Becoming a Sport Psychologist: Experiences of a Volunteer

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Reflective practice is a tool that sport psychologists use in order to make sense of their experiences, manage themselves personally and professionally, and ultimately improve their consultancy effectiveness. Nonetheless, the final product of reflections offers important resources of knowledge-in-action, so much required in the sport psychology field (Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004). Thus, this article provides an account of a volunteer’s sport psychology practicum experience, making the case for reflective practice. The paper reports on the application of a self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and motivational interviewing (MI; Rollnick & Miller, 1995; Miller & Rollnick, 2002) based intervention with a rhythmic gymnastics trainee coach. The experiential knowledge gained by the volunteer is shared via a narrative in the form of a case study. The narrative is organized in different sections, offering an overview of the setting, the coach and her athletes, the intervention and self-reflections. The theoretical and practical underpinnings of the intervention, as well as the thought process which accompanied the work described are highlighted. A more in depth understanding of the process on how sport psychology services are delivered by a volunteer/trainee is depicted to guide other volunteers or aspiring professionals during their initial practical experiences.

Keywords: reflective practice, sport psychology, volunteering

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Introduction-background information

The work described in this paper reflects the experiences of a sport psychologist immediately after graduation, before starting the official Supervised Experience (The British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences) process. At the beginning of the collaboration with the client, I had an undergraduate degree in psychology and a taught postgraduate degree in sport and exercise psychology, so my skills and strengths were based on theoretical and research knowledge of sport and exercise psychology. Therefore, there had been limited opportunities to design and deliver psychological support or workshops to sports performers and/or coaches. Having little practical experience in sport settings, I was keen to develop my ‘real world’ knowledge of sport psychology. Consequently, I introduced myself to the National Institute for Sport Research and offered my services as a volunteer in sport and exercise psychology. The client was recruited during a morning session of lectures for coaches who attended a professional training course in the institute.

Lauren (from here on also referred to as the coach) is the manager and coach of a newly-founded gymnastics club. She was enthusiastic about a possible collaboration with a sport psychologist and she suggested she was keen to have the psychological support services delivered in conjunction with the training sessions. Lauren explained that she coached children under 10 years old, at recreational and competitive level. Each group of gymnasts trained twice a week, with approximately 7-9 girls in each group, for 1.5 hours. The competitive level group had one extra training session. On the initial meeting it was agreed upon that I would observe both the athletes and the coach during a training session and subsequently the objectives and outline of the collaboration would be discussed.

Prior to designing the intervention it was decided that the service delivery will be based on a holistic approach (Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004; Ravizza, 2002) and will consist of two different sections: a coach-focused approach and an athlete-focused approach. The coach requested that the service be delivered before the Rhythmic Gymnastics National Championship (6-7 April), so the timeframe for the work described in this case study spanned between March and May 2012. The intervention implied a complex process and was divided between the coach and the athletes. The part of the intervention focused on the coach consisted of 5 sessions and the one focused on the athletes consisted of 7 sessions (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for intervention overview schedule), including monitoring and feedback.
This paper will discuss the needs assessment, development and monitoring of a self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1895; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and motivational interviewing (Rollnick & Miller, 1995; Miller & Rollnick, 2002) based intervention with a rhythmic gymnastics trainee coach and her athletes. However, due to its complexity, only the coach part intervention will be detailed in the present case study. Particular emphasis will be placed on highlighting the volunteer’s experience (Tonn & Harmison, 2004) and the importance of reflective practice (Andersen, 2000; Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004; Cropley, Miles, Hanton & Niven, 2007) in improving service delivery, as well as professional development of the practitioner.

Background on client-presentation of the coach and the athletes

Lauren is a 35 year old trainee rhythmic gymnastics coach and full-time management consultant. She is a former elite gymnast, retired due to a back injury. She had been practicing rhythmic gymnastics at competitive level since the age of 6. Even though she was forced to retire when she was only 15 years old and could not pursue a professional career, gymnastics remained her passion. As a result, she decided to found her own club and become a certified coach. When our work started, she was at the end of her first year of training to become a coach. Between the moment she left gymnastics until she decided to become a certified coach and own a sports club, she had not been involved in sports whatsoever. On the contrary, she went to university and pursued a career in management.

Lauren confessed that owning the gymnastics club and coaching were the only activities that gave her satisfaction at that time. She dedicated her weekends to training sessions and studying in order to improve as a coach. Therefore, we agreed that I would give her feedback based on the training sessions and we would discuss it every week. All training sessions for recreational and performance groups were scheduled on Saturdays and Sundays due to her full-time job. At that moment, Lauren’s main goals was to develop her coaching skills and learn how to lead the class. She also expressed her interest in psychological support for the performance squad, as the national championships were approaching. Overall, Lauren seemed an energetic person, with a positive attitude and a drive for performance.

