Psychological services for rural athletes

Publication details
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Published online on: 13 Oct 2010
Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology

A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners

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Professionals in the field of psychology have been cognizant of the needs of psychologists with regard to their work with rural populations since the 1980s (Murray & Keller, 1991), as evidenced by increased writing and the existence of journals dedicated to this topic (e.g., the Australian Journal of Rural Health, and the Journal of Rural Community Psychology). Sport and exercise psychologists, however, have been slow to address this area of concern. The only references we could identify in current sport and exercise psychology literature that pertained to working with rural populations were specific to populations in Australia. Because of the paucity of research and writing in this area, we aim in this chapter to present sport psychology consultants with useful information related to working in rural settings and with rural athletes, using material gathered primarily from the parent field of psychology.

For the purposes of this chapter, we define the term “rural” using a multidimensional perspective, as an area that satisfies the rural triad (i.e., ecological, occupational, and socio-cultural components). That is, a rural area is one in which the population is relatively sparse and isolated from metropolitan areas, where occupations within the area are primarily based around agriculture or extracting industries, and values and ideals such as self-reliance and ethnocentricity form the basis of community interactions. Furthermore, because of financial factors associated with the industries that support these populations, individuals who reside in these areas have an increased likelihood of being economically disadvantaged (Murray & Keller, 1991).

Cultural considerations for working with rural athletes

Even though residents of rural communities tend to be more heterogeneous than homogeneous, many common traits tend to exist within these groups. Rural residents often attempt to take care of their own problems or rely on family and close friends, only seeking help when the aforementioned options have been exhausted. This self-reliance may lead rural residents to believe that their problems should stay “in-house” and not be discussed
with strangers or outsiders. Moreover, for many rural individuals, seeking help can be analogous to showing personal weakness, a trait that is not consistent with many rural cultures. Thus, sport psychology professionals may only be approached by rural athletes when a problem has become detrimental to self-esteem, functioning, or athletic performance.

Rural residents tend to be distrusting of outsiders, and may be resistant to setting up appointments with healthcare providers, especially those who are from outside their local areas. When rural athletes first meet with sport psychology professionals, they may not be forthcoming about the gravity of the current situation and their reasons for scheduling the appointment. Furthermore, the “goldfish bowl phenomenon when everyone expects to know everyone else’s business” (Slama, 2004, p. 10) also plays a role in perpetuating distrust of outsiders because there is a common perception among rural residents that the details of such sessions will become shared knowledge within the community. These issues can contribute to a pervasive stigma with regard to seeking help within rural communities. The belief that privacy and confidentiality will be lacking, coupled with the associated stigma toward seeking help, often leads to rural individuals being less likely to request services.

Another characteristic to consider when working with rural populations is the possibility that they may possess stigmatic negative attitudes toward mental health professions. Residents in rural areas have been known to avoid seeking mental health services because they perceive these services to be unsuitable avenues for assistance. When rural residents seek help for mental health issues, they often request such assistance from general practitioners (Judd et al., 2006) or clergy, stemming from their established relationships with these practitioners. Consultants should not only be aware of the prevailing help-seeking stigma present in rural communities, but also the associated beliefs and behavioral tendencies (e.g., resistance against seeking help, limited beliefs in the efficacy of services, inclinations to seek out general practitioners).

Psychology professionals who practise in rural areas should also be aware of the time and work demands often present in these communities. Rural residents can sometimes ill afford to miss time away from work to bring their children to regularly scheduled sessions or attend sessions themselves (Bischoff, Hollist, Smith, & Flack, 2004). For this reason, rural residents may be less consistent than other clients in attending appointments, and may be late or leave sessions early. Additionally, the financial burden associated with sport psychology sessions may sometimes necessitate clients being creative with regard to payment (e.g., installment plans, bartering).

