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Exploring the Relationship Between Effective and Reflective Practice in Applied Sport Psychology

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This study offers an investigation into the concept of effective practice in applied sport psychology (ASP) with emphasis being placed upon the role that reflective practice may have in helping practitioners to develop the effectiveness of their service delivery. Focus groups (n = 2), consisting of accredited and trainee sport psychologists, were conducted to generate a working definition of effective practice, and discuss the concept of effectiveness development through engagement in reflective practices. The resulting definition encapsulated a multidimensional process involving reflection-on-practice. Initial support for the definition was gained through consensus validation involving accredited sport psychologists (n = 34) who agreed with the notion that although effectiveness is context specific it is related to activities designed to meet client needs. Reflective practice emerged as a vital component in the development of effectiveness, with participants highlighting that reflection is intrinsically linked to service delivery, and a key tool for experiential learning.

With applied sport psychology (ASP) now commonly recognized as having gained professional status, emphasis is increasingly being placed on the effective practices of service providers (Grove, Norton, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1999; Hack, 2005; Tod & Andersen, 2005). Nevertheless, research that is available on developing understanding of effectiveness within sport psychology has largely focused on examining the characteristics of ASP consultants rather than on effective practice in its entirety (e.g., Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998). Although findings from such investigations have provided a more in-depth understanding of the characteristics that must be developed by sport psychologists in their efforts to

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provide an effective service, a number of researchers have commented that there is still a distinct lack of literature that considers the full range of specific service delivery factors in ASP that might contribute to successful outcomes (e.g., Holt & Strean, 2001). Certainly, little effort has been made to define what 'effective practice' is within ASP beyond the confines of goal achievement (cf. Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007). Although this may appear to offer a valid interpretation of effectiveness, emphasis is generally placed on the achievement of outcome goals (e.g., helping an athlete to overcome a crisis in confidence) making it problematic to distinguish causation, the influence of the practitioner and their interventions, and consequently evaluate the effectiveness of practice in such a way (cf. Lyle, 2002). Thus, it is suggested that the evaluation of applied effectiveness and the development of an evidence-base to guide practice have been limited (Martindale & Collins, 2007).

Strean (1998), some time ago, indicated that effective evaluation of the efficacy of performance-enhancement interventions is, "Among the most pressing needs in applied sport psychology" (p. 340). Indeed, with increased accountability resulting from the attainment of professional status, applied sport psychologists must engage in systematic evaluative processes to render judgment, facilitate improvement, and generate knowledge regarding their professional practice (cf. Anderson, Miles, et al., 2004; Chelimsky, 1997). However, previous understandings of 'what' and 'how' to evaluate effectiveness have been limited by equivocal understandings of what actually constitutes effective practice. In attempts to address such issues Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, and Robinson (2002) proposed a case study approach to evaluation involving the collective examination of four effectiveness indicators (e.g., performance, psychological skills and well-being, athlete response to the support, and consultant effectiveness). In addition, Martindale and Collins (2007) suggested that professional judgment and decision making (PJDM) should be included into case studies that are used to evaluate practice. Importantly, such research presents both outcome (e.g., psychological skills) and process (e.g., social validity, PDJM) measures of effectiveness and has thus helped to elucidate the wider concept of effective practice. However, both Anderson et al. and Martindale and Collins have acknowledged that future research is necessary to establish valid and reliable measures of each of the effectiveness indicators. Interestingly, however, a common theme emanating in both papers is the notion of reflective practice as a method for evaluating process indicators and developing knowledge that can be used to enhance the evidence-base available to practitioners.

Research from a variety of fields has suggested that reflecting on an experience is an intentional and skilled activity requiring an ability to analyze practice actions and make judgments regarding effectiveness (Driscoll & Teh, 2001). Indeed, the utility of reflective practice has been widely acknowledged in recent literature that has attempted to consider how practice can be evaluated and thus how knowledge can be generated to inform and develop the effectiveness of future practice (e.g., Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004; Cropley et al., 2007; Schinke et al., 2006; Tod, 2007). Further, Tod, Marchant, and Andersen (2007) advised that the multidimensional process of service delivery competence should incorporate practitioners reflecting on how they have influenced the interactions and outcomes of service provision. Although Tod et al.'s proposal focuses on competence it may also contribute to a greater understanding of the determinants of effective practice

by encouraging us to consider the concept as a multidimensional process that is intrinsically linked to reflective practice. In this sense competence refers to the practitioner's ability to be effective, whereas effectiveness refers to the power of the practitioner to produce a desired effect (e.g., performance enhancement) and is therefore something that consultants are trying to achieve.

To illuminate the relationship between effectiveness and reflective practice further three key principles of reflection can be considered. First, reflective practice is about learning from experience (Ghaye & Lillyman, 2000). Consequently, practitioners engaging in reflective practice can begin to act on the notion that knowledge is embedded in the experience of their work and use that knowledge to consider potential alternative courses of action to affirm effective future practice (cf. Amulya, 2004; Flemming, 2007). Second, reflection can improve practice (Ghaye & Lillyman, 2000). Reflective practice is proposed to help practitioners make more sense of difficult and complex situations by creating links between professional knowledge (e.g., theory) and practice and raise *knowledge-in-action* (e.g., tacit or craft knowledge) into consciousness (Anderson, Knowles, et al., 2004). Schön (1987) proposed that knowledge-in-action is core to the artistry of professional practice and that by, "Turning a problem upside down" (p. 12) and examining not just the research based knowledge that influences our practice but also hands on knowledge-in-action, we will be in a better position to identify good practice and take steps to learn from it. This is particularly pertinent for the field of sport psychology where the simple application of theory to practice is often unlikely to achieve successful results (Andersen, 2005). Third, reflection involves respecting and working with evidence (Ghaye & Lillyman, 2000). As it is based on real-life, reflection can generate practice-based knowledge, which adds to evidence concerning 'how we actually practice' (Driscoll & Teh, 2001). In light of current calls for sport psychologists to engage in evidence-based practice to demonstrate that what they do is actually effective (cf. Rowland & Goss, 2000), it would appear imperative that practitioners seek to develop their knowledge of 'what actually works in practice' through reflection.