Due to the coach’s request and time constraints I only worked with the athletes training at competitive level. The performance squad consisted of six girls between 5 to 9 years old (1 girl age 5, 1 girl age 8, 1 girl age 9 and the rest were age 7). They had been training for 6 months at the moment I started working with them. The squad trained during week-ends, having one training
Experiences of a Volunteer

session on Saturday morning and two sessions on Sunday with a break during lunchtime. A training session lasted approximately 1.5 hours and included both solo practice and group routines.

As far as competitions are concerned, the national championship was the first competition for all of the athletes. They competed both individually and as a group for two different categories: little gymnast and IV category (Romanian Rhythmic Gymnastics Federation). All athletes were members of the performance squad since December 2011.

Intervention

Needs assessment

The interpretation of the coach’s needs was based on the detailed qualitative and observational information I gained during the initial meeting and first training session I attended. A semi-structured interview was designed to gain a better picture of Lauren as a person and her dynamics between emotions, thoughts, behaviour and experiences. Furthermore, I also addressed any possible discrepancies between her expectations and what she could accomplish with her skills at that moment (Lemyre, Trudel & Durand-Bush, 2007; McCombs & Palmer, 2008; Solomon, 2010; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2011). Nonetheless, Lauren was very specific about her goals regarding our collaboration and her request of specific exercises in order to achieve them. As a result, we agreed that we would focus on a key objective:

- To develop the appropriate coaching skills needed to create a structured motivational climate during trainings and competition that promotes autonomy-support

In order to foster this climate and to enhance the coach’s skills, the intervention would need to target Lauren’s motivation for actual change related to her development process as a coach. For this particular purpose, we focused on:

- Setting and atmosphere of the training sessions
- Needs and expectations, discrepancies
- Decision-making
- Sport psychology specific knowledge

Furthermore, while observing a training session, I noticed the atmosphere was a bit chaotic as the coach was losing control from time to time. This issue was
addressed in collaboration with the coach. However, one of the reasons why this might have happened is that the parents were present in the gym throughout the entire training session, influencing the girls’ behaviour (O’Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2011). What is more, some of them also gave instructions during breaks.

Furthermore, upon observing and talking with the children and their parents, I decided a group social support intervention that promoted confidence would benefit both the athletes and their parents. The timeframe and lack of a setting outside the gym also influenced the decision. Because the work with the athletes started just four weeks before the national championships, creating a positive climate and increasing confidence were the main focuses of the intervention.

Moreover, parents showed limited knowledge of sport psychology and what involvement in sport implied at all, so we all agreed that a couple of group sessions on that subject would be suitable. Therefore, consulting strategies needed to stimulate the involvement of the parents in order to create a supportive environment for the athletes.

**General approach and rationale: theoretical background**

*S Self-Determination Theory. The consultation approach, the techniques and strategies involved in the intervention are underpinned by the philosophy and theorising of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and motivational interviewing (Rollnick & Miller, 1995; Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

SDT is a social-cognitive theory of motivation which proposes that all human behaviours lay along a continuum of autonomy. Central to this theory is the process of internalization, which can explain human motivation, development and psychological adaptation. Human behaviour is characterized by the degree to which its regulation has been internalized so that the person is engaged in it with a true sense of volition and choice. So, it is assumed that autonomously determined behaviours (one’s actions are undertaken with a full sense of choice and volition, being in line with the individual’s personal values and goals) are more likely to be maintained (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to the SDT the continuum of autonomy reflects the varying degree of self-determination. At one end of the motivation continuum there is a motivation, which is characterized by the lack of any personal causation, whereas, at the other end there is an intrinsic motivation, which is characterized by the highest level of autonomy. Between a motivation and intrinsic motivation, on the continuum of autonomy lay various forms of extrinsic motivation. The
Experiences of a Volunteer

forms of extrinsic motivation range from those that are externally controlled to those that are personally valued, autonomous.

At the more controlled end of the continuum are the behaviours determined by *external regulations* such as gaining rewards or avoiding punishments. On long term, external regulation is not beneficial, as the person will only be compliant when the controls are present and therefore will show poor performance quality, will invest minimal effort into the activity and lose interest quickly. A bit more autonomous is *introjected regulation*. In this case, the behaviour is motivated by self-esteem related contingencies, which are gradually internalized. Such contingencies could be avoiding disapproval or gaining externally referenced approval. Introjection reflects a partial internalization of a certain behaviour’s value. An individual who is introjected regarding a particular behaviour is likely to impose pressure on themselves to act in a certain way, experiencing feelings of disgrace and self-disparagement when failing to behave the desired way, and pride and self-approval when succeeding. However, this form of motivation is more likely to promote the maintenance of behaviour than external regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Koestner, Losier, Vallerand, & Carducci, 1996). A much more self-determined form of motivation is *identified regulation*. In this case, the action is motivated by personally held values such as learning new skills. The behaviour is important in achieving personally valued, desired outcomes. Thus, the valued outcomes provide an adequate incentive to overcome the difficulties in maintaining the behaviour. Therefore, it was proposed that identified regulation could be more relevant than intrinsic motivation for the maintenance of behaviours that are not necessarily interesting and enjoyable per se (Ryan, 1995; Vallerand, 2001). Finally, the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is *integrated regulation*. At this point, the person has identified with the regulation, incorporating it into the set of behaviours that satisfy psychological needs. So, integrated regulation represents a self-endorsed, stable and persistent form of motivation. Lastly, *intrinsic motivation* is the most self-determined type of motivation. A person is intrinsically motivated when they engage in an activity because it is enjoyable and exciting in its own right.

