Psychology and Psychologists in search of an identity: What and who are we, and why does it matter?

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Abstract

The field of sport psychology has faced a challenge in its professional formation, to the extent that some scholars have argued that its status as a healthy, sustainable, or viable profession is an illusion. Within the discipline, there continues to be a range of professional qualifications, educational and training pathways, and labels used to define the study and application of sport psychology. This diversity is a by-product of complex legal, social, political, cultural, and contextual issues characterizing the world of sport psychology. We argue that there exist multiple – or perhaps fragmented – professional identities within sport psychology and that this has led to confusion and a lack of regulation across the field as a whole, and may contribute to unethical, ineffective, and unclear service delivery and pose challenge for the development of personal practitioner identity. Considering these observations, we call on scholars to study professional identity within sport psychology and how it is conceptualized, experienced, and implemented by professionals in practice.

Keywords: Professional training and development, profession, practice, professional formation, performance psychology

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The field of sport psychology, that is, the academic discipline and professional practice, has gained widespread visibility within the sport science and psychology professional communities, as well as in the media and in society more generally (Kornspan & Quartiroli, 2017). Indeed, numerous scholars have commented on development and training, professional services, competence, and the professionalization of sport psychologists (SPs¹; e.g., Fletcher & Maher, 2014; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Danish & Hale, 1981; Martin, in press; McDougall et al., 2015; Portenga et al., 2017; Sly et al., 2019; Tod et al., 2017; Wagstaff, 2019; Winter & Collins, 2016; Wylleman et al., 2009). While this domain of psychological practice is a relatively new field among the helping professions, Sport Psychology has been “emerging” for the last 50 years (see Gilmore et al., 2018). Sadly, the absence of a clear professional identity in this field has led to confusion regarding the status, regulation, ethics, cultural and contextual relevance, societal value, public awareness of professional roles and service provision, and ultimately, the extent to which the profession thrives. Moreover, these field-level identity challenges present an obstacle to the development of individual’s practitioner identity. Put briefly, who we are as a field is unclear, and this creates challenges for individuals seeking to understand who they are as professionals. In this commentary, we aim to make a further contribution to the general discourse regarding a professional identity for Sport *Psychology*, which we argue will assist Sport *Psychologists* in developing their personal practitioner identity.

What is professional identity?

The first step toward establishing a strong professional identity among SPs is to create a better understanding of the construct of professional identity. Professional identity is as a constellation of professional self-concept attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences people use to define themselves in specialized, skill- and education-based occupations or vocations (Ibarra, 1999). The study of professional identity is inextricable from personal identity, defined by

Gecas and Burke (1995) as “the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others” (p. 2). By extension, membership in a profession influences one’s self-definition and in turn shapes how others think about an individual. The extant research on the construction of professional identity indicates that these self-views are shaped in three primary ways (cf. Ibarra, 1999). First, professional identity is the result of the socialization process and rhetoric, exposing an individual to information regarding the meanings associated with a profession. Second, individuals adjust and adapt their professional identity during periods of career transition. Third, Schein (1978) suggested that one’s life experiences influence professional identity by clarifying one’s priorities and self-understanding. While we believe these mechanisms to professional identity are relevant for SPs, we also appreciate – as alluded to in our introduction – that individuals within the SP field may receive conflicting and ambiguous messages concerning meanings of the profession, and in turn, may resist the rhetoric associated with the profession.

Professional identity in other psychology disciplines

The search for and necessity to develop a unified professional identity has been the center of much scholarly reflection in other disciplines of psychological practice, such as counseling psychology. Moore-Pruitt (1994) described counseling professional identity as a part of ego and defined it as, “an integration of theoretical orientation and methodology that is consistent with the counselor’s personal values and beliefs; the counselor is authentic” (p. 34). Further, Brott and Myers (1999) argued that professional identity evolves over time, describing it as a cognitive frame of reference from which practitioners carry out professional roles and responsibilities. Puglia (2008) later articulated professional identity, having three components comprising, “agreement with the counseling philosophy, beliefs that the counseling profession includes activities such as becoming licensed and certified, and professional engagement” (p. 13). Elsewhere, Calley and Hawley (2008) found the key elements of counseling professional identity to include beliefs and values distinctive to the counseling discipline, the scope of professional

