



LJMU Research Online

Tod, D, Eubank, MR and Nesti, MS

Its good to talk...ramble on...

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/2736/>

Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Tod, D, Eubank, MR and Nesti, MS (2015) Its good to talk...ramble on... Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, 11 (1). pp. 71-78. ISSN 1745-4980

LJMU has developed **LJMU Research Online** for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

Ramble On

David

A Scottish proverb states “open confession is good for the soul.” Although I agree with these words, when it comes to peer supervision, I also like the words of novelist and satirist, Peter De Vries: “Confession is good for the soul only in the sense that a tweed coat is good for dandruff - it is a palliative rather than a remedy.” Acknowledging my consulting mistakes is a good start, but is the first step in the learning process. Given that my knowledge is finite, being open to others’ opinions and being willing to make changes is needed if I am to develop as a practitioner. When I am tempted to hide my mistakes to avoid being viewed as incompetent, ineffective, or unethical, I tell myself maybe someone will benefit: a colleague, student, trainee, athlete, or even me. With these thoughts in mind, when Paul invited me to contribute to this column, I saw it as an opportunity to detail one of my consulting mistakes and then hear the opinions of two colleagues I respect: Martin and Mark. I invited these two colleagues to contribute because they operate from different schools: Martin from the cognitive behavioural approach and Mark from an existential train of thought. In the following paragraphs I will describe a consulting situation before handing over to them.

In my first year of helping athletes I was approached by Virgil, a 19-year old male who played for a provincial rugby union team in New Zealand (I have permission to share his story, although I have changed identifying details). The team was regularly in the top tier of the national New Zealand championship. It was his first year as a provincial player and he was finding the transition to the new level somewhat overwhelming, although he had managed to win and hold his starting position. He played fly half, a position in which players need to have the full complement of physical skills, as well as being able to direct a team’s game plan and make sound tactical decisions under pressure. The fly half is sometimes described as one of the most influential positions in a team. Virgil was keen to cement his

place and had ambitions of representing his country. The reason he approached me was find out “how sport psychology could help me get better.” He had met me previously at a rugby coaching workshop and had been impressed by my delivery style. He believed that I was a knowledgeable person who could help him because I had made the classroom sessions on sport psychology enjoyable and practical.

During the first session, I followed Taylor and Schneider’s (1992) intake protocol to help me gain an understanding of Virgil and his situation. The only presenting problem that he identified was as I indicated above: he wanted to see what sport psychology could do for him. He had always excelled at rugby and with the advent of the professional game he believed it was a way he could earn a living without having to get a “dead end job.” He had done poorly at school and did not believe he had a large number of options for a “decent salary.” His family had always supported him and were keen for him to become a professional rugby player. Virgil described his family as generally supportive, although he said his father could sometimes be a bit overbearing. Aside from these details, no other red flags arose as I was going through the protocol.

I talked a bit about sport psychology, reinforcing the material I had covered in the workshop and asked Virgil if there was anything from the workshop that he thought might be useful to him. Virgil identified that goal setting would be the most helpful intervention we could focus on initially. As a neophyte practitioner I felt confident I could help Virgil with goal setting. It was something I had learned about during my education, I had developed goal setting tools and worksheets that I had used with (my limited number of) previous clients and in workshops. Goal setting was something I used for myself. My approach to goal setting was based on a top-down approach: athletes and I would start with a long term goal and then break it down into medium and short term goals. It seemed a no brainer. Virgil had identified

goal setting as something he wanted to do and I had the necessary skills and knowledge to assist him.

Virgil also mentioned that he didn't really know a great deal about goal setting. I spent time talking to him about goal setting. I explained the different type of goals (e.g., process, performance, and outcome), the value of writing goals down, and the various goal setting principles, such as making them realistic, measureable, specific, and time-limited. Virgil seemed quite receptive to the information I was delivering and he asked a few questions about how goal setting could be applied to rugby. We finished the session by agreeing that Virgil would spend time during the week developing goals and he would bring them back to the next session.

When Virgil returned for the next session, he mentioned that he had not set any goals because he had not felt confident he could do it properly. When I inquired as to what he meant, he mentioned that he had been unsure if he could set the right goals he needed for his sport and he was unable to determine what would be realistic goals. I realized at that point I had made a mistake. My interpretation was I had spent too much time explaining what goal setting was about and not enough on actually doing goal setting. I will now turn it over to Mark and Martin for their opinions.

