Exploring Emotion Abilities and Regulation Strategies in Sport Organizations

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This study aimed to contribute to a growing theoretical body of literature relating to the role of emotional intelligence abilities and emotion regulation strategies in creating optimally functioning in sport organizations. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 21 participants (athletes, coaches, administrators, national performance directors, and chief executive officers) representing 5 national sport organizations. Key emotion abilities (i.e., identifying, processing and comprehending, and managing emotions) associated with the use of specific experience and expression regulation strategies (e.g., forward-tracking, back-tracking, reappraisal, suppression, and impulse control) were identified, providing important insights into how such emotion abilities may be developed within sport. Emotion abilities were found to be highly contextualized and appeared to influence regulation strategy selection through sociocultural norms present within organizations. Based on these findings, approaches to developing emotion abilities may be effective in facilitating organizational functioning by assisting individuals to perceive, process, comprehend, and manage emotions intelligently.

Keywords: athletic, elite, emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, positive organizational psychology in sport

Psychologists have increasingly highlighted the importance of the complex social and organizational dynamics that influence athletic performance (see, for review, Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). The interest in such issues has developed from the observation that organizational excellence in elite sport is dependent on far more than athletic talent alone (Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2011). Recently, researchers (see Aoyagi, Cox, & McGuire, 2008; R. Weinberg & McDermott, 2002) have begun to explore behavioral factors that promote flourishing in sport under the rubric of positive organizational psychology in sport (POPS; Wagstaff et al., 2011). A corollary of such an approach is the need for sport organizations to be characterized by positive relational climates, which may be characterized by inter alia relationship closeness and quality and, to a lesser degree, mastery motivation. However, while positive relational and motivational climates may act as markers for functioning in sport organizations, the intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that cultivate these outcomes are not clear. It appears that organizational functioning is influenced by operators' ability to build and maintain complex networks of interdependent relationships (Jowett & Lalonde, 2007), characterized by trust, influence, and key interpersonal collaborations. Given the extent to which these relational dynamics have significant emotional dimensions (Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012), the present study explored the socioemotional factors that facilitate optimal organizational functioning.
Emotions play an essential role in organizations by providing feedback and stimulating retrospective appraisal of actions, promoting learning, and altering guidelines for future behavior and self-management (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007; Damasio, 1994). Indeed, due to a recent proliferation of research attention exploring emotion and affect in organizations, Barsade, Brief, and Spataro (2003) have termed the current era an “affective revolution.” Although the foundations for this revolution materialized some time ago (e.g., Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989), the recent sea change began with peer-reviewed publications on the expression of emotion at work (e.g., Mann, 1999) and more recently the publication of several books (e.g., Fineman, 2003; A. Weinberg & Cooper, 2007) and special editions of journals on emotion in organizations (e.g., Ashkanasy, 2004; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Weiss, 2001). The emergence of this body of literature has led to an increased interest in affective concepts for those exploring organizational functioning in sport (see Wagstaff et al., 2011). Collectively, this literature has indicated that research on emotion may allow us to divide the exploration of emotional experiences with more accuracy and calculate the importance of such phenomena for individual and organizational outcomes. For example, Fredrickson (1998, 2001) asserts that despite their fleeting nature, positive emotions have longer lasting consequences. That is, positive emotional experiences may be the vehicle for individual growth and social connection by building people’s personal and social resources and buffering against stress, and thus represent an essential element of optimal personal functioning (Fredrickson, 2001).

Allied with recent conceptualizations that emotions are socially functional (see Butler & Gross, 2009; Rime, 2009), there is the view that they are amenable to management or regulation to enhance psychosocial dynamics (i.e., interpersonal relationships). Herein the social sharing of emotion is a learnable necessity that enables us to transact with others (Rime, 2009), whereby emotions trigger controllable responses that help us to self-regulate (Frijda, 1986) and allow for behavioral norms to override automatic or impulsive emotional reactions (Grandey, 2000). Hence, contemporary emotion theorists acknowledge that through reflection and learning we actually have an impressive amount of choice as to what our emotions will be, how we experience them, and how and when we express them. Support for this view comes from Fineman (1993), who argued that “the management and mobilization of emotions are pivotal [in] the way organizational order is achieved and undone” (p. 1). Furthermore, Solomon (2003) proposed, [emotions] require an advanced degree of conceptual sophistication, including a conception of self and at least some ability in abstraction. They require at least minimal intelligence and a sense of self-interest, and they proceed purposefully in accordance with a sometimes extremely complex set of rules and strategies. (p. 35)

