Essential competencies in contemporary applied sport psychology: Comparative perspectives from South Africa and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Investigation of essential competencies in present-day sport psychology practice is critical to keeping the training, education and regulation standards of applied sport psychology (ASP) practitioners at the forefront of research (Fletcher & Maher, 2013). Moreover, investigation is also needed to offer a new rationale for promoting academic inquiry in developed and developing contexts. This study identified essential competencies in contemporary sport psychology practice and explored the comparative views of a purposefully selected sample (n=9) of expert ASP practitioners/psychologists. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in South Africa (SA) and the United Kingdom (UK). Interview data were analyzed using thematic content analyses. Main findings suggested that a relational and dependable character, a client-centred focus, an all-encompassing counselling skills-set (facilitative and restorative), and explicit expertise in the domains of psychology, sport and sport science are indispensable to current sport psychology practice. Views generated by both stakeholders were remarkably similar and overlapped considerably, which indicated the advanced levels of sport psychology praxis in both contexts. It was recommended that behavioural indicators (personal character) and certain skills prerequisites merit special consideration for candidates entering ASP training and practice. An interdisciplinary training model in ASP with acquired competency in both kinesiology and psychology-based training should become the accepted standard in the training and development of practitioners for the purpose of garnering an inclusive capacity to render client-centred services.

Keywords: Applied sport psychology (ASP), competencies, contemporary practice, practitioners.

Introduction

Professional competence is perceived as "the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served" (Epstein & Hundert, 2002:227). Competence is therefore a candidate's overall capability to perform critical work-tasks in a defined setting. Competence in any particular profession is instituted by an interactive and unified constellation of skills, knowledge, behaviour, strategies, values, attitudes and abilities which are formally referred to as competencies (Moore, Cheng & Dainty, 2002; Rubin, Bebeau, Leigh, Lichtenberg, Nelson, Portnoy & Kaslow, 2007). Competencies, therefore, encapsulate whole person qualities/skills that are determined and evaluated against contextualized standards associated with sustained performance criteria (Fletcher & Maher, 2013) which in view of applied sport psychology (ASP) are the qualities/skills essential for safe and effective practice (Tenenbaum, Lidor, Papaianou & Samulski, 2003; Fletcher, 2015).

A recent movement towards a competency-based understanding in ASP emphasized the developmental and contextual nature of competence and suggested that a minimum threshold of competencies relevant to current sport psychology practice be continually reviewed and aligned to training to ensure safe and effective service delivery (Fletcher & Maher, 2013).

This contention follows a review and identification of generic limitations in existing training documentation and recognized competence standards in ASP such as the Association of Applied Sport Psychology's (AASP) certification criteria (AASP, 2015), American Psychology Association (APA) Division 47 Self-Assessment Checklist (APA, 2005), International Society for Sport Psychology (ISSP) competencies position stand (Tenenbaum et al., 2003), and the athlete-counselling competencies proposed by Ward, Sandstedt, Cox and Beck (2005). Pervading these varying competence standards in ASP are the effects of the general education and training models in two distinct academic domains namely kinesiology/sport science, and psychology which focus on performance enhancement and therapy-based work respectively (Cremades, Tashman & Quartiroli, 2014).

The consequence of this has been the prevailing lack of global understanding of the much-needed competencies in ASP as manifested in the broad, undefined and ambiguous nature of current practices (Aoyagi, Portenga, Poczwardowski, Cohen & Statler, 2012; Baker, 2014; Cremades et al., 2014). Moreover, this structure in education and training has given rise to discontent and turf wars between practitioners coming from a psychology background and those holding

a kinesiology/sport science qualification (Baker, 2014; Portenga, Aoyagi, Balague, Cohen & Harmison, 2011).

Nonetheless, current opinions have acknowledged the multidisciplinary nature of ASP (Aoyagi, Czech, Portenga, Metzler & Poczwardowski, 2009; Aoyagi et al., 2012) resulting in an interdisciplinary (kinesiology/sport science and psychology) compromise: practitioners are being trained to be proficient in performance enhancement and therapy-based work (Baker, 2014) by bodies such as the British Psychology Society (BPS) Chartered Sport & Exercise Psychologist, (BPS, 2011). As a result the title 'Sport Psychologist' in most parts of the world has become a licensed profession which requires practitioners to possess a certain minimum education, training and supervised experience.

Despite the significant strides in developing interdisciplinary curricula in sport psychologists' education, the majority of programs are still said to be inadequately preparing trainees for all the essential competencies (Fletcher & Maher, 2013; Tod & Lavallee, 2011) and that trainees' competencies are restricted to the home discipline of the programme due to "cursory exposure" to the "other" discipline (Aoyagi et al., 2012:34). Additionally, at this stage there is no international or common consensus on the specializations (sport, exercise, and performance) within the field of ASP, which is believed to be the main reason for inconsistent and diverse training models, practice standards, and methods of service delivery within and among countries (Cremades et al., 2014).

A further argument is that professional certification is questionable when there is no clear distinction between performance interventions and therapy-based work, since they are distinct undertakings which require unique sets of skills and knowledge, especially when working with an athlete population (Aoyagi et al., 2012). Hence, generally speaking, ASP is snared in confusion over what (in terms of philosophies, theoretical paradigms and models) exactly encapsulates and delimits professional sport psychology practice (Aoyagi et al., 2012, Cremades et al., 2014; Eubank & Hudson, 2013).

As a result, the chances of truly knowing what actually constitutes a competence – or best practice for that matter – are slim. The implications are that practitioners might offer inconsistent and diverse services that may not only obscure clients' perceptions about what they do but also elicit legal repercussions which complicate the title of "psychologist" (Aoyagi et al., 2012; Baker, 2014). In view of this, Wrisberg, Simpson, Loberg, Withycombe & Reed (2009) (as cited in Aoyagi et al., 2012) caution that unprincipled services in an evolving profession such as Sport Psychology could very easily be misconstrued, resulting in a depreciation of the field instead of being the subjective view of a certain individual.

