

Applied sport psychology: An expert panel discussion



Introduction

This article represents some of the discussion that took place during the BASES Conference 2014 roundtable session *Applied Sport Psychology: An Expert Panel Discussion*. The aim of this question and answer session was to offer delegates an insight into modern issues associated with applied practice through the ideas and experiences of the four professional practitioners working in a variety of contexts. Through this discussion it was hoped that a more holistic view of the field could be offered and thus provide an excellent resource for those working and training in applied sport psychology. The questions were categorised into the following areas: (a) practice philosophy; (b) practice experiences; (c) challenges and organisational issues; and (d) training and development, and the panel were asked to offer their own thoughts regarding each question before being invited to discuss any follow-up questions from the audience.

In attempts to capture some of the information presented and share it to a wider audience, this article has adopted a question and answer format, where the initials of the panel members have been used to depict their responses. Due to the scope of this article, however, it is impossible to epitomise the depth of the discussion that took place or to simply present each expert panel member's answers to the questions. Instead, this article aims to offer a 'flavour' of the panel discussion and provide the reader with some 'food for thought' regarding four of the main questions that were dealt with on the day.

Question 1: How has your practice philosophy developed over time?

Dr Joy Bringer

JB: My core values have remained relatively stable over my career, especially my humanistic belief in collaborating and supporting people towards self-actualisation. How I have practised, and the tools and models I use, have evolved over time. My undergraduate and master's degree was led mostly from an objective epistemology, and I used objective questionnaires more during my early training. My PhD supervisors introduced me to other epistemological perspectives, particularly constructionism, and this in turn has influenced my professional delivery philosophy. When I started working at Sport Wales 12 years ago as a full-time sport psychologist, I was very athlete-centred and due to having to work across eight sports, I did not work with coaches or in the training environment as much as I do now. Experiences with different sports and being exposed to a wide range of organisational, performance, lifestyle, and clinical issues, working away at camps and Paralympic and Commonwealth Games, continuing professional development, peer supervision, and informal and formal reflection has further shaped my philosophy. My work is now focused around three sports, and my philosophy is more eclectic, where I try to match my approach to the needs the client (e.g., Governing Body, performance director, coach, team or athlete).

Dr Chris Harwood FBASES

CH: I don't believe my core philosophy has changed but the models of practice I adopt have evolved with a greater understanding of the developmental aspects of sport psychology. At a youth level, psycho-education and cognitive-behavioural aspects work for me, as well as close attention

to the environment around the athlete. I'm also a believer in the supervisory consulting model where the coach/other education professional can help athletes at the coalface. Teenagers tend to benefit from greater direction, examples, and strategies and start to think for themselves once you've brought them in and gained their trust. My experience with adults tends to allow for a more person-centred collaboration, and a greater confidence that they can find their own solutions to challenges with me as a more empathetic sounding board.

Dr Brian Hemmings FBASES

BH: There is frequently some misunderstanding in the literature about philosophy; whereby it is often mistakenly used to just describe a practitioner's theoretical approach. A philosophy is greater than this; it is a personal outlook or view that includes one's values and beliefs. A good read to elucidate this would be Poczwardowski *et al.* (2004). I believe that my outlook continues to change. A practice philosophy evolves over time; so I have been shaped by upbringing, my training, and my personal experiences for example. In recent years, I have become a Christian so I can see how that is now being woven into my philosophy. Central to my philosophy is the importance of relationships and the uniqueness of individuals, and I also believe in humour, storytelling and looking beyond sport psychology for interventions.

Question 2: What is the toughest situation that you've experienced as a practitioner?

JB: Although I felt most prepared for the Glasgow Commonwealth Games as a practitioner (it was my 7th major multisport Games), it was by far the one filled with the most adversity for the athletes and staff in our team. My previous Games experiences had prepared me well, and I was diligent in using my personal stress management strategies so that I could be fully present for the athletes and support staff. I had even discussed the personal 'what if' scenario of getting a phone call from home...and that unlikely situation became reality. With four days remaining of the Games, I was on a plane home to California to be with my dad during his final four days. I am grateful to our team doctors, chef de mission and colleagues for supporting me in my decision to leave the team to be with my family.

Rebecca Symes

RS: Hmmm, this is a tough one! I think anything to do with clinical cases, especially the first few times you encounter those situations. It can be hard to know exactly what to do, who to seek support from and what the best course of action is, especially due to the boundaries of competence in which we have to work. You have to know your own competencies/limits, build up a good referral network as well as develop your own coping strategies to be able to deal with what clients throw at you (guilty and emotive knowledge).



