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**The Sport and Exercise Psychology Practitioner’s Contribution to Service Delivery  
Outcomes**

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**Author Note**

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25 **Abstract**

26 The purpose of this article is to review research related to the practitioner's  
27 contribution to effective service delivery. Specifically, we answer five questions. First, what  
28 are sport and exercise psychology practitioners striving to achieve? Second, what is expertise  
29 in applied sport and exercise psychology? Third, what are characteristics of effective  
30 practitioners? Fourth, how can practitioners develop their expertise over time? Fifth, how do  
31 practitioners manage the athlete variables and contextual factors that influence service  
32 delivery? Offering answers to these questions allows us to identify practical implications to  
33 inform practitioner training and development and to suggest avenues to expand knowledge.  
34 Results from the review suggest that practitioners who help athletes effectively possess  
35 facilitative interpersonal skills, experience professional self-doubt, engage in judicious  
36 decision making, exercise organizational savviness, demonstrate multicultural humility, and  
37 willingly engage in skill development. Based on current knowledge, future research  
38 directions include examining the magnitude of practitioner attributes on service delivery  
39 outcomes. Applied implications for professional development include the use of deliberate  
40 practice to enhance skill learning, along with using supervision and feedback.

41 *Keywords:* practitioner expertise, professional development, service delivery  
42 outcomes, performance psychology

43

## 44       **The Sport and Exercise Psychology Practitioner’s Contribution to Service Delivery**

### 45                                       **Outcomes**

46               When applied sport and exercise psychology practitioners meet with athletes, the  
47 individuals start a partnership to secure outcomes the client wants. Attaining desirable  
48 outcomes, however, results from many factors, including the athlete’s and practitioner’s  
49 input, their collaboration, the interventions they use, and the cultural and organisational  
50 context (Cruickshank et al., 2020; Poczwadowski, 2019). Researchers have examined these  
51 factors to build evidence-based knowledge that can inform practitioners’ attempts to help  
52 athletes and their own continued professional development, and this research has led to  
53 professional organizations’ position stands on topics such as supervision (Poczwadowski et  
54 al., 2023), professional accreditation (Schinke et al., 2018), scientist-practitioners (Schinke et  
55 al., 2023), and competence and training (Tenenbaum et al., 2003).

56               When considering the practitioner, Brown (2009, p. 309) suggested, “as a consultant  
57 assisting performers, you yourself are a performer. Your success as a consultant will be  
58 determined largely by how you perform as a consultant”. Like other performers, practitioners  
59 work in unpredictable environments, cope with various, sometimes stressful demands, and  
60 strive to deliver outputs that other people value (e.g., athletes). The consequences of a  
61 practitioner’s performance can be both positive (e.g., excellent client outcomes) and negative  
62 (e.g., reputational damage, unemployment). Research on sport and exercise psychology  
63 practitioners and their roles in service delivery provides knowledge they can use to improve  
64 their abilities to assist athletes.

65               Further, when practitioners enter service delivery, they rely on their knowledge,  
66 behaviour patterns, emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and personalities to achieve  
67 positive athlete interactions, a notion summed up in the phrase that the “individual is the  
68 instrument of service delivery” (Tod, 2013, p. 44). In this article we explore practitioner

69 characteristics that allow them to help athletes achieve desired outcomes. More specifically,  
70 we aim to review knowledge related to practitioner expertise. To achieve our aim, we seek  
71 answers to the questions presented in Figure 1. The questions in Figure 1 help to integrate  
72 existing research and provides a conceptual map of the contributors to effective service  
73 delivery. We have integrated the research around questions rather than summative statements  
74 to show that firm answers are still developing. In this article we will (a) discuss research  
75 related to each question, (b) offer applied implications for practitioner development, and (c)  
76 suggest future research directions. Where possible, we have cited sport and exercise  
77 psychology literature, but where research is lacking, we have included counselling  
78 psychology literature to broaden our answers and provide a starting point for continued  
79 discussion. Previous research has indicated strong parallels between sport and exercise  
80 psychology and counselling psychology, and sport and exercise psychology practitioners  
81 have indicated that much of their learning comes from reading counselling psychology  
82 literature (McEwan et al., 2019).

### 83 **Question 1: What are Sport and Exercise Psychology Practitioners Striving to Achieve?**

84 A starting point to understanding the practitioner's role is to explore what constitutes  
85 effective service delivery because doing so describes what the person is striving to achieve.  
86 Researchers have defined effective applied sport and exercise psychology as a multifaceted  
87 activity in which practitioners (a) assist athletes in attaining goals, exploiting unused  
88 resources, and resolving issues, (b) via collaborative alliances characterized by open and  
89 genuine attitudes from each person, (c) in which they reflect on and agree the goals, tasks,  
90 interventions, and responsibilities contributing to desired outcomes (Cropley et al., 2010; Tod  
91 et al., 2007). Missing from these previous definitions, however, is the need for practitioners  
92 to act in ethical and humane ways as described by the codes of conduct of professional bodies  
93 such as the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (<https://appliedsportpsych.org/>). The

94 ability to provide effective and ethical services, as described above, and help athletes in  
95 dynamic unpredictable settings, where performance is being evaluated by others, requires a  
96 set of skills, knowledge, and competencies that take time to acquire (Martindale & Collins,  
97 2013). Once mastered, practitioners might be considered experts, and it is helpful to define  
98 expertise in sport and exercise psychology (Cruickshank et al., 2020).

