Learning Experiences Contributing to Service-Delivery Competence

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Graduates (n = 16) and teaching staff (n = 11) of Australian master’s of applied psychology programs (sport and exercise) participated in interviews about learning experiences that they believed contributed to service-delivery competence. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically content analyzed. The authors sought to enhance research credibility through data source and analyst triangulation. Participants thought the main contributions to service-delivery competence were client interactions; relationships among teaching staff, supervisors, and students; and specific events outside of the training programs. Participants considered sport psychology research and theory to be helpful when applicable to clients. The authors discuss issues arising under the major themes relating to practitioner development, such as supervisor–supervisee relationships. The results of the study have implications for future training in sport psychology, such as the mentoring of students, the grounding of practice in research and theory, and how anxiety can be minimized during role-plays.

Athletes and coaches perceive that effective sport psychologists have highly refined interpersonal skills and the ability to apply technical knowledge to clients’ needs (e.g., Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004; Orlick & Partington, 1987). Numerous graduate programs have been developed for training students to become effective practitioners, and there are over 100 master’s and doctoral programs listed in the Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology (Sachs, Burke, & Loughren, 2007). Evaluating sport psychology training programs might help contribute to students developing effective practitioner competencies. Evaluation of sport psychology training has not received widespread attention, however, and only a few studies have been conducted. In these investigations researchers have (a) explored graduates’ training and early career experiences (Aldridge, Andersen, Stanton, & Shen, 1997; Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997; Waite & Pettit, 1993; Williams & Scherzer, 2003), (b) examined

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students’ and professionals’ experiences and views of supervision (e.g., Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1994; Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker, 2004), (c) surveyed athletes’ and coaches’ perceptions of supervised placements (Gentner, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2004; Weigand, Richardson, & Weinberg, 1999), (d) investigated the course offerings of U.S. postgraduate programs (Van Raalte et al., 2000), and (e) assessed sport psychology’s status in human movement and psychology departments (LeUnes & Hayward, 1990; Petrie & Watkins, 1994a, 1994b). The existing research covers a broad range of topics and provides insights into the types of training and individuals’ perceptions of sport psychology education.

Although the existing research contributes to knowledge about sport psychology training, there is little understanding of how neophyte practitioners and their instructors experience training or the ways they believe it contributes to the ability to help athlete–clients. Through in-depth exploration of trainees’ personal journeys and their instructors’ perceptions, the joys, pains, hopes, frustrations, and lived experiences of developing and growing into self-reflective practitioners might be understood. The knowledge gained might help normalize what is often a turbulent and, at times, frightening and daunting evolution for students and their instructors. Students might benefit from learning that their experiences are echoed in the lives of others, and teaching staff might be helped, in a peer-consultative manner, through the reflections of their fellow academics’ experiences in training graduates.

Helping individuals develop service-delivery competence is one goal of sport psychology training. Service-delivery competence has not been explicitly defined in the literature. Drawing on research in which coaches, athletes, and experienced consultants have discussed effective practice (e.g., Anderson, Miles et al., 2004; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Simons & Andersen, 1995), we consider service-delivery competence to be a multidimensional process in which practitioners (a) meet clients’ needs and expectations, (b) develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships (Andersen, 2006), (c) understand psychological interventions and apply them to assist athletes in specific situations, (d) empathize with athletes’ situations and interpret them through the lens of suitable theory (e.g., cognitive-behavioral, family systems), and (e) reflect on how they (the practitioners) have influenced the interactions and outcomes of service provision. One way to increase knowledge of sport psychology training is to examine learning experiences in and around formal education that contribute to service-delivery competence.

Researchers surveying sport psychology graduates’ training and careers have asked participants to identify the beneficial learning experiences they had as students (Aldridge et al., 1997; Andersen et al., 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). The beneficial experiences respondents identified included completing supervised placements, attending and presenting at conferences, undertaking counselor training, and personal involvement in sport. Findings from these sport psychology graduate surveys paralleled results of counseling psychology research (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Orlinsky, Botermans, Rønnestad, & The SPR Collaborative Research Network, 2001). Researchers in counseling psychology have used a range of methods to examine participants’ beneficial learning experiences in detail, such as qualitative and quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews. In contrast, sport psychology investigators have identified only the different types of beneficial learning experiences. The preambles in paper-and-pen questionnaires used in the sport psychology graduate surveys requested that participants only list (but not elaborate on)
their beneficial learning experiences. The research designs did not allow in-depth examination of the rich details and complexities of those experiences. Interviewing graduates and teaching staff of training programs should contextualize and extend the findings from sport psychology graduate surveys.

