

**The Gravitational Pull of Identity:  
Professional Growth in Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychologists**

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### Abstract

Theories based in symbolic interactionism and narrative psychology can help us understand practitioner identity. Drawing on theories from these approaches, our purpose in this article is to distil research on sport psychologist growth, argue professional identity is a central goal in practitioner development, and offer applied implications. Professional growth includes movement from the self as an expert, who solves clients' problems, to the self as a facilitator, who works alongside clients. Practitioners strive towards being authentic and along the way, develop self-awareness, learn to manage anxiety, and choose their preferred ways of working. A key feature of being authentic is an articulated professional identity. Practitioners can shape their professional identities by interacting with helpful people, consuming various genres of literature, and engaging in different types of writing.

**Keywords:** Psychologist Development; Professional Identity; Applied Sport Psychology; Counsellor Development.

## **The Gravitational Pull of Identity:**

### **Professional Growth in Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychologists**

Professional growth is wonderful to observe. Trainees who step tentatively into their initial client interactions, carrying anxiety and self-doubt, become confident and self-aware practitioners. Trainees are like painters who only have primary colours on their palettes and have not yet grasped fully the artistic power at their fingertips. With experience, they learn to create new colours to add depth and nuance to their interactions with clients. The trainee consumed with the desire to lead the way and solve clients' problems with their special knowledge, becomes the practitioner who steps sideways and walks alongside clients helping them manage their problem situations and tap their unused potential. Yes, professional growth is wonderful to observe.

It is also wonderful to contribute to trainees' growth. Educators, supervisors, and professional organizations provide training pathways and vocational qualifications to succour trainee growth and prepare practitioners for rewarding careers. To buttress these pathways and qualifications, researchers hope to discover knowledge to inform supervisors', educators', and professional bodies' attempts to optimize trainee growth. Our purpose in this article is to distil the major findings from the research, argue that articulating professional identity is a central goal in trainee growth, and offer strategies to help individuals mature into seasoned consultants. In discussing professional identity, we draw on work grounded in symbolic interactionism and narrative psychology (e.g., Bruner, 2004; Côté, 2016; Stets and Burke, 2009).

### **Existing Research on Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychologist Growth**

#### ***The Attributes of Effective Practitioners***

The phrase *Do, You, Know*, sums up researchers' attempts to ascertain the attributes of effective practitioners (Chandler et al., 2016; Tod et al., 2019). The word *Do* reveals that

effective practitioners help clients attain change in their lives. Change can involve new ways of behaving, feeling, thinking, or any combination of the three. The word *Do* also includes practitioners' abilities to create consulting environments and build working alliances, allowing clients opportunities to find solutions to their problem situations and ways to exploit their unused resources.

*You* highlights that practitioners' personal characteristics (e.g. integrity, self-awareness, flexibility, and courage) influence client interactions. To help manage the influence that practitioners' personal attributes have on client interactions, consultants benefit from self-awareness and an articulated identity (Tod et al., 2017). As we discuss below, a practitioner's identity is that individual's self-description, built from the interactions between the person and the environment, particularly the social context (Bruner, 2004; Côté, 2016; Stets and Burke, 2009). To illustrate, sport and exercise psychologists unaware of their own attitudes and beliefs may act in ways complicit with sexist, ageist, racist, homophobic, or other oppressive stereotypes present in society. Self-aware practitioners are able to manage their attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, practices, and personal characteristics for the client's benefit.

*Know* refers to the psychological, sport-specific, and contextual knowledge needed to assist clients. Information about how to help clients, however, is just part of a broader knowledge base needed to sustain a career. Practitioners, for example, benefit from knowing how to thrive in the marketplace (Tod et al., 2007). When examining the attributes of effective practitioners, investigators have conducted descriptive research to date, and limited data justifies inferring causal relationships. Nevertheless, the best evidence describes effective practitioners by what they do, who they are, and what they know.

