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Using a Mixed Method Audit to Inform Organizational Stress Management Interventions in Sport

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Abstract

Objectives: The purposes of this study were twofold: to conduct a mixed method organizational-level stress audit within a sport organization and to explore recommendations for organizational stress management.

Design and Method: Semi-structured interviews, focus groups and surveys were conducted with 47 participants (professional sportmen, coaches, sport science support and administrative staff) who represented a professional sport organization. Content analysis was employed to analyze the data.

Results and Conclusions: The findings indicated a wide range of organizational stressors (e.g., cultural and academy issues), appraisals and coping behaviors (e.g., emotion-focused behaviors), and stressor outcomes (e.g., emotional responses) for sport performers. Content analysis and survey data supported the categorization of stress management recommendations at both an individual- (e.g., coping education) and organizational-level (e.g., improving communication channels) for particular target groups (e.g., players, staff, team). The identification of stress audit factors and recommendations have important implications for the optimization of organizational functioning within professional sport. Consistent with organizational psychology research, applied considerations for mixed method and multi-level intervention approaches are discussed.

Keywords: appraisals, emotions, coping, individual-level, organizational-level, team building.
Using a Mixed Method Audit to Inform Organizational Stress Management Interventions in Sport

The growing body of literature concerning organizational stress suggests that it may be a critical factor in determining well-being and performance development in sport (Fletcher & Arnold, 2017). Based on a transactional conceptualization (Lazarus, 1991; McGrath, 1976), organizational stress 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). For young athletes aspiring to develop within professional sport, they are typically required to manage a range of environmental demands within their sport organization, such as training load, logistics, poor team cohesion, and the prospect of being released (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Fletcher, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Neil, 2012a). The management of these organizational stressors is important for reducing the negative spillover that may occur between ongoing exposure to organizational (e.g., leadership styles, selection), performance (e.g., opponents, social evaluation), and personal stressors (e.g., parental expectations, romantic relationships); which collectively may be detrimental to well-being (Duong, Tuckey, Hayward, & Boyd, 2015). For those performers operating in sport organizations, the successful management of organizational stress may not only facilitate the maximization of well-being and performance development at an individual-level, but it is also likely to support the effective functioning of teams and institutions at an organizational-level (Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012). Despite this, organizational stress management interventions, which aim to improve the psychosocial environment and enhance the well-being of personnel (Nielsen, Randall, Holten, & Rial González, 2010) are currently limited in sport psychology research (Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2012). This limited evidence-base is problematic for advancing sport psychologists’ knowledge of how best to develop effective organizational
stress management interventions.

According to the organizational psychology literature, one of the key ingredients for increasing the likelihood of effective stress management interventions in organizations is the systematic and careful assessment of stress processes prior to intervention development (Bowling, Beehr, & Grebner, 2012). To reliably understand the context of organizational stress as a means to inform appropriate stress management initiatives, it is necessary to conduct an organizational-level stress audit; one that is able to identify the individual and group needs of those operating in organizations (Nielsen et al., 2010), so that initiatives can be developed to modify environmental demands and/or a person's resources. A stress audit is traditionally a generic term which describes a number of approaches which aim to identify potential environmental demands (i.e., stressors), assess which have the greatest negative impact and identify any individuals, and groups who are most at risk (Rick, Briner, Daniels, Perryman, & Guppy, 2001). Although there have been a range of measures that have been adopted for auditing stressors in organizations (e.g., Biron, Ivers, Brun, & Cooper, 2006), it has long been acknowledged that a comprehensive audit, based on a transactional stress conceptualization (Lazarus, 1991), should reflect the sequence of events and stress processes that occur across individuals in transacting with their environment (McGrath, 1976). In this way, it is believed that an organizational-level stress audit should identify key organizational stressors, appraisal and coping strategies, stressor outcomes, at risk groups, and attitudes towards available options for stress management (Dewe, O’Driscoll, & Cooper, 2010).

Qualitative research has previously explored a plethora of organizational stressors that are encountered by sport performers. From a research synthesis of 34 studies, Arnold and Fletcher (2012) identified 640 distinct stressors that were labelled hierarchically in to the following categories: leadership and personnel, cultural and team, logistical and environmental, and performance and personal issues. A host of these stressors have been
linked to the identification of threat and harm appraisals (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2012),
negative emotional responses (e.g., Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012b), and the enactment
of different coping behaviors (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2014). These findings have also
been complemented by quantitative research that has shown relationships between athletes'
perceptions of developmental, team, and cultural stressors within sport organizations and
negative affect (Arnold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2017). Although the findings from both
methods have enabled the identification of organizational stress processes in sport and some
of their relationships, it is posited that these methods in isolation may limit our ability to
confidently develop tailored stress management programs for individuals and groups who
operate in culturally rich organizations (Nielsen et al., 2010). In this regard, the adoption of
mixed methods may facilitate a pragmatic stress auditing approach for developing stress
management programs for specific organizations (Bowling et al., 2012).

One of the key benefits of conducting a mixed method stress audit is to triangulate
understanding of attitudes from individuals and groups whose organizational roles may differ
(Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2011). This is vital for establishing common stressful
incidents for specific individuals and target groups in an organization (Bowling et al., 2012).
In addition, by incorporating methods such as focus groups, individuals may be empowered
to collaboratively discuss their needs with other organizational members (Kohler & Munz,
2006). This is advantageous in developing stress management interventions at an individual-
and organizational-level, as members will have both individual and collective attitudes,
prefectures and motives. Furthermore, participatory methods, which treat members as active
agents of change and encourage the commitment of management, are necessary (but not
sufficient) conditions for successful organizational interventions (Daniels, Gedikli, Watson,
Semkina, & Vaughn, 2017). This approach motivates groups to identify common issues and
design solutions. Without the participation of various personnel, a tailored program for
tackling organizational stress cannot be appropriately designed (Elo, Ervasti, Kuosma, & Mattila, 2008).