It is important to highlight that this theory provides a conceptual continuum concerning degrees of self-determination or volition. In other words, people do not necessarily have to follow a chronological pattern in internalizing behavioural regulation. More often, the acquisition of a new regulation varies depending on the social context and can be initiated anywhere along the continuum of autonomy. It is assumed that SDT both acknowledges the individual differences in motivational orientations and predicts the within-person variations in motivation, as a function of the social climate (Ryan & Deci, 2002).
SDT also specifies the conditions that foster and those that undermine autonomy and self-regulation. In order to obtain the more internally regulated forms of behaviour, there are three basic psychological needs that must be satisfied: autonomy—one feels free to exert choice and responsibility over one’s behaviour, competence—one feels capable of accomplishing the behaviours to reach a goal and relatedness—one has significant social relationships with others, feeling valued, understood and cared for by them. These three fundamental psychological needs constitute the basis for self-motivation and person integration (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The influence of the social environment on motivation is also considered by the SDT, so that the integration process can either be facilitated or hindered by the person’s social environment.

In line with this, there are three aspects of the motivationally facilitative environment that need to be considered: autonomy-support, structure and involvement. Autonomy-support largely refers to providing choice, encouraging the person to engage in behaviours for their own reasons, consistent with their personal values and goals by minimizing pressure (Markland, Ryan, Tobin & Rollnick, 2005). The structural dimension implies helping people to develop realistic goals and expectations in relation to their behaviour change, as well as providing them with positive feedback about the progress and encourage them to believe in their capabilities (Markland et al., 2005). Involvement refers to the extent to which people perceive significant others (e.g. parents, coaches, friends, medical staff) as being genuinely interested in them, their activities and well-being (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1991). Thus, when the context around offers support for satisfying the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, a person is expected to develop and maintain more self-determined motivation.

Having this said, there is a consistent body of research supporting the application and effectiveness of SDT interventions in a variety of environments (e.g., health, organizational, sport, education, parenting etc.) (e.g., Baumrind, 1991; Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007; Reeve, Bolt & Cai, 1999; Reeve, 2002; Silva et al., 2010 etc.). In sport settings, SDT has been studied mostly from the coach-athlete point of view, in most cases related to performance.

For example, there is evidence that the coach-athlete relationship is one of the most important influences on athletes’ motivation and subsequent enjoyment of their game and performance in sport (see Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). The motivational climate that the coach creates represents one of the many factors which impact on the coach-athlete relationship. Through closely working together, athletes and coaches eventually develop an interdependence between their affect, cognitions and behaviours (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009), as well as between their need to share knowledge and skill. In their relationship
Experiences of a Volunteer

with the athletes, coaches are in position of being influenced amongst others by the context, their self-perceptions of their abilities, motivation and perceptions of their athlete’s behaviour. The way in which they interact with their athletes reflects on the quality of training sessions, which can more or less directly affect satisfaction, motivation, enjoyment, interest and ultimately performance (e.g., Álvarez, Balaguer, Castillo & Duda, 2009; Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007; Lorimer & Jowett, 2009 etc.). As a consequence, their coaching behaviour may be more or less autonomy-supportive. In order to manage the climate related to the training setting and the interactions with the athletes, a coach must use his/her social skills. The interpersonal style that coaches use to foster their athletes’ autonomy was described by Mageau and Vallerand (2003) through seven behaviours:

• provide choice within specific rules and limits
• provide a rationale for tasks and limits
• acknowledge the other person’s feelings and perspectives
• provide athletes with opportunities for initiative taking and independent work
• provide non-controlling competence feedback
• avoid controlling behaviours (overt control, criticism and controlling statements, tangible rewards for interesting tasks)
• prevent ego-involvement in athletes