### ***Factors Involved in Professional Growth***

Investigators have documented typical ways neophyte practitioners change with experience (e.g., McEwan et al., 2019). Trainees, for example, initially adopt expert problem-solving personas. They act in rigid ways trying to fit clients' issues to the interventions they (consultants) use. With experience, practitioners realise that clients are experts in their own lives, and often do not need or want education in managing their problem situations. Consultants start collaborating with athletes, start acting as facilitators rather than problem solvers, and start helping clients adapt new and existing strategies to suit their specific needs (Tod et al., 2011). Factors contributing to the shift from *acting on* the client to *acting with* the client include decreased anxiety, increased confidence, enhanced self-awareness, the individuation process, and improved authenticity.

***Decreased anxiety and increased confidence.*** Often, trainees experience anxiety and self-doubt, and are distracted by their thoughts and feelings when first helping clients (McEwan et al., 2019). They realise they have limited knowledge and evidence to demonstrate competence. Trainees fuel their anxieties with their desire to show themselves, clients, and supervisors they are capable of helping people. Neophyte practitioners may be anxious because they assume responsibility for client outcomes, a consequence of adopting the expert problem-solving façade (Tod et al., 2011). Trainees may be nervous because they fear letting their supervisors down. Students aspire to prove their competence and gain their supervisors' approval. Supervisees may view supervisors as gatekeepers with the power to prevent trainees from completing their qualifications. As individuals help athletes successfully, receive positive feedback from clients and supervisors, and broaden their understanding of their role as practitioners, they realise they are competent and begin to have high self-efficacy. Unless managed well, low self-efficacy and high anxiety can stifle practitioners' budding careers (Tod et al., 2011).

***Self-awareness.*** Combined with increased self-efficacy, self-awareness deepens. Trainees learn about themselves and their influence on service delivery (McEwan et al., 2019). Greater self-awareness affords practitioners opportunities to manage themselves, to avoid letting their own issues hinder client progress. Reflective practice is a central mechanism for building self-understanding (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013). Similar to tuning a guitar, self-reflection helps practitioners attune themselves so they can harmonize with clients and the context. Like rhythm guitarists, trainees learn to provide the rhythmic pulse and harmony so athletes can sing their songs with clarity and power. Trainees also learn the music is all, and they are one part of an ensemble of musicians supporting the singer.

***Individuation and authenticity.*** Alongside enhanced self-efficacy and self-understanding, practitioners experience individuation (Tod et al., 2011). Individuation occurs when practitioners select service delivery behaviours, theoretical orientations, and helping styles compatible with their personalities, their philosophies, their work settings, and their clients (McEwan et al., 2019). Movement along the individuation pathway involves consultants working out a fit between themselves and their cultures and contexts (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013). Practitioners may decide to focus on specific clients or settings. They may also configure their knowledge, skills, and characteristics to fit their current or desired work settings. People and environments change, and individuation is dynamic and ongoing as practitioners seek professional satisfaction and meaning. As practitioners make choices about their preferred work practices and settings, and arm themselves with the skills and knowledge that lets them fit within specific domains, they operate in authentic ways, congruent with their practice philosophies (Chandler et al., 2016; McEwan et al., 2019).

If authentic service delivery reflects a dynamic fit between consultants and their work settings, the term *professional development* may not describe practitioner growth accurately. Development may imply a journey towards an idealised universal goal: the masterful

consultant who operates in a specific way. The term development may imply all roads lead to Rome. Rome, however, is not the only desirable place. Some people visit Rome, but others want to see Paris, London, or New York (and even Glasgow, Chester, and Tremeirchion). No single type of masterful practitioner exists. Effective service delivery occurs when consultants have the knowledge, skills, and characteristics needed for the niches they occupy.

*Professional evolution* may be a more suitable label. Evolution does not imply a single path or endpoint. Instead, evolution focuses on the fit between practitioners and their current professional niches. Individuals ensure sustainable careers when they acquire behaviours and practices that match the demands of the environments they currently, or hope, to inhabit. Entrepreneurial consultants may create niches to suit their skills. Practitioners wishing to work in the performing arts, for example, benefit from learning the language and cultures associated with musicians, dancers, actors, etc. Evolution is dynamic and ongoing because people and environments continually change. The existing practitioner-setting fit may become obsolete, rendering consultants less effective or able to sustain their careers.