Rural athletes may have limited knowledge and exposure to psychology and psychologists, and may tend to first seek the services of professionals in other fields. Therefore, a central task for the rural practitioner is to explain what sport psychology is to individuals and influential community members (e.g., coaches, pastors, physicians), and to address any associated myths, stereotypes, and stigmas. Some of the most popular myths and misconceptions that should be addressed from the onset are: only problem athletes seek help, the consultations are not confidential, only crazy people see psychologists, and, only weak people ask for help. If sport psychology consultants are proactive in addressing these concerns early, the likelihood of receiving referrals, and of individuals entering into and continuing with sessions, will be increased. Research has shown that the traditional urban model of delivery is not often a good fit in rural communities (Helbok, 2003), and it would be wise for psychologists to tailor their approaches to meet the needs of rural athletes.
Practising sport psychology in rural settings

Although the overall process for sport psychology consultations with rural athletes may not vary considerably from the processes used with urban athletes, there are issues that should be considered throughout traditional face-to-face and teletherapy sessions with rural athletes. These issues generally result from the social, economic, and cultural experiences of rural athletes. Although many of the qualities of rural individuals discussed in the previous section are not consistent across rural athletes, consultants should be aware of this information and know some basic strategies to help promote successful consultations. Practitioners should use this information as a starting point to improve communication. This section focuses on suggestions for consultants to consider when working with rural athletes either face-to-face or via some form of teletherapy.

Suggestions for in-person services with rural athletes

Face-to-face encounters with rural clients often closely resemble traditional service delivery. Consultants should be aware of, and take steps to use, information about common issues with rural clients. These concerns include: acknowledging unique qualities, addressing confidentiality and trust concerns, exploring knowledge/expectations about sport psychology, taking a culturally sensitive approach, and developing working alliances within the community.

It is important that the individual’s decision to seek help be recognized and validated prior to beginning the consultation. Such recognition can be accomplished by thanking the client for coming in and acknowledging any difficulty/apprehension associated with beginning the consultation. Rural psychologists may then encourage conversations about issues such as weather, local news, and school events prior to commencing the session as a way to help put the client at ease, but also create a sense of shared experiences between the consultant and client that can be used as a base upon which a relationship can be built. Once some rapport has been established, we recommend that consultants discuss confidentiality. Affirming confidentiality and discussing issues such as how to greet/acknowledge each other in public if paths should cross in the community can help the therapist avoid potential problems (e.g., client public discomfort) in the future.

Another way to help alleviate some client concerns is by asking clients questions that they will likely feel comfortable answering, such as “How did you get involved in sport?” The initial session is a great time to help clients feel knowledgeable about the discussion topics, and can also provide an opportunity for clients to speak about concerns they may have about talking to a sport psychologist. Many rural clients may have little understanding of sport psychology and may only expect what they have seen on television. Such conversations often produce a laugh and help with the rapport-building process.

Sport psychology consultants need to establish working alliances with their clients from the outset. Rural consultants need to let clients know that they empathize with their situations, in addition to having their best interests at heart. Furthermore, this alliance is presented as a collaborative endeavor whereby both the psychologist and client establish goals that they will work toward achieving. Moreover, establishing a working alliance early in the consultation process has been shown to be a critical variable in predicting treatment outcomes (Hovarth & Greenberg, 1994; see also Chapter 1). This working alliance may be even more important when working within rural populations, because rural residents are often distrusting of outsiders and helping professionals.
Practitioners need to make every effort to incorporate aspects of multicultural counseling into their consultations with rural athletes. They should actively strive to become aware of the biases (e.g., by identifying personal experiences with this population and identifying how these experiences have influenced perceptions), values, and assumptions they may have with regard to rural populations because the possibility exists that the aforementioned experiences may interfere with their abilities to work effectively with rural clients. Sport psychology practitioners should strive to be nonjudgmental about the views expressed by rural clients because any inadvertently insensitive remarks could negatively affect the therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, practitioners should acknowledge if they were not raised in a rural area, and more important, should attempt to acquire as much practical information as they can about their rural clients (e.g., background, daily living experiences).

