The long and winding road: Professional development in sport psychology

Link to publication record in USC Research Bank:
http://research.usc.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/usc:12011

Document Version:
Published version

Citation for published version:

Copyright Statement:
Copyright © 2007 Human Kinetics. Reproduced here in accordance with the publisher's copyright policy.

General Rights:
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the USC Research Bank is retained by the author(s) and / or the copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of the Sunshine Coast has made every reasonable effort to ensure that USC Research Bank content complies with copyright legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact research-repository@usc.edu.au providing details, and we will remove the work immediately and investigate your claim.
The Long and Winding Road: Professional Development in Sport Psychology

David Tod
University of Wales, Aberystwyth

To date, there has been limited discussion of sport psychology consultant development, and there is not a comprehensive knowledge base on practitioner maturation. In this article the author argues that counselor-development literature might contribute to sport psychology consultant training and practitioner-maturation research. The author reviews counselor-development theory and highlights similarities with sport psychology literature, such as the documentation of trainees’ anxieties. Implications for practitioner training include matching instructional methods to trainees’ developmental needs, creating strategies for making use of modeling and simulated or real client interactions, and helping trainees deal with anxiety and conflict. Possible research directions include following sport psychology consultants longitudinally and recording experienced practitioners’ life histories. The use of counselor-development literature might assist educators and supervisors in their interactions with trainees, help practitioners reflect on and perhaps improve their service-delivery practices, and stimulate studies that contribute to a broader understanding of sport psychology consultant development.

The field of sport psychology has expanded greatly in the last 35 years (Williams & Straub, 2006), and, increasingly, athletes, coaches, and sport administrators have sought psychological services from practitioners. The number of individuals providing consulting services has grown, with many having obtained considerable experience helping athletes resolve personal issues and prepare for competition. The number of sport psychology training programs has also grown, and examples are illustrated in the Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology (Burke, Sachs, & Smisson, 2004). Understanding experienced practitioners’ developmental journeys will likely benefit neophyte consultants as they begin their service-delivery careers. To date, the literature on professional development consists of a small number of conference abstracts and published articles (e.g., Morris & Thomas, 2004; Sedgwick & Zaichkowsky, 2003; Simons & Andersen, 1995), and much remains to be learned about sport psychology consultant maturation, such as the ways that practitioners change throughout their careers.
One way to advance practitioner-development knowledge is to draw on the relevant counseling-psychology literature. Petitpas (2002) depicted counseling as a psychoeducational and developmental process emphasizing enhancement and growth, and such a description could apply to sport psychology service delivery. In addition, effective counselors and sport psychology consultants probably have similar competencies such as relationship-building skills and the ability to apply interventions to clients’ specific situations. Many sport psychology consultants also draw on theories similar to those used by counselors to guide service delivery, such as the cognitive-behavioral theory (see Hill, 2001). Given the similarities between the two disciplines, it is likely that relevant counseling literature might contribute to the understanding of sport psychology consultant development and provide guidance for practitioner training. In addition, participants in sport psychology graduate surveys have indicated that learning counseling skills enhances service delivery (e.g., Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003).

There are a number of benefits that counselor-development literature could have for sport psychology professionals. Counselor-development literature might assist researchers as they investigate sport psychology consultant maturation. Consultants might use counselor-development literature to assist them in understanding their professional journeys, and such self-reflection might stimulate improvements in service delivery. From an educational perspective, supervisors and academics might draw on counselor-development literature to better tailor supervision and courses to students’ needs. Neophyte practitioners might benefit from understanding the typical themes in professional growth and find comfort in learning the experiences of others in similar positions. The purpose of this article is to review relevant counseling-psychology literature, to identify similarities to sport psychology knowledge, to suggest possible implications for the training and supervision of practitioners, and to propose research that will extend knowledge.

