COPING STRATEGIES OF SOCCER PLAYERS

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on coping strategies used by soccer (football) players by exploring the role of the environment, ethnicity and culture in players' response to stressful situations. An interpretive-qualitative research methodology was applied with a sample of 33 professional soccer players. The subjects were representative in terms of race, age, experience and playing positions. Semi-structured interviews and biographical questionnaires were used to gather information. The data were analysed by means of an interpretive or thematic content analysis procedure. Results showed that there were similarities and differences in the way players coped with a variety of stressors.

Key words: Stress; Coping strategies; Soccer; Football; Ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

Stress and coping are complex phenomena that are not always fully understood and impinge on an individual's performance and response to their environment. According to Park (2000), performance in competitive sport depends on the physical and technical skills of sportspeople, as well as their psychological aptitude. He articulated that players' ability and emotions interact to influence performance. Research revealed that high levels of stress have a negative impact on sportspeople's performance during competitive events (Marmot & Madge, 1995; Kaplan, 1996). Stress is perceived as the cause of many psychological problems and sportspeople in both the elite and recreational sport levels are equally affected by it and equally susceptible to its effects (Park, 2000). Anshel *et al*. (2001) reported that stress is a contributing factor of psychological disorders such as depression, weight problems, sexual problems, sport burnout, alcohol abuse and injuries. Literature revealed that not all individuals are comfortable with the psychological effects of stress on their lives, in particular when they are expected to perform at their peak (Meichenbaum, 1983; Marmot & Madge, 1995; Kaplan, 1996).

Football players are not exempted from this unfortunate situation, as they also suffer from the illnesses that are related to stress such as restlessness, irritability, anxiety, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep, low resistance to physical illness, poor performance, fatigue, lack of concentration and memory problems (Meichenbaum, 1983; Kaplan, 1996; Park, 2000). Holt and Hogg (2002) revealed that sport has the potential of taxing players and exposing players to extreme stressful conditions. They argued that when players engage in sport, they expose themselves to a high pressure environment that requires expertise in dealing with their mental challenges and the deployment of their arsenal of cognitive and behavioural coping strategies.

In fact, literature disclosed that although considerable research has been conducted on stress, little is still known about the coping strategies of ethnically diverse football players (Scheier *et al*., 1986; Gould *et al*., 1993; Giacobbi & Weinberg, 2000). Studies that were conducted both in social and sport psychology gave little attention to the issue of ethnicity and coping in sport. There is a dearth of research on team sport, yet little is known about how the team sport environment influences players' perceptions of stress and coping (Gould *et al.,* 1993; Giacobbi & Weinberg, 2000; Park, 2000; Anshel *et al.,* 2001; Holt & Hogg, 2002). A large amount of work was done in sporting codes other than football. These studies were conducted in basketball, track and field, baseball, wrestling, swimming, boxing, tennis, golf, weight lifting, skiing, shooting and gymnastics (Gould *et al.,* 1993; Giacobbi & Weinberg, 2000). Their focus was on variables related to individual sport.

Research also revealed that there was a scarcity of cultural and cross-cultural studies related to coping (Duda & Allison, 1990; Park, 2000). Even though football is a popular sport in Africa, very little research has been done on soccer populations from this continent. According to sport researchers and scholars, there is a need for a cultural specific approach to the study of stress and coping in sport in particular, football (Park, 2000; Anshel *et al.,* 2001; Holt & Hogg, 2002). It is known that football teams are characterised and reflective of cross-cultural branding, open interaction between players of diverse backgrounds, the immigration and migration of players and a need for coexistence amongst members of a particular team. The plurality of teams brings about a unique experience, which poses challenges to many owners, managers and coaches of football clubs. It was the research team's resolve that the coping functions of diverse football players could not be fully understood by simplistic application of a research design and interventions that are based on a universal understanding without a consideration of the issues of a player's ethnicity and group's culture in coping. Sera Dei *et al.* (2000) and Wilson (2003) propose that knowledge systems should be inclusive of all and incorporate the different ways in which indigenous people think and interpret the world and its realities.