Recent graduates are in ideal positions to reflect back on their training in the context of how that education equipped them with the skills needed to be professional service providers. In a similar way, recent graduates are well positioned to provide retrospective accounts of how their training might have been limited in preparing them for the real world of service delivery. Interviewing teaching staff who train student consultants could also contribute valuable insights and knowledge into learning experiences in sport psychology. Teaching staff might offer different perspectives on sport psychology training that complement or contradict graduates’ views. The two perspectives, from graduates and their instructors, could result in a broader understanding of the salient issues in training. Such knowledge might support and justify current teaching and learning practices in the field or help reconfigure some aspects of programs to assist students’ learning.

The purpose of the current study was to interview graduates and teaching staff of Australian sport psychology master’s degree programs about learning experiences that they believed contributed to service-delivery competence. Closely examining learning experiences in the Australian context is relevant because the Australian educational pathway, which leads to practitioner registration, is being examined by sport psychologists in other countries as a possible model to adopt (Anderson & Lavallee, 2005; Tod & Thatcher, 2005). In Australia, specialist applied sport psychology training occurs at the postgraduate level. Some psychology departments offer master’s and professional doctorate degrees that focus on the practice of sport and exercise psychology, and the programs are accredited by the Australian Psychological Society (APS). Students applying for these postgraduate degrees must have completed 4 years of undergraduate study in psychology. The components of APS-accredited programs include coursework, supervised placements, and master’s theses or doctoral dissertations. Australian students complete coursework in sport and exercise psychology, general psychological practice, ethics, research methods, and the sport sciences. Supervised practical experience includes both sport and generalist psychology placements. Completion of either an APS-accredited master’s or doctoral program allows graduates to obtain state registration (equivalent to state licensure in the United States) as psychologists and also become eligible for APS membership.

**Method**

**Participants**

We interviewed graduates (8 females, 8 males) between 24 and 46 years of age and teaching staff (5 males, 6 females) between 33 and 52 years of age from four Australian APS-accredited applied psychology master’s degree programs with a sport and exercise emphasis. There were 4 graduates interviewed from each of the institutions, and 15 individuals were of European-Australian descent and 1 was South African. Graduates’ work experience ranged from 8 months to 4 years, with 7 graduates employed full-time at sports institutes or with professional
teams. The remaining graduates worked with sports and exercise participants in private-practice settings, with 1 person working full-time and the other 8 providing services part-time. Master’s degree graduates were interviewed because there were no professional doctorate alumni at the time of data collection. With respect to teaching staff, 9 individuals had doctoral degrees and 2 had master’s degrees. Teaching experience among the staff varied from 2 to 26 years, with 8 individuals of European-Australian descent, 1 from the United Kingdom, and 2 from North America. Regarding their own training, 6 teaching staff classified themselves as having come from a psychology background, 2 from a sport science or physical education background, and 3 described themselves as having both psychology and sport science backgrounds.

Authors’ Teaching and Practice Backgrounds

Brief descriptions of the authors’ teaching and practice backgrounds might help readers evaluate the data interpretations presented in the Results and Discussion section. Such information might also help readers reflect on their own interpretations of the participants’ quotes. The current study was one of four that the first author completed for a PhD focused on service-delivery development in neophyte practitioners. Before beginning a PhD, the first author taught undergraduate sport psychology and consulted with athletes from a variety of sports for 9 years. The second author is a registered psychologist with undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in both sport science and psychology. He is an experienced applied consultant, having worked for over 10 years with professional Australian Football players and coaches and athletes from a number of other sports. The third author is a licensed psychologist in the United States and Australia with bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees in psychology. He has taught university students and offered applied services to athletes for over 20 years.

Interview Guide

We developed initial interview guides from a review of relevant literature (e.g., Aldridge et al., 1997; Andersen et al., 1997; Rønneset & Skovholt, 2003). The initial interview guide for both teaching staff and graduates began with general questions to collect information about their teaching and consulting experiences and the ways the master’s degree programs helped graduates develop service-delivery competence. The guide for both graduates and teaching staff included specific questions to elicit accounts of supervised placements, specific learning experiences raised by participants, formal and informal interactions among classmates and staff, obstacles to learning, and the contribution events outside of formal training made to learning. The interview guides were not prescriptive, but the wording and order of questions were adjusted to allow interviews to flow like conversations. The first author piloted the interview guides with the second author and a counseling psychology academic, along with two sport psychology practitioners. After piloting, one topic was added to the interview guides (the skills and abilities participants thought students needed to learn).
Procedure

**Identifying Teaching Staff.** After ethical approval was obtained from Victoria University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, purposeful sampling was used to identify teaching staff. Heads of departments where APS-accredited sport psychology master’s programs were offered supplied names of the relevant staff. We invited them to participate and explained the study’s purpose, risks, and safeguards. Teaching staff were also offered opportunities to receive the interview guide at the time of the invitation to participate, and 9 requested the guide to help them consider their thoughts before the interview. Of the 13 individuals invited to participate, 11 agreed to be interviewed.