Martin

How did I go about this task? Well firstly, David gave his account to me 'cold'. There was no priming here (i.e., "I've written it like this so you can say this"; it was simply a case of "read this and let me know what you think"). As I read David's description of the consulting situation with Virgil, I firstly found myself looking for bits of information about the client that might give me an 'in' into what, in David's view, went wrong, followed by some thoughts about what David did in term of intervention and whether I would have done the same, both then (as a neophyte) and now.

I began with thoughts about what I was learning about the client based on what David had presented. So what had I learned, and I wonder whether you picked out the same things as me as you read? Whether you did or not, it does stress the importance of those first encounters we have with clients and the difficult, often ‘muddy and murky’ challenge associated with trying to get a sense of who they are and what they are about. The other big question for me here was whether what I was picking out in the ‘now’ would have been the same in *my* ‘first year of helping athletes’? Probably not was my answer, given how much you learn about your knowledge base and yourself as you practice over time, and how that shapes what you do and how you do it. At a deeper level, getting it wrong is good if it then helps you to get it a little more right, but never perfect, next time!

Initially, I got these sense that Virgil had some fairly clear and strong aspirations and motivations, being “keen to cement his place” and “having ambitions of representing his country”. It struck me that this was in some way influenced by his belief that he had “always excelled at rugby but done poorly at school”. While any self-determining mastery, autonomy and relatedness could be lived out by succeeding as a professional Rugby player, at the same time I felt this placed high importance and value on the associated extrinsic reward (“decent salary”) this would yield. Furthermore, it seemed to me that this was representative of the beginnings of an important identity formation (i.e. I think I can excel at Rugby, and so do my parents, and I think this is my route, and possibly the only one, to living a “professional life” and avoiding a “dead end”). I began to get curious about what it would mean if he didn’t make it?

In addition, David’s account alluded to a ‘critical moment’ brought about by Virgil’s within-career transition into the provincial player level. The fact he was finding this “overwhelming” resonated with me, and found myself wanting to know much more about what he meant by this. In my experience, a transition always involves anxiety, due to its

cognitive association with perceived threat brought about by important yet uncertain circumstances, where difficulties in coping with change can yield unwelcome behavioural outcomes. In Virgil's case, any sense that this might be associated with a threat to his athletic identity, given that he seemed relatively uni-dimensional in his outlook would, for me, be an important factor to consider.

So what about what David did? According to his account, Virgil approached him to find out "how sport psychology could help him get better", that Virgil thought "goal setting would be the most helpful intervention" and that "as a neophyte practitioner I (David) felt confident I could help Virgil with goal setting". With my neophyte hat on, I can certainly see how goal setting would have been a tempting choice; the client has identified it, the practitioner has the knowledge base; it can be made to be relevant and impactful and it's concrete and practical etc...I could go on, and would I have done the same at that stage of my applied career...probably!

With an older hat on, I'm thinking that Virgil is an open book, so why would the opening chapter be goal setting? How does he know that "goal setting would be the most helpful intervention we could focus on initially"...in fact, does he know? Actually David has answered that question for us..."he didn't really know a great deal about goal setting", so perhaps neither actually knew for sure what the most appropriate start point was. I think I'd have just talked some more to be honest and not delved into the tool-bag quite so quickly, if at all! As neophytes we are keen to help and impress, motivating by the desire to 'make a difference', seeing an opportunity to 'connect' what we know to what the client appears to want. This means that it's often easy to see a 'goodness of fit', and we jump in with both feet. While that desire is important, it should be tempered with a sense of stepping back and take stock of whether we are, in reality, starting in the right place.

When Virgil returned for the next session and claimed he hadn't set any goals because he was unconfident and unsure about what he was being asked to do, I did, in part, share David's impression. Perhaps he'd done a little too much telling at the expense of doing, so the client wasn't able to practice what he'd preached. While there's a small learning curve here for us all, I kept coming back to the notion that there was a much bigger curve, namely that David hadn't quite yet got to the point where he or the client knew exactly what the specific client needs and subsequent goal of their work together actually was. If (and I say if) goals setting was to be of use, then what was the target of the client's goal setting? In a cognitive behavioural approach, where the goal might be to understand Virgil's salient cognitions and associated feelings to assess their impact on his behaviour as an athlete, and then to create alternative ways of thinking etc, this would be difficult to do without knowing what his salient cognitions and associated behaviours actually were! For example, if Virgil's cognitive appraisal indicated that the demands associated with his transition exceeded his ability to deal with them, resulting in being overwhelmed (whatever that means?), perhaps goal setting, and a more positive expectancy to attain the goals he set would assist with reappraisal such that he felt more able to be in control of his emotions and so on. That said, I'm speculating. At this point in the consultation I'm not sure that I'd have known enough about the client's cognitions to go down a PST route, and would be struggling to justify the purpose for goal setting, other than Virgil's desire to try it? While I'm on my CB platform, it's also an opportune moment to dispel the myth that CB approaches have to involve some form of Mental Skills Training intervention. I see this frequently in young practitioners, where they justify their perfectly legitimate use of PST on the basis that they're adopting a CB approach, almost as if they feel they have to. Sure, MST has most comparability with the CB approach, but the two are not joined at the hip. Some of the best (and worst) CB sessions I've done have been conspicuous in the absence of PST technique based intervention.