So, it has been proposed that coaches’ behaviour directly impacts on athletes’ basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, relatedness), influencing their motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Therefore, to achieve an optimal psychological functioning and good performance, athletes need to feel connected to their environment, competent and autonomous. What is more, to the extent to which athletes perceive that their coaches allow them to feel competent, connected with others and autonomous in their actions, they will experience higher levels of self-determination as their basic psychological needs will be satisfied. Altogether, studies show that autonomy-support does not only impact on perceived autonomy, but also on perceived competence and relatedness (see Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Being autonomy-supportive entails that athletes are encouraged to take initiative and make their own choices, while pressure and control are minimized. While doing so, coaches manage to convey to their athletes a message of trust in their abilities, influencing athletes’ perception of competence. Besides, in order to achieve this, coaches need to consider their athletes’ perspectives and feelings, behaviour that communicates their involvement, thus influencing athletes’ perceptions of relatedness. To conclude, the autonomy-supportive coaching style implies satisfaction of all three psychological needs, not only autonomy, as one might be tempted to think.
Motivational Interviewing. It was suggested that SDT can offer a theoretical framework for the change process that occurs in motivational interviewing (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick 2005; Miller & Rollnick, 2012; Vasteenkiste & Sheldon, 2006; Vansteenkiste, Williams, & Resnicow, 2012). Motivational interviewing can be defined as “a client-centred, directive method for enhancing intrinsic motivation to change by exploring and resolving ambivalence” (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p.25). Motivation was conceptualized by Miller as a state of readiness for change, which can fluctuate over time and can be influenced to change in a particular direction. Lack of motivation or the so-called resistance to change is seen as a state which is open to change, the main purpose of motivational interviewing being to facilitate behavioural change by helping clients to explore and resolve their ambivalence.

Thus, motivational interviewing could enhance self-motivated behaviour change by promoting the integration and internalization of a new behaviour so that it is more in accord with the person’s personal values, goals and sense of self (Markland et al., 2005). The process is facilitated by the spirit, principles and strategies of motivational interviewing which provides support for the competence needs, autonomy and relatedness (e.g. autonomy is supported by exploring behavioural options, avoiding confrontation, encouraging clients to choose their preferred strategies to take action, etc.).

The spirit of motivational interviewing ‘lies in understanding and experiencing the human nature that gives rise to that way of being’ (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p.34). According to Miller and Rollnick (2002), motivational interviewing is a way of being with people, characterized by collaboration, evocation and autonomy. The method of motivational interviewing involves collaboration between the client and the counsellor, the latter supporting the client in their actions, exploring together a variety of options regarding behaviour change. The desire for change and subsequent actions are drawn from within the person, whereas the responsibility for change is left with the client (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). In other words, the method of motivational interviewing promotes respect for the individual’s autonomy.

Underlying motivational interviewing there are four general principles: (a) express empathy, (b) develop discrepancy, (c) roll with resistance and (d) support self-efficacy (Miller, 1983). The principle of empathy is adequately represented by an attitude of acceptance and skilful reflective listening. As far as the second principle is concerned, the main goal of motivational interviewing is to identify and amplify, from the client’s perspective, the discrepancy between their goals and values and the present behaviour (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). From this point of view, it is arguable that motivational interviewing is a directive method.
toward the resolution of ambivalence in order to promote behaviour change. Rolling with resistance largely consists in returning the decisional process back to the person and actively involve them in problem solving. Self-efficacy is part of being responsible for the change and taking action, so assuming and showing the client that they are capable of deciding, directing and implementing the process of change is primordial (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Furthermore, the method of motivational interviewing is actually a method to trigger the change process and support its development.

More recently, it has been argued that the similarities between the spirit and principles underlying motivational interviewing and the social-environmental factors discussed in SDT in regards to the process of internalization are striking (Markland et al., 2005). An overview of this parallel is presented in Figure 1, suggesting a possible explanation for how motivational interviewing can foster self-determined behaviour by promoting the internalization and integration of a new behaviour regulation so that the degree of autonomy is higher. The process is supposed to be facilitated by both the spirit and strategies of motivational interviewing that create a climate that supports for the three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness. The need for competence is supported in motivational interviewing by providing structure to the ambient. In line with this, the counsellor helps the client to set appropriate goals, form realistic expectations and provide them with clear information and positive, non-judgemental feedback regarding their behaviour outcomes. Autonomy support underpins all the principals of motivational interviewing. Autonomy is promoted by providing choice, exploring different options with the client, taking the client’s perspective on how they feel about current discrepancies and how they would like to evolve, as well as avoiding argument and constraints. Finally, the authenticity of the counsellor and their genuine interest in the client’s persona facilitate the need for relatedness (Markland et al., 2005).

Central to the motivational interviewing method is the client’s change talk. Change talk represents the mechanism that promotes the behaviour change and involves anything the client has to say about their willingness to change, options, timing and steps to be taken in order to achieve the desired change (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). While referring to change talk, quality and amount must be considered, as patients could engage in change talk both in a controlled way or in a way that reflects autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2012).
Figure 1. Self-determination theory and motivational interviewing according to Markland et al., 2005.