**Identifying Graduates.** Snowball sampling (see Patton, 2002) was used to locate graduates. In using snowball sampling, we asked teaching staff to direct us toward graduates whom they considered knowledgeable about beneficial learning experiences and would respond honestly and openly to the interview questions. Staff supplied the contact details for 14 graduates who then provided the names of the remaining 2 participants. We contacted the graduates and informed them of the study’s purpose, risks, and safeguards and invited them to participate. Graduates were also offered opportunities to review the interview guide before participating; all individuals accepted this invitation. All graduates we approached agreed to be interviewed. Initially, we decided to interview 16 graduates and include more if data saturation was not reached. After reviewing the teaching staff’s and graduates’ transcripts, we decided saturation had been achieved because the final interviews were not adding new information.

**Interviews.** Before participating, individuals provided informed consent to be interviewed and have the conversations recorded. We conducted face-to-face interviews with 7 participants residing in Melbourne, and we interviewed the other 20 by telephone. Interviews were between 35 and 90 min, followed the semistructured guides described previously, and were audiotaped.

**Data Analysis and Presentation**

We followed Patton’s (2002) guidelines for analyzing qualitative data. There were three phases—data preparation, description, and interpretation. In the data-preparation phase, we transcribed the interviews verbatim, and the first author read the transcripts while listening to the audiotapes. In data description, we performed a thematic content analysis of the transcripts. Initially, we organized participants’ interview responses into broad categories, with labels reflecting the content, to allow the classification system to develop (Patton). For example, some of the initial broad categories we identified included practical service-delivery experiences, social interactions among teaching staff and students, and specific events prior to and outside of training. After the initial categorization, formal coding began with individual text units being assigned to subcategories within the broader topic areas. Two subcategories, for example, under the practical service-delivery experiences heading included supervised placements and classroom role-plays. Formal coding was not a linear process; data were frequently reassigned to new categories, and the
classification system was continually revised. We debated, for instance, whether to place data about supervision under social interactions or practical service-delivery experiences. After examining how these data fit in both categories, we decided that placing them under practical service-delivery experiences contributed to a more coherent presentation of results. In making our decisions, we followed Patton’s principles of internal homogeneity (by considering the extent to which different text units in a category fit together in a meaningful way) and external heterogeneity (by evaluating how data from different categories were about different topics).

As the classification system developed, we concurrently interpreted the data for sport psychology educators and practitioners. Specifically, we reviewed the classification system in light of the literature, with a view to identify the contributions that the results might make to current knowledge and professional development. We have combined the results and discussion sections in recognition that data analysis and interpretation are intertwined (Thomas & Nelson, 2001), and in presenting the findings we have followed a realist approach (see Patton, 2002; Sparkes, 2002). In a realist approach emphasis is given to the participants’ words to help illustrate their perceptions on a topic, and little information about the researchers is presented. Sparkes suggested that the realist approach has made a significant contribution to sport psychology knowledge, and examples include Gould, Udry, Bridges, and Beck (1997) and Tod and Hodge (2001). The realist approach allowed us to bring participants’ quotes to the foreground to directly illustrate their perceptions on the relevant topics. Generally, quotes illustrate common perceptions among participants. Occasionally, quotes from individuals that are not reflective of others’ viewpoints have been included because the message from a single person can be relevant, insightful, and meaningful (Krane, Andersen, & Strean, 1997). We have indicated where quotes did not reflect common perspectives. Typically, graduates’ and staff’s views were similar, and their perspectives have been combined. There were some areas in which the perspectives differed but complemented each other, and these variations have been highlighted.

**Research Credibility**

We incorporated three types of triangulation into the study’s design (see Patton, 2002). One purpose of triangulation was to achieve a deeper and broader understanding of the topic. Because we already had substantial collective knowledge about the topic under investigation (see Krane et al., 1997), triangulation also allowed our thinking to be critiqued through external review, assisted in making our biases explicit, and helped us consider how the findings might contribute to the knowledge base (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sparkes, 1998). Data-source triangulation involved collecting information from multiple informants (Patton, 2002). By interviewing graduates and teaching staff from the four institutions offering APS-accredited master’s programs, our sample gave us coverage of the range of individuals associated with Australian applied sport psychology training. Regarding analyst triangulation, the results from this study have been reviewed by a number of individuals. First, the three authors frequently discussed the results in regular meetings (at least once a week), in which we debated our interpretations of the data. Second, every participant received copies of their own interview transcripts.
along with the results from the data analysis and interpretation process (member checking). Participants then had the opportunity to review the findings and our interpretations. Approximately three quarters of the participants provided feedback on the results, allowing us some confidence that we understood their stories. No participant disagreed with our interpretations, and 2 individuals provided additional data to support the content of the earlier interviews. Third, several academics and students have critiqued the findings (audience review). One sport psychology and two counseling psychology researchers, who investigate topics associated with professional development and service delivery, examined an extended report of this study, and the results have been presented at several department seminars and international conferences (e.g., Tod, Marchant, & Andersen, 2004). Undertaking audience review helped us uncover our biases, explore possible themes that we might have missed, and tailor the data analysis for the needs of sport psychology educators and students (Patton).