Counselor-Psychologist Development

Many therapist-development theories, from student to master practitioner, have been proposed (e.g., Hogan, 1964; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998). Although there are variations among the theories, they contain many similarities (Worthington, 1987). Initially, for example, trainee therapists are dependent on the guidance of their teachers and supervisors because they lack sufficient service-delivery knowledge (Loganbill et al.). Mature practitioners, however, draw on internalized theories of therapy developed from their service-delivery experience (Stoltenberg, 2005). Trainees often experience anxiety regarding their initial client interactions (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Feelings of incompetence and being evaluated by teachers and supervisors contribute to beginning-consultants’ anxieties (Stoltenberg). Typically, beginning counselors focus on learning specific intervention techniques that they implement in rigid ways, and they prefer to learn by imitating mentors (Hogan). Seasoned practitioners are flexible in using intervention techniques and adjust them to suit their clients (Stoltenberg). To illustrate the various counselor-development theories, I will present Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) theory in some detail.
Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) Theory of Therapist Development

Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) theory has six phases and is one of the few theories to describe development across therapists’ entire careers. Most theories primarily emphasize student-therapist development (e.g., Hogan, 1964; Loganbill et al., 1982). Although Rønnestad and Skovholt’s theory is suitable to guide research and practice, the consideration of other theories will likely contribute to the understanding of sport psychology consultant development (e.g., Stoltenberg et al., 1998). Space does not allow other theories to be presented here.

Phase 1: Lay Helpers

Lay helpers are individuals with no training in counseling who informally help others such as friends and work colleagues. Generally, a lay helper identifies an individual’s problems quickly, provides strong emotional support, and gives advice based on personal experience. Often, these individuals feel natural and authentic when assisting others, and they are guided by their personal worldviews rather than professional counseling theories.

Blurred boundaries might characterize lay helpers’ assistance. Typically, lay helpers lack control of their emotional engagement when assisting others and do not reflect on their counseling attempts. Lay helpers might identify strongly and become overinvolved with those they help. Overinvolvement and strong identification exacerbate lay helpers’ tendencies to give advice, rather than helping individuals arrive at their own solutions. The criticisms Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) raise are probably not unique to lay helpers, and trained counselors (and sport psychology consultants) might blur practitioner–client boundaries (see Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001). Although they are not professionally trained, many lay helpers offer considerable assistance to others.

Phase 2: Beginning Students

The start of professional training can be taxing for many students because they might believe their lay-helper approaches are unsuitable, and they need to adopt new counseling perspectives. Often, beginning students doubt they have the characteristics to become effective counselors. There are many issues about competence that novice practitioners might consider. For example, students are often unsure how to proceed when they are counseling, and they fear losing control of therapeutic sessions. Most beginning students experience anxiety, and their negative emotions could interfere with their initial client interactions. Anxious novice practitioners, for example, might find it difficult to concentrate on, remember, and process clients’ stories.

Several sources influence beginning students’ counseling development, including clients, professional elders (e.g., academics, supervisors), theory and research, classmates, nonprofessional experiences, and the training program’s social environment. These influences are salient for counselors throughout their professional careers. Many beginning students are particularly reliant on teachers’ and supervisors’ guidance. Trainees, for example, often lack abilities to evaluate their own
counseling knowledge or the material presented in the professional literature. In addition, beginning students typically rely on feedback provided by supervisors and clients to evaluate their counseling effectiveness. Negative comments could leave neophyte practitioners feeling anxious and despairing of becoming competent.

Often, beginning students favor learning service-delivery methods that they hope are easily mastered and applicable in all situations to help them control their anxieties and have confidence that they can help clients. Imitation is often trainees’ preferred learning method, and they search for expert counselors to copy.

**Phase 3: Advanced Students**

Characteristically, advanced trainees are conservative when interacting with clients. For example, interventions might be applied rigidly according to external sources of knowledge (e.g., literature, teachers) and without consideration for clients’ needs. In addition, many advanced students tend to take full responsibility for client outcomes. Advanced students’ self-evaluations vary depending on the comparisons they make. For example, when comparing themselves with beginning students, advanced trainees appreciate their growth and feel confident in their abilities. If comparing themselves with professionals, however, advanced students might feel vulnerable, insecure, and dependent on external feedback. Along with fluctuating confidence, many advanced students experience ambivalence toward their training. Ambivalence is influenced by advanced students’ dependencies on supervisors and teachers, the necessity to meet training-program requirements, and their desires to be autonomous practitioners.

There are differences between beginning and advanced students in their learning foci, use of role models, and vulnerability to supervisors. For example, advanced students are more likely to consider how their personalities and histories influence service delivery than beginning students are. In addition, beginning students tend to accept or reject role models at a global level, whereas advanced trainees consider components of the examples they are observing. Also, advanced students might be more vulnerable to supervisors’ feedback than beginning trainees. Supervisors might expect more from advanced students because they are supposed to have mastered professional competencies to higher levels.