Even though motivational interviewing and SDT have received a lot of attention in the literature and have been proved effective in their application especially in health-settings, there is still need for further evidence of their integration (see Deci & Ryan, 2012; Miller & Rollnick, 2012; Vansteenkiste, Williams, & Resnicow, 2012). However, central to both of the approaches towards human behaviour is autonomy and interventions should be delivered in an autonomy-supportive way. The point of this extensive overview of the self-determination theory and the method of motivational interviewing is to provide the reader with the core principles that underpinned the intervention in order to facilitate a better understanding of the case study.
How coaches learn to coach: fostering motivation for learning

Recent studies identified that there are mixed opinions of the formal coach-education programs from the coaches’ point of view (e.g., Irwin, Hanton & Kerwin, 2004; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004; Salmela, 1996). However, there was unanimity regarding the importance of learning through other opportunities such as playing experience, mentoring, discussions with other coaches etc. (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). Therefore, it has been suggested that interaction with others would benefit the development of the coaches through shared knowledge, experience, strategies, mutual observation and collaboration in problem-solving (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Others may include fellow coaches, managers, athletes, parents, friends and family, sport scientists etc. It was proposed that not only elite coaches could benefit from a collaboration with sport science specialists, but youth-coaches could also improve their coaching knowledge (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). Culver and Trudel (2006) suggested that a facilitator would foster behaviour change in coaches. The role of the facilitator could be played by a sport psychology consultant. Drawing from these findings, I tried to facilitate Lauren’s access to sport psychology knowledge and to support in her endeavours to develop as a coach.

Essential to the intervention approach was Lauren’s status as a gymnastics trainee coach. In line with this, sharing knowledge and working together towards her development in the role of the coach was vital. It was decided that complementing her formal coach-education program with some sport psychology specific knowledge (e.g., theoretical and practical underpinnings of the SDT, stress and anxiety in sports, goal-setting etc.) would be appropriate and helpful.

Debriefing in sports: building rapport and initiating reflective practice

The potential and benefits of debriefing in sport contexts were recently explored (McArdle, Martin, Lennon, Moore, 2010). Debriefing is regarded as a complex process which can impact on the learning process, motivation, confidence, emotional and cognitive recovery, as well as self-awareness (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Hogg, 1998, 2002; Milne, Shaw, & Steinweg, 1999). The findings suggested that there is a need for development of a greater awareness of the role of debriefing in sports, involving coaches, athletes and other sport-related practitioners. It was proposed that coaches may benefit from developing their own skills and reflective practice during the coach education programmes and, eventually, pass this set of skills to their athletes (McArdle, Martin, Lennon, Moore, 2010). Positive effects of debriefing on self-
referenced achievements and action planning was also reported in professional tennis (see Harwood, 2009).

During my collaboration with Lauren I used debriefing both to build and consolidate rapport as well as to initiate the reflection for change. After the first training I attended, a 15 minute period was employed in order to review the strategies applied during the session and to exchange perceptions regarding the general climate during practice. Later on, 15-20 minute debriefing sessions were scheduled after each training and/or competition in order to reflect on the event and monitor any relevant task accomplishment previously discussed (see Appendix 1). These brief discussions produced some of the strategies and activities used in the following meetings and trainings.

The reflective interview: raising self-awareness

Since the main goals of the intervention were set and a potential action plan emerged from the debriefing discussions, I decided to conduct a reflective interview with Lauren. This was meant to provide Lauren with the opportunity to recall and capture some of her experience as a coach, identify her needs, expectations, strengths and weaknesses. The session was designed to improve Lauren’s self-awareness in relation to her role as a coach and bring it closer to the climate she wanted to create during training. In line with the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and MI (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) principles, Lauren was encouraged to reflect on some topic areas that emerged from our discussions:

- best and worst training sessions during the past 3 months;
- challenges of the role (coach and manager of the club);
- well-being as a coach;
- motivational climate during training;
- reflections of the previous training week;
- factors that influence the training atmosphere;
- her mission and goals;
- the message she wanted to convey to the gymnasts and parents;
- lessons that she had learned about coaching so far;
- strategies that she felt were potentially effective.

During the session, Lauren was also invited to explore possible options of action in order to foster the debut of her change talk. The conversation with her served to emphasize the positive aspects of her work and identify the areas that needed further attention as well as to generate a couple of solutions.
Experiences of a Volunteer

By the end of the session we agreed that she needed to provide more structure to the training environment by being more consistent in choosing coaching strategies and ultimately in her behaviour towards the athletes. Together, we identified two key concepts that were perceived as having a great impact on the training sessions: control and freedom. The degree of control/freedom that Lauren employed offered structure to the training environment and also influenced athletes’ perception of their coach (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

In the educational setting it has been argued that establishing limits and guidelines provides children with the opportunity to competently interact with their environment (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). In order to feel competent, athletes need rules and guidelines which provide structure to their environment. Similarly, to feel connected with their environment and people who are part of it, they need to feel involved and supportive. Moreover, it has been shown that a highly permissive (Baumrind, 1991) interpersonal style of the coach, who allows total freedom to his/her athletes, thwarts competence and relatedness, and implicitly autonomy-support (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Since our main objective was working towards an autonomy-supportive coaching style, I discussed and explained to Lauren the rationale behind the work I suggested before actually putting it into practice.

