritually mature athletes would separate and/or limit the integration of their faith within the sporting context, while more spiritually mature athletes would be able to integrate their faith into their sport experience.

In a second study by Stevenson (1997), he asked 31 Christian-athletes involved in AIA about their struggles within elite sport and how they coped with these struggles. He found five common difficulties among the participants: (a) the value of winning; (b) the value of social status; (c) relationships with teammates and coaches; (d) relationships with opponents; and (e) expectations of those outside of sport. The results showed that these struggles led to one of two consequences, which included experiencing a “crisis” in living up to the expectations of sport and/or to cause the athlete to find meaning in their sport involvement. Athletes in the study who described themselves as non-Christians or “fallen-away” Christians also described returning to Christianity to help them cope during the time of their struggles. As a result they reported either having a greater commitment to sport, acting in a more “Christian” manner, or leaving elite sport altogether as a result.

Christian coaches are another group of sportspersons who should be considered. Bennett, Sagas, Flemming, and Von Roenn (2005) explored the lived experience of one Division I male Christian coach. They found there were three primary dilemmas this particular Christian coach faced within the culture of elite sport: (a) winning; (b) importance of social status; and (c) behavior in and out of the sport setting. His methods of coping with these struggles included disconnecting from his coaching identity, maintaining a “take it or leave it” mentality, and relying on God by giving God control of his life, including his role as a baseball coach. Among the various forms of coping for Christian sportspersons, prayer has been one of the most common methods utilized and researched (Watson & Czech, 2005).

The act of prayer is a common religious practice found within the Christian faith. So, it is not surprising that prayer is used by Christian athletes (Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004; Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, & Aoyagi, 2015; Park, 2000; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000) and coaches (Egli, Czech, Shaver, Todd, Gentner, & Biber, 2014a). For example, a foundational study on Christian athletes and prayer was conducted by Czech et al. (2004) who interviewed nine Division I Christian athletes about their experiences of prayer within sport. Four themes emerged: (a) performance-related prayers; (b) prayer routines; (c) thankfulness; and (d) acceptance of God’s will. Building on the work of Czech et al. (2004), Egli et al. (2014a) asked a similar question to six Division I head Christian coaches about their experience of prayer within their sporting context. The following themes materialized from the data: (a) relying on God’s guidance, (b) understanding their roles within coaching, (c) various prayer types, and (d) desiring to have a subtle influence on players. However, there is still a dearth of literature relating to how sport psychology professionals understand and utilize Christian religious practices, especially prayer, with those sportspersons such as athletes and coaches who ascribe to Christianity.

Recently, Egli, Fisher, and Gentner (2014b) examined nine SPCs’ experiences of engaging spirituality within a sport psychology consultation. Although the focus of the study was on the broader term of spirituality, when asked to provide an example of a specific instance, the most prolific case study given entailed working with a Christian athlete. The SPCs in this study also noted they had very little, if any, training on how to work with sportspersons who ascribed to a particular spirituality and/or religion. The authors posited that since the SPCs primarily lived and worked in Western cultures where Christianity is the dominant religious narrative (Blodgett et al., 2009), therefore, there were a plethora of Christian examples given. The authors recognized that while this finding was specific to their participants only, Christianity appeared to be an important cultural aspect sport psychology professionals should consider in their work.

Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, and Aoyagi (2015) provided unique insight into how sport psychology professionals might consult with Christian-athletes. They interviewed five elite Christian-athletes about their integration of faith within their sporting context as well as their experiences and thoughts of working with a sport psychology professional. The Christian athletes all utilized their faith through various Christian practices within the context of sport such as prayer and reading the Bible. When asked about their interest in working with a sport

psychology professional who would integrate faith into their work together, all but one participant had a very positive response.

Therefore, it appears that Christian athletes, Christian coaches, and sport psychology consultants have varying experiences and dilemmas regarding their faith while experiencing sport participation. Christianity is a lens through which these sportspersons have used to frame their experience and even provide them with a routine. Yet, despite this knowledge, the field of sport psychology as failed to provide much guidance to sport psychology professionals who might encounter a Christian sportsperson.

Practical Next Steps for Sport Psychology Professionals

As previously stated, the field of sport psychology is still lacking in research related to Christianity and applied sport psychology practices (Egli et al., 2014a, Watson & Nesti, 2005). When certified sport psychology consultants were asked about spirituality - including Christianity - they expressed that this was a “taboo” topic within sport psychology and that they rarely received formal training on how to engage this particular aspect of culture (Egli et al., 2014b). In addition, there appears to be a stigma attached to the topic of spirituality in sport psychology which we believe may be one of the primary reasons the field of sport psychology has yet to fully wrestle with spirituality as a cultural aspect of athletes’ sport experience. In hopes of lessening this “taboo,” we provide several practical steps for sport psychology professionals who encounter Christianity within a sport psychology consulting relationship.

Step 1: Education. If one hopes to continue the process of becoming more culturally competent regarding Christianity, we agree with Gill and Kampoff (2010) who suggest that sport psychology professionals in general should become more culturally aware, develop cultural knowledge, and then develop the appropriate multicultural counseling skills and strategies to work within a specific cultural context. Again, for the purpose of this article, we focus on an understanding the Christian culture, which is just one aspect of spiritual competence. Sport psychology professionals should be encouraged to educate themselves in the following ways: (a) seek out helpful theoretical frameworks that may be used when engaging athletes who profess Christianity, (b) practice reflexivity, and (c) continue and/or begin to include Christianity into sport psychology training programs.

