



## A perspective on education and professional development in applied sport psychology

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives and method:** As the field of applied sport psychology (ASP) is witnessing a growth in interest in professional practice, it is also faced with the challenge of developing its professional status. Taking into account the lack of research on the career development of ASP practitioners, this article reviews research and information relevant to two major career phases: a) education in preparing for ASP practice, and b) initiation and development of professional ASP practice. The paper also provides an initial collation of information and research regarding ASP education, professional development, and service provision in Europe.

**Results and conclusions:** Results revealed that the field of ASP still faces the challenge of formulating an encompassing and uniformly used definition of ASP; of gaining a better understanding of the career development of ASP professionals, with particular attention for female ASP practitioners; of gaining insight into, analysing and providing quality management in the educational pathways preparing for ASP practice; and of optimising the vocational development of the ASP professional by way of ensuring the quality of ASP service delivery and the development of competencies in ASP practitioners. In conclusion, recommendations are formulated for furthering the development of ASP in Europe, and on the possible role of the European Federation for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (FEPSAC).

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### Introduction

The field of applied sport psychology (ASP) has met with different challenges during its relatively young history. It faced a significant challenge some four decades ago when trying to establish its *raison d'être* during the 1970s. Concerns raised on the ecological validity (i.e., the lack of attention to the unique context of sport) of laboratory-based sport psychology observations (Silva, Metzler, & Lerner, 2007), the growing need for field-based observations and research, as well as the evolution of the scientist-practitioner model in (sport) psychology brought the need for distinguishing the practices of academic sport psychology and that of ASP (Giacobbi, Poczwadowski, & Hager, 2005) to the forefront and championed the establishment ASP as a full sub-discipline of

sport psychology (Petrie & Diehl, 1995). The field of ASP received its recognition in Europe when, in 1995, the European Federation for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (Fédération Européenne de Psychologie des Sports et des Activités Corporelles; FEPSAC) recognized that application, together with education and research, was one of the three interrelated tasks of sport psychologists (Apitzsch & Schilling, 2003).

Related to establishing itself as a sub-discipline within the domain of sport psychology, the field of ASP faced another major challenge in finding an encompassing and uniformly used definition of its aim. This needs to define the aim of ASP remained a topic of discussion for almost three decades. This is exemplified by Maureen Weiss who, in her Presidential address to the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) in 1998 clearly stated that “the lack of a clear definition of applied sport psychology perpetuates the cloud of uncertainty many individuals have about their identity” (Weiss, 1998, p. S14). The use of expressions such as ‘the application of sport psychology’ (Silva, Conroy, & Zizzi, 1999), ‘doing sport psychology’ (Andersen, 2000) or ‘the practice of sport psychology’ (Silva et al., 2007) during the past

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decade reflected that ASP was indeed “not easy to pigeonhole” (McCann, 2005, p. 283) and that a more elaborate description of the aim of ASP was needed. A relevant step was taken by Silva et al. (1999) when noting that ASP “has taken on two very different meanings. One interpretation focuses on ... conduct[ing] applied research while the second interpretation describes ... the application of sport psychology principles with clients.” (p. 301). Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, and Robinson (2002) added that both the research-oriented and the practice-oriented branch of ASP influence and inform each other.<sup>1</sup> The practice-oriented branch was primarily described in terms of athlete performance enhancement, a focus on ASP which is still strong, as exemplified by Roper (2002) who translates ASP as “the application of psychological techniques and strategies that are aimed at aiding athletes in achieving greater performance” (p. 53). Several authors identified the need to elaborate this perspective on the practice-oriented branch of ASP by including, beyond intervention work, diagnosis, psychological testing and assessment (e.g., Gardner, 2001), counselling, consulting in special problem situations, and the provision of clinical services (Apitzsch & Schilling, 2003).

