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A Longitudinal Examination of a British Neophyte Sport Psychologist’s Development

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A consultant in private practice, Anna, was followed over 2 years to observe ways her service delivery perceptions and practices changed after completing her academic education. Anna was interviewed three times with each interview being transcribed verbatim with ensuing transcripts thematically content analyzed. Over the two years, Anna experienced increasing coherence between her broadening theoretical orientation and service delivery practices. Anna’s service delivery became more client-led and focused on long-term growth rather than short-term problem fixing. Decreasing anxiety and increasing confidence in her competence, along with experimentation influenced the changes Anna experienced. Anna’s story provides insights for sport psychologist training, such as the value of experiential learning through client contact, personal therapy, and supervision groups.

A growing body of literature has focused on sport psychologist training and supervision. For example, existing research addresses various topics including: (a) graduates’ training and early career experiences (e.g., Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003), (b) students’ and professionals’ experiences and views of training and supervision (e.g., Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1994; Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker, 2004), (c) athletes’ and coaches’ perceptions of supervised placements (e.g., Gentner, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2004; Weigand, Richardson, & Weinberg, 1999), (d) course offerings of U.S. postgraduate programs (Van Raalte et al., 2000), (e) sport psychology’s status in human movement and psychology departments (e.g., LeUnes & Hayward, 1990; Petrie & Watkins, 1994), and (f) trainees’ reflections on their early service delivery experiences (e.g., Tonn & Harmison, 2004; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008). Currently, research on training and supervision is in its embryonic stages and researchers have been identifying key issues that might be addressed in subsequent investigations. Given
the breath of issues that have been identified, investigators may now be positioned to select suitable theories to synthesize and advance knowledge (Tod, 2007).

Given similarities between counseling and applied sport psychology (Petipas, Giges, & Danish, 1999), counselor development theory may provide a framework for examining sport psychologist training and growth. Among the several counselor development theories (e.g., Hogan, 1964; Stoltenberg, 2005), Tod (2007) identified Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) model as one suitable to underpin sport psychology research and explained how it might contribute to knowledge. Whereas most development models focus on students, Rønnestad and Skovholt’s model addresses the entire career spectrum and illustrates how people mature as practitioners after their years of formal education. Rønnestad and Skovholt’s model may guide researchers examining professional development in sport psychologists post education (such as in the current study).

Rønnestad and Skovholt developed their model after interviewing 100 American therapists with various amounts of professional experience about topics such as: important development tasks, service delivery-related emotions, perceived roles and working style, sources of influence, theoretical orientations, preferred learning methods, and service delivery effectiveness criteria. They identified six phases in counselors’ careers. The lay helper phase covered the years before students enrolled on postgraduate programs. The beginning and advanced student phases addressed the time during postgraduate education. The novice, experienced, and senior practitioner phases occurred after formal education. Rønnestad and Skovholt identified themes that cut across the six phases describing ways that counselors change over time. For example, trainee therapists are initially dependent on the guidance of their teachers and supervisors because they lack sufficient service delivery knowledge. Mature practitioners, however, draw on internalized theories of therapy developed from their service delivery experience. Trainees often experience anxiety regarding their initial client interactions, influenced by feelings of incompetence and awareness they are being evaluated by teachers and supervisors (Rønnestad & Skovholt). Typically, beginning counselors focus on learning intervention techniques they implement in rigid ways. Seasoned practitioners are flexible in using intervention techniques and adjust them to suit their clients.

A key theme in Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) theory is individuation, a process that involves increasing levels of coherence between therapists’ ideologies (e.g., values, beliefs) and the methods they use with clients. There is movement from unarticulated and ideological ways of helping others, to models of functioning grounded on practitioners’ experience-based generalizations about how therapy works and the human condition. Before training, lay helpers operate according to rules they perceive govern personal relationships. Lay helpers might, for example, act as sympathetic friends by providing emotional comfort and giving advice based on their experiences. During training, students lack knowledge and rely on external sources (e.g., professional elders, theory/research) to guide their cognitions and behaviors. Students often suppress their beliefs about helping in favor of ways that seem more “professional,” and interact with clients in rigid and inflexible ways. After graduation practitioners’ service delivery behaviors become less controlled by external standards and more freely self-chosen. With increased client experience, practitioners’ service delivery practices become more flexible and coherent with their beliefs.
In one of the few published studies on neophyte applied sport psychologist development, some themes present in Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) model were observed in Australian applied sport psychology students, including the experience of anxiety about competence (Tod, Andersen, & Marchant, 2009). In addition, during their formal training, the way participants helped athletes evolved. Initially, participants attempted to provide solutions to athletes’ problems to justify their involvement with clients. With experience, some participants tried to adapt their approach to fit clients’ needs and also collaborate with athletes rather than act as experts dispensing advice.