Despite apparent connections between reflective practice and effectiveness within ASP there is currently a lack of empirical support for such connotations. Indeed, Newman (1999) warns against accepting the value of such a reflective approach to practice without questioning the evidence upon which claims are based. In addition, the majority of our current knowledge and understanding of reflective practice and how it can be successfully integrated into ASP has been deduced from related fields (e.g., nursing, education). While we can learn about the potential value of reflective practice we must also take into account a range of issues that have been raised in these related fields. For example, from an educational perspective Scanlan and Chernomas (1997) indicated that people may think they are reflecting but often they are confused between what reflection is and other mental processes (e.g., pondering, scrutinizing, ruminating). This lack of conceptual clarity is supported by Totterdell and Lambert (1999) who question whether practitioners really understand what reflective practice is or whether there is substantial research evidence to deem it effective. Allied with these issues is the actuality that reflective practice has been assimilated into ASP training and development programs (cf. the British Psychological Society [BPS], and the British Association of Sport & Exercise Sciences [BASES]) with little guidance or instruction resulting in

the likelihood that reflective practice becomes something to 'be done' to fulfill accreditation requirements rather than a mechanism for developing practice. The nature and potency of reflective practice for sport psychology must therefore be considered carefully and critically.

If the field of ASP is to continue to progress and meet the demands placed upon it by the acceptance of professional status then greater clarity of the processes that may influence the level of effectiveness of practice must be obtained. Such information, accompanied by current understandings of the characteristics associated with effective consultants, will provide a more holistic understanding of the concept and provide a platform for the enhancement of the evidence-base that currently informs practice. Advances in our understanding of effectiveness will also allow a more thorough examination of the relationship it has with reflective practice. Investigating possible links will help to generate potentially significant information regarding the successful integration of reflective practice into ASP, and thus generate evidence to support the value of reflection and its integration globally into professional training programs, such as the Association of Applied Sport Psychology's (AASP) certification scheme where currently there is no specific requirement for neophytes to engage in reflection-on-practice. Accordingly, the aims of this study were to: (a) develop a more holistic understanding of effective practice through the development of a working definition, (b) examine the relationship between effectiveness and reflective practice, and (c) explore current practices, knowledge, and beliefs of applied sport psychologists with regards to reflective practice. The present study adopted a qualitative approach to probe participants' responses and establish detailed information regarding the research question (cf. Hanton & Connaughton, 2002; Anderson, Miles, et al., 2004). Specifically, two focus group sessions were conducted with sport psychologists at differing levels of professional status (e.g., neophyte, accredited) allowing the inspection of individuals' experiences while engaging all participants in directed discussion. Thus, with a permissive atmosphere that fosters a range of opinions, focus groups allow a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues to be obtained (Greenbaum, 1998).

Method

Participants

In attempts to generate valuable information that addressed the specific research area, the focus group sample was selected using purposive techniques (Patton, 2002). Specifically, criteria were set to obtain a 'rich' sample characterized by homogeneity but with sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). To sample the widest range of knowledge and experience it was deemed that participants must have worked with teams and individual athletes from a variety of sports and had to be providing sport psychology support at the time of the focus group session so that current opinions of the context of modern-day consultancy, effectiveness and reflective practice could be discussed. Finally, it was decided that each focus group should consist of practitioners at different levels of BASES accredited status (e.g., supervised experience candidates, accredited and reaccredited consultants, see BASES, 2007).

In line with research adopting similar methods, a triad of participants was selected for each focus group to make it easier for the session leader to probe comments and obtain more input and details from each group member (e.g., Hanton, Cropley, Neil, Mellalieu, & Miles, 2007). Further, Edmunds (1999) suggested that smaller focus groups generate greater participant interaction and discussion, allowing issues to be investigated in more depth. Consequently, six (three male, three female) BASES registered sport psychologists, were contacted, screened in relation to the purposive criteria, and asked to take part in the study, all of whom agreed. Participants, who ranged in age from 26 to 46 years ($M = 32.5$, $SD = 7.1$), were then selected for one of two focus groups. The trainee sport psychologists ($n = 2$) were at year one and three of BASES Supervised Experience, the accredited practitioners ($n = 2$) had been qualified for one and five years, and the reaccredited practitioners ($n = 2$) had eight and 12 years of experience resulting in them being reaccredited once and twice respectively at the time of the focus group sessions. Each focus group consisted of one practitioner from each stage of professional accreditation.

Focus Group Procedure

A preparation booklet was sent to participants one week before their focus group session to allow them to become familiar with the content of the focus group and thus aid the depth of the discussion during the session (cf., Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007). Following procedures advocated by Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002) and Hanton et al. (2007), as an aid to the focus group process, a protocol was developed using the extant literature. Although the protocol had several definite sections it was not rigid in structure, but instead served as a map to chart the course of the focus group from beginning to end while allowing the moderator to probe more deeply where necessary (cf. Greenbaum, 1998). Indeed, with the focus groups being used for developing a richer understanding in this investigation, it would have been inappropriate to restrict the flow of the discussion by using a strictly structured protocol (cf., Edmunds, 1999).