To combat the challenges of gaining as many perspectives and recommendations from organizational members as possible, researchers have called for greater use of mixed methods (Elo et al., 2008; Mazzola et al., 2011; Nielsen et al., 2010) to facilitate triangulation and complementarity of findings (Greene, 2008, Moran, Matthews, & Kirby, 2011). This is important for exploring the existence of common organizational stress processes and intervention recommendations that may not be easily achieved from the sole adoption of quantitative or qualitative methods. Moreover, the incorporation of qualitative with quantitative methods allows for understanding of contextual issues and what matters to individuals in their own language (Daniels et al., 2017; Nielsen, Abildgaard, & Daniels, 2014). According to Bowling et al. (2012, p. 79), “research should give more attention to developing techniques used to diagnose the need for stress interventions”. The current research seeks to address some of the conceptual challenges of stress audit models previously used to inform the development of organizational programs. By adopting a mixed method, the study attempts to understand sport performers' experiences of organizational stress in greater depth from the perspective of various members (e.g., sport performers, coaches, staff). This approach aims to explore the contextual and cultural complexities that are not explicitly evident in current organizational stress audit models.

Taking these points together, the primary purpose of this study was to conduct a mixed method organizational stress audit of competitive performers who operate within a sport organization. A secondary purpose was to identify stress management recommendations for performers and teams operating in this organization. The exploration of organizational stress processes and recommendations may facilitate the future tailoring of both individual- and organizational-level initiatives. This study makes a unique conceptual contribution to
auditing organizational stress, by offering a mixed method framework from which
organizational interventions in sport can be advanced.

**Method**

**Research Design**

A mixed method design was adopted for serving the following philosophical aims. Firstly, the authors believe that it is important to integrate techniques that can more thoroughly investigate a phenomenon of interest (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011, p. 286). Gaining multiple sources of information from various individuals (e.g., sport performers, staff) is fundamental for exploring the convergence *and* divergence (cf. Greene, 2008) of organizational stress experiences for sport performers. Furthermore, the researchers sought to educate and modify an organization's current practices regarding stress management. In doing so, it was necessary to represent the democratic values and recommendations of organizational members, to progress towards participatory action in the future. To achieve this purpose, the study was founded on a pragmatist perspective with a critical realist ontology (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) whilst employing methods that parallel understanding of stress in organizations (Lazarus, 1991).

**Participants and Procedure**

The organizational sample (*N* = 47) consisted of staff (head coach, assistant coach, sport science support, and administrative staff; *n* = 7) and a male professional rugby union academy playing squad (*n* = 40). The ages of staff and rugby players ranged from 22 to 56 years (*M* = 36.71, *SD* = 11.35) and 15 to 19 years (*M* = 17.13, *SD* = 0.97) respectively. The largely male sample (i.e., 98% male) represented multiple job roles of individuals who operated on a full-time basis in this professional rugby union academy. The participating organization was selected due to the successful profile of the organization, the consistently high level of competition that the players and team operated at, and due to its close proximity
to the senior professional team's training facilities. The purpose of this academy was to recruit, develop and support professional youth players' transition into the senior team. Following institutional ethical approval, managers and head coaches of sport organizations in the United Kingdom were initially contacted by email and informed of the purposes and requirements of the research being conducted. Once consent was provided by the manager of the sport organization and its members, a concurrent triangulation mixed methods design was followed, such that qualitative and quantitative stress audit data were collected concurrently (Creswell & Pikachu Clark, 2011). Data collection began prior to the beginning of pre-season training. This represented a period whereby most of the playing squad had not returned from the previous end of season break. At this time, interviews and surveys were completed with staff ($n = 7$) and key players ($n = 6$) from the playing squad who had returned early for pre-season conditioning. Key players were identified by the head coach and assistant coach as individuals who demonstrate leadership and have considerable input into the team's functioning and development. The benefit of this approach was that exclusive participation was gained from key subgroups and decision makers who operate in distinct roles, and hold an influence in planning an organizational-level intervention (Bachiochi & Weiner, 2004).

Once the remaining players had returned for pre-season training, it was identified that the squad was characterized as three sub-groups (e.g., under-17, under-18, and under-19 age groups). Sub-groups are important for delimiting future intervention programs to those most at risk of organizational strain (Bradley & Sutherland, 1994). The existence of organizational stressors and outcomes may also be apparent for specific players who share similar needs (Briner & Reynolds, 1999). Thus, to promote discussion on the common issues that sub-groups experience (Krueger & Casey, 2009), three focus groups with survey data collection were steered with the remaining participants ($n = 34$). The focus group approach contrasts that to previous research on organizational stress in sport, which has often utilized face-to-
face interviews or diary methods (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2012a; Didymus & Fletcher, 2012). The benefit of conducting focus groups in organizational settings is that team members who are familiar with one another are able to openly share ideas and discuss sensitive issues like stress in a comfortable and relaxed setting (Liamputtong, 2011).

In comparison to one-to-one interviews or diary methods, focus groups enable cultural insights into the sources of individual and group behaviors (Morgan, 1996). This is highly relevant when exploring the social and contextual complexities of organizational stress (Daniels, Harris, & Briner, 2004). In organizational contexts, focus groups have proven beneficial in understanding and identifying recommendations to tackle barriers to well-being and productivity. Moreover, focus groups can help to determine which recommendations are easiest to adopt and easiest for organizations to enforce (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 12).

Interviews, focus groups and survey data collection were conducted face-to-face by the first author. Before the completion of each interview and survey, participants were given written and verbal information as to the purposes and outcomes of the study. Following assurances of voluntary participation, anonymity, and the freedom to withdraw at any stage, participants had the opportunity to ask questions before completing an informed consent form.