***Professional Identity.*** Practitioners' self-awareness lets them secure a fit between their attributes and their clients. Self-knowledge allows people to form their professional identities and manage their growth in desired directions. Professional identity represents practitioners' understanding of themselves as sport, exercise, and performance psychologists. Burke and Stets (2009, p.3) wrote "an identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person." People describe themselves as sport and exercise psychologists, for example, when they assist clients with their mental health or performance (role), when they join sport psychology professional bodies (group membership), or when they declare adhering to ethical principles underpinning

practice (personal characteristics). An identity is a cognitive structure helping people to interact with their environments, because they are aware of their tangible and intangible resources (Côté, 2016). A clear identity, for example, helps sport psychologists decide how to act in specific situations. To illustrate, practitioners who are aware of their values (personal characteristics), who adhere to the ethical codes of their professional bodies (group membership), and who clarify the legal boundaries of their jobs (roles) are well equipped to respond to ethical dilemmas.

Like the emperor in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, however, our identity threads are non-existent. We have no objective identity. Yet, we are sorely tempted to believe an identity exists, because it provides guidance to our actions and meaning to our lives (Bruner, 2004). As postmodern and poststructuralist thought has taken root, researchers, theorists, and philosophers have recognised that identity is a social construction, as illustrated in Jerome Bruner's words (2004, p. 4):

There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future. Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what's happened, and why we're doing what we're doing.

Perhaps more adroitly, Daniel Dennett (2013, p. 339) wrote "it is not so much that we, using our brains, spin our yarns, as that our brains, using yarns, spin us."

Identity is a story we construct to describe our view of our self. Once documented the story is static, but we are dynamic. We are an accumulation of ongoing dynamic biopsychosocial processes, constantly changing. These changes occur both within and outside of our conscious awareness. The identity story we tell ourselves is akin to a still



frame or a freeze frame taken from the movie that is our existence. Any description is a representation and will be accurate in some ways and inaccurate in others.

Practitioners have the responsibility and the freedom to construct their identities, although there are constraints on their ability to live their self-story. Consultants can also construct multiple stories reflecting different identities. They have numerous experiences and interactions on which to build their identities. When telling our stories, we do not integrate everything we have experienced or thought. Instead, out of a large array of interactions and experiences, we usually select those that present a positive persona to others and ourselves. We weave these episodes to form plots that provide us with meaning and help us fit within our environments. Being people with agency, we can select experiences, plots, and meanings to describe ourselves in protective, flattering, or challenging ways.

Although practitioners have the freedom to construct their identities, it is not an unrestricted liberty. The cultures surrounding people influence the stories they tell about themselves (Burke & Stets, 2009). These cultures provide scripts or narrative resources that shape people's self-understanding and their interpretations of their experiences, out of which their identities are constructed (Brunner, 2004). For example, competitive high performance or professional sport is a results driven industry, often with a short term focus and a highly masculine culture (Eubank et al., 2017). Sport psychologists whose identities are based on being consultants dedicated to the long-term development of athletes' health, wellbeing, and happiness, and who ignore the need to demonstrate they are adding value to the organization's attempts to achieve immediate performance goals, may experience discomfort and a lack of congruence when submerged within those contexts. To re-establish congruence and reduce internal strife, these individuals may need to adjust their self-story, cease involvement in high performance sport, or find ways to influence the cultures in which they work.

### **Strategies for Authoring Professional Identities**

The three *Rs* list basic skills taught in schools: *reading*, *writing*, and *arithmetic*. The phrase also describes three sources of information that drive professional growth and can help individuals shape their identity-story: *reading*, *writing*, and *relationships*. To misquote the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 13.13), “these three things remain: reading, writing, and relationships. But the greatest of these is relationships.”

#### **The Value of Relationships**

*Relationships* speak to the benefits practitioners accrue from networking. People influence professional growth and practitioner identity more than impersonal sources of information (Kanazawa & Iwakabe, 2016; McEwan et al., 2019). Clients, supervisors, peers, and colleagues teach trainees and practitioners about service delivery more than research and theory. The interactions practitioners rate most highly include actual or simulated service delivery, such as helping athletes, supervision, role-plays, and personal therapy.