The intention with the present study was to address the gap in research by looking at football players' coping strategies from the context of ethnicity and diversity, and constructing the meaning of reality as defined by these ethnically diverse football players. The study focused on football as a team sport in an attempt to investigate how ethnicity, indigenous knowledge, language and cultural variables influence a players' selection and use of coping strategies in football and to compare the way ethnically diverse football players respond to their stressful environment. It explored the role that the environment, ethnicity and cultural differences play in players' response when joining multi-ethnic teams.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The research described here forms part of a doctoral study conducted in a local community of the Western Cape. An interpretive-qualitative research design was employed and principles of Indigenous Paradigm methodology were also incorporated to eliminate dilemmas, contradictions and distortions that are generated when researchers are involved in work with ethnically diverse groups (Menzies, 2001). A purposive sampling strategy was employed

(Lewis & Ritchie, 2003) and a sample of 33 football players was drawn from a Premier Soccer League (PSL) club in the Western Cape. Participants were selected with the purpose to reflect and represent features of the investigated group. Race, age, educational level, playing position, years of experience in the team, and marital status were used as the population characteristics for the basis of this selection.

Subjects

Informed consent was secured from the local professional football club. Players were conveniently selected from the different teams. Three groups of 11 football players were selected from a Black, Coloured and White group of players. The three groups included three goalkeepers, 12 defenders, nine midfielders and nine strikers. The ages of the players ranged between 15 and 32 years (Mean=18.33 years; SD=3.0).

Data collection

Data were obtained using semi-structured interviews and biographical questionnaires. Information obtained from the questionnaire included: (1) socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (age, ethnic group, marital status, player's educational level and occupation); and (2) self-reported soccer related aspects, which included health information, playing experience, position and level of participation.

An interview question guide was developed and then piloted by involving 15 soccer players prior to its administration to the study sample. These players were selected from a senior team of a local Football Association according to their playing positions (e.g. three goal keepers, four defenders, four midfielders and four strikers). The piloting was carried out to assess applicability and evaluate the completion time of the question guide and to allow the researcher "to measure whether the data that was collected was suitable for the purpose of the study and to dry run data analysis" (Gratton & Jones, 2004:127). Questions were divided into 'primary' and 'secondary' research questions. The primary questions were assembled first and then sub-divided into secondary questions. Each primary question had a set of corresponding secondary questions. The 'scripts' were not rigid and space was created for further interaction and development of new questions. The primary researcher conducted the interviews in a secluded environment and sessions were audio taped with the permission of the participants.

The cross-referencing of questions was done to ensure that primary and secondary questions corresponded with the research question. The secondary questions were crosschecked against primary questions. The trustworthiness and authenticity of the research tools were used because of epistemological reasons and inappropriateness of the concept of reliability and validity in qualitative research. Trustworthiness refers to "the process of verifying and cross-checking accuracy and truth in a social inquiry by allowing other researchers access to information and matters related to the research processes" (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003:274).

Data analysis

Data obtained from the interviews were analysed using interpretive or thematic content analysis (Donnelly, 2002; Gratton & Jones, 2004). The data was analysed using the

indigenous analysis ethnic model to accommodate and reflect on the realities of the experience and values of ethnic groups. The first step began with the transcription and translation of the interviews. The primary researcher transcribed and checked information on the transcripts for accuracy and consistency including utterances of both interviewer and respondents. This was followed by a theme-inducing phase. In this phase, the transcripts were studied to ascertain the organising principles that naturally underlined the material. This resulted in the organisation of raw data into categories or themes during which the language of the interviewees rather than abstract theoretical language was used to label the categories. Poor performance, home circumstances, strong opponents, high expectations from others, pressure of being a professional football player, school work and workload, language and culture, injuries, inclusion in the starting line-up, allowing early goals, unruly supporters, finances, being way from home, referees' decisions, transport problems, player jealousy, intolerant players, fear of making mistakes, thinking about results, big game effect, losing games, negative evaluation of the club by others, poor playing facilities, losing friends through early promotion, coach and media were identified as categories that caused stress to the three groups of football players.

These categories were further divided between pre-match, match and post-match situations. The *pre-match* category included conditions that took place before a football game and this, for example, included home circumstances, thinking about the strength of the opponents, high expectations from others, unruly supporters, inclusion in the starting line-up, allowing early goals, injuries, fear of making mistakes, intolerant players, thinking about results, big game effect, being away from home, coach and media. The *match* category included conditions that took place during the football game and included, for example, issues related to performance, allowing early goals, fear of making mistakes, poor performance, strong opponents, injuries, referees' decisions, intolerant players, unruly behaviour of spectators, thinking about results, media, coach's response to individual performance, and poor playing conditions. The *post-match* category included conditions that took place after a football game and included reflection on poor performance, losing games, evaluation of club by others, thinking about results, sustained injuries, dealing with media and inclusion in the starting line-up.