There are some other parallels between Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) model and sport psychology research. For example, Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, and Maynard (2007) discussed a newly qualified practitioner’s journey towards congruence between his philosophy and service delivery practices. Congruence is similar to Rønnestad and Skovholt’s concept of individuation. As another example, Rønnestad and Skovholt believed that reflective practice was central to professional development. In recent years reflective practice has been discussed in the sport psychology literature, and a number of trainees have revealed how reflective practice has aided their development (e.g., Crolely, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007; Knowles, Gilbourne, Tomlinson, & Anderson, 2007; Woodcock et al., 2008). These parallels provide support for Tod’s (2007) suggestion that Rønnestad and Skovholt’s model may help guide research on applied sport psychologist development.

For example, Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) model may help identify gaps in existing knowledge. Most research on applied sport psychologist development has used participants in either the beginning or advanced student phases (e.g., Woodcock et al., 2008). Investigations focused on practitioners, posteducation, have typically used individuals in the experienced or senior practitioner phases (e.g., Simons & Andersen, 1995). There are few investigations on individuals in the novice practitioner phase (e.g., Lindsay et al., 2007). Novice practitioners undergo tremendous change according to Rønnestad and Skovholt, and investigations focused on these individuals are likely to add to knowledge. In addition, most research on sport psychologist development has been cross-sectional, or if longitudinal, has covered a short period of time, such as 9 weeks (e.g., Woodcock et al.). In addition, researchers have typically used autobiographical or one-off interview methods. Longitudinal designs over extended periods, in which participants are interviewed on multiple occasions (such as that used by Tod et al., 2009, in their examination of students), may generate findings complimenting and adding to existing knowledge.

The purpose of the current study was to examine professional development in a British individual who, according to Rønnestad and Skovholt, was operating as a novice practitioner in private practice. Specifically, the study focused on examining the ways her service delivery perceptions and practices changed over a two year period. The knowledge from the current study helps color in the gap between student and experienced practitioners, who have been the focus of previous research. In addition, results might provide information useful for supervisors, educators, practitioners, and students. For example, supervisors might be better able to tailor their supervision to suit supervisees’ needs. Educators might identify insights helping them structure classes to prepare students better for their careers.
Practitioners might find comfort in understanding how their development compares with peers. Student practitioners will likely appreciate learning about what they might experience as they emerge from their training cocoons.

**Method**

**Participant**

The British female practitioner, Anna, was 23 years old at the start of the study, had completed an undergraduate degree in psychology, and was in the final month of her masters degree in sport and exercise psychology from an English university. Anna provided informed consent, and certain details, such as her name and the sports in which she has worked have been changed to help protect her identity. Anna started her private practice straight after her masters degree and at the end of the two years was generating a full time living from her practice, although to ensure financial viability, she had branched out from sport and was offering services to individuals in other domains such as business. In addition, she was nearing the completion of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) supervised work experience program. When finished, she would be eligible to become a BASES accredited practitioner. Anna worked predominately in two major sports with youth athletes who represent their counties and some of whom have represented their country. Over the two years, Anna also worked with amateur and professional athletes from club to international level in a range of sports.

As common in much qualitative research, Anna was purposefully selected because the researchers believed she would be an information rich case (Patton, 2002). Although the researchers could not guarantee that Anna would pursue a career in private practice for at least two years and maintain a status that paralleled Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) novice practitioner, they were willing to embark on the study nonetheless. Given Anna’s career goals and the way she had conducted herself during her master’s degree, the researchers believed that she would most likely achieve her objective. As a final point, the first author (who was not a staff member of the university) recruited Anna for the study.

**Procedure**

After obtaining ethical approval, the researchers approached Anna in the final two months of her masters degree, explained the purpose, risks, and safeguards of the investigation, and invited her to participate. After obtaining informed consent, the first author interviewed Anna in the final month of her masters degree. Understanding Anna’s perceptions of service delivery just before entering the novice practitioner phase allowed a point of comparison that assisted in identifying how she changed over the two year period. Two further interviews were undertaken, spaced approximately one year apart. Interviews were semistructured, lasted between 60–90 min, were recorded onto audiocassette tape, and were transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was based on the one Skovholt and Rønnestad (1992) used in their original study and included questions focused on the topics mentioned in the introduction (i.e., important development tasks, service delivery-related emotions, perceived roles and working style, sources of influence, theoretical orientations,
preferred learning methods, and service delivery effectiveness criteria). The wording and order of questions was adjusted to allow a conversational interview style so that Anna felt comfortable with the process.