**Interview guide.** A semi-structured interview guide was initially used to facilitate each session. Each interview and focus group took place in a private meeting room at the training ground of the organization. The interview guide was generated from a range of sources. In line with previous stress audits that have been conducted in organizational psychology (e.g., Biron et al., 2006; Rick et al., 2001), the main components of the stress audit included: an exploration of organizational stressors, appraisals and coping behaviors, stress outcomes, and stress management recommendations. In addition, question content was devised based on relevant research conducted in sport (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2006) and organizational psychology (Dewe et al., 2010). Prior to beginning interviews,
participants were verbally informed that they will be asked about players’ experiences of the academy environment and how they perceived various issues that occurred. This included providing examples of organizational stressors (e.g., the training environment, player and staff relationships) using Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) taxonomic classification. The interview guide began with introductory questions (e.g., Could you tell me about something that has happened within the academy recently which has gone well?). These questions intended to build rapport and provide time for the participants to consider the area in question (Silverman, 2014). The main questions explored players’ exposure to organizational stressors in their environment and suggestions for improving organizational functioning and performance. Where relevant, probes were offered to consider how the players attempted to appraise or cope with any issues that arose (e.g., What did you tend to think about when these issues occurred? / How did you deal with that at the time?), and any potential outcomes that occurred (e.g., How did you feel about these demands at the time? / What effect did that have?). The same probes were reworded for coaches and staff, to allow for their perspective on player's experiences of organizational stress. Finally, all participants were encouraged to summarize their views and elaborate on any relevant issues. The first author then clarified the participants’ intervention recommendations for specific target groups and requested feedback on the interview process.

Prior to the interviews being conducted, the guide was piloted with an amateur athlete who operated in a separate organization. Subsequently, several questions were reworded to enhance their clarity (Silverman, 2014). Additional questions were also integrated after several themes emerged from attending a meeting at the sport organization (cf. Liamputtong, 2011). These themes related to communication, social support, decision making and time management. The interviews and focus groups ranged from 52 to 96 minutes ($M = 69.30, SD = 11.86$) and 63 to 79 minutes in duration ($M = 71.90$ min, $SD = 8.16$) respectively.
Stress management survey. At the end of each interview, players and staff were asked to complete a short stress management survey (Bradley & Sutherland, 1994) which had been adapted for the sport organization. This served the purpose of triangulating individuals’ interview responses and evaluating their readiness for developing stress management programs (Nielsen, 2013). The survey presented a list of 14 possible intervention programs, which included the following: building confidence; improved social support; managing emotions positively; problem solving; relaxation training; team building; and team performance appraisal systems. To outline what was meant by each survey term, examples of psychological intervention techniques associated with each option were offered to the participants. Players and staff were then asked to select one of three responses (yes / no / don’t know) to each of the following four statements: (1) I feel I would personally benefit from; (2) I would personally participate in; (3) I feel that the academy would benefit from; and (4) I would recommend the academy to participate in. The survey list was generated from a pre-interview staff meeting and the stress management literature in sport (for a review, see Rumbold et al., 2012). Participants were also encouraged to suggest additional programs that may have emerged from the interviews and focus groups.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was deemed the most appropriate for interpreting the data for several reasons. Firstly, it allows the exploration of interview transcripts and survey responses for recurrent instances in relation to the research questions (Silverman, 2014). Secondly, it is suitable for exploring common organizational processes from both interview and focus group data (e.g., Bachiochi & Weiner, 2004). Thirdly, due to the multi-method nature of data collection, a method of analysis was required to yield a ‘typology’ (Creswell & Piana Clark, 2011) that could triangulate and supplement the interpretation of findings from the interview and survey data (Greene, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). During the initial stages, the
first author immersed himself in the data by adopting a reflective approach. This involved re-
reading post-interview notes that had been taken at the time of interviewing, listening to each
of the interview recordings to gain clarification of participant tones and meanings, and
reading and re-reading the written transcripts whilst noting initial ideas. Following this,
segments of quotes that represented similar meanings were inductively coded as raw-data
themes. Raw-data codes which represented common themes were grouped into lower-order
themes. These lower-order themes were then clustered into higher-order themes. In light of
established organizational stress frameworks (e.g., Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Dewe et al.,
2010; Fletcher et al., 2012a), the majority of higher-order themes were deductively clustered
into general dimensions.

**Research Quality and Rigor**

Integrative mixed method research requires a strong audit trail and reflexive stance to be presented (Bergman, 2011). In line with Teddie and Tashakkori's (2009) criteria for evaluating inference quality, a variety of steps were taken to maximize the *design quality* and *interpretive rigor*. *Design quality* refers to the extent to which appropriate procedures have been conducted to answer the research question(s). In this way, the study design was deemed suitable for answering the purpose(s) of the research. Since the function of the research was to develop a tailored organizational intervention, it was critical to triangulate participants' stress management recommendations with players' experiences of organizational stress. The authors were cognizant of implementing design components with the fidelity to capture participants' perceptions of organizational stress processes and attitudes towards stress management. In this way, the first author was diligent in devoting significant time and thoroughness in conducting the interviews, focus groups and completion of surveys. A self-reflexive diary was completed throughout the data collection and the first author engaged critical friends in discussions during the data collection of interviews, focus groups and
surveys. These critical friends provided a sounding board to encourage reflexivity and challenge the construction of knowledge and interpretations made. By gathering multiple types of qualitative and quantitative data, we engaged dialogically with paradigm differences (Greene, 2008) to generate a more contextual understanding of organizational issues.

Interpretive rigor refers to how interpretations have been made in relation to the results obtained (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009). We attempted to adhere to interpretive consistency by closely relating a large dataset of organizational stress processes in sport performers with participant recommendations for future stress management interventions. These stress processes and recommendations were interpreted on the basis of a large organizational sample \((N = 47)\), and, were consistent with relevant theories and frameworks in this area (Fletcher et al., 2006; Dewe et al., 2010; Lazarus, 1991). Regarding the latter, the conceptual contribution to organizational stress audit research should also be considered, along with the extent to which the research is heuristically and practically significant for empowering organizational members to engage in action or change. We present a multivocality of quotations from different participants, to enable readers to consider whether they reach similar conclusions. Interpretive conclusions are also evident where staff perceptions complement players' experiences of organizational stress. Interpretive distinctiveness was achieved by debriefing participants through presentation and discussion of the findings to assess participants' agreements with the inferences made. Integrative efficacy was achieved by comparing the inferences made regarding players' experiences of organizational stress with the conclusions made in relation to player and staff intervention recommendations.

Finally, in considering the interpretive correspondence of the research, we feel that the inferences made align to the purposes of conducting a stress audit of sport performers operating in a sport organization and exploring intervention recommendations.

