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Previous research has documented the positive impact of mental skills coaching on performance. However, mental skills coaches may have varying levels of familiarity with particular coaching contexts. One unique coaching environment that may require specific contextual knowledge is the U.S. Army's Cadet Summer Training (CST) camp. In the present study, 34 coaches completed surveys regarding their Army cultural knowledge, length of time they have worked as a mental skills coach with the Army, knowledge and preparation for CST, and their training experiences. Training experiences were strongly correlated with both Army cultural knowledge and CST knowledge and preparation. Future research should examine optimal methods for increasing preparation of coaches assigned to work with individuals in unique training settings.

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Abstract

Previous research has documented the positive impact of mental skills coaching on performance. However, mental skills coaches may have varying levels of familiarity with particular coaching contexts. One unique coaching environment that may require specific contextual knowledge is the U.S. Army's Cadet Summer Training (CST) camp. In the present study, 34 coaches completed surveys regarding their Army cultural knowledge, length of time they have worked as a mental skills coach with the Army, knowledge and preparation for CST, and their training experiences. Training experiences were strongly correlated with both Army cultural knowledge and CST knowledge and preparation. Future research should examine optimal methods for increasing preparation of coaches assigned to work with individuals in unique training settings.

Keywords: military, mental skills, competence, coaching

Sport Psychology Coaches in the US Army: Experiences from Cadet Summer Training

Mental skills, such as those taught by sport psychology practitioners, can be leveraged to improve performance through optimizing responses to external events (e.g., being assigned a new task) and internal signals (e.g., thoughts and emotions). Indeed, training that emphasizes mental skills has been shown to benefit job-related behaviors and performance (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). In psychologically intense environments, teaching mental skills may be especially valuable. For example, studies have found that comprehensive mental skills training programs helped improve the surgical performance of surgeons (Anton, Bean, Hammonds, & Stefanidis, 2017; Anton et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2017) performance of elite athletes in martial arts, table tennis, and soccer (Lim, Jang, O'Sullivan, & Oh, 2018; Lim & O'Sullivan, 2016; Slimani et al., 2016).

Another high-pressure occupational context is the military. The armed forces have a long history of instilling war-fighters with the necessary technical, tactical, and physical characteristics. As part of more contemporary efforts to target the psychological aspects of performing under pressure, the armed forces also employ sport psychology practitioners to teach and coach mental skills. Mental skills coaches in the armed forces come primarily from sport psychology backgrounds, and the US Army is currently the largest employer of sport psychology practitioners (Weir, 2018, p. 50).

Two large, group-randomized trials have examined the link between mental skills training and enhanced performance in military service members (Adler et al., 2015; Jensen, Bernards, Jameson, Johnson, & Kelly, 2020). Both studies found that mental skills training led to increased use of a variety of cognitive skills, higher self-confidence, and better objective performance outcomes relative to an active control group. While these results are promising and support the effectiveness of mental skills training in the military, studies to

date have focused on the service members receiving mental skills training, and have not examined the experiences of mental skills coaches conducting the training.

Collecting feedback on the experiences of these coaches could provide further insight into the challenges of coaching mental skills within unfamiliar settings. While the core skills and techniques coached by practitioners are common across training settings, the necessary angles of approach can differ markedly based on the parameters of each training event. Fletcher and Maher (2013) described competence in sport psychology as a combination of both development (i.e., education and prior training) and context (i.e., an understanding and familiarity with the coaching environment and events). Additionally, Hays and Brown (2019) proposed a three-tiered model of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) necessary for practitioner competence, based on the previous work of Terenzini (1993). Briefly, tier one includes the foundational sport and performance psychology KSAs, which could be gained in a general academic context. Tier two covers domain-specific KSAs, such as those related to working within a particular organization. Finally, tier three encompasses contextual intelligence of the micro-culture in which a coaching session occurs, such as a specific mission within that organization (Hays, 2019; Hays & Brown, 2019; Terenzini, 1993). Sport psychology practitioners employed in military settings, while expertly trained and educated in sport psychology (tier one, foundational KSAs), are not usually military veterans. They may therefore have limited understanding of Army-specific culture, tactics, terminology and procedures (tier two, domain-specific KSAs), and might be naïve to the micro-culture within a specific military occupation or mission (tier three, contextual intelligence) to which they are assigned.

