

The professional game

PROFESSIONAL issues have featured prominently in the sport and exercise psychology literature for many years (e.g. see Nideffer, 1981). More recently a number of authors (see Andersen *et al.*, 2000) have warned that even the most well-intentioned psychologist may inadvertently harm sport participants through their interventions. In this article I will outline how potentially counterproductive effects can arise from inadequate sports-relevant background and training, lack of awareness of personal limitations, problems in establishing who the client is, and difficulties in implementing truly voluntary informed consent and maintaining confidentiality.

In the UK the psychology section of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) has led the way in formulating a code of conduct that is consistent with that of the BPS, and also in developing an accreditation system for researchers and practitioners. Currently some 60 people are accredited for scientific support (providing guidance and services to client groups), 20 for research, and 25 for both. The rigorous requirements for BASES accreditation recognise the importance of a comprehensive understanding of psychology as well as sport-specific expertise. Accredited sport psychologists normally have an undergraduate degree in psychology or sport science plus a higher degree.

Most applicants are also expected to supplement their academic education by undergoing three years of supervised experience, an 'apprentice' period during which the candidate will shadow an accredited sport psychologist, eventually gaining autonomy in practice. Some 125 probationary sport and exercise psychologists are currently undertaking supervised experience.

A number of long-standing issues regarding competence remain as objects of controversy. One concern is that gaining Chartered status may not necessarily represent 'full' competence, and it could give some psychologists not also BASES-accredited (and indeed their potential clients) undue confidence in their effectiveness as sport science practitioners. For example, a lack of knowledge of sport sciences (such as biomechanics and physiology), sport-specific problems (e.g.



SANDY WOLFSON on the ethics and regulation of sport and exercise psychology.

fitness training, drug use, injuries and rehabilitation) and actual experience of a sport (coaching or playing) may lead to inappropriate diagnoses and treatment.

Some psychologists may also be unaware of the many testing instruments designed specifically for sport. Ostrow (1996) lists over 300 such sports scales and inventories representing a multitude of areas, including motivation, achievement orientation, aggression, anxiety, attention and confidence. Many of these tests are not designed for sport in general but for particular activities such as basketball, running, gymnastics and exercise. The sport psychology literature suggests that some of the classic questionnaires used in psychology are unhelpful and inappropriate when used in a sports context.

Similarly, some mainstream psychologists assert that highly qualified sport academics and practitioners may lack depth of knowledge in some areas of psychology, and that this could lead to problems in recognising their limitations and problems of a serious clinical nature being missed. A well-meaning sport scientist could, for example, misinterpret a highly agitated sport participant's phobic disorder as competition anxiety and fail to involve a qualified therapist.

To complicate matters, sport psychologists – whatever their backgrounds – have particular difficulties with which to contend. Although it is considered essential to identify who the 'client' is – the individual sport participant, team, coach, manager or club – conflicts can arise that undermine the psychologist's attempt to adhere to ethical principles. BASES regulations for informed consent state that 'no member may undertake any work without first having the informed consent of all participating clients... without any undue inducement or element of force, fraud, deceit or coercion'. But this can be difficult to achieve with confidence. Just as an occupational psychologist may proceed knowing that employees are reluctant to

take tests for selection purposes (but feel they have no choice if they wish to be considered for a job or promotion), sport psychologists are often concerned that real or imagined pressure from a coach or manager might prompt sport participants to 'volunteer' to take tests, participate in research, or receive counselling.

Confidentiality is also considered to be of paramount importance, but the required 'prior written consent of a client' to divulge information that ostensibly emanates willingly from a player may actually be a result of perceived demands from club personnel. A powerful soccer manager can easily convince his players to persuade the team psychologist that they will benefit if their manager is provided with intimate details of their sessions. While a desire for open dissemination may indeed be genuine, the footballer may also be inhibited from revealing perceptions that the manager might interpret negatively.

Ethical guidelines provide recommendations for resolving these complex issues, but the situation remains difficult. BASES and the BPS are currently working both independently and together in the hope of providing satisfactory safeguards for all concerned. Both groups are committed to maintaining and enhancing the integrity and standards of psychological services available to the sports community.

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References

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