Other categories are related to more than one timeframe. For example, coach, media, injuries and thinking about the results is experienced before, during and/or after the game. Other categories such as strong opponents, high expectations from others, poor performance, allowing early goals, unruly supporters, fear of making mistakes, big game effect are experienced before and during the game. Inclusion in the starting line-up and home circumstances are related to periods before and after the game.

The next step in the data analysis process was a coding phase or breaking down of a body of data into labelled meaningful pieces with a view to cluster the coded material together under coded headings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data was cut, labelled and pasted into meaningful pieces of information. Similar thematic topics were grouped together and developed into broad explanatory categories. Themes were then categorised in order of importance, for example low order themes and high order themes. Four high order themes were identified as coping strategies for football players and these were: the emotion focused coping; problem focused coping; avoidance coping; and passive coping. *Emotion* focused coping dealt with emotional arousal and control. *Problem* focused coping involved the manipulation of tasks

and behaviour control. *Passive* coping included passive reactive strategies to stressful situations and *avoidance* coping involved the use of strategies that are geared towards avoiding dealing with a stressful situation.

The low order themes that were identified for emotion focused coping were, for example, emotional expression, losing focus, seeking social support and self-blame. The problem solving low order themes included active coping, planning, adopting a positive approach, self-support, relaxation, mental engagement, focusing, concentration and goal setting. Passive coping included acceptance, turning to religion, no planning, mental disengagement and behavioural disengagement. Avoidance coping included avoidance, suppression of competitive activities, ignoring, suppression and substance abuse.

The final step was the interpretation and checking phase. A triangulation method was employed to validate the interpretation of data (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). Findings were crosschecked using multiple analyses and an audit trail as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Two research analysts who are experienced in qualitative research were asked to validate and trace the route of interpretation and reflect on how sections of the data came together. These researchers were invited to assess and help improve the precision of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that football players from diverse ethnic backgrounds were experiencing stress as a result of match, pre- and post-match situations and that there were differences and similarities in the way in which players conducted themselves under stressful conditions. This was attributed to the differences in their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. This observation was supported by the findings of Holt and Hogg (2002) in their study of field communication and competence amongst football players. They discovered that many of the coping strategies the soccer players used were related to social interaction and the environment to which these players were exposed. In fact, Aldwin (1994) stated that the source of stress and coping strategies are contextual and differ according to circumstances. It appeared that coping strategies were related to the specific conditions in which they manifested. The players differed according to context and varied from one ethnic group to another. The study suggested that in each cultural group there were certain ways in which players tend to behave. It appeared that as players developed, they become exposed to situations and developed behavioural patterns that were normative and distinctive of each group.

Players' perceptions of their experience of stress also suggested intergroup differences. The study showed that non-White players were experiencing more stress than White players. It would appear that the distribution of resources and other problems associated with unemployment and home circumstances were interplaying in creating stress amongst the non-White players. The findings revealed that there was a relationship between stress and the socio-economic environment to which the players were exposed.

Discrepancies were recorded in players' experience of control. Football players from advantaged backgrounds were expected to display better coping strategies than players from a historically disadvantaged background. Instead, the findings revealed that the majority of

Black and White players were in control during stressful times. The fact that these players were regular starters and occupied leadership positions (e.g., captains of the teams) might have worked as a confidence booster for them. It appeared that exposure to these experiences and roles equipped non-White players by enhancing their coping strategies and making them believe in their abilities and adaptive functioning.

Although Black players reported being in control, the perception of a lack of control was recorded only amongst non-White players. Non-white players' self-evaluation of their coping experience suggested that they were not positive and confident about their abilities. The study revealed that how these players evaluated and experienced themselves affected the way they evaluated their ability and perceived themselves. It appeared that ethnic factors and other societal influences were contributing towards these differences. The environments, from which many non-white players came, exposed them to diverse conditions that had a negative impact on the development of their self-concepts which is a key factor in coping. The history of not being able to carry out their responsibilities affected how these non-white players evaluated themselves in stressful situations. The experience was generalised to other contexts and influenced players' perceptions of those situations. Madden *et al.* (1990) in their evaluation of the perceived stress on coping with competitive basketball players found that players who reported low levels of perceived competitive stress reported a lesser use of coping strategies than players who reported high levels of perceived stress. There appears to be a strong correlation between an individual's self-evaluation and his coping ability.

The findings of the study also indicated that problem focused coping and emotion focused coping were the main strategies used by all three ethnic groups in coping with their everyday stressful life events. The ethnically diverse football players responded in almost the same way towards the challenges presented to them by football. There were no clear differences amongst the ethnic groups in how they responded to stress under these circumstances.

