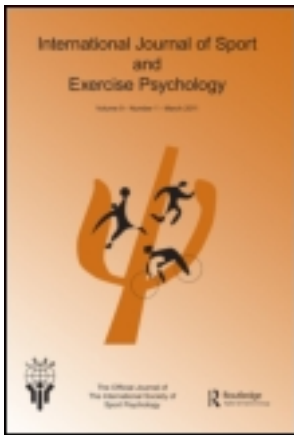


This article was downloaded by: [University of Portsmouth]

On: 11 December 2013, At: 04:36

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjjs20>

Cognitive appraisals of stressors encountered in sport organizations

Sheldon Hanton ^a, Christopher R.D. Wagstaff ^b & David Fletcher ^c

^a Cardiff School of Sport, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, UK

^b Department of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK

^c School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

Published online: 10 May 2012.

To cite this article: Sheldon Hanton, Christopher R.D. Wagstaff & David Fletcher (2012) Cognitive appraisals of stressors encountered in sport organizations, *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 10:4, 276-289, DOI: [10.1080/1612197X.2012.682376](https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2012.682376)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2012.682376>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Cognitive appraisals of stressors encountered in sport organizations

Sheldon Hanton^a, Christopher R.D. Wagstaff^{b*} and David Fletcher^c

^a*Cardiff School of Sport, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, UK;* ^b*Department of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK;* ^c*School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK*

(Received 23 August 2011; final version received 19 March 2012)

This study investigated athletes' appraisals of organizational stressors. Four elite sport performers (two males and two females) completed Stress Appraisal Logs over a six-week competition period regarding the stressors they encountered within their sport organization. The participants predominantly appraised sources of organizational strain (i.e. organizational-related stressors) as threatening or harmful, with little perceived control, and few coping resources available. Appraisals were categorized under three dimensions: primary appraisals, secondary appraisals, and reappraisals. The findings provide a valuable insight into performers' cognitive appraisal of organizational-related stressors by highlighting that they reflect on the personal meaning and importance of demands, evaluate their resources to deal with the stressors, and employ reappraisals to subsequently revisit and re-evaluate situations in a more positive manner.

Keywords: athletes; control; evaluations; performance; stress; transactions

Literature discussing the psychology of elite sport performance has increasingly emphasized the importance of the organizational environment in which athletes operate (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012). Within the field of organizational psychology, researchers have examined in some detail the relationships between employees' health, well-being and performance (e.g. Sparks, Faragher, & Cooper, 2001). A principal construct of interest within this line of inquiry has been organizational stress, which has been defined as, "an ongoing transaction between an individual and the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with the organization within which he or she is operating" (Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006, p. 329). Over the past decade or so, sport psychology researchers have investigated the organizational-related stressors that top-level athletes experience (see Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Neil, in press; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Woodman & Hardy, 2001), their responses to these demands (see Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012), and how they cope with these types of stressors (see Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010).

The most recent research study in this area has focused on athletes' responses to organizational stress (Fletcher et al., in press). The findings showed that performers generally do not react indifferently to organizational stressors; they respond with a wide range of emotions, attitudes and behaviours. It was also found that while experiencing some organizational stress is inevitable, it does not necessarily follow that athletic and psychological consequences will invariably be negative. As part of their suggestions for future research, the authors posed the question:

*Corresponding author. Email: chris.wagstaff@port.ac.uk

“what are the cognitive mechanisms underpinning, and the theoretical relationships surrounding, performers’ psychological and behavioural responses?” and went on to conclude that “if researchers are to really get to the ‘theoretical heart’ (Lazarus, 1999, p. 61) of the stress process in sport, then our analytical lens needs to more sharply focus on performers’ cognitive appraisals of the organizational stressors they encounter” (Fletcher et al., in press).

Cognitive appraisal is a central and pivotal concept in the transactional perspective of stress (Lazarus, 1964, 1966, 1981; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Speisman, Lazarus, Mordkoff, & Davison, 1964). This concept refers to how a person evaluates his or her transactions with the environment. People constantly evaluate the significance of what is happening with respect to its implications for well-being and what might be done about it. In the context of organizational stress in sport, cognitive appraisal involves evaluating the relevance of a stressor, for example, a conflict with management, and its personal significance for well-being. If the conflict is considered meaningful, the performer then evaluates whether he or she has the sufficient personal resources available to cope with the stressor (Fletcher et al., 2006). Situational variables that influence the appraisal process include demands, constraints, opportunities and culture. Personal variables include goals and goal hierarchies, beliefs about self and world, and personal resources (Lazarus, 1998, 1999).

Lazarus (1966) distinguished between two equally important types of appraisal: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal refers to evaluations one makes regarding what is at stake relative to values, goal commitments, situational intentions, and beliefs about self and world, which ascribe meaning and significance to a situation (Lazarus, 1966). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed three types of primary appraisal: *irrelevant appraisals* are those situations that are evaluated as neither threatening nor harmful, nor of potential benefit to the individual; *benign-positive appraisals*, which relate to evaluations of potential enhancement in well-being by the individual; and *stressful appraisals*, which occur when evaluations indicate a substantial threat to one’s well-being. Those situations appraised as stressful generally involve apperceptions of harm/loss (i.e. damage to one’s goal, values, or beliefs has occurred), threat (i.e. damage to one’s goal, values, or beliefs is possible), or challenge (i.e. the individual perceives positively an obstacle towards their goal, values, or beliefs), which may occur simultaneously and instantaneously. It has been contended that challenge appraisals will occur when the situation does not require substantial efforts and when a sense of control is perceived (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If meaning is ascribed to an encounter, then there is a need for further evaluation. This is in order for an individual to identify and determine the availability of coping resources, in addition to the potential to utilize such resources. This process of abstraction, akin to a resource-inventory, is termed secondary appraisal. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), if a stressor is appraised negatively (i.e. threat or harm) with limited resources to change it, emotion-focused coping (or efforts to deal with one’s emotional responses to the stress) will ensue. However, if the situation is appraised as having potential ameliorative outcomes by action (i.e. challenge), problem-focused coping efforts (or those aimed at dealing with or changing the actual stressor) will be adopted.

