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Industry Challenges Facing Sport Psychology

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Introduction

Sport psychology is a rather new professional field that is experiencing “growing pains”. In this article I will attempt to share with you the challenges currently facing the field and where possible offer my thoughts on how to deal with current problems. I will begin by describing what I think is an “identity problem” in the field of sport psychology, that is, “who are we, what do we do, and how do we do it”? Secondly I will discuss the enormous challenge of adequately training the next generation of sport psychologists. This will be followed by my thoughts on research in sport psychology as well as the matter of consulting in sport psychology.

Creating an Understanding of, and a Demand for Expertise in Sport Psychology

A major problem in the field of sport psychology is that few people understand what sport psychology is, and what sport psychologists do. For a large segment of the population the term “psychology” connotes issues related to mental health or psychopathology, and this perception is difficult to overcome. However, as a lifelong educator, I believe one solution to this problem lies in the power of education, but the process of education has to be improved on several fronts. We must be clear on who can provide the education as well as whom we are to educate, what the knowledge base should be, and finally how to deliver the message.

The Who

The question of who has the competencies to teach concepts of sport psychology is an important issue that I will also address later in this paper (training the next generation of sport psychologists), however, Maher (2005) and his colleagues argue (and I agree) that well trained educators with knowledge of sport, child development, and basic psychology can adequately educate the currently underserved school age population about concepts that will improve their sport performance, teach character, and hopefully improve their quality of life. When “clinical”

issues arise, educators should recognize that referral to a clinician is in order.

To date sport psychology professionals in general have not targeted the school age population, although writers such as Orlick (2000) and Hogg (1997) have argued on behalf of this population. Recently Maher (2005) edited a book entitled “*School sport psychology: Perspectives, programs, and procedures*” that encourages school personnel, particularly school counselors to teach children about sport psychology (Table 1).

Table 1. Populations served by sport psychologists

Population	Description
School age population	Students starting with junior high school ages
Athletes	Recreational athletes, competitive recreational athletes, athletes with disabilities, youth sport participants, college/university sport participants, club sport participants.
Coaches	Those who work with youth, high school club, college or university athletes.
Olympic and professional athletes	Elite athletes.
Others	Parents of athletes, sport administrators, officials including referees and umpires, as well as professionals associated with the performing arts.

What should be included in the sport psychology curriculum is somewhat dependent upon baseline knowledge of the target population, however the following concepts should be considered:

- Explaining that sport psychology is a unique discipline of sport science and psychology, and
- Pointing out where sport psychology intervention falls along the continuum of psychology (Figure 1).

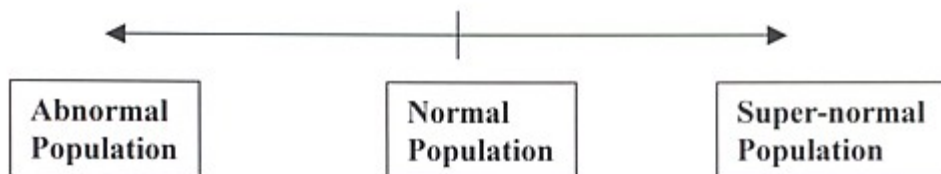


Figure 1. Dimensions of Sport Psychology Services

Most sport psychologists work in the normal to super-normal part of the continuum. The consumer should ultimately understand that sport psychologists help athletes, coaches, and teams with some of the following:

- Assessing/profiling strengths and weaknesses
- Performance anxiety
- Coping with pressure
- Career transition issues
- Coach-athlete communication
- Self-confidence/efficacy
- Time management
- Coping with injury
- Team building
- Initiating and maintaining exercise behaviors
- Teaching mental skills such as goal setting, self-talk, imagery, concentration, and emotional control

The How

The how of education is in dire need of creative efforts because our current approaches have not been entirely successful. Courses and degree offerings in universities generally do a good job, but this serves a fairly small part of the population - college students and many of these are post graduates. Professional associations such as AAASP, ISSP, APA (division 47) generally target their education efforts to their membership. Searching for “sport psychology” on the web may result in topics being returned which contain inaccurate information. An informed consumer can discriminate between accurate and inaccurate information, whereas novices may not be able to make these discriminations.

Publications targeted for coaches, in general, fail to adequately inform the membership about sport psychology. The media will sometimes feature the work of sport psychologists but this is generally limited to major events such as the Olympic games, world championships, and world cup events. Over the years, I have used the media to help educate the public about sport psychology, but this is a perilous path to walk. Where confidentiality is important the media will often want to exploit confidentiality, other times they sensationalize sport psychology and other times they will belittle sport psychologists as “shrinks” and continue to stigmatize psychological training as weakness in mental health of athletes.