96 engagement, an understanding of counseling's history, theoretical orientation, credentialing or
97 licensure, and scholarly work. Most recently, Woo and Henfield (2015) noted that the prevailing
98 definitions of counseling professional identity are divergent, with each study targeting a specific
99 group of professionals, such as trainees, practitioners, or educators. The authors concluded that
100 subgroup specificity has made it difficult to generate a cohesive and consensual definition of
101 professional identity for the counseling profession. These sentiments were also informed by Woo
102 and colleagues' previous work, aimed at developing a shared professional identity for counseling
103 professionals. That is, Woo et al. (2014) reviewed the existing counseling, counseling psychology,
104 and counseling education literature identifying common characteristics and a 6-dimension model
105 of professional identity, grounded in the assumption that all members of the counseling profession
106 share a common vision for the development of the profession. Based on this model, Woo and
107 Henfield (2015) developed the Professional Identity Scale in Counseling (PISC), encompassing a
108 sub-scale for each of the six domains: (a) demonstrate knowledge of the profession, (b) articulate
109 philosophy of the profession, (c) establish expertise required of members of the profession and
110 understand members' professional roles, (d) validate attitudes toward the profession and oneself,
111 (e) be engaged in professional behaviors expected of members, and (f) interact with other
112 professionals in the field. To elaborate, according to Woo et al., knowledge of the profession was
113 referred as one's basic knowledge and understanding of the counseling profession, including
114 counseling history, standards for professional preparation, impact of credentials and certification,
115 ethical standards, counseling associations, and counseling journals. Philosophy of the profession
116 was described as one's agreement with the belief system that underlies the counseling profession
117 and distinguishes counseling from other mental health professions. Professional roles and expertise
118 was characterized as one's knowledge of the counseling professional's various roles (e.g.,
119 counselor, educator, supervisor, and consultant) in diverse settings and expertise to provide
120 appropriate services. Attitudes relate to individual's perspective toward the profession (e.g., pride
121 for one's profession, beliefs in the future of the profession) and toward the relationship between

oneself and the profession. Engagement behaviors are one's capability to perform professional actions and activities that a counseling professional practices as a member of the profession. Finally, interaction refers to a set of actions that individuals engage in for professional development, including advising, mentoring, supervisory relationships, ongoing feedback from professional colleagues, as well as networking through training and professional associations

The Professional Identity Crisis in Sport Psychology

While other disciplines of psychology have been more proactive in exploring the conceptualization, experience, and implementation of professional identity, this has not been the case in the Sport Psychology profession. Instead, the field appears to have experienced an *identity crisis*. Indeed, fissures in the identity of Sport Psychology as a field have been evident for some time (cf. Danish & Hale, 1981; Silva et al., 1999). Maureen Weiss, in her Presidential address to the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP) in 1998, stated that "the lack of a clear definition of applied sport psychology perpetuates the cloud of uncertainty many individuals have about their identity" (Weiss, 1998, p. S14). Elsewhere, Aoyagi et al. (2012) noted that, "while psychology distinguished itself from the medical field and established its own licensure and accreditation, sport psychology is still searching for its own unique identity... and... is struggling to identify and gain widespread acceptance in its target markets" (p. 32). Recently, Martin (in press) drew on this lack of professional identity when offering a commentary on the field, stating that sport psychology is not yet a viable or healthy profession, and that the perception of sport psychology as profession is an illusion. While it is important not to conflate professional identity of the field with individual practitioner identity, we feel that the confusion regarding identity within the profession – at the field level within SP – influences, and more specifically, poses challenges for individual professionals seeking a clear and congruent practitioner identity.