Lazarus’ appraisal-centred transactional theory of stress has received ongoing attention from scholars outside of sport psychology (e.g. industrial, work, and organizational: IWO psychology). Much of this work has examined individuals’ appraisals of workplace stressors (e.g. Frederikson & Dewe, 1996a; Troup & Dewe, 2002). Indeed, this research has suggested that the organizational environment may affect individuals’ appraisals of coping options, and ultimately, their coping response and outcome (Oakland, 1991). They may also need to acquire information in order to cope (Ostell, 1991), during which time alternative coping strategies (e.g. reappraisal, emotion-focused coping) may facilitate a more positive evaluation of one’s situation (Oakland & Ostell, 1996). Dewe (1991) found primary appraisal to be a significant contributor to feelings of discomfort with a strong relationship between secondary appraisal and coping strategy

selection. In a subsequent investigation, Dewe (1992) found primary appraisals of workplace stressors to relate to their impact upon work-group or organization, a desire to do well and worry about job security, with perceived control over stressors emerging as an important mediating factor. Secondary appraisals were categorized as those where action could be taken, where action could be taken following reflection, and where there was little or nothing employees could do. More recently, Troup and Dewe (2002) found primary appraisals of workplace stressors to relate to threats to self-esteem, feelings of embarrassment, thoughts of losing respect for someone, and feeling they would not achieve an important goal. They also found negative correlations between perceived control and threat and harm appraisals.

In view of the increasingly frequent appearance of organizational-related topics in the elite sport literature (see, for reviews, Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2012), and recent attention being paid to appraisal-related concepts (e.g. Nicholls, Levy, Jones, Rangamani, & Poman, 2011) and emotions (e.g. Neil, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Fletcher, 2011) associated with stressors in sport, it is surprising that no study has directly explored performers' appraisals of organizational-related issues. Whilst none of this research has studied organizational stressors directly, much of it indicates the importance of exploring performers' appraisals of such issues. Specifically, this research has found environmental issues (e.g. coach's negative comments) to cause both positive and negative appraisals (Anshel & Delany, 2001), and performers experiencing these stressors to report high levels of threat, moderate levels of harm, and low levels of challenge (Anshel, Jamieson, & Raviv, 2001). Campbell and Jones (2002) reported negative match preparation and communication issues to elicit more positive appraisals (i.e. challenge), whilst negative coach style/behaviour, relationship issues, costs or demands, to be appraised in a more negative manner (i.e. threat or harm/loss). In a longitudinal exploration using diary measures, Holt and Dunn (2004) found appraisal and coping to be closely related to one's goals and to interact in a transactional, recursive manner. It is worth mentioning that Holt and Dunn (2004) emphasized the need for longitudinal research designs, citing the use of daily diaries as an important method for identifying specific changes in the stress process. More recently, Ben-Ari, Tsur, and Har-Even (2006) found perceived high levels of procedural justice on teams were associated with greater challenge appraisals, team loyalty, and commitment among Israeli athletes.

In view of the findings from workplace stress research, it is likely that appraisal patterns will be influential in sport performers' experiences of stress in their sport organizations. Indeed, there have been a number of recent calls in the sport psychology literature for future research to examine the underlying stress appraisals associated with the organizational stress experience (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2006, Fletcher et al., in press; Levy, Nicholls, Marchant, & Polman, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore sport performers cognitive appraisals of organizational stressors. To this end, it is hoped that information addressing this purpose will better help practitioners understand why the individuals they work with respond and cope in different ways to similar stressors.

Method

Participants and organizations

In line with recent sampling for appraisal research (Holt & Dunn, 2004), four performers (two males and two females) from a range of sports took part in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 26 ($M = 23$, $SD = 1.87$) and all competed at full international level for more than four years in their sport at the time of data collection. All participants were British Caucasians competing in Olympic sports, of which two were individual events and two invasive team games. Each of the participants had competed at a major championship (e.g. Commonwealth Games, European Championships, World Championships). All sports were predominantly

self-funded, supported by public or private funding, which was managed and distributed by a national sport organization.

Data collection

Data were collected over a six-week competition period using diaries (see Holt & Dunn, 2004; Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & James, 2005a). Such an approach emphasizes day-to-day variations capturing the sequential, dynamic environment in which people operate and the meaning they ascribe to this, allowing intensive monitoring of phenomena such as appraisal (see Dewe & Trenberth, 2004; Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000; Webber & Laux, 1990). These techniques are, “essential, if not just advantageous, for the study of stress, emotions and coping” (Lazarus, 2000a, p. 667) and minimize the limitations of retrospective recall associated with interviews (see Campbell & Jones, 2002; Smith, Leffingwell, & Ptacek, 1999). The benefits of using diaries to examine cognitive processes within stress transactions have also been emphasized recently by sport psychology researchers (e.g. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Nicholls et al., 2005a). These studies have predominantly utilized audio diaries or stressor checklists with open-ended responses for data collection. Therefore, a standardized log was developed specifically for the purpose of this study.