Results and Discussion

We distilled four major themes from the interview transcripts related to the research question. First, participants discussed at length the value of gaining service-delivery experience via supervised placements and classroom role-plays. Second, research and theory were considered helpful when applicable to clients’ issues. Third, participants detailed the contribution social interactions among teaching staff and students made to learning service-delivery-related skills and knowledge. Fourth, specific events prior to and apart from training also helped graduates develop their service-delivery skills and insights. In presenting these themes, we identify how they relate to and extend current knowledge.

Service-Delivery Experiences Were Highly Valued

Both graduates and teaching staff believed practical service-delivery involvement was a key experience in helping trainees acquire knowledge and skills to assist athletes, as indicated in the following quote: “the main thing was to take the textbook and actually practice . . . anyone can learn, pick up a textbook and read it, but implementing it was really of benefit.” Learning activities that involve practicing service delivery are highly valued because students are undertaking the types of activities they will perform as registered practitioners. Such learning activities would have high ecological validity.

**Supervised Placements.** Both graduates and staff discussed the central role of supervised placements to trainee learning. One graduate remarked, “If I didn’t have that placement, I don’t think that I would be as effective as I am now.” Another graduate said, “If I didn’t have that [placement] I probably wouldn’t have the same confidence in my ability as a practitioner, that’s how important it was.” One staff member believed placements were valuable because “that is where they get to practice their art, and that is where they learn and see a lot of stuff in actual action.” One graduate identified a number of benefits that he had learned during his placements:
I learned about dealing with people, the counseling process, personal issues for myself to be aware of, the sporting culture. . . . I was getting to apply my trade and understand the intricacies of it and best practice; also athletes’ views of sport psychology. . . . Really one of the biggest lessons I took out of it was the need to . . . know the athlete as a person before you try and work with the person.

Other benefits identified by teaching staff and graduates included learning to apply psychological interventions to sports people, thinking about service delivery from a psychological perspective, networking, understanding ethical issues such as confidentiality and boundaries, learning how to design intervention programs, and learning how to do psychometric assessment. Other sport psychology professionals have mentioned similar benefits, such as Taylor (1991), who discussed the role of supervised placements in the development of successful sport psychology careers.

The benefits that participants discussed provide specific examples for three of the service-delivery-competence dimensions mentioned earlier: relationship skills, knowledge of psychological interventions, and understanding clients through a psychological model. Participants also discussed the self-reflection dimension. Participants believed that the benefits of practical experience were enhanced with self-reflection. One staff member said, “not just drawing on them [client interactions] but understanding them, and that comes back to that desire to develop your self-awareness . . . that curiosity, that fascination to understand yourself, to understand the human condition.” As indicated by the quote, practitioners enhance their understanding of their client interactions and themselves with self-reflection, and such knowledge might help them become more effective consultants (Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004).

Supervision issues were tied to discussions about placements. One graduate’s response to a question about how her supervisor was helpful to her illustrates the benefits of supervision that teaching staff and graduates described, such as feedback, guidance, challenge, support, and security.

[My supervisor helped me] by providing lots of information; she provided me with a whole set of materials to use for future clients and seeing how she worked with teams. Asking about my own clients and reflection back on client sessions and what I could have done differently and about how I was feeling about those things. You can’t put a price on that sort of stuff.

Another student said that when she had difficulty in her placement, having a supervisor was like having a “nice little safety net to come back to and ask ‘What do I do?’” The benefits of good supervision raised by the participants in this study accord with those that have emerged from previous research in both sport and counseling psychology (e.g., Andersen et al., 1994; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Perhaps not documented as well in the literature is the possible variations that trainees receive in supervision. In the current study, there were substantial variations in the time graduates spent with supervisors, with several believing they had been poorly supervised. One graduate mentioned, “I was in a placement with no one really checking what I was doing or how I was doing it. I was not
learning what I knew I could be learning if I had a supervisor.” As a consequence of inadequate supervision, her clients might have received limited, and possibly substandard, services.