Behaviour change through client empowered, awareness driven and autonomy laden 'dialogue' and all that works just as well...they don't always need a technical tool to play with!

Looking back over my opinion about 'what went wrong', the key messages for me centre around the importance of i) the learned skill of taking your time with case formulation to justify the approach taken, and ii) the learned ability of looking more broadly and deeply at the client's 'presentation' and seeing beyond and underneath what appears obvious on the surface.

Mark

When David asked me to contribute something about my failures in my applied sport psychology work I thought he was testing my academic knowledge! The literature and theory that guide my approach is based on the idea that when you sit down with an athlete or coach to help them become better at what they do, the entire process will be shot through with lots of failures and successes, many small, some more significant. So while I was delighted to be asked to give my views, I fired back a brief note to David, the gist of which was that I had never failed and still awaited my first complete success! You may be wondering why I am making so much of this point at the start of my response. Well, quite simply, because I believe that the art of dialogue between the sport psychologist and client is always an unfinished business. And just like a piece of art (or scientific research), even the most sublime work is flawed and can be improved, and yet it possesses great strength and even beauty. So there we have it! I think we should view ourselves as artists who apply science to human persons (rather than inanimate material). Or as existential psychology might express it, our task is to help the only being on the planet that possesses some measure of free will. And free will, or agency as philosophers sometimes call it, means at the very least, that human beings are impossible to totally second guess. They are on a never ending journey, one that

ultimately they will never be able to fully comprehend. This means they must be approached with great care by those hoping to understand their lives to help them in some way.

Doing applied sport psychology practice guided by this type of perspective is not primarily about using an assessment process to assist in the identification of techniques that the individual athlete may or may not use. Rather, the main task is to ask often difficult, challenging, even anxiety producing questions (yes, existential psychology has argued for over 150 years that normal anxiety is a good sign...see Nesti, 2004) to help the client understand themselves more fully. Given this way of working it is highly unlikely that the session would proceed so quickly to an exclusive focus on goal setting (David, maybe I'm assuming too much here). If I may be even more provocative David, (and I hope you will still continue to say good morning to me as I pass your door on the way to my office) it does sound that you were tempted by the desire to be practical and offer something tangible, whether it was wanted or needed. This way of proceeding was written about in John Corlett's (1996) magnificent paper in the Sport Psychologist almost 20 years ago. In this work he argues that sport psychologist's often seem to behave as the Sophists did in ancient Greece, and offer technical solutions to non-technical problems because they seem so reasonable, rational and useful. And indeed, sometimes they are! But very often what is needed is dialogue; hard hitting on occasion, but always respectful of the person sitting opposite. And Corlett, as a non-sport psychology professor (a very important point), echo's the ideas of some of the greatest minds that ever lived, Aristotle, Socrates, Aquinas, and in more recent times, the existential, humanistic and personalist psychologists, in claiming that developing self-knowledge (and not just self-awareness) is the key to excellence in any performance domain. Of course this is not a very fashionable course of action because it is usually a hard, slow process, and one that should never really end. The practical way this will be carried out depends on many factors such as age, level, gender and culture. And of course techniques like

goal setting, visualisation and positive self-talk may all have a part to play. But without attention to a person's core, their deepest self and the values, ideals, aspirations and dreams they possess, techniques are likely to miss their target, or at best only work in the short term. It is for these reasons that my session with David's client would have been almost completely devoted to using dialogue to help the athlete clarify their sense of identity. We need to know who we are at this moment in time to allow us to see the way ahead; this might involve learning mental skills techniques, refining those already acquired, or neither of these options. I would suggest that actually, doing nothing in this case, which really means taking on that much talked about but often avoided task of looking deep and hard at what you really want and who you are, might have turned out to have been the most useful (and I do mean this very practical word) option for David's client during this critical moment (Nesti and Littlewood, 2012).