**Data Analysis and Presentation**

Data were subjected to a thematic content analysis focused on the dynamic of change as an a priori concept and in light of Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) theory. The researchers followed Patton’s (2002) broad stages of preparation, description, and interpretation. In data preparation, the first author transcribed the interviews verbatim, and then read the transcripts while listening to the audiocassette tapes. Transcription resulted in 80 pages of double spaced text. During data description, Anna’s interview responses were initially placed into broad categories representing themes relevant to the research question; for example, *service delivery changes*. After the initial categorization, formal coding was undertaken in which the researchers assigned individual text units to subcategories within the broader topic areas. For example, subcategories under service delivery changes included *silence* and *control*. Formal coding was not a linear process; the researchers debated the meaning of individual text units and the supporting data for the organic themes until they reached agreement. In addition, Anna was presented with the results and invited to contribute to the data description process to help ensure authenticity (see below). After data description, the themes and current literature were considered to identify contributions Anna’s story might make to knowledge. Presentation of Anna’s case has been influenced by Holliday’s (2002) writings. The data were collected at three distinct time points and Anna’s case might have been presented as a chronological narrative. Instead, the researchers believed that presenting themes more concisely and explicitly answered the research question.

**Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

Anna received early drafts of the current manuscript and had freedom to review the representation of her journey. In doing so, Anna offered additional information that helped provide deeper insight. In addition, the researchers invited critical review from others. Specifically, two sport psychology educators and practitioners were asked to read earlier drafts of this manuscript and play devil’s advocate, questioning the researchers’ interpretations and highlighting areas that might have been missed. Similarly, the results were presented at several department seminars and international conferences for the purpose of obtaining critical review (Tod & Bond, 2009). Based on others’ feedback, the researchers reflected on their interpretations of Anna’s story, in some cases rereading the data, to ensure (a) themes that helped answer the research question or (b) ways that the project added to current literature were not missed. For example, based on feedback, the researchers realized they had over-interpreted the degree to which Anna could be considered a humanistic practitioner. After reassessing their interpretation, and seeking feedback from Anna, they believed they had a more accurate understanding of her theoretical orientation. Anna also believed the reassessment was “accurate and fair.”
Results

During data analysis four themes emerged. First, the changes in the way Anna worked with clients seemed to reflect the individuation process. Second, she experienced a broadening of her theoretical orientation. Third, decreased anxiety and increased confidence seemed to influence the changes Anna experienced. Fourth, experiential learning also seemed to influence Anna’s service delivery-related changes.

Changes in the Way Anna Interacted With Clients Seemed to Reflect Individuation

Anna suggested that over the two years, “I have been creating my own style, and finding out what works for me.” In creating her style, she had been experimenting with methods to find those with which she was comfortable and were coherent with her beliefs about herself and service delivery: “I have found . . . there isn’t always a right or wrong answer, you have got to find out . . . the way you feel comfortable delivering that service to that client.” In keeping with the individuation process, Anna’s initial service delivery approach had been heavily influenced by external knowledge sources present during her undergraduate and masters degrees (e.g., teachers, theory/research). When discussing ways that her approach to service delivery had changed, Anna said: “I still use bits of mental skills, but it tends not to be the focal point . . . my philosophy is based in humanism.” As will be developed below, Anna had moved from a directive mental skills training [MST] style to a more collaborative humanistic-type approach. Specific changes, identified in the following paragraphs, included becoming: (a) less problem-, and more client-, driven; (b) less controlling and structured, and allowing athletes to direct sessions; (c) more long-term focused; (d) a facilitator rather than advice-giver; (e) more flexible; (f) more comfortable with silence; and (g) aware of the need for strong working alliances.

The following quote illustrates a key way Anna felt she changed over the two years: “I’m more relaxed about them [clients] coming to their own conclusions . . . I’m less kind of like ‘you have got a problem in this area, let’s fix that, and here is the solution.’” Initially she focused on solving athletes’ problems, whereas over time Anna became more comfortable with helping athletes find their own solutions. In addition, athlete sessions had tended to be highly structured and Anna had been quite directive in her approach:

I feel more comfortable having that ability to change and not have so structured sessions, and “let’s talk about this, and we cannot talk about this or approach this.” If the client is directing it then they will approach those different areas . . . as opposed to saying “I better do this, and I should be doing this, and I need to make sure that my sessions are structured in this way.”