**Results and Discussion**
A total of 645 raw data themes emerged from the qualitative transcripts, which were inductively abstracted into 186 lower-order themes and 76 higher-order themes. These higher-order themes then formed 14 general dimensions which were deductively categorized into the following components of the organizational-level stress audit: organizational stressors, cognitive appraisals and coping behaviors, organizational stressor outcomes, and stress management recommendations. Tables 1 to 3 illustrate the higher-order themes and general dimensions of each stress audit component. Example lower-order themes are also provided for each higher-order theme. In addition, Table 4 displays participants' survey responses in relation to offering recommendations for stress management programs. In view of the quantity and wide ranging themes to emerge from the stress audit, space precludes an exploration of all themes and their complexity. Therefore, a selection of quotes are provided and discussed in relation to relevant literature.

Organizational Stressors

Consistent with a synthesis of organizational stressors in sport performers (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012), the four general dimensions of organizational stressors were: leadership and personnel issues, cultural and academy issues, logistical and environmental issues, and performance and personal issues.

**Leadership and personnel issues.** Leadership and personnel issues, which were the most frequently cited organizational stressors for players, consisted of the stressors that were related to the direction and support of the organization. The higher-order themes within this dimension were: *external expectations, feedback, referees, retention, support staff, coach behaviors, and the coaches' personality and attitudes*. Within *external expectations*, “coaches’ expectations” for players to conform to the organization’s core values (e.g., work hard, learn quickly) was regularly cited as a key stressor for first year players: "I think the big thing I noticed [when starting at the academy] was you had to learn quickly, the culture of the..."
club as well. I think the coaches are big on setting that culture, just coming in, working hard, no excuses about a thing" (Player 6). "I think the expectation to develop quickly makes them [players] stressed sometimes and they need to be able to just enjoy it a bit more … instead of it just being drudgery, hard work, hard work you know (Staff 6)."

Within feedback, a common issue that contributed to a range of stressor outcomes was “receiving negative feedback” from others. The following quote (Player 3) illustrates how negative feedback can be harmful for decision making and team morale, and, how game reviews may help to manage feedback:

At half time, the coaches scream and shout but it doesn’t help if they pick out [blame] individuals because the individuals are just going to think about that [making mistakes] the next time they go out. Every decision the players make … Like, [a coach] was just saying “All forwards played really well. Backs were ****” … Like, yeah, have a scream and shout, kick a few bottles around but then talk about the game properly … I think people after that game were pretty dejected for a couple of weeks.

Cultural and academy issues. Cultural and academy issues comprised the stressors that were associated with the atmosphere and behavioral norms in the organization. The higher-order themes within this dimension were: academy atmosphere, communication, cultural norms, players’ personality and attitudes, and roles. Within academy atmosphere, one commonly cited raw data theme related to player year group “cliques in the squad”. The emergence of this theme supports previous research which has identified cliques as a common organizational stressor encountered by sport performers (Fletcher et al., 2012a).

However, the specific structure of the current organization also gave rise to “academy hierarchies”, which are less reported in the extant literature. Hierarchies were visible throughout the institution, as there were structured divisions between an academy and senior team organization. Within the academy, the playing squad was divided in to three sub-groups
based on birth year. As the following quote illustrates from a group of second year players, hierarchies and cliques in the squad were closely associated with a “culture of intimidation”;

seen by many as a reason for poor communication between players:

They [first year players] need to be brought down a peg (Player 25) ... Yea, they think they’re all big timers (Player 24) ... They don’t ever speak to anyone else (Player 26).

I think that’s the same with the third year [players] (Player 25) ... I think they’ll [first year players] calm down when we [second year players] start the ‘contact game’ [physical intimidation] with them (Player 23) [group laughter].

Logistical and environmental issues. Logistical and environmental issues encapsulated the stressors that were associated with the organization’s management of training and competition. The higher order themes within this dimension were: training environment, competition environment, facilities and equipment, selection, and travel. The most cited themes were identified within training environment, which included a “lack of individual development sessions” and “high training intensity”. Whilst training environment is a regularly encountered stressor for professional sport performers (Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012; Nicholls, Backhouse, Polman, & McKenna, 2009), one explanation in this specific organizational context is that there is a daily coach expectation for players to demonstrate their skill improvement in training, to improve their chances of being selected to the senior professional team. Within facilities and equipment, a number of players cited “inadequate changing rooms” as a potential reason for poor communication between players during training and competition. The following quote (Player 2) demonstrates how “inadequate changing rooms” may negatively impact on communication between players:

I think something that is quite bad is our changing rooms. You’ve got a first year changing room, a second year changing room, a third year changing room and there’s no one [squad] together … it’s very much three separate changing rooms ... It comes
to a game situation where a first year needs to tell a third year something or vice versa
and they’re hesitant to say it.

**Performance and personal issues.** Performance and personal issues consisted of the
stressors relating to a player's professional career and personal development. The higher-
order themes within this dimension were: *academy transitions, work-life interface, diet and
recovery, player injury, and finances*. Within *academy transitions*, “moving to the academy
to train”, “transition to a higher standard of rugby”, and “transition to a higher training
intensity” were seen to be key issues that were believed to advance or compromise a player’s
career development. These themes are consistent with research highlighting the non-elite to
elite transition as a key stressor for sport performers (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). In the current
study, *academy transitions* provided a richer account for why “cliques in the squad”, “high
training intensity” and “fierce competition for selection” may be common issues. Player 1
describes the difficulties a player can face when moving to the academy to train:

> It was a shock to the system to be honest … I mean there were times, like I was
> waking up in the morning thinking, "do I really want to be here?" Quite a lot. I mean
> I'm not playing rugby [not being selected], you've just moved away from home,
> moved to a new place so sometimes my motivation levels were really, really low.
> Some games [game days], like Saturday mornings in November when it's absolutely
> pissing it down [heavy rain] and you've got to get two buses in to town, two more
> buses to the academy at six o'clock in the morning, and you're not playing [not being
> selected]. It does get you down when you've moved away from home to be here.

