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Training and professional development in applied sport psychology

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In the last 40 years, the demand for applied sport psychology has increased as coaches, athletes, and exercise participants have sought help with performance and other issues, and as practitioners have marketed their services. Concurrent with the increased demand, researchers have conducted investigations to examine whether applied sport psychology can help athletes and exercisers with their issues. The lion’s share of researchers’ attention has been towards evaluating practitioners’ typical interventions (e.g., goal setting, self-talk). A much smaller number of studies have focused on effective practitioners’ characteristics. There are even fewer investigations examining optimal ways to train practitioners.

Some professionals believe training to become an applied sport psychologist involves more than learning the typical interventions used in the profession, because psychological service delivery is intimately tethered to practitioners and their client relationships (Tod & Andersen, 2005), a feature recognized in other applied psychology disciplines (Sexton & Whiston, 1994). Findings from research on applied sport psychologist training and development have strong parallels with results from mainstream psychology investigations (Tod, Andersen, & Marchant, 2009), providing evidence that parent literature can help guide educators’ and supervisors’ attempts to mentor trainees. One purpose of this chapter is to explain typical trends in applied sport psychologist development and training. Another purpose is to suggest ways that educators, supervisors, trainees, and practitioners may benefit from practitioner maturation knowledge. Given the parallels between the sport and mainstream psychologist development literature, this knowledge may also help practitioners from other disciplines wishing to reconfigure their skills to work with exercise participants and athletes (e.g., counselors, psychologists).

**Trends in applied sport psychologist development**

When trainees first begin working with clients, they typically adopt problem-solving perspectives, in which they attempt to provide solutions to athletes’ issues (Tod et al., 2009). Associated with a problem-solving approach, trainees also behave in rigid ways and try to adapt clients’ issues to fit the interventions they (trainees) have at their disposal. For example,
trainees may apply goal setting in ways they have been taught by respected mentors without much consideration for clients’ specific needs. Trainees’ service delivery practices often result from their desire to justify their involvement with clients (Andersen, 2000a). With experience, practitioners may start collaborating more with clients, acting as facilitators rather than problem solvers, and adapt interventions to suit athletes’ specific needs (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). For example, rather than tell an athlete she should write her goals on paper, a practitioner may help the individual create a pictorial montage because the client believes that approach will be more helpful for her motivation to train regularly.

Trainees may have difficulty adapting interventions to clients’ needs because they can be distracted during service delivery by their own cognitive activity (Tod et al., 2009). In addition to listening to athletes’ stories, beginning practitioners are normally trying to coach themselves through sessions, and attempting to recall advice from supervisors, educators, and their readings. One trainee in the Tod et al. study (not reported in the published article), for example, described that he didn’t just have the voice of Homer Simpson in his head, referring to his own self-dialogue, but it felt like he had to contend with the voices of the entire Simpson family (e.g., Marge, Lisa, Bart, Grampa, Santa’s Little Helper, Snowball II). As practitioners develop a sense of competence, the level of internal Simpson family domestic chaos reduces and trainees report that they are better able to listen to clients.

Beginning consultants’ high levels of cognitive activity may reflect their anxieties and self-doubts about their service delivery competence (Tod et al., 2009). Although excited about helping people, neophyte practitioners are acutely aware they have limited knowledge and skills. They may also be fearful that they will be stripped naked professionally in front of clients and supervisors and be exposed as frauds. With client experience, anxiety intensity is likely to be reduced as practitioners come to realize they can help athletes. Also, they might reinterpret their anxieties as a sign that they care about helping clients and want to improve their service delivery. Mature practitioners, however, are not immune from service delivery anxiety, and may experience self-doubts when working in novel situations and with client groups with whom they have not previously interacted (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

The change from directive advice-giving and problem-solving approaches to more collaborative and facilitative perspectives is usually associated with an increased recognition of the role of relationships in service delivery, a decreased sense of self as a change agent, and greater appreciation for the ways individuals’ needs and personalities influence service delivery (Tod et al., 2009). Trainees often develop their interpersonal skills and attempt to realign the balance of service delivery power to allow clients more control over relationships (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Trainees may also reflect on ways they can draw on their issues and needs to inform their client-interactions or ensure their “stuff” does not hinder service delivery. For example, a neophyte consultant may draw on his experiences of locker room homophobia to help understand gay male athletes’ difficulties functioning in threatening and inimical environments.

