



Assessing competencies of trainee sport psychologists: An examination of the ‘structured case presentation’ assessment method



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: There is virtually no literature on how to assess competencies of applied sport psychologists. We assessed casework of applied sport psychology students and compared written case report assessment (WCRA) with structured case presentation assessment (SCPA) on reliability and acceptability (e.g., validity, transparency, feedback function and preference of methods, as perceived by students and assessors).

Design: A quantitative, comparative study of two assessment methods.

Method: Participants were 11 students, nine supervisors and three exam committee members. A number of 18 cases were evaluated with both WCRA by the supervisor and SCPA by two exam committee members. Ten of these cases were also evaluated with WCRA by exam committee members. Interrater reliability measures were calculated and compared for the different assessment methods. Participants' perception of the validity, transparency, and feedback function of the methods, and the preferences for assessment methods were surveyed with a brief questionnaire.

Results: SCPA by the exam committee resulted in higher interrater reliability than WCRA by supervisor and exam committee. The feedback function of SCPA seemed superior to WCRA by either supervisor or exam committee. For assessment by the exam committee, the perceived validity and transparency of SCPA seemed higher than of WCRA. Students and exam committee had the highest preference for SCPA by supervisor and exam committee.

Conclusions: Overall it can be concluded that, for assessment by the exam committee, structured case presentations provided a more reliable and acceptable method of assessment than written case reports only.

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As the world of sport is becoming increasingly professional, it is important for the field of sport psychology to develop in tandem with this professionalization. The training and professional development of sport psychology practitioners play an important role in this process. In recent years, education and training of sport psychologists has received increasing attention. Insight into what should be learned to be successful in sport psychology has evolved through research, evaluation, and personal accounts (e.g., Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010; Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008; Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Ward, Sandstedt, Cox, & Beck,

2005; Weigand, Richardson, & Weinberg, 1999; Yukelson, 2001). In these studies a wide variety of skills have been identified as important for sport psychologist's development, such as reflective practice, critical self-evaluation and abiding by ethical regulations, applying and understanding interventions, understanding and fitting in with the sporting context and culture, communication skills, and building an effective working alliance.

Following up on this body of literature, and in accordance with developments in related fields such as medicine and professional psychology, competencies for sport psychology service delivery have been conceptualised (AASP, 2012; APA, 2005; Fletcher & Maher, 2013; Stapleton, Hanks, Hays, & Parham, 2010; Tenenbaum, Lidor, Papaianou, & Samulski, 2003). Organisations, such as the American Psychology Association (APA, division 47), the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), and the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP), have outlined areas of competence, mostly distinguishing between required knowledge

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and skills. ISSP, for example, depicted intervention skills and communication skills (Tenenbaum et al., 2003), and AASP (2012) distinguished between counselling skills and skills in sport and exercise, such as coaching. As for the knowledge-oriented competencies, knowledge of psychology, sport science, and sport psychology theory and practice were commonly listed competencies (AASP, 2012; APA, 2005; Tenenbaum et al., 2003). In addition, both ISSP and AASP explicitly mentioned knowledge of research and scientific methodologies.

The advanced knowledge of competencies is important to enhance training and performance in the professional field of sport psychology. However, one important aspect of competencies is still absent: There is virtually no literature on how to assess sport psychologists' competencies, or how to evaluate whether trainee sport psychologists are "fit for practice". For certification by AASP (2012), for example, a mentorship evaluation and verification form has to be completed by mentors, but instruction is lacking on how scores on the criteria on this form should be established. APA, division 47, provides a self-assessment checklist "intended to assist practitioners in assessing their knowledge and skills in terms of the proficiency criteria" (2005, p. 1), but no benchmarks or recommendations for self-assessment are given. ISSP (Tenenbaum et al., 2003) specified competence in different competence standards, but also overlooked the matter of how these standards should be evaluated. In short, although competence domains and criteria have been described, the question of how to assess competence remains largely unattended.

One possible explanation for the dearth of literature on competency assessment in sport psychology could be that there are hardly any competency problems in the field, and the unspecified systems are actually working well. However, in 2000 Andersen, van Raalte, and Brewer stated "Given the research in clinical and counselling psychology and the limited studies among sport psychology consultants, impairment is an area waiting for research in the field of sport psychology" (p. 137). It seems that the wait is still on-going; a literature search on professional impairment, competency problems or gatekeeping in sport psychology rendered no studies investigating the occurrence and incidence of competency problems in sport psychology. Thus, it is evident that the process of developing and assessing professional competence has been largely overlooked within the sport psychology domain.