Stress Appraisal Log (SAL). Diaries comprised blank SALs (available from corresponding author) to be completed within 12 hours of encountering a stressor in order to reduce retrospective recall interference (cf. Campbell & Jones, 2002). The SAL included three segments for open-ended responses: Stressor, Appraisals, and Responses, each containing a number of prompts. The stressor segment invited participants to discuss in detail the situation they were experiencing, including its causes and whether they expected the issue. Participants were provided with an education and orientation pack which involved defining the nature of organizational stress and provided examples of stressors using the organizational stressor dimensions from Fletcher et al. (in press). This was done in the hope of exposing meaning rather than imposing it through checklists, to reveal facets of stress processes which have not been previously reported (Erera-Weatherley, 1996). The appraisal segment prompted performers to consider their evaluations, thoughts, and the significance of the situation they had just experienced/were experiencing. Additionally, they were invited to discuss the degree to which they found the situation positive, negative, neutral, and controllable. Finally, prompts related to whether the individual thought they could cope with the situation and what it meant for them personally. The responses segment invited participants to discuss their responses at the time, the emotions they experienced/were experiencing and whether they could express their feelings at the time of occurrence. The SAL was piloted with four non-international performers for one week, with only minor cosmetic changes being made relating to page layout. Regular communication was maintained throughout data collection between researcher and participant in order to answer any questions which arose (e.g. phraseology) and help ensure adherence (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005b).

Data analysis

As this study explored the subjective appraisals of individuals, an ideographic approach to analysis was taken to understand these phenomena. This is in line with similar stress research in sport psychology which has adopted these methods (e.g. Dunn, 1994; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). Indeed, Dunn (1994) stated that ideographic techniques for qualitative data “provide, ‘richer’ information from which more valid inferences can be made” (p. 383). Appraisals are by their nature ideographic, therefore, it was deemed important for participants to state stressor information in order to provide a contextual base for subsequent cognitions and responses

to be more fully understood during analysis. Whilst previous appraisal research in sport (e.g. Thatcher & Day, 2008) has focused on examining Lazarus' primary appraisals (i.e. underlying properties), due to the exploratory nature of this study, we attempted to allow findings to emerge from within the data, taking an open approach to any appraisals reported by participants. That is, whilst the design of this study is informed by extant theory and research, we believe that the limited research examining appraisals of organizational stressors called for analysis procedures which attempted to allow themes to emerge from within the data.

To address the primary purpose of this study, we employed content analysis. This approach involves a series of analytical steps which are conducted to facilitate the emergence of meaningful concepts relating to the topic of inquiry. There has been a notable growth in the use of content analysis in sport psychology research (see Neil, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2009) in response to the desire for greater understanding of complex behaviours, needs, systems, and cultures (cf. Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The analytical process involved the researchers examining and debating content relating to the transactional stress process which gave rise to the appraisal concepts. We began by undertaking pattern recognition (Patton, 2002), which refers to extensive reading and close examination of diaries. This allowed a number of initial themes and meanings to emerge regarding performers' experiences (e.g. a threat). In line with Aronson's (1994) guidelines, the next step involved identifying all the data that related to the already classified pattern. In doing so, all of the diary data that related to specific pattern (i.e. a threat) were placed with similar quotations for that corresponding theme. As analysis continued, other concepts were identified which were treated the same way. We then combined and catalogued any related patterns into sub-themes and defined units derived from these patterns using memos to summarize the nature of the sub-theme. For example, perceived threats to career development, performance, or the organization's image were grouped under the subheading "threats" which, in turn, comprised part of the primary appraisal dimension. The ongoing linking of units and formation of themes allowed patterns in participants' stories to emerge into a more comprehensive picture of their collective experience (Aronson, 1994). The final stage of analysis involved refining and integrating the categories to form an explanatory framework of the participants' appraisals. By moving back-and-forth between the analytical procedures outlined above, an integrative and explanatory framework of the performers' appraisals emerged. In line with sport psychology-specific guidelines (e.g. Weed, 2009) the quality of this research should be judged according to four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Results

The results represent the collated Stress Appraisal Logs completed by all four participants. In total, 42 SAL's ($M = 10.5$, $SD = 0.5$) were completed from which 86 appraisals were mentioned, reflecting the complexity of the stress process. The appraisals were abstracted into three dimensions: Primary appraisals, Secondary appraisals, and Reappraisals which, in turn, encapsulated six higher-order themes (see Figure 1). The higher-order themes within the Primary appraisal dimension were: "harms", "threats", and "challenges". The higher-order themes within the Secondary appraisal dimension were: "restricted resources", "action could be taken", and "had to hold back". There was no higher-order theme in the Reappraisal dimension. To elaborate, analytical procedures identified 36 Primary appraisals, 36 Secondary appraisals, and 14 Reappraisals. Data are displayed as segments of narrative portraying the "stories" described by the performers, and hierarchical content trees. The segments are introduced with relevant information about the stressor and the ensuing processes. It should be noted, however, that extracts were not treated as a single situation, but an ongoing process which systematically changed over time (Lazarus, 1991). Therefore, the narrative and diary extracts which follow are not presented