As a consequence, we agreed upon a set of exercises that would be applied in order to gain a better understanding of the situation and eventually improve it. It was decided that Lauren would define the terms control and freedom and she would identify the strategies she employed to apply them to practice. She also considered important to observe the leader of the team of gymnasts and the team’s dynamics. For a better organization of the training sessions a new set of rules had to be proposed and implemented during the following week.

The goal of the reflective interview was to allow recent past experiences to rise to the conscious surface in order to increase self-awareness and provide raw material for the desire to change and possible future actions. This technique provided a rich source of information that I was able to use to design the following two sessions as well as individualized exercises for Lauren. What is more, by providing the coach with feedback and allowing her to choose from a variety of exercises I fostered support for her self-efficacy and autonomy.

**Listening support: dealing with ambivalence**

After the initial meeting and the reflective interview session, Lauren was still not showing strong willingness to actually work on her training skills and implement the scheme previously discussed. Thus, for the last two sessions of
our collaboration I decided to explore her resistance to change and potential barriers that might stop her in taking action. In order to achieve this, social support was offered during trainings and listening support was employed during the individual meetings.

During the reflective interview, Lauren emphasized the challenges of being a trainee coach and her needs as a coach. So, I decided that this theme would worth further exploration, as it could have been linked to Lauren’s ambivalence regarding her coaching behaviour. In line with this, I started the next meeting by inviting her to talk about her needs and expectations as a coach, as well as about her experience as a gymnast and her transition to coaching. What appeared to be paramount for her, both as an athlete and as a coach was well-being within the coaching environment (‘need to be appreciated, cared for and feel comfortable’). She later confessed that she was attempting to provide her athletes with ‘the well-being’ she could not have as an athlete herself, compensating for the lack of autonomy and support she experienced during her gymnastics career. From previous discussions I knew that Lauren, as an athlete, was emotionally and physically abused by her coach. What is more, she had never talked about the maltreatment she received as an elite child athlete, nor she attempted to seek professional help in order to deal with it.

Even though there are no empirical investigations of physical abuse experiences in the sport setting and very few studies on emotional abuse, long-term effects on athletes’ well-being have been questioned (David, 2005). Research on athletes’ experiences of emotional abuse in sport suggests that this type of experiences are related to athletes’ perception of performance and cultural obedience (Stirling & Kerr, 2007). Nonetheless, it was obvious that Lauren’s childhood experience of maltreatment influenced her coaching style. As a consequence, Lauren sometimes employed a very strict, autocratic behaviour pattern that she probably related with good performance, but at the same time she wanted to offer her athletes a safe, trustworthy training environment. There were still memories and ‘stuck’ feelings about her experience that needed further exploration in order for her to be able to move on and grow as a coach.

Therefore, the coaching style she experienced as a junior and the coaching style she was employing were exact opposites, creating confusion and behaviour inconsistency during practice. Trying to find a balance between the two, Lauren was alternating the autocratic with the laissez-fair styles, creating chaotic moments during training sessions. Lauren was sometimes using controlling motivational strategies (e.g., using rewards or a self-defending style of coaching), detrimental to the athletes’ autonomy. On other occasions she was extremely permissive with the gymnasts, giving them a sense of autonomy, but preventing
Experiences of a Volunteer

the athletes from experiencing competence and relatedness. Obviously, Lauren was migrating between two extreme coaching styles.

**Feedback: providing structure**

In order to support and accordingly adjust the intervention, feedback from both sides was essential during the entire process. Apart from the debriefing sessions we would have immediately after each training and competition, the need for more structured feedback emerged. As a consequence, Lauren and I agreed on dedicating 10-15 minutes at the end of each week to exchanging perceptions, opinions, suggestions regarding what was done during the past week. The majority of these discussions focused on the athletes’ behaviour during training and/or competition and what could have been done in order to improve the management of the class. Apart from this, I also provided the coach with written feedback in two occasions: at the beginning of our collaboration, after the initial needs assessment and observation of the first training session and at the end of the collaboration, concluding what has been done and incorporating a set of exercises for the coach.

Separately, during the individual meetings with the coach, that focused on her development, feedback was provided in relation to her behaviour as a coach and observed consequences on the training climate and her relationship with both the athletes and the parents. In this way, I helped Lauren become more aware of her role and impact as a coach.

**Ending the collaboration and follow-up: moving from knowledge to skill**

Considering the deadline of the contract and Lauren’s resistance to changing her behaviour and implementing the discussed strategies, I decided to dedicate a meeting to summarizing and analysing the sessions we had had so far. During the final session of our collaboration we concluded the work that had been done and I also suggested to Lauren that we could continue our individual meetings if she felt this decision would benefit her. As a consultant, I considered worthwhile exploring her ambivalence and eventually preparing her for the self-development process. However, Lauren decided to end the collaboration and following that session we only scheduled a follow-up meeting.