While only a select few studies have explicitly addressed SPs' professional identity (Portenga et al., 2017; Tod et al., 2017; Williams & Andersen, 2012), there exist some initial foundations from which scholars can build. To elaborate, Portenga and colleagues made valuable

148 steps towards supporting the development of identity and a sense of purpose among SPs when they
149 articulated a definition of sport and performance psychology. Specifically, they advocated that
150 reconceptualizing and defining sport psychology as a subdomain of performance psychology (also
151 specifically defined) will provide guidance, clarity, and, eventually, resolution for many of the
152 challenges faced by the profession of sport psychology (i.e., standards clarification for professional
153 qualifications and professional competencies). These challenges, they argued, were due to a
154 limited shared understanding of what the practice of sport psychology entails and therefore what
155 training, supervision, and competencies are required to be an ethical and capable practitioner.

156 Portenga et al. (2017) noted that although there are many reasons for individuals
157 encountering difficulty in successfully transitioning from graduate training to professional
158 practice, the failure to appropriately answer the question, “What does a sport psychologist do?”
159 has likely contributed to the challenges these graduates face in achieving their career goals. We
160 would argue that this also poses challenges for individuals developing a clear and coherent
161 personal practitioner identity. Hence, Portenga et al. added that to make progress in the profession
162 of sport psychology, definitional clarity is necessary to delineate the profession’s unique identity,
163 to detail the required competencies for practice, and facilitate clearer pathways for training and
164 developing these competencies. The authors also noted that current definitions of the field are
165 effective in broadly identifying the profession, but because they typically attempt to concurrently
166 define sport psychology and exercise psychology, they lack both precision and clarity. To
167 elaborate, many definitions of sport psychology do not delineate what competencies would be
168 necessary to practice, and imply that sport psychology and exercise psychology are the same
169 profession. It is noteworthy that many professional organisations also conflate these increasingly
170 distinct professions. Portenga and colleagues’ proposed solution to this challenge was an attempt
171 to honour the unique concept (i.e., understanding the psychology of high performance) that led to
172 the field of sport psychology, and to alleviate the confusion surrounding the term “sport
173 psychology” by proposing that “performance psychology” be adopted as an umbrella term (cf.

Aoyagi et al., 2012). In this nomenclature, sport would be one domain that applies performance psychology, along with others such as the performing arts, business, medicine, and high-risk occupations. As performance psychology is defined by the end goal (i.e., helping people consistently perform in the upper range of their abilities), not by what intervention is used, the highly-politicized dichotomies of mental skills versus mental health, kinesiology versus psychology, and clinical versus performance service provision may become less obstructive to progress with such reconceptualization. Nevertheless, if the foundation of any systemic applied psychological service provision is built on a foundation of sound psychological principles and professional relationships, there may be little need for “land grabbing” by competing professionals, and instead an embedded and holistic provision based on complementarity, collaboration, and integration of varied psychological expertise may become good practice.

Focusing on *individual* practitioner identity rather than the identity of the *profession*, in their commentary on professional development in sport psychology, Tod et al. (2017) concluded with a suggestion that examining practitioner identity represents novel research that has educational and applied value. While Tod and colleagues used a lens of individuation and practitioner self-awareness, it is likely that this self-awareness would include some element of sense of self as a professional. Indeed, Tod et al. argued that practitioners with clear and articulated personal and professional identities are able to make choices leading to optimal individuation and decision-making. That is, practitioners who have (a) clarified their values (personal characteristics), (b) made themselves aware of the ethical codes of the professional bodies to which they belong (group membership), and (c) clarified the legal and other boundaries of the roles they are occupying may be well-equipped to respond to ethical dilemmas and reach decisions that balance competing stakeholder interests. While we agree with the importance of exploring the development of individual practitioner identity, as highlighted by Woo et al. (2014), this can only occur within the context of a shared identity of the profession.

Whose professional identity and what’s in a name?

200 To socialize future professionals and adequately prepare them competently for
201 employment, we must first analyze what knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) are needed to
202 perform that job (Portenga et al., 2017). Another crucial component in the development of a
203 profession is a standardized system to validate someone's attainment of the KSAs needed in that
204 profession. Such systems are achieved through professional certification and, as in the case of
205 psychology disciplines in many countries, licensure. It follows that a clear definition of the
206 profession is a foundational requirement of developing a standardized system to teach the
207 necessary KSAs and a system to validate their attainment. Hence, to advance a unified identity for
208 our field, we first need to ascertain what that field is. As Woo et al. (2014) argued in reference to
209 professional identity in counselling, the key is to have professionals able to work and to develop
210 their own identity within the profession, as long as they share a common understanding of the
211 profession's identity.