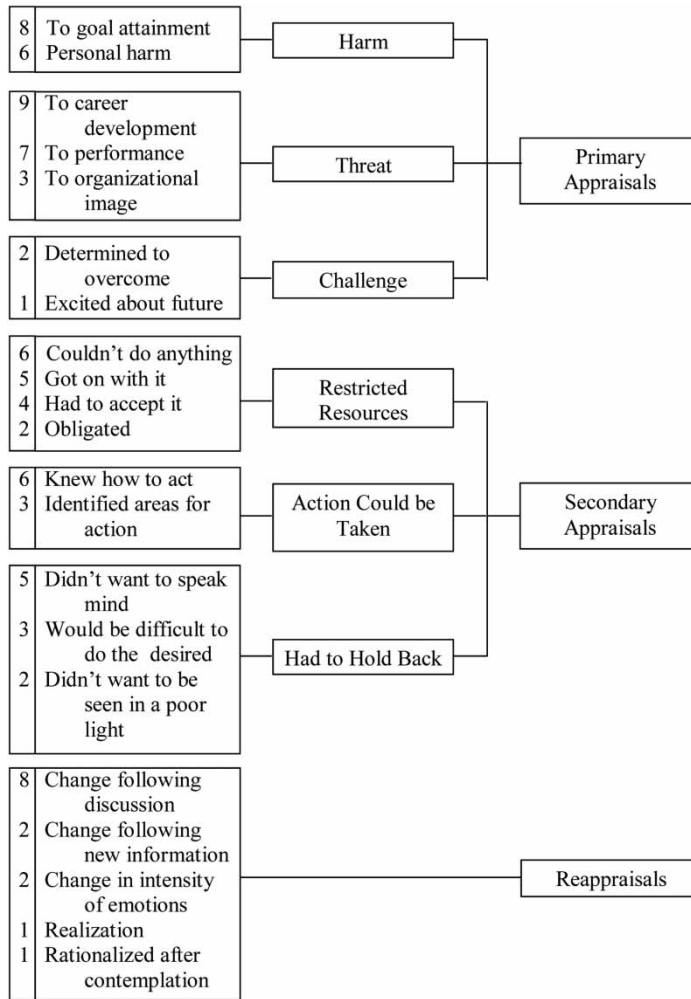


Figure 1. Primary appraisals, secondary appraisals, and reappraisals of organizational stressors (a frequency analysis is provided in the first column to illustrate the number of times participants mentioned each appraisal).

within specific appraisal dimensions, but across primary, secondary and reappraisals, as stories described by participants, in an attempt to fully illustrate these dynamics.

A number of performers appraised situations as harmful to either their goals or themselves personally. The following quotation illustrates participant 1's primary appraisal of "Personal harm" after receiving criticism from a coach regarding body size:

I feel like people are always putting me down with crappy comments. I was really hurt on both accounts. I felt like they were being mean for the sake of it. It just made me feel horrible about myself and I was annoyed considering I work hard on my training and my diet... it was important to me.

The performer then assessed the resources available for dealing with this personal slight. Despite wishing to take action, it appears that the participant chose not to express their feelings, thus exemplifying how performers may appraise a situation as "Had to hold back":

I didn't want to say anything. I didn't want them to see me upset and then think I'm weak. Then they would just have more stuff to make fun of me and hurt me with. I wanted to argue my case with my coach but I ignored the fat comment and pretended not to hear it. I didn't want to be a diva in front of everybody. Plus I thought he did it on purpose so I didn't want to say anything.

Despite this rather negative secondary appraisal of the situation, the performer did reappraise the situation after utilizing their social support network, which led to a partially positive outcome:

I just spoke to my friends about it and they helped me to calm down and see the good points of the whole, rubbish, long weekend. Although I'm still sad from last night and I mostly feel as if nothing is going right.

Whilst some performers believed their stakes, values, or goals to be harmed by the organizational stressors they were experiencing, for many this deficit had not yet occurred. Therefore, a large number of situations were appraised primarily by individuals as a "Threat to career development". The following quotation relates to participant 2's appraisal of large-scale off-season player recruitment:

My initial evaluation was very negative in that my perception was that these new players would be coming in and taking my place after I had worked throughout my career to start in the [sponsor] league. I was thinking that this could be the end of me playing at the top level. So I was feeling pretty scared and vulnerable about my future... [It was] hugely important as, to me, my future career was in jeopardy.

In the next narrative section from this stress process, the performer indicates that there was a disparity between the amount of control they desired and they received. This appears to have acted as a trigger for the individual to adopt the secondary appraisal of "Knew how to act":

I wanted to have complete control over my future at the club, but when we were told I felt none. This made it worse, my career development rested on this player recruitment. The only thing I had control over was the amount of training I could put in before pre-season in order to be in good shape... this made me motivated to be in good shape for pre-season.

After evaluating the resources available for dealing with the stressor, the performer's narrative describes their reappraisal of the situation in a more positive way after discussing the issue with team mates later that evening:

However, on the other side of the coin I could see how the club was going to benefit from this. After discussions with team mates I rationalized to some extent, and we began to see some of the positives that could come from this, particularly for the club in general... it was good to get their perspective.

Whilst the performer in the previous narrative was able to reappraise their situation in a more positive light, this progression occurred in only 39% of the stress logs, with many being reported as negative and persistent. Similarly to the previous example, in the following quotation from participant 3 the performer primarily appraises the stressor, which relates to prolonged travel to competition, as a threat, "I was worried about how it would impact on my preparations, finances and role as captain... worry and apprehension as to what impact this whole issue would have on my performance".

Interestingly, all of the participants evaluated their resources for dealing with a threatening situation as being restricted where they perceived little control or changeability. This was illustrated by participant 3, "I had to get on with it despite my reservation. As I had no option

about it I couldn't draw any positives from the situation. The impact of the travel arrangements was totally negative". Additionally, a large number of performers indicated that they did not perceive sufficient control to express their feelings or emotions due to the organization. As participant 3 continued, "no, I didn't express my feelings. As captain I have a responsibility to remain calm and in control - any negative displays from me can send negativity to the rest of the team".

It appears that performers appraise stressors as threatening not only to their career development and performance, but also as potentially harmful to their organization. The following segment exemplifies participant 3's primary appraisal of threat after being provided with incorrect apparel at a major final:

Ultimately, two players took the arena in unsuitable apparel, which made the team look unprofessional in front of the opposition, crowd and press. It was really negative but not to the extent that I thought it would have huge implications for the match itself, but more for the image of the club in front of the crowd and press.

As the situation continued the performer was expected to solve the issue whilst preparing for the impending competition themselves. The participant also emphasized the lack of control and resources available to deal with the stressor and perceiving that they must suppress feelings:

I didn't want the responsibility of trying to find a solution but felt obligated due to my role as captain. I didn't feel much control as my resources were limited at the time... Apart from trying to discuss possible solutions, I kind of had to suppress any feelings that could distract me, and focus on the game ahead- trying to calm myself down.