99 **Question 2: What is Expertise in Applied Sport and Exercise Psychology?**

100         Currently, an agreed definition describing the expert sport and exercise psychology  
101 practitioner is lacking. In proposing a description, we draw on work from the broader  
102 discipline of performance science. Ullén et al. (2016, p. 427) suggests experts “gradually  
103 acquire highly specialized competencies, which are needed for achieving consistently  
104 superior levels of performance within a particular domain”. Based on this definition, an  
105 expert sport psychology practitioner is an individual who achieves superior client outcomes  
106 compared to non-experts, primarily because they have acquired highly specialised  
107 competencies over time. This definition, however, along with any description, has limitations.  
108 First, the correlation that sport psychology practitioners’ behaviours and attributes have with  
109 client outcomes is unknown. Second, expertise is an arbitrary label dichotomising attributes  
110 existing on a continuum. For example, skills in interpersonal communication are not all or  
111 nothing phenomena. Practitioners marginally below a cutoff score (expert/nonexpert) will  
112 have almost the same level of interpersonal skill as individuals just above the criteria and will  
113 be just as effective with clients. Labelling one person an expert and the other not is  
114 unsubstantiated discrimination. Third, although desirable, expertise is not always a necessary  
115 requirement to help athletes. Competent practitioners and trainees can help athletes when  
116 their skills and knowledge match the athlete’s issues (Little et al., 2023). We hypothesize,  
117 however, that expert practitioners would be more consistently helpful when working with  
118 challenging issues and complicated situations. Fourth, although agreement exists about the

119 highly specialized competencies needed for effective service delivery, as illustrated in the  
120 position stands cited above (Poczwadowski et al., 2023; Schinke et al., 2018; Schinke et al.,  
121 2023; Tenenbaum et al., 2003), the evidence that practitioners acquire these over time is  
122 almost exclusively based on self-report. Investigators have seldom measured practitioners'  
123 skills, behaviours, and attributes or documented change over time. Much work remains  
124 before a satisfactory evidence-based definition of expertise exists. Nevertheless, expert  
125 practitioners are a subset within the broader group of individuals who are effective in helping  
126 athletes, just as elite athletes are a subset of competent and highly skilled sporting performers.  
127 Researchers have examined characteristics of effective practitioners, and the results provide  
128 an answer to question 3 as summarised in the next section.

### 129 **Question 3: What are Characteristics of Effective Practitioners?**

130 Ullén et al.'s (2016) definition suggests expert practitioners have a set of highly  
131 specialized competencies or characteristics allowing them to achieve positive client  
132 outcomes. Limited evidence exists, however, measuring the relationship between applied  
133 sport and exercise psychology practitioner characteristics and athlete outcomes. Instead,  
134 indirect descriptive data suggests a relationship (e.g., Orlick & Partington, 1987). For  
135 example, athletes and coaches report that helpful practitioners have strong interpersonal skills  
136 and offer concrete practical advice, whereas unhelpful individuals lack these attributes  
137 (Anderson et al., 2004; Orlick & Partington, 1987). Perceptions of helpfulness, however, may  
138 not translate to effectiveness. Athletes may perceive a practitioner as helpful, even if the  
139 practitioner did not resolve the issues that led the athlete to approach them. Nevertheless, the  
140 existing research pointing to the characteristics of expert practitioners focuses primarily on  
141 facilitative interpersonal skills and judicious decision making.

142 **Facilitative Interpersonal Skills.** In more than 30 studies, various stakeholders,  
143 including athletes, coaches, practitioners, administrators, and parents, have reported on the

144 attributes of effective and ineffective practitioners leading to several reviews (Fortin-  
145 Guichard et al., 2018; Tod et al., 2022; Woolway & Harwood, 2020). Stakeholders believe  
146 effective practitioners build strong interpersonal bonds with athletes, develop real  
147 relationships characterized by openness and realistic perceptions, inspire hope and realistic  
148 expectations in clients, encourage athlete engagement in the change process, and fit well into  
149 the teams and organization where they work. These findings point to cultural humility as a  
150 characteristic of useful practitioners. Specifically, individuals who are culturally humble: (a)  
151 treat athletes with respect and openness, (b) collaborate with clients, (c) strive to understand  
152 the intersections among athletes' various identities, and (d) explore how that affects the  
153 working alliance (Hook et al., 2013). Cultural humility incorporates a willingness to self-  
154 reflect, share power, and to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with individuals and  
155 their communities (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Cultural humility, however, embraces  
156 more than learning about and appreciating a client's various identities and backgrounds (i.e.,  
157 it goes beyond cultural competence). Athletes live and operate in various contexts, cultures,  
158 and subcultures which the culturally humble practitioner will endeavour to understand and  
159 engage where suitable. Also, athletes' identities and culture intersect, and effective  
160 practitioners are sensitive and flexible when adapting services for these individuals. These  
161 principles of cultural humility echo the cultural sport and exercise psychology literature that  
162 has emerged in recent years (e.g., Hanrahan, 2023; Hanrahan & Lee, 2020).