**Phase 4: Novice Professionals**

During the initial years after graduation, novice professionals often experience considerable development as they discard some ideas and behaviors learned during training and adopt new approaches to practice. Novice professionals might experience a sense of freedom immediately after finishing training because they are no longer being evaluated by teachers and supervisors. New graduates are also eager to assess knowledge learned in training. Novice professionals, however, might feel unprepared for their jobs, miss the guidance provided by academics and supervisors, and search for mentors offering assistance with the transition from student to autonomous practitioner.

After the initial sense of freedom, many novice practitioners experience disillusionment with their training and themselves when they are unable to meet professional challenges such as learning how to adapt services to the needs of heterogeneous client groups. Novice professionals are usually unprepared for the
disillusionments they experience and have difficulties coping with gaps in their knowledge. Disillusionment stimulates many novice professionals to examine their skills, values, and interests. Novice professionals also consider the environments they work in and roles they adopt. Such reflections could stimulate the search for environments and roles compatible with novice professionals’ skills and interests. Self-reflection continues to be a preferred learning method for novice practitioners, and they consider how interventions can be adjusted to suit their own and clients’ needs.

There are numerous issues that novice professionals attempt to resolve. For example, many beginning professionals have difficulties with boundary regulation, such as how much responsibility to adopt for client outcomes. Also, many novice practitioners observe how their personalities influence their client interactions and might begin considering how to integrate their personalities with their professional roles. In addition, there is often increasing recognition that therapeutic relationships influence client progress. Novice professionals tend to give increased attention to developing their relationship-building skills.

Phase 5: Experienced Professionals

Many experienced professionals attempt to develop congruence between their therapeutic roles and personalities. Congruence allows practitioners to feel authentic when interacting with clients. For example, practitioners often adopt theories and counseling styles that suit their personalities. Associated with their desires for congruence, experienced practitioners use interventions and techniques in personalized and flexible ways. Counseling tools are no longer applied in the rigid manner characteristic of beginning students.

Experienced practitioners’ predominant emotions are generally positive. Practitioners typically feel they can trust their professional judgments, are comfortable with clients, are competent, can form effective working alliances, and are able to challenge clients if necessary. Sometimes, however, experienced practitioners feel anxious when starting work outside their knowledge and competencies.

The perspectives of past professional elders have often been internalized by experienced practitioners who might recall advice received from previous supervisors, teachers, and mentors. An additional influence for an experienced practitioner is becoming a professional elder for younger therapists. Becoming a supervisor or mentor might stimulate reflection on a therapist’s practices and beliefs. In addition, experienced professionals learn about human behavior from life events outside of the therapeutic realm, such as a divorce. Regarding learning method, experienced practitioners learn primarily by reflecting on their interpersonal interactions. Theory and research are often considered secondary sources of knowledge and are accepted if they assist with practitioners’ interpretations of their client interactions.

Often, experienced practitioners have resolved the issues they faced as novice professionals. For example, mature practitioners, in general, have become proficient at regulating their involvement with clients. Many experienced practitioners have also determined the suitable levels of responsibility they adopt for the counseling process and client outcomes. The resolution of these issues comes from practitioners’ reflections on their considerable experience of helping clients.
Phase 6: Senior Professionals

Senior professionals are individuals with 20 or more years of counseling experience. Many themes describing experienced professionals apply to senior practitioners. The emotions most senior professionals experience are predominantly positive, and they are usually satisfied with themselves and their careers. Senior practitioners, however, might also experience negative emotions regarding their careers. For example, some individuals could feel boredom from the repetition of routine tasks. Senior professionals might also feel grief over the losses they experience. Most senior practitioners grapple with loss in various guises such as the termination of their professional roles through retirement; their failing health and capacities to function as therapists; and the death of family, friends, and colleagues. In addition, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) used the phrase loss of innocence to describe the fading of illusions or the increased sense of realism about what senior practitioners can achieve professionally.

Stage theories suggest that development consists of distinct periods through which all individuals proceed. Development, however, is gradual, and individuals mature at different rates, could regress, and could be characterized by themes from more than one stage. Reviewing counselor-development theory might help identify implications for consultant training and possible research directions. Before identifying possible implications and research, I highlight some similarities between counselor-development and sport psychology literature.