Although we are certain that there are multiple frameworks that could be effective in working with Christian sportspersons, two potential frameworks that sport psychology practitioners could consider include humanistic as well as faith development perspectives. Humanistic practitioners seek to see individuals as unique from one another and to understand from within their specific contexts (Hill, 2001; Patton, 2002). One specific humanistic approach that has been successfully used to address Christianity is existential phenomenology (see Czech et al., 2004; Nesti, 2004, for example). A humanistic athlete-centered approach was also found to be used by SPCs who encountered spirituality, including Christianity, within a sport psychology consulting relationship (Egli et al., 2014b).

The second framework that has yet to receive any real attention in sport psychology is faith development theory (FDT) (Fowler, 1981). Although faith is often associated with religion,

Fowler (1981) sees faith as a universal phenomenon that may or may not include religion. Fowler (1981) understands FDT as a theory of praxis and that it can be used to address issues of meaning. Research has demonstrated that issues of meaning can be a dilemma for Christian athletes and coaches (Bennet et al., 2005; Stevenson, 1997); therefore, FDT may be an appropriate framework to use with sport constituents. Parker (2011) says the following about FDT:

It provides a generic, nonsectarian map for diagnosing and assessing the nature and role of a person's faith apart from its specific contents. This permits a counselor to work with a client's faith structures without having to endorse or challenge specific religious beliefs. (p. 112)

Those sport psychology professionals who feel comfortable could help identify the level of faith stage athletes are experiencing by either formally administering the faith development interview developed by Fowler (1981) or by listening to the faith experiences of Christian athletes and/or Christian coaches and then comparing those descriptions with Fowler's (1981) model (Parker, 2011). However, this approach would entail having an in-depth understanding of Fowler's (1981) stages of faith model which is beyond the scope of this article. For a greater understanding of this model, readers are directed to Fowler's (1981) book entitled *Stages of Change* as one resource.

Another educational step we believe to be beneficial for sport psychology practitioners is to practice reflexivity. This method encourages individuals to reflect on their own personal beliefs and biases on a particular topic (McGannon & Johnson, 2009). Therefore, one can reflect on the role of Christianity in one's own life. Questions could include: "How do I understand Christianity?" "How has my education and training prepared me to consult with athletes and coaches who incorporate Christianity into their sport?" and, "How to I engage others who hold different value systems from me?" These are only some of the many questions individuals could ask, in a reflective practice that should be done continually.

Lastly, we believe that sport psychology educators could engage students in conversations related to spirituality within graduate training programs and professional meetings. Engaging sport psychology students and professionals in conversations related to Christianity and sport may begin to lessen the "taboo" regarding this belief system in particular and the culture of spirituality and religion in general (Egli et al., 2014b). This, in turn, may help students have a more complete understanding of the ethical considerations involved in sport psychology consulting (Sarkar, Hill, & Parker, 2014). Developing culturally-relevant skills during training is essential.

Step 2: Intake interview. For any practitioner interested in offering a more holistic approach, we recommend including questions related to an athlete or coaches' faith, spirituality, and/or religion during an intake interview (Egli et al., 2014b). This allows an opportunity for an athlete or coach to include it in the conversation. However, while Christianity may be valued by the athlete or coach, this does not automatically mean that s/he would like it to be an aspect of

the consulting relationship; this is a question to also ask interviewees. Further, we agree with Sarkar (2014) that imposing one's beliefs onto an athlete or coach is unethical behavior.

Step 3: Integrate Christianity into mental skills training. Mosley et al. (2015) found that Christian athletes often organically integrate their faith within their sport experience and have expressed an interest in having sport psychology professionals integrate Christianity within mental skills training. One way consultants may do this is by using the actual language of the individual athletes or coaches they work with. This is one practice already utilized by SPCs (e.g., using clients' own words); having a shared language can be a meaningful method of communication and rapport-building (Balague, 1999; Egli et al., 2014b; Ryba, 2009).

Sport psychology professionals should also recognize the context and situation in which they are working which may influence whether or not spirituality can even be expressed. For example, one should be aware of the geographic location and cultural practices where one practices. As mentioned earlier, Trevor completed his sport psychology training in the southeastern region of the United States where he encountered many Christian athletes and Christian sport contexts. Research has also demonstrated that athletes will often bring up spirituality and/or Christianity when faced with adversity (Egli et al., 2014b; Mosely et al., 2015; Stevenson, 1997).

Step 4: Collaboration and/or referral. Lastly, we believe that while sport psychology professionals should be aware of their competency levels related to Christianity, they could also consider consulting with other helping professionals with expertise engaging with Christianity such as sport chaplains (Egli et al., 2014b; Egli & Fisher, 2016; Gamble, Hill, & Parker, 2013; Hemmings, 2015). Sport psychology professionals should be encouraged to network with sport chaplains in their geographic area and become aware of their credentials and competencies (see Waller, Dzikus, & Hardin, 2008, for more information on sport chaplains); Sadly, Gamble et al. (2013) found that these professional relationships are lacking. For a more in-depth discussion on how sport psychology professionals and sport chaplains might work together, see Egli and Fisher (2016).

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this article was to highlight research related to Christianity and sport psychology and to provide practical suggestions to sport psychology professionals based on this research. Although we believe this to be a helpful step toward becoming more culturally competent, there is still a need for more research and training (Egli et al., 2014a; Watson & Nesti, 2005). The integration of spirituality and sport – including Christianity - is a complex phenomenon that is different for each individual (Bennet et al., 2005; Egli et al., 2014a; Mosley et al., 2015; Stevenson, 1991, 1997). Therefore, we hope that this article serves as an initial springboard for continuing conversation within the field of sport psychology.

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ⁱ It is important to note this paper is written from the perspective of two sport psychology consultants (SPCs) and not from a sport psychologist perspective.