

23 The Practice of Applied Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology

Irish and International Perspectives

Mark Campbell and Aidan Moran

INTRODUCTION

As Chapter 1 has shown, considerable disagreement exists about the boundaries between the fields of sport, exercise, and performance psychology (SEPP). Given this background of uncertainty, the present chapter will focus on establishing some common ground between these disciplines. More precisely, it will investigate Irish and international perspectives on the key skills required by effective SEPP practitioners to help people to do their best when it matters most.

We have organized the chapter as follows. To begin with, we shall trace the formal emergence of SEPP in Ireland and explain the practical requirements that applied sport psychology practitioners must satisfy in order to receive accreditation from the relevant national regulating authority—namely, the Irish Sports Council. Next, adopting an international perspective, we analyze the results of interviews with four experienced performance psychology specialists on the lessons that they have learned to date from their professional practice. These specialists were drawn from four different locations: Ireland, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, and Australia. In the final section of the chapter, we identify some key current challenges facing practitioners in sport psychology and performance psychology in Ireland.

SEPP IN IRELAND: HISTORY AND ACCREDITATION REQUIREMENTS

Sporting excellence has been venerated in Ireland for over a thousand years, dating back to Celtic history and mythical warrior figures such as Cuchulainn, whose athletic prowess was attributed to supernatural factors (see Moran, 2001; 2012). Despite this ancient national respect in Ireland for the virtues of athleticism, however, sport psychology is a relatively new discipline in this country (see recent account by Moran, 2013). To illustrate, formal recognition of this discipline by mainstream psychology in Ireland was achieved as late as 2012—but with a rather unusual twist. Specifically, at its annual congress, the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), which is responsible for the accreditation of academic and professional training programs in Psychology nationally, in November 2012 ratified the formation of a Division of Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology (DSEPP) in its organization. What is especially interesting about this development is that the title of this new division includes the term “performance”—a feature that is unique among international Psychology associations. However, in spring 2013, Division 47 (Exercise and Sport Psychology) of the American Psychological Association formally approved the formation of a section on Performance Psychology.

Historically, applied sport psychology has been conducted predominantly by psychologists—rather than sport science graduates—on the island of Ireland (which includes Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) since the early 1990s. For example, in the Republic of Ireland, one of the co-authors of this chapter—Aidan Moran (School of Psychology, University College

Dublin)—was appointed Official Psychologist to the Irish Olympic Squad in 1993. Around the same time (early 1990s), in Northern Ireland, psychology researchers such as John Kremer (from the School of Psychology, Queen's University, Belfast; QUB), Craig Mahoney (also of QUB), and Deirdre Scully (then of University of Ulster) provided workshops and individual consultancy services in sport psychology to a variety of individual athletes, teams, and sports organizations. In addition, John Kremer and Deirdre Scully made important theoretical contributions to the field internationally. For example, their seminal book *Psychology in Sport* (Kremer & Scully, 1994) was the first major attempt to evaluate research in sport psychology from the theoretical and methodological perspectives of mainstream psychology. Shortly afterwards, Scully and Hume (1995) investigated the attitudes to sport psychology of elite athletes and coaches in Ireland at the time. Perhaps most significantly from an applied perspective, Kremer and Scully (1998) developed an innovative model for the delivery of sport psychology services to athletes and coaches. Briefly, this new model identified the *coach* rather than the athlete as the primary target for psychological education and/or mental skills training. In many countries, the services of sport psychologists were delivered under a medical model (e.g., they were implemented through the Medical Committee of the Olympic Council of Ireland). Accordingly, the sporting community often perceived such psychologists as medical experts who could “cure” athletes’ problems. This medical model approach is fraught with difficulty, however, because it may impede athletes’ self-reliance (Kremer & Moran, 2013). Accordingly, Kremer and Scully (1998) postulated that the role of a sport psychologist should change from that of a medical expert to that of a management consultant whose ultimate goal was not to nurture dependence but to support the athlete to the point where the services of a sport psychologist should become less and less significant. Interestingly, this point was echoed by Gordin (2003) who advocated the importance of empowering those who receive consultation. Specifically, he observed that “it is my intent to put myself out of a job with a client. That is, a goal of mine is to make the client self-sufficient and independent. Once these athletes have achieved independence, then the relationship is appropriately terminated or altered” (pp. 64–65).

Given such developments, it is notable that in Ireland in the early 1990s, sport psychology not only had a strong theoretical base in mainstream psychology in University College Dublin, and Queen's University, Belfast, but also an explicit awareness of the importance of having a clear theoretical rationale for the delivery of its services. Looking back, this focus meant that in some ways, applied sport psychology in Ireland was considerably ahead of its time. In 1998, the Irish Sports Council (ISC) established a “carding” scheme for elite athletes. Since 2009, however, the Irish Institute of Sport (IIS) has provided the Council's medical and sport science (including psychology) support services. Today, there are over 20 professional members of the IIS providing quality assured psychological services to athletes and coaches funded by the Irish Sports Council.

