Professional Development for Sport Psychology Practice

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Abstract

Applied sport psychology practice and research date back to the late 19th century. During this period investigators have largely examined the interventions practitioners employ to help athletes. More recently, researchers have begun addressing the person employing those interventions, including identifying their attributes and how they develop expertise, in recognition that practitioners are central to effective practice. Research focused on practitioners can inform educational and registration pathways, helping trainees to develop the knowledge, skills, and characteristics needed to meet their clients' needs. In this article major lines of inquiry in this area are reviewed. It is suggested that examining practitioner identity represents novel research that has educational and applied value.

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Since the 1890's, researchers have examined the psychological principles involved in sport, and individuals have applied interventions to enhance athletes' performance [1]. Research has largely focused on the psychological principles and interventions practitioners employ, and much less on understanding the consultant [2]. Nevertheless, as sport psychology journals and professional organisations started forming in the 1960s, individuals discussed practitioner professional development [3]. Articles have often been opinion pieces focused on questions such as who could practice or call themselves a sport psychologist, as individuals from various disciplines fought battles over the sport psychology territory [4-8]. Perhaps stimulated by these debates, professionals have examined practitioners and developed consultant training programmes, although they vary in their applied focus [9]. The purposes of the current article are to overview practitioner development knowledge and suggest future research.

Existing Research

One professional development-related research thread has focused on effective practitioner qualities [10-17]. Various stakeholders (e.g., coaches, athletes, sports doctors, and consultants) have reported helpful consultants to have the psychological, sport-specific, and contextual knowledge needed to assist clients. The knowledge needed to help clients, however, is just one aspect of a broader knowledge base needed to sustain a career. For example, practitioners have indicated that they would have benefited from learning about how to operate within the marketplace [9, 18, 19]. Participants have also indicated effective practitioners have well-developed interpersonal skills, such as being likeable, open, trustworthy, and empathetic. Highly rated sport psychologists are also able to help clients use practical and concrete interventions in meaningful ways and adopt client-centred approaches. Implementing client-driven approaches rests on consultants being flexible and having

command of various approaches that allow them to adapt to clients, rather than foisting a one-size-fits-all model on athletes [20]. Further, there is evidence that service delivery is influenced by a practitioner's character [12, 15]. Although not discussed as frequently as knowledge and skills, consultants' psychosocial characteristics (e.g., integrity, self-awareness, flexibility, and courage) influence their client interactions. To illustrate, consultants unaware of their own attitudes and beliefs may consciously or unconsciously act in ways complicit with sexist, racist, homophobic, or other oppressive stereotypes present in their work settings. The research has been descriptive and offers little evidence that these characteristics have a causal relationship with service delivery outcomes. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that effective practitioners can be defined by what they know, what they can do, and who they are as individuals.

In recent years, investigators have examined the ways practitioners change with experience and the learning activities perceived to facilitate growth [21-24]. When first helping clients, for example, neophyte practitioners typically assume an expert problem-solving perspective and behave in rigid ways, trying to adapt clients' issues to fit the interventions they (consultants) have at their disposal. Inexperienced consultants' service delivery practices often result from their desires to prove to themselves and others that they are competent and can help clients change and enhance performance. With experience, practitioners may start collaborating with athletes, acting as facilitators rather than problem solvers, and adapting interventions to suit clients' specific needs [24, 25].

New consultants' inabilities to adapt interventions to clients' needs reflect various reasons, such as rigid understandings regarding suitable and unsuitable service delivery behaviour, and a lack of knowledge. Trainees are also often distracted by their own cognitive activity: in addition to listening to clients, they are normally trying to coach themselves through sessions and recalling professional elders' advice. High levels of cognitive activity

may reflect trainees' anxieties about their competence. Beginning practitioners are aware they have limited knowledge and skills [26]. With successful client experience, anxiety levels reduce as practitioners realize they can help clients [24, 25, 27].

The development of collaborative service delivery perspectives is typically associated with an increased and deeper understanding of the working relationship in service delivery, a decreased sense of self as the change agent, and greater appreciation for the ways practitioners and clients influence service delivery [28]. Consultants may attempt to develop their interpersonal skills and realign the balance of service delivery power to allow clients more control over relationships [29]. They may also reflect on ways their own needs and issues may enhance or hinder service delivery [30].

The recognition of the role of the self in service delivery reflects an individuation process in which practitioners develop service delivery practices, theoretical orientations, and styles compatible with their personalities and worldviews [24, 29, 31, 32]. Individuation involves experimentation and negotiating a fit between the practitioner and the environment. Practitioners may attempt to: (a) manage their environments, such as focusing on specific types of clients; (b) develop their knowledge, skills, and characteristics to fit their current or desired work settings; or (c) both. Given that people and environments change, individuation reflects a dynamic ongoing process as practitioners strive to achieve professional satisfaction and meaning.