The full protocol (available upon request) was separated into six sections. Section one contained an introduction to explain issues of confidentiality, reasons for audio-taping, and a statement of the individual's rights. Participants were provided with a standard set of orientating instructions preparing them for the subject matter and the way in which the focus group would function. Section two offered the participants the opportunity to discuss what effective practice meant to them as practitioners. The discussion was guided by the moderator using probes such as: "how would an athlete describe effective service delivery?" and "how does effectiveness differ from competence?" Section three invited participants to debate and discuss a definition of effective practice within ASP. Participants were encouraged to engage with one another and verbally formulate their ideas before being asked to reach a consensus on the definition. Importantly, both focus groups were asked to develop their own definition of effective practice so that the concept could be explored more thoroughly (cf. Jones et al., 2002). Section four required participants to consider their knowledge of and approaches to evaluation and reflection in ASP practice. The discussion in this section was developed through the use of probes such as: "how do we (psychologists) learn from experience?" and "how

do we (psychologists) generate knowledge and develop the effectiveness of our practice?" Participants were also asked to discuss their personal methods, protocols, and experiences of evaluating and reflecting on their own practice. Section five gave the participants the chance to discuss related issues such as: "are there any types of situations that you cannot learn from?" and "can learning from the experiences of others influence the effectiveness of your own practice?" Finally, section six acted as a conclusion by affording participants the chance to revisit the definition and raise any topics they deemed important that had not been covered.

In accordance with the recommendations of Krueger and Casey (2000) both focus group sessions were led by two moderators. This allowed one moderator to focus on facilitating the group while the other was able to take detailed notes and deal with the mechanics of the recording equipment. Both focus group sessions were conducted face-to-face in a neutral setting to aid the flow of conversation and to avoid any environmental bias. The sessions lasted for approximately 120 min each, were audiotape recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim yielding 186 pages of text.

Data Analysis

Due to the exploratory nature of this investigation, a combination of inductive and deductive content analysis procedures was employed to address the three research questions. Initially, transcripts were independently studied in detail by the research team to ensure content familiarity before the common underlying trends from the transcripts were clustered within new emergent themes, which were categorized based on links with the extant literature (Greenbaum, 1998). In line with previous qualitative research, it was decided that the reader should be given the opportunity to interpret the data in a manner that may be more meaningful to them (e.g., Hanton et al., 2007; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Data gathered, therefore, are reported in the form of direct quotes from the transcripts to enable the reader to empathize with, and immerse themselves in the participants' experiences while illustrating important points (cf. Sparkes, 1998). Trustworthiness characteristics were considered throughout via thick description, the recording and transcribing of all interviews, peer debriefing, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Effective Practice Definition: Consensus Validation

To examine the validity of the proposed definition a four-staged consensus validation procedure was employed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, each member of the research team reviewed the session transcripts independently before collectively constructing and agreeing upon the definition of effective practice that incorporated all of the key elements emanating from discussion in the focus groups (cf. Hanton et al., 2007). Second, the definition was sent to the focus group participants for confirmation and feedback, incorporating member checking. Third, the definition was emailed to all members of the Sport and Exercise Psychology Section of BASES who were asked to review the definition and to: (a) comment on anything that clearly stood out as being overlooked; (b) make any positive comments regarding the definition and what it encompasses; (c) offer any thoughts on its wording or structure, and (d) provide any other more general comments. Of the 129 members

emailed 34 (26.4% return) responded. Finally, responses from stages two and three were reviewed collectively by the research team before discussing any plausible changes to the definition. This debate continued until agreement was reached.

Results

Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of this investigation the results are divided into four sections allowing the reader to empathize with the depth of data collected. The definition of effective practice is presented in the first section. This is followed by three sections that outline specific aspects of the focus group discussion relating to the research questions: i) effective practice and associated conceptual issues; ii) reflective practice and effective ASP; and iii) ASP consultants' current beliefs, attitudes, and practices of reflection. Each of these are subdivided into higher order themes, deduced from the session transcripts, that strive to sequence the findings in a meaningful way for the reader to interpret (Anderson, Miles, et al., 2004).

Effective Practice Definition

The definition of effective practice emerging from the previously described focus group and consensus validation procedure was as follows:

> Effective practice in applied sport psychology concerns meeting the needs of the client(s). Effective practice is therefore a process where, (a) a working alliance is developed between client(s) and practitioner, (b) clients goals are clear and agreed by all stakeholders, (c) appropriate evidence-based interventions are undertaken to achieve goals, and (d) goals are achieved or reformulated. Honest evaluation and reflection on the process then occurs to inform future practice, which requires the consultant to pro-actively seek sincere feedback.

Therefore, effective sport psychology practice was considered to be a multidimensional process linked to athlete-centered service delivery where the consultant endeavors to meet the client needs. The process of effective practice was also suggested to be associated with the willingness and ability of practitioners to engage in systematic evaluative and reflective practices, central to which is the collecting of evidence or feedback from a variety of sources.

Consensus validation procedures involving BASES Accredited Sport Psychologists, not directly involved in the initial construction of the definition, resulted in a plethora of comments ranging from matters concerning punctuation and wording to conceptual issues. For example, one respondent commented, "I think the mark of an effective practitioner is to know their limits or boundaries of their knowledge and expertise. However, I'm not sure how it would fit into the definition." Another remarked, "One suggestion I have is that I don't think the word 'stakeholders' is the right word to use here." However, the majority (n = 21) provided confirmation that the definition does capture 'effective practice'. For example, some of the respondents comments acknowledged, "I agree that the definition contains all of the main elements concerning effective practice", and "I agree with the stated definition. These are generally the things that I would look to try to achieve." Further, one participant suggested:

> I tried to think about how each step could be missed out and still allow effective practice to happen. I wanted to see if I could find a 'hole' in it because it didn't feel right initially. However, I could not think of a good reason, or a situation where those stages should not or could not occur in truly effective delivery for all stakeholders.