Related to time, graduates also discussed the quality of the interactions they had with supervisors. For example, several graduates reported that their generalist psychology placement supervisors had been more helpful than their sport psychology counterparts: “I don’t think their [sport psychology supervisors’] clinical skills were up to scratch, and my other [generalist] supervisor, when you compare the two, the things they [generalist supervisor] picked up on were much greater.” Another graduate said, “for the two sport psych [placements] I just went out, and I didn’t have a supervisor in the field . . . but with the two general [placements], the two supervisors were just really great.” To understand these perceptions, it might be helpful to consider some differences between generalist and sport psychology supervisors. Some generalist placement supervisors were perhaps more insightful and accessible because, typically, they were highly experienced practitioners, compared with some of the sport psychology supervisors, and often worked in the organizations where students were placed. Such individuals likely understood the types of issues clients were dealing with firsthand. In contrast, most sport psychology supervisors were academics, primarily based at universities, who might have lacked extensive experience in applying sport psychology services, possibly unfamiliar with the issues that students were dealing with or unable to provide immediate feedback.

During the participant review process, one graduate indicated that his sport psychology supervisor had been very helpful. The sport psychology supervisor ensured that the graduate interacted with athletes, provided critical feedback, and assigned homework on issues such as ethics, payment, and marketing that were then discussed in later supervision sessions. Of note, this sport psychology supervisor was one of the few who was a full-time practitioner rather than an academic. Clearly, the applied experience of sport psychology supervisors varies substantially, with academic sport psychologists perhaps sometimes being less suitably equipped or positioned to assist trainees than full-time practitioners in general psychology.

**Role-Plays.** In addition to fieldwork, role-plays were another way trainees practiced service delivery. One graduate commented, “the biggest thing about the [coursework] . . . without a doubt it was the role-plays.” Another graduate said,

Role-plays held me in good stead when I actually had to counsel clients. I learned to shape my counseling style and understand where I was at because people were able to say “you really showed a lot of empathy” . . . or “you’re showing you’re not interested,” or “something has popped up three times and you haven’t gone with it.”

Other benefits students and teaching staff mentioned included learning how to communicate theoretical ideas in lay terms, learning how to keep case notes, and practice at handling specific situations such as consultancy termination. Students reported that sport psychology “skills were refined quite a bit” during role-plays. Graduates suggested that “the role-plays helped us because they were real.” One staff member expanded on the realness of role-plays:
Even if you’re role-playing something, you start putting yourself into it . . . the stories you start to tell in that role-play are also stories that have meaning and resonance for you . . . you use role-plays to develop skills; you also use role-plays to self-explore.

The perceived realness of role-plays could be compared with method acting, in which performers draw on their experiences, memories, and emotions to think, feel, and behave as their characters might in the contrived situations portrayed on stage (Stanislavski, 1967). Similarly, during role-plays graduates often drew on their experiences, memories, and emotions as they performed in simulated consulting situations, thereby increasing their self-awareness while practicing their consulting skills. In both role-plays and method acting, conscious and unconscious processes operate. In both situations, individuals are drawing on conscious memories to guide their behaviors. As students become engaged in role-plays, their unconscious fears, hopes, beliefs, and dreams might begin to emerge. Similarly, as actors adopt their roles, various self-resonating behaviors, emotions, and thoughts might unconsciously emerge.

Although the perceived realness of role-plays had benefits, many graduates were uncomfortable and fearful because “I’m going to be judged by my peers as a professional.” The following quote illustrates how threatened some graduates had been about role-plays: “You had to kind of get up and do role-plays in front of the whole class, and that terrified me.” Student psychologists frequently experience anxiety and low self-confidence because of the complexities involved with client interactions and being unclear about how to deliver services (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Because students are apprehensive with role-plays, teaching staff acknowledged the need to create safe environments. One teaching-staff member observed “if it’s not a safe environment, then it’s going to be a harrowing experience for everyone, and it’s lost; it’s wasted.” Part of developing a safe environment includes helping students avoid thinking in moral absolutes, as suggested in the following quote: “I try to instill in students that right and wrong just keep us locked up . . . fascination unlocks us, especially when you screw up totally in front of the class, it’s fascinating, we are all going to learn from it.” The speaker might have used the phrase “screw up totally” to emphasize how badly students feel when they believe they have made mistakes. Given the complexity of service delivery, labeling most consultant behaviors as right or wrong seems absolutist, naïve, and counterproductive. Instead, consultants’ actions might be perceived as being more or less helpful for clients.