Such requirements support a multicomponent perspective of emotion, in which intelligence, judgment, and intent are important. It is interesting that this bares striking resemblance to the converging areas of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and emotion regulation (Thompson, 1994), which propose that individuals manage their own and others’ emotions in order to facilitate optimal intra- and interpersonal outcomes. The first of these, emotional intelligence, has been perhaps the most popular area within the study of emotion in organizations in the past two decades (see, for reviews, Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2009). This has been defined as the “ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotion knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 10). This definition contains four “branches” of emotional intelligence abilities that are hierarchical in nature and progress from basic to highly psychologically integrated processes: (a) perception, appraisal, and expression of emotion; (b) emotional facilitation of thinking; (c) understanding and analyzing of emotion/employing emotional knowledge; and (d) reflective regulation of emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Research on the concept of emotional intelligence has found its way into the sport domain, but it has not received the extent of support seen in nonsport domains. That is, the small body of research in this area (e.g., Lane et al., 2010; Perlini &
Halverson, 2006; Thelwell, Lane, Weston, & Greenlees, 2008; Zizzi, Deaner, & Hirschhorn, 2003) has provided equivocal findings regarding the importance of emotional intelligence and has been characterized by conceptual and measurement concerns (see, for reviews, Meyer & Zizzi, 2007; Latimer, Rench, & Brackett, 2007; Meyer & Fletcher, 2007; Stough, Clements, Wallish, & Downey, 2009). In reviewing this research, Meyer and Fletcher (2007) provided a critical theoretical overview of emotional intelligence in sport by questioning the value of extant research in the area, claiming that

Researchers have utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods, inconsistent and sometimes inappropriate operationalization of the construct . . . use of disparate models and in the case of one study an unsubstantiated assessment tool, make it difficult to draw conclusions that will advance sport psychology research and practice. (p. 9)

Such issues may partly explain the scarcity of emotional intelligence research in sport. However, given the parallels identified between business and sport (see, for a recent review, Fletcher, 2011), and with the proposed importance of controlling emotions in sport (Jones, 2003; Vallerand & Blanchard, 2000), it is not surprising that researchers have reinforced the need to examine emotional intelligence in sport (Latimer et al., 2007; Stough et al., 2009).

In a similar vein to emotional intelligence, emotion regulation has emerged within the domain of affect regulation, or the purposeful alteration of one’s current affective state (Bonanno, 2001; Gross, 1998; Larsen, 2000), with knowledge of the ways in which people regulate their emotions increasing drastically (see Augustine & Hemenover, 2009). Thompson (1994) defined this as “the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one’s goals” (pp. 27–28). These processes are all distinct, but work together toward the common goal of reducing unwanted and enhancing desired emotional experiences (Gross, 1998). Researchers have increasingly indicated that there may be crossover between emotional intelligence and emotion regulation (e.g., Barrett & Salovey, 2001; John & Gross, 2007; Salovey, 2006), leading Wranik, Barrett, and Salovey (2007) to propose that “most people would probably agree that several skills are necessary for managing and regulating emotional life, and that individuals differ markedly in their proficiency with this skill set” (p. 393). These skills allow individuals to understand their emotional reactions quickly and efficiently and understand how others may judge this expressive behavior. Individuals must quickly perceive intra- or interpersonal information as an emotional state (e.g., anger, anxiety, happiness, excitement), anticipate how others might judge this reaction, know what to do to adjust this expressive behavior, and employ a chosen strategy for action (to regulate the emotion; Wranik et al., 2007). If individuals can master a situation in line with their goal and facilitate a beneficial outcome, it may be deemed that those persons have regulated their emotional episode in an “emotionally intelligent” manner (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Indeed, “the study of emotion regulation provides an arena within which problems of social competence and incompetence, behavioral self-control, and even intellectual and cognitive functioning can be regarded in a new light” (Thompson, 1994, p. 45). For this reason, emotion abilities are likely to be of interest to sport psychologists (cf. Uphill, McCarthy, & Jones, 2009) wishing to optimize transactions between individuals and their environment.

Recently, Wagstaff et al. (2012) highlighted how emotion abilities and strategies may influence transactions in sport organizations. This study found the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships to be the critical building blocks in creating an optimally functioning national sport organization (NSO). Moreover, individuals better able to monitor and manage their emotions were more likely to forge and maintain successful relationships. They did this by using intra- and interpersonal awareness of emotional processes and used this information rationally to select appropriate emotion responses. In doing so, individuals were able to guide transactions more effectively and increase what was termed psychosocial capital and displays of prosocial behavior. However, further research is required to better understand perceptions of successful regulation strategies and how these may be developed to enhance relationships. It is interesting that non-sport research has highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence for quality in social rela-
tionships (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003), social interaction (Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes, Salovey, Côté, & Beers, 2005), social functioning (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006), and social exchange reasoning (Reis et al., 2007).