Importantly, as a result of recurring themes being raised regarding potential improvements to the definition (e.g., "Goals cannot be set until effective rapport is built", and, "Perhaps add 'evidence-based' before activities in 'c'") minor elements of the definition were altered.

Effective Practice: Conceptual Issues

Competence versus Effectiveness. This theme emanated through agreement by participants in both focus group sessions that clear distinctions can and need to be made between competent and effective practice in order for effectiveness to be defined. However, participants were clear that both concepts were interlinked. For example, one participant suggested, "I think you have to have competence in order to be effective." Distinctions were based on the notion that competence refers to practitioners having theoretical knowledge and "how to" practice skills to implement that knowledge ethically, whereas effectiveness refers to the practitioner being able to apply and adapt their knowledge to the specific context in which they find themselves to meet the needs of the client. Indeed, one participant suggested, "Traditionally books will tell you how to do an imagery session. But then it's the application of that knowledge with the performer and acknowledging the context that probably distinguishes someone who's competent from someone who's effective." Interestingly, participants agreed that from an athlete's perspective these client needs would refer to performance enhancement. However, they also embraced the notion that defining effective practice based on client needs would be context specific depending on the intended outcomes of support being provided (e.g., personal growth and development, injury rehabilitation).

Participants also discussed the notion that the knowledge and skills required to practice effectively are learnt "on the job." Conversely, professional accreditation and certification programs (e.g., AASP; BASES) are focused on the development of competencies. One participant acknowledged, "It (BASES Supervised Experience, see BASES, 2007) involves rating yourself, with your supervisor, on how competent you are in each of the predefined areas and there's not an awful lot that assesses how effective you are." Consequently, participants agreed that such training programs must embrace frameworks that help practitioners learn from their experiences and thus prepare them holistically to meet the challenges associated with applied practice.

Linking Effective Practice to Reflection. This theme emerged from participants' comments that learning is intrinsically linked to effective practice. Indeed, it was reported that, "Effective practice within sport psychology is about learning from your experiences, allowing you to evolve and cope with the different contexts in which you find yourself." The discussion progressed to suggest that reflective practice allows the generation of a "bank" of knowledge that aids decision making

and practice in all situations. Such knowledge was proposed to allow practitioners to understand 'what actually works' in practice, thus enhancing the likelihood of the practitioner engaging in effective service delivery. Regarding this, one participant added:

> When you're training it's easy to think that sport psychology is 'black and white' but in reality it's the most grey world in existence. You have to recognize that reflection helps you to know the grey parts better so you can practice more successfully.

Consequently, due to the nature of sport psychology and the roles that a practitioner may have to fulfill, reflection-on-practice was suggested as an inherent aspect of effective practice.

Participants in both focus groups agreed that practitioners can learn and generate knowledge from all experiences, including the experiences of other consultants. However, participants also thought that reflecting on first-hand experiences produces more meaningful learning. For example, one participant suggested, "You can get tips to help you in certain situations, but actually being there yourself, ingrained in the situation, I think you learn more." Therefore, participants agreed that reflecting on the experiences of others can help to inform practice but it will not provide the context-specific answers to problems associated with service delivery. Further, participants indicated that the only experiences you do not or cannot learn from are those that have not been reflected upon. One participant remarked, "You can learn from every experience, positive or negative, it's whether you chose to learn from it and chose to implement change as appropriate." In essence then, participants concurred that reflective practice focuses the intensity and effort of motivation to change behaviors and practices based on learning from experience.

Reflective Practice and Effective Applied Sport Psychology

Current Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs Concerning Reflection. This theme emerged from agreement by both the accredited (n = 2) and reaccredited (n = 2) consultants participating in the focus groups that reflective practice is a relatively new concept in sport psychology. Although one participant suggested that, "We were never asked to do it (reflective practice) formally", participants agreed that reflection is an integral part of being an applied sport psychologist and something that should form part of everyday practice. Indeed it was proposed that, "It (reflection) is part of the day-to-day aspect of being a practitioner. It's (reflection) the part of the process where you become a better practitioner…effective, competent, or however you want to define it." Notably, participants discussed that while BASES have introduced reflective practice into its professional training and development schemes it is commonly seen by practitioners as an additional "tick-box" exercise due to the lack of guidance over the involvement in reflective practices. Consequently, there appeared to be some confusion over the definition and the processes involved in reflective practice. One participant admitted, "I struggle sometimes to understand how it differs from effective evaluation." Nevertheless, participants confirmed that by emphasizing the need to reflect BASES have made it "fashionable" and therefore more neophytes are engaging in reflection. One of the trainee consultants revealed that:

> For me I think it (awareness of reflective practice) came out through becoming a requirement for Supervised Experience with BASES. It became an extra element that had to be covered and until it was pointed out to me in that context I might not have necessarily come across it in a formal sense.