**Research and Theory Were Helpful When Applicable to Clients**

Teaching staff and graduates identified benefits from studying theory and reviewing research. Reviewing research literature and theoretical models gave students frameworks from which they operated as consultants and that helped them understand their clients, assisted in the selection of suitable interventions, and helped them gain confidence in their actions. Other sport psychology professionals have mentioned similar benefits, such as Hill (2001), who described a number of major theoretical schools and explained how they might be applied to practice. Typically, graduates believed theory and research were less helpful to their development
when compared with practicing service delivery. One graduate stated, “for me it hasn’t been what’s pivotal in my development as a psychologist . . . I mean when you compare it to actually getting out there and working with people, which is what you want to do.” The graduate’s attitude might have been influenced by her primary desire to work with athletes. Client interaction might have seemed more useful to her than research and theory because it was why she had enrolled in the master’s degree program. In addition, the quote might reflect her developmental level. Neophyte practitioners often value learning skills that help them interact with clients to alleviate their doubts about their service-delivery competence (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Some graduates did not value learning research and theory if the knowledge did not seem readily applicable to clients. One graduate said, “we did a lot of research subjects in sport psych and presented a lot of articles, and I don’t know how much that’s really helped me personally.” Another graduate said, “people that pay me want to see how they can take it [theory] home and use it today.” This individual’s perspective appears similar to findings from counseling psychology research. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) found that when trainees are exposed to conceptual ideas or research findings, they apply them to their clients’, friends’, families’, or their own lives. If the ideas make sense in the application, then students become committed to them. The previous quote perhaps also reflects how service delivery for this graduate was evaluated primarily by client feedback, a characteristic common among neophyte therapists (Rønnestad & Skovholt).

Graduates highlighted two shortcomings in the sport psychology literature they had studied regarding applicability. One participant described how a lot of research was unsuitable for athletes that he worked with in his sports placement:

If you look at a lot of the research that’s done . . . in North American big universities or schools . . . that’s where a lot of the data and the theory and the research is coming from, and . . . when [I was] working with someone who’s the world champion, I quickly realized that with regards to that research, I think I’m dealing with an outlier here.

The second shortcoming was captured in the following quote: “I think a lot of it is too textbook, I think it is not applicable to real life.” These graduates’ criticisms might have reflected their developmental levels. Inexperienced practitioners might be unable to apply theory and research unless explicit implications are detailed (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). A more appreciative view of theory and research was expressed by a graduate who said practitioners needed the “skill of drawing out the drops of gold in the important parts or whatever that are in all of the research and theory.”

The teaching staff also appreciated the need for graduates to learn to analyze theory and research critically:

The applied psychologist, even if they claim that theory is irrelevant, it becomes quite evident that they’re using psychological theory as the underlying assumption of their own modes of practice. Theory is your guide to effective practice; it can’t be otherwise whether it’s implicit or explicit . . . I think that, as with any profession, it’s important for the applied psychologist to keep up to date with the latest [theory and research], and they should, if they have had a good
grounding in theory, be able to evaluate it, so if the new ideas are worth incorporating then they’ll do so, and if not they won’t, but they’ll have a reason [to guide their decision].

This quote indicates that theoretical perspectives influence service delivery (whether consciously or unconsciously). Research from counseling psychology provides evidence that learning theory and research helps practitioners reflect on their own perspectives and adopt models of service delivery coherent with their personalities and clients’ needs (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Social Interactions Contributed to Learning

Participants placed considerable value on the interactions students had with classmates. One graduate said, “we would compare notes and throw ideas around, which is good. That was probably the best thing and seeing how other people do things.” Another graduate said,

Everybody was going through the learning curve together, and you could talk through issues with people who were going through similar issues with you, and that was valuable. I learned a lot from quite a few of my peers. One of the biggest benefits was that informal communication, that bonding, but also challenging; you couldn’t just sit back and not think about what you were doing, and why you were doing it, because somebody would inevitably challenge you on it.

These findings on the value of social interactions for student learning parallel results from counseling psychology research. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003), for example, found that classmates were considered a central influence on student practitioners’ early development.

The contributions that interactions with classmates make to students’ learning have received limited attention in sport psychology literature. For example, peer supervision has been only briefly discussed as a mechanism for helping trainees develop service-delivery competence (Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996). Although participants did mention peer supervision, they discussed in more detail the contribution that social interactions made to their learning. Examining the influences that peers have on early professional development might be a fruitful topic of inquiry. Knowledge yielded from examining the social interactions that take place during sport psychology training might assist teachers’ attempts to ensure that educational programs help trainees develop service-delivery competence. The centrality of collegiality among students as a core learning theme in the current research has implications for broader educational issues such as remote learning and online delivery of entire units and training courses. Training programs that do not provide opportunities for regular social interaction might be denying students a complete educational experience and might be limiting learning that might otherwise occur.

Reciprocal learning among classmates also occurred during informal situations. One staff member argued that these informal learning experiences were powerful because

They get people using their skills, interpersonal and communication skills, in different settings. Settings I think that are much more like the collegial work
they’ll do beyond [their studies], and much more like the applied sport psych work they’ll do under a tree or at a café.