In view of the above, it is surprising that researchers have failed to fully explicate the importance of strengths-based capacities such as emotion abilities and regulation strategies for building and maintaining key relationships in sport organizations. Hence, this study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the key perceived mechanisms and processes associated with interpersonal relationships with a focus on emotion abilities and regulation strategies and how these may be supported and developed within NSOs.

Method

Participants and Organizations

A two-step procedure was implemented to select participants. In the first phase, letters of invitation were sent to potential gatekeepers in eight British NSOs with which the researchers had no relationship to reduce bias. In line with the sampling procedure employed by Wagstaff et al. (2012) to examine organizational functioning, organizations were selected on the basis of their successful performance at the previous Olympic Games. Of the potential participant pools, four (two individual sports, two team sports) agreed to participate. Attempts to conduct follow-up inquiries with the NSOs unwilling to participate were unsuccessful. In the second phase, a snowball sampling procedure was adopted; all participants were asked to provide contact details of potential participants within their organization from a predefined role list, who the researchers then invited to participate. This sampling procedure provided a total sample of 21 individuals (five international performers, four international coaches, four national performance directors, four administrators, two chief executive officers, and two non-executive directors). Hence, the sample represented multiple roles and levels of governance across five NSOs, with only the two non-executive directors not full-time employees of their NSO.

Data Collection

Preparation booklet. A booklet (available from corresponding author) was developed for this study to help participants prepare for data collection and consisted of an introduction to the study, an overview of the structure and content of the interview guide, and an educational section. This last section was included to familiarize participants with the area of research and to provide “participant-friendly” definitions of emotion-related concepts. For example, emotion regulation was defined as “the strategies individuals usually use to regulate their emotions” (John & Gross, 2007).

Interview guide. A semistructured interview guide was used to facilitate the interview process and to allow for a point of deviation when salient topics arose. The structure of the guide emanated from reviewing interview guides from studies of an exploratory nature (e.g., R. Weinberg & McDermott, 2002), whereas the content of the questions was generated from organizational (e.g., Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2012) and emotional intelligence sport literature (e.g., Latimer et al., 2007; Meyer & Fletcher, 2007). The guide was piloted with an elite athlete and a high-level administrator from a world-class sport organization. Feedback led to minor structural and content refinements to enhance the clarity and comprehensiveness of the guide. The ensuing guide consisted of four sections. Section 1 intended to build rapport and set context and asked participants to discuss their day-to-day roles and responsibilities as well as typical emotions they experienced and encountered in their organization. This section was intended to understand the participants’ position within their organization and unearth potential themes for later discussion; therefore, the data from this section are not explicitly presented in the Results section. Section 2 invited participants to discuss situations in which they had encountered obstacles or supports that had influenced the effectiveness of their functioning. Section 3 requested participants to describe regulation strategies they used or observed during their interactions in sport that they perceived to be successful for developing organizational relationships and functioning. The fourth section of the guide provided participants with the opportunity to suggest practical recommendations for
others when attempting to regulate their own or others’ emotions in sport organizations.

**Interview.** Each participant was sent a copy of the preparation booklet 1 week prior to the interview. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the same researcher who was trained in qualitative techniques. Each interview lasted between 120 and 180 min (M = 156.76 min, SD = 17.38). All interviews were recorded in their entirety and transcribed verbatim.

**Data Analysis**

From the potential approaches to qualitative analysis, we adopted a content analysis procedure to analyze and represent participants’ responses in a coherent form. The advantages of constructing inductive conceptualizations emergent from data have been extensively discussed (Silverman, 2006) and employed in similar studies exploring organizational psychology in sport (e.g., Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012; Hanton, Wagstaff, & Fletcher, 2012). During analysis, the researchers who were all trained in qualitative methods to postgraduate level immersed themselves in the data by adopting a reflexive “in-dwelling” stance: listening to the interview tapes, reading transcripts several times, jotting notes and thoughts. In line with the procedure reported by Fletcher and colleagues, the researchers read through transcripts and attached memos to each segment of narrative, indicating preliminary, tentative connections. Each researcher independently extracted content segments of potential importance from the interview transcripts, regardless of their context, allowing themes and concepts to emerge in an inductive manner. This procedure allowed a number of initial themes and meanings to emerge regarding participants’ typical emotions and situations in which they had encountered obstacles or supports to effective functioning and regulation strategies used or observed.