ASP in SA is not formally recognised as there is no registration category of "Sport Psychologist" with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA – regulatory body for all medical and mental health practitioners) (SASSEP, 2015). Sport psychology services in this context are rendered on a part-time or full-time basis by practitioners with an educational background in psychology (clinical, counselling, educational, research) and/or sport science domains (biokinetics, human movement, sport or exercise science) (Edwards & Barker, 2015; Whitton, 2011). On the contrary, in the UK, sport and exercise psychology (SEP) is a recognized vocation which has been awarded chartered status (CPsychol) by The British Psychology Society (BPS) (Division Sport & Exercise Psychology – S&EP) in 2004 – thus, implying that S&EP in the UK is structurally underpinned by professional training, standards of proficiency, codes of conduct, ethics and practice, and registration with the BPS, which serves as the golden standard for anyone who wishes to legally practise as a sport and exercise psychologist.

In the UK, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) is currently (since 2009) the statutory regulatory body for all practitioner psychologists (including sport and exercise psychologists), requiring BPS accredited S&EP programs (such as the BPS's own Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology – QSEP stage 1 & 2) to ensure competence in a portfolio of key roles that are underpinned by the HCPC published Standards of Proficiency for Practitioner Psychologists (HCPC, 2012:3) (See the BPS website www.bps.org.uk for admission requirements and course undertakings towards accreditation).

The BPS's required competencies for accreditation (BPS, 2011) are described in the following key roles (KR): KR 1: Develop, implement, and maintain personal and professional standards and ethical practice; KR 2: Apply psychological and related methods, concepts, models, theories, and knowledge derived from reproducible findings; KR 3: Research and develop new and existing psychological methods, concepts, models, theories, and instruments in occupational psychology; KR 4:

Communicate psychological knowledge, principles, methods, needs, and policy requirements. However, although the BPS's training route towards becoming a Chartered Sport and Exercise Psychologist is not flawless (Eubank & Hudson, 2013) it has been dually recognized within the UK and internationally (Edwards & Barker, 2015).

Accreditation by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Science (BASES) in the UK is reserved for practitioners who work in sport, and exercise psychology related careers (e.g. sport psychology researcher/lecturer in higher education, and/or consultant for sport performers) who hold a BASES recognized undergraduate degree in Sport Science and an MSc with 2 to 6 years

of supervised practice in a particular branch of sport sciences such as biomechanics, physiology, psychology, and/or an interdisciplinary discipline at an MSc level (Cotterill, 2011; Niven & Owens, 2007).

It is evident that the practice of sport psychology has reached an age of professional liability. In reality the boundaries between performance enhancement services and addressing issues which require clinical or counselling expertise in sport psychology practice remain vague and unclear (SASSEP, 2015) – hence the lingering, critical need to identify essential competencies in effective sport psychology practice in order to delineate practice and comment on the necessary training and/or ongoing support to harmonize, develop and promote professional service delivery (Cremades *et al.,* 2014), especially in an unregulated and developing context such as South Africa.

Also needed is comparative evaluation of practitioners' views on effective sport psychology service delivery in various developmental contexts with the view to promoting both national and international education and training standards in ASP over and above the contribution to the meagre volume of comparative research on this topic (Edwards & Barker, 2015).

Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following research questions: "What are the essential competencies in contemporary ASP practice?" and "What are the comparative views of SA and UK expert ASP practitioners?" The rationale for benchmarking expert views in ASP held in SA with that of the UK is because of UK's significant strides in the development of sport and exercise psychology (i.e. training, education, research and practice) in recent years mainly taking into account the statutory recognition (chartered status and professional regulation by UK's HCPC) and well developed accreditation systems (BPS) that are presently in place (Morris, Alfermann, Lintunen & Hall, 2003, Eubank, Niven & Cain, 2009). A further motive is the similar peak organisations in sport (i.e. for rugby, cricket, athletics and soccer) that exist within these countries as a result of British colonialism in SA in the eighteenth century (Miller, Lawrence, McKay & Rowe, 2001).

The results could provide valuable insight into the essential competencies needed in current ASP service delivery, which may better define areas of professional practice in the field, and proffer significant inferences for streamlining and harmonizing education, training and regulation standards of sport psychologists in the contexts of both developed and developing nations.

Methodology

Design

In view of the divergent and rather scant international perspectives on competencies required in contemporary ASP, this study was deemed best suited to qualitative exploration. An explorative approach to the inquiry will enable the investigators in this study to collect rich, thick and descriptive data that describe participants' intricate and relative experiences which are envisaged to promote the formation of a paradigmatic standpoint on the explored phenomenon (Edwards, 2010; Silverman, 2006). In order to elicit participants' values and beliefs on competent sport psychology practice, an interpretative paradigm of semi-structured interviews was adopted. The specific method of interviews will encourage participants to offer profound personal insight that encapsulates subjective meaning in contextual situations (Kvale & Brinkmana, 2008 as cited in Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

Hence, the ontological position was that exploring and comparing the views of expert practitioners from dissimilar contexts such as country, education and training background, clientele et cetera would provide a rich and meaningful account of essential competencies in ASP since these compare service delivery across greater parts of the world. Epistemologically this required an approach embedded in the principles of a descriptive phenomenological stance which prompted interview questions to be asked in a non-leading, depersonalised manner.

Furthermore, the researchers intentionally attempted to "bracket" the text by confronting both participants and data without pre-conceived notions (including biases, personal conceptions, and other prejudice) in order to understand and elucidate the true essence of participants' perceptions (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Carter & Little, 2007). To elaborate the methods used for this investigation, the following sections are included: participants, data collection, and data analyses. Methodologically, the research was pursued in an explorative, interpretive and qualitative way for the purpose of stimulating further enquiry using alternative paradigms and perspectives.