Similarities Between Counselor-Development and Sport Psychology Literature

During interviews about their careers and service delivery, experienced sport psychology consultants have raised many themes similar to those present in the counselor-development literature. For example, experienced practitioners have suggested that self-reflection contributes to professional development, and effective consultants learn from colleagues and clients (Partington & Orlick, 1991; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Straub & Hinman, 1992).

Many practitioners have written articles in which they reflect on their service-delivery experiences, and these writings contain similarities with counselor-development theory. In recent years, for example, neophyte practitioners have written accounts of their initial client experiences (e.g., Holt & Strean, 2001; Tammen, 2000). Tonn and Harmison (2004) discussed how the first author’s anxieties led her to focus on herself rather than clients. Also, articles by experienced practitioners indicate how clients have influenced their service-delivery practices (e.g., Bond, 2002; Ravizza, 2002).

According to counselor-development theory, with experience, counselors recognize the influence that therapeutic relationships have in service delivery (Stoltenberg, 2005). In recent years, there has been recognition that practitioner–athlete relationships play a central role in sport psychology service delivery (e.g., Andersen, 2000; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Tod & Andersen, 2005). In addition to the similarities between counselor-development and sport psychology literature, some
authors have referenced professional-development theory in discussions on sport psychology supervision and service delivery.

In their writings, Andersen and colleagues (Andersen & Williams-Rice, 1996; Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000) have discussed the role of counselor-development theory in supervision. With reference to Stoltenberg’s (1981) therapist-development theory, Van Raalte and Andersen made recommendations about suitable approaches to supervision (e.g., behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, phenomenological, psychodynamic). Initially, trainees usually are anxious, want to know the right way to behave, have low tolerances for ambiguity, think in concrete ways, and are dependent on supervisors. Behavioral approaches might be appealing because they are relatively straightforward, offer recipes for action, and provide structure. When trainees are close to becoming independent practitioners, they might be ready for in-depth examinations of themselves and their client relationships. Psychodynamic approaches might be suitable because they allow for thorough analyses of supervisees and their athlete relationships.

Morris and Thomas (2004) discussed Berliner’s (1994) theory of teaching expertise in their chapter on applied sport psychology. Although Berliner’s theory is focused on teacher expertise rather than counselor development, there are many similarities. Based on Berliner’s theory, Morris and Thomas made a number of suggestions about how practitioners could develop with experience. For example, novice sport psychology consultants expect to learn rules and procedures for helping athletes that are applicable without consideration for the contexts in which service delivery occurs. As practitioners develop expertise, they become flexible in service delivery and individualize their work with clients.

To date, few authors have considered the role that counselor-development theories have for sport psychology, and they have not been discussed in depth. More in-depth discussion of counselor-development theories might help synthesize the existing sport psychology literature. Development theories might also form a basis for identifying training implications and future research.

**Possible Implications for Training and Development**

**Matching Instructional Style With Trainees’ Needs**

A common recommendation made by counselor-development theorists is to match supervision and instructional style to trainees’ needs (Hogan, 1964; Stoltenberg, 2005). Stoltenberg suggested that the degree of structure and guidance supervisors provide can be decreased as supervisees develop. High levels of structure and guidance early in development might help trainees cope with anxiety and provide them with direction for learning about service delivery. As trainees’ skill levels and knowledge increase, they are able to take responsibility for their growth (Stoltenberg).

Loganbill et al.’s (1982) instructional interventions might help educators and supervisors match teaching and supervision practices to trainees’ needs. *Facilitative interventions* refer to attitudes and behaviors that encourage supportive environments in which trainees feel secure and safe. Ways to develop supportive environments include demonstrating a liking for students, warmth, respect, empathy,
tolerance, and placing the evaluation of trainees’ progress within the broader goal of their development. Supportive environments help lessen trainee anxiety and afford them opportunities to engage in self-reflection (Loganbill et al.). Demonstrating positive attitudes toward trainees is suitable across the various levels of development (Stoltenberg, 2005), such as remembering details about trainees’ partners and periodically inquiring after their health.