The study revealed that problem focused coping strategies were mainly used during the pre-match and match stages and that emotion focused coping strategies were mostly used during the post-match stage. This was brought about by the fact that on many occasions (especially during match stages), football players were required to engage in tasks that demanded immediate application of decisions and hence the tendency towards a problem solving approach. Players tend to react this way because team players rely more on the group than individual players and with these players there is a tendency to focus on solutions and support of others (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Endler & Parker, 1990; Anshel *et al.,* 2001). Crocker (1992) made similar observations in his study of competitive sportspeople in various team sports.

Generally, players from the three ethnic groups used problem-focused coping for stressors such as poor performance, strong opponents, workload, inclusion in a starting line-up and allowing early goals. For stressors caused by the coach, financial situations, home circumstances and transport problems, players across the three ethnic groups used social support and emotion focused coping. For situations beyond their control, for example, referee decisions and unruly supporters, players mainly used avoidance coping and relaxation. For injuries, playing conditions and negative perceptions about the club, most players used problem focused and passive coping strategies.

All three groups recorded passive and avoidance coping as the lesser used strategies in dealing with stress. Evidence showed that these coping strategies were mainly used in situations where players had no control e.g. playing conditions, dubious referee decisions (as mentioned previously) and in dealing with angry coaches.

The following results were elicited to indicate the processes involved when choosing coping strategies. There were four processes used by the diverse football players in selecting their coping strategies and these processes were: automatic processes; thought out processes; influence of experience; and a combination of these processes. A large number of players in all three groups preferred to think thoroughly before selecting their coping strategies and very few players used automatic processing. Generally, the findings suggested that players across racial lines think about the choice of their coping strategies and that they used little of their former experience in selecting strategies (intrinsic versus extrinsic factors). Compared to the other two groups, the White group of players were more comfortable in using a combination of processes. The non-white (Black and Coloured) players preferred a particular process to the others and not a combination thereof.

Ethnically diverse football players experienced regular constraints when coping with football stress and these constraints were both similar and varied depending on their relevance and context. Exhaustion, language barriers and cultural differences were recorded as factors that were restrictive to coping across the three ethnic groups of players. Absence of family support structures, home circumstances, poverty and substance abuse were factors that hindered coping amongst the non-white players, whereas the White group of players identified personalities, communication and high expectations as factors that affected their coping.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that football players from diverse ethnic backgrounds experienced stress as a result of pre-match, match and post-match situations and that players responded differently to those experiences. Non-white players were recorded to experience more stress than White players. All three groups of players used multiple coping strategies, with problem focused and emotion focused strategies being the main coping strategies employed by the majority of the players. The application of these strategies differed according to game stages, for instance, pre-match, match and post-match phases. Players thought about their responses and processed information when identifying and selecting coping strategies. They were motivated by different intrinsic and extrinsic factors to respond in a particular way. There were factors that acted as constraints to coping and some of these factors were reflected across ethnic groups, whilst others were group specific.

It can be concluded from the findings that stress is part of football. It is something that many football players experience, whilst many football players from diverse backgrounds do not have the skills to deal with the pressure presented to them by their sporting environment. The Premier Soccer League (PSL) should thus develop a health care support program in which stress management could be used as a tool to help football players to acquire skills that will enable them to handle challenging situations and to offer practical suggestions as to how to take better care of their health. A life skills program may also be incorporated in this

intervention program. Such a program could include a personal skills course, social skills training, study skills, time management, communication skills, problem solving skills, crisis intervention, diversity training, team building and coaching. To address the problem of limited skills in dealing with mental challenges and poor performance, a mental skills training program is also suggested. Players could be exposed to goal-setting, concentration or focusing skills, following routines, self-confidence, progressive relaxation and emotional control techniques. This training intervention could be adopted and incorporated into the daily training schedule of football players.

The majority of players cited being away from home, high workloads, losing friends through promotion, language and cultural barriers as conditions that contributed to stressful experiences. A parent–player support program could assist in equipping players and to support them during their sporting careers. The program may include an induction program for new players, a support program for distant players and the implementation of football player development plans. An exclusive program could be developed for 'care taker' parents. This will help introduce and familiarise 'care taker' parents to the difficulties the 'away-from-home' players encounter when they join clubs that are far from home. These parents must be empowered with skills to help identify stressors and support players to cope with their sport and life challenges.

Individual and group therapy sessions would be important for personal counselling, motivational interviewing, enhancing group cohesion, helping players to know one another and becoming aware of how each member experiences the group, and to help establish a common goal or vision for the team.

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