**Cognitive Appraisals and Coping Behaviors**

The general dimensions for cognitive appraisals and coping behaviors were: cognitive
appraisals, problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, reappraisal-focused coping,
and avoidance coping.
Cognitive appraisals. Cognitive appraisals consisted of the primary appraisals of organizational stressors that players encountered. These primary appraisals reflected players’ evaluations of the personal significance of stressors in relation to the attainment of personal goals or well-being (Lazarus, 1991). The higher-order themes in this dimension were: threat appraisals, benefit appraisals, challenge appraisals, and harm appraisals. It was apparent that players typically developed threat appraisals of various organizational stressors.

Although sport performers may appraise events as challenging (Didymus & Fletcher, 2012), our results support the finding that organizational stressors are typically appraised by sport performers as preventing the attainment of goals or positive well-being (Didymus & Fletcher, 2014). Specifically, it was perceived that players felt threatened by “making the transition to professional rugby”, “negative feedback”, “asking for advice”, “job uncertainty”, “academy hierarchies”, “unfriendly teammates”, and “competition for playing positions”. The following quotes from players and staff illustrate players’ typical threat appraisals of players due to competition for positions: “Who are these other lads?” … you’re thinking, “Oh he’s going to take my position”, you’re talking about it for weeks (Player 37) … If anyone comes in at your position you’re going to think **** [feel threatened] (Player 32). There is definitely a positional threat for the players. “If he's going to be my threat [for selection] then I'm going to make sure I knock him down and keep him down as long as possible” (Staff 6).

Problem-focused coping. Problem-focused coping consisted of the behaviors that were elicited to resolve stressors. It was evident that some players used a range of behaviors and drew on resources, such as social support, to achieve coping functions, such as problem solving. This supports research which has conceptualized coping behaviors and functions as interrelated (Daniels, Beesley, Wimalasiri, & Cheyne, 2013; for a review, see Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). The higher-order themes within problem-focused coping were: increased effort, informational support, planning, talking to teammates, changing behavior,
and increased concentration. One player (Player 3) explained how planning through “practicing what if scenarios” in training was effective in dealing with opponents in games:

We [the playing team] knew we had a good line out [during the game] because we had some good [training] sessions drilling the line out in a [practice] game environment … I think those sessions were good because when we played [club], they needed a drop goal to win and they had about 8 scrums. It was just the mentality [of working hard].

I think me and [teammate] hit 55 scrums one after the other, in one [training] session … stuff like that is good and players will know what they can do [under pressure].

**Emotion-focused coping.** Emotion-focused coping captured the most frequently cited behaviors that were used by players to manage or express their emotions. The higher-order themes were: receiving encouragement, seeking social support, visualization, creating tasks, relaxation, self-talk, and acceptance. The most common themes related to receiving encouragement, which consisted of “encouragement from teammates”, “encouragement from staff”, and “encouragement from house parents”. Receiving emotional support from teammates and coaches is a common resource used to cope in organizations (Kristiansen et al., 2012). This is because social support offsets the negative effect of stressors on well-being (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986). From the focus groups, it emerged that more experienced players offered encouragement to help players manage their emotions:

I think I got [received] that [encouragement] actually, when I was a first year (Player 37). Yeah, in our first year [at the organization] there were a lot of third years [players] for us to [receive] get help from. Like, if you looked nervous they would sit down and say “don’t worry, you’ll be fine, you’re here for a reason, they [the coaches] wouldn’t have chosen you otherwise” (Player 34).

**Reappraisal-focused coping.** Reappraisal-focused coping consisted of the behaviors that were used by players to reappraise the relevance and importance of organizational
stressors. The higher-order themes were self-rationalization and rationalizing with others. *Rationalizing with others* appeared to reflect a coping resource that was rarely adopted by players. Moreover, the professional academy players in this study appeared to lack the confidence to seek support from staff and teammates to help rationalize particular stressors. In light of these findings, sport performers in this organization may benefit from the development of greater support seeking behaviors to promote collaboratively reappraising organizational demands. The following quote illustrates the influence of rationalizing with physiotherapists to help a player (Player 1) re-appraise the significance of an injury:

> I had a small stress fracture in my left foot … for the first week I didn’t really manage it very well … Then you kind of get your head around it and think that this could work in a positive way and that’s due to [the support of] the coaches and physiotherapy team. They kind of put it into your mind all the positives you’re going to get out of being injured at this time.

**Avoidance coping.** Avoidance coping consisted of the behaviors that were used to actively avoid solving problems or managing emotions. The higher-order themes were: behavioral avoidance, blocking, denial, and substance abuse. Although the function of avoidance coping is believed to be maladaptive for long-term well-being, it could be adaptive in the short-term (Kristiansen et al., 2012); however, this may depend on the behaviors enacted to fulfill this coping function (Skinner et al., 2003). Although a limited number of themes were cited, academy staff reported a range of avoidance behaviors commonly displayed by players, such as “lying to avoid conflict”, “denial over incurring an injury” and “drinking alcohol to disengage from having their professional contract terminated”.

**Organizational Stressor Outcomes**

Organizational stressor outcomes refer to the symptoms of exposure to demands. The four general dimensions were: emotional responses, intrapersonal outcomes, and performance
Emotional responses. Emotional responses consisted of a wide range of negative emotions and positive emotions. The most highly cited lower-order themes were “anxiety”, “anger”, and “fatigue”. This finding is consistent with previous research that has explored emotional responses to organizational-related demands in elite (Arnold & Fletcher, 2015; Arnold et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2012b) and professional sport performers (Nicholls et al., 2009). This can be explained in so far that anxiety and anger represent a basic set of states by which threat and harm appraisals are commonly associated (Lazarus, 1999). From the interviews, it was evident that the academy had bred a culture of fear amongst the players, with anxiety being a typical response to “receiving negative feedback from others” and the formation of “academy hierarchies”. In addition, players typically experienced intense anxiety from selection stressors such as “call ups [to the senior squad] at short notice”: “All of a sudden you need to be on the bench for the first [senior] team and then you’ve got 5 or 6 days to learn all of the calls [tactics] and you think ******* hell” (Player 6).