One reason why Anna had maintained a structured problem-solving approach was because she believed she had to offer concrete advice to justify her involvement with clients. Anna felt anxious if unable to identify ways she had helped athletes each session. A related change was a reduced need to maintain control: “I feel more comfortable with allowing them [athletes] to have control, control of the session, control of the situation, control of their development, control of the areas
they want to look at.” As developed in the third theme, initially Anna was uncertain about her competence and highly structured sessions allowed her to manage and maintain control over service delivery. Highly structured sessions let her implement interventions in the ways that she had been taught rather than adapt them to client’s needs. In this sense Anna, initially at least, downplayed her own reactions, intuition, and ideas, in favor of following the advice and direction of professional elders and the literature, a key theme in individuation.

Associated with Anna’s move toward being client-led was her adoption of a long- rather than short-term focus: “Before, sessions tended to be quite discrete, ‘this session we are going to look at concentration’ . . . thinking about the work I have been doing [recently], it’s more like we have running themes.” One reason for Anna’s longer term focus was her increased belief in her ability to operate as an effective practitioner. As a result, Anna did not feel obligated to identify ways she had helped athletes every session. In addition, she had begun to appreciate that effective service delivery may involve activities other than fixing athletes’ problems, such as “getting athletes talking about their experiences . . . to get them to become more self-aware.” Anna realized that it might take several sessions before her work with athletes bore tangible fruit with respect to behavior and performance change.

In another way that her service delivery practices had changed, Anna had begun to perceive that her role was to be a facilitator rather than an advice giver, and her job was to “guide” athletes toward the achievement of service delivery goals. Alongside the movement toward being a facilitator was Anna’s recognition that she had to adapt her practices to the athletes’ needs and preferences, as illustrated:

I have my style, but also I will adapt that depending on the client; taking that really simple example, [taking case notes, with] some clients I might sit there with a pad and a pen in my hand . . . some I won’t do that at all, I will just sit and do nothing.

Another change, influenced by enhanced self-efficacy, was her comfortableness with silence: “I feel more confident in waiting for them to come up with an answer, and I’ll often say ‘just think about it for a minute and then come back to me.’”

Over the two years Anna became more aware of the role relationships played in service delivery. One particular incident from which Anna learned a lot involved a young male athlete who had stormed out of a team meeting she was leading because he felt other players had been picking on him. The athlete then refused to seek help from Anna because she had stayed in the meeting and he believed she should have stopped the session and sought to offer him assistance. From this experience, and others, Anna began to understand the role played by relationships in service delivery: “If you haven’t got a good relationship then it’s very difficult and I don’t think clients are going to trust you; when that relationship with the [player] broke down, I wasn’t really able to work with him.” Although in the first interview Anna had mentioned that relationships with clients were important to service delivery, in the third interview she said, “I definitely understand it better than I did, and feel more strongly; if I didn’t feel the relationship was strong enough, I don’t think I could be effective and therefore it’s kind of pointless and unethical.” Anna’s understanding had deepened from her interaction with clients over the two years, and also from having formed a close connection with a counselor she was meeting “on the basis that I felt it was hypocritical if I did not, as I was going on
to clients about increasing self-awareness but then as not exercising the same thing myself.” Regarding the relationship, Anna said:

If my relationship with her [the counselor] is very important because I trust her and I like her and I feel comfortable . . . and therefore I am willing to open up to her, that must be a similar thing when I am working with a client.

A parallel process was occurring: Anna was thinking about her experiences in personal therapy and applying those reflections to her service delivery practices. Across the two years, Anna began to focus increased attention to developing relationships with athletes.

A Broadening of Anna’s Theoretical Orientation

The deeper appreciation for the value of service delivery relationships was associated with a broadening of Anna’s theoretical orientation. According to her: “I see my approach as very much based in humanistic psychology, but I would say there are still times I would use elements of what would probably classify as CBT [in the guise of MST].” Initially, Anna drew on techniques regularly discussed in sport psychology literature under the rubric of MST. Over the two years, however, Anna also began to incorporate some ideas she learned from humanistic approaches. For example, the key hypothesis in person-centered therapy, that clients’ self-directed growth follows therapeutic relationships characterized by genuineness, nonjudgmental caring, and empathy (Raskin & Rogers, 2000), paralleled Anna’s emphasis on building relationships and helping clients solve their problems.

Anna had begun learning about humanistic ideas during her masters degree from a respected lecturer, however, there were two reasons why she drew on MST principles early on, and gradually began incorporating some humanistic ideas into her practice. First, when asked why she had begun to incorporate humanistic ideas into her practice over time, Anna said:

It’s linked into the confidence . . . getting to know them [clients] more as people and more understanding about their needs and understanding the demands that are being placed upon them by the club, by their schools, by their families.