163         Researchers in applied sport and exercise psychology have not measured the  
164 associations practitioners' facilitative interpersonal skills have with service delivery  
165 outcomes. It is unknown, for example, the extent to which interpersonal skills predict or  
166 enhance client change (i.e., the magnitude of the relationship has not been assessed). Also,  
167 research exploring the perceived attributes of effective practitioners has focused most often

168 on male consultants from Western countries. Researchers could advance knowledge by  
169 examining diverse groups of practitioners.

170         Although the association that sport and exercise psychology practitioners' facilitative  
171 interpersonal skills have with athlete outcomes are lacking, evidence from counselling shows  
172 a robust and consistent relationship (Wampold & Owen, 2021). In several longitudinal  
173 studies, for example, practitioners' interpersonal skills predict client outcomes (Anderson et  
174 al., 2016; Schöttke et al., 2017). These studies indicate that effective practitioners are fluent  
175 verbally, communicate clearly, express suitable emotions, are persuasive, communicate hope,  
176 are warm and empathetic, demonstrate respect, attune to clients, can develop strong working  
177 alliances, are willing to collaborate, are problem focused, and manage criticism well  
178 (Anderson et al., 2016; Schöttke et al., 2017). Evidence also indicates that these facilitative  
179 interpersonal skills are teachable, and trainees can develop them (Anderson et al., 2020).  
180 Recently, Santos et al. (2023) created an inventory that allows clients to provide feedback on  
181 practitioners' facilitative interpersonal skills. Practitioners who use the inventory will have  
182 access to feedback which they can use to help them improve their interpersonal skills,  
183 although they need to recognise that clients may not readily give negative feedback given the  
184 power dynamics inherent in service delivery relationships.

185         **Professional Judgement and Decision Making.** Practitioners' professional  
186 judgement and decision making (PJDM) skills influence the course and outcomes of service  
187 delivery (Martindale & Collins, 2005; Martindale & Collins, 2007). For example,  
188 practitioner's decisions at case formulation will affect the interventions they select, design,  
189 and implement (Smith & Keegan, 2023). As another example, practitioners' judgements  
190 about the goals of service delivery (e.g., performance, wellbeing, happiness, etc.) will shape  
191 the working alliances they build with athletes (Smith et al., 2019). From a PJDM viewpoint,  
192 applied sport and exercise psychology involves a chain of decisions practitioners make in



193 dynamic and unstructured environments (Cruickshank et al., 2020). Benefits of studying  
194 PJDM include helping practitioners understand the reasons underpinning their judgements  
195 and equipping them with the resources and skills to make suitable decisions to guide effective  
196 athlete interactions (Martindale & Collins, 2013).

197 PJDM theory offers a coherent description about the ways that practitioners' decisions  
198 influence service delivery processes and outcomes. Although PJDM literature in applied sport  
199 and exercise psychology is blossoming, most papers to date are theoretical (Martindale &  
200 Collins, 2013), and there are few empirical studies focused on the applied sport and exercise  
201 psychology context (e.g., Smith et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2023). Research has revealed, for  
202 example, the role of PJDM in the training of applied sport and exercise psychology  
203 practitioners (Martindale, 2010; Smith et al., 2019), explored the decision-making process in  
204 athlete consultations (Martindale & Collins, 2012), and examined issues related to evidence-  
205 based practice (Winter & Collins, 2015a, 2015b; Winter et al., 2023). Few attempts, however,  
206 have been made to measure the associations between PJDM and athlete outcomes. Although  
207 studies exploring relationships between decision making and athlete outcomes will advance  
208 knowledge, researchers need to consider which outcomes are relevant, robust, and worth  
209 measuring.

210 Although much scope remains for researchers to explore PJDM in applied sport and  
211 exercise psychology, the approach rests on a solid theoretical and empirical foundation  
212 borrowed from other disciplines. The foundation offers useful insights, such as methods for  
213 evaluating practitioner effectiveness and learning outcomes for practitioner training. When  
214 evaluating practitioner effectiveness, for example, Martindale and Collins (2007) proposed  
215 methods including process and outcome measures. Regarding learning outcomes for training,  
216 Phillips et al. (2004) outline goals for developing effective cognitive decision-making skills,  
217 such as: (a) enhancing perceptual skills, (b) enriching mental models about the practitioner's

218 domain, (c) constructing a varied set of relevant cognitive patterns and styles, (d) providing a  
219 wide range of behavioural examples, (e) exposure to a large base of instances, and (f)  
220 encouraging a commitment to continued learning.