Intrapersonal outcomes. Intrapersonal outcomes consisted of the organizational stressor outcomes that were associated with a player’s cognitive functioning. The higher-order themes were: confidence, de-motivation, concentration, decision making, and sleep. Both players and staff suggested that “reduced confidence” is experienced primarily by first year players, who are attempting to adapt to academy transitions (e.g., “moving to the academy to train”) and cultural norms (e.g., “negative motivational climate”). In some cases, it was acknowledged that intrapersonal outcomes were often a result of negative emotional responses to specific stressors. The following quote by a coach (Staff 6) illustrates the collective consequences of a negative motivational climate, which can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and reduced confidence for players:

We’ve got two small guys and the motivation [from a coach] is constantly, “You’re
too small for this game, I don’t know why you’re here, you might as well go home now” … the lads [players] just cower like this [shy away] and don’t say anything back … So that’s why when it comes to situations which need somebody to be confident and speak up they won’t do it because they fear they’ll just get ridiculed. When things have been shouted at them on the touchline you can see it [in their body language], just like, “oh ****”, heads down, it really affects them, they won’t turn around and say, “Okay, I made a **** up [a mistake] but I’ll put it right”, in response to “You’re ***** coming off if you do that again! [shouting]”.

**Performance-related outcomes.** The higher-order themes within this general dimension were: communication, individual performance, team performance, and retention. Within individual performance, “reduced skill development” was considered a consequence from training-related stressors, such as a “lack of individualized sessions” and “longer training sessions”. In addition, players spoke of making technical and tactical errors in training due to a fear of receiving further negative feedback from coaches. Players and staff also felt that the organization could consider reducing the longer duration of some training sessions, which are often counterproductive to concentration and skill development: “I saw it several times last year … I’ve done 45 minutes [coaching], it’s been quality intense stuff but [coach] does another 45 minutes on line outs and scrums. The lads are just exhausted and it’s counterproductive [for skill development]” (Staff 3). “Rather than doing an hour and a half session, do two 45 minute sessions where it’s just detail … Really intense … And then you’re not [fatigued], because towards the end of sessions, you get really tired and then your concentration goes” (Player 2).

**Stress Management Recommendations**

In line with organizational stress management frameworks (Dewe et al., 2010; Richardson & Rothstein, 2008), participants provided a series of organizational-level and
individual-level recommendations to maximize sport performers' well-being and performance development. Figure 1 illustrates the target groups by which stress management initiatives were recommended throughout the organization. Higher-order themes are presented for each target group, along with example lower-order themes. To corroborate these interview responses, stress management survey recommendations were also completed at the end of each interview (see Table 4). These survey responses reflected the average proportion of players and staff that believed them and the organization would benefit from and participate in particular stress management programs to facilitate players' ability to manage organizational stress in the future.

**Organizational-level recommendations.** Organizational-level interventions are typically developed to remove or modify specific organizational characteristics that individuals and groups encounter, such as stressors (Dewe et al., 2010). The fourteen higher-order themes within organizational-level recommendations were: *communication channels; facilities management; work appraisals; talent development; game reviews; game preparation; reflective practice; team cohesion; time management; training structure; team goal setting; team problem solving; and, professionalism.* Within these themes, the most frequently suggested recommendations were to: organize more team socials for all academy players and staff to attend, integrate more regular team analysis of games, involving all academy players and coaching staff; incorporate varied training sessions involving the commitment of all academy players and staff; and, encourage communication between the players and all academy and senior team staff. These initiatives were considered important due to the aforesaid stressors relating to poor communication between players and members of the organization, high training intensities, fatigue, the existence of academy hierarchies, and, cliques in the playing squad. The need to address these stressors was supported by a series of survey recommendations (see Table 4). In particular, team building was suggested
by many of the academy players \((n = 39, 98\%)\) and supported by some staff \((n = 3, 42\%)\).

Moreover, building confidence was cited by players \((n = 32, 81\%)\) and staff \((n = 4, 61\%)\) as a program that they believed academy players would all benefit from and participate in as an academy. Problem solving at a group and individual-level was also suggested by players \((n = 30, 76\%)\), with 4 out of 7 staff believing that players would benefit from this program.

**Individual-level recommendations.** Individual-level interventions are typically developed to enable individuals to better appraise, respond and cope with organizational stressors (Dewe et al., 2010). The seven higher-order themes within this dimension were: senior first team exposure; mentoring; coping; goal setting; trust; coach feedback; and, parental education. Within these higher-order themes, the most commonly cited lower-order recommendations were to: modify negative appraisals for first and second year players, encourage problem solving and decision making to first year players, raise coach awareness of providing varying methods of feedback to players, and optimize confidence for first year players. The education of coping efficacy for less experienced players was deemed particularly important. This was explained in so far that first year players, who are making an amateur to professional sport transition, often perceive their environment to be intimidating. Moreover, it was suggested that players struggle to cope with high training intensities and receiving negative feedback. The survey data also indicated that players \((78\%)\) and staff \((100\%)\) believed that players would benefit from coping education.

One noticeable incongruence between the interview and survey recommendations obtained was players' need for improved social support. From the survey data, 24 out of 40 players \((60\%)\) and 2 out of 7 staff \((29\%)\) felt that players would benefit from improved social support. However, the interview and focus group data suggested that some players already seek and receive different forms of support from teammates and staff. A recommendation from staff suggested improving social support could be achieved by raising coach awareness.
of feedback methods and educating parents on methods of support. Conversely, one member of staff (Staff 5) argued the following: "This academy is like no other academy in the country in the different levels of support provided to players". From the interviews and survey responses it was also apparent that staff were keen to support the design and delivery of stress management programs for their players, but were less interested in participating in any of these programs alongside the players. This is an important applied consideration for the development of organizational programs, since the effectiveness of such initiatives may be largely dependent on the evidence of key decision makers' readiness for change, support for and engagement in the programs (Nielsen, 2013).