With client experience, Anna realized that she was a capable practitioner, was more relaxed during service delivery, and was able to incorporate some of the less prescriptive humanistic ideas that she had previously learned, such as spending more time gaining a fuller understanding of clients. As alluded to in the previous theme, initially, as a result of her anxieties about her competence Anna adopted a problem-solving perspective to service delivery and the MST approach provided her with a range of techniques and interventions to help her solve athletes’ problems (and satisfy herself that she was effective). Second, with experience Anna developed a more sophisticated appreciation of effective service delivery and realized one approach was not always sufficient. For example, when talking about a specific client who had difficulty with concentration Anna said:

Rather than being like “you lose concentration, here’s a technique to help you regain concentration when you lose it,” it’s more “well you lose concentration, let’s think about what are some of the underlying reasons for that”, so it’s
probably more in-depth than surface level, rather than “ok this is the problem, lets paper over the cracks.”

Later she mentioned:

From a humanistic philosophy once they have resolved what the underlying areas are then they won’t have a problem, they won’t lose their concentration and that’s true and I would agree with that, but I think there are times when . . . it may be useful to give them bit of a technique they might be able to use or a refocusing technique after they have made a mistake or something, so I still will use bits of mental skills.

In these quotes, Anna discussed how helping athletes develop insight into and resolving more deep seated issues in combination with cognitive interventions are likely to be more effective than either strategy on their own.

Decreased Anxiety and Increased Confidence Influenced Anna’s Evolving Style

Above it was revealed that decreasing anxiety and increasing confidence was one reason for the changes in Anna’s service delivery style. In this theme the ways Anna’s emotions evolved over time are explored. Initially when first interacting with clients, Anna experienced anxiety and self-doubt. During sessions, she would doubt her effectiveness:

[I was] questioning, “is what I’m saying true”, or “have I interpreted this in the right way” or “am I giving helpful [advice], are these questions helpful” or is the athlete sitting there thinking “this is crap” or “what am I wasting an hour sitting here for?” Whereas I don’t think I have quite so much head chatter if you like, I don’t have quite so much negative self-talk now.

Over time Anna’s levels of anxiety and self-doubt decreased, and she developed confidence in her ability. In addition to negative self-talk, Anna’s “head chatter” included attempts to: (a) recall information from her readings and professional mentors, and (b) coach herself through sessions. As another result of her self-doubt, Anna would not always seek athlete feedback because she wanted to protect herself from potentially negative evaluations.

The emergence of confidence, by the third interview, had been born primarily from client experiences in which Anna could pinpoint examples of her effectiveness. Examples included when athletes demonstrated changes in attitudes, cognitions, emotions, behaviors, and performance. Clients’ verbal and nonverbal feedback had also contributed to her confidence, including when teams had renewed her contracts, athletes had returned for additional consultations, and coaches who previously held negative attitudes toward sport psychology began displaying enthusiasm for her position. With increased confidence, she had become more willing to seek feedback and had asked athletes to complete evaluation questionnaires about her assistance.

With confidence, Anna had noticed a decrease in the amount of inner dialogue she experienced and she was less self-focused when helping athletes. In addition, she reported that she enjoyed her job more consistently than when she first started. Initially, Anna experienced ambivalence toward applied sport psychology.
Although she enjoyed helping people, as mentioned above, Anna also experienced anxiety. Anna’s emotions fluctuated greatly based on whether she thought she had been effective or not with clients. After two years, Anna’s emotions fluctuated less because the evidence she could help clients had tipped the scales toward competence. Nevertheless, after two years Anna occasionally had anxiety when placed in novel situations. For example, recently she had been asked to run integrated sessions in which she helped athletes during physical training with one of the teams with whom she worked, and Anna had found it somewhat stressful because it was a mode of service delivery in which she had limited experience.

Loneliness was another emotion Anna experienced as a private practitioner: “It can be quite lonely at times because it’s not like you are working in a great big company and you are meeting every day like when you work in an office job.” When a masters student, she interacted with classmates, lecturers, and supervisors, and the structure of her degree ensured regular contact. Since completing her masters, however, the amount of contact with colleagues had reduced dramatically, and she had had to actively seek out interaction with peers and supervisors. Anna participated regularly in group supervision and one of the benefits was the comfort and inspiration she received from interacting with peers.