Participants also discussed the idea that reflection is a cognitive activity that requires training and guidance, with information to engage in such activities not currently being explicitly available. Indeed, agreement was clear that the evidence-base underpinning the application of reflective practice into sport psychology is limited; "In essence we are a new field and we're just taking over from the practices and the way they do things in mainstream psychology. The knowledge base about how to do reflective practice isn't there yet." It was advocated that, "People need to be trained in how to do it (reflect) because although some people may have a set of reflective skills others don't, and therefore there needs to be some means of acquiring them." In attempts to address this it was suggested that initial engagement in reflective practice may benefit from more structured processes. One participant highlighted, "When you start reflecting you need to go through a structured process in terms of asking loads of questions so you can attend to that information you need to focus on to improve your practice." Another participant recommended that, "I think they're (accreditation programs) an issue because you don't get to develop and get feedback on reflective skills. This (training) could be improved to get people reflecting more deeply earlier on because that's when you need to reflect the most."

Participants shared the belief that the quality of supervision in accreditation programs is important in developing a reflective culture and therefore increasing practitioners' engagement in and commitment to reflective practice. For example, it was stated that, "The element of having a formal supervisor who is aware that part of the process of effective supervision is reflective practice, will encourage the trainee to reflect more." Allied with this idea, participants highlighted the importance of practitioners being able to produce honest reflections. One participant shared, "From the guys that I've supervised their reflection isn't honest enough for me, it doesn't actually reflect what they were thinking it just reflects what they think I want to know." It was surmised that honest reflection may be borne out of the training of practitioners and the commitment they are willing to give to reflective practice.

Current Evaluative and Reflective Practices. A common theme emanating from discussion on current reflective practices was the importance of reflecting with others (e.g., colleagues, supervisors). Specifically, participants outlined concerns over only engaging in processes of self-reflection due to practitioners being limited by their own knowledge. For example, one participant revealed, "It (reflective practice) can be quite an isolated process. I think as an early practitioner I have found having people in that loop of reflection the most powerful way of increasing my effectiveness." In agreement, another participant highlighted:

> When you're an applied consultant normally you're quite isolated so I've found that using other people in my reflection has forced me to seek advice from people. I've found that useful because otherwise I'd be sitting there with only my own thoughts and ideas about an experience and I don't feel as though that's effective reflection because you don't know what you could have done differently.

Accordingly, one participant suggested that the level of engagement in reflective practice can be improved through the use of a "buddy-system" where you reflect with a colleague who is preferably at a similar level to you. This participant indicated:

> I speak to my colleague before and ask him what he thinks about my plans. Afterwards he calls me to ask how the session went, so I guess that creates a formal reflection process…doing this you're actually developing your consultancy styles together, which I think is more of a beneficial, emergent, developmental process.

The participants also established that, although all reflective methods should be promoted, reflective practice is more lucrative as a formalized, structured process. Such practices were thought to lead to deeper, more critical reflections, thus enhancing learning. Indeed, it was implied that, "Although we reflect naturally it (structured reflection) takes it to that deeper level. If you make the effort to formalize it (reflection) then you are putting conscious awareness into it leading you to generate or seek more knowledge appropriately." Support was provided by another participant who noted, "It's (reflective practice) one of those ideas that by making it more formal you'd get a better learning experience and that makes you more effective." Coupled with the suggested value of formalizing reflections, participants raised awareness of a need to gain feedback from clients (e.g., athlete, coach, National Governing Body [NGB]) to help structure and focus reflections. Such feedback is proposed to change the level of reflection, as does the nature of the experience. Certainly, it was noted that the type of process engaged in is dependant upon the nature of the experience with more formal reflection being engaged in only for critical incidents. One participant stated, "It (reflective practice) ranges in the amount of time and the extent to which you analyze is dependant upon the situation." Another participant also added that, "I reflect informally after every session and formally if an issue came up that was a little bit out of my remit."

Focus group discussion further exposed that some of the participants benefited from "framing" their experiences immediately post-incident in attempts to reduce the influence of memory decay. Participants highlighted that making notes or expressing thoughts onto a Dictaphone afforded them the opportunity to reflect accurately and in more depth at a later date. It was expressed that such procedures help practitioners to not be influenced by post-incident emotion and thus produce more honest reflections. This was best articulated by one participant who stated, "I put half an hour aside at the end of the day for it (reflection) but sometimes you are so euphoric after something that I don't actually have clarity so I make notes and leave it for a week later." Connected to this comment came suggestions that time should be put aside for reflection to allow it to become part of everyday practice. Participants were clear that ideally this would happen, however, the nature of applied practice may dictate that consultants may not always get the opportunity to do this. Nevertheless, one participant surmised that, "Reflection becomes such a critical part of some of our existence that actually you almost build in reflection time to your practice."

Finally, participants outlined that, "It's not the normal procedure to reflect on good performances." Indeed, even when the experience has been successful participants suggested that there is a tendency to reflect only on the elements that could be improved. One participant outlined, "I'll spend less time reflecting on

the things that went well and I'll always be looking for 'how can I change that for the next time around?'"

Benefits of Engaging in Reflective Practice for the Applied Sport Psychologist. Focus group discussion uncovered participant's beliefs that reflective practice has several important benefits for applied sport psychologists. First, reflective practice was suggested to improve the self-awareness of the sport psychologist. One participant noted, "Sometimes you're not aware of the reasons why the errors are occurring and therefore you don't know how to change them. By reflecting you can improve your self-awareness and understand how to change appropriately." Participants were in agreement that improving self-awareness further helps practitioners to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their practice, and uncover deficiencies in theoretical and practical knowledge. For example, one participant explained, "It (reflection) helps you to identify where your strengths lie as well because it's not always about 'what did I do badly?'" Consequently, participants discussed the notion that reflection is thought to drive the practitioner to make appropriate changes to improve their practice.