**General Discussion**

The primary purpose of this study was to undertake a mixed method organizational stress audit of competitive performers who operate in a sport organization. A secondary purpose was to identify future stress management recommendations to maximize performers' well-being and performance development. Informed by a transactional stress approach (Dewe et al., 2010; Lazarus, 1991, 1999), the findings reveal a number of common organizational stressors encountered by sport performers who operate in this sport institution. These findings support the identification of themes identified in sport performers across a range of competitive levels (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012; Nicholls, Backhouse, Polman, & McKenna, 2009). In this organizational context, many stressors (e.g., training demands) were often a by-product of encountering other demands (e.g., academy transitions). Moreover, a culture of intimidation and a negative motivational climate were linked to commonly developed appraisals and coping behaviors. In line with stress theory (Lazarus, 1999), these player appraisals and coping behaviors were related to emotional, intrapersonal and performance outcomes.

A wide range of stress management recommendations were also identified for specific
groups in this organization, with the aim of directly or indirectly helping sport performers to better manage their experiences of organizational stress in the future. An overarching message was that players, and to some degree staff, would take part in individual- and organizational-level stress management programs. At an individual-level, player coping efficacy is important, as the behaviors used to achieve coping functions may be adaptive for well-being in specific contexts, but maladaptive in others (Daniels et al., 2013; Skinner et al., 2003). This is sensible given the mission of the current organization, which is to retain academy players who demonstrate an ability to cope with professional sport and its demands. At an organizational-level, it was perceived that the institution should integrate initiatives to enhance team cohesion and communication channels, vary training stimulus, and to incorporate reviews of competitive games. Such organizational-level programs are believed to be the most proactive solution to managing stress (Dewe et al., 2010), as they aim to prevent player strain from occurring by modifying structures and environmental conditions (cf. Briner & Reynolds, 1999). Although support for their efficacy has been equivocal (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008), participatory stress audits are arguably a prerequisite for effective interventions, as the sport performers who may benefit from such programs are also those recommending their creation (cf. Nielsen et al., 2010).

A strength of the current stress audit was the sample size (N = 47) and sampling of varying organizational members. This was important to illustrate how players' stress experience may also be perceived by staff and jointly developed by common player attitudes, cultural norms, contagion, and managed by a range of coping resources. Despite these strengths, the sample sizes for some of the focus groups (i.e., n = 15) was considered a limitation, which could have compromised an appropriate level of participant contribution. Further, the data yielded from large focus group samples may not have enabled individuals to represent their views as clearly as individual interviews might. Although we were mindful of
adhering to focus group guidelines for organizational research (Bachiochi & Weiner, 2004),
the specific context determined that we had to complete interviews at times that were most
convenient to the organization. It is possible that the development of steering groups
comprising a mixture of sport performers and staff could have been applied to identify clearly
agreed motives for tackling sport performers' experiences of organizational stress. However,
given the identification of potentially threatening cultural norms, steering groups may have
been counterproductive. In the current study, conducting focus groups with player sub-groups
was necessary for delimiting future interventions to groups who may be most at risk of strain
(Bradley & Sutherland, 1994). We acknowledge that the analysis of group experiences makes
it problematic to assess the coping effectiveness of particular stressors for specific
performers. We therefore recommend mixed-method assessments to further inform
intervention development and refinement.

The findings from this study suggest that organizational stress management in sport is
an area worthy of future research. While attempting to advance the conceptual framework
and methods used to understand organizational stress, we concur that “research should give
more attention to developing techniques used to diagnose the need for stress interventions”
(Bowling et al., 2012, p. 79). As the current study indicates, not all stressors are maladaptive
for sport performers' well-being and performance. Researchers considering a mixed method
approach to stress auditing could consider a longitudinal examination, using a combination of
regular steering group meetings, interviews, diaries, observations, and surveys. A blend of
these approaches will likely result in greater exposure to the organizational environment and
may capture an accurate reality of day-to-day functioning. Comprehensive audits such as the
aforesaid may be more time consuming for organizations. Yet, the benefits of conducting a
detailed, participative, and proactive approach to stress management are likely to outweigh
the time taken and the relatively minimal cost that could be incurred to improve the well-

There are a number of practical challenges when conducting applied research in sport organizations. In conducting stress audits that are theoretically founded (e.g., Lazarus, 1991), psychologists should identify the stress processes and common issues that need solving for those individuals (e.g., players) and groups (e.g., sub-group teams) who need the most support (Bowling et al., 2012; Nielsen et al., 2010). This is vital for prioritizing whether organizational-, individual-level interventions, or an amalgamation of the two is necessary (Giga et al., 2003). Organizational-level programs may be the priority for modifying organizational stressors, such as cultural norms. Where stressors cannot be removed or reduced, individual-level programs such as modifying cognitive appraisals are also appropriate for facilitating well-being (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008). In reality, studying sport performers' organizational experiences and recommendations for intervention development in context is not straightforward, particularly when there may be incongruence between performers and key stakeholders as to the main issues that need prioritizing. In this regard, sport psychologists have a challenging but important role in encouraging stakeholders to provide support for the necessary interventions to be designed and implemented. Without such commitment, it is likely that sport performers will perceive a lack of interest on the part of stakeholders in their well-being. This may subsequently lead to negative performer perceptions of the organizational climate in which they operate (cf. Dewe et al., 2010).

In conclusion, this stress audit makes a conceptual contribution by unearthing contextual (e.g., non-normative transitions) and cultural complexities (e.g., political hierarchies) that are not explicitly evident in the organizational psychology models used to inform interventions. Organizational interventions which aim to modify the stressors encountered, or reduce their impact on performers' well-being, are more likely to be effective if a stress audit is rigorously adopted and integrated in an organization’s overall management.
strategy. Although some challenges exist for undertaking an audit, the prevention and management of stress should be a joint responsibility between sport performers and stakeholders (Dewe et al., 2010; Fletcher et al., 2006); one that may hold great promise for optimizing well-being, performance, and organizational productivity.
References