Thus, in a unique setting, contextual preparedness may influence coaching competence. In the military, training is conducted within a context of specific occupational demands, organizational structure, and team-based culture (Adler & Castro, 2013). Coaches

new to this setting may find it challenging to adapt their approach and operate effectively. The present analysis aims to explore the challenges faced by mental skills coaches during a specific military training event: Cadet Summer Training (CST). In this unique, high-pressure environment, coaches provide “in the field” instruction as opposed to teaching in a classroom, with the goal of training cadets to apply mental skills toward the completion of specific military tasks. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the relationship between training experiences of Army mental skills coaches and domain-specific knowledge and contextual intelligence.

Methods

Setting

The U.S. Army Cadet Command conducts annual CST, a rigorous program for Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets designed to strengthen leadership skills and military knowledge, build confidence and technical skills, and reinforce values desired in Army leaders (Cadet Command, Reg. 145-3, 2011). Approximately 10,000 ROTC cadets travel to Fort Knox, KY to participate in this program each year, during the months of June to August. Cadre (commissioned and non-commissioned officers who lead the program) are responsible for training cadets. Mental skills coaches (hereafter referred to as coaches) in this environment typically work alongside Cadre. CST, structured to last for 31 days, consists of two camps: basic and advanced. Rising second or third year college students attend basic camp, while rising fourth year students attend advanced camp, the most significant training event during ROTC (USACC, 2018). CST comprises a number of individual events (such as rifle marksmanship, land navigation, and obstacle courses), which are scored by Cadre. Failure during advanced camp to reach the required scores results in the inability to commission as an officer into the U.S. Army (USACC, 2018). Participants in the current

study exclusively coached the advanced camp of CST, and for brevity, the present paper refers to CST advanced camp simply as CST.

Participants

The coaches (known within the Army as Performance Experts) were Department of Defense contractors, who in the present study had either a Master's degree (88%) or Ph.D. (12%) in sport psychology or a related field. Coaches received temporary assignments from their primary job location to coach at CST. Coaches, embedded in units of approximately 160 cadets, were not allotted any classroom time to formally teach skills and concepts, but rather were required to coach skills in the field whenever the opportunity presented itself.

All participating coaches were invited to complete an anonymous paper survey at the end of their coaching assignment. Exclusion from analyses occurred if coaches did not provide consent (n = 1; 2%) or did not return a survey (n = 6; 15%), resulting in a total analytic sample of 34 coaches. Survey materials were distributed under a program evaluation approved by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research Human Subjects Protection Branch.

Curriculum

In addition to their prior sport psychology education, coaches receive training on the Army's performance psychology-based curriculum. This curriculum includes six domains: Mental Skills Foundation (Dweck, 2006; Ellis, 1994; Ellis & MacLaren, 1998; Sowa, 1992), Building Confidence (Bandura, 1997; Lazarus, 1999; Vealey, 2005; Weiner, 1985; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2010), Attention Control (Cox, 2002; Nideffer, 1976), Energy Management (Benson & Klipper, 2000; Easterbrook, 1959; Hanin, 2000; Jokela & Hanin, 1999; Lazarus, 1999; Lupien, Maheu, Tu, Fiocco, & Schramek, 2007), Goal Setting (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Locke & Latham, 1990; Tubbs, 1991), and Integrating Imagery (Cooper & Shepard, 1973; Cumming & Hall, 2002; Driskell, Copper, & Moran, 1994; Green, 1992; Martin, Mortiz, & Hall, 1999; Suinn, 1980; Vealey & Greenleaf, 2010).

Additionally, coaches are trained in the Army's Master Resilience Trainer course (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011; Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011). This course, developed to improve resiliency amongst soldiers, focuses on basic psychological skills and is taught through the lens of positive psychology. During CST, coaches were free to employ whichever of these techniques they felt were most appropriate for their cadets at the moment.

Measures

Army Knowledge (Tier Two, Domain-Specific KSAs)

Coaches reported number of years of experience working as a mental skills coach for the U.S. Army (rated from one [*less than six months*] to seven [*five years or more*]), and a self-assessment of knowledge regarding Army culture, which was rated from one (*knowledge equivalent to the average civilian*) to ten (*knowledge equivalent to the average soldier*).

CST Preparedness (Tier Three, Contextual Intelligence)

Coaches reported whether or not they had previous experience working at CST (rated from one [*never worked at CST before*] to five [*more than three times*]). Additionally, coaches responded to two items developed by the evaluation team that aimed to assess the amount of CST-specific information received prior to the commencement of CST (The purpose and structure of CST was sufficiently explained to me before training began; My role as a mental skills coach within CST was fully explained to me before training began). Responses ranged from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*).