Participants

For the purpose of this investigation, the term *ASP practitioner* was applied when collectively referring to accredited sport and exercise psychologists/psychologists/mental skills trainers in both SA and the UK. Two female and seven male participants (n=9) aged between 33 and 65 of Caucasian origin participated in this investigation. Participants from SA (n=4) were HPCSA registered psychologists (clinical n=3; counselling n=1 with a European Masters

degree in Sport Psychology). One of the SA sample participants is also a BPS Chartered and HCPC registered Clinical, Sport and Exercise Psychologist. Four participants from the UK were BPS and HCPC registered psychologists (Chartered Sport and Exercise Psychologists n=2; Clinical n=1; Occupational who was working towards chartered S&EP accreditation n=1), whilst one participant was a BASES accredited Sport Scientists (n=5). One participant from the UK sample was also an HPCSA registered Clinical Psychologist. Seven participants had a qualification at PhD level and two at Master's degree levels. Three participants consulted with athlete-clients on a full-time basis whilst six were academic staff in sport and exercise psychology/psychology programmes at universities which provided part-time consultation.

Initially, expert ASP practitioners were purposefully identified in SA and the UK from the SA S&EP emailing list, and the co-author's (registered psychologists with the HPCSA & BPS, HCPC) professional network respectively. The idea behind a purposeful sampling approach is to identify expert ASP practitioners who are knowledgeable at answering subject related questions and who will provide valuable insight into the study phenomenon (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). For the purpose of this study, expert status is defined by licensure as a practitioner psychologist with a track record of working with professional and non-professional athletes for a minimum duration of five years or, qualified sport scientists (kinesiology trained) who have rendered sport psychology services to professional and non-professional athletes for a minimum of ten years.

These criteria helped ensure that, although participants had different training backgrounds, they had developed a certain skills-set working with athletes. The sample size for this qualitative research was dependent on reaching an adequate level of data saturation (Creswell, 2013). All participants were English speaking at a native or near-native level and preferred to have the interviews conducted in English.

Data collection

The primary investigator collected the data by means of individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews which were scheduled at a location and time convenient for each participant. An interview guide was developed containing structured open-ended and probing questions which were asked to explore participants' views on essential competencies in contemporary sport psychology practice (a copy of the interview guide can be obtained on request from the first author). Question topics included views on effective practice, proficiency requirements, clients' preferences and expectations during consultation, and competencies which differentiate effective from less effective sport psychology practitioners.

The investigator provided an electronic copy of the interview guide to each participant at least two to three days prior to the confirmed interview meeting. Only data available to the interviewer's awareness were utilized to describe the essence of the ASP practitioners' "lived experiences" (Lindlof, 1995:236). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour and was recorded with a reliable digital voice recorder. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist and sent to each participant for confirmation of accuracy.

Once confirmation was received, the investigator did a preliminary interpretation of the data (187 pages typed at 1.5 spacing) and returned relevant transcripts to participants for member checking. The interview questions were formulated on the grounds of related literature published over the last decade and reviewed by experts in the field for its applicability which was adapted accordingly. The interview guide was pilot tested with an ASP practitioner whose status is similar to the inclusion criteria set for the sample to ensure that questions are understood correctly and would potentially elicit meaningful responses. The primary investigator reflected his personal feelings and impressions in field notes along with other factual information that was noticed during each interview.

Analysis Data

The meagre knowledge of essential competencies in contemporary ASP encouraged investigators to analyse interview data by means of a thematic content analysis approach, which is a technique for systematically transcribing the content from spoken or written material (Creswell, 2013). Tesch's (1990:142-145) eight-step analysis method was followed whilst Atlas Ti.7 (code-based computer software program) was used to manage and handle the data (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). Following the transcription of interview recordings, the process involved: 1) carefully reading through all the transcripts and making notes on key aspects as they came to mind, in an attempt to gain a collective sense of the data gathered. 2)

The longest transcript from each sample grouping (SA & UK pile) was selected and read through again as notes in margins of words, theories or short phrases were made to summarize what was being said. This was done for several transcripts from each sample pile. 3) Descriptive wording and phrases with the highest frequency were captured on a clean set document which was subsequently worked through in an attempt to eliminate all duplications. 4) Similar topics were clustered together and abbreviated as higher-order themes which were then electronically assigned to fitting segments of text in each of the interview transcripts by means of Atlas Ti. 5) New topics and codes that emerged were added to the initial organizing scheme, and these finally categorized as lower-order themes. 6) A filter option was applied to Atlas Ti,

which displayed separate network views for the coded data of the SA and UK samples. 7) higher-order themes were subsequently assembled into suitable general dimensions. 8) Finally, an export option of all themes into excel format (frequency analysis) was applied in Atlas Ti to illustrate the number of occurrences in participants' responses. A co-coder was used to verify the results through consensus discussions.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from North-West University's Health Research Ethical Committee before the commencement of the study (NWU-00061-14-S1). Signed informed consent was obtained at the interview site prior to the individual interviews. Participants were assured that they did not have to answer any questions or divulge information which made them uncomfortable. The investigator attempted to establish a trusting relationship with participants from the outset by being open about the purpose and procedures of the investigation and providing elaborative answers to questions about the investigation. Codes were assigned to the selected interview respondents to use when describing and reporting the results. The signing of a confidentiality agreement between the researcher and other professional service providers such as transcriptionist, and co-coder was requested prior to their involvement in the data collection process.

Trustworthiness

The following methods as recommended by Shenton (2004) and Creswell (2013) were implemented to ensure the accuracy and rigor of findings: First, definite and comprehensive detail was provided concerning the research design and implementation (operational detail of data gathering) of the current investigation in an attempt to ensure the dependability of results. Second, a triangulation of data sources was used as field notes were merged with interview responses from all participants considered to be experts in the field, followed by an SA versus UK comparison to ensure the confirmability of results.

Third, a member-checking procedure was employed to check for both accuracy and clarity of responses to address the aspect of credibility. Fourth, credibility was further ensured by way of confirming emergent dimensions and themes in validation discussions between the primary investigator and an experienced sport psychology researcher who was independent of the analysis process. Fifth, in support of the latter an audit trail of all raw-data quotes was presented for external scrutiny. Finally, consistent with the recommendations made by Thomas, Nelson and Silverman (2011), participants' comments will be extensively quoted in the results section of this investigation to allow readers to judge the accuracy and trustworthiness of the authors' concluding remarks. In contributing to these qualitative validity criteria, results have also been displayed in hierarchical content to give readers added opportunity to evaluate and interpret

data in a meaningful and self-interpretative way (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis & Sparkes, 2001) and to ensure transferability judgment of potential appliers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure anonymity, participants were identified with a country code (SA or UK) followed by a number 2-10 (e.g. SA02).

Results

Applicable to the research questions formulated in this investigation, four major dimensions with supporting higher-order and lower-order themes were distilled from participants' views on essential competencies in contemporary sport psychology practice, namely: relational and dependable character, a client-centred focus, restorative and facilitative skills, and knowledge of psychology, sport science and sport (Tables 1-4). Presented dimensions and themes reflect central and summarised viewpoints generated from opulent data. Inclusive individual responses and/or supporting responses from participants in each sample grouping will be provided in verification of themes. Due to space restrictions, only the most salient themes will be elaborated on.

Relational and dependable character

Relational and dependable character consisted of six higher-order themes: ethics, dynamism, good interpersonal qualities, interest in clients, passion, and personal conduct.

Both the SA and UK samples placed significant emphasis on personal qualities that reflect *ethical behaviour* such as the demonstration of competence, integrity, and being trustworthy. These – plus getting clients to divulge their true feelings – were regarded as the cornerstones of professional practice. SA02 explained that: *"if the athlete can trust you then he will open up to you. I had athletes who would come for a session and a second session and the real issue they want to solve only came in the third session. So what they do is, they check out the way you work: "Are you trustworthy first?" and "Do you show integrity?" before they determine if you're competent enough."*

Table 1: ASP practitioners' views on essential competencies in contemporary practice: Relational and dependable character

SA sample (n=4)			UK sample (n=5)		
Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency	Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency
Ethics (27)	Demonstrated competence (n=4); Honesty (n=4); Trustworthy (n=4); Integrity (n=2)	9 7 7 4	Ethics (21)	Trustworthiness (n=5); Demonstrated competence (n=2); Integrity (n=1)	13 6 2
Dynamism (8)	Being abreast of the latest developments / willingness to learn (n=2)	5	Dynamism (10)	Being abreast of the latest developments / willingness to learn (n=2)	4
Good interpersonal skills (14)	Fostering a trusting relationship (n=4); Good interpersonal qualities (n=3)	9 5	Good interpersonal skills (18)	Good interpersonal qualities (n=3); Fostering a trusting relationship (n=4); Fitting in with the team (n=3)	4 11 3
Interest in clients (9)	Genuine care for / interest in client (n=3); Becoming one with client (n=2)	5 4	Interest in client (7)	Genuine care for / interest in client (n=3); Becoming one with client (n=2)	5 2
Passion (11)	Passion for the profession (n=3); Going the extra mile (n=2)	9 2	Passion (5)	Going the extra mile (n=2); Passion for the profession (n=2)	3 2
Personal conduct (3)	Self-care (n=1)	3	Personal conduct (6)	Stable life (n=1); Being organized (n=1)	3 3

A supporting exemplar taken from UK09 stated: *"You do all the surface stuff but you can't really address the stuff underneath unless you have genuine trust.*
And in order to do that I suppose you can try to help things along the way by being trustworthy, you know, so then you've got to show them that you're going to keep things confidential."

A view mutual to all participants was that clients desire sport psychologists/practitioners who can assure their confidentiality (trustworthy). SA participants also added that clients appreciate practitioners who are honest enough to tell them when they do not have knowledge in a particular area to comment on or make a referral to someone else who *does*. These qualities such as practitioner honesty and trustworthiness were also frequently associated with the establishment of a trusting relationship with clients (still to be discussed under the interpersonal skills category).

Another salient theme within this dimension was the ability to be *dynamic*. A view common to the samples was that it is imperative to stay abreast of the latest research and developments in the field and maintain a strong strength of mind to

continue learning. An interview with SA02 revealed: *"I attend a lot of conferences, a lot of courses and do a lot of reading and studying… because then the more knowledge I have…, it's not that I become a jack of all trades, I just know how to help my client in the best way."*

An interviewee, UK06 stated: *"I've learned very quickly that unless you stay dynamic and on top of things, you are going to fall behind. So never stop learning."*

Good interpersonal skills was a theme grounded within the data. Both samples' participants emphasised the importance of interpersonal qualities and the ability to foster a trusting relationship with clients. Verifying this, SA03 commented: *"The person (practitioner) who will stand out is one who can establish a trusting relationship with the athlete; that's number one for me."*

UK09 concurred saying: *"Honestly, it's just the ability to get on with people… the more I work within the applied fields, the more I think it's not necessarily about being able to be good at what you do, it's about being able to get on with people."*

The instrumental role that practitioners' interpersonal qualities play in dictating the effectiveness of therapy was captured in a statement by UK08 who argued: *"Time and time again within literature, there's been no difference between the efficacies of one therapy compared to another, but the key factor is the rapport you can gain with your client."*

Three UK participants acknowledged that, when working in a team setup, it is essential for a practitioner to fit in with the team and get along with coaches and team staff as this promotes interpretative value and longevity.

Table 2: ASP practitioners' views on essential competencies in contemporary practice: Client-centred practice philosophy

SA sample (n=4)			UK sample (n=5)		
Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency	Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (11)	Mental skills training (n=3); Mindfulness, Acceptance & Commitment (MAC) intervention (n=1)	9 3	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (3)	Mental skills training (n=2)	3
Humanistic qualities (20)	Ability to empathize (n=3); Athlete-centred (n=3); Accepting (n=2); Human before athlete (n=3)	4 6 4 6	Humanistic qualities (26)	Ability to empathize (n=3); Athlete-centred (n=5); Be a sounding board (n=2)	7 15 4
Integrative approach (11)	Holistic approach (n=3); Flexibility (n=3); Global coherence (n=1)	6 3 2	Integrative approach (14)	Flexible (n=4); Authentic (n=1); Holistic (n=1); Positive Psychology (n=1); Social Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (n=1)	6 2 1 3 2

Client-centred practice philosophy

Client-centred practice philosophy consisted of three higher-order themes: cognitive behavioural therapy, humanistic qualities, and integrative approach. The most salient of the higher-order themes was practitioners' ability to adopt a *humanistic stance* when working with clients. The capacity to emphasise and understand clients' individual needs was one of the most grounded themes in participants' views on competent practice. For example, when SA02 was asked which personal characteristic contributes mostly to positive therapy outcome, she replied: *"My empathy, my ability to emphasise with a person [client]."*

SA02 continued explaining that: *"I treat every single one [client] as a unique individual. Because that's what they are."*

Elaborating on this, UK08 added: *"I think listening and the empathy is absolutely vital, so if I was meeting someone [ASP practitioner] for the first time, it would be right this guy is willing to listen and actually understand... that for me would be absolutely vital."*

Furthermore, three SA and five UK participants verified that their approach is client-led and that an ASP practitioner has to treat a client as a person and not as an athlete (three SA participants). Two SA participants also argued that one has to be accepting of each client's unique needs. SA05: *"So yes, I think number one for me, as I said, is treating them as a person not just as an athlete ... Yeah that*

is more traditional Rogerian kind of therapy. I don't think there has to be any judgment. Athletes are judgmental enough of themselves. They are their own worst enemies. They certainly don't need me telling them this is wrong. So there is no judgment and you would say, "'If this is what you are thinking then this is what you are thinking. Let's work on it.'"

Three UK participants claimed that many athletes want them to be a soundboard against which they can just express their views and issues. UK08 reported: *"I'm just a, just someone to listen to their objectives and I think it's key for them to have that sounding board sometimes... the ability to quickly grasp and understand what they're going through emotionally and performance wise."*

Integrative approach was the second most grounded theme within this dimension. Three SA and four UK participants agreed that being flexible in one approach will enable one to address clients' individual needs. Some SA and UK participants also reported that it is essential for ASP practitioners to support and develop the whole person (holistic) instead of being blindly captivated by issues known to the sports environment.

To do this, they argued it is essential for a practitioner to integrate various knowledge items, approaches and skills into one's practice philosophy to be able to address the whole person [client] in ensuring optimal functioning. SA02: *"I have a very holistic approach... I need to have; my toolbox is full. I mean from mindfulness right to narrative therapy or solution focus therapy or many things to a basic knowledge about nutrition, injuries and rehabilitation."*

In these situations, competence is reflected in a practitioner's ability to get a feel for a client's presenting issues and to dichotomise them from an integrative perspective. One SA participant in particular underscored the quality of global coherence in order to fully understand clients' natures and render services which are not only directed to the heart but also relevant to the client's underlying issues.

Of the same opinion, one UK sample participant also emphasized the importance of integrating different forms of knowledge and being flexible in adjusting one's knowledge to clients' diverse issues.

UK06 revealed that: *"Personally I prefer a very holistic approach…. Absolutely every time out of your comfort zone, because some of the basics would stay the same but the detail will always be different so you have to be sort of sharp and able to adjust and adapt… so where initially I tried to have the recipe and fit people in there, I quickly realised, well not quickly actually – over a matter of years, that it doesn't work like that, you have to find ways of adjusting to the client."*

Another two participants in the UK sample reported integrating humanistic principles with a positive psychology, and cognitive social behavioural approach respectively. Notwithstanding, an aspect which was fairly grounded within the UK sample data was the importance of practising in a congruent manner. It was evident that, irrespective of the practitioners' views on the value of altered approaches in contemporary practice, the need for ASP practitioners to be congruent (authentic) and practice in a sincere way is central to competent practice.

UK09: *"I think enabling somebody to work in a way which sits well with their core values, so having that philosophy in that way is really quite central to making an effective practitioner.*

What I don't think should happen, is, I don't think there should be a list of competencies. You must understand this theory or you must understand that theory, no. I think you should say something like, 'I understand your philosophy' and then demonstrate that you can work within that philosophy. And find techniques within that philosophy, so it becomes more of a personal journey than a dictated way of working."

Restorative and facilitative skills

Restorative and facilitative skills consisted of four higher-order themes: counseling skills, knowledgeable educator's skills: mindful awareness, and self-reflection. The most frequently cited higher-order theme within this dimension was *counseling skills*. Common agreement amongst most of the SA participants was that successful consultation rests on the ability to identify clients' individual needs by means of attentive listening to what clients say, as well as accurate attention to clients' nonverbal messages.

Table 3: ASP practitioners' views on essential competencies in contemporary practice: Restorative and facilitative skills

| SA sample (n=4) | | | UK sample (n=5) | | |
Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency	Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency
Counselling skills (22)	Attentive listening (n=3);	7	Counselling skills (18)	Attentive listening (n=2);	8
	Differentiation (n=2);	5		Good counselling skills (n=3);	5
	Reading nonverbal cues (n=2);			Challenging / confrontational skills (n=2);	3
	Cultural sensitivity (n=2);	2		Self-disclosure (n=2)	2
	Translating clients' thoughts (n=1);	2			
	Self-disclosure (n=1)	2			
Knowledgeable educator's skills (13)	Offering practical skills (n=4);	8	Knowledgeable educator's sills (14)	Offering expert advice (n=3);	6
	Offering expert advice (n=3);	3		Offering practical skills (n=3);	5
	Contextualizing thinking & speaking (n=2)	2		Conceptualizing knowledge in succinct way (n=3)	3
Mindful awareness (30)	Being mindful of situation at hand (n=4);	11	Mindful awareness (9)	Managing the self in consultation (n=4);	7
	Self-awareness (n=3);	7		Self-awareness (n=1);	4
	Managing the self in consultation (n=3);	7		Being mindful of situation at hand (n=1)	1
	Self-care (n=3)	3			
Self-reflection (6)	Arranging regular discussions with peers (n=1);	4	Self-reflection (2)	Reflecting on each session (n=1);	1
	Reflecting on each session (n=1)	2		Arranging regular discussions with peers (n=1)	1

Furthermore, cultural sensitivity, differentiation, and the ability to translate clients thoughts in a succinct way were also grounded themes in data gathered. SA04: *"You have to be a fantastic listener, with the listening skills of clarification, summarization – those skills that allow your clients to express themselves… So, what I am saying is: 'What makes a good sport psychologist? You have got to listen to your client.'."*

Interestingly one SA participant indicated that self-disclosure during consultation contributes to favorable therapy outcomes. SA05: *"Some self-disclosure is what they [clients] appreciate. When they know that I might say, 'When I was competing I also did this. OK, it's not just you; we all do it.' So they often do appreciate some self-disclosure."*

Supporting this notion, two UK sample participants also acknowledged self-disclosure as facilitative to therapy outcomes. UK10 claimed that: *"Sometimes I share an element of myself with the performers, so I might tell them about experiences that I've had in sport because I think you have to reveal something of yourself."*

The majority of the UK sample participants regarded good counselling skills as essential to competent sport psychology service delivery, while two participants underscored the ability to challenge or confront clients' way of reasoning, and identify their individual needs by way of attentive listening. UK06: *"The ability to listen first… I think first seek to understand and then to be understood, because very often and especially early in one's career, you are very eager to show what your worth is."*

Mindful awareness was another salient higher-order theme within this dimension. SA sample data underscored that being mindful of the self (self-awareness) and the situation at hand, as well as the ability to manage this aspect of oneself is imperative to competent practice.

An ASP practitioner should present a liberated self in the moment of therapy when a client seeks clear understanding. SA03 insisted that: *"… self-awareness of who you are and who your client is, is very important. If you can do that, you will sit with every client right from the start and you won't push your own agenda but focus on what's important for that athlete because your client comes first and your client is not you."*

Table 4: ASP practitioners' views on essential competencies in contemporary practice: Well-informed about psychology, sport science and sport

SA sample (n=4)			UK sample (n=5)		
Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency	Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Frequency
Strong psychological background (19)	Registered psychologists (n=4); Skilled in psychological approaches (n=3); Background in clinical psychology (n=3)	9 6 4	Psychological background (15)	Knowledgeable about psychology (n=4); Background in clinical psychology (n= 2); Skilled in psychological approaches (n=2)	9 4 2
Sport - specific knowledge (14)	Experience of working in a variety of sports (n=3); Sport experience (n=1); Sport -specific knowledge (n=1)	6 3 3	Sport-specific knowledge (14)	Sport experience (n=2); Sport specific knowledge (n=3)	4 10
Training in Sport Science (5)	Knowledgeable about Sport Science (n = 2)	5	Training in Sport Science (10)	Knowledgeable about Sport Science (n=4); Understanding of sport psychology within sport science (n=2)	7 3

The need for overall self-care such as attending to one's own needs, emotions and wellbeing was also highlighted by three participants in this sample. Similar themes such as being able to manage the self in consultation, along with being mindful of the self and the emerging situation with the client were grounded in the UK sample data. UK09 opined: *"Things that surprised me going into sport psychology are how much people pick up on small cues. So clients know that you're not OK, clients understand that, or clients know that maybe you don't like them or, that you do like them; they pick up on those very small cues – that's why I think managing yourself is imperative."*

Well-informed about psychology, sport science and sport

Well-informed about psychology, sport science and sport consisted of three higher-order themes: strong psychological background, sport-specific knowledge, and training in sport science. *Strong psychological background* was the most cited higher-order theme within this dimension. SA participants' compiled views on proficiency requirements in ASP practitioners which conveyed that being a registered psychologist who understands the underlying mechanisms of human behaviour, and is skilled in psychological approaches is first and foremost to ASP. SA02 explained: *"Because you work with human beings and because you work with emotions, the thoughts, the way of doing, their behaviour, the cognitive functioning, you need to understand and know psychology. That is your foundation – so first of all, be a registered psychologist*

and second of all you need to know about sport sciences… so, if I wasn't a registered psychologist with all that psychological background, I would have lost this client because nothing would have happened… once the person is sorted, then I go to his sport performance."

Furthermore, three participants from this sample felt that their background in clinical psychology contributed to their overall competence. SA05 commented:
"In South Africa, as we know, there is no category "sports psychologist". But being only a clinical psychologist absolutely helped me one hundred percent to be a better sport psychologist. As I say, it's because you are dealing with people."

Whereas the earlier themes were grounded within the data gathered from the UK sample; views on this aspect were divergent. Four UK participants pointed out that knowledge of psychology is essential in ASP but that being a psychologist without schooling in sport science will not ensure competent practice. UK09 explained: *"I think people going into sport need to understand sport. I don't think a general psychology practitioner is really able to go in and understand things with the psychology of training. I think you have to understand the context in which they work. I think you have to understand how elite sports work. So for me I think you need to understand sport science".*

The essential feeling from these participants was that sport science and basic psychology schooling should overlap at some stage during training to ensure competent practice. One participant in particular who teaches in a BPS accredited S&EP Masters program argued that the sport science graduate would be better equipped to practice competently than the psychology graduate.

On the contrary, one participant (UK06) from the sample also placed significant emphasis on clinical psychology knowledge, and explained: *"Because you work with people, it's very difficult to separate the clinical from the performance side. These things do overlap. And we like to, in textbooks and written material, keep these things separate. But they are all very much enmeshed so you can't really separate them.*

This particular participant also elaborated on his own professional development and stated that:*"I think if I sort of try and quantify it, I'd say initially I used 80% the sport psych recipe and 20% clinical knowledge and then the balance probably shifted to 30% sport psychology specific things, but 70% of clinical experience in terms of (again), the underlying dynamics of how people function".*

Another salient higher-order theme within this dimension was *sport-specific knowledge*. Three SA participants suggested that practitioners with experience working in a variety of sports would be able to make a greater impact on service delivery. SA03 argued: *"I think the more experience sport psychologists have in a variety of sports, the more effective they will be. I think you can pick up so many more skills and ideas around your intervention from other sports than just specializing in one type of sport".*

Another participant from this sample reported that her background competing at an elite level of sport contributed to her understanding most of the obstacles athletes struggle with. The participant even implied that her experiences as a professional athlete have inspired her to pursue a career in sport psychology. Only one participant felt that sport-specific knowledge advances competence in practice.

UK sample participants held comparable views, reporting that a background in sport participation (sport experience) as well as sport-specific knowledge is definitely required to successfully implement sport psychology interventions and helps to establish a connection with clients because they can easily relate to what one says if it is explained within their sporting context. UK08 stated: *"In a sporting environment, I think you've got to be able to talk the language. I went to a full-time football environment, having played football to a great standard – you know, semi sort of professional standard and, being able to talk their language, I think initially buys you some credibility… you can talk, you can tract for all language, you can talk about players, and people see that straight away."*

UK07 added: *"The better psychologists, obviously the real expert psychologists, will have a better knowledge of those specific sports."*

UK09 commented on this: *"Whatever you do in psychology has to fit in with the requirements of the sport."*

Evidently the SA and UK views partially overlap with both samples valuing practitioners who have experience as an athlete. Surprisingly, SA participants favoured knowledge and work experience in a variety sport whereas UK participants placed more emphasis on sport-specific knowledge.

Sport science background. Overall, having sport science training blended with psychology training was a top priority for competent practice for the majority of participants in the SA and UK samples. SA04: *"I think you must have certain basics which would be majors in psychology and in sport science – ideally,"*

Although SA participants steadfastly believed that a strong psychological basis (being a registered psychologist first) is imperative, the need for additional schooling in sport science was underscored as fundamental in effective practice. SA02: *"So, first of all, a registered psychologist and second of all, you need to know about sport science. You have to have knowledge there"*.

In contrast, two UK participants believed that an understanding of sport psychology from a sport science background would contribute more to competent practice. UK07: *"I think a competent, effective sport psychologist is someone who has studied sport psychology from a sport science background and has an affinity with the inter-disciplinary side of sport. The sport-scientist-educated psychologist has more knowledge about who is involved in the athlete's life, whom they can use, and what an athlete's little idiosyncrasies are."*

Nevertheless, when the participants were asked whether competent sport psychology practice is more reliant on schooling in psychology than on sport science, all affirmed that the practitioner must have a foot firmly grounded in each of these fields of training. SA02: *"One foot in psychology, one foot in sport science and you have to know about sport."*

UK07: *"I think it's not an either or, really. I've got a very straight belief about this one. I think you need both competencies."*

Comparatively speaking, participants in this investigation accentuated the significance of accumulating distinct training in and knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings (knowledge-based standards) of psychology, sport science (sport psychology within sport sciences) disciplines and being able to apply sport-specific interventions. Nonetheless, participants in this investigation reported that background knowledge and experience of sport was also regarded as a cornerstone of competent practice.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to identify essential competencies associated with contemporary sport psychology practice and to disseminate the comparative views offered by SA and UK ASP practitioners.

Dimensions emerging from interview responses suggested that competence in contemporary sport psychology service delivery is primarily reflected in a relational and dependable character, a client-centred focus, definite counseling skills-set (restorative and facilitative skills) and explicit expertise within the fields of psychology, sport and sport science. Essentially, the views provided by SA and UK practitioners were overlapping and remarkably similar. Nonetheless, strong parallels between the views of these two stakeholders were also

documented in another comparative study which explored national perceptions of professional philosophy, education and training, supervision, ethical guidelines and decision making in S&EP (Edwards & Barker, 2015). The extensive overlap in views found in this investigation could largely be ascribed to the expert status of the participants recruited and the accustomed level of praxis due to experience in working with comparable athlete populations.

Elementary differences in viewpoints (sub-themes) in relation to competent practice such as the importance of being a registered psychologist offered by the SA sample could mainly be ascribed to their different professional registration status and education background which is rooted within conventional psychology disciplines (e.g. clinical, counseling) owing to the lack of formal training and professional accreditation in sport psychology.

Nevertheless, salient themes within data such as being ethical, which entailed competencies such as trustworthiness, honesty and integrity are standards expected by professional regulatory councils for health-care providers. More specifically, the UK's HCPC (2012) Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics expects health-care providers such as sport psychologists, to overtly keep clients' interests at heart and comport themselves with honesty and integrity in maintaining the public's confidence in services offered.

The standards also require sport psychologists to be trustworthy and to respect the confidentiality of clients. Interestingly, an investigation reporting on athlete-clients' perceptions of sport psychologists' effectiveness has revealed that honesty and trustworthiness were some of the most desirable sport psychologists' characteristics (Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004). Participants' strong views on the competency of willing to learn and the importance of keeping knowledge and skills up to date are warranted since keeping abreast of latest developments not only conforms to current standards in professional practice (HCPC, 2012) but is also regarded as mandatory to circumvent incompetence or being caught out as professionally 'impaired' (Olkin & Gaughen, 1991; Reamer, 1993).

Supportive of the participants' views on interpersonal skills, Andersen, Van Raalte and Brewer (2000) acknowledged that the interpersonal style and personality of sport psychology consultants is the driving force behind effective service since this forms a central part of athlete care.

Views generated from a sample (N=13) of New Zealand sport psychology consultants also underscored the ability to build a connection and establish a collaborative professional consulting relationship, as essential elements contributing to effective service delivery (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Surprising, yet not unexpected, the ability to relate effectively and meaningfully to others is a skill highlighted in Rodolfa, Bent, Eisman, Nelson, Rehm and Ritchie's (2005) cube model which describes competency development in professional psychology. Nor are participants' strong views on humanistic qualities such as the ability to emphasize, being a soundboard, and adopting a client-centred approach surprising.

Despite the relevance of mental-skills approaches in conventional ASP textbooks and education programs (Weinberg & Gould, 2015), there is a long-standing support for a client-centred approach in sport psychology (Collins, Evans-Jones & O'Connor, 2013; Corlett, 1996; Petitpas, Giges & Danish, 1999). In a vein similar to the responses of these participants, is a sustained contention that being an athlete is secondary to being a person, which implies that ASP practitioners ought to understand and support the person so that the person can function as an athlete (Bond, 2002; Taylor, 2008).

And another, corroborating, outlook, emanating from Fifer, Henschen, Gould and Ravizza (2008:357) avers that the client in sport psychology consulting "has to know you care before they care what you know". Analogous to participants' views in this study, Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas and Maynard (2007) argued that perceiving and treating clients solely as athletes could impede their optimal functionality as persons fulfilling the role of athletes.

And then there is the relevance of a holistic approach in efforts to optimise the whole person in ASP which is probably based on the multi-dimensional nature of athletes and the overpowering influence that non-performance identity domains have on an athlete's performance (Friesen & Orlick, 2011; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Participants' sentiments about the importance of attentive listening in sport psychology practice are greatly supported by relevant literature. Owton, Bond and Tod (2014) conceded that it is common practice when working with athlete-clients, for trainee and novice ASP practitioners to act as expert advisers based on knowledge of rigid recipe-like problem-solving approaches.

However, analyses of interviews with expert sport psychologists who worked with athletes during the most anticipated sporting events in the world (e.g. Olympic games), reported that sport psychologists tend to misjudge clients' true needs when they attempt to 'fix' matters, and, echoing the views of participants documented in this study, suggested that practitioners should spend more time listening and facilitating the athletes through the process because only then will they discover the essential nature of clients' issues (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015).

Also advocating participants' views on mindful awareness, Ponton (2012) maintained that mindful attention to the present moment with the client would enable counsellors to formulate a rich and meaningful concept of the whole, that is, to combine the client's individual needs with one's own.

Finally the notion of having explicit psychology, and sport sciences expertise resonates with the stand taken by the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) on required competencies in sport and exercise psychology practice (Tenenbaum et al., 2003). Similarly, participants' high regard for sporting experience is not only supported by the AASP certification criteria (AASP, 2015) for sport psychology consultants, but also verified by investigations documenting that athlete-clients tend to favour practitioners who can relate to them as athletes (e.g. sport experience, knowledge of the sport) (Anderson, Miles, Robinson & Mahoney, 2004; Lubker, Visek, Geer & Watson II, 2008; Lubker, Visek, Watson, & Singpurwalla, 2012).

Various competencies (such as being skilled in domains covering therapeutic work, performance enhancement, and sport-specific insight) which have emerged in this investigation, provide substantial verification of the promotion of an interdisciplinary (psychology and kinesiology/sport sciences) approach to sport psychology training for the development of competence in practice (Aoyagi et al., 2012; Cremades et al., 2014; Fletcher & Maher, 2013).

It is indicative of the multidimensional competencies associated with contemporary practice (as revealed by the study themes) that, while not decisively defining sport psychology into two distinct service delivery models (i.e. performance-based and therapeutic-based interventions as recommended by Aogai and colleagues [2012]), considerable efforts should be made to define training models that adequately school ASP practitioners in the realms of both psychology and kinesiology.

This investigation, however, also draws attention to personality-related competencies needed by practitioners in contemporary practice, which are not developed by formal training (such as the ability to provide empathy, good interpersonal skills, a stable character, passion, personal conduct, willingness to learn, genuine interest in the client, and sport participation experience and related knowledge). It is therefore a viewpoint which signifies the importance of personal character screening (behavioural indicators) and rigid selection criteria of prospective ASP trainees by formal sport psychology training programs – thus upholding the contention that identifiable personality qualities, personal skills and abilities are prerequisites for candidates entering training and practice (Hatcher & Lassiter, 2007).

At the very least, this viewpoint is supported by the observations of both Sakinofsky (1979) and Andersen et al. (2000), which alluded to the inability of formal training programs to develop or refine qualities that are not congenital in a trainee. Adding to this notion, a recent ASP expert panel discussion noted that current training programs are fixated on content interventions whereas the focus should shift towards the trainees' "soft skills" in service delivery such as interpersonal skills and relationship building in consultancy (Hemmings, 2015:11). Yet, supporting the views of Andersen et al. (2000), it is also viable to recommend that sufficient supervision during training as well as ongoing peer consultation become prime facets of ASP of providing trainees and professionals with opportunities to learn and examine how their own personal character dictates their interactions with athlete-clients.

The notion of modern-day sport psychology services trending towards a client-centred approach is also verified by the views of the participants. In validation of the affirmations of Tod and Andersen (2005) and Collins et al. (2013), this study concedes that humanistic elements and client-centred services form the cornerstones of contemporary sport psychology practice.

It could be argued that comparing findings from existing research into the views of practitioners and service seekers on effective sport psychology practice, and strong parallels with the current position on professional policies and competencies checklist lends credibility to emergent dimensions and themes generated from the data in the current investigation.

However, there are a few matters concerning the scope of the current findings that warrant consideration – for example, a general deficiency in diversity regarding the participants' ethnicity and gender together with a clear separation in views of participants who consult on a full-time versus part-time basis versus being an academic versus rendering services to the public versus being contracted to a specific sport team.

Presenting participants with the interview guide prior to the face-to-face interview and allowing them to become acquainted with the interview questions could be another issue since participants' responses might have been rehearsed and less spontaneous than they would have been without exposure to the guide. Nevertheless the probability of creating rapport, accurate reflection, and observation of interview data was enhanced with a personal face-to-face interview at the convenience of each participant in the investigation (Silverman, 2013).

Conclusion

Findings reported by this investigation underscored a selection of competencies as functional and foundational to contemporary sport psychology practice. Awareness and understanding of these competencies by existing and novice practitioners within the field could offer valuable insight and guidance (practice measure) in their pursuit towards professional development in terms of evaluating what they know, are doing or should be doing in their work with clients (Ward et al., 2005), especially bearing in mind the needed stimulus for ongoing support or training within the field (Eubank & Hudson, 2013; McEwan & Tod, 2015).

From a training point of view, the essential competencies identified here could also promote academic enquiry/inform future efforts in establishing a benchmark in sport psychology training as well as drawing attention to elements that merit special consideration such as the personal character and skills of practitioners.

The latter in particular, bears significance to efforts in proposing/developing accredited sport psychology qualifications in the recent curriculum reform performed by South African Universities (Council on Higher Education - CHE, 2013).

Furthermore, findings could provide impetus for scrutiny, streamlining and adaptation of current or developing training models and regulation in ASP into a progressive pathway which focuses on specific methods that address the development of competencies essential and relevant to contemporary practice. Such informed efforts would ensure significant strides in the "modern pilgrimage toward the maturation of ASP" (Fletcher & Maher, 2013:276).

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