Second, participant discussion focused on the development of *knowing-in-action*. This is best summarized by the comments of one participant who advocated that through reflection, "You're looking at a grounded theory approach where you develop your view of the world and the way that you practice…You're developing these models of practice in terms of what you need to do and mechanisms involved." Further, agreement was achieved on the notion that when you reflect you can begin to understand, "Why you did certain things and whether they were right or not." Participants voiced the belief that knowledge emanating from these questions could then inform future decisions and practices, subsequently adding support for the value of reflective practice in the development of effective service delivery.

Finally, participants considered the value of reflective practice in the development of a consultant's philosophy. One participant stated, "I think it (reflection) helps you to develop your philosophy as well if you're constantly reflecting back on what you've done and what your stance is on things." Further, another participant offered a personal experience of the way in which reflection had helped then construct new understandings of the way in which they practiced: "I've learnt from reflection that it's not that I've got every correct tool in my bag to fix problems, so I've changed my philosophy, moving away from mental skills and cognitive-behavioral therapy." Conversation surrounding this idea emphasized the connection between philosophy development and increasing knowledge of 'real-life' consultancy through self-awareness by reflecting-on-practice.

Discussion

This study attempted to provide a more explicit understanding of effective practice within ASP and clarify potential links between effectiveness and reflective practice. Further, the study aimed to explore current practices, knowledge, and beliefs of applied sport psychologists with regards to reflective practice in attempts to enhance the evidence-base available and thus aid the translation of reflective practice into the field of ASP.

Effective Practice Definition and Linking Effective Practice to Reflection

Inherent within the definition formulated in this study is the notion that effective practice is linked to an athlete-centered approach to service delivery. Central to this is a practitioner's ability to engage in a "process" focused on meeting the needs of the client. This echoes recent trends in ASP where humanistic, athlete-centered approaches have become increasingly popular methods of consultation (e.g., Holt & Strean, 2001; Lloyd & Trudel, 1999). Client-based approaches emphasize the development of a relationship between the consultant and the client and focus on the centrality of that relationship in the facilitation of therapeutic change (Rogers, 1957). This raises two important issues. First, it recognizes the central role of the practitioner in successful practice (Anderson, Knowles, et al., 2004). Participants in this study discussed this concept by emphasizing that although effective practice is about meeting client needs it cannot be assumed that the consultant has the necessary characteristics to do this. Consequently, the definition presented in this manuscript must be considered in conjunction with literature that outlines the characteristics of effective practitioners (e.g., Anderson, Miles, et al., 2004; Petitpas et al., 1999). Indeed, it is recommended that the definition presents a process that is proposed to lead to the achievement of effective practice, while consultant characteristics reflect the attributes required to engage in the process successfully. Second, the development of a working relationship is vital to the client-centered approach. This is again cognizant with the findings of this study in which participants agreed that, "You cannot be effective if you don't have that relationship, that rapport and trust." Further, the notion of the importance of a *working alliance* was created out of the consensus validation procedures of this study and subsequently incorporated into the definition. A working alliance refers to the strength of the collaborative relationship between client and practitioner (Hovarth & Bedi, 2002). Tod and Andersen (2005) proposed that one integral aspect of this alliance is the rapport between both parties as it aids consultants in obtaining honest histories that contribute to understanding athletes' needs and helps determine useful interventions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the working alliance has been consistently associated with successful service delivery outcomes (e.g., Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000).

The definition also contains the element of agreeing goals with all stakeholders. Participants were specific that goals had to be agreed by those involved in the consultancy process and acknowledged that at times this is simply the client and the practitioner, whereas in other circumstances the stakeholders may include: the coach, team officials, and/or NGB's. Interestingly, participants proposed that a central part of this goal setting process was the initial establishment of who the client actually is. This supports Andersen's (2000) contentions concerning the necessity to be clear about who you are actually working for so that appropriate interventions can be designed and administered without interference from stakeholders associated with the 'client'. Certainly, without clarity over the identification of the 'client', as well as the involvement of other stakeholders and the responsibilities of the ASP consultant, the ability of the practitioner to maintain confidentiality may be compromised. In situations where the employer and/or other stakeholders are separate from the actual client with whom the ASP consultant will be working, the practitioner must establish rules of consent, disclosure and involvement based on

the perceptions of the client. Consequently, as a result of the ethical considerations embedded in this situation the ideal scenario outlined by participants in this study where, in some circumstances, all stakeholders mutually agree to be involved in the process of goal setting, rarely presents itself in practice.

Almost inevitably the definition includes the idea of goal achievement as a determinant of effectiveness. This element is thought to help distinguish this definition of effective practice from definitions of competent service delivery (cf. Tod et al., 2007) in that consultants can practice competently without achieving the aims of a particular session, but your practice cannot be deemed as effective if you do not ultimately achieve the session goals. It must be noted that participants of this study acknowledged that the setting and achievement of appropriate goals is not as simple as it may appear. Indeed, Gardner and Moore (2005) reported that appreciating athlete's issues and needs, and determining how to best assist the athlete, can be a complex process. Participants of this study also added that the specific short-term goals (e.g., process and performance goals) agreed upon for practice would fall under several over-arching, long-term outcome goals (e.g., developing independent performers). This belief adds to the complexity of the practice of setting and agreeing goals as well as the design and administration of appropriate interventions. Thus, attempting to measure effective practice without an understanding of the immediate goals in question becomes problematic. Further, it was noted that practitioners need to be "adaptable" to allow the reformulation of goals if unforeseen circumstances inhibit their achievement (e.g., injury). This supports the findings of Orlick and Partington (1987) who uncovered that effective sport psychologists were, among other attributes, characterized by being flexible.