Having said all of this David, I too, especially in my early years, have tried to save the world and lead everyone to the top, and have also been guilty of prescribing what I thought was wanted before finding out what was needed. We do this for many reasons but surely the best, most compassionate and ethical is because we want to help a fellow human being who's having a tough time to find some happier times. And in our business as *sport* psychologists this means helping someone, through the application of psychological knowledge, to perform better but not at the expense of their humanity. A tough ask? Yes, but this is surely what it means to have a vocation (rather than career!) and to be a professional; ethics and excellence in action.

David

I smiled and nodded as I read Martin and Mark's responses. They raised excellent points that have helped me view Virgil's case in new ways. I was interested in the common themes they discussed. The parallels remind me that as I learn more about the different

approaches to helping people, the more similarities I see across them. Sometimes the differences among the schools reflect issues of emphasis rather than points of disagreement. Perhaps this is unsurprising; the different approaches are maps of the same territory – the territory being the business of helping people achieve happiness, meaning, relief of anxiety, peace, love, etc. Maps, however, are not the territory; they are representations of the landscape and are accurate to greater or lesser degrees. When I say inaccurate, sometimes an approach is inaccurate, not because it is internally incoherent, but because it does not fit the situation or the client’s needs. I think both Martin and Mark have captured that thought when they suggest that more information was needed before goal setting could be deemed a suitable intervention in Virgil’s case. I needed more information before being sure that my map of the territory was accurate for the consulting landscape I was navigating.

For me, another telling comment I wrote above was that “goal setting was something I used for myself,” indicating I was operating at some level as a lay helper – a person who gives advice based on my own experience, rather than from an informed appreciation of the client (Ronnestad and Skovholt, 2003). I do not wish to imply that lay helpers do not assist others; they do – friends, lovers, family, teachers, coaches, hairdressers, etc. regularly provide us with emotional and psychological assistance, sometimes in our darkest moments. I think what psychologists bring is a theoretically, evidence-based, and (with an increasing client history) experientially informed understanding of the helping process as it applies to the client’s situation and context. Also, we may not have the difficulties of having to manage an existing close personal bond (as many people have found when trying to counsel their partners).

If I were to sit down with Virgil now, I would take more time to get to know him and his story before launching into an intervention (well actually, getting to know Virgil, or least giving him space to talk is an intervention). Both Martin and Mark highlight that neophyte

practitioners are many times anxious to prove their competence and justify their involvement with clients by showing that they have the skills and interventions to make a difference and that reflects how I handled Virgil's case. As Mark astutely observes, I was going to help Virgil whether he needed it or not. Not just because he desired my assistance, but also because at some level, I needed to help him for my own peace of mind.

Part of this more relaxed approach reflects a greater ability, on my part, to recognise red flags. Martin observes that he began to get curious about what it would mean if Virgil didn't make it. Similarly, I would want to know why Virgil did not think he had many options other than rugby to make a living and what he meant by his father being a bit overbearing. When working with Virgil, reflecting that I was inexperienced, I had many voices in my head: mine, the client's, past clients', my supervisor's, respected teachers', colleagues', and my boss' to name a few. I was coaching myself through the process and trying to remember what other people had said to me about applied sport psychology. It was like The Simpsons family were having an argument in my head. It's a wonder I heard Virgil's voice at all. As I demonstrated to myself that I could help clients, the voices quietened and I have been able to focus more on client's stories and recognise issues that may need pursuing.

Since Virgil, when using goal setting I have typically focused on collaborating and working with clients to help them gain benefits from the method, rather than lecturing them. I also have a clearer understanding why I use the method. As one example, not long after Virgil, I read Frankl's (1959) *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he records his experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp and explains his approach to psychotherapy or Logotherapy. A key principle is the need to find purpose and meaning in life. Many times when using goal setting (or other interventions), I have helped athletes explore the reasons why playing sport is important to them. What is its meaning or purpose for them? Clients

have reported that clarifying meaning has helped them make decisions about what long-term goals to set and increase the attention they give to short term goal setting.