CH: A stand out one for me was the challenge of encouraging football coaches to engage in appropriate post-match performance debriefs. I think the arrival of performance analysis and video feedback has helped matters but that is a very general observation. At the local level it was chronically challenging to witness the debriefing (or lack of) process and the motivational and emotional effects on players. It felt like someone was tearing up all of my training and knowledge in theories of human behaviour for the purpose of a good old self-serving 'vent'. My interpretation of the players' views that I worked with were always the same - "We can take it, it is part of the culture, but it doesn't help us; there are better ways to motivate players."

Question 3: What is the biggest challenge that the field of applied sport psychology faces today?

RS: Perceptions still seem to exist that psychology is there just to fix things. The challenge we face is in changing these perceptions. We need to work harder to demonstrate how we can enhance performance and not just expect coaches/athletes to 'get it'. We need to show how we can have an impact and be clear on exactly how we are going to do that. Demonstrating and evidencing the potential value and impact of psychology is therefore a huge challenge.

CH: Defining who and what a sport psychologist is and is not by their training and education, and getting the education and training processes right to meet the demands of that definition correctly. Unless we do this better, we'll continue to be a profession that remains a bit all over the place and open to cowboys and charlatans. I personally don't believe that you can be an effective sport psychologist in the way I define the term without having some knowledge or background experience in sport science and implicit knowledge of sports and the support/coaching context. However, one can go through BSc Psychology, an MSc in Sport Psychology and Stage 2 DSEP and bypass knowledge of sport science or application of knowledge of auxiliary areas and interdisciplinary matters. When I stand in front of two of my MSc students in semester 1 - one with a 1st class profile in sport science (including sport psychology modules), one with a low 2.1 in psychology (and no sport psychology or sport science knowledge), I find it personally very uncomfortable seeing a potentially stronger practitioner disadvantaged compared to the other. It doesn't sit well given my knowledge of the real world demands of the profession and how grossly behind some psychology graduates are when entering an MSc.

BH: The biggest challenge we face is to have training and supervision programmes equip trainee sport psychologists for all the roles they will encounter. We need to better prepare trainees in the communication skills they need, for example. Lots of research and practitioner experiences point to the importance of interpersonal skills and relationship building in consultancy yet the field still, to my mind, is too fixed on

'content' issues about interventions; rather than 'soft' skills, consultancy practice and 'delivery process'.

Question 4: What advice would you give to a trainee practitioner?

CH: Practise your interpersonal and relational skills rigorously, ensure you get coaches on side with your work, and clearly establish with them/the club/the organisation 'who is the client' and 'who is the employer'.

BH: Work really hard and persist when you meet apathy. Get involved in different sports. But overall, remember the most important thing is to build strong relationships.

RS: Get out there and start getting some experience - you might not be fully qualified but you've got a degree and a master's (or working towards) so you actually know quite a lot! You need to create opportunities to starting putting your knowledge into action. Go out and test stuff out, be creative, do things how you think they should be done (don't feel you have to do things the way others do it) within the boundaries of your own competence.

JB: Find a great supervisor who makes time to support and challenge you.

As Chair of this panel discussion I would like to thank the experts not only for their contribution but more explicitly for the candid insights they were willing to share with the rest of the field. The availability of such practice based information is scarce and as a result this session provided a unique and excellent learning experience for all involved and in attendance. It is, therefore, pleasing that the panel discussion session will be continued BASES Conference 2015 - DR BRENDAN CROPLEY FBASES. ■

Expert Panel Members



Dr Chris Harwood FBASES

Chris is a Reader in Applied Sport Psychology at Loughborough University. He is a British Psychological Society Chartered Psychologist and a Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registered practitioner.



Dr Brian Hemmings FBASES

Brian is a British Psychological Society Chartered Psychologist, HCPC registered practitioner working at Golf Mind. He is a Research Fellow at St. Mary's University and private practitioner.



Dr Joy Bringer

Joy is the Senior Sport Psychologist at Sport Wales, a British Psychological Society Chartered Psychologist, a HCPC registered practitioner and holds BASES High Performance Sport Accreditation.



Rebecca Symes

Rebecca is the Founder of 'Sporting Success' consultancy. She is British Psychological Society Chartered Psychologist and a HCPC registered practitioner.

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