Evaluating the exact extent to which the intervention was successful or not is difficult because there are several factors which might have contributed to its (non)effectiveness. In other words, its partial effectiveness could be justified by positive effects associated with some of the techniques used, with the social
support that was offered, with the structure of the intervention itself or the role’s negotiation and working alliance. However, some of the goals (e.g., a more structured setting and atmosphere of the training sessions, discrepancies between needs, expectations and actual skills) were reached and the coach’s change talk was initiated.

During the follow-up meeting, Lauren reported to have become more involved into her relationship with the parents. She organised meetings with them once a fortnight and also developed some educational material regarding gymnastics which she edited and spread among the group. She also seemed to have slightly improved the training climate by introducing a new set of rules. However, she confessed the chaotic moments were still present during training sessions. I also noted the persistence of behavioural ambivalence towards the athletes from her comments and the way she related to past events in competition or recent training sessions. So, apart from showing some general improvement, the coach still reported a sense of concern regarding her role and her future plans. To conclude, another follow-up meeting would be appropriate in order to acquire knowledge regarding the clients’ evolution and maintenance. Even though, by the end of the collaboration the coach did not gain the necessary skills to solve her ambivalence by herself, maintenance and slight improvement in relationships and structure within the club and the training sessions would be expected. At the end of the collaboration, Lauren possessed some specific knowledge that could help her develop an autonomy-supportive climate within the gymnastics setting and the athletic team, but partially developed the specific skills needed to implement the knowledge.

Reflective practice

The experience of working within such a complex sport setting provided me with valuable reflections for my future practice and professional development. For a better understanding, I structured my reflections grouping them under five themes: (a) personable, (b) provider of a good practical service, (c) good communicator, (d) knowledge and experience in sport psychology and (e) professional skills (according to Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004 examination of the effective applied sport psychologist). The first theme refers to how reflections on my own experience improved my ability to develop a working alliance with the client. Providing a good practical service translates into the provision of individualized support and the ability to adapt in practice in order to meet the client’s needs. The application of the communication and active listening skills, as well as asking meaningful questions and discussing with the client indicate the degree to which one is regarded as a good communicator. Anderson, Miles, Robinson, and Mahoney (2004) emphasized the importance of being knowledgeable and
experienced in delivering sport psychology services. In line with this, I focused on two main characteristics that fall under the umbrella theme of knowledge: the ability to apply theory to practice and employ a holistic approach to service delivery. Lastly, reflecting on my skills outlines the importance of demonstrating professional skills to gain understanding of the client and her situation. The following sections outline my overall development and what I have practically learned from the particular experience described in this case study.

**Personable**

The work described in this paper represents the second major sport psychology service I delivered in a sport context. Even though I had some experience of working within a team of professionals in a sport setting, delivering sport psychology consultancy to a sports club was new to me. Moreover, focusing the service delivery on the coach was a first. Not to mention that the collaboration with the gymnastics club emerged on a voluntary basis at a time when I was eager to be involved in applied sport psychology work. So, during the first two meetings with Lauren I was pretty excited for the challenge to come and very aware of the fact that I had to make a good impression from the start. At that moment I found it very hard to control my level of eagerness and drive for putting into practice the knowledge I had gained through my masters degree. My partial lack of control during the first sessions negatively impacted the intervention, as I was not capable to adjust my pace to Lauren’s pace. However, we addressed this issue later on, but unfortunately for this collaboration it was too late.

Since it was not the very first time I was offering sport psychology consultancy, I was fully aware of the importance of building rapport with the client, establishing boundaries and negotiating roles from the very first session, as well as reflecting from the beginning. During the very first meeting with Lauren I presented her what I could offer and how the club would benefit from our collaboration. I was also keen to establish the time frame for the collaboration and the role of each party. In line with this, apart from the oral agreement, we also signed a written agreement, which detailed the parties’ rights and responsibilities (see Appendix 4). However, during the second individual meeting I felt that the coach was expecting a more directive attitude from me. I, then, discussed with her the situation and reminded her that my role is not to fix her issues and prescribe solutions to her problems, but to support her in finding her own solutions and implementing them. It was also agreed that she is responsible for the change and that she has all the answers to her questions. My presence, asking the right questions and the intervention we would design together would facilitate the change in her behaviour together with her active
involvement in the process. Apparently, after this discussion role responsibilities and boundaries were clearer for both of us. During the following sessions I still felt that I had not developed such a good working alliance as I could have and I still struggled to adjust to the client’s own pace, as I rushed a bit into the relationship.

After a feedback session with a fellow sport psychologist who acted as my supervisor for this case, I decided to openly discuss the issue with Lauren and together decide how to continue our work. Reflecting on my consultancy allowed me to understand that the client’s needs are a priority regardless any clash between the practitioner’s philosophy and the techniques required by a specific situation. I understood that I should not try too hard and let the client find his/her own rhythm towards change.