**Experiential Learning as a Second Mechanism of Change**

Anna perceived that experimentation and reflection fueled the changes she experienced, as illustrated in the following quote: “To a certain extent, a little bit of trial and error, do I feel comfortable using this method or that method? Definitely I think it’s about finding what works for you.” The primary opportunities for experimentation and reflection had been client interaction. For example, Anna had established a long-term relationship with a football club through which she had been able to learn about the central role relationships played in service delivery and sport psychology’s place in competition preparation. A second stream of opportunities came from interacting with peers and a supervisor who meet once a month for group supervision:

Learning from [the] other people in the group and discussing it [service delivery] and thinking “right how would have I gone about that?” And saying differently, how I would have dealt with that or even “brilliant you have been in that situation, it sounds like a really good idea, I might try doing that,” and so they have been a really big source as well, actually sharing with people who are going through the same process.

As discussed above, Anna also found group supervision beneficial in alleviating some of the loneliness she experienced as a private practitioner.

A third opportunity for reflective learning had been personal therapy. For example,

The counselor I have, she’s probably early 30s and she is self-employed . . . although she is in a slightly different field, she has done something similar [to what I want to do] in that she has said “right I want to do this, I want to go into practice, and I’m going to become self-employed, I’m going to work in the private sector,” having someone that’s been through that experience has been useful.
In addition to providing Anna with a model of the type of person she desires to become, she had learned a great deal about service delivery, such as, “Feel[ing] how a client might feel, because it is different, you sit in that chair and you feel really vulnerable, you sit in the practitioner’s chair and you feel quite strong and confident.” A third benefit was increased self-awareness with Anna gaining a greater appreciation of the ways she influenced service delivery with athletes.

Since completing her masters degree, Anna suggested that research and theory had not influenced her development as much as clients, colleagues, and supervisors. Although she had not stayed abreast of developments in the field, due to time constraints as a private practitioner, Anna had found research helpful to her, such as drawing on Master’s (1992) conscious processing hypothesis when helping a client cope with competitive pressure. When reflecting on the literature she found most helpful, Anna mentioned:

I have got Andersen’s (2000) text, “Doing sport psychology”, and I will pick up that book from time to time because it’s got qualitative stuff in it, it’s got transcripts from interviews and that kind of stuff . . . I will look at books a fair amount but then they are based on applied practice as opposed to research, I tend to look at those more but I don’t really look at research journals, but then saying that, you look at some of the research . . . that has been done in a lab on 15 university students, is there relevance?

**Discussion**

Themes in the current study suggested that over two years: (a) the changes in Anna’s service delivery style reflected the individuation process, (b) her theoretical orientation broadened, and (c) experiential learning, decreased anxiety, and increased confidence underpinned her evolving practices. Specific changes included becoming: client-led, long-term focused, a facilitator rather than advice-giver, flexible, comfortable with silence, and aware of the need for strong working alliances. Anna’s case study adds to existing sport psychologist development literature by providing insights into the experiences of a practitioner who had just completed her formal education and had embarked on a career in private practice. Anna’s story addresses the gap between previous work focused on students during their education and examinations of highly experienced practitioners. As such, Anna’s case study contributes to a burgeoning literature focused on development across the entire career spectrum. Documenting Anna’s story has also unearthed issues previously unaddressed in sport psychologist development literature, such as the loneliness practitioners in private practice might experience in the absence of regular collegial interaction.

**Parallels With Rønnestad and Skovholt’s Model and Existing Sport Psychology Literature**

Individuation involves developing coherence between practitioners’ ideologies and their service delivery practices (Rønnestad and Skovholt, 2003). In keeping with individuation, Anna was starting to freely select methods and principles based on her reflections of her client experiences. Although individuation has seldom
been explored in sport psychology, there is some recognition of the increasing congruence trainees develop over time between their philosophies and practices (Lindsay et al., 2007). Individuation typically takes a number of years before practitioners have fully developed approaches with which they are comfortable. For example, in her words Anna is “still learning,” and her broadening theoretical orientation seems reflective of her developmental stage. Rather than saying she is a humanistic or MST practitioner, it may be more accurate to suggest her service delivery is informed by these approaches, and that she tries to apply ideas she learns from these frameworks. Mastering a model of practice involves considerable training, practice, and supervision from a relevant practitioner. Given that Anna has completed a one year masters degree and has had to juggle the various activities needed to establish a viable private practice, it is unlikely she has had sufficient time to become an expert in either approach. When first learning about a model, individuals likely focus on the areas emphasized by the approach and it may take time before they recognize the framework’s less prominent features. For example, Anna’s recognition of the need for caring close service delivery relationships has been informed by her understanding from humanistic theories. Although similar sentiments are expressed by experienced MST practitioners, the emphasis in the framework (MST) is teaching athletes techniques for performance enhancement. With more experience, Anna will likely develop greater appreciation for the subtleties of each model and an understanding of their similarities and differences.