221 **Other Practitioner Characteristics.** In a recent review, Woolway and Harwood  
222 (2020) explored the preferred characteristics of applied sport and exercise psychology  
223 practitioners in terms of athletes' likelihood to seek help. Although the strength of the  
224 evidence varied, preferred practitioners were the same gender, race, and age as clients. Also,  
225 preferred practitioners had athletic backgrounds, sport-specific knowledge, and solid  
226 interpersonal skills. Such practitioners were lean and athletically built, physically active,  
227 possessed advanced degrees or were certified, and had experience working with diverse  
228 populations. Although these results point to the types of practitioners that athletes prefer  
229 when seeking services, they do not reveal how well these characteristics predict service  
230 delivery outcomes.

231 Evidence suggests that several of the preferred characteristics Woolway and Harwood  
232 (2020) identified are not related to service delivery outcomes. For example, athletes do not  
233 always use athletic background and sport-specific knowledge as criteria to evaluate the  
234 effectiveness of practitioners (Anderson et al., 2004). From counselling literature, age,  
235 gender, training, and certification (registration or licensure) are also not related to outcomes  
236 (Nissen-Lie et al., 2023; Wampold et al., 2019). Research has shown, however, that  
237 practitioners vary in their abilities to work with individuals of diverse racial and ethnic  
238 backgrounds (Hayes et al., 2016; Hayes et al., 2015). Multicultural competence influences  
239 service delivery outcomes. Cultural sport and exercise psychology literature has expanded in  
240 recent years and there exists guidance to help practitioners develop their knowledge,  
241 attitudes, and skills so they can assist people from diverse intersectionalities, cultures, and  
242 subcultures (Hanrahan, 2023; Hanrahan & Lee, 2020).

243           Notwithstanding multicultural competence and strong interpersonal skills, few  
244 characteristics that athletes use when seeking preferred practitioners (e.g., Woolway &  
245 Harwood, 2020) seem to be the ones they apply when evaluating effectiveness (e.g., Tod et  
246 al., 2022). The distinction between the attributes athletes use when seeking help and the ones  
247 they employ to evaluate practitioner effectiveness has implications for the marketing and  
248 recruitment of practitioners. For example, based on the preferred characteristics research,  
249 sporting organizations might be tempted when hiring practitioners to privilege individuals  
250 with attributes athletes use when seeking help (e.g., individuals of a similar age to the  
251 athletes). In many places, however, such practices are unlawful (e.g., in the UK it is unlawful  
252 to discriminate on age). Instead, in the UK suitable criteria for hiring practitioners include  
253 those characteristics necessary to perform the practitioner role, such as facilitative  
254 interpersonal skills and sound professional decision making.

255           Some practitioners have used the phrase *imposter syndrome* when describing anxiety  
256 about their abilities to work with athletes (Middleton et al., 2022), a term referring to a  
257 pattern of thoughts and behaviours in individuals who doubt their abilities and fear being  
258 exposed as inadequate (Clance & Imes, 1978). Practitioners from various helping disciplines  
259 (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses) who doubt their abilities have better  
260 client outcomes, especially if they also possess a positive sense of self (Nissen-Lie et al.,  
261 2017). Potentially, practitioners who doubt their abilities may be willing to improve and  
262 engage in self-reflection and skill development (Wampold et al., 2019).

263           Beyond the characteristics already discussed there exists a smattering of research  
264 focused on applied sport and exercise psychology practitioners across a diverse range of  
265 topics. Examples include practitioner self-care (Quartioli, Etzel, et al., 2019), quality of life  
266 (Quartioli, Knight, et al., 2019), professional identity (Quartioli, Wagstaff, Martin, et al.,  
267 2021), self-awareness (Winstone & Gervis, 2006), sexual attraction between clients and

268 practitioners (Stevens & Andersen, 2007), emotional labour (Hings et al., 2020), practitioner  
269 use of mental skills (Filion et al., 2021), and practitioner social support (McCormack et al.,  
270 2015). The emergence of research on the practitioner is an encouraging sign for the discipline  
271 because it reveals increasing recognition that the person delivering the intervention is just as  
272 influential on consultancy outcomes as the strategies and methods they use with athletes (or  
273 even more instrumental according to counselling psychology research). In applied sport and  
274 exercise psychology, practitioners, and the interventions they employ, cannot always be  
275 divided into neat separate categories. Any intervention, be it empathetic reflection, a person-  
276 centred relationship, a needs assessment questionnaire, or a mental skill, is delivered through  
277 the ways that practitioners behave, talk, and interact with athletes. The practitioner is the  
278 intervention or the instrument of service delivery.