Early in their careers, trainees are interested in learning how to deal with specific cases and in developing themselves to handle the issues and challenges they will experience [26]. The experiences that drive these changes include engagement in actual or simulated service delivery, discussing client interactions with supervisors and colleagues, and engaging in personal therapy [21, 22, 33, 34]. Although inexperienced practitioners find theory and research helpful sources of knowledge, the professional literature dealing with service

delivery processes is typically deemed to provide more assistance than the latest research on theoretical frameworks or intervention studies [23]. Their preference is due to their need to actually understand the patterns, "richness," and "authenticity" of "doing" sport psychology practice as applied to real-world complex problems [35], rather than being subjected to the inevitable positive outcome of yet another intervention study that worked.

Trainees tend to accept information from external sources uncritically and imitate respected mentors. Seasoned practitioners are better able to critique knowledge from external sources and select aspects they believe will assist their client interactions [24]. Non-sport psychology-related experiences also contribute to professional development. For example, unpleasant events, such as a divorce or bereavement, may help practitioners empathize with clients. In addition, input from professionals from other branches of work (e.g. medicine and corporate business) are useful for development of sport psychology consultants [21].

Reflective practice and supervision are two key processes underlying development [36, 37]. Although practitioners and trainees highly value these activities, they have only received scholarly attention relatively recently. There is some evidence that it is typically trainees and neophyte practitioners who engage in formal supervision and reflective practice, and then only when required by professional bodies [36, 38]. The reality, however, may not be as bleak as such evidence implies. Reflective accounts reveal that experienced practitioners participate in informal peer supervision and reflective practice [39], but are seldom required to document their engagement. Much of the work in this area is descriptive or qualitative, providing insights that can help individuals and educators enhance professional development [40]. There is little evidence, however, that these processes lead to more effective service delivery, and this represents an area of future research.

Future Research

Individuation is a central theme in professional development. Practitioners with clear and articulated personal and professional identities will likely be able to make choices leading to optimal individuation. Practitioner identity, however, has received negligible attention in sport psychology literature, but has the potential to fruitfully drive research and education. Burke and Stets [41, p. 3] define identity as "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 might identify themselves as sport psychologists, for example, when employed to deliver psychological services in sporting organisations (role), when members of professional organisations, such as the Fiji Association of Sport Psychology (group membership), or they value the ethical principles underpinning safe and humane practice (personal characteristics). Côté [42] asserts that an articulated identity is a cognitive structure that helps people interact with their environment, because they are then aware of the tangible and intangible resources at their command. In the realm of applied sport psychology, a clear identity can assist in decision making. To illustrate, practitioners who have (a) clarified their values (personal characteristics), (b) made themselves aware of the ethical codes of the professional bodies to which they belong (group membership), and (c) clarified the legal and other boundaries of the roles they are occupying may be well-equipped to respond to ethical dilemmas and reach decisions that balance competing stakeholder interests.

Just as consultants will benefit from knowing their identity-related resources, they will profit from understanding their limitations. For example, practitioners realising they are zealots for one particular theoretical orientation may also recognise that they might not have the flexibility to adapt their style to best meet clients' needs. Paraphrasing Kaplan's [43] *law of the instrument*, zealots without self-awareness are like children who pound everything, because they only have hammers at their disposal. It would be useful to be aware that,

though we only have hammers, not every athlete needs a pounding. Knowing who we are *not* is as helpful as knowing who we are. For example, understanding our limitations helps inform decisions regarding when, and to who, clients may need to be referred for suitable assistance and underpins ethical practice.

Given that sport psychologist identity is under-examined, qualitative research may help establish a definitional and descriptive understanding of the topic. Life histories, for example, may reveal how practitioners describe themselves and their perceived roles. Life histories could also shed light on the events, people, and experiences that shape practitioner identity, along with insights into the processes that underlie individuation. Along a related line, given that identity represents a series of related and dynamic stories that people tell about themselves, narrative analyses can reveal the simultaneous shaping that occurs between practitioners and their environments. First, such studies will reveal the dominant social narratives to which practitioners are exposed in sporting and sport psychology-related contexts, along with how and why they have been influenced by these scripts. Second, narrative analyses can uncover the ways practitioners use their identity-related stories to assist their attempts to select, manage, and adapt to their environments. Once qualitative research has allowed a rich understanding to emerge, then investigators could use quantitative tools to examine questions, such as the prevalence of various identity-related dimensions and their correlations with service delivery processes and outcomes. If identity is correlated with service delivery-related measures, then experimental designs could be employed to assess optimal ways to help individuals develop articulated and adaptive identities.

Conclusion

Despite applied sport psychology practice being traceable back to the late 19th century, scholarly attention on the person delivering services has a relatively young history. Consultants are central to effective practice, and research focused on them can contribute to

helping these people develop the knowledge, skills, and characteristics needed to meet their clients' needs. This article has overviewed major lines of inquiry in the area and has suggested that examining practitioner identity represents a novel line of inquiry that may have applied value.

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