Sport psychologists should be cautious about routinely applying standard psychological interventions with rural populations. Rural areas are often inhabited by economically disadvantaged individuals who do not take well to “talk therapy,” because self-disclosure is typically contrary to traditional values. Finally, sport psychology professionals who intend to work with rural populations should make every effort to obtain coursework and training to help prepare themselves to work effectively with this population. Beneficial courses and experiences include multicultural counseling, cultural diversity, issues in rural mental health, and other internship or practical placements with rural populations (for more information please see Table 44.1).

Suggestions for teletherapy with rural athletes

Sport psychology is a relatively new and specialized field, but the demand for practitioners is growing. At present, there is not a large enough market in most rural communities to financially support a sport psychology practitioner. Therefore, if consultants want to make a living working with athletes in rural settings, they should also be trained as general counselors or psychologists, and be willing to work with non-athletes. Furthermore, there are not enough competently trained sport psychology professionals to directly serve many rural communities. If rural athletes want to have access to a sport therapist, they usually either drive to an urban area or consult via teletherapy (e.g., telephone, email, internet messaging, web camera).

Table 44.1 Additional training resources for working with rural athletes.

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The process of working with clients from a distance is one that needs to be considered closely before initiating consultations. Beyond the many ethical and legal issues affecting such services, there are several other factors that rural psychologists should take into consideration to enhance teletherapy interactions. These factors include suggestions for initial meetings, assessing cultural issues, acquiring local knowledge, discussing possible communication problems and solutions, disclosure of common identifying information, and confidentiality concerns. It is also important to note that rural athletes may not have access to computers given the possible economic hardships associated with living in a rural area.

**Strategies for successful internet consulting**

When starting professional relationships with rural athletes, we encourage practitioners to schedule the first one or two sessions in person or over a web camera. Such meetings will facilitate the intake process by allowing the consultant to use both verbal and nonverbal information. Because of the importance of nonverbal communication in client conceptualization, it is important for the consultant to have as much visual information available as possible. During these initial sessions, the client and therapist should work on developing rapport, learn about communication styles, and discuss future communication patterns and techniques for dealing with potential communication problems. These initial sessions provide an opportunity to ask important cultural questions and to formulate a basic treatment plan. Future sessions in some situations can be carried out using a web camera or telephone with periodic in-person meetings, but may also take place over protected e-mail or the internet (live “messenger” services).

Because clients living in a different area may be affected by community issues that may not be affecting the practitioner, it is important for the consultant to stay current on the community issues occurring in the client’s town. For example, drought, flood, fire, pest infestation, or other regional issues may be affecting the client. To stay on top of such local developments, professionals may try to periodically read the client’s hometown paper on the internet. When possible, consultants may also try to visit the client’s town to learn more about the culture and other background issues.

Beyond learning about a client’s culture and hometown, when therapists work via the internet or e-mail, we also encourage them to discuss with clients possible strategies for clarifying communication. For example, the use of emoticons (i.e., text-based characters inserted into communications to help describe the emotion that one is currently feeling) can help both parties express emotion in text. Further, because of the lack of nonverbal communication and higher likelihood of communication mistakes caused by typing, grammar, or reading errors, both parties must understand how to clarify discrepancies. Such strategies include follow-up phone calls or web camera sessions, and encouraging and empowering clients to ask questions.

On a similar note, communication mistakes via internet consultations are common for individuals who do not type well, have writing difficulties, or dislike typing. Consultants will note that such clients are brief with their responses and often do not do a good job of expressing themselves. These situations can lead to multiple communication problems. To avoid such difficulties, therapists should assess potential problems before entering into an internet consultation, and consider not using these modalities when working with such people.

In a traditional session, when clients come in to meet with a sport psychologist, they learn information about the practitioner that they might not necessarily learn during internet consulting. This information includes approximate age, appearance, race/ethnicity,
office memorabilia, and speech patterns. Although many of these issues are not absolutely pertinent to the sessions, this information affects rapport building. Sport psychology consultants should provide similar information to clients either through a brief description on a webpage, or keeping an up-to-date picture of oneself on the webpage.