The recognition of the role of the self in service delivery reflects the individuation process in which practitioners develop service delivery styles that mirror their personalities and the theoretical orientations resonating with their worldviews (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). For example, individuals who like to adopt a philosophical and rational approach to problems and believe that the cognitive model readily explains much human functioning may base their service delivery on cognitive therapy principles (Beck, 1995). Individuation often involves experimentation, and over time practitioners may try on for size the mantles of various schools of thought as they search for the one(s) that fits comfortably.
Given that initially trainees have limited internal cognitive and behavioral maps to guide service delivery, it is understandable they will seek information from external sources (Tod et al., 2009). The principle of specificity from exercise physiology might help make sense of the types of information trainees’ value. The specificity principle suggests that athletes benefit more from modes of training closely resembling their sports than those methods placing different demands on their bodies. Trainee applied sport psychologists value most sources of information providing models or knowledge about how to work with clients (Tod, Marchant, & Andersen, 2007). One such source includes taking part in or observing actual or simulated (e.g., role plays) service delivery. A second source involves discussing service delivery with a supervisor or other colleagues. Although trainees (and practitioners) do find theory and research useful sources of knowledge, the professional literature dealing with the service delivery processes is typically deemed more helpful than the latest research on interventions (Tod et al., 2009). Examples include books and articles dealing with how to interact with clients or use interventions, and those that include examples of service delivery in action (e.g., Andersen, 2000b). With increasing amounts of client interaction, neophyte practitioners’ reliance on external knowledge sources decreases, and they are able to draw on their accumulated experiences.

Optimizing professional growth

Applied sport psychologists begin their careers sticking closely to recipes of action dictated to them by their mentors. As individuals accumulate service delivery experience, they are able to explore different ways of operating and develop consulting styles reflecting their personalities and theoretical orientations. One challenge for educators, supervisors, and practitioners is to find ways to facilitate professional development, such as helping trainees manage and learn from their anxieties. Some professional development issues, however, probably receive insufficient attention from professionals in the discipline. For example, a substantial proportion of qualified sport psychology practitioners do not seem to have regular or frequent supervision (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). Also, the supervised work experience hours students undertake in many places may be considered minimal compared with those from other applied psychology disciplines (see Williams & Scherzer, 2003).

Supervised experience

Given that research indicates client interactions and supervision are the most potent influences on professional development (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), it is understandable many educators argue that formal supervised experience is one pillar of effective training programs. Through supervised experience trainees have opportunities to explore their craft and develop their skills, in a safe (one would hope) environment under the guidance of a caring supervisor. Through supervised experience, beginning practitioners can learn to cope with the messiness of real-world service delivery and deal with the ethical, interpersonal, logistical, and other issues that crop up when operating in helping professions (e.g., Andersen, 1994). Supervision can also help practitioners from other fields of psychology receive assistance from an experienced applied sport psychologist when they expand their work to athletes.

Just as some writers believe the working alliance is one (if not the central) cornerstone of psychotherapy and applied sport psychology (Tod & Andersen, 2005), some researchers have suggested that the supervisory working alliance is a (or the) foundation of effective
supervision (Ladany & Inman, 2008). In addition to providing one of the most cogent descriptions of supervisory working alliances, Bordin’s (1983) approach may also guide supervisors and supervisees as they embark on what can be, at times, a turbulent, yet rewarding, relationship. For Bordin, supervisory working alliances refer to relationships in which participants collaborate to achieve the desired objectives of supervision and consist of: (a) mutually agreed goals, (b) shared understandings of the tasks each party will undertake, and (c) interpersonal bonds between partners.