#### 279 **Question 4: How can Practitioners Develop their Expertise over time?**

280 Much literature has been published in which authors suggest how practitioners can  
281 develop their expertise (e.g., Silva et al., 2011), but due to a lack of sport and exercise  
282 psychology specific studies, these claims are unsupported. Instead, studies document the  
283 ways practitioners suggest they have changed throughout their careers, along with the people  
284 and events stimulating professional development, but these studies have been descriptive and  
285 have not demonstrated that client outcomes improve (McEwan & Tod, 2023; Simons &  
286 Andersen, 1995). Researchers making statements about how quickly registered sport and  
287 exercise psychologists or certified mental performance consultants develop expertise (or  
288 compare individuals from diverse backgrounds) are speculating without suitable evidence.

289 Several of these studies have been longitudinal and focused primarily on trainees  
290 (Fogaca et al., 2018; Haluch et al., 2022; McEwan & Tod, 2023; McEwan et al., 2019; Tod et  
291 al., 2011). Major findings reveal that practitioners' confidence in their abilities increase and  
292 they become adept at managing their anxiety through client experience. Over time,

293 individuals adopt client-focused, rather than solution-focused approaches to helping athletes.  
294 They experience individuation or an integration of professional ideas and methods with  
295 personal values and beliefs that allow them to thrive within the contexts they work and with  
296 the clients they help. Practitioners report that clients, supervisors, and colleagues influence  
297 professional development more than theory and research, although such work is deemed  
298 helpful if applicable to individual's current needs (McEwan & Tod, 2023).

299         Another key finding from the longitudinal studies reveals that self-reflection drives  
300 professional development (Tod et al., 2009). Most articles on reflective practice in sport and  
301 exercise psychology are theory-based, opinion papers, or case-studies, and they provide  
302 limited evidence that self-reflection influences professional development. A recent study,  
303 however, provides initial evidence that teaching practitioners how to reflect leads to  
304 improved client feedback (Cropley et al., 2020). Pre-and post-intervention client feedback  
305 indicated practitioners had improved across several personal qualities, such as becoming  
306 more personable, practical, trustworthy, and knowledgeable. The magnitude of changes,  
307 however, were small and their significance untested. Further, out-of-session client change  
308 was not measured (e.g., increased competitive performance). Nevertheless, the study shows  
309 that practitioners can improve their expertise and examining the association between  
310 practitioner characteristics and client-outcomes is possible.

311         Whereas researchers have not examined if practitioners' client outcomes improve  
312 with time, experience, or professional development, such studies exist in counselling  
313 research. Longitudinal studies reveal that experience, whether defined as years helping  
314 people or number of cases accumulated, has a weak inconsistent relationship with client  
315 outcomes (Goldberg et al., 2016; Owen et al., 2016). Goldberg et al.'s (2016) results showed  
316 a decrease in client outcomes, although the effect was small. Overall, there is limited  
317 evidence indicating that practitioners have improved client outcomes across their careers.

318 Instead, research indicates that inexperienced practitioners achieve client outcomes  
319 comparable to their professional elders (Owen et al., 2016).

320 Nevertheless, counselling studies show that practitioners benefit from skills training,  
321 becoming proficient at helping clients (Hill & Lent, 2006). In a recent line of inquiry,  
322 researchers have implemented deliberate practice principles (e.g., providing clear feedback,  
323 goal-directed instruction, and supportive coaching), and emerging results yield positive  
324 outcomes (Mahon, 2023). These results have relevance for sport and exercise psychology  
325 because the deliberate practice principles studied echo many suggestions about how to train  
326 practitioners. There are different nuances between counselling and sport and exercise  
327 psychology, however. Researchers could replicate the counselling studies in sport and  
328 exercise psychology contexts to help the discipline learn how to optimise practitioner  
329 training. In the applied implications section, we will discuss ways to implement deliberate  
330 practice principle to help practitioners.

331 **Questions 5a and 5b: How do Practitioners Manage the Athlete Variables (Question 5a)**  
332 **and Contextual Factors (Question 5b) that Influence Service Delivery?**

333 Effective practitioners are aware of and work with the athlete and contextual factors  
334 that influence service delivery, fashioning interventions to suit clients' needs, preferences,  
335 and circumstances (McEwan & Tod, 2023). In this section we review literature on how  
336 effective practitioners manage athlete and contextual variables influencing service delivery.