While the previous narrative extract demonstrates how performers may appraise organizational stressors as threatening with restricted resources to cope, other performers may appraise a situation as amenable to change, thus reducing the intensity of the primary evaluation of threat. The following illustrates participant 4's ongoing cognitions regarding major changes to their organizational structure:

I did feel a bit vulnerable as I didn't know if this change would be for better or worse... my future development as a player was undoubtedly going to be impacted, but I didn't know to what degree. I was going to have to form a new relationship with a new coach and hope that it would be successful.

However, despite this "Threat to career development", as the transaction unfolded the performer "Identified areas for action" following an informative meeting led by a club director. This led to participant 4 perceiving sufficient information to deal with the stressor and an appraisal of challenge at the prospect of developing new interpersonal relationships:

My club was very good at explaining why they had made the decisions, so I felt I was in the know. The prospect of having a new coach to learn from was quite exciting, but at the same time unnerving as I didn't know how successful our new relationship would be...but I could cope, yes.

The performer went on to describe their positive reappraisal of the initial threat as events unfolded later that day after she was able to discuss the stressor with other performers:

We had been given such a good explanation of what was going on, I knew the club would be going out of its way to ensure all the players were happy. Plus, I wasn't going through this alone, my whole squad was in the same boat so I knew we could offer support and talk things through. I spoke to players about my concerns. It was good to express what I was thinking and have others rationalize it.

Despite the high proportion (92%) of primary appraisals of threat or harm, in a few instances performers reported more positive “Challenge” appraisals. The evaluations described here relate to participant 1’s perception of an unfair selection policy, “although I felt a little negative in the way the coach didn’t keep her word, I was more positive in the way it’s making me more determined to get into the squad again”. This rather mixed appraisal facilitated a secondary appraisal where the performer “Knew how to act” in order to deal with the stressor, “I want to keep training and will in the future. It’s just made me more determined to get in next time or at least push players selected above to work harder and get better”.

Despite this rather positive appraisal, when prompted whether the performer expressed their feelings of unfairness at the time of the situation to the coach, the following narrative segment was written, “No, it wasn’t really appropriate as everyone was emotional. I spoke to some squad members after selection though”.

Discussion

This study aimed to incorporate transactional stress theory into psychology research in sport organizations (cf. Fletcher et al., 2006). The rationale for this was to provide some initial insights into why performers respond in differing ways to similar sources of strain they encounter in their organizations. The research question was addressed by exploring performers’ appraisals of these stressors using a longitudinal diary method. This approach was employed to allow the participants to systematically describe the stressful situation they were experiencing and their appraisals of it in a more timely and natural way than through retrospective interview techniques (Brief & Atieh, 1987; Dewe, 1992). The findings indicate that cognitive appraisals are a pivotal mechanism in stress transactions in sport organizations. More specifically, the data indicate that organizational stressors are appraised in similar ways with regards to their relational meaning for performers and the resources available to them for coping. Such observations have important implications for theory and practice and are discussed with consideration of future research directions.

Performers in this study generally stated appraising organizational stressors as threatening, with some evaluations of harm, and few reports of challenge. This illustrates the substantial meaning which athletes attribute to sources of organizational strain. The findings lend tentative support for previous appraisal research which has found workplace stressors to be related to threats to self-esteem and goals (Troup & Dewe, 2002) and associations between appraisals and goal conflict in a sport context (Holt & Dunn, 2004). For example, the preceding narrative illustrates how organizational stressors were evaluated as being personally harmful to self-esteem after receiving coach criticism and threatening to participants’ goals via perceived limited career development opportunities during organizational change. The present study furthers research in this area through its identification of organizational stressors being predominantly appraised as threatening or harmful in some way, with little control or changeability. Interestingly, a large proportion (42%) of the stressors which caused threat or harm appraisals emanated from factors intrinsic to the sport (e.g. training load and environment, or travel). Whilst these may not be the most insidious or enduring sources of strain, they indicate that performers must constantly appraise and deal with a continual bombardment of organizational stressors and daily hassles. This supports the notion that some organizational stressors may be unavoidable (Fletcher et al., 2006), with appraisal appearing to be the key mechanism for determining meaning for the performer and their view of available coping resources.

Further to the primary appraisals ascribing relational meaning to their situations, performers described how their evaluations related to the coping options available to them. Importantly, they often appraised threatening and harmful situations as having “restricted resources” (52%) or “had to hold back” (30%) but fewer where “action could be taken” (18%). When reporting these

appraisals, all of the participants stated the importance of social support networks. These networks included family, friends, and team mates, but rarely did they include significant others within the organization (i.e. coach, selector, manager). Moreover, all of the participants emphasized the direct influence of these significant others upon their appraisals of “restricted resources” or “had to hold back”. This was often due to the individual perceiving the significant other as unapproachable or fearing the repercussions of approaching them. The performers also disclosed cognitions of perceiving such actions as unacceptable or damaging in some way. Thus, it would appear that whilst organizations may function to provide resources and support for performers, they may also impose numerous constraints, which seem to affect evaluations of the perceived availability and utility of these resources (Frederikson & Dewe, 1996b). This adds to the emerging evidence that sport organizations have rules and norms concerning the display and expression of emotions in response to stressors (cf. Fletcher et al., 2006; Wagstaff et al., 2012). Hence, it may be that participants were providing appraisals of coping strategies which are more desirable and inline with the socio-cultural landscape within their organization, rather than those which are *actually* being felt as a result of the stressor *per se*. This will obviously impact on the performer’s reappraisals should the transaction continue to be of significance to the individual, reducing the likelihood of a more positive reappraisal of the situation.

