

Ethical issues in sport psychology

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The field of sport psychology is dynamic and growing. To continue building credibility with the public and allied professionals, effective and ethical practice is crucial. Advances in technology have allowed sport psychology professionals to consult with athletes from a distance, but practitioners must be mindful of their competency to use technology, confidentiality concerns, and the suitability of technology for their clients. Movement toward defining competency and clarifying issues of title usage are additional areas in which the field is gaining momentum. Recent attention has also been drawn to the topics of professional development and cultural competency. With the unique settings in which applied sport psychology practice takes place, attention to multiple relationships is another key ethical issue.

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The ethical issues affecting the profession of sport psychology are very similar to the ethical issues affecting the broader fields of counseling and clinical psychology. Recent topics of interest in sport psychology literature include the use of teletherapy, title usage and competency, multiple relationships, and practice settings. After reviewing the literature, it appears these ethical issues are relevant in applied sport psychology practice across the world.

Teletherapy

One of the most prominent ethical issues facing applied sport psychology practitioners in the present day relates to their use of teletherapy. Generally speaking, teletherapy is a subset of telemedicine that refers to the use of telecommunications strategies and technology to provide psychologically related therapeutic services to a client from a distance. While the use of teletherapy has increased dramatically amongst psychology practitioners,

the use of these technologies to provide services to clients may be even more prominent in the practice of sport psychology given the demands often placed upon the clientele. Somewhat recently, a study involving sport psychology practitioners from 23 different countries found that 48% used the internet in their consulting [1]. These services may range from the use of Email or texting apps, to the use of easily accessible and more sophisticated confidential videoconferencing technology. All forms of teletherapy services present the practitioner with unique ethical challenges that must be considered (*e.g.*, knowledge of who the client is, their age, ability to consent to services, existence of duress). Therefore, ethical issues related to the practice of teletherapy are essential to cover, as little consistency exists between jurisdictions with regard to the regulation, policy and reimbursement for services [2].

Within sport psychology, clients tend to be younger athletes between the ages of 12 and 35 [3]. Research suggests that individuals of this age tend to embrace technology and be very technologically savvy, having grown up in a technological age and having been exposed to technology for the majority of their lives [4]. This increased exposure to technology throughout their lives, may result in individuals within this age range actually developing a dependency upon the availability and use of such devices throughout their lives [3]. Furthermore, present day athletes tend to have very demanding schedules that include extensive travel, game and practice schedules, along with coursework and/or other work commitments [5].

While many different benefits (*e.g.*, service availability, decreased response time, anonymity, and cost effectiveness) and concerns (*e.g.*, confidentiality, credentialing of practitioners across boundaries, quality of information and services, relationship development, and changing technology) surround the use of teletherapy in sport psychology [6,7,8], teletherapy can allow practitioners to provide services that accommodate the time and travel demands faced by many clients [3].

While many ethical issues are important to the practice of teletherapy, the primary ethical issues that need to be considered when making decisions about the provision of teletherapy services in sport psychology include: confidentiality, competency, informed consent, and appropriate use of services [3,8–10]. These issues are extremely important for practitioners to consider when deciding if they should consult with clients from a distance.

Confidentiality is the most commonly cited ethical issue associated with teletherapy. Practitioners utilizing teletherapy technology should do their utmost to secure the confidentiality of their clients, especially because teletherapy is vulnerable in this regard. They should clearly indicate to their clients what can and cannot be achieved in this regard [11].

Competency is another essential ethical issue for practitioners to consider when deciding to utilize teletherapy. Competency issues need to be considered by practitioners from two perspectives [6[•]]. First, practitioners need to be well versed with the technology they plan to use in practice. Such technical competency would entail the practitioners understanding how to trouble shoot technology problems on their end or the clients' end, being able to communicate potential concerns and limit confidentiality concerns associated with the technology, knowing how to store information effectively, and understanding how to communicate should technological problems arise [12]. Second, practitioners need to be competent with regard to their ability to provide effective services using the technology. Practitioners should be aware of the evidence to make determinations of the potential effectiveness of the use of technology with specific clients and work to gain the necessary professional training (*e.g.*, education, training, self-study, continuing education, supervision/mentoring) to deliver effective services to their clients based upon best practices standards [12]. This second point is very important, as most practitioners have not received any training in the effective use of technology for service provision.

The informed consent process may change for practitioners who are consulting via teletherapy. In addition to normal informed consent, practitioners using teletherapy should also consider taking steps to ensure that the client is whom s/he says they are, and is of age to provide consent. This information might also include limits to confidentiality, personal background and training with regard to teletherapy, limitations of teletherapy, possibility of misunderstandings, frequency of responding to messages, and alternative communication strategies [13].

It is also important for practitioners to understand that teletherapy is not appropriate for all clients (*e.g.*, those presenting with eating disorders or personality disorders). Therefore, decisions about the use of teletherapy services should be based upon a case-by-case consideration of factors such as client's presenting concerns (is there literature to support the benefit of teletherapy work with specific presenting problems), clients' comfort and knowledge related to the use of technology (*e.g.*, behavioral presentation, age, knowledge of technology) [13]. Without such considerations, practitioners could work with clients who are not likely to benefit from their services.

Competency

In addition to emerging issues with teletherapy, there are other competency related topics that are at the forefront of the profession. Perhaps due to its interdisciplinary nature, the profession of applied sport psychology has struggled to solidify a clear, unifying conceptualization of competency. As reviewed by Aoyagi *et al.* [14], the early years of applied practice saw "two groups of practitioners trained through two different academic models and doing two different things, yet both referring to their work as sport psychology" (p. 33). Subsequent ambiguity about the 'blurred lines' [15] between performance enhancement and counseling/clinical services can leave both practitioners and clients feeling confused about roles and expectations [14,16]. Professional title usage amid these ambiguous blurred lines is an ongoing ethical issue, and competency is a crucial topic therein.

Although little research has examined the patterns or frequencies of specific titles used by sport psychology practitioners, this is a common topic of ethical debate. A primary issue revolves around the use of the title 'sport psychologist' [17]. Legally, the title of 'psychologist' is protected in many countries, restricting the title of 'sport psychologist' to those who are credentialed psychologists. This has barred non-credentialed professionals often trained in sport sciences from using the sport psychologist title, although this has not deterred some from doing so. This creates not only an ethical, but a potential legal issue for these practitioners. However, just as a practitioner trained in individual therapy who attended a workshop about family therapy would not be able to refer to him or herself as a family therapist [17], being a credentialed psychologist does not necessarily give one the ethical right to call oneself a 'sport' psychologist. In Brazil, for example, an individual must earn the 'sport psychologist' specialist title through one of three training pathways [18]. Substantial supervised training within applied sport psychology is needed to build a level of competency deserving of the title [19^{••}]. Studies of sport psychology practitioners in Belgium have also highlighted a desire for more formalized sport psychology training in an effort to enhance their competency [20,21]. Although we recognize that titles are not protected in all countries [20,22], it is clear that many practitioners recognize the importance of training specifically within sport psychology theories and methods.

Despite their title, practitioners must consider not only the breadth and depth of their competency, but also what is in the best interest of the client [23]. For instance, those with extensive clinical training may be inclined to hone in on potential mental health concerns, but doing so prematurely can make athletes uneasy [24]. Conversely, those without a psychology background should not neglect the importance of screening for common mental disorders among athletes [15] and utilizing counseling skills during

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