337 **Athlete Factors.** Few researchers have explored athlete factors influencing service  
338 delivery. Studies have examined athletes' attitudes to sport psychology but have not  
339 established links with service delivery processes or outcomes (Martin et al., 2002), which is  
340 an area for future research. Counselling psychology, however, has ascertained client factors  
341 predicting outcomes (Constantino et al., 2021). For example, clients who (a) have positive  
342 outcome expectations, (b) see interventions as credible, (c) actively participate, (d) are open

343 to psychological ideas, (e) are self-aware, (f) are ready to change, and (g) have a secure  
344 attachment style have better outcomes than individuals lacking these characteristics  
345 (Constantino et al., 2021). Factors such as increased problem severity, perfectionism, self-  
346 criticism, interpersonal problems, hostility, and resistance obstruct outcomes. Many of these  
347 characteristics are cited by applied sport and exercise psychology practitioners when they  
348 describe mental skills training. For example, sport psychology practitioners encourage  
349 athletes to hold realistic and positive expectations about their mental training (e.g., Hodge,  
350 2005).

351         To manage and work with athlete factors, and elicit clients' active involvement,  
352 effective practitioners use strategies such as promoting allegiance, contracting, and building  
353 sound service delivery relationships (e.g., Wampold & Imel, 2015). The first strategy,  
354 allegiance, involves practitioners helping clients understand and believe in the model of  
355 mental skills training underlying service delivery (Tod et al. 2022) through providing simple  
356 clear explanations and specific concrete practical interventions (Orlick & Partington, 1987).  
357 The second strategy, relationship building, helps athletes commit to working with the  
358 practitioner and engaging in the tasks that will allow positive outcomes to arise, such as  
359 trying interventions and disclosing relevant personal information (Sharp & Hodge, 2014).  
360 The third strategy, contracting, occurs when practitioners and clients agree on the goals,  
361 methods, individual responsibilities, and logistics of their collaboration (Moore, 2003).  
362 Contracts help athlete commit to the service delivery process and make them accountable for  
363 their involvement. Helpful contracts also enhance positive expectations by outlining the  
364 practitioner's approach and foster beneficial relationships.

365         **Contextual Factors.** In contrast to knowledge about the athlete's role in applied sport  
366 and exercise psychology, researchers have identified relevant contextual factors (e.g., Orlick  
367 & Partington, 1987). Effective practitioners adapt to the organization or context in which they

368 find themselves (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015). Specific examples from research include dealing  
369 with stigmas about applied psychology and mental health, resolving ethical dilemmas, such  
370 as managing confidentiality in high performance environments, and coping with gender  
371 stereotypes and sexual attraction (e.g. Mapes, 2009; Sharp & Hodge, 2011; Zakrajsek et al.,  
372 2013). Further contextual factors include the amount of time practitioners have available to  
373 spend with athletes and the support they receive from coaches (Orlick & Partington, 1987).  
374 Effective practitioners embed themselves into the context and culture, build relationships  
375 with the stakeholders, and act in helpful ways during difficult moments, such as knowing  
376 what type of support to offer during competition (e.g. Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Castillo et al.,  
377 2022).

### 378 **Applied Implications**

379         Research shows that practitioners can develop their capacities to help athletes by  
380 applying deliberate practice principles (Mahon, 2023). For practitioner learning, deliberate  
381 practice requires: (a) goal-directed systematic efforts to enhance performance, such as  
382 focussing on weaknesses; (b) help from suitable supervisors; (c) feedback on service delivery  
383 processes and outcomes; and (d) constant repetitive efforts undertaken outside of service  
384 delivery (Rousmaniere, 2017).

### 385 ***Goal-Directed Systematic Efforts to Enhance Performance***

386         Practitioners can use goal setting and performance profiling to satisfy the first  
387 principle (Weston, 2023; Wang & Healy, 2023). A performance profile will help practitioners  
388 to identify their strengths (e.g., empathy) and weaknesses (e.g., tendency to offer solutions  
389 too quickly) when helping athletes. Having identified areas to address, goal setting can help  
390 practitioners set measurable goals and plan systematic learning strategies to build skills. For  
391 example, a practitioner might have a habit of asking too many questions leading to clients  
392 feeling interrogated. The practitioner may aim to increase the number of empathic reflections



393 used with clients (goal) and have role plays with their supervisors to practice using empathic  
394 reflections rather than asking questions (learning strategy).

### 395 *Receive Help from Suitable Supervisors*

396 Practitioners can consider several questions when assessing if a potential supervisor  
397 will help them towards their skill learning goals:

- 398 • Can we form a relationship based on openness and genuineness?
- 399 • Am I open to being coached by this individual?
- 400 • Does the person have suitable experience, both in skill learning and supervising?
- 401 • Is the person reliable?
- 402 • Do we have compatible professional philosophies?
- 403 • Can I afford the cost this individual charges?
- 404 • How will we deal with differences of opinion?

405 The list of questions is not exhaustive but helps to illustrate the value of spending time to find  
406 a suitable supervisor instead of making an unreflective decision.