In addition to the disparity between felt and expressed emotion, or “emotional dissonance” (see Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) alluded above, findings here indicate that a disparity between the *desire for* and *perceptions of* control may influence performers’ appraisals, and even cause additional stress (e.g. social anxiety). To elaborate, a number of participants stated that they wanted more control than they perceived. This related to control over both the actual stressor and the performers’ emotional, behavioural, and attitudinal responses. Hence, control may be part of both primary (i.e. limited control over training load) and secondary appraisal (i.e. limited control in employing desired coping strategies). This emphasizes the importance of perceived control in cognitive appraisal and echoes intimations from previous stress literature (Campbell & Jones, 2002; Dewe, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Whilst sources of organizational strain were predominantly appraised as negative with little control and limited resources to cope, a small number of positive appraisals were described. In the few narratives where challenge appraisals were reported, performers declared greater perceptions of control, and expressed that “action could be taken” in one form or another. Additionally, in many of these stress processes the participant reappraised the situation in a more positive light following their initial appraisal. In narratives where reappraisals were reported, the secondary appraisal was predominantly one of either “action could be taken” (50%) or “had to get on with it” (43%). It may be that individual differences (e.g. hardiness, resilience, emotional intelligence, mental toughness) may be influential in such appraisal patterns. Indeed hardiness, which encapsulates control as a component, has been suggested to act as both a mediator and a moderator of stress (Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn 1982). The findings reported here are also particularly interesting in light of extant organizational stress research in sport. To expand briefly, literature in this area has considered these stressors as invariably negative, without potential facilitative benefits. These findings go some way to explaining performers’ positive responses to organizational stressors (Fletcher et al., 2012) and build support for the application of transactional stress theory in sport contexts.

When considered alongside the findings of previous organizational stress research in sport (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Levy et al., 2009), it is likely that harm and threat appraisals are pivotal mediating variables in the incidence of negative emotional, behavioural, and attitudinal responses. Such responses will likely include anger, anxiety, resentment, alcohol consumption or absenteeism (Fletcher et al., in press). Indeed, it may be that one’s appraisals of a stressor offers more insight into the way performers respond and cope with stress in their sport

organizations than the stressor itself, which has hitherto been the main focus of research in this area. To elaborate, primary appraisals of threat are likely to be associated with anxiety responses (see Lazarus, 2000b), those of harm with anger or resentment, and those of challenge with more positive emotional reactions, such as excitement (see Dewe, 1989, 1993). Moreover, when combined with evaluations of “restricted resources” or “had to hold back” (i.e. little changeability or controllability), it is easy to conceive how primary and secondary appraisals could be instrumental in performers’ coping responses. However, caution is required here as it is likely that there are other personal (e.g. hardiness or resilience) or situational (e.g. social support networks, organizational culture) factors which are likely to contribute to the path a stress process takes.

A strength of the present study was its use of daily diaries to explore stress in a longitudinal manner. By asking performers to write about their appraisals at or close to the time they occurred, the potential for retrospective recall interference was reduced. Previous appraisal research (e.g. Campbell & Jones, 2002; Dewe, 1992) has invited individuals to retrospectively report their evaluations regarding the most stressful incident over a considerable period of time or from overly rigid checklists. Essentially, these measures may create in an incomplete or inaccurate depiction of performers stress appraisals which, at least within organizations, seem to require constant appraisal. A second virtue of this investigation was the insight provided by the data regarding the portrayal of transactional stress processes in sport organizations. The wealth of narratives collected which reveal the numerous cognitions involved in stress processes also adds testimony to the SAL as a measure of appraisal. Furthermore, diaries bring research and practice together as this method mirrors those of practitioners and are a common feature of life as an international performer (i.e. training or diet logs). Knowledge derived from such methods, “has a relevance that promotes understanding and paves the way for the development of more refined theories” (Dewe & Trenberth, 2004, p. 155). Hence, we advocate the continued use of the SAL for future stress research. Such examinations may also be enhanced by the use of complementary qualitative (e.g. follow-up interviews) or quantitative (e.g. stress questionnaires) measures. This research may also benefit by examining appraisals of other stressors experienced by performers to provide a broader perspective of appraisals in sport organizations.

In terms of the praxis of these findings, despite the exploratory nature of this study, there are a number of applied implications for practice at an individual and organizational level. If, as is contended here, performers respond in light of their appraisals of a stressor rather than the stressor *per se*, then practitioners must focus on facilitating appraisals of challenge and minimize appraisals of threat and harm. There is also a need to increase performers’ appraisals of having resources to change or cope with stressors. Perceptions of control appear to be an integral part of both of these requirements, thus, practitioners must be cognizant of this when attempting to help performers avoid the debilitating effects of strain. Whilst, many organizational stress transactions are outside of the control of the individual (cf. Briner, Harris, & Daniels, 2004; Frederikson & Dewe, 1996a), an increased internal locus of control may act as a buffer during stress transactions. That is, by building a store of psychological resources (e.g. locus of control, positive emotions, and emotion regulation strategies), performers may buffer against the negative impact of stressors appraised as uncontrollable and facilitate a more resilient response to stressors. To gain this, sport psychologists might encourage clients to be proactive about identifying resources (e.g. perceived social support networks) which they may utilize when subjected to organizational stressors. Interventions might also be implemented at an organizational level in an attempt to empower individuals and reduce control and emotional display norms associated with negative appraisals in relationships. These could include emotional and social intelligence training to promote significant others’ understanding and empathy towards others’ emotions and desire for control. For example, emotion-related support interventions might be provided for performers, coaches, and

family members to endorse more performer-focused organizations who better prepare athletes and their support networks for the stressors they are likely to encounter.