Preventing competency problems in the field may not be the only function of competence assessment, though. According to Kaslow (2004) "the assessment of competence fosters learning, evaluates progress, assists in determining the effectiveness of the curriculum and training program, and protects the public." (p. 778). These are all functions that contribute to the quality of practice and education in sport psychology, and thus lend to the professional development in the field.

Competency assessment for complex professions is not an easy task. According to Epstein (2007) "All methods of assessment have strengths and intrinsic flaws" (p. 388). Similarly, Kaslow et al. (2009) highlighted "salient challenges" (p. S34) for all assessment methods in their competency assessment toolkit for professional psychology. In our personal experience, we recognise the difficulties in designing appropriate and acceptable measures for the evaluation of sport psychology students' competence. We are, in different roles, responsible for assessment in the post-master program in applied sport psychology in the Netherlands. The first author is a member of the exam committee and teacher in the program. The second author is the program manager. The third author is a member of the steering committee of the program. The impetus for the current study was our wish to take a critical look at the assessment method applied in the program, and to investigate an alternative way of assessing competence. The study aims to

contribute to the knowledge on methods to assess competence, in our case of trainee sport psychologists who are about to enter practice. As outlined previously, despite the important functions of assessment of competence, very little is known about competence assessment in the field of sport psychology.

1. Context and background of the study

The most important assessment of competence in our post-master program is the evaluation of supervised casework, with which the student trainees conclude the program. Before the study took place, cases were evaluated by supervisors and an exam committee by assessing a written report on the case (see also Hutter, 2014). Both students and assessors were critical of this written case report assessment (WCRA). Assessors had the impression that the written reports did not completely capture the how, what and why of the students' professional actions (see also Hutter, 2014). Moreover, (wide) discrepancies occurred (in some cases) between the evaluation by the supervisor and the exam committee. Students indicated that they struggled to clearly present the professional decision-making and rationales behind their actions in the written reports. On a pragmatic level, both students and assessors perceived the written reports to be time consuming, tedious, and inefficient in terms of learning. Different actions were taken to improve the assessment. For example, we tried to reduce the discrepancies between assessors by revising the assessment criteria list and providing training for the assessors (Hutter, 2014). To try to relieve the workload associated with the written reports, we prescribed a maximum number of pages for the case reports. Although these actions improved some aspects of the assessment, room for improvement remained. Therefore we continued to discuss the needs, challenges, and available methods for assessment with stakeholders (such as students, assessors, and supervisors) and turned to the literature on competency assessment in search of a better assessment method.

Petti (2008) offered an elaborate description of a structured case presentation procedure that is used at the California School of Professional Psychology to assess students' clinical competence (from here on called CSPPA). For CSPPA, students hand in a written case report, which is read and (preliminarily) evaluated by the assessors. Next, the assessors conduct a 60 min oral examination with the student. At the end of the oral examination, the assessors complete the evaluation and grading of the student, using a standardised criteria list outlining different competencies and competency domains. The CSPPA (Petti, 2008; Swope, 1987) has been reported to have high reliability (Dienst & Armstrong, 1988; Tori, 1989, both as cited in Petti, 2008), and it has been used for over a decade (Petti, 2008). Goldberg, DeLamatre, and Young (2011) compared CSPPA with three other assessment methods for the evaluation of performance of clinical psychology interns. CSPPA was the preferred method of both the interns and the examiners in the study, in terms of clarity, simplicity, and fidelity. Kaslow et al. (2009) categorised CSPPA as *case review presentations*, and discussed this method in the competency assessment toolkit for professional psychology. They deemed case review presentations useful for assessing different foundational competencies (e.g., interventions) at different developmental levels, including entry level to practice.

For our study, we adapted the CSPPA structure of assessment into what we labelled a *Structured Case Presentation Assessment* (SCPA; see 'Method' section for further explanation). We chose the CSPPA structure, with assent of the before mentioned stakeholders, for its evidence-based merit, but also its practical feasibility within the post-master program. Standardised criteria lists were already part of the assessment method applied prior to the study. For SCPA,

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