Conceputal interventions include efforts to help trainees use research and theory to understand their client interactions (Loganbill et al., 1982). Supervisors could, for example, ask supervisees to explain how they used Marchant’s (2000) chapter on goal setting with professional athletes to prepare for a client session. One way to match conceptual interventions to trainees’ needs is to consider their preferred learning styles. People who study and pursue careers in psychology typically favor working with others, generating and exchanging new ideas, receiving personalized feedback, and considering specific situations from various perspectives (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). Based on such research, trainee development might be enhanced via group supervision or classroom discussions in which specific situations are considered from different viewpoints, for example, discussing the relevant ethical principles and logistical factors to consider when consultants no longer feel comfortable working with particular athletes. After completing formal training, practitioners could belong to informal groups that regularly (and confidentially) discuss clients and other athlete situations (e.g., those reported in the media). Professional organizations (e.g., the International Society of Sport Psychology [ISSP]) also provide group learning opportunities for practitioners via conferences and workshops such as Stevens and Andersen’s (2005) workshop on erotic issues in service delivery at ISSP’s 11th World Congress.

When using prescriptive interventions, professional elders provide trainees with specific plans of action for particular situations (Loganbill et al., 1982). Prescriptive interventions might include giving neophyte practitioners action plans for use with athletes or instructions to eliminate specific behaviors from their service-delivery practices; a supervisor might ask a trainee to follow Boutcher and Rotella’s (1987) program for use with athletes in closed-skill-based sports when working with a golfer. Such instructional strategies might be useful for beginning practitioners embarking on initial service-delivery attempts. Prescriptive interventions, such as intake interview guides, might help trainees maintain client welfare, provide effective services to athletes, and cope with anxiety. Although prescriptive interventions might help trainees during their early professional development, such instructional strategies might stifle advanced students’ progress toward autonomy and independence (Loganbill et al.).

Confrontive interventions refer to attempts by educators and supervisors to highlight discrepancies among trainees’ emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and external factors (Loganbill et al., 1982). For example, a supervisor might identify a discrepancy between a trainee’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Confrontive interventions might be perceived as negative evaluations of trainee functioning (Loganbill, et al.). Skillful professional elders might diffuse the negative perceptions of confrontive interventions by emphasizing the positive components of the discrepancies, such as highlighting unused strengths. Effective educators and supervisors could also convey their acceptance of trainees and belief in their potential as practitioners (Loganbill et al.). In addition, it might be beneficial to separate the
specific behaviors, emotions, or attitudes being examined from the trainee as an individual. Confrontive interventions might be suitable for advanced students, who typically have begun to consider the ways that their needs, relationship histories, and personalities influence service delivery (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992).

Catalytic interventions are designed to promote change through making unconscious abilities, thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and processes conscious (Loganbill et al., 1982). For example, questions from an astute supervisor might help a trainee become aware of the adoption of paternal or maternal posturing toward younger athletes experiencing anxiety-provoking situations. With such insight, the trainees might be able to understand their parental needs and how they influence their interactions, back off from such infantilizing of the athletes, and improve service-delivery competence. The goal-setting and performance-profiling processes might also be useful catalytic interventions (see Butler & Hardy, 1992; Gould, 2006). In developing short-term goals, for instance, a trainee and supervisor could observe a video recording of the neophyte practitioner collaborating with an athlete to identify unconscious strengths, such as behaviors or verbal statements that communicate engagement with the client. The trainee might set goals and develop achievement strategies to help ensure that such strengths are repeated with other athlete-clients (such as a reminder card that is reviewed before meeting with a client).

Another catalytic intervention is to encourage practitioners to experiment with different roles and behaviors (Loganbill et al., 1982). Being able to adapt service delivery and adopt different roles to suit athletes’ needs contributes to consultant effectiveness (see Andersen et al., 2001). One role that trainees might adopt, for example, is the expert advice giver (Loganbill et al.). Although such a role might be suitable for some clients, supervisors could encourage trainees to refrain from giving advice and, instead, help clients generate their own solutions. Role plays and supervised placements might provide opportunities for practitioners to experiment with different roles. Catalytic interventions might be most suitable for advanced trainees to help expand their awareness of clients, themselves, and the therapeutic process (Stoltenberg, 2005).

**Observed, Simulated, and Real Service-Delivery Experiences**

Early in training, students can observe service delivery in action (e.g., watching a recording of an athlete consultation), engage in simulated client interactions (e.g., role plays), or undertake supervised work experience. Typically, beginning students are trying to understand how service delivery is conducted (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). Providing opportunities to observe experienced practitioners in action or engage in role plays might help trainees develop cognitive maps to guide their initial (supervised) service-delivery attempts.