It would be naïve to simply consider the achievement of goals as the main determinant of effective practice as such a conception negates the value added to the process by the practitioner (cf. Lyle, 2002). In attempts to address this, participants of this study confirmed the need to consider within the definition the role that the practitioner plays in the process of goal achievement by including: (a) designing and implementing appropriate evidence-based interventions, and (b) engaging in honest evaluation and reflection to inform future practices. Certainly, the view that interventions should be based on the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the provision of service delivery is indicative of the recent development of professional status within the field (Sackett, 1998). However, Gardner and Moore (2006) have articulated concerns within the field of sport psychology over whether it is providing such evidence-driven models for perceiving, conceptualizing, assessing, and intervening with athletes. Consequently, Gardner and Moore concluded that, "The efficacy of an intervention should not completely replace a practitioner's personal decision on the best intervention for the client" (p. 69). To facilitate the selection of the most appropriate interventions, learn from experience, and thus augment the chance of effective service provision, participants in this study advised the adoption of reflective practice.

Interestingly, focus group participants were adamant that reflection and evaluation should be "honest", the process of which could be aided by the gaining of feedback from clients and associated stakeholders. Nevertheless, practitioners maybe hampered in their pursuit of feedback from a range of sources due to the limits that confidentiality imposes. Practitioners should therefore consider and agree with the client during the initiation of the support a framework for feedback

so that consent to approach stakeholders can be established. Participants of this study proposed that this feedback would inform the content and basis of reflections following an experience. Related focus group discussion expressed concerns over the risk of practitioners producing socially desirable reflections. This issue has previously been raised in nurse education by Mackintosh (1998) who questioned whether students were likely to write what they really did and thought in a given situation, or whether they were more likely to write what they believe their tutors wanted to read. This could be prominent if practitioners use reflection to increase their accountability to their client and the profession (e.g., through submitting reflections as part of accreditation/certification requirements). Indeed, it is unlikely that a practitioner would be willing to completely share experiences and reflections on poor and/or unethical practice, thus reducing the value of reflection as a mechanism for personal growth and the development of an evidence-base for the field. Nevertheless, if practitioners are truly committed to improving practice then embracing experiences of poor practice and difficult situations will allow them to learn from their experiences and understand the context of their practice (Anderson, Knowles, et al., 2004). In addition, the authors of this study agree with Knowles, Gilbourne, Tomlinson, and Anderson (2007) who appealed to editors and practitioners to, "Embrace the value inherent in reflecting on applied experience, be it good, indifferent, or plain bad" (p. 121).

In summary, the definition of effective practice that has emerged from this study embraces a multidimensional process of athlete-centered consultancy designed to meet the client's needs. The definition also highlights the importance of developing a working alliance, establishing evidence-based activities, and the engagement in reflective practices to learn from experience.

Reflective Practice and Applied Sport Psychology

Participants of this study acknowledged that reflective practice is an integral aspect of being an applied practitioner that specifically allows consideration of the effectiveness of service delivery. It was also accepted that applied practice rarely lends itself to the neat application of theory to practice and involves continuous decision making and judgment activities that require practitioners to work on a reactive basis (cf. Martindale & Collins, 2007). This is reminiscent of a recent shift in the types of activities that sport psychologists are thought to engage in from mental skills models to more counseling based consultancy (cf. Anderson, Knowles, et al., 2004). Further, such thoughts echo the ideas of Schön (1987) who explained that, "Everyday problems are not simply pre-defined, but are constructed through our engagement with the 'intermediate zone of practice', which, typically, is characterized by uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict" (p. 6). Consequently, problems that occur in practice cannot always be solved by the application of theoretical knowledge alone. Hence, Schön emphasizes the need for practitioners to draw on an integrated *knowledge-in-action* approach, much of which is spontaneous and tacit.

Importantly, Anderson, Knowles, et al. (2004) have proposed that through reflective practice, sport psychology practitioners can access, make sense of, and learn from the relevant knowledge-in-action that contributes to actually 'doing sport psychology'. Indeed, the development of knowledge through experience, as

a result of reflective practice, can lead to recognition and articulation of professional knowledge, which is indicative of the intertwining of theory and practice (Loughran, 2002). In agreement, participants of this study proposed that reflection allows practitioners to consider how they can apply their knowledge and skills to the specific context in which they are working to practice more effectively. Although this explicates movements away from traditional understandings of knowing and of positivistic frameworks of knowledge generation, if practitioners are to meet the demands placed upon them by the acceptance of professional status and its accompanying levels of accountability, then reflective practice and the value of knowledge-in-action must be embraced more stringently (cf. Ghaye & Lillyman, 2000; Schön, 1987).

The findings of this study indicated that although a variety of reflective methods should be embraced by practitioners, considerable value can be gained by reflecting with others. One issue raised by participants in this study was that by reflecting on their own practitioners are limited by their own knowledge and understanding of practice, a belief shared by Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, and Neville (2001). For example, Woodcock, Richards, and Mugford (2008) expressed that by conducting reflections in solitude the practitioner may restrict professional development processes promoted by shared reflections with supervisors and peers. Sharing experiences with others is thought to create a forum for facilitating an interchange of views (Knowles et al., 2001). Several authors have reported that such 'action learning groups' force practitioners to consciously attend to their practice (e.g., Haddock, 1997; Scanlon & Chernomas, 1997). However, the key role that the supervisor has to play in the process of shared reflection cannot be taken-for-granted. Currently, little emphasis has been placed on the education and training of the supervisor, particularly in reference to the supervisor's ability to establish a supervisory process underpinned by reflective practice (cf. Knowles et al., 2007). Due to the complex process inherent within reflective practice there is a distinct need to establish, within continuing professional development (CPD) programs, opportunities for supervisors to develop their skills in not only engaging in reflective practice but in nurturing reflective skills, and engaging others in reflective dialogue so that quality of such an approach can be obtained. Such endeavors could link into the CPD processes currently adopted by AASP, BASES and FEPSAC.