In order to receive accreditation by, and professional membership in, the IIS applicants have to go through a rigorous peer review process. This process involves four steps. First, applicants must have a master's level degree in an appropriate discipline (either Psychology or Sport Science). Second, the candidate must demonstrate evidence of an active commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) in sport psychology and/or performance psychology that is relevant to elite-level sport. Third, applicants must provide evidence of at least 3 years of post-master's degree experience in a professional discipline that is relevant to elite sport. Finally, the applicant is peer evaluated on his/her ability to apply professional knowledge to high performance sport as demonstrated by a 3,000-word case study. Assessment of this case study is undertaken using criteria such as the intellectual content of the work; its scientific rigor; the ability of the applicant to apply theory to practice; the quality of his or her evidence-base, and finally, the applicant must be able to demonstrate an ability to work with elite performers. Another requirement is that applicants must supply the names of three referees—one of whom must be a coach, one a player, and the final one another relevant professional who can comment on the applicant's work in high performance sport.

LESSONS LEARNED: THE VIEWS OF FOUR EXPERIENCED INTERNATIONAL PRACTITIONERS

In an effort to obtain an international perspective on the key skills required by effective SEPP practitioners, we interviewed four experienced practitioners working in these fields. The backgrounds of these practitioners can be summarized as follows.

The first interviewee is an Irish performance psychologist referred to as “BB.” He has gained over 15 years’ experience in his dual role as an academic and consultant sport and performance psychologist. An accredited sport psychologist with the Irish Institute of Sport, he is also a Registered Psychologist with the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI). The second expert we consulted is referred to as “MH.” He is a sport and performance psychologist based in the United Kingdom (UK) who has accumulated over 20 years of consulting experience (advising individuals and teams). Currently working as a sole private practitioner, he is a Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society (BPS). He is also accredited by the British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) and the UK Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The next participant is “RO.” He trained in continental Europe and has gained over 6 years’ experience consulting with teams in three different European countries. He is currently based in the UK and occupies the dual role of university researcher and applied practitioner. A Chartered Psychologist with the BPS, he is also an active member of the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC). The final participant is “SM.” He is an Australian psychologist with almost 15 years of consultancy experience. As with two of the three preceding interviewees, SM combines an academic career with that of a consultant. Unlike his counterparts, however, his primary professional experience is in the field of performance psychology rather than sport psychology. Although SM has obtained some professional experience in North America, his accreditation is with the Australian Psychological Society (APS).

We asked these four experienced practitioners about their qualifications, how they evaluated their efficacy, their views on where the field (sport/performance psychology) was heading, what practical lessons they had learned, what strategic advice they would offer neophytes, and what performance lessons they had learned. Their answers to these questions are summarized in Table 23.1.

From this table, it is clear that the qualification routes in SEPP are relatively standard. All four experienced practitioners in these fields obtained their formal qualifications in Psychology or a cognate discipline followed by, and/or complemented with, relevant continuing professional development (CPD). They also cited the importance of seeking peer evaluation of their knowledge and skills in applying psychological science to influence a team or individual in a performance setting.

Extrapolating from the information in Table 23.1, the following practical tips may be identified for aspiring SEPP practitioners.

- Invest time and effort in the profession: It will reap dividends in relation to one’s career satisfaction and reputation. Also, sign up for relevant continuing professional development (CPD) courses whenever possible.
- Network with profession colleagues as frequently as possible: Strong professional links with experienced colleagues will help to keep abreast of the latest developments and techniques in the SEPP field. If possible, these networks should include colleagues from other disciplines (e.g., clinical psychology, counseling psychology, sports medicine, physiotherapy, sport and exercise science).
- Seek wise mentors: The importance of a good supervisor/mentor cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, there are few papers in sport and exercise psychology—let alone the newer field of performance psychology—that provide useful models of supervision and mentoring (Andersen, 2012). As a result, some critics have claimed that supervision in SEPP is

Table 23.1 Experienced sport psychology and performance psychology practitioner's approaches to applied work