Modeling has been shown to help trainees develop service-delivery competencies (Hill & Lent, 2006). Video instruction, such as *Three Approaches to Sport Psychology Consulting* (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000), is one possible way to allow trainees to observe service delivery. The value of modeling might be enhanced if professional elders encourage discussions, perhaps in group supervision, in which individuals can compare their perspectives. In addition, Rønnestad and Skovholt (1993) suggested that the individuals who are modeling service delivery
are suitable for beginning students if their modeling displays helpful behaviors for the client issue, the models have high status among the trainees, and they are able to clearly demonstrate specific skills.

Role plays afford trainees opportunities to engage in or observe simulated service delivery and can take place both in the classroom and during supervision. Beginning and advanced trainees might find role plays uncomfortable because typically they are in front of a perceived evaluative audience. There are ways, however, to ensure that role plays occur in safe and encouraging environments. For example, it might be helpful to avoid labeling behavior as right or wrong. Instead, describing neophyte practitioners’ role-playing attempts as more or less helpful to clients might relieve students from feeling like they have to act in rigid, correct ways. Also, educators can explain to students that classrooms are safe places to make mistakes because the other people involved (teachers and classmates) understand the complexities associated with service delivery and so can empathize, be supportive, and offer alternatives for improvement. In addition, mistakes in the classroom provide opportunities for everybody present to learn, not just the student in the role play. Reducing the number of people watching, or even eliminating the audience altogether, might also lessen evaluation anxiety. In a classroom situation, for example, separating students into small groups and running several role plays simultaneously might help them begin to gain some insights into service delivery and reduce large audience evaluation anxiety. Allowing trainees to stop role plays at any time lets them take breaks when they are uncomfortable or explore issues as they arise. As with modeling, group discussions during and after role plays could enhance learning such as helping trainees become aware of how ethical issues might arise, how particular consultant behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure) might influence clients’ willingness to share their stories, or how to adapt interventions to suit athletes’ needs.

Encouraging trainees to become clients in the service-delivery process might lead to substantial personal and professional benefits (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2000; Petitpas et al., 1999). For example, in counseling or psychotherapy students can deal with personal issues that might otherwise have negative consequences on their client interactions. Being clients can help trainees understand how other clients experience service delivery and the influences that practitioner behaviors have on athletes. Being clients also provides neophyte practitioners with opportunities to observe another consultant over an extended period of time (Andersen et al., 2000).

Trainee learning from interacting with client-athletes might be enhanced by encouraging them to engage in self-reflection individually, with peers, and during supervision. For example, Anderson, Knowles, and Gilbourne (2004) presented a series of questions under the headings of description of consulting experience, reflection, consequences of actions, alternative tactics, and learning to help practitioners reflect on their consulting experiences. Trainees could use these questions to guide their reflections either in supervision or by keeping a reflective journal. Andersen and colleagues’ work on supervision provides helpful information by discussing topics such as ethics, relationships, and logistics (Andersen, 1994; Andersen, Van Raalte, & Harris, 2000; Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). For instance, Andersen presented brief case examples, on topics such as pain management, that supervisors can use to help trainees learn about ethical issues.
Helping Trainees Cope With Anxiety and Conflict

Awareness of the anxieties that many beginning practitioners experience can help professional elders when interacting with trainees. Professional elders could draw on the counseling-psychology literature to enhance their understanding of some of the reactions anxious trainees might display. For example, anxious trainees might want to only discuss athletes who are making progress or choose topics with which they feel comfortable (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993). Professional elders might provide support in various ways. Supervisors and teachers might encourage self-awareness and emotional expression (Rønnestad & Skovholt). For example, professional elders might ask questions designed to help trainees explore their emotions and reactions. Reviewing trainees’ case notes in supervision might help them recall their thoughts, feelings, and reactions when working with athletes. Once anxiety sources have been identified, trainees might be in positions to make helpful changes to lessen anxiety. For example, trainees might become aware of counseling skills that need developing, such as active listening. Professional elders who communicate unconditional positive regard and acceptance might help relieve trainees of rigid imperatives that they must behave in particular ways.

