



## Novice consultants' experiences: Lessons learned by applied sport psychology students

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Applied sport psychology (ASP) literature reveals a number of publications on reflective practice and professional philosophies of well-established sport psychology consultants. However, there is much less interest in studying how novice consultants make the first steps in their careers and how they perceive the field of ASP in their respective countries and themselves within the field. The objective of this study is to analyse and structure lessons learned by students during their one-year ASP education and supervised practice in Sweden.

**Method:** Thirty-seven ASP students (23 males and 14 females) took part in this study. The data were extracted from the students' final reports on their six-month interventions with athlete-clients. Altogether 278 raw data units (lessons learned) were identified.

**Results:** We used both inductive and deductive analyses to create 33 themes and four categories named *professional tools*, *consultant–client relationship*, *learning process and experiences*, and *professional philosophy*. These four categories were further structured into three levels reflecting the students' learning process and exploration of the profession with the shifts from analysis to synthesis and from concrete to more generalized and strategic lessons learned.

**Conclusion:** The study provides insight into the novice sport psychology consultants' reflective practice. The results are discussed using career development, scientist–practitioner and cultural sport psychology perspectives. Applications and future research directions are outlined.

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An increase in publications on applied psychology education and further professional development of psychology practitioners has been noted during the last decade. At the turn of the century, when “our professional lives are being shaped by an increasingly complex array of social, professional and political forces” (Lane & Corrie, 2006, p. 9) and “practice is ever changing in this rapidly changing world” (Jarvis, 1999, p. 131), the concerns of the applied psychology community have been directed towards preparing applied psychology students to work in a rapidly changing world and also towards ensuring a continuity in the profession. A similar trend is visible in the applied sport psychology (ASP) literature. The most recent review of ASP educational programs (emphasising European programs) and literature on professional development of neophyte practitioners in the field (Wylleman, Harwood, Elbe, Reints, & de Caluwé, 2009) has appeared in the special section of

*Psychology of Sport and Exercise* devoted to the 40th anniversary of FEPSAC. The authors stated that “the practitioner is central to the development of ASP practice” (p. 441) but so far “... the literature reveals limited research on how novice professionals mature into experienced or senior professionals” (p. 439). Discussing further how ASP might gain greater professional status, Wylleman, Harwood et al. (2009) emphasised studying career development and transitions of ASP practitioners as one of the current challenges in our field. This study, dealing with reflections of Swedish ASP students making the first steps in their careers as educationally oriented sport psychology consultants, can be seen as one step forward to meet such a challenge.

Careers in ASP can be analysed based on career development models created in vocational psychology. For example, in a classic five-stage model suggested by Super (1957) and developed further by Savickas (2002) vocational career development is considered as a sequence of stages including exploration, establishment, progress, maintenance, and work retirement with normative transitions between them (e.g., from exploration to establishment, and so forth). The exploration stage covers professional education and related practical experiences. In this study ASP students reflected

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about their experiences in the particular moment of their careers, such as when they completed the first year of ASP education and approached the transition to the next educational level or to own practice.

### Reflective practice

One way to study professional development is through practitioners' reflections on various stages of their careers both in retrospective and actual time frames. The importance of *reflective practice* is emphasised by many authors (e.g., Jarvis, 1999; Lane & Corrie, 2006; Tod, 2007) and has been described as the process through which practitioners can assess their tacit knowledge, develop a deeper understanding of their practice and take steps towards improving it (Schön, 1987). According to Jarvis (1999), "...a professional way of knowing is a dialectic movement from action to reflection in a continuing loop" (p. 133). As a result of continuous reflections on their work, practitioners create, test, and further develop their *personal theory* which is that "practical knowledge which is validated by successful practice" (Jarvis, 1999, p. 139). When a consultant shares a personal theory with others, for the other practitioners such a theory is just *information to learn* and then to transform into the *knowledge* in order to further test/validate in their own practice. Thus Jarvis' statement has an implication for this study: in analysing reflections of our participants (i.e., information) we see our task in structuring them to help the readers to transform the reported information to their knowledge.

Lane and Corrie (2006) in their "modern scientist-practitioner model" emphasised the importance of reflective practice in a lifelong and contextualized learning as well as in development of professional identity. "The principle which underpins lifelong learning is that we can never fully 'arrive' at mastery but spend our careers working towards it" (p. 190); similarly our "professional identities are never unified but consist of multiple processes of identification" (p. 91). Reflective practice on the different stages of a professional career contributes to identity formation helping professionals to organize and make sense of their professional beliefs, actions and communication with others. Therefore, in this study analysing the ASP students' lessons learned, special attention should be paid to how their identities as sport psychology consultants are formed and explored in their practice.