Another step forward in outlining the aim of ASP was taken in the wake of sport psychologists using a more holistic perspective on the development of athletes (e.g., Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). For example, Anderson et al. (2002) elaborated that the aim of ASP should include athletes’ development when describing it as “principally concerned with the application of theories, principles, and techniques from psychology to induce psycho-behavioural change in athletes to enhance performance, the quality of the sport experience, and the personal growth of the athlete” (p. 434). Thus, beyond psychological skills training and use of mental skills (McCann, 2005), ASP also focused on lifestyle development, and use of life skills amongst athletes. FEPSAC (2008a) supported this perspective recently in its position statement on the quality of ASP services by referring not only to athletes’ personal growth, but also to their relational and vocational development, and by including a reference to athletes’ well-being. FEPSAC stated that while in ASP “...a central focus is usually on optimising performance, other psychological themes such as well-being, work-life-balance or interpersonal issues may also come across”. In fact, by stating in this position paper that its services should not be geared solely towards athletes, but also to provide “efficient psychological support for ... coaches, sport clubs, organisations and significant others”, FEPSAC added a new element and took another step in elaborating on the aim of ASP. This broadening of the target group of ASP also led ASP to be linked to other, non-sport populations (e.g., managers, CEO’s), thus bringing it into the remit of another psychology sub-discipline, namely organisational consulting (Meyers, Coleman, Whelan, & Mehlenbeck, 2001).

During the past decade the field of ASP has witnessed a growth in interest in professional practice (Meyers et al., 2001) as well as in the number of practitioners (Roper, 2002). These developments confronted ASP with another major challenge, namely, that of delineating its practitioners. Traditionally, practitioners were described in terms of their education and training (e.g., Knowles, Gilbourne, Tomlinson, & Anderson, 2007; Weigand, Richardson, & Weinberg, 1999), their qualifications (e.g., McCann, 2005), as well as their acquired accreditation and certification in ASP (e.g., Anderson & Lavallee, 2005; Hale & Danish, 1999). For example, Hack (2005) used education and qualifications to delineate two types of service

practitioners, particularly to the United States: (a) sport psychologists or sport psychology consultants typically holding a PhD in clinical or counselling psychology (and can thus be licensed as psychologists), having obtained additional specialised education and training by taking courses in sport psychology and sport sciences, and having conducted supervised work with athletes; and (b) mental skills coaches at the leading edge of sport psychology research, often employed in an academic setting, having expertise in understanding the interplay of athletes’ physical and mental processes and their social culture, and trained in the development and interpretation of sport psychology-related tests.

A second body of literature has developed focussing on the services ASP practitioners provide as well as how these are provided. This perspective includes aspects such as the provision of specific (on-field/on-site) ASP support and services (e.g., Bull, 1995; Gardner & Moore, 2005; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Van Raalte, 2003), the effectiveness of ASP practice (e.g., Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004), ethical issues in ASP (e.g., Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001; Moore, 2003), or the quality of ASP services (e.g., FEPSAC, 2008a). At present, a third research strand is being developed which focuses on the way in which the career of ASP practitioners develops. While research on the career development of talented and elite athletes is well established (e.g., Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004), the literature on the career development of ASP practitioners (e.g., Roper, Fisher, & Wisberg, 2005) is agonisingly scarce.

In the present paper, the authors aim to contribute to the process of delineating the ASP practitioner by focussing particularly on the way in which the career of ASP practitioners develops. Taking into account that “much remains to be learned about sport psychology maturation, such as the ways that practitioners change throughout their careers” (Tod, 2007, p. 94), this article will present research and information particularly relevant to two major career phases, that of the education required in preparing for ASP practice, and that of the initiation and development of professional ASP practice.

When reviewing the ASP literature, it becomes obvious that the majority of the publications relate to the United States (USA), with little information on the situation in Europe. While relevant research on ASP in the USA will be reviewed, the second aim of this article is to provide an initial collation of information and research regarding ASP education, professional development and service provision in Europe. Our intent is not to achieve a detailed and complete review but rather to provide a starting point for discussions about, and recommendations for, the development of the field of ASP in general, with particular attention on its development in Europe. With this goal in mind, this article will conclude by specifying future needs in, and recommendations on, furthering the development of ASP in Europe and address the possible role of FEPSAC herein.

### Education preparing for ASP practice

As the education, training and preparation to practice ASP are generally linked to the phase of the student (beginning or advanced) (Tod, 2007), research and information on programmes aimed at preparing for ASP practice will be reviewed first. Second, a retrospective view will be used by evaluating the educational background of the actual ASP practitioner in light of their ASP practice.

#### *Education programmes preparing for ASP practice*

Programmes preparing for ASP practice can be organised by educational institutes, associations representing sport psychology,

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that ‘applied exercise psychology’ described as “the study of psychological factors underlying participation and adherence in physical activity programmes” (Anshel, 2006, p. 4) is in fact solely linked to conducting research.

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