



The influence of the Chinese sport system and Chinese cultural characteristics on Olympic sport psychology services



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of sociocultural factors on Chinese Olympic sport psychology services.

Design and methods: Fifteen sport psychology consultants (SPCs), who served Chinese national teams for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, participated in this study after the Olympics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted within three months of the closing of the Olympics, followed by a hybrid approach to inductive and deductive thematic analyses.

Results: Two general dimensions of sociocultural influence on Chinese Olympic sport psychology services were identified: (a) the Whole-Nation System and (b) Chinese cultural characteristics. They consisted of eight higher order themes, which comprised 26 lower order themes. This study revealed that Chinese sport psychology services were enhanced by recognizing the features of the Whole-Nation System (e.g., resource centralization and top-down management) and the successful blending of these features with Chinese cultural characteristics (e.g., holistic thinking style, keeping face and interpersonal order) into the psychological service.

Conclusions: Sociocultural factors had a marked influence on Chinese Olympic sport psychology services, which enabled Chinese SPCs to provide a culturally competent service (e.g., prioritizing collective interests, respecting the authority of administrative officials and coaches, and keeping face with others) for the Beijing Olympic Games.

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Over the last decade, there has been growing interest in cultural sport psychology (e.g., Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2003, 2005; Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013; Schinke, Michel, Danielson, Gauthier, & Pickard, 2005; Schinke & Moore, 2011). Ever since Duda and Allison (1990) pointed out that the omission of cultural factors had resulted in a void in the field of sport and exercise psychology, cultural sport psychology has proven to be a beneficial reference for the field, especially now that researchers and practitioners are working with more ethnically diverse athletes and in multicultural settings (see Ryba, Schinke, & Tenenbaum, 2010; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009 for a review). Cultural sport psychology research, broadly defined, can be used to investigate the issues of cultural diversity in a multicultural framework (Gill & Kamphoff, 2009) and can “explore the experiences of athletes,

consultants and coaches using critical cultural studies that focus on social differences, the distribution of power and social justice as interrelated concerns.” (McGannon & Johnson, 2009, p. 57).

With regard to the practice of cultural sport psychology, researchers have long emphasized that SPCs should integrate athletes' cultural backgrounds with their psychological services (e.g., Friesen & Orlick, 2011; Martin, Lavallee, Kellman, & Page, 2004; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). Although the issue of multiculturalism and multicultural counseling has raised researchers' attention in the field of counseling (Speight, Myers, Cox, & Highlen, 1991), there is still a lack of cultural diversity research in the sport psychology field (McGannon, Schinke, & Busanich, 2014; Ryba et al., 2013). For example, without systematic examination of the experiences of marginalized groups (Duda & Allison, 1990; Ram, Starek, & Johnson, 2004), racial and ethnic minorities may suffer negative consequences, for example, through the influence of negative stereotyping in the delivery of sport psychology services (Andersen, 1993; Beilock & McConnell, 2004). As such, cultural competence is required to deliver effective and ethical

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psychological services. SPCs with cultural competence will not only be able to recognize the differences that exist between themselves and athletes; but they will also be able to interact effectively with athletes from different cultures (Ryba et al., 2013).

Based on the multicultural guidelines developed by the American Psychological Association (2003), Ryba et al. (2013) have stressed three general areas of cultural competence. These include, cultural awareness (i.e., understanding of one's own culturally constituted beliefs, values and attitudes), cultural knowledge (i.e., understanding and knowledge of other worldviews) and cultural skills (i.e., use of culturally appropriate communication and interventions). Nonetheless, in different countries, contexts vary and knowledge and strategies might differ. For example, Kontos (2009) stated that although sport psychology remains a predominately White domain in the United States, necessary multicultural skills should be developed to provide effective sport psychology services to athletes from different cultures, especially among cultural minorities. Similarly, cultural awareness of aboriginal cultures should be developed when working with both Canadian Aboriginal (Schinke et al., 2009) and Australian Aborigine (Hanrahan, 2009) athletes. Compared to these individualistic countries, cultural awareness, knowledge and skills in sport psychology services might be different in Eastern countries, which are dominated by collectivistic social customs. For example, in order to understand Japanese athletes, SPCs need to be familiar with the concept of Samurai ideals (Kozuma, 2009) and they should also be familiar with Confucianism and Taoism when working with Chinese athletes (Si, Duan, Li, & Jiang, 2011). Furthermore, Si et al. (2011) stated that effective psychological services for Chinese athletes should be integrated into two main areas: (a) The Whole-Nation System (Chinese elite sport system) and (b) Chinese cultural characteristics. As such, under the influence of collectivist cultures, both Chinese and Japanese researchers have emphasized the importance of considering the influence of sociocultural factors. Such factors include, the importance of keeping face (e.g., being polite and non-confrontational and behaving according to one's social status), social hierarchy (e.g., the authoritative role of coaches) and harmony of social interactions (e.g., prioritizing the building of trust and forging relationships) (Kozuma, 2009; Si et al., 2011).