Another theme from Rønnes and Skovholt’s (2003) theory apparent in Anna’s story and related to individuation is reflective experimentation. Anna tried new ways of working and incorporated the helpful ideas into her practice. There is recognition in the sport psychology literature on reflective practice. Reflection allows practitioners to draw on various types of knowledge (Knowles et al., 2007). For example, Anna drew on formal theory and research as well as tacit knowledge she gained from client interaction. Anna’s case helps extend existing evidence for the efficacy of self-reflection (e.g., Cropley et al., 2007), by illustrating how the process contributed to her individuation and broadening theoretical orientation. Based on existing evidence, practitioners may find their professional development enhanced through self-reflection, and there are resources available to help them initiate the process (e.g., Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004; Knowles et al.).

As a third similarity with Rønnes and Skovholt’s (2003) novice practitioners, Anna experienced decreasing anxiety and increasing confidence over the two years. Reports of service delivery anxiety have also been published by other sport psychologists and trainees (Lindsay et al., 2007; Tonn & Harmison, 2004). Documenting novice practitioners’ anxieties may help other beginning individuals find comfort in knowing any negative emotions they are experiencing are part of the typical developmental path. In addition, experienced consultants, educators, and supervisors may be reminded of what life is like for those in the early stages of their careers. Together the similarities among Anna’s story, Rønnes and Skovholt’s model, and existing sport psychology literature indicate counseling psychology knowledge might fruitfully assist sport psychology practitioners and researchers, and may provide a foundation on which implications might be based (as discussed in the next section).
Implications for Training and Supervision

Over two years Anna found MST for performance enhancement insufficient for the range of athletes and issues she encountered, a finding echoed in other literature (Lindsay et al., 2007; Nesti, 2004; Tod et al., 2009). Perhaps one reason is that the MST paradigm consists of an eclectic group of interventions borrowed from the cognitive behavioral therapies, and in some cases have been divorced from the philosophies and theories underpinning their use. Without an understanding of the underlying theory, students may not learn to use the techniques to their fullest potential (Corlett, 1996). In addition, a sole focus on MST may prevent students from studying other approaches (e.g., humanistic) that may help them to deal with a wide range of issues and people. Although there is a place for MST for performance enhancement in sport psychology, it may be beneficial to expose students to various service delivery perspectives.

As mentioned above, Anna’s professional growth was underpinned by experiential learning, an observation with theoretical support, such as Kolb’s (1984) experiential cycle. In the cycle (and similar to the reflective practice literature discussed above), learners have concrete experiences on which they reflect and derive principles to guide future behavior. Learners then apply those principles to similar or novel situations which then provide material for further self-reflection. For example, based on client interaction, such as the athlete who stormed out of a team meeting, Anna’s reflections contributed to her emerging belief that relationships play a central role in service delivery. Subsequent positive outcomes from her attempts to build good relationships with clients further reinforced to Anna the value of establishing close interpersonal bonds with them. Potentially, Kolb’s learning cycle may have insights to assist applied sport psychology educators and supervisors. For example, research underpinned by Kolb’s theory has found that psychology trainees prefer learning through social interaction, generating and exchanging new ideas, receiving personalized feedback, and considering situations from a number of perspectives (Kolb). Incorporating these insights might help optimize sport psychology trainees’ educational experiences.

In light of Anna’s case study, it seems effective supervision probably focuses as much on the process, and trainees’ experiences, of service delivery as on the content. For example, when first engaging in practice, trainees desire guidance on how to deliver interventions. Once they are competent in a range of interventions they begin to consider how other factors may influence service delivery, such as athlete involvement (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). Searching for ways to help trainees reflect on service delivery processes may enhance the quality of supervised work experience. Reflective practice is one such strategy and was discussed in the previous section. Anna found group supervision to be helpful to her development and the process is another way by which trainees’ learning preferences can be accommodated. Benefits from group supervision include development of communication skills, obtaining new perspectives on current cases, and feedback from peers on how one’s own needs might influence client interaction (Proctor, 2008). Group supervision may be one solution when it is not feasible for trainees and practitioners to meet with supervisors on an individual basis for reasons such as expense or a lack of readily available trained mentors. There are a variety of resources, including books and Internet sites (e.g., http://www.peer-supervision.
com) available to help individuals establish and maintain suitable environments for group supervision, such as atmospheres of trust, acceptance, respect, and empathy.