In addition to the implications for practice outlined above, a number of research directions are suggested in light of the present findings. Firstly, the continued exploration of appraisal using longitudinal daily diaries is recommended. Beneficial to such research would be the verification and development of the SAL; which may include temporal variations and intensity measures for meaning, control, and appraisal components. Secondly, researchers would benefit by exploring how personal and situational characteristics specifically contribute to the occurrence of positive (i.e. challenge, action could be taken) and negative (threat, restricted resources) appraisals, and reappraisal. Thirdly, as control appears to be inherent in appraisal and emotion (Fineman, 2001), it may be insightful for sport psychology researchers to distinguish between different types and functions of control. Such an investigation must consider the feelings and emotions attached to control, not merely performers control over organizational characteristics, and may also explore the nature of multidimensional control (see Troup & Dewe, 2002). Interestingly, Burger (1989, 1995, 1999) has called for the distinction between “being *in* control” and the “desire *for* control”, due to individual differences in the importance placed upon this. Finally, whilst the authors have attempted to illuminate the appraisals (the present study) and responses (see Fletcher et al., in press) associated with organizational-related stressors, coping remains an under-represented component in research on organizational stress transactions in sport. Thus, a more in-depth exploration of the coping strategies utilized by performers in response to organizational stressors is required. This attention should focus on a better understanding of how appraisals *actually* influence coping strategy selection and the effectiveness of such behaviours.

The present findings offer a novel insight into performers’ appraisals of organizational stressors in sport. Indeed, they suggest performers do not respond to organizational stressors in autonomy, they do so by reflecting on their personal stakes and the meaning of situations, how they may deal with them, and often reappraise situations in a new light. The qualitative variance in appraisal patterns suggests that this is a potentially fruitful area for researchers exploring stress in sport organizations. In light of findings reported here, it is quite remarkable that appraisal is considered as such a poor relation to coping (cf. Dewe, 1994) in terms of the research attention it has received. Therefore, further exploration is required in order to understand how to best tackle the consequences of negative appraisals in sport organizations. Such research would benefit by employing longitudinal daily diaries and complementary qualitative techniques (e.g. observations, follow-up interviews), thus utilizing the methods outlined here as a stepping stone for better research on stress and coping.

References

- Anshel, M.H., & Delany, J. (2001). Sources of acute stress, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies of male and female child athletes. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 24, 329–353.
- Anshel, M.H., Jamieson, J., & Raviv, S. (2001). Cognitive appraisals and coping strategies following acute stress among skilled competitive male and female athletes. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 24, 129–143.
- Aronson, J. (1994). A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 2, 1–3.
- Ben-Ari, R., Tsur, Y., & Har-Even, D. (2006). Procedural justice, stress appraisal and athletes’ attitudes. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 13, 24–44.
- Brief, A.P., & Atieh, J.M. (1987). Studying job stress: Are we making mountains out of molehills? *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 8, 115–126.
- Briner, R.B., Harris, C., & Daniels, K. (2004). How do work stress and coping work? Toward a fundamental theoretical reappraisal. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 32, 223–234.
- Burger, J.M. (1989). Negative reactions to increases in perceived personal control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 246–256.