Themes	Ireland	United Kingdom	Europe	Australia
What are your qualifications and how did you get there?	Master's/PhD research and continuing professional development (CPD). Additionally, Irish Institute of Sport Professional Membership application criteria (case study and 200 hours post-master's field experience).	Master's/PhD research with registration from UK's Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).	Master's/PhD research through different countries' professional Psychology Societies.	Master's/PhD research through the Australian Psychological Society (APS).
How do you measure your effectiveness in working with clients?	Triangulation—the combination of mentoring, case notes and critical reflection and/or client evaluation forms.	Standard questionnaires and client feedback. Detailed case notes and dedicated time for critical reflection.	Emphasis on measuring performance characteristics.	Using a mentor and guided supervision. Practice-based evidence similar to what clinical psychologists do.
Where do you think that the field is heading?	Create a framework and define the field more precisely. The need for more case studies. Valuable in providing signposts for what to do and where things may not work. Valuable for a field such as ours that does not have a definition of its limits yet.	More closely align with the American model (AASP). Training/mentoring in situ and more of it.	Define performance psychology and training-wise have good mentors readily available and better CPD opportunities (interactive workshops with quality practitioners and problem-based learning/case study groups for learning.	Interlink positive psychology, counseling skills, and applied sport psychology. Don't take short cuts in training and development. Dedicated structured doctorates offering modules in above-mentioned.
What practical lessons have you learned?	Find a good mentor. Wait—delay the onset of developing a style. Keep reading the literature and be informed.	Value yourself and keep your standards high. Try and understand the exact components of peak performance. This scrutiny will pay off.	I find using technology like iPad really useful for conveying your message and for doing little tests in the field.	Don't work for nothing. "Poor quality, poor expectations—poor all round". Make sure to build in at least two psychology cycles in performance preparation strategies.
What strategic lessons have you learned?	Join a professional society and get "signed up."	Align with the relevant professional bodies and get the best training and peer supervision.	Invest in your future. Take it seriously and think of it as an investment. Keep an eye on US developments—AASP & APA47.	Learn from the best. Have a background or ongoing interest in conducting research. This helps to know what works and what is the best.

(Continued)

Table 23.1 (Continued)

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Ireland</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>Europe</i>	<i>Australia</i>
What performance lessons have you learned?	Use a pedagogical tool (for example—iPad app for monitoring performance goals and outcomes [performance app]). I like the instant feel it gives me when I use it with clients. Technology can definitely help.	Know your sport and the disciplines that work with these and how these work. This will help you integrate into a multi-disciplinary team and inform these and players alike of the type of work you can do.	Work closely with your mentor and have them sit in on sessions every few months—be open to critical evaluation and developing new skills as a practitioner.	Be adaptive and try and accommodate the needs of the performer in as much as you can. Make sure to stick to the evidence base for what you are trying to achieve with them.

“overly practitioner focused” (Andersen, 2012, p. 725) with not enough attention devoted to supervisees’ self-reflection. This problem needs to be addressed.

- Seek peer evaluation: Be open to peer supervision and peer evaluation.
- Keep comprehensive case notes. These notes will enable and enhance critical self-reflection.
- Keep up-to-date with scientific developments: Familiarity with current research evidence in your field increases the likelihood that you will benefit from new strategies and techniques.

WHERE TO NEXT? CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR PRACTITIONERS IN APPLIED SEPP

Although the SEPP field is still in its infancy internationally, it can benefit from some of the training and continuing professional development structures that have been evolved in sport psychology. In this regard, Tod’s (2010) four-pronged approach to optimizing professional growth has a special resonance for SEPP practitioners in Ireland. First, he argued that supervised experience is essential in allowing practitioners to learn to cope with the vagaries of service delivery in real-world settings. For example, in Ireland, the small number of practitioners available for consultation can lead to ethical issues in situations where performers seek referrals from one consultant to another. Supervision goals and consideration of clients’ and students’ developmental needs are at the forefront of supervised experience and provide a forum for successful working relationships.

Second, Tod (2010) proposed that practitioners should undertake regular counseling for personal issues. This process can increase the self-awareness of practitioners and may help them to develop a “cognitive map of service delivery” (p. 26). The mentoring scheme offered by the Irish Institute of Sport for sport psychologists aims to get more experienced professionals offering advice, strategies, and instruction to less experienced trainees and in this way can act to benefit the trainees’ self-awareness of what they do and how they do it. Third, the concept of reflective practice—or “the process of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our environment” (Raelin, 2002, p. 66)—is a pillar of optimal professional growth. According to Tod (2010), regular engagement in reflective practice may “stimulate changes in the ways practitioners understand their craft and behave” (p. 26). Finally, increasing one’s interactions with one’s peers and colleagues can contribute positively to professional development. In this digital age, popular media such as webinars, blogs, emails, and discussion boards can be used to expand the range and quality of professional interaction with colleagues. Clearly, on the basis of the preceding suggestions, the next few years will be a critical period for the development of SEPP in Ireland.

CONCLUSION

The new SEPP field displays considerable potential for integrating research findings from mainstream psychology (e.g., on the efficacy of psychological training programs for elite musicians and military personnel) with the traditional concerns of SEPP practice (e.g., to provide evidence-based consultancy services to athletes, coaches, exercisers, and performers). For such integration to occur, however, SEPP must address a variety of professional issues (e.g., how to develop appropriate models of supervision), which have been sketched in this chapter.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- SEPP is thriving in Ireland and the Psychological Society of Ireland has been very proactive in supporting the establishment of the SEPP division.

- SEPP offers graduates and practitioners the unique opportunity to help fashion and mold a new field in psychology, quite a unique position for such a well-established and embedded discipline.
- SEPP practitioners can work under the umbrella term of performance enhancement and in doing so have more opportunities to work outside of traditional sport and exercise settings and apply their knowledge and skills with individuals engaged in performance-related work (e.g., musicians, military personnel).

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