Stress-management techniques might help anxious neophyte practitioners, but they need to be used judiciously. Although unpleasant, anxieties could signal areas that beginning students would benefit from addressing. For example, a trainee might be nervous about an upcoming athlete consultation because of a perceived need to be an expert advice giver to justify involvement with the client. The supervisor might help the trainee adopt a client-led approach to service delivery. Along with stress-management techniques, assertiveness training could help trainees cope with some anxiety-provoking situations such as communicating with difficult clients. Stress-management and assertiveness-training techniques might be taught to students as part of applied sport psychology courses or during supervision. Supervisors might suggest that trainees undertake continuing-education classes offered by universities or professional bodies. Although helpful, stress-management and assertiveness training might be used best in conjunction with other attempts to deal with feelings of discomfort (e.g., self-reflection, emotional expression).

Another way to help students cope with anxiety is to build their confidence that they can help athletes. Drawing on Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy theory might help professional elders identify techniques they can use with individuals. For example, short-term goal setting might assist trainees in obtaining positive service-delivery experiences, such as completing an intake interview that identifies an athlete’s issues, helping an athlete develop a mental-preparation routine, or helping a client adopt a new perspective on a personal issue.

There are likely to be times when professional elders and neophyte practitioners experience disagreements and strained relationships. Interpersonal difficulties might peak during the advanced-student phase (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). For example, a trainee and supervisor might disagree on the amount of specific direction the student needs. There might be a lack of fit between professional elders and students for a number of reasons such as different personalities or theoretical orientations. Advanced students might feel ill prepared to meet professional challenges and blame their supervisors and teachers. Sometimes, advanced students have intrapersonal conflicts in that they feel insecure about their professional competencies but also
desire to be autonomous practitioners (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Although unpleasant, conflicts can provide opportunities to enhance students’ development. Supervisors and teachers could model attitudes and behaviors that facilitate conflict resolution. Professional elders could take time to ensure that both they and trainees are able to express their opinions and associated emotions on disagreements and then explore solutions together. In addition, encouraging self-reflection can provide trainees with insights into the ways they could exacerbate or diffuse athlete dissatisfaction. One way that professional elders could encourage introspection is by modeling self-disclosure of past failures and how they learned from them. Supervisors who admit their own vulnerabilities and mistakes communicate to students that such behavior is normal and a part of professional development.

Possible Future Research

In addition to assisting educators and supervisors, counselor-development literature might guide researchers as they investigate sport psychology consultant maturation. Reviewers of the counseling-psychology literature have consistently identified several method limitations such as the reliance on cross-sectional designs and the almost exclusive use of closed-response self-report questionnaires (Ellis & Ladany, 1997; Stoltenberg, 2005; Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Crethar, 1994). Awareness of limitations with counseling-psychology research might help investigators when designing sport psychology consultant development studies. In addition, counseling-psychology investigators have suggested a number of topics for further examination. Researchers could, for example, investigate whether therapist development varies for different types of practitioners such as educational psychologists, marriage counselors, and social workers (Watkins, 1995). Sport psychology consultants could possibly be added to Watkins’s list.

There are a number of specific research topics that could be pursued. In one line of inquiry, investigators might examine relationships between indicators of professional development and client outcomes. For example, does client satisfaction increase as student practitioners proceed through a training program? As another line of inquiry, neophyte practitioners could be followed over time, and their perceptions could be compared with those of their professional elders regarding development. Including different perspectives might contribute to a deeper and broader understanding of sport psychology consultant development. As a third line of inquiry, life histories of eminent practitioners might provide insights into how childhood and adolescent experiences contribute to individuals’ service-delivery practices. A fourth possible line of inquiry could examine reasons for which people pursue sport psychology careers. Also, examining the ways that people’s motives and needs influence their service-delivery practices might contribute to the knowledge base. Research into sport psychology consultant development might accrue benefits for practitioners. Trainees might be forewarned of obstacles that could hinder their development and might find comfort in learning about the experiences of others in similar positions. Practitioners and students could use findings to help plan their professional growth, resulting in optimal maturation.

Sport psychology service delivery is complex, and there are many consultant competencies that contribute to effective athlete collaboration. Although good
training might help individuals develop the skills and knowledge to be effective practitioners, it can take many years to become masterful consultants. The counselor-development literature might help provide an understanding of the ways sport psychology consultants change as they grow professionally. Such an understanding might contribute to improved training programs, enhanced supervision of practitioners, and optimal professional growth of consultants. Practitioners who are well prepared for their careers might better serve their athlete-clients.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Dr. Daryl Marchant, Professor Mark Andersen, and Ms. Melissa Day for their feedback on the content of this manuscript.

References