As I reflect further on the relationship Virgil and I shared, I wonder why he returned and continued to see me. I had not really offered much tangible assistance, yet Virgil came back and we continued to see each other for many months. He was motivated sufficiently to keep searching for ways sport psychology could help him, but there were other practitioners in the area he could have seen. Mark and Martin will be able to offer some insights based on their experiences, but I think one reason was that through the workshop and our first consulting session, enough trust had been developed that Virgil thought that a second session was a worthwhile investment of his time. To me the consulting relationship is a central component of service delivery. Without a collaborative relationship based on trust, respect, role clarification, and a personal bond, I have found service delivery to be difficult, generally unrewarding, and short. With a solid relationship, sometimes clients are a bit more forgiving. But I will get off my soapbox and hand it over to Mark and Martin.

Martin and Mark

On being presented with David's initial account, we both wrote our responses to it 'blind', and then proceeded to nod, smile, and thoroughly enjoy reading what each of us had said...very refreshing and good for the soul (to echo part of David's opening line!) One of the things that really struck us hard was that although our theoretical framework (and how we had expressed points as a consequence) was different, so many of our underlying points were similar. In essence, different theory, yet shared fundamentals...well mostly! David picks this up nicely in his response, where our different theoretical approaches represent maps of the same territory, but with particular features of the terrain being drawn with different degrees of emphasis and scale.

Having both ‘drooled’ (as many of our students have, on our instruction, done since) and nodded and smiled over Corlett’s ‘visionary’ paper in the mid-90’s, we had then sat, on a wet November 2014 Saturday afternoon in our respective homes at our respective CB and existential laptops, both independently screaming for the neophyte to take his time, to attend to and understand the person that was Virgil and to engage the necessary dialogue. ‘Doing nothing more’ would have been everything at that point. Our respective maps both led us to the same conclusion that engaging the client in goal setting (and so quickly) was a product of David’s own neophyte desire to be practical and tangible in his immediate offering. A neophyte super-hero, rushing in to change the world, just like in the fictional movie. In the non-fictional real world, we both advocated a less fashionable and more patient approach to help Virgil *and* David to look deep and hard together.

In his second account, David echoes this well in his expressed need for a better territorial map to allow him to navigate the consulting landscape with more care and attention to detail. In addition, he also highlights some important features of the landscape that are not always seen on the surface yet are important to effective navigation. The search for purpose and meaning in our clients (to which David refers) can only be done well if we have a ‘strong’ consulting relationship. For the practitioner, this is linked to the development of the important personal qualities of trust, empathy, authenticity and integrity (see Chandler, Eubank Nesti & Cable 2014). These qualities are also integral to ensuring that, as David puts it, we do hear the client’s voice above everyone else’s, including our own. This is testament to David, as they probably represent some ‘other reasons’ why Virgil wanted to keep searching with him. Sport, and its protagonists, do represent a challenging minefield, and there is value in taking our time and engaging in a thorough search to help us to tread carefully and avoid stepping in the wrong place. We hope this ‘chat’ helps you to do the same.

And finally, at the risk of opening up another line of discussion, we feel it is worth mentioning that where we start from theoretically will inevitably shape what we see and how we see it. In relation to this, David identifies that the lay helper can sometimes be a great source of support for the client, especially if they are an empathetic and skilled listener. They often start from their own life experiences rather than from ideas contained in a specific psychological approach. As professionals, that is, as individuals' who possess particular skills, knowledge, and personal qualities, we must always be more than just good communicators. Our role is to engage in dialogue, one that is shaped by the client's story, but which must also be guided by theory and research. What we choose to help frame our work is therefore of the utmost importance. And, to be most effective it should be actively chosen by us rather than being merely accepted because it is the currently dominant orthodoxy. David emphasises this existentially significant point in his reflections. Having an approach counts, but what matters just as much is that it is one you are personally committed to, and therefore paradoxically, one you are prepared to adjust, apply flexibly and even abandon for another way if necessary. This is not failure. Instead, we should see failure to mean applying an approach that *we* may be comfortable with, but which does little for our clients. We could go even further and say that the sport psychologist who is fully comfortable with their approach has forgotten (or ignored) the main skill they acquired as a University graduate – critical thinking!

References

- Chandler, C., Eubank, M., & Nesti, M. (2014). Personal qualities of effective sport psychologists: A sports physician perspective. *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*, *61*, 28-38. doi: 10.2478/pcssr-2014-0003
- Corlett, J. (1996). Sophistry, Socrates, and sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, *10*, 84-94.
- Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Nesti, M. (2004). *Existential psychology and sport: Theory and application*. London: Routledge.
- Nesti & Littlewood (2012)**
- Rønnestad, M. H., & Skovholt, T. M. (2003). The journey of the counselor and therapist: Research findings and perspectives on professional development. *Journal of Career Development*, *30*, 5-44.