Given the differences and similarities in current cultural sport psychology research, it seems necessary to investigate the influence of sociocultural factors on sport psychology services, within specific cultures and to build culturally competent practice in sport psychology (Ryba et al., 2013). SPCs are typically involved in Olympic psychological services during the whole quadrennial Olympic cycle or for at least one year of this (e.g., Blumenstein & Lidor, 2007; Si & Lee, 2008; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008). The Olympic sport psychology service is, therefore, related to and aligned with, the regular psychology service. Additionally, participating in the Olympics is a prestigious, sporting experience, which may only occur once in an athlete's career. Accordingly, a multitude of challenges must be faced by SPCs, such as, exhausting time commitments, athletes' fluctuating emotions and goal conflicts (Hodge, 2010; McCann, 2008). Moreover, the complexities of sport psychology services (e.g., multiple roles of SPCs) are intensified during the Olympics and SPCs' concerted effort and cooperation with many other individuals is required to keep the service on track (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001; McCann, 2000). As such, the Olympic Games provide an ideal context within which to examine sociocultural influences on sport psychology services. Furthermore, the most important factor, for some countries, for example, China, is that the macro-level government involvement in the Olympic sport psychology services cannot be neglected (Zhang, 2009). Given that it is recommended for researchers and practitioners to focus on their own cultural awareness, knowledge, and

skills as an important aspect with which to develop cultural competence (Ryba et al., 2013), an investigation into local SPCs' Olympic services in different countries can also be viewed as an idiosyncratic exploration of this important area.

Aims of the study

The Chinese Olympic sport psychology services have received greater attention from athletes, coaches and administrative officials in recent Olympic Games. Increasing numbers of SPCs have been invited to join the Olympic preparation task force, for various teams, reaching a peak in the numbers of SPC (22 SPCs) at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (Zhang, 2009). There was a slight decrease in the number of SPCs (17 SPCs) for the 2012 London Olympics (Zhang, 2012) due to the availability of some SPCs, and as a result, several SPCs took on more than one position simultaneously during the London Olympic cycle. The Chinese elite sport system, under the Whole-Nation System, plays a key role in the organization of the sport psychology service. The development of sport teams and professional services, including sport psychology delivery, is directed by this top-down Whole-Nation System, with all functions operating under the same umbrella (Zhang, 2009). Despite the importance of this contribution from the Whole-Nation System to the Chinese sports science services (Jiang, 2007), no empirical research has been conducted to investigate its influence on sport psychology services. In addition, a long history and a prosperous culture have shaped various values and thinking styles among the Chinese people (Ji, Lee, & Guo, 2010; Kulich & Zhang, 2010) and it is therefore not surprising that Chinese SPCs have also incorporated these cultural characteristics into their psychological services (e.g., holistic/dialectic thinking, collectivism, relationship/guanxi) (Si et al., 2011). Recently, Chinese researchers have begun to advocate and examine the blending of Chinese cultural characteristics and sport psychology services, in both content and process (e.g., Si et al., 2011; Zhang & Zhang, 2011). However, to our best knowledge, there is no research that examines how the Whole-Nation System and Chinese culture influence and interact with Chinese sport psychology services, particularly in terms of Olympic preparation, which is the service for the highest level of athletes.

Cultural sport psychology assists SPCs in establishing their own cultural awareness, knowledge and skills with regard to clients' culture and situational context (e.g., Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012; Schinke & Moore, 2011). Given the lack of cultural research related to Chinese sport psychology services, in a national context, our first aim was to examine the influence of Chinese cultural factors on Olympic sport psychology services, in the context of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Through revealing how these factors influence the Olympic psychological services, cultural awareness and knowledge related to service provisions for Chinese athletes, can be preliminarily established. Given that we can reasonably assume that a consultant's personal service experiences are a product of complex political, economic and racial contexts (McGannon & Johnson, 2009), it would be beneficial for us to understand the sport system (e.g., Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009), in order to inform the nature and rationale of SPC work in situ (Ryba et al., 2013). An investigation into the influence of the Whole-Nation System on the Olympic sport psychology services can provide informative knowledge related to the nature of Chinese SPC work under the Whole-Nation System, which can serve to further extend cultural sport psychology scholarship through revealing the understanding of sport psychology services within a local community under a national context. Therefore, the second aim of the current study was to examine how the Whole-Nation System influences Chinese Olympic psychological services.

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