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<tr>
<th>Lower-order themes (examples only)</th>
<th>Higher-order themes</th>
<th>General Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Coaches’ expectations</td>
<td>External expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving negative feedback</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor referee decisions</td>
<td>Referees</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Job uncertainty</td>
<td>Retention</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambiguous injury diagnoses</td>
<td>Support staff</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Conflicting coaching styles</td>
<td>Coach behaviors</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Unapproachable coaches</td>
<td>The coaches’ personality and attitudes</td>
<td>Leadership and Personnel Issues</td>
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<td>Academy hierarchies</td>
<td>Academy atmosphere</td>
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<td>Poor communication between players</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Culture of Intimidation</td>
<td>Cultural norms</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Hostile teammates</td>
<td>Players’ personality and attitudes</td>
<td>Cultural and Academy Issues</td>
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<td>Role ambiguity</td>
<td>Roles</td>
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<td>Lack of individual development sessions</td>
<td>Training environment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fluctuating game preparation</td>
<td>Competition environment</td>
<td>Logistical and Environmental issues</td>
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<td>Inadequate changing rooms</td>
<td>Facilities and equipment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fierce competition for selection</td>
<td>Selection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long away game journeys</td>
<td>Travel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moving to the academy to train</td>
<td>Academy transitions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Balancing academy and education</td>
<td>Work-life interface</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of food preparation</td>
<td>Diet and recovery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation from being injured</td>
<td>Player injury</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Finances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower-order themes (examples only)</td>
<td>Higher-order themes</td>
<td>General Dimension</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Player threat appraisals of making the transition to professional rugby</td>
<td>Threat appraisals</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Benefit appraisals of the academy training program</td>
<td>Benefit appraisals</td>
<td>Cognitive appraisals</td>
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<td>Challenge appraisals</td>
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<td>Harm appraisals of negative feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working harder due to feedback</td>
<td>Increased effort</td>
<td>Problem-focused coping</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional support from teammates</td>
<td>Informational support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing ‘what if scenarios’</td>
<td>Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to teammates to solve issues</td>
<td>Talking to teammates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working on changing technique</td>
<td>Changing behavior</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Focusing</td>
<td>Increased concentration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouragement from teammates</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to teammates for support</td>
<td>Seeking social support</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td>Visualization</td>
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<td>Creating tasks to prevent boredom</td>
<td>Creating tasks</td>
<td>Emotion-focused coping</td>
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<td>Listening to music</td>
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<td>Self-talk</td>
<td>Self-talk</td>
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<td>Accepting selection decisions</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
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<td>Rationalizing negative feedback</td>
<td>Self-rationalization</td>
<td>Reappraisal-focused coping</td>
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<td>Re-evaluating injury with physiotherapists</td>
<td>Rationalizing with others</td>
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<td>Avoiding conflict</td>
<td>Behavioral avoidance</td>
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<td>Trying to forget mistakes</td>
<td>Blocking</td>
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<td>Player denial over injury</td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Avoidance coping</td>
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<td>Drinking alcohol prior to being released by the academy</td>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
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Table 3. Organizational stressor outcomes experienced by professional academy players

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lower-order themes (examples only)</th>
<th>Higher-order themes</th>
<th>General Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>Emotional outcomes</td>
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<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced confidence</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>De-motivated</td>
<td>De-motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced concentration</td>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>Intrapersonal outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Players being unable to make</td>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>appropriate decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of sleep</td>
<td>Sleep</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced team communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making mistakes</td>
<td>Individual performance</td>
<td>Performance-related outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced team performance</td>
<td>Team performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Players being released</td>
<td>Retention</td>
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</table>
Table 4. Survey recommendations for organizational stress management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Academy Players (n=40)</th>
<th>Academy Staff (n=7)</th>
<th>Academy to Use (n=40)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team building</td>
<td>38P, 2S</td>
<td>40P, 4S</td>
<td>40P, 3S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building confidence</td>
<td>28P, 3S</td>
<td>34P, 4S</td>
<td>34P, 5S</td>
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<td>Coping with pressures</td>
<td>26P, 1S</td>
<td>32P, 4S</td>
<td>35P, 5S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>28P, 4S</td>
<td>28P, 5S</td>
<td>33P, 4S</td>
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<td>Relaxation training</td>
<td>29P, 3S</td>
<td>32P, 4S</td>
<td>32P, 4S</td>
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<td>Team performance appraisals</td>
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<td>28P, 5S</td>
<td>33P, 4S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>26P, 1S</td>
<td>29P, 5S</td>
<td>32P, 4S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness training</td>
<td>25P, 3S</td>
<td>28P, 4S</td>
<td>33P, 3S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing emotions positively</td>
<td>24P, 4S</td>
<td>29P, 5S</td>
<td>30P, 4S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology rehabilitation for injured players</td>
<td>25P, 2S</td>
<td>29P, 3S</td>
<td>30P, 4S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-regulating teams</td>
<td>25P, 1S</td>
<td>28P, 3S</td>
<td>28P, 2S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved social support</td>
<td>21P, 1S</td>
<td>23P, 4S</td>
<td>30P, 2S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolving conflict</td>
<td>18P, 3S</td>
<td>24P, 4S</td>
<td>26P, 3S</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 47, P = the number of recommendations from academy players (n = 40); S = the number of recommendations from academy staff (n = 7).
ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS MANAGEMENT

ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Target: The Organization
- Communication Channels: Encourage communication between players and staff
- Facilities Management: Restructuring of the changing rooms
- Work Appraisals: More regular player appraisals

Target: Academy Staff
- Talent Development: Revisit the talent development process

Target: Academy Players and Staff
- Game Reviews: Regular team analysis of games
- Game Preparation: Food preparation for games
- Reflective Practice: Encourage individual reflective practice
- Team Cohesion: More team socials
- Time Management: Optimize time management
- Training Structure: Incorporate variety in training sessions

Target: The Academy Squad
- Team Goal Setting: Performance profiling
- Team Problem Solving: Simulating ‘chaos’ in training
- Professionalism: Educating player professionalism

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Target: Academy Players
- First Team Exposure: Expose players to senior team
- Mentoring: Encourage player mentoring

Target: First and Second Year Academy Players
- Coping: Modify negative appraisals

Target: First Year Academy Players
- Goal setting: Optimize confidence
- Trust: Strengthen trust in teammates

Target: Academy Coaches and Player Parents
- Coach Feedback: Raise awareness of feedback methods
- Parental Education: Educate parents on methods of support

Figure 1. Organizational and individual level stress management recommendations