212 Professionals within our field work in different ways with different clients, and this
213 necessitates a variety of specific competencies. Such a variety of competence has created
214 confusion within the field and public. While we acknowledge the need for specific competency
215 within performance contexts, we argue that for the profession to flourish it needs a generally
216 shared identity. Nevertheless, a cursory glance at the sport psychology professional practice
217 literature further accentuates the identity crisis of the field regarding the titles used. That is, within
218 our field people use different titles to describe very similar professional individuals or groups with
219 largely similar credentials. These include, but are not limited to Certified Mental Performance
220 Coach, Practitioner Psychologist, Applied Sport Psychologist, Applied Psychological Practitioner,
221 Performance Psychologist, Sport and Exercise Psychologist, Sport Psychology Professional, Sport
222 Psychology Consultant, Expert in Performance Behavior, and Specialist in Applied Sport
223 Psychology (cf. Sly et al., 2019; Wylleman, 2019). The professional and regulatory societies
224 founded by pioneers in our field are also complicit in this professional title miasma. For instance,
225 the Association of Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) and the International Society for Sport

226 Psychology (ISSP), the European Federation of Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity
227 (FEPSAC), the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity
228 (NASPSPA). The issue extends to the professional divisions developed within existent
229 psychological associations, with the American Psychological Society adopting the “catch all” title
230 of Division of Sport, Exercise and Performance Psychology (i.e., Division 47). Less inclusive, but
231 equally lacking in both precision and clarity are the titles adopted by the Division of Sport and
232 Exercise Psychology (DSEP) of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the College of Sport
233 and Exercise Psychologists (CSEP) of the Australian Society of Psychology (ASP). Even more
234 varied and, in some instances obscure, are the titles these different organizations confer. For
235 example, the BPS confers “Chartered Psychologist” status to qualified members, with “full” or
236 “affiliate” membership depending on credentials leading to Chartership, while AASP, after a job
237 task analysis and overhaul of its certification process, created the new label of CMPC. The CSEP
238 confer an area of practice endorsement as a “Sport and Exercise Psychologist”, while FEPSAC has
239 recently developed a certification as “specialist in applied sport psychology” (SASP-FEPSAC) and
240 the ISSP started its ISSP Practitioner Registry. This range of titles does not end with professional
241 organizations and extends to employers as well. For example, the English Institute of Sport (EIS),
242 the largest single employer of “Sport and Exercise Psychologists” in the United Kingdom (N >
243 30), provides services to the Olympic and Paralympic system under the banner of “Performance
244 Psychology”. In this instance, individuals are qualified as a “Sport and Exercise Psychologist” via
245 a professional pathway, have use of the additional title “Chartered Psychologist” if they have
246 trained with the BPS, and are regulated by the Health and Care Profession’s Council as
247 “Practitioner Psychologists”. Yet, they voluntarily adopt the professional title “Performance
248 Psychologist” as arguably the most accurate description of the service provided, which is neither
249 credentialized or legally protected. .

250 While the requirements for the titles vary between countries, the applied practice embraced
251 by professionals, whether certified, endorsed, accredited, registered, or licensed, is often very