Considerable evidence is also available to support engagement in personal reflective practice. However, as was highlighted by participants in this investigation, practitioners may benefit initially from the use of more structured models of reflection that guide them to access and makes sense of pertinent sources of information and thus engage in more systematic reflection (Knowles et al., 2001). It has been suggested that such a process allows practitioners to develop the knowledge and understanding required to produce effective reflections (Cropley et al., 2007). Which ever approach to reflection sport psychologists decide to adopt, the findings of this study encourage practitioners to integrate time for reflection into practice. The process of reflection is widely acknowledged to require highly developed skills of analysis and evaluation and the considerable investment of time (Andrews, Gidman, & Humphreys, 1998; Holt & Strean, 2001). Therefore, sport psychologists must consider the allocation of time and resources for reflection to give them the best chance of engaging in an effective process.

Finally, participants in this study outlined the impact that professional accrediting bodies (e.g., BASES, BPS) have had on encouraging practitioners to engage in reflective practices. Specifically, by outlining the need for trainee practitioners to demonstrate evidence of reflective practice in fulfillment of requirements for accreditation, neophytes now intrinsically participate in the process of reflection in attempts to learn from their supervised experiences. Similar trends have been witnessed in the health care professions where the implementation of National Health Service reforms have given practitioners added impetus to consider reflection as a practice-based learning activity for re-registration (Driscoll & Teh, 2001). This has had the positive effect of raising awareness of the value of reflective practice and encourages supervisors to facilitate the development of their trainee practitioners through reflective learning, which is conceived to enhance the effectiveness of the supervisory process (cf. Anderson, Knowles, et al., 2004; Knowles et al., 2007). However, participants in this study acknowledged that the introduction of reflective practice into professional training programs had been done with little guidance or understanding of the processes involved. Consequently, it appears as though reflective practice has been accepted with little exploration over its successful integration into ASP practice. Researchers and practitioners have warned against becoming 'swept along' with trends without questioning the value of such practices (Ghaye & Lillyman, 2000). Thus, there appears to be a distinct need to develop the evidence-base that can inform our reflective practices within ASP so that practitioners are able to reflect effectively and engage in the processes associated with effective applied practice. Certainly, although participants in this study outlined in some depth the value that reflective practice potentially has for the development of effective ASP practice, they also raised issues concerning the lack of evidence-base available to guide reflective practices. In some instances this has resulted in confusion over what actually constitutes reflective practice. Andrews et al. (1998) raised the issue that in nursing practice that many practitioners may believe that reflection has always been part of their practice and that little behavioral change is necessary. Moreover, reflection requires highly developed skills of analysis and evaluation and it may generally be assumed that professionals have the necessary competence. This may be case within ASP. However, professional accrediting bodies (e.g., AASP, BASES, BPS) have, at present, done little to dispel myths surrounding reflective practice, the skills and processes required to engage it, the potential benefits and impact on practice, and the training and development of reflective practitioners. These organizations could embed reflective practice more into their education schemes so that Master's students and neophyte practitioners begin their reflective journeys from the very outset of the professional accreditation/certification process. In doing this, reflection is more likely to become a fundamental aspect of practice rather than as something that is done in addition to professional practice. Further, organizations could build upon the success of professional workshop initiatives (e.g., the Redondo Beach Sport Psychology Consulting Think Tank, see Poczwardowski & Lauer, 2006) where communities of practice are constructed of practitioners from different backgrounds and at different levels of professional status. These communities could then meet quarterly to engage in reflective dialogue regarding a range of professional practice, training, and development issues.

Summary and Future Directions

Findings emerging from this study in the form of a definition of effective practice and a better understanding of the value and integration of reflective practice into ASP represent a platform for the scientific investigation of the development of effectiveness. Further, it is believed that such information has helped to initiate the removal of some of the existing confusion over the concept of reflective practice and its relationship with effectiveness. The study does, however, have its limitations, including the relatively small sample size, and the duration of the focus group sessions, which may have inhibited discussion in the latter stages due to their considerable length. In addition, it could be argued that using only two focus groups with three individuals in each was a potential constraint. Nevertheless, these possible limitations are outweighed by the richness of the data that have emerged allowing evidence to be created to provide initial support for claims regarding the potency of reflection in developing effective practice.

A number of research avenues could be followed as a result of the findings of this investigation. First, the definition provided in this study offers an opportunity for more in-depth examinations of how effectiveness can be developed and evaluated. Future research should consider the value of incorporating a holistic approach to evaluation that considers the process of effective practice as a whole. Second, given that reflection emerged as a vital component in the process of effective practice, and that it has been highlighted as a highly complex skill, it would be valuable for future research to consider how reflective practice can be taught to applied sport psychologists and how their engagement in reflection can be evaluated. Such research would help to clarify how reflective practice can be more systematically integrated into global ASP professional training and development programs. Finally, this study has examined explicit links between the use of reflective practice and the development of effectiveness; however, there is still a considerable lack of evidence that highlights whether adopting a reflective approach to consultancy directly improves the effectiveness of practice. Future research should examine this proposed effect as it would also provide empirical support for anecdotal reports regarding the potential benefits of reflection for the individual. As the demand for ASP services increases the need for practitioners to be able to engage in practice that is both competent and effective becomes paramount. Thus, understanding the concepts that have been proposed to enhance the level of effectiveness of practitioners presents important and challenging areas for investigation that deserve attention.

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