Ethics and the rural community

Consultants should be aware of the potential ethical dilemmas they may face when working in rural settings. Some of these ethical dilemmas and potential solutions are directed at consultants who live and work in rural communities, whereas others are for practitioners who may live in an urban setting, but see clients from rural communities. The primary issues to consider include multiple role relationships, confidentiality, competency/scope of practice, limited supervision and consultation, visibility in the community, and other issues related to the use of the internet in consultations (see Helbok, 2003, for an overview).

Ethical issues for those living and working in a rural community

One of the benefits of living in a small town is the depth of the relationships that an individual can develop with friends and neighbors. Because of the often limited resources available in rural areas, individuals living in the region often take on multiple roles for the benefit of the community (e.g., youth coach, Sunday school teacher, postmaster). Such roles are also likely to occur for sport psychology professionals living in rural communities. Although this immersion in a small community may be appealing to many, it can cause problems for consultants who are concerned about developing multiple-role relationships with clients or potential clients. Taking on such roles, however, may help sport psychology consultants extend their client base and referral networks, as well as develop trust, respect, and credibility in the community. Although the ethical concern related to multiple-role relationships is important to consider, this is not to say that consultants should not take on other roles within a small community, but more that they should be careful about the relationships that they develop. Multiple-role relationships, especially in rural communities, are not usually unethical. Such relationships become unethical when there is a conflict of interest between the two roles or when a power differential exists between practitioner and client that increases the likelihood for harm or exploitation of the client, affects the client’s ability to make decisions, or impairs the practitioner’s objectivity, competence, or effectiveness.

As mentioned previously, confidentiality is a big concern in rural communities. In a small community everyone tends to know everyone else, and news travels quickly. When clients come in to see a sport psychologist, they may be identified by support staff, clients’ cars may be identified outside the office, or others may spot awkward interactions between consultants and clients in the supermarket. Any of these seemingly innocuous issues can affect the client, the practitioner, and the working relationship.

Working within one’s area of competency is an expectation of all practitioners, but this principle may be challenged when working in rural regions. In small communities, it is unlikely that there will be many options for receiving psychological services. Therefore, consultants may be approached for any number of sport- and non-sport related issues. Some of these issues may fit neatly within one’s competency areas, but other issues may not.
With few (or no) other practitioners around for referrals, difficult decisions about service provision need to be made. In an urban setting, sport psychologists are much more likely to have colleagues to whom they refer clients when presenting concerns are outside of their competencies. In rural communities, practitioners may be faced with difficult decisions about providing services outside of their competency areas or leaving potential clients with no options for services. Further confusing the situation is that there are not likely to be many professionals around from whom to receive supervision or to consult to help consultants develop new areas of competence. Although telesupervision may be an option to help one remain ethical in such situations, finding a supervisor who is willing to work with you from a distance can be challenging. Rural practitioners often find themselves in positions without much support. Not only is practising near or outside of one’s competency dangerous, but it is also taxing, and can lead to burnout.

Ethical issues for teletherapy with rural athletes

Although practitioners who live and work in a rural setting should strongly consider the ethical issues mentioned above, it is unlikely that many professionals will actually set up shop in a rural community with a limited client base. Sport psychology consultants are more likely to live and work in larger cities and either travel to rural communities to see clients, or consult with rural athletes via teletherapy (i.e., phone, email, internet messaging, web camera). The ethical issues related to teletherapy are important to consider, but due to space considerations in this chapter, only a few of these issues will be discussed: confidentiality, credentialing, competency, relationship development, and treatment efficacy. Other issues such as scheduling, response time, and rates of payment will not be discussed (see Watson, Tenenbaum, Lidor, & Alfermann, 2001, for a more complete description of these and other issues).

It is not earth-shattering news that e-mail is not confidential. Computer servers are frequently hacked, and anyone who has been to internet cafés to send e-mails may have had their information hacked by someone who has gained access via that public server. Therefore, conducting therapy via the internet should not be a decision made lightly. It would be a good idea to use encryption software, and to have a visible notice on all e-mails and even a waiver for clients to sign indicating that internet communications are not confidential but that reasonable efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality. Such reasonable efforts probably entail having developed a competency for understanding internet-related technologies and how to consult effectively via this medium. Because rural clients often have strong concerns about confidentiality, professionals may want to make sure that clients clearly understand the confidentiality issues related to this medium of consultation. Such discussions may take place effectively in person, over the phone, or using a web camera.