Reflective practice as situated and grounded in particular socio-cultural contexts is emphasised in an emerging discourse in ASP, namely, *cultural sport psychology* (e.g., Ryba, Schinke, & Tenenbaum, 2010; Ryba & Wright, 2005). The recent book *Cultural Sport Psychology* (Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009) clearly illuminated differences in delivery of ASP in different countries around the world. Within this work Stambulova, Johnson, and Stambulov (2009) summarised some specific features of ASP delivery in Sweden (e.g., absence of official certification process, a lack of educational ASP programs, dominance of private ASP business, challenged gender stereotypes, etc.). An implication of the cultural sport psychology ideas for this study is that the participants' reflections should be contextualized so that they may be considered from the point of the Swedish socio-cultural context and the Swedish ASP context with its values and traditions.

### Reflections of established and novice sport psychology practitioners

Sport psychology literature reveals a number of reflective practice reports of well-known ASP practitioners (e.g., Balague, 1999; Gould, 2001; Henchen, 2001; Ravizza, 2002, and others). Most often these reports are grounded in the phenomenological perspective and emphasise the consultants' views of the ASP field

and their own place, role, professional development, and contributions to the field as well as their professional philosophies or guiding principles. Poczwadowski, Sherman, and Ravizza (2004) conceptualised a professional philosophy "for didactic and self-reflective purposes" (p. 446) as a hierarchical structure, in which the components are arranged from the most stable and internal (the bottom of the hierarchy) to the most dynamic and external (the top of the hierarchy): (a) personal core beliefs and values, (b) theoretical paradigms concerning behaviour change; (c) models of practice and the consultant's role, (d) intervention goals; and (e) intervention techniques and methods. Statler (2003) conducted a qualitative study of professional reflections of 12 outstanding sport psychology consultants in North America and concluded that their excellence in ASP is rooted in an optimal combination of personality, self, guiding principles, professional competencies/experiences, and understanding of sports with related policies.

Wylleman, de Caluwé, and Borgoo (2009) asked European sport psychology practitioners to describe attitudes/beliefs as well as knowledge/skills of novice and experienced ASP professionals. The respondents linked interest in people and sport, openness, perseverance, modesty, self-knowledge, and knowledge of how to work with people and implement mental and diagnostic skills to both novice and experienced consultants, whereas knowledge of the requirements of sport, ability to work individually and providing supervision was only linked to the experienced practitioners.

Literature dealing with the development of novice ASP professionals focuses mainly on the importance of self-reflections and a role of supervision in the professional development of neophyte professionals. Holt and Streat (2001), Tonn and Harmison (2004) presented and analysed self-narratives of ASP trainees (in an American context) and Cropley, Miles, Hanton, and Niven (2007) examined reflective practice experiences of one ASP trainee during her first year of supervised practice (in a British context). Cropley et al. concluded that "...reflection improves self-awareness and generates knowledge in action that enhances the delivery of applied sport psychology" (p. 475); they also recommended adopting reflective practice as a tool for personal and professional development.

Tod, Andersen, and Marchant (2009) conducted a longitudinal examination (three interviews over a two year period) of 8 Australian ASP trainees' motivation and models of service delivery. The authors showed the trainees' evolution from a rigid problem-solving approach to more flexible interventions to suit athletes' needs. The same authors (Tod, Marchant, & Andersen, 2007) interviewed graduates and teaching staff of the Australian master's ASP program. Participants discussed the value of interpersonal interactions among classmates and teaching staff, specific events outside of training (e.g., own athletic experiences) and they considered sport psychology research/theory to be helpful when applicable to clients.

In terms of the Swedish context, in Fallby (2004) novice sport psychology consultants presented their case work and reflected about their interventions in terms of the consultant–client relationship, the clients' achievements during the intervention and directions of potential future work with the client.

Another topic related to professional development of ASP students is supervision of their applied work which is seen in the literature as one of the most important parts in the training of sport psychology consultants from undergraduate to graduate levels (e.g., Andersen, Van Raalte & Brewer, 2000; Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, & Maynard, 2007; Tod et al., 2007; Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker, 2004). Andersen and Williams-Rice (1996) referred to developmental models of supervision created in counselling psychology (e.g., Hogan, 1964; Stoltenberg, 1981) describing four stages in a trainee-supervisor

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