Training Experiences

Coaches indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with four items developed by study authors to evaluate coaches' experiences at CST (listed in Table 2). Response options ranged from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*).

Additionally, surveys allowed coaches to write open-ended responses addressing challenges they experienced, advice for future coaches working at CST, and specific information that would have been helpful to know prior to the commencement of training.

Analysis

Frequencies of coach professional backgrounds were assessed and reported in Table 1. Correlations (for continuous measures) and t-tests (for binary measures) assessed associations between self-rated knowledge and preparedness measures and training experiences. For qualitative free response items, two analysts identified common themes. All statistical analyses were conducted using STATA 14.

Results

The majority of the 34 surveyed coaches had less than two years of experience working as a mental skills coach with the Army (68%), and had never coached at CST previously (62%). Coaches who had experience working at CST had only coached for one year. On a ten-point scale of knowledge regarding Army culture, most (79%) rated themselves at least six or higher. The majority of coaches agreed that the purpose and structure of CST (59%) and their roles as coaches (70%) were sufficiently explained to them before training began (Table 1).

Knowledge of Army culture (tier two, domain-specific knowledge), was positively correlated with agreeing that cadets saw the value of the coach's input (r = .38, p = .03) and that the pace of CST allowed sufficient time to coach (r = .44, p = .01).

Measures of CST preparedness (tier three, contextual intelligence) were also associated with training experiences. Coaches who had previously worked at CST were more likely to agree that cadre were supportive when they wanted to coach cadets (M = 4.54, SD = 0.52) compared to coaches with no CST experience (M = 4.05, SD = 0.74; $t(32)$ = -2.09, p = .04). Agreeing that the purpose and structure of CST had been sufficiently explained to them was positively correlated with agreeing that Cadre were supportive of their presence (r = .53,

$p < .01$). Additionally, agreeing that *their role* within CST had been full explained to them was positively correlated with both agreeing that Cadre were supportive of their presence ($r = .47$, $p = .01$), and agreeing that the pace of CST allowed sufficient time to coach cadets ($r = .40$, $p = .02$). In this sample, there were no strong associations observed between years of coaching within the Army and CST training experiences (tier two, domain-specific KSAs).

In open-ended responses, the most commonly reported challenges for coaches were Cadre not knowing who the coaches were or what their capabilities were for training (44%), and having difficulties scheduling times to coach or running out of time (44%). When asked what would be helpful advice for future coaches, the most common responses involved encouraging future coaches to build relationships with Cadre (29%) and to be as physically present with the unit as much as possible (24%). When asked what information they wished they had known at the start of CST, the most common responses included wishing they had known what the events were and how the events were scored (26%).

Discussion

This evaluation is the first to report the perspectives of Army mental skills coaches in a unique training setting. Using the three-tiered model of Hays and Brown (2019), our findings provide evidence that greater domain-specific knowledge (tier two) and contextual intelligence (tier three) are associated with positive coach experiences.

Specifically, ratings of Army cultural knowledge (tier two) were correlated with positive training experiences. This cultural knowledge is crucial because of the unique characteristics of the Army environment. Service members, through exposure to a formal chain of command structure, cultural norms, and military group-identity, develop a distinct military culture (Adler & Castro, 2013; Atuel & Castro, 2018). A better understanding of these dynamics could expand competence amongst civilian coaches by improving military-specific vocabulary and empathy for the challenges faced by military personnel, thus

enabling coaches to develop creative strategies to engage service members (Fletcher & Maher, 2013).

Higher ratings of contextual intelligence (tier three) were also associated with training experiences. Coaches who had previous CST experience were more likely to agree that Cadre were supportive when coaches wanted to coach cadets. Coaches who agreed that the purpose and structure of CST and their roles as coaches within CST were sufficiently explained to them before training began were more likely to agree that cadre were supportive of their presence. Furthermore, agreement that their role as coaches within CST had been explained to them was correlated with agreeing that the pace of CST allowed sufficient time to coach cadets. In written comments, over a quarter of coaches wrote about the importance of building rapport with Cadre. Perhaps coaches who had previously coached during CST had increased contextual intelligence in understanding the role of Cadre and could therefore build stronger relationships with them. Alternatively, Cadre who had more experienced coaches may have felt more comfortable allowing coaches time to train cadets. Encouraging coaches to meet with Cadre or other first-line supervisors prior to working with service members could help coaches feel more supported during training activities.