Bordin (1983) included eight broad goals in his model that may help supervisors and supervisees identify specific aims relevant to their particular needs and situations. Bordin’s goals included helping supervisees to: (a) master specific skills, (b) enlarge their understanding of clients’ concerns, (c) increase their awareness of service delivery process issues, (d) expand their self-knowledge about how they influence client interactions and outcomes, (e) deal with personal obstacles hindering development, and (f) deepen their appreciation of theory. Two additional goals Bordin mentioned were using supervision as a stimulus for research, and the maintenance of service delivery standards.

The achievement of supervision goals, according to Bordin (1983), is influenced greatly by the negotiated tasks and the interpersonal bonds among the parties. Examples of tasks he proposed as being typically associated with supervisees include preparing and presenting service delivery reports for discussion. Examples of tasks within the supervisor’s realm include providing feedback, suggesting alternative conceptualizations, and directing supervisees’ attention to relevant phenomena such as their feelings during service delivery. One characteristic of effective supervisors is their ability to tailor tasks to suit supervisees’ developmental needs and to negotiate specific goals. The strength of the interpersonal bond is in the degree to which the parties involved care for, like, respect, and trust each other. One particular issue influencing interpersonal bonds specifically, and supervisory alliances generally, is the evaluative component of supervision. Supervisors are gatekeepers tasked with the responsibility of protecting the public and profession. Given the intimate role that practitioners’ personal factors play in service delivery, for both qualified and trainee professionals, supervisors’ feedback may be approached (and received) with trepidation. The development of a strong interpersonal bond will help buttress potentially sensitive feedback.

Supervision relationships provide a structure within which parties can deal with issues and problems that arise in service delivery. Supervision can quickly become a messy interpersonal minefield because trainees and supervisors bring their strengths, frailties, desires, and needs, of which they may or may not be aware, to the relationship. Reading suitable literature may be a useful way to help people prepare for supervision, and be able to recognize and deal with problems and issues. For example, Andersen (1994) briefly addressed ethical issues in supervision and provided case examples that readers can discuss with colleagues.

Supervision contracts are another vehicle by which the potential messiness of supervision can be addressed (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993). The degree of formality and structure of contracts has probably varied across supervisors in applied sport psychology. The trend, however, toward accountability in higher education and the workplace may lead to contractual processes becoming more explicit and documented. In the absence of accountability and legal pressures, a number of additional benefits may be accrued when individuals consider their rights and obligations in supervision. Issues that may hinder supervision can be acknowledged before they arise and possible solutions discussed. A contract may provide a basis for decision making and a way to resolve conflicts if either party feels aggrieved.

According to Rønnestad and Skovholt (1993) there are four areas to consider when establishing supervision contracts: (a) students’ developmental needs; (b) supervisors’ competencies;
(c) goals, methods, and focus; and (d) the opportunities provided by the work setting. In many situations, such as when supervisees work in the same organizations as supervisors, addressing each of the areas may be relatively straightforward. There are indications, however, that some applied sport psychology supervisors may not have much service delivery experience, may not have training in how to foster students’ development, and may not work in the same organization as supervisees (Tod et al., 2007). In less than ideal situations, contracts may be needed to clarify people’s rights and obligations because opportunities for conflict and unhappiness may be greater than when supervisors are active practitioners, have training and experience in mentoring others, and operate in the same workplaces as supervisees.

Consideration of students’ developmental needs will inform goal setting (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993). There are various theories through which to view and address supervisees’ developmental needs, and supervisors may change their approaches as supervision progresses. Van Raalte and Andersen (2000), for example, suggested beginning trainees may find behavioral models helpful because the focus is on skill development and supervisors give direct advice. Phenomenological and psychodynamic approaches may be suitable for advanced students. Based on these models, supervisors create environments conducive to supervisee growth and encourage trainees to examine how their needs and histories influence service delivery relationships and outcomes (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). A brief discussion about the models supervisors adopt may help trainees understand why their mentors act and react in particular ways during supervision. More broadly, student practitioners will likely benefit from experiencing multiple supervisors (although not for the same client at the same time). Receiving supervision from a range of practitioners will expose trainees to different perspectives and modes of service delivery. Supervision from a variety of people may help trainees develop flexibility in their client interactions.

Given that some sport psychology supervisors may have limited service delivery experience, have little supervision training, and work away from the locations where trainees are gaining experience, reflecting on their competencies may help them identify ways to ensure goals are achieved. In some cases, it may be prudent for individuals to turn down requests for supervision. In other instances, after beginning supervision relationships, supervisors may realize they are not able to help trainees with issues that have arisen in service delivery. The ethical response is to refer trainees to other supervisors.

Educators and practitioners who seek supervision training may find that the quality of their supervisory working alliances improves, and their trainees are better prepared for their careers. Metasupervision is one way that individuals may develop their abilities to mentor others, and refers to when individuals receive supervision for their supervision of others. Metasupervision was a feature of Barney, Andersen, and Riggs’ (1996) supervision training model in which beginning students were supervised by advanced trainees, who in turn were overseen by faculty. It is doubtful, however, that metasupervision procedures are included in many training programs.

Although Rønnestad and Skovholt (1993) acknowledged the value trainees may find in clear supervision goals, they recommended the need to consider goal specificity and permanence. Specificity refers to the balance between making goals general enough to be meaningful and specific enough to be measurable. Permanence refers to striking a balance between rigid adherence to outdated targets and changing goals too frequently. There is a great deal of theory and literature on goal setting (see Chapter 51) to help guide supervisors in setting supervision goals. As with many interventions, with experience supervisors will learn how to tailor and negotiate supervision goals to meet trainees’ needs.
Supervision methods may be conceptualized at different levels, and Rønnestad and Skovholt (1993) specifically discussed the need to be explicit about procedures (e.g., written reports), interventions, (e.g., modeling), and more pervasive issues (e.g., the use of the supervisory relationship as the vehicle of change). Another level not mentioned by Rønnestad and Skovholt, but which may assist supervision if established at the contractual stage, includes practical and organizational components, such as payment, supervisor availability, legal constraints, grievance procedures, and referral processes (see Andersen, Van Raalte, & Harris, 2000, for an example of how some of these issues can be negotiated).

Another area, focus, refers to the objects, people, and events of primary attention in supervision (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993). The main areas of focus in supervision include clients, trainees, and therapeutic relationships. The areas of focus in supervision may vary according to factors such as supervisors’ theoretical orientations and trainees’ developmental needs. Detailing the areas of focus may help avoid misunderstanding and frustration. For example, a misunderstanding may arise if supervisors focus on the supervisory working alliance, as a parallel process for the therapeutic alliance, when trainees expect the primary attention to be given to their mastery of specific interventions.

One of Bordin’s (1983) supervision goals was helping trainees overcome personal obstacles to learning, and this goal may blur the boundaries between supervision and personal counseling. Supervision is the suitable place where trainees can examine how personal issues influence service delivery processes and outcomes, such as how their past experiences with drugs may cause them to react if athletes admit to steroid use. The roots and treatment of trainees’ personal issues, however, are best addressed in personal therapy and not supervision. More broadly, authors have advocated the value of applied sport psychologists undertaking personal counseling (Petitpas, Gikes, & Danish, 1999).

**Undertaking counseling for personal issues**

Research provides evidence that practitioners derive personal and service delivery benefits from receiving counseling (Tod et al., 2009). One benefit, for example, is an increase in self-awareness, in addition to resolving personal issues. Increased awareness allows practitioners to be cognizant of their reactions and behaviors, and explore how they might influence service delivery. The opportunity to sit in the client’s chair helps practitioners gain insights into how athletes might experience service delivery. Undertaking personal psychotherapy may also help trainees develop confidence and manage their anxieties because observing a practitioner in action may help them to develop a cognitive map of service delivery.

**Reflective practice**

Reflective practice is one central pillar to optimal professional growth (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), because the cognitive processing of experience may stimulate changes in the ways practitioners understand their craft and behave. Although self-reflection can help practitioners develop new service delivery insights and practices, they can find it uncomfortable because they may need to admit to limitations and mistakes. Also, practitioners’ blind spots and finite worldviews may limit the benefits gained from reflective practice. Self-reflection can be improved with guidance and support (Johns, 1994). Individuals can obtain guidance by following a reflective framework. Johns’ model, for example, consists of a series of questions that help practitioners describe, reflect on, and learn from their experiences. Further guidance can be sought from the writings of other sport psychology professionals.
who have discussed reflective practice. For example, Anderson, Knowles, and Gilbourne (2004) discussed techniques and methods to enhance self-reflection, such as journaling. Also, practitioners might find value in comparing their own service delivery experiences with the published accounts of others (e.g., Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007).

Reflective practice need not be a solitary experience, and additional guidance and support can be obtained by including others in the process (Anderson et al., 2004). For example, practitioners can establish ongoing relationships with peers in which they discuss service delivery experiences together. Shared reflection underpins effective supervision. Supervisors may also draw on the reflective practice literature to consider their own supervisory practices and help trainees engage in self-investigation. Also, applied sport psychologists can learn a great deal about the human condition and service delivery from reflecting on a range of experiences, not only athlete interactions (Tod et al., 2007). For example, practitioners who reflect on traumatic events they have experienced (e.g., divorce) may find that their levels of tolerance, empathy, and acceptance for difficult clients increase (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Developing strong professional networks

Sport and mainstream psychologists report that interactions with colleagues contribute to professional development (Tod et al., 2007). Learning how colleagues operate and exposing one’s practice to peer review may lead to improved service delivery or reassure individuals they are already acting ethically, safely, and effectively. Professional networks might include clinical and counseling psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, pastoral care providers, sport and exercise scientists, coaches, marriage and family therapists, horse whisperers, career guidance and substance abuse counselors, sport administrators, sports medicine specialists, and physical therapists. Interacting with a wide range of professionals may provide practitioners with alternative perspectives on service delivery and greater insights into the various issues with which athletes grapple. Having a wide range of contacts also helps ensure practitioners will be able to find suitable professionals for referral and supervision purposes. Psychologists and counselors have also reported that supervising others leads to professional growth because it stimulates self-reflection on one’s knowledge and skills (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Through helping trainees, for example, experienced practitioners might uncover blind spots about how they influence athlete interactions. Networking might be achieved by attending and presenting at professional organizations’ conferences and meetings. Establishing informal but regular contact with groups of peers, or individuals, are other ways to network. Collegial interaction is not limited to face-to-face meetings, and practitioners can make use of various other communication modes including email, discussion boards, and blogs.

Conclusion

The conditioning of many athletes is based on systematic training plans and regular feedback and instruction from coaches and other experts to help individuals achieve their targeted goals. Perhaps sport training provides a metaphor for effective applied sport psychologist training: competence results from the use of specific goals, expert feedback, and guided practice. The content presented in the current chapter may help trainees and practitioners strive toward specific goals and seek the feedback and guided practice that will allow them to develop their service delivery skills to better meet their clients’ needs. See Box 3.1 for a summary of practical suggestions.
Box 3.1

Practical suggestions for sport psychologists’ training and development

- Develop patience regarding professional development, realizing it takes many years to master the service delivery process.
- Accept that anxiety is a typical experience when first engaging in service delivery and when working in novel situations.
- Avoid being negatively self-critical, but accept your level of self-development.
- Remember nearly everybody experiences similar emotions and developmental themes.
- Engage in self-reflection and find ways to make it an interpersonal experience.
- Draw on reflective practice models to facilitate the process.
- Keep good case notes to aid in self-reflection and supervision.
- Receive regular supervision from a range of individuals (but not for the same client at the same time).
- Establish a clear and explicit contract at the start of supervision.
- Develop conflict resolution and management skills to help deal with difficult situations in service delivery and supervision.
- Engage in supervision training, and when suitable be open to supervising others.
- Read professional literature to stay up-to-date about what works in service delivery.
- Engage in self-analysis through personal therapy.
- Develop relationships with professionals from a range of disciplines.
- Join and become involved in professional organizations.

References