I have been involved in several television productions that attempted to promote sport psychology, however it is difficult to assess how effective they were. The first one was a production of PBS (2000) entitled, “Exploring your Brain: The Brain-Body Connection” with a section devoted to sport. The second was a program describing the breadth of sport psychology produced by Global Television in Canada as part of a series on “Body and Health (2005). More of these types of video productions would go a long way towards educating the public about sport psychology. We must always be mindful that the information we provide to the public is empirically and ecologically valid, accurate, up to date and easy to understand. Further, if we are teaching for excellence we must always model excellence or “walk the talk”.

The Training of the Next Generation of Sport Psychologists

I believe professional training of the next generation of sport psychologists is one of our biggest challenges. One challenge stems from the fact that sport psychology is truly an interdisciplinary field that requires collaboration between psychology, education, and sport science. University departments have a long history of turf protection rather than collaboration and professional organizations tend to be discipline specific. This is unfortunate because sport psychology requires not only specialized knowledge in a number of areas but also supervised internship experiences as well as a strong understanding of the ethics involved in working as a sport psychologist.

Another factor that has impacted the world of sport and performance psychology is the recent explosion of the “executive/personal coaching” industry. One coaching organization, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) is the largest not-for-profit professional association worldwide with more than 9,500 members in 70 countries. For more information, go to: www.coachfederation.org/ICF/ . This organization makes the claim that “professional coaches provide an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives. Coaches help people improve their performances and enhance the quality of their lives.” The federation also claims that coaches are trained to listen, develop performance enhancement strategies and support for the client. This sounds remarkably similar to what consulting sport psychologists do - does it not?

The reality is that even though some coaching organizations have a certification arm, the field of “personal coaching” attracts a broad spectrum of individuals - some with little formal education to experienced clinical psychologists that are tired of the bureaucracy of “managed health care” and desire a new type of client. This, of course, provides competition for a great number of sport psychologists because many of these personal coaches believe they have expertise in the world of sport.

In addition to the growth of “executive/personal coaches”, as competition for training in sport psychology, a new branch of psychology called “positive psychology” is beginning to take hold in North America (see for example, www.sas.upenn.edu/CGS/graduate/mapp). Martin Seligman past president of APA and noted psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania along with Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, spearheaded the positive psychology movement in the late 1990’s. The goal of positive psychology is to study the positive aspects of human experience rather than pathology and examine human strengths and resilience that lead to an improved quality of life

and ideally to the prevention of disease. Positive human strengths include virtues such as hope, wisdom, creativity, courage, spirituality, responsibility, perseverance, laughter, and mental toughness. Again, this incorporates a great deal of what sport psychologists have been doing for years.

So performance enhancement professionals of today receive training that is very different from the first generation of sport psychologist who were active in academic circles in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Sport psychologists that were active in promoting sport psychology during the 1960's, 70's, and 80's were primarily academics trained in physical education/sport science teaching and researching and writing at the University level. In North America this included the likes of Jack Cratty, Bob Singer, Dorothy Harris, Rick Alderman, Murray Smith, Rainer Martins, and Bill Morgan. Clinically trained psychologists such as Bruce Ogilvie, Bob Nideffer, Ron Smith, and Joe Massimo also became involved in promoting the field of sport psychology. Following (shortly after) included the likes of Jean Williams, Tara Scanlan, Diane Gill, Bert Carron, Frank Smoll, Terry Orlick, John Salmela, Wayne Halliwell, Cal Botterill, Bob Rotella, John Silva, Ken Ravizza, Penny McCullagh, Dan Gould, and Bob Weinberg. In the 1980's many more clinically trained psychologists started to become active in part because of the formation of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) and APA's recognition of sport psychology as a division (47) within the organization. Some of the more prominent clinically trained individuals included Burt Giges, Steve Danish, Al Petitipas, Shane Murphy, Jack Lesyk, Charlie Maher, Kate Hays, MaryAnn Kane, and others. More recently a younger clinically trained group has emerged and includes the likes of Britt Brewer, Judy Van Raalte, Karen Cogan, Trent Petrie, Mark Anderson, Frank Perna, and others. (*My apologies for possible overlap of generations and omission of the names of significant colleagues I greatly respect. My intent here is to simply provide examples of individuals contributing to the field*).