No strong associations were found between training experiences and years of coaching experience with the US Army. All coaches, regardless of CST experience, had previous experience working with soldiers, and should therefore had some of the domain-specific (tier two) contextual knowledge for commonly practiced events, such as rifle qualifications (typically required twice a year) and confidence courses (required for some Army training schools). However, it is worth noting that the structure of CST differs from standard military training, so contextual intelligence (tier three) is critical. The program is extremely fast-paced given the time constraints, and includes events not regularly conducted in other military units.

The present evaluation had a few limitations that warrant mention. First, coach ratings were self-reported at the end of the CST period, and may have been influenced by retrospective bias. Additionally, this analysis only examines the coach's perspectives, and does not account for the perspectives of Cadre and cadets, or cadet performance. We therefore cannot conclude from the analysis that increased tier two and three knowledge in coaches affect performance results of trainees. We also cannot make any statements regarding whether tier two or three knowledge improves the coaching quality of coaches, as we have no objective measurements of this metric.

Nevertheless, the results of this evaluation are valuable given that the Army is presently piloting the effectiveness of a coaching program based on the model used at CST. The present results reinforce the importance of contextual knowledge, particularly when embedded in a novel training environment in which service delivery is conducted more organically rather than in formal classroom settings, as is the case in other Army venues. In addition, approximately 30 mental performance coaches are currently embedded in large military units for a full year. Ensuring tier three contextual intelligence for these coaches could promote ease of training in this larger-scale context.

Our results highlight the challenges coaches face while working in a new training environment. Understanding these challenges could help future sport psychology practitioners working with military populations to prepare themselves for training. While the majority of coaches agreed that the purpose and structure of CST and their role within CST had been explained to them before training began, a substantial number did not. In the future, efforts should focus on increasing preparedness of coaches for specific environments to improve their contextual intelligence prior to commencement of training. Additionally, the effects of domain-specific KSAs and contextual intelligence should be studied in relation to performance outcomes in high-pressure occupational contexts.

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Table 1. Mental Skills Coaches Professional Backgrounds (N = 34)

		n (%)
Years of experience as a mental skills coach for the U.S Army	*Less than 1 year*	6 (18)
	Between 1-2 years	17 (50)
	Between 2-3 years	5 (15)
	Three or more years	6 (18)
Previous experience at CST[a]	*No*	21 (62)
	Previous CST Experience	13 (38)
Knowledge of Army culture[b] *M (SD)* = 6.85 (1.96)	*5 or less*	7 (21)
	6 or more	27 (79)
The purpose and structure of CST was sufficiently explained before training began	*Strongly Disagree*	1 (3)
	Disagree	4 (12)
	Neutral	9 (26)
	Agree	14 (41)
	Strongly Agree	6 (18)
My role as a mental skills coach within CST was fully explained before training began	*Strongly Disagree*	1 (3)
	Disagree	4 (12)
	Neutral	5 (15)
	Agree	14 (41)
	Strongly Agree	10 (29)

[a] CST category was divided into no experience or previous CST experience

[b]Measured using a ten-point scale with one equivalent to “as much as the average civilian” and ten equivalent to “as much as the average soldier”

CST = Cadet Summer Training

Table 2. Correlations Between Training Experience of CST by Army Cultural Knowledge, Years of Experience, Previous CST Experience, and Preparedness for CST. (N = 34)

		Tier Two Domain-Specific KSAs				Tier Three Contextual Intelligence					
Training Experiences[a]		Army culture[b]		Years of Coaching Experience within the Army[c]		Purpose of CST sufficiently explained[a]		Role within CST fully explained[a]		CST Experience[d]	
	M (SD)	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*t*(32)	*p*
Cadre were supportive of my presence	4.12 (0.88)	.31	.07	.11	.54	.53	.00	.47	.01	-1.41	.17
Cadre were supportive when I wanted to coach cadets	4.24 (0.70)	.00	.98	-.03	.89	.31	.07	.34	.05	-2.09	.04
Cadets saw the value of my input	4.26 (0.79)	.38	.03	.11	.11	.10	.57	.20	.26	0.64	.53
The pace of CST allowed me sufficient time to coach cadets	3.18 (0.90)	.44	.01	.16	.37	.31	.07	.40	.02	0.89	.38

[a]Item scored from one (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 *(Strongly Agree*)

[b]Army culture is examined continuously on a ten-point scale ranging from as much as the average to as much as the average soldier

[c] Years of experience is examined continuously with seven categories ranging from 6 months or less to five years or more

[d] CST category was divided no experience or previous CST experience

CST = Cadet Summer Training; KSA = Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes