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Cross-disciplinarity in sport (and) psychology

Over the last few years there has been considerable development regarding the education and training of applied sport psychology practitioners and the associated options available to them. As readers of this article will be aware, both BASES and the BPS provide a route to becoming a sport psychology practitioner, and I do not intend to spend this article revisiting the specific entry requirements, process or indeed titles associated with each! Rather, I would like to take this opportunity to present my perspective as an individual who has studied, taught and researched within the area for the past 12 years and hopefully provide some ‘food for thought’ regarding the ongoing development of sport psychology.

Cross-disciplinary knowledge seeks to connect disciplines – in this case the psychology of sport. As sport scientists more broadly, and sport psychologists specifically, we are driven to understand the world of sport through a specific lens, which requires us to ‘borrow’ from one discipline to enhance our understanding of the other. It struck me, whilst attending a University research committee with colleagues from other disciplines within my College, that I and indeed sport psychology academics in general, may have very little to do with individuals from a psychology department. Of course, opportunities exist to collaborate with regards to research, but certainly in my experience sport and psychology continue to exist as two seemingly separate and distinct disciplines. This is not a criticism, yet it is an interesting reflection of the 2 key issues that I feel need addressing within sport psychology. The first is that, in my experience, good examples of cross-disciplinarity within sport psychology education and training are hard to come by and as a student of sport psychology, I have had to develop my own wider understanding of psychology through the focus of my PhD, rather than a taught programme of study. The second is that it feels as though the development of excellent sport psychologists has been somewhat lost amidst the restrictions imposed on future practitioners within their education and training, when what we should be focussing on is enabling and supporting these individuals in developing the necessary breadth of knowledge. Below I have shared an example from my research which represents this breadth of knowledge in the spirit of cross-disciplinarity!

The broad focus of my PhD research was professional practice within sport psychology. More specifically I endeavoured to explore the notion that sport psychology practitioners are the tool; that they bring themselves to their practice and that 'who they are' directly impacts on the

effectiveness of their work. Returning, therefore, to the idea of ‘borrowing’; I did so extensively from counselling psychology to inform the research based on its emphasis on the therapist’s personal qualities (Corey, 2009), but the context of elite and professional sport added a new dimension and a focus on organisational psychology soon developed. The cross-disciplinarity was clear, as was the significance of these sub-disciplines of psychology in the context of sport. Perhaps the best example of this relates to a new conceptualisation of empathy that emerged from the research. Typically, empathy has been understood as existing between two people and is a term closely associated with the discipline of psychology; the British Association of Counselling Psychology (BACP; 2004) define empathy as “the ability to communicate understanding of another person’s experience from that person’s perspective” (p. 4). However, participants within my research described the importance of a sport psychology practitioner having empathy with the sporting environment and thus their ability to understand and operate effectively in a given context. Is a sport psychologist empathic because they have studied psychology, a discipline in which empathy has long been considered as important for effective practice? Or is a sport psychologist empathic as a result of being exposed to and therefore understanding and appreciating sport environments and other sport science disciplines?

For arguments sake (!) let’s say that both ‘types’ of empathy are required – how can they be developed? This question of development extends beyond empathy alone and returns to the concept of cross-disciplinarity in terms of the wider understanding of people (psychology) and context (sport). When questioned on the challenge for early career practitioners in a recent Q&A in *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, Dr Chris Harwood stated that “BSc and MSc degrees may not educate or train you enough in ‘working with people and personalities. Your interpersonal skills, social character and attitudes, knowledge of the sport and street-smartness will be substantial factors in your development and success as a practitioner” (2016; p.31). Arguably MSc courses need to be doing more to 'bridge the gap' between undergraduate study and applied practice by focussing on developing an understanding of self, and/in relation to, the realities of working in a sport environment. The issues raised also extend to the supervisory process and the way in which supervisees are developed both professionally and personally. Ultimately, whatever the individual's educational background, the aim needs to be to develop the most effective practitioners possible and I believe we need to embrace cross-disciplinarity to a far greater extent to be able to achieve this.

References

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