The reality today is that most graduate training designed to prepare sport psychologists are housed in sport science departments or schools. Although the training in many cases is comprehensive, rigorous, and increasingly interdisciplinary, in my opinion, these programs are excellent for preparing researchers and academicians and perhaps organizational consultants, but they are not adequate to prepare graduates to effectively counsel today's athletes. I have been in the field for nearly 30 years and have been training graduate students in sport psychology for nearly 20 of those years. I have witnessed a dramatic increase in "clinical" cases at all levels of competitive sport. It is no longer the case that an athlete comes to me seeking "mental and emotional strategies" to be a better athlete, rather, I am seeing many clients with significant clinical issues such as: substance abuse problems, eating disorders, and depression. As such I have taken steps to modify our graduate program so that students can be better prepared clinically and become license eligible. At the master's degree level, I have structured a collaborative two year program with the School of Medicine (Division of Graduate Medical Science). Students enter the program in the School of Education where the curriculum focuses on performance enhancement, positive psychology, and supervised experience in a sport/exercise environment. During the second year, students carry a heavy load in "mental health & behavioral medicine" and complete an internship that focuses on mental health.

For 25 years I also provided on an "ad hoc" basis, services to the Boston University athletic department, a competitive Division I program. Two years ago we formalized the arrangements where graduate students, under faculty supervision, provide individual and team sport psychology services. This is a "win-win" situation because the athletic department receives high quality sport psychology services at minimal cost and our students are placed in a situation where they receive excellent supervised experience. During the 2005-06 academic year the clinic served a total of 17 teams, 76 athletes in 340 sessions. This does not include graduate students assigned full-time to specific teams. The presenting problems were primarily "performance" related, however other issues included anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, injury, post-traumatic stress, grief/loss, and mood disorder.

After successful completion of course work and internship requirements students can sit for a license called "Licensed Mental Health Counselor". It is my opinion these students have a formal well-balanced curriculum that will enable them to effectively deal with contemporary sport psychology clients. I urge graduate training programs in sport psychology throughout the world to formalize interdisciplinary training that involves counseling psychology, sport science, education, and research. This type of cross-university collaboration is indeed possible and gives students more breadth in their curriculum.

There are sound benefits to rigorous academic and clinical training. I have noticed that my graduate students work in a wide variety of occupations. For instance two have become presidents of higher education institutions, several have become headmasters, others as university professors, directors of wellness centers, research centers, student athlete support centers, psychologists at Olympic training centers, psychologists in sports medicine centers, counselors in the performing arts, and "consultants" in sport and industry.

Future Research in Sport Psychology

The field of sport psychology cannot continue to grow unless research adds to the knowledge we have about the field. Some of the research of the 1970's and 1980's, which was primarily laboratory-based and experiential, provided insight as to what was known and what was not known. A huge shift occurred in the direction of applied or field-based research during the 1990's and this continues today - some good and others not very informative. Consumers, including sport administrators, coaches, and athletes themselves want to know if specific sport psychology interventions work, and under what conditions. One example of research that challenged perceptions about the development of coach and athlete "expertise" is that of Salmela and his colleagues (Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, (1997). Researchers in clinical and counseling psychologists have made the call for "evidence based research", ideally using the gold standard methodology of "randomized control group designs". I maintain sport psychologists should also strive to increase the sophistication of their approaches to research. Two examples of a randomized control group design being used in sport and exercise psychology are studies authored by Tsutsumi et al. (1997) and Beniamini et al (1997).

Becoming more sophisticated with research questions and methodologies requires

collaboration with scientists from other disciplines. We need experts in technology, sport, basic science, and statistical methods that will enable us to get answers to important practical questions. For instance the recent work of Hap Davis and colleagues (2006) with experts in neuroscience will enable us to learn how high level athletes (swimmers) respond to victory and defeat using the technology of fMRI. The findings should enable us to develop appropriate intervention strategies.

Students must be well trained in scientific methodologies so that we can advance a strong body of knowledge, be able to apply these research competencies to other areas, be better respected by professionals in other disciplines, and contribute significantly to service delivery that is “evidence-based” and appropriate.

A Few Comments on “Consulting”

The vast majority of young people entering the sport psychology profession want to be consultants and unfortunately want to work immediately at the highest level - professional sport. Unfortunately these are unrealistic expectations. It has been my experience that professional sport organizations want a little “gray hair” or experience from their consultants. Interestingly many professional sport organizations do not care what your training is, which is frustrating to highly trained consultants and also for those of us that are involved in training graduate students. Most decision makers do not know there are differences between clinically trained psychologists and sport science trained practitioners. Likewise a terminal degree is usually not relevant to sport decision makers. What they want is someone that is capable of making a difference for their organization. My advice continues to be this: get the best possible training in sport science, and counseling, be an excellent communicator, be prepared to write articles in professional journals, magazines, and newsletters. Writing will help make you visible to decision makers in sport. Before attempting to work in the elite sport arena get a wide variety of experiences. For example, consulting with youth sport organization, high school, and university athletes. Do not be afraid to get out of your specialty sport comfort zone. Obtain experience working with both team and individual sports, as well as men’s and women’s sports. Develop a theoretical orientation that works for you and follow the highest ethical standards

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