Sport psychology work is often unscheduled, such as 5 minutes in a hotel lobby or on a bus traveling to a sporting event (McCann, 2000; Simons & Andersen, 1995), and practitioners often operate in settings that have unclear boundaries (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001). Unplanned sport psychology work might have similarities with many informal social interactions. It seems reasonable that neophyte practitioners might develop their communication skills during informal social interactions that occur at cafés or sporting events.

Participants suggested that student–teacher relationships contributed substantially to the sport psychology training process. One graduate described his course as “a transformational learning experience” because “it was the first time that I felt like I was being treated as almost an equal . . . and that gives you a little bit of confidence [personally and professionally].” By treating him “as almost an equal,” the graduate perceived that staff were suggesting that he could become a competent practitioner. Like many graduates in the current sample, this individual experienced anxiety with regard to his service-delivery skills (he described himself as “the unskilled helper,” a play on the title of Egan’s [2002] book), and the way staff treated him appeared to help counter his self-doubts.

Some participants discussed how student–teacher relationships evolved over time. One teaching staff member said,

In terms of what the student gets out of supervision, I think it varies throughout the process of their degrees. At the beginning, I think that it’s information and security, and the idea that I’m not on my own, and that if I’m going to do really the wrong thing that someone will say something. . . . As things go on, it’s more trialing ideas and discussing them and experiences rather than more direct guidance.

Findings from counseling psychology parallel this theme. Initially, neophyte therapists benefit from direct explicit guidance from their teachers and supervisors. With experience, however, trainees profit more from being questioned and challenged rather than being given direct instruction (Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). As therapists mature, professional elders might become colleagues and seek advice from their students. As illustrated in this study, one graduate now meets regularly with a former teacher and thought “it’s good to actually see now [the lecturer] thinks he can learn something off me . . . which is wonderful.” The former teacher is communicating a belief in the graduate’s competence, and such positive reinforcement seems to have enhanced the graduate’s self-efficacy.

**Specific Events Outside of Training Influenced Learning**

Specific events outside of training before and during enrolment were perceived to influence service-delivery competence, a theme also evident in counseling psychology research (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Orlinsky et al., 2001). Sports participation was one activity that graduates and staff thought helped them understand sport psychology principles, an observation echoed by other practitioners. For example, Brown, Gould, and Foster (2005) discussed the contribution previous sporting experience made to contextual intelligence, a concept they believed enhanced practitioners’
abilities to understand and help athletes. When responding to a question about activities that helped him learn about service delivery, one graduate said, “the sport I played for most of my life also has a lot of that, those mental skills involved.” Sporting experiences might have been sources of confidence for graduates or helped them empathize with athletes because they had dealt with similar issues personally. Prior sporting participation, however, does not ensure trainees will be helpful practitioners (Anderson, Miles, et al., 2004).

Interpersonal interaction was a key feature in the examples of helpful events outside of training that participants mentioned. Examples included employment in managerial, sales, or supervisory positions; communicating with people who spoke another language; and being a psychotherapy client. In these examples, communicating well with others was central to positive outcomes, whether they were motivating employees, adapting to life in a foreign country, or engaging in self-exploration. When reflecting on learning from his previous managerial employment, one graduate said, “I guess communicating and linking with people, and I guess those abilities to kind of discuss things broadly and get into the mind of the person you work with, and find out what they really want.” Although it is not surprising that well-developed interpersonal communication skills are a feature of competent sport psychology practitioners (Anderson, Miles, et al., 2004), the previous examples illustrate that therapists learn a good deal about interacting with clients from situations outside of formal education and service delivery.

Previous employment in managerial or sales positions also helped graduates develop service-delivery competencies other than relationship-building skills. One graduate had learned “things like financial management, budgeting, those sort of core business skills, which I think are important if you are running your own practice.” Morris (1995) suggested that the number of practitioners offering services in private practice could increase as the scope of sport psychology becomes better known and accepted in society. Business-management skills are helpful because consultants need to find and keep paying clients, manage money, and stay inside the confines of business law. Currently, there is limited sport-psychology-specific literature to guide recent graduates in developing business competencies (Hays & Smith, 2002; Lesyk, 1998), and thus consultants might have to draw on mainstream psychology literature (e.g., Kasperczyk & Francis, 2002).