Networking benefits practitioners if they reflect on the relationships they share with clients, supervisors, peers, and others. With reflection consultants gain awareness of themselves in relation to others, such as how they build, strain, and repair relationships. Reflecting with supervisors is an ideal way for practitioners to examine their professional relationships (and personal ones if relevant). During supervision, for example, trainees can explore any parallel processes. Parallel processes describe how practitioners may (a) re-enact in supervision the interaction patterns that occur in service delivery, but with them in the client’s role, or (b) transfer interaction patterns from supervision to service delivery, but adopt the supervisor’s role (Tracey et al., 2012).

#### **The Benefits of Reading**

Just as empty watering cans cannot water plants, practitioners with empty heads cannot help clients. Reading fills people’s heads with information they can use to assist their

professional growth and help athletes. Relevant literature includes fiction and nonfiction. Theoretical writings aid practitioners in articulating professional philosophies. Research succours them in selecting interventions for clients. Case studies offer insights to guide athlete interactions. Creative nonfiction allows practitioners entry into other people's worlds, allowing a safe space and lens into the unknown. Nonfiction literature from both within and outside of sport psychology helps practitioners learn about service delivery and identity the type of practitioners they wish to become.

Fiction can also contribute to practitioners' professional growth and their identity-story, especially literary works (Duffy & Guiffreda, 2014; Graham & Pehrsson, 2008). Literary fiction exploring mental health illustrates the lives of people with psychological challenges. Fiction that includes psychologist-client relationships examines topics such as ethics, social power, and human reactions in service delivery. Readers also discover new perspectives on ways to help clients. Although counselling research reveals fiction assists practitioner growth (Graham & Pehrsson, 2008), investigators have yet to parallel the work in sport psychology. Research could explore, for example, the existential threats related to professional growth lurking within Dr Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham*. The written word is not the only text that practitioners can read. Consultants can read and study audio and visual mediums in the same ways as written texts (Lafferty, 2013, 2017).

### **The Gains from Writing**

Writing contributes to learning if it helps people engage in cognitive and meta-cognitive self-regulation (Klein et al., 2019). Practitioners, for example, could keep a journal to record their experiences and ideas they gain from colleagues and reading. They can also use the journal to reflect on and organise their ideas about service delivery or to build philosophies of practice. In the journal, consultants can practice developing lines of arguments to enhance their critical thinking. Writing can be a physical way to reflect and

learn. For example, practitioners might record ideas on post it notes and then arrange the pieces of paper to help build their understanding of a topic. Writing can assist practitioners in exploring or testing different identities and deciding on those that seem to resonate with their core beliefs and values.

Writing well or logically is difficult. Steven Pinker (2015) remarks: “writing is an unnatural act . . . and must be laboriously acquired” (p. 26). There are, fortunately, ample resources to assist people and many ways to develop writing skill. Most strategies echo Stephen King’s (2000) recommendation to read and write a great deal. King’s recommendation reflects deliberate practice research (Ericsson & Pool, 2016): the more we write and focus on improving weaknesses, the better we get.

Practitioners can experience relationships, reading, and writing directly, but observational learning also contributes to professional evolution and identity development. Individuals, for example, can learn about the types of consultants they wish to be by watching other practitioners or trainees in role-plays or actual service delivery, and then reflecting on what they observe.

### **Conclusion**

A body’s centre of gravity is an imaginary point where total weight is located for mathematical convenience. Although abstract, physicists and biomechanists calculate centre of gravity because it helps when designing objects or predicting their behaviour. Similarly, our identity is our narrative centre of gravity that focuses our understanding of who we are and our place in the world (Dennett, 2013). Our narrative gravity pulls together our description of the groups we belong to, our personal attributes, and the roles we fill in our communities. Similar to an object’s physical centre of gravity, our narrative counterpart helps us predict or manage our behaviour and author the meaning of our life’s story. Our narrative identity provides us with the cognitive resources to answer the question that our

clients ask when we first meet them, and that the music group, The Who, posed to us in 1978:

*Who are you?*

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