Subsequent comparison of initial themes and debate between the research team gave rise to a range of emotion-related concepts and was, in part, inevitably influenced by the existing work relating to emotions in sport organizations (e.g., Wagstaff et al., 2012). The resultant themes are indicative of those identified by each of the researchers. Although some scholars have opposed the development of unvarying universal standards for qualitative research (cf. Tracy, 2010), it is important to consider the quality of such inquiry. Indeed, this research might be judged according to the eight markers of quality research outlined by Tracy (2010), which relate to (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. In line with these criteria, the present research might be deemed a worthy topic because of its relevance, timeliness, significance, and interest. Rigorous research is characterized by rich complexity and variety in theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts, and samples (Tracy, 2010). The overlapping markers of rigor, face validity, and due diligence were pursued here by devoting substantial time, care, and thoroughness in data collection and engaging in participant debriefing and member checking. Sincerity reflects honesty and transparency about the role of researchers’ biases, goals, and foibles in research outcomes (Tracy, 2010). In the present study, a reflexive diary and “critical friends” were used to monitor changes in the researchers’ approach to data collection and increase the trustworthiness of the analysis process.

Credibility refers to the plausibility, dependability, persuasiveness, and trustworthiness of the data as an expression of reality (cf. Sparkes & Smith, 2009). In an attempt to reduce subjective bias, we employed purposefully broad sampling, the use of a reflexive diary, “critical friends,” member checking, and multivocality of participant quotations. Content analysis procedures also provide emergent themes that can be logically traced back to raw data. Resonance refers to the meaningful effect of research on an audience by promoting empathy, identification, and reverberation despite a lack of direct contact with participants. It can be achieved through aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations as well as transferability (Tracy, 2010). We attempted to promote such resonance by presenting data using visual representations and rich quotations in the hope of allowing participants’ complex experiences to vividly emerge. In addition, in an attempt to enhance naturalistic generalization and transferability, we gathered direct quotations from a breadth of individuals from multiple organizations (cf. Sparkes & Smith, 2009), yet leave it to the reader to decide the extent to which the
content overlaps with their own experiences. In evaluating the significance of contribution of the research, one might consider the theoretical (e.g., implications for conceptual understanding), heuristic (e.g., stimulation of curiosity, discourse, and further exploration), and practical (e.g., utility of knowledge for practitioners) significance of the findings.

Attempts were made throughout the research process to adhere to procedural (i.e., institutional ethical clearance was obtained), situational (i.e., reflection on the methods employed and data worth exposing), relational (i.e., reflection on the researcher actions and potential consequences on participants and their organizations), and exiting (i.e., avoiding unjust or unintended consequences of presented findings) ethical obligations. The final marker of quality by which this research might be judged is its meaningful coherence. In attempting to achieve this, we feel that the study achieved its stated purpose, used methods and representation practices that matched the domain and research paradigm, and attentively interconnected extant literature with research foci, methods, and findings.

Results

The findings from this study highlight a number of adaptive emotion regulation strategies (see Figure 1) that were perceived by participants to be successful for developing organizational relationships and functioning. These strategies were employed in response to the perception and interpretation of emotion information and evolved as a consequence of ongoing intra- and interpersonal emotion processing. It is important to note that these strategies were reportedly influenced by an interplay of social–cognitive factors, namely, organization-specific learning and individual emotion abilities. To elaborate, participants reported the importance of understanding and abiding by behavioral norms and expectations about expressing thoughts and emotions within their sport organization. Individuals also reported differing levels of competency in their own and others’ ability to accurately identify, process, and manage emotions. Specifically, three emotion abilities (see later narrative) were perceived to be associated with high-functioning relationships in organizations. The findings are presented using quotations from interviews as well as visual representations of findings with the full range of emotional responses illustrated in Figure 1.

Emotion Abilities

Identification of emotion data. All of the participants reported the importance of being able to identify emotion information in themselves or others. The most frequently cited themes within this dimension were being aware of your own behavior, reading others’ emotional state, and identifying emotional sensations in self (see Figure 1). The following quotations illustrate these themes using an elite performer’s and then a coach’s words:

You have to know when you get angry, overexcited, or frustrated and also when other people are so you can respond in the best way. . . . I guess you know by the feeling in your stomach and the way they are behaving; stuff like body language and the faces people pull when they feel a certain way.

That has to be the first step. . . . how do you know someone is angry? You hear or see it in how they are acting, but also, I guess I might be better at that than others because I think it’s important so I look for those signs.

Participants reported that an ability to discriminate the honesty of others’ expressions by identifying “false” emotions was important for accurate identification of emotional expressions. Participants reported that they interacted with individuals who demonstrated acuity to false expressions of emotion by monitoring variations in vocal tone and pitch. Indeed, by closely monitoring and observing the behavior of those they interacted with, participants gained an understanding of the subtle changes in those they had to build strong relationships with, as this international coach suggested, “because you work together day-in, day-out. . . . you can hear it in the way people say things.” This was also demonstrated by the following administrator’s view of the requirements of successful relationships in sport:

If you could read minds or how people feel from their faces and understand everyone, you would be the most effective sportsperson in the world! I guess you can only do the next best things and pick up those little telltale signs people give off and listen. Then you can think about how you deal with any issue, yours or theirs, effectively.
**Processing and comprehension of emotion data.** The second emotion ability dimension identified was that of emotion processing. This involved using perceived emotion data to better understand situations and comprehend potential behavior pathways. The most frequently cited themes within this dimension were understanding others’ emotional investment in a given situation, identifying the cause of an emotion, and generating suitable behavioral intentions (see Figure 1). This ability is illustrated by this national manager:

Some people you can read like a book when they are happy or sad or aren’t motivated, but others you need to build up an understanding over time. At the same time, you can’t always use the same approach with every person. An athlete who is upset one time, might not react the same way to your attempts at discussing “the bigger picture” when they are upset at another time. You need to be constantly checking for how they react to what you are (or aren’t) saying. I guess intelligence is the right word for that knowledge.

**Management of emotional expression in self and others.** The third and most often cited dimension of emotion ability related to the

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**Figure 1.** Emotion abilities and regulation strategies perceived to optimize interpersonal relationships in sport organizations (a frequency analysis is provided in the first column to illustrate the number of participants mentioning each theme).
perception that those more adept at regulating their own and others' emotions and behavior were better able to navigate situations using interpersonal influence. The most frequently cited themes within this dimension were avoiding acting on impulse, influencing others via emotional expression, manipulating others’ emotions, and masking emotions (see Figure 1). The participants provided information about how individuals use their emotion abilities to control tasks, strategically plan, and gain influence to facilitate better relational dynamics. An example of the perceived importance of such abilities is indicated in the following quotation:

I use emotions to plan how I can gain a bit of influence over people. Not in a manipulative way, but I use them to act savvy when I see an issue on the horizon . . . you can see the storm coming a mile off, and if you use those skills cleverly, you hold your tongue, you hide your time, and then act when the moment is right, you do so in the most effective way. You influence the way you want after careful planning and thinking, rather than acting how your feelings want you to. . . . And I’d say that has been a hugely influencing factor in getting to where I am now.

Participants suggested that it was possible to learn to manage emotions in order to express the most appropriate behavior when experiencing negative emotions or stressors in sport:

It is strange really, no one tells you when to be madly passionate, or what you should feel when you lose, how you should treat abusive fans, or when you can be grumpy or disgruntled, but you sure know when you are getting it wrong because you can go from being the star of the show one minute to feeling like a complete outcast . . . you have to learn to be able to deal with the emotional fallout of that stuff pretty quickly.

Emotion Regulation Strategies

The emotion ability themes in the previous section were enacted through emotion regulation strategies. That is, the ability to identify, process, and manage emotions in one’s self and others appeared to be manifested in the selection of two dimensions of regulation strategy: experience regulation (i.e., managing feelings) and expression regulation (i.e., managing behavior). Furthermore, the selection and perceived success of these strategies appeared to be dependent on social and cultural influences. A full range of emotion regulation strategies is illustrated in Figure 1. All of the participants reported expressing emotions in social transactions that they thought would lead to positive feelings and “win–win” situations. In doing so, they stated that drawing on previous experiences or a “toolbox” of regulation strategies facilitated this in addition to a “bank” of previous “win–win” experiences. The link between abilities and strategy selection was mentioned by a performance director:

[if] you have disagreed about an issue, sit-down and discuss it, and then come out with a win–win scenario for both of you. By going through that process, you build stronger relationships, and are there abilities relating to emotions important in that? Sure they are! You build up knowledge of people, the way they work and think when you work in high level sport. And by manufacturing those win–win situations, they feel good, you feel good and the working relationship becomes so much easier. Once you understand the way an individual thinks and feels you can change your strategy to suit them and have more win–win situations. Okay, it’s not always going to work like that, but you will always have those in the bag from before to fall back on.

Experience regulation. The most frequently cited themes within this dimension were forward-tracking (“what ifs”), back-tracking (“making sense of situation”), and trying to feel emotions you think you should. Within this dimension, the use of two dichotomous strategies was reported more frequently than any others for regulating emotional experience and facilitating optimal outcomes in sport organizations. The strategy of back-tracking (i.e., reflecting back in time) allowed individuals to consider the causes of their own or another individual’s emotional expressive cues and involved an understanding of possible relationships between various emotions. Forward-tracking (i.e., attempting to anticipate the potential consequences for the future) involved acuity in perceiving the potential consequences of expressing certain emotions and involved planning what emotions or behaviors might facilitate an optimal outcome.

