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The 'Coolness' of Sport Psychology

"It was kind of a dream when I started Uni, to be able to work with Olympic athletes"
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INTRODUCTION

Performance enhancement with elite athletes continues to dominate media attention exciting prospective students who perhaps perceive that applied sport psychology (ASP) would be 'cool' to study regardless of whether there are opportunities open to them for careers in this field. While there has been increasing research on practitioner development (Tod, 2007), there has been little research focusing on postgraduate students and their early experiences of ASP practice. Understanding these student's perceptions of ASP practice and their motivation to embark on a practice career might add to knowledge on practitioner development, and provide useful information to guide university tutors and supervisors. Therefore the purpose of this research was to explore student's preconceptions of ASP who were initiating their first steps in pursuit of a career in ASP.

METHOD

Participants were 7 full-time MSc students (5 female, 2 males; 21 to 45 years) enrolled in an MSc of psychology of sport and exercise degree offered at a UK University (4 on British Psychological Society (BPS); 3 on non-BPS). 'Being-In' the MSc and ASP module gave me 'insider' access (Moustakas, 1995; Sparkes, 1992). Whilst sharing experiences attempted to enhance the researcher-participant relationship, a bracketing process of my foreknowledge was necessary, by participating in a bracketing interview, in order to facilitate the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open view (Maykut & Morehouse, 1996; Charmaz, 2004). An interview schedule was developed based on Tod *et al.* (2007) and assessed in a pilot interview with an opportunity to explore personal bias and raise self-awareness assumptions (Silverman, 2000). Upon informed consent, individual semi-structured interviews were then conducted prior to the start of the ASP module. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborne, 2004) clustered the following themes:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THEMES

PERCEPTIONS OF ASP PRACTICE/PRACTITIONER ROLE

Most participants thought that the main aim of an ASP was to enhance performance and felt that learning mental skills was important in order to provide interventions and demonstrate competency. One participant thought there would be:

"a menu where they say right you've got to do X, Y, Z and this is what you should charge"

These desired fixed rigid ways of providing services are common in beginning students (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Tod *et al.*, 2009). However Murphy (1995) has reported that 60% of athletes present with non-performance issues.

Some participants placed importance on the client-practitioner relationship and felt that:

"I'd form that sort of relationship where, if it meant I needed to stay, or put myself out slightly, I'd be in the position to do that really"

Whilst it is important to demonstrate support to clients; it is also important for practitioners to establish clear boundaries and protect themselves from too much exposure or feeling too responsible for clients. The practitioner must develop an attitude of detached concern, which provides a degree of objectivity and distance from client problems to avoid burnout and allow for adequate self-care (Anderson, 2000; Guy, 1987).

PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS

Participants expressed personal interest in sport and psychology and the process of working with an athlete as motives for pursuing a career in ASP. So, *"sitting down and listening to people and trying to work through things"*. Anderson (2000) suggests that these motivations (e.g. fascination with human relationships) means that the SP most probably has a good tool (self) to work with. Additionally, most participants were allured by working with *"elite athletes"*. In fact, what emerged was the fascination with the high status of sportspeople and sport and:

"As a psychologist, if you work with that person, then they hit that, the level and they win Olympic gold... I think that would be massively satisfying that you've been involved in that sort of success".

Anderson (2000) suggests that such desires to work with high profile athletes and visions of fame and status where athletes are a route to recognition, are troublesome motivations. Such narcissistic needs may lead the SP to subtle (dependency fostering) and not-so-subtle (outright exploitative) behaviours to increase one's own self-esteem and competence that will ultimately influence the working alliance (Anderson, 2000; e.g. Winstone & Gervis, 2006).

VIEWS ON CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Participants felt that first there would be opportunities at the Olympics *"which will be really exciting. So hopefully there'll be some opportunities there"*. It appeared that due to this desire many participants *"wouldn't want to work at grass root level"* narrowing their career opportunities. Despite receiving information prior to the module, some experienced disillusion of career prospects, need for qualifications and continued experience and thought that after the master's they would start applying for jobs to work with elite

Evaluating thoughts

These findings are similar to findings from Tod *et al.* (2009) where the need to stay involved with sport had a self-serving motive and helping others with issues one has faced and a need to compensate for one's own past were common motives for entering the profession. Perhaps it is the intensity of these motivations that determines whether they are functional (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Nonetheless, these findings indicate the importance of structured reflection to help students become more aware of; and work through their own motives and needs. Also, perhaps supervisors need to intervene at Undergraduate level and highlight realistic career opportunities which might help prepare students and plan their professional careers, growth and

Development

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