The observation Anna gained much from engaging in personal therapy parallels other studies and provides evidence for calls made by professionals for the activity to be one component of training (Petitpas et al., 1999). These other writers have detailed the various service delivery benefits to be gained from personal therapy, such as opportunities for practitioners to examine how their own issues may influence client interactions. Although it may be difficult to have mandatory personal counseling included as one component of applied sport psychology training, educators and supervisors may be assisting students’ development by suggesting they undertake such in-depth self-examination.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although Anna’s story has provided insights into development in the British context, there will be some relevant issues not apparent in her experience. Anna was selected because she is relatively unique. Few individuals move straight from their education into private practice. In some ways, however, perhaps Anna’s story can be of comfort for aspiring practitioners. Although there are a limited number of institutional applied sport psychology positions, Anna’s case does suggest that private practice can be a viable option for individuals desiring to become consultants. Nevertheless, further examination of British practitioners will likely unearth additional issues not revealed in Anna’s story.

As a second consideration, the interviews may have contributed to her development as a practitioner, as indicated by her informal feedback that they had helped her reflect on her service delivery understandings. It is unknown, however, the extent that the interviews influenced her development. Such an observation provides indirect support for practitioners talking about their experiences with others and the value of supervision.

As a third issue, the second author was one of Anna’s masters degree lecturers. Before the study, the researchers considered the influence the existing relationship may have had on Anna’s participation. In recognition of the relationship, the second author did not conduct any of the interviews or talk to Anna about the study until after she graduated. Although the first interview took place in the final month of Anna’s formal education, she was told that her involvement in the study would not harm her completion of her masters degree. In addition, the second author did not see any data or talk with the first author about Anna until after Anna had graduated. When asked directly, Anna said neither her masters degree nor involvement in the study had been influenced negatively by having had the second author as a lecturer.

The number of studies focused on applied sport psychologist development, training, and supervision is small, especially when compared with the quantity on the interventions typically used by consultants. In the current case study, Anna discovered service delivery outcomes were influenced by athlete self-awareness and the quality of the relationships she had with clients. The observation that relationships and client factors contribute to service delivery is a consistent finding from mainstream psychotherapy research (Orlinsky, Rønnestad, & Willutzki, 2004). There is growing recognition among sport psychologists (e.g., Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Henschen, 1998; Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004; Tod,
& Andersen, 2005), but few researchers have collected data on these subjects (e.g., Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004). Researchers could advance knowledge by examining how practitioners develop relationships and assist athletes to find their own solutions in service delivery. With respect to applied sport psychologist development, researchers could further investigate how practitioners develop relationship-building and other process skills over time.

Along a different line, Anna’s doubts regarding the relevance of laboratory-based research parallels findings from other investigations (Stewart & Chambless, 2007; Tod, Marchant, & Andersen, 2007). In addition, other professionals in the field have discussed reasons why a considerable amount of research has limited influence on applied practice, such as the use of arbitrary metrics (Andersen, McCullagh, & Wilson, 2007). Frequently, professionals argue for the importance of practice being underpinned by scientific evidence (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002). Practitioners, however, need to have confidence that the research being conducted is of high quality and relevant to their situations. The ideal is for researchers and practitioners to share symbiotic relationships in which they collaborate to identify meaningful research questions and conduct studies from which the results are used to underpin service delivery (Andersen, 2005). As a starting point, researchers could survey practitioners about the research questions that if answered would help them improve the quality of their client interactions.

As explained above, Anna identified increased confidence, decreased anxiety, and experimentation as reasons for the changes in her service delivery practices, such as being accepting of silence during consultations, listening better to athletes’ stories, and feeling less need to talk and offer advice. Although there is no direct evidence, it is contended that potentially Anna now creates more psychological space for her clients to express themselves. She possibly also understands clients and their issues better than when first practicing, and her tailoring of interventions to athletes’ needs may have improved. One way to gain such evidence might be to gather athletes’ perspectives over time as they interact with a practitioner. Researchers may advance knowledge by including clients as participants in future studies.

Previous studies have focused on either students, when the seeds of service delivery competence are being sown and cultivated, or on highly experienced practitioners, who are laden with the fruits from many years of growth. Anna’s story provides glimpses into the period when fresh seedlings leave their university greenhouses and are exposed to the various elements associated with pursuing sport psychology careers. Taken together the emerging literature is beginning to provide a description of the sport psychologist lifecycle. Much more research is needed, however, before a complete and detailed understanding is attained. Such knowledge is useful for helping the agriculturalists in the discipline (i.e., educators and supervisors) tender in caring and sensitive ways to the growth of young seedling-practitioners.

References