### 407 *Feedback on Process and Outcome*

408 There are several ways practitioners can obtain feedback about their progress towards  
409 their skill learning goals. As a first example, the individual above who wants to ask fewer  
410 questions and offer more empathetic reflections could record client sessions and count the  
411 number of each communicate type. Recorded sessions also allows practitioners to reflect and  
412 supervisors to provide feedback on what occurred. As a second example, researchers have  
413 developed routine process and outcome questionnaires that are usable in real world settings  
414 (Lambert et al., 2018), allowing athletes to provide feedback on practitioner performance.  
415 These questionnaires can be used alongside qualitative feedback, although clients may not  
416 always be comfortable criticising practitioners and relationship complexity may hinder  
417 feedback processes. As a third example, practitioners can gather data about athletes' sporting

418 performances, such as using putting performance in golf to assess the helpfulness of pre-shot  
419 routines. Inferring a causal relationship between sporting performance and service delivery is  
420 not possible given the army of rival explanations. Practitioners, however, can discuss  
421 performance measures with athletes and together they can decide about the helpfulness of  
422 service delivery. Although not objective data, practitioners can use the discussions to reflect  
423 on their skill learning progress.

#### 424 *Constant Repetitive Efforts Undertaken Outside of Service Delivery*

425         The need to focus on the client takes precedent over skill learning during service  
426 delivery. Instead, role plays and simulations are suitable vehicles for practitioners to practice  
427 their skills. For example, if a practitioner wants to develop the ability to adapt interventions  
428 to athletes' needs, then colleagues could role play as distinct types of clients (e.g., children,  
429 mothers who are elite performers, or athletes hard of hearing). Practitioners can sometimes  
430 practice skills outside of role plays. For example, practitioners can practice basic counselling  
431 and communication skills during everyday conversations they have with family and friends.

#### 432 **Future Research Directions**

433         Although we know much about the contribution practitioners make to service delivery  
434 and how they develop their expertise, a lot remains to be learned. Two ways to advance  
435 knowledge include exploring service delivery outcomes and examining practitioners' in-  
436 session behaviours, thoughts, and feelings.

#### 437 *Service Delivery Outcomes*

438         Anderson et al. (2002) offered a framework of service delivery outcome variables that  
439 investigators could draw on to help them select relevant measures for their studies.  
440 Specifically, Anderson et al. listed quality of support, psychological skills, athlete wellbeing,  
441 athletes' responses to support, and performance as ways to assess applied sport and exercise  
442 psychology practice in general. Researchers, however, could use these same indicators to

443 explore the practitioner attributes and behaviours that predict service delivery outcomes.  
444 First, under quality of support, for example, Anderson et al. mentioned athletes' perceptions  
445 of and satisfaction with support. Specific questions to explore include what types of  
446 practitioner verbal behaviour (e.g., silence, empathic reflections, questions, affirmations)  
447 predict athletes' positive perceptions of and satisfaction with a consultant? Second, regarding  
448 psychological skills, researchers could explore the relationships practitioners' behaviours and  
449 attributes have with athletes' increased or decreased use of psychological skills in training  
450 and competition. For example, what practitioner actions and attributes lead to athletes' use of  
451 pre-competition and in-competition plans becoming more consistent and robust? What types  
452 of practitioner behaviours predict increases in the quality of athletes' imagery? Third, with  
453 respect to athlete wellbeing, do practitioner attributes predict changes in athletes' wellbeing  
454 and happiness? Fourth, regarding athletes' responses to support, are there practitioner  
455 characteristics and styles of working that increase clients' knowledge, use, and attitudes  
456 toward sport and exercise psychology?

457 Fifth, performance was another indicator Anderson et al. (2002) identified.  
458 Performance can be assessed at various levels equivalent to the outcome, performance, and  
459 process goals described in goal setting literature (Bird et al., 2023). At the outcome level,  
460 variables include rankings, placings, and win/loss records, but may also include team  
461 selection and money earned. At the performance level, indicators include personal bests and a  
462 host of other statistics, such as batting averages, cycling cadence, bowling speed, shots to  
463 green, and stick speed. At the process level, markers include the bodily responses and actions  
464 athletes need to produce to perform well, such a head position, running economy, and  
465 muscular power.

466 Although relevant in some cases, athletes do not always seek help with performance  
467 enhancement. They may wish to discuss other issues with practitioners, such as grief,

468 destructive relationships, loss of meaning, or addictive behaviours. Researchers could explore  
469 a range of outcomes beyond sport performance. After seeing a practitioner, for example, do  
470 athletes report improved social skills, greater life satisfaction and meaning, better self-  
471 regulation, or a sense of ease with life?

#### 472 *Practitioners' Behaviours, Thoughts, and Feelings during Service Delivery*

473 To date, most research has treated practitioners as static entities and their attributes as  
474 trait-like factors. For example, researchers suggest athletes appreciate empathetic and genuine  
475 practitioners (Poczwardowski, 2019). Empathy and genuineness, however, are dynamic  
476 attitudes that are expressed through actions and words (Wilkins, 2015). In personality  
477 parlance, empathy and genuineness are states, not traits. Practitioners' capacities for and  
478 expressions of empathy and genuineness will vary across clients and settings. Acknowledging  
479 that practitioners are dynamic, and their characteristics are expressed through their words and  
480 actions points to the value of exploring their in-session verbal and non-verbal behaviours,  
481 thoughts, and feelings. Two questions could help frame studies in this area. First, what are the  
482 indicators that signal to athletes that practitioners are displaying characteristics such as  
483 empathy, genuineness, unconditional positive regard, etc.? Second, what is the magnitude of  
484 the relationship these verbal and non-verbal behaviours have with athlete outcomes?