**General Discussion**

Similarities with results from existing research lend credibility to the themes identified from the data in the current study. For example, in sport psychology graduate surveys, participants indicated that supervised placements, learning counseling skills, and previous sporting experience had been beneficial to their learning (Aldridge et al., 1997; Andersen et al., 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). The current study has extended the literature on applied sport psychology training in two ways. First, the semistructured interviews allowed issues associated with the previous findings to be explored in more depth. For example, participants detailed specifically why supervised placements had been beneficial. Second, participants related stories of learning experiences not addressed in previous research. Specifically, participants discussed the value of interpersonal interactions among classmates and teaching staff, specific events outside of training, and the place of
theory and research in their education. The findings in the current study are similar to those from counseling psychology research (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Orlinsky et al., 2001; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). The similarities provide evidence that the counseling psychology literature is directly relevant to sport psychology practitioner development. Perhaps the similarities also indicate that practitioners in sport psychology and other mainstream psychology subdisciplines might benefit from developing similar skill sets.

There are some issues related to the scope of the current findings that warrant consideration. For example, teaching staff and graduates of Australian programs were the participants, and these programs are perhaps more the exception than the rule in applied sport psychology training. In many countries, sport psychology training primarily occurs in physical education and sport science departments (see Sachs et al., 2007), and most programs are not accredited by professional psychology organizations (e.g., American Psychological Association, British Psychological Society). Another issue to consider is that the graduates’ contact details were obtained largely from teaching staff. The teaching staff might have directed us toward their most capable, noteworthy, or outstanding graduates. Different results might arise if the study were repeated with other types of individuals (e.g., those unhappy with their experiences in graduate school, those who dropped out of programs).

Offering participants the interview guide prior to their participation is another issue. Many participants appreciated the opportunity to become acquainted with the interview guide and gave detailed responses. Participants, however, might have rehearsed their responses, omitted some information, and been less spontaneous than if they had not had exposure to the guide. Some participants might have been less forthright than others, but this issue is true of any research involving humans. Although it was difficult to determine the extent to which interviewees were being candid, attempts were made to establish trusting relationships with participants by being open about the study’s purpose and procedures and answering any questions about the investigation. In addition, participants were free to decline sharing information and to not answer questions if they were uncomfortable.

Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were used in the current study. With phone interviews some visual and nonverbal cues that aid interview interpretations are not accessible (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). It is possible that the data quality of the telephone conversations might have been lower than the information gathered in face-to-face interviews. During the data analysis process, we assessed the richness of the data generated through face-to-face interviews with that obtained via the telephone. Specifically, we considered the range and types of ideas participants discussed, but we did not detect any notable differences in the scope or quality of the data across the two interview modes. Recently, Sturges and Hanrahan concluded that interview mode (telephone versus face-to-face) did not influence the breadth or depth of data collected during their interview research. In addition, the participants in Sturges and Hanrahan’s study who chose the telephone interviews did so because of convenience and privacy. The response rate for Sturges and Hanrahan’s study improved once they offered participants the choice between telephone and face-to-face interviews. In the current study, the use of a convenient interview mode possibly outweighed the loss of visual and other nonverbal information.

The findings reported here offer sport psychology educators and students grist for the reflective mill. Teaching staff might consider how they structure role-plays
to ensure safe environments, how they draw on trainees’ existing knowledge, and how their attitudes toward theory and research influence their students’ attitudes and development. In addition, sport psychology trainees could use the current results to assist in their own self-explorations, such as considering ways they interact with their classmates. Students might also benefit from knowing that their training experiences often reflect those of their predecessors, and the findings might help normalize their reactions and emotions. Trainees might be relieved to learn that many individuals experience uncertainties and anxieties during role-plays and fieldwork.

There are several related avenues of inquiry that researchers could pursue. Investigators could engage in cross-cultural investigations by interviewing graduates and teaching staff from a number of countries about their perceptions of training. Longitudinal studies could be undertaken with students’ and their teachers’ perceptions of training being compared. The perspectives of other stakeholders such as professional sport psychology organizations and educational institutions could also be examined. In Australia, for example, universities are focusing more on reflective practice, quality assurance, and graduate outcomes than they have previously, and researchers could examine how these factors influence sport psychology training. In addition, data might be gathered through observing actual behavior in classrooms, role-plays, or placements to capture what is occurring during the process of instruction and service delivery. Evaluating the efficacy of training is also important. For example, investigators could examine if, in practice, client satisfaction improves as sport psychology students progress through their training programs. In pursuing these research directions, investigators could draw on counselor development and training literature to guide their endeavors (e.g., Furr & Carroll, 2003; Stoltenberg et al., 1998).

When sport psychology practitioners change from offering a limited number of services (e.g., performance enhancement) to a wider range (e.g., psychological well-being, happiness, rehabilitation), they can help a broader spectrum of people. Graduates are finding work in areas such as sports medicine, obesity clinics, and cardiac rehabilitation settings. Examining applied sport psychology education in detail can lead to a better understanding of whether the skills and knowledge needed to work in the broader field of sport and exercise psychology are being acquired by future practitioners.

References


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