The use of forward-tracking or thinking about “what ifs” was perceived to be of value in allowing individuals to process their emotional experience or cognitions. The following excerpt demonstrates one national performance director’s thought processes when considering the emotions involved in national squad selection procedures. In particular, he highlights the importance of considering others’ emotional investment during his decision making and communication of selection:
While I would never pander to any kind of media pressure, I have to admit that the way I get my decisions about selection across is influenced by the way they [the media] might spin it. But of course my priority is the well-being of my players and winning games, so I have to think about how they might interpret what I say to the media too.

This suggests that while individuals may not change their thoughts (e.g., decision making in selection) due to psychosocial pressures, they may change their behavior (e.g., the way a message is communicated) in light of perceived emotions present in a situation and the potential impact of their behavior on players’ well-being and performance. Indeed, many of the participants who perceived such emotion understanding to be important also reported the value of integrating their perceptions of others’ emotional experience and contextual information to generate suitable behavioral intentions and facilitate learning. The following quotation from a senior administrator illustrates this point:

If a performer is angry with a coach, the most effective strategy might be to question why the performer is blaming their coach for a particular action and then to focus energy on getting more information from them about the issue. On the other hand, if an athlete is angry at her/himself for mistakes in an important competition, then the most effective strategy may be to focus emotional energy on correcting these mistakes and devising strategies to avoid similar situations in the future.

One strategy that was reported by 14 participants as useful was redirecting thoughts to positive things. This included reappraisal or restructuring of one’s own or another’s thoughts and/or emotions. A national coach offered the following story when two players competing for one position were physically fighting. Of particular significance is his consideration of the performers’ investments to facilitate judgment:

I was mad as hell with them for disrupting an important session, but then, by thinking about both of their situations; I think I made the right decision in the way I dealt with the matter. . . . [I] let them cool off, and the situation blew over without really having to discipline them. I could have had a rant, but what good would that have done?

Restructuring was one strategy reported by participants and was influenced by knowledge and reasoning about emotion data. One performer discussed an instance of emotional harm caused by another operator within their organization:

For some people I can imagine it would be quite upsetting, but I decided not to take that stance. . . . I sat down I weighed up the consequences of what would happen if I took one action or another . . . and just looked at it through as wide a lens as I could to see reasoning behind it all. I took a much more measured approach to it and soon realized how to deal with it.

In addition to regulating one’s own experience, participants also reported using strategies to manage others’ experience of emotions to help resolve conflict and gain positive outcomes for both personal and organizational goals, as the following quotation illustrates:

When things get a bit heated or confrontational, where possible, I try and take myself out of the situation and think about the situation and what everyone wants out of it—not just me. If you think of the potential fallout of your actions you can decide which things to change and in what order. That is what works for me most often, but you have to change it up . . . the more ways you can attack a situation, the better, I’d say.

Expression regulation. The most frequently cited themes within this dimension were self-control to avoid acting on impulse, expressing an emotion you think you should, and withholding emotions. Overall, at least one of these strategies was mentioned by 19 of the 21 participants, most of whom included the perceived benefit of using self-control to express “false” emotions (those they did not feel) to mask their true feelings or avoid acting on impulse to achieve a preferred outcome. Moreover, the expression of dishonest emotions was perceived to be an accepted and required aspect of organizational life or “part of the game” by many participants, as the following extract from an athlete suggests:

Putting a bit of a façade up is all part of the game. I think. You never get anywhere by telling your coach that you think his tactics are a load of b******. Instead, you have [to] lie at first and say that their ideas “might work” or that you could “give it a go.” you can’t just rubbish it straightaway, regardless of how you feel about the ideas. That said, it is really important to address the issues later when you can appear more considered.

The organizational context was also perceived to influence the selection, success, and appropriateness of emotion expression, as this national performance director suggests:

I think it is in the nature of any job or role in sport that you have to deal with different people and different situations differently and the more perceptive you can be to how you should deal with those situations the
The importance of learning strategies to assist this process was outlined by another performer who recalled rationalizing and waiting for more information to help control an impulse:

When somebody says something [cynical] I find that it helps if you give personal reassurance, but I’ve also learned that it is important to see two sides of a story and remain neutral until more information comes to light. . . . You learn to not bottle things up, it’s taking a professional stance. You have to counter that initial surge of emotion.

Many participants were forthcoming with examples of how they had regretted acting impulsively when they experienced intense emotions. However, participants also reported positive interpersonal outcomes when they controlled these impulses:

I could tell [athlete] wasn’t right straight away. There were tears, which made it pretty obvious. At first I felt a bit awkward as she was a lot younger than me. The first thing I wanted to do was give her a hug and say everything would be all right, but I didn’t do my usual impulsive thing. I held back until she gave something else away. I had a sense that it might have been from the discussion I saw her having with the coach. I realized then that she had been dropped. I’ve been there and it’s s***. The last thing you want right then is someone saying “it’ll be all right,” so I waited for her to say something so I could see where she was at. We ended up having a good talk and I think she felt better, but I know that wouldn’t of happened if I’d of acted on my first instinct to act when I saw her tears.

In addition to controlling an impulse to give advice or pass judgment, all but one participant reported the importance of withholding emotions. Individuals mostly reported doing this to limit the impact of expressing negative emotions; however, they also recalled using strategies to engage or maintain negative emotions as well as withholding the expression of positive emotions. The following quotation illustrates one athlete’s experience during a competition:

Both myself and my training partner got through to the final which was important but we both set our sights on winning for the prize money. Basically, we both ran a good race and I won. I was so happy afterward and obviously I started celebrating. But almost as soon as I had started, I caught a glimpse of my training partner’s face, she was gutted. I ran over and told myself I had lost and that she had won. I tried to comfort her and act as if it wasn’t that big a deal. I stopped smiling, obviously, and just played it all down. I think that helped, you know, not rubbing her face in it at the time, but also I think it brought us closer together afterward.

The following quotation provides another example of the perceived value of withholding emotions when frustrated with teammates:

It is really hard, you can’t just use the psychological skills you people teach to get over something like that, you know imagery and all that. Sometimes you have to put on a bit of a face or bite your lip so you don’t say something and try to wait until you calm down to think about it, but then other times it’s best just to get it all out there. . . . I think that the way to do that comes with a bit more experience of these situations.

Discussion

In the present study, participants operating in successful Olympic sport organizations highlighted the importance of identifying, processing, and managing emotion-related data. Such findings support previous literature on emotion abilities such as emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), while also furthering our understanding of this area by highlighting the importance of participants’ social environment for the perceived success of subsequent regulation strategies. Participants here reported distinct expectations and norms relating to emotional expression and “professional” behavior, with operators often required to decide between acting on emotional impulse and adhering to organizationally imposed social expectations. It is important to note that abiding by these social norms was perceived to be a major contributing factor to the appropriateness of regulation strategy selection. Indeed, many participants were acutely aware of the parameters in which they were expected to behave and actively learned the norms and rituals regarding emotion expression within their organization.

The expression of emotion does not occur in a vacuum; rather, people in sport organizations are connected in complex ways, where the impact of emotional expression may not always be direct but mediated through others’ perceptions of the appropriateness of emotionally expressive behaviors. Therefore, the findings suggest that sensitivity to others’ expressive cues, although largely automatic and implicit, appear to
be the building blocks for dyadic-level phenomena (e.g., empathy) and group-level emotional phenomena (e.g., emotional contagion; see Wagstaff et al., 2012). Indeed, in sport teams, the accurate perception of expressive cues of others is a window into their attributions, motivations, and intentions for behavior. This ultimately provides one with rudimentary information about whether to approach or avoid a situation, person, or issue, which must be accurately processed and comprehended to devise appropriate behavioral intentions. Finally, following this identification and processing of emotion data in transactions, sport personnel must manage their own and others’ emotions. The participants in the present study reported doing this using a range of experience regulation (e.g., forward-tracking, back-tracking, reappraisal) and expression regulation (e.g., using self-control for impulses, suppression) strategies to facilitate optimal outcomes.

The present findings advance the literature by highlighting the extent to which the emotion abilities perceived to be important for optimal interpersonal relationships have a contextualized quality. The participants in the present study perceived key emotion abilities and the sociocultural norms of one’s organization to influence emotion and behavior regulation strategy selection and subsequently intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes. Hence, according to the present findings, it appears that the successful selection and implementation of emotion regulation strategies are determined by a combination of social (i.e., the meaning and significance of one’s environment) and cognitive (i.e., the manifestation of emotion abilities) factors (see Figure 2). Such findings, although preliminary, contribute to the extant body of literature on emotion abilities and regulation in sport. Previous research in this domain has focused on athletic performance (e.g., Lane et al., 2010; Perlini & Halverson, 2006; Zizzi et al., 2003) and not the way emotion abilities help individuals navigate the myriad emotional, social, and political obstacles within their organizations (see Wagstaff et al., 2011, 2012). Hence, by building on previous POPS research, this study offers an insight into the microlevel dynamics (e.g., social politics and interpersonal relationships) of NSOs that may influence the broader macrolevel collective (e.g., team and organizational functioning).

The findings relating to the role of social norms and organizational context (e.g., culture and climate) support previous research in organizational behavior. To elaborate, participants reported using regulation strategies in order to...
adhere to these norms and be perceived to behave in an acceptable manner to achieve greater performance. This supports previous research into the concept of emotional labor in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). Morris and Feldman (1996) defined emotional labor as "the effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal interactions" (p. 987). In light of the present finding that emotional intelligence abilities influence individuals’ emotion regulation strategies, it is likely that these abilities will also influence the success of one’s emotional labor efforts. Indeed, Grandey (2000), in her discussion of emotional labor as an organizational requirement for employees to regulate their emotion in the workplace, views emotional intelligence as a key individual difference influencing the extent to which this requirement may have certain outcomes, particularly for stress and burnout.

In interpreting the data, there are considerations for practitioners and researchers regarding the potential influence of emotional abilities on emotion regulation strategy selection and appropriateness. It is possible that individual differences in emotionality and emotion regulation can influence each step of emotion data processing. Indeed, due to the social function that emotions appear to serve, manipulating these cues may affect information processing for higher functioning interpersonal relationships. It may be that strategies related to emotion identification (e.g., accurate perception) and knowledge processing (e.g., forward-tracking, back-tracking) provide the fulcrum for predicting “intelligent” regulation and a focus for interventions to develop relationships. Moreover, the findings suggest that emotion identification provides vital data for processing, and emotion knowledge appears to improve the appropriateness of strategy and action decision making in a hierarchically important manner (see Figure 3). Previous literature on emotions in sport has predicted that characteristics of one’s emotional response (e.g., reappraisal, suppression) will have intrapersonal (e.g., cognitive, motivational) and interpersonal (e.g., communication) consequences and influence the efficacy of emotion regulation strategies (Uphill et al., 2009). However, this study provides the first empirical support for these assertions in sport.

In light of the findings, support is provided for a sociocognitive (see Figure 2) conceptualization of emotion, which encapsulates individual differences (e.g., emotional ability) and social characteristics (e.g., social and organizational norms). Such a conceptualization suggests that successful emotion regulation is both a component of emotion ability (e.g., managing emotions) and a complex set of strategies aimed at specific components of emotion processes (e.g., masking one’s emotions and employing self-control). Here, emotional “intelligence” is not viewed as a mixture of individual differences and traits, but one part of an umbrella construct that also includes a range of regulatory strategies that influence the emotion process. In taking this perspective, the findings offer novel insight into the way emotion abilities are manifested in the day-to-day behaviors of sport personnel. Hence, it may be overly simplistic to reduce the entire emotion process to attribute “correct” behavior to the concept of emotional intelligence (Elfenbein, 2007), and we might focus on broader concepts of abilities and regulation, inclusive of norms and contexts.

The individual differences in emotion abilities (i.e., emotional intelligence) and their manifestation in behavior (i.e., emotion regulation strategies) suggested here provide important considerations for practice. Specifically, practitioners should not only attempt to teach individuals a range of emotion regulation strategies, but to also develop emotional intelligence (i.e., the ability to identify, understand, and manage emotions). This may allow individuals to “work through” (e.g., back-tracking, reappraise) or
consider how to “do” (e.g., forward-tracking) emotions. Moreover, enhanced abilities may also assist individuals attempting to regulate their experience and expression of emotions for optimal intra- and interpersonal outcomes. By enhancing both facets of regulation strategy, individuals may better develop a range of potential cognitive and behavioral options before implementing the most appropriate strategy in transactions. In turn, this should promote the development of life skills, resilience, stronger relationships, and greater organizational functioning. To achieve this, applied practitioners may take a microlevel (e.g., one-to-one coaching) or macrolevel (e.g., organization-wide workshop) approach to facilitate optimal organizational functioning.

A caveat of the present study is that it has not shown that emotion abilities were actually developed. Therefore, further research is required to determine whether interventions to develop emotional intelligence, teach regulation strategies, or a combination of both can impact organizational functioning. Researchers should also consider the potential impact of participant emotion abilities when employing self-report methods regarding emotions. That is, we acknowledge that participants’ emotion abilities may have influenced the information reported in the present study. However, it is hoped that the diverse sampling of individuals performing a range of roles and responsibilities across a breadth of organizational hierarchies guarded against this. Indeed, despite the variance in roles and responsibilities of the sample, it is important to note the similarity of perceptions and experiences reported by participants here. Although the day-to-day activities and relational patterns of the sample differed markedly, the emotion abilities and regulation strategies perceived to be important remained similar. Thus, it is believed that despite the descriptive, phenomenological nature of the data presented here, the findings offer a valuable insight for both practitioners and scholars in the domain of sport and performance psychology. Yet, it appears that there remains much to be understood on concepts within POPS research to illuminate the relationship between emotion, behavior, and organizational functioning.

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