Credentialing is another issue to consider when working with clients from a distance. It is important to realize that if consultants are communicating with clients over state, provincial, or country lines, they may not be credentialed to provide services in this new jurisdiction. In such cases, professionals may be doing something that is unethical and illegal. We encourage practitioners to check the laws that govern the areas where clients are located. In many cases, licensed practitioners may apply for short-term privileges to work in different jurisdictions.

Sport psychology consultants should develop competencies for working with all mediums they choose for consultations. Some of the major issues associated with teletherapy modalities of service delivery involve the ability to develop effective rapport and to have a treatment
approach that is based upon evidence of success. Consultants should be extra conscious about developing rapport through honest and accurate communications, given that the majority of all face-to-face communication is nonverbal (Poyatos, 1992). Therefore, when using non-face-to-face modalities such as the internet for consulting, practitioners will have significantly less information available to them. Limited information has the potential to affect information gathering, diagnosis, and treatment. Even when using web cameras for consulting, a camera provides a two-dimensional image of a limited area. Extra time must be taken to get to know the client, ask specific questions about feelings and behaviors, and develop honest and open two-way communication.

Because of these above-mentioned communication concerns, and limitations with regard to building rapport, it is important that professionals think carefully about clients’ presenting issues before consulting with them via teletherapy. For example, adopting an educational approach to help a client learn how to concentrate may be an appropriate intervention to deliver over the internet, but it is probably not a good idea to deal with complex eating or mood disorder issues via the internet. Sport psychology consultants must choose wisely the issues with which they are willing to work from a distance, because some issues are more easily dealt with in situations with restricted communication and less access to nonverbal communication. Practitioners should also make sure that they are aware of efficacious techniques for dealing with communication concerns using their chosen medium of consultation.

Conclusion

Although rural athletes are probably more similar to urban athletes than they are different, it would be a mistake for sport psychologists to treat them the same. Rural athletes are exposed to cultural, economic, and social systems within their communities that are often different from those to which urban athletes are exposed. Therefore, it is important for consultants to be knowledgeable about these potential differences and have strategies for dealing with them if they are to work successfully with rural athletes. In this chapter, we have outlined many potential differences for practitioners to consider in their work with rural athletes. Knowledge of these potential differences should be used as a basis for inquiry to help sport psychology consultants understand their clients, their presenting concerns, and their potential treatment options. One should not assume that treatment approaches that have been validated with urban athletes will necessarily be effective with rural athletes. Although these approaches may be effective with rural athletes, there is the possibility that the cultural, economic, and social differences in their communities call for different tactics (see Box 44.1).

We have identified several ethical issues of which practitioners should be aware when working with rural athletes either in person or via teletherapy. Even though the same ethical principles and standards apply for working with rural and urban clients, sport psychology professionals who work with rural athletes are more likely to be faced with certain ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas include, but are not limited to, problems with multiple roles, confidentiality, client concerns about confidentiality and privacy of internet communications, competency, credentialing, and appropriateness of working with some issues. Although there are many other ethical issues of which therapists should be aware, those mentioned here tend to be the major concerns faced when consulting with rural athletes.
Box 44.1

Take home messages about working with rural athletes

- Be aware of common rural characteristics such as self-reliance, distrust of outsiders, and stigmatic attitudes toward seeking help when working with rural clients.
- Be conscious of biases and assumptions toward rural clients. These biases could affect the therapeutic relationship.
- Be mindful of the unique social, economic, and cultural experiences of rural athletes.
- If planning to work with rural clients, attempt to obtain as much training (coursework, practical, or internship experiences) in preparation for working with this population.
- Teletherapy may be one option that enables work with rural clients when face-to-face sessions are not feasible.
- When using teletherapy communication, ground rules must be established to avoid miscommunications and to deal effectively with communication mishaps.
- Be especially cautious to adhere to appropriate ethical codes when working with rural clients, especially when using teletherapy.

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