similar. Indeed, after articulating similar sentiments, Wylleman (2019) noted that while sport psychology jobs across three countries (viz. Denmark, Netherlands, UK) shared some similarities in terms of profile, there also existed remarkable differences (e.g., titles used, workplace locations for delivery, requirements for cooperation, formats to describe competencies, job descriptions). A possible cause of this lack of clarity between titles, requirements, and professional competence may be the substantial number of individuals who engage unregulated in the provision of sport psychology services with limited formal education and professional training. Relatedly, Fletcher and Maher (2014) noted that a perennial misunderstanding has existed within our field regarding whether one's professional background and training determines their competence, labeling the issue as a central factor in the turf wars and territorial debates that have plagued sport psychology for the past few decades. They added that while a practitioner's educational background will undoubtedly provide them with foundational knowledge and understanding, gaps inevitably exist in other areas of professional development. We would argue that one's individual practitioner identity is one of the key areas to address during training and continuing education. Regardless of educational background, all trainees will need to adapt their personal development and professional training to advance their awareness and understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, and enrichment priorities. Moreover, behavioral anchors indicate increasing levels of independence at successive developmental levels, and it is these behaviors, rather than educational background, which ultimately determine an individual's competence (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; 2013; Tod, 2007). Indeed, according to some developmental models (see Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; 2013), professional development is characterized by an alignment of personal and professional values. Such development will be hindered without individuals having a clear understanding of what our profession is and how they might develop an individual level practitioner identity with consideration of their personal attributes, values, beliefs as well as the context in which they work.

What next?

The importance of a shared and strong professional identity results in an increased likelihood of ethical performance, greater awareness of counseling roles, and, ultimately, a better chance for the profession to thrive. Our commentary and anecdotal experience suggest that our profession is at a crossroads and has a number of key agendas to resolve. These include the changing expertise of the sport psychologist (i.e., traditional mental skills, contemporary performance psychology, organizational and systemic approaches, and mental health), a need for a reassessment of key professional competencies, a greater need to reassess the identity of sport psychology as profession and how this facilitates the development of individual practitioner identity, and perhaps most importantly how to communicate this to the public (cf. Sly et al., 2019; Wagstaff, 2017, 2019). Although, nuance within any profession psychological field is common, perhaps even healthy, within the sport psychology field we risk identity confusion for students, trainees, neophytes and experienced professionals. To elaborate, given sport psychology currently encapsulates a diverse range of professionals providing a range of services, developing a commonly shared profession identity is key to enable the profession to thrive, and within this common space, each individual could develop their own practitioner identity..

Training/education. We believe that professional identity development of SPs may occur over an extended time, beginning with formative educational experiences, continuing with training and development, and later employment experiences. For this reason, it may be important for educators and trainers to share and discuss commonalities and different professional roles and profiles that have emerged within sport psychology (i.e., traditional mental skills, contemporary performance psychology, organizational and systemic approaches, and mental health). This would better help students and trainees understand, and in turn articulate, what this looks like in their practice and how it forms part of their professional identity.

Practice. Considering the ongoing process of identity development throughout one's career, current sport psychology professionals might continue to reflect on their professional identity, and the factors that sustain and promote it. Multinational professional societies and

regulatory bodies could establish standards for continuing education, professional quality of work life, self-care, positive ethics, lifelong learning, and the half-life of professional knowledge over time.

Research. Sport psychology scholars should more systematically examine the professional identity of individuals within the field while also undertaking work to gather a deeper understanding of how those already doing the work, conceptualize and experience their own professional identity. This work may lead to the development of a consensually shared definition of what professional identity may be in the sport psychology profession. This work will necessarily need to be sensitive to individual nuance and personal values and identities. Collaborative programs of work might also explore whether there exist developmental differences in professional identity. Such programs will require the input of trainees and applied and academic professionals. At minimum, we would consider it vital that any working group developing consensus definitions should be culturally diverse and include scholars with various areas of expertise (viz. traditional mental skills, contemporary performance psychology, organizational and systemic approaches, and mental health). Moreover, we are cognizant that much of the work cited here and published in the main sport psychology journals emanates from a Euro-American cultural perspective. We also acknowledge cultural and ethical tensions at play when negotiating one's professional identity. Hence, while we do not necessarily advocate a hegemonic stance of performance psychology as a "catch all" for our field, from which practitioners should derive their own personal professional identity, we do perceive value in greater clarity and congruence within our professional field to better support an individual's practitioner identity development.

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¹ While we acknowledge that the terminology for professionals differs around the world due to different personal preferences, as well as legal and professional requirements, in this

405 manuscript use the term “sport psychologist” to refer all professionals engaging in sport
406 psychology work.