485 A difficulty that researchers face is accessing enough practitioners and athletes to  
486 generate sufficient power to answer the questions posed above, both quantitatively and  
487 qualitatively (Malterud et al., 2016). In the United Kingdom, for example, there are about 385  
488 registered sport and exercise psychologists, compared with more than 16, 000 counselling  
489 and clinical psychologists (Health Care and Professions Council, 2023). Given the small  
490 number of sport and exercise psychologists, and their geographic spread across the United  
491 Kingdom, running experiments of sufficient size to estimate the effect of practitioner  
492 attributes on athlete outcomes represents a logistical challenge. Rather than rely on

493 experiments or large-scale surveys, researchers could use other approaches, such as single-  
494 subject experimental designs, as illustrated by Cropley et al. (2020) when they tested the  
495 influence of practitioner reflective practice on client feedback. Further, when conducting a  
496 single-subject experiment, researchers can calculate effect sizes that can be meta-analysed  
497 making it possible to pool research results (Hedges et al., 2012).

#### 498 **Conclusion**

499 In this article we examined research exploring the practitioner attributes that allow  
500 them to assist athletes to attain positive service delivery outcomes, and we integrated it in a  
501 conceptual map based around five questions. The literature indicates that practitioners who  
502 display strong facilitative interpersonal skills, who possess a professional self-doubt that  
503 allows a self-reflective attitude, who exercise judicious decision making, who are sensitive to  
504 the organizational and political context, who recognise athletes' intersubjectivities, and who  
505 willingly engage in skill development outside of applied practice will provide clients with  
506 high quality services. To advance these findings, researchers need to measure the  
507 relationships that practitioners' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have with service delivery  
508 processes and outcomes. Researchers need to also examine how supervisors and educators  
509 can help practitioners develop the attributes listed above. These lines of research will provide  
510 evidence-based knowledge that can help practitioners (and their educators and supervisors)  
511 develop the knowledge, skills, and expertise to better meet their clients' needs.

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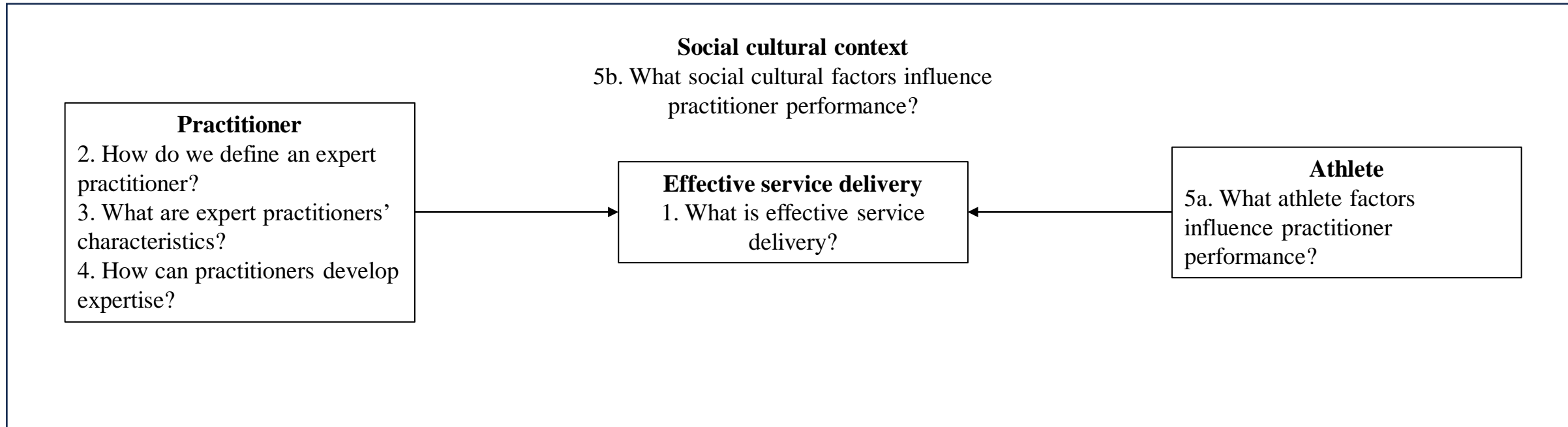
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**Figure 1**

*Framework for exploring the practitioner's contribution to effective service delivery*



**Figure 2**

*Framework summarizing research exploring the practitioner's contribution to effective service delivery*