- Burger, J.M. (1995). Need for control and self esteem: Two routes to a high desire for control. In M.H. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem* (pp. 217–233). New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Burger, J.M. (1999). Personality and control. In V.J. Derlega & B.A. Winstead (Eds.), *Personality: Contemporary theory and research* (pp. 82–306). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- Campbell, E., & Jones, G. (2002). Sources of stress experienced by elite male wheelchair basketball players. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, *19*, 82–99.
- Dewe, P.J. (1989). Examining the nature of work stress: Individual evaluations of stressful experiences and coping. *Human Relations*, *42*, 993–1013.
- Dewe, P.J. (1991). Primary appraisal, secondary appraisal and coping: Their role in stressful work encounters. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, *64*, 331–351.
- Dewe, P.J. (1992). The appraisal process: Exploring the role of meaning, importance, control and coping in work stress. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, *5*, 95–109.
- Dewe, P.J. (1993). Measuring primary appraisal: Scale construction and directions for future research. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, *8*, 673–685.
- Dewe, P.J. (1994). EAP's and stress management: From theory to practice to comprehensiveness. *Personnel Review*, *23*, 21–32.
- Dewe, P.J., & Trenberth, L. (2004). Work stress and coping: Drawing together research and practice. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, *32*, 143–156.
- Dunn, J.G.H. (1994). Toward the combined use of nomothetic and ideographic methodologies in sport psychology: An empirical example. *The Sport Psychologist*, *8*, 376–392.
- Erera-Weatherley, P.I. (1996). Coping with stress: Public welfare supervisors doing their best. *Human Relations*, *49*, 157–170.
- Fineman, S. (2001). Emotions and Organizational control. In R.L. Payne & C.L. Cooper (Eds.), *Emotions at work: Theory, research and applications for management* (pp. 219–237). Chichester: John Wiley.
- Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2003). Sources of organizational stress in elite sports performers. *The Sport Psychologist*, *17*, 175–195.
- Fletcher, D., Hanton, S., & Mellalieu, S.D. (2006). An organizational stress review: Conceptual and theoretical issues in competitive sport. In S. Hanton & S.D. Mellalieu (Eds.), *Literature reviews in sport psychology* (pp. 321–374). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science.
- Fletcher, D., Hanton, S., Mellalieu, S.D., & Neil, R. (in press). A conceptual framework of organizational stressors in sport performers. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1600-0838.2010.01242.x
- Fletcher, D., Hanton, S., & Wagstaff, C.R.D. (2012). Performers' responses to stressors encountered in sport organizations. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *30*, 349–358.
- Fletcher, D., & Wagstaff, C.R.D. (2009). Organizational psychology in elite sport: Its emergence, application and future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *10*, 427–434.
- Frederikson, L., & Dewe, P. (1996a). The cognitive appraisal of stress: The influence of organizational climate, perceptions of control, and feelings associated with stressful work events. *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management*, *4*, 1–24.
- Frederikson, L.G., & Dewe, P.J. (1996b). A longitudinal study of appraisal and coping using repeated measures of stressor, importance, frustration and coping response. *Stress Medicine*, *12*, 81–91.
- Hanton, S., Fletcher, D., & Coughlan, G. (2005). Stress in elite sport performers: A comparative study of competitive and organizational stressors. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *23*, 1129–1141.
- Holt, N.L., & Dunn, J.G.H. (2004). Longitudinal idiographic analyses of appraisal and coping responses in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *5*, 213–222.
- Kobasa, S., Maddi, S., & Kahn, S. (1982). Hardiness and health: A prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *42*, 168–177.
- Kristiansen, E., & Roberts, G.C. (2010). Young elite athletes and social support: Coping with competitive and organizational stress in "Olympic" competition. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, *20*, 686–695.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1964). A laboratory approach to the dynamics of psychological stress. *American Psychologist*, *19*, 400–411.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1966). *Psychological stress and the coping process*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1981). The stress and coping paradigm. In C. Eisdorfer, D. Cohen, A. Kleinman, & P. Maxim (Eds.), *Models for clinical psychopathology* (pp. 177–214). New York, NY: Spectrum.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1991). Cognition and motivation in emotion. *American Psychologist*, *46*, 352–367.
- Lazarus, R.S. (1998). *Fifty years of the research and theory of R. S. Lazarus: An analysis of historical and perennial issues*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Lazarus, R.S. (1999). *Stress and emotion: A new synthesis*. London: Free Association.
- Lazarus, R.S. (2000a). Toward better research on stress and coping. *American Psychologist*, 55, 665–673.
- Lazarus, R.S. (2000b). Cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion. In Y.L. Hanin (Ed.), *Emotions in sport* (pp. 39–63). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Lazarus, R.S., & Launier, R. (1978). Stress-related transactions between person and environment. In L.A. Pervin & M. Lewis (Eds.), *Perspectives in interactional psychology* (pp. 287–327). New York, NY: Plenum.
- Levy, A., Nicholls, A., Marchant, D., & Polman, R. (2009). Organisational stressors, coping, and coping effectiveness: A longitudinal study with an elite coach. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 4, 31–45.
- Neil, R., Hanton, S., & Mellalieu, S.D. (2009). The contribution of qualitative inquiry towards understanding competitive anxiety and competition stress. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 1, 191–205.
- Neil, R., Hanton, S., Mellalieu, S.D., & Fletcher, D. (2011). Competition stress and emotions in sport performers: The role of further appraisals. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 12, 460–470.
- Nicholls, A.R., Holt, N.L., & Polman, R.C.J. (2005b). A phenomenological analysis of coping effectiveness in golf. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19, 111–130.
- Nicholls, A.R., Holt, N.L., Polman, R.C.J., & James, D.W.G. (2005a). Stress and coping among international adolescent golfers. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17, 333–340.
- Nicholls, A.R., Levy, A.R., Jones, L., Rengamani, M., & Polman, R.C.J. (2011). An exploration of the two-factor schematization of relation meaning and emotions among professional rugby union players. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 1, 78–91.
- Oakland, S. (1991). *Stress, coping behaviour and health: A study of headteachers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Bradford, UK.
- Oakland, S., & Ostell, A. (1996). Measuring coping: A review and critique. *Human Relations*, 49, 133–155.
- Ostell, A. (1991). Coping, problem-solving and stress: A framework for intervention strategies. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 64, 11–24.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rafaeli, A., & Sutton, R.I. (1987). Expressions of emotions as part of the work role. *Academy of Management Review*, 12, 23–37.
- Ritchie, J., & Spencer, L. (1994). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In A. Bryman & R.G. Burgess (Eds.), *Analysing qualitative data* (pp. 173–194). London: Routledge.
- Smith, R.E., Leffingwell, T.R., & Ptacek, J.T. (1999). Can people remember how they coped? Factors associated with discordance between same-day and retrospective reports. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 1050–1061.
- Sparks, K., Faragher, B., & Cooper, C.L. (2001). Well-being and occupational health in the 21st century workplace. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 74, 489–509.
- Speisman, J.C., Lazarus, L., Mordkoff, A.M., & Davison, L.A. (1964). The experimental reduction of stress based on ego-defense theory. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 68, 367–380.
- Tennen, H., Affleck, G., Armeli, S., & Carney, M.A. (2000). A daily process approach to coping: Linking theory, research and practice. *American Psychologist*, 55, 626–636.
- Thatcher, J., & Day, M.C. (2008). Re-appraising stress appraisals: The underlying properties of stress in sport. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, 9, 318–335.
- Thelwell, R.C., Weston, N.J.V., Greenlees, I.A., & Hutchings, N.V. (2008). Stressors in elite sport: A coach perspective. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 26, 905–918.
- Troup, C.L., & Dewe, P.L. (2002). Exploring the nature of control and its role in the appraisal of workplace stress. *Work & Stress*, 16, 335–355.
- Wagstaff, C.R.D., Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (2012). Positive organizational psychology in sport: An ethnography of organizational functioning in a national governing body. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 24, 26–47.
- Wagstaff, C.R.D., Fletcher, D., & Hanton, S. (in press). Positive organizational psychology in sport. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*.
- Webber, H., & Laux, L. (1990). Bringing the person back into stress and coping measurement. *Psychological Inquiry*, 1, 37–40.
- Weed, M. (2009). Research quality considerations for grounded theory research in sport and exercise psychology. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10, 502–510.
- Woodman, T., & Hardy, L. (2001). A case study of organizational stress in elite sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 13, 207–238.