**Provider of a good practical service**

Although I was pretty much aware of the importance of reflecting on my relationship with the client in order to gain a better understanding of the situation and improve our working alliance, I did not do it immediately. Because of my over-confident attitude and the time pressure, I rushed into starting working before fully developing an adequate rapport for the proposed intervention. I also felt pressured to find a balance between the problem-focused approach that Lauren demanded and the client-focused approach which was in line with my holistic professional philosophy (to be detailed later). As a consequence, during the third meeting I felt anxious and preoccupied about how directive I should be in order to meet the client’s needs and also stick to the client-centred approach. Even though my non-judgemental and client-centred attitude helped Lauren open up and feel secure in my presence, she was systematically seeking concrete advice from me and expressed her disappointment regarding my behaviour of not doing so. Realizing that I needed to better balance the relationship with the client and the fact that I did not know exactly what to do frustrated me even more. At this point I knew I had to deal with my frustration, take a step back and re-evaluate the best way to implement the client-centred approach and deal with the client’s needs.

**Good communicator**

Despite the initial rhythm discrepancy between Lauren and myself, the design of the intervention was tailored to her needs, all of the exercises and techniques being based on her requests and agreed on before implementation. What is more, the fact that she expressed her dissatisfaction and disappointment regarding some of my behaviours and attitudes (e.g., not giving advice, not
Experiences of a Volunteer

telling her exactly what to do) is an indicator of a good relationship with the
client. As far as communication is concerned, there was a session when I tried
to seek too in depth information from the client when she was not ready yet.
As a consequence, I might have been perceived a little aggressive. However, on
the background of an authentic relationship, Lauren reacted immediately and
told me she was not feeling comfortable talking about certain issues. On a more
positive note, listening to feedback and giving feedback enabled the client to
better relate to the service delivery and collaborate in an effective manner.

Knowledge and experience in sport psychology

My work with Lauren implied two levels of development: 1. educate her
regarding sport psychology, teach her how to integrate sport psychology concepts
into the training context and 2. facilitate change in order for her to grow and
develop as a coach. From a theoretical point of view, in order to accomplish this,
I had to make myself more familiar with the application of the SDT, motivational
interviewing and their implementation when working with coaches. As I kept
reading and thinking of how to design my sessions as effectively as possible,
I noticed I became more confident and obviously more knowledgeable about
what I was doing. However, in this case I feel that the theory was not an issue, but
its implementation. In other words, at times I was probably concentrating too
much on what I was doing, missing some of the points of the client. According
to the research, I might have been in the conscious incompetence phase of
learning which implies that the practitioner becomes aware of the required skills
in effective practice, but at the same time demonstrates deficiency in this area
(Howell & Fleishman, 1982). Consequently, the intervention had visible positive
effects regarding the coach’s sport psychology theoretical knowledge, but not
necessarily in the skills’ area as well. Lauren did not develop new skills because in
order to do so, there is a need for a deeper exploration of the self and motivation
for change, which require a longer collaboration.

As I mentioned before, my approach to sport psychology is a holistic one
and I usually guide my service delivery on its principles. There are 3 central
perspectives underpinning the practice of holistic psychology:

- Non-sport environments may affect athletic/coaching performance.
- Developing the core of who the athlete/coach is as a person facilitates
good athletic/coaching performance.
- All human beings function on four dimensions (behaviour, mind,
emotions, physiology) and behaviour change involves appreciation for
how all these dimensions interact and affect each other.
One of the core values of the holistic approach is authenticity, which means being genuine, ‘who’ and ‘what’ one is as a person. Being authentic does not imply lack of professionalism, but implies being honest to the athletes and being able to share thoughts and opinions openly.

In regards to my sport psychology approach, I think I managed to implement it overall and stick to its principles, although at times it felt like I was trying too hard. Indeed, reflecting on my applied work rose awareness concerning the implementation of one’s professional philosophy in a real-life setting. That is how I realized that no matter how hard one tries to properly apply the theory to practice, there are situations when the client might need a slightly different approach and in this case, the sport consultant has to play the appropriate role. In this particular situation, I think a more problem-centred approach rather than a client-centred one would have benefitted my client more.

Professional Skills

As I have never worked with a gymnastics coach before, not delivering sport psychology consultancy to the coach at least, this has been a great opportunity for me to use the professional skills I already possessed, as well as develop new ones. I am grateful I was forced to get out of my comfort zone and push myself to improve in a real-practice experience. I became more self-aware of my professional skills (e.g., positive attitude, willing to learn, active listening, being supportive, approachable, being empathic) and my limitations (e.g., negotiating roles, establishing boundaries, alternating roles). All in all, the take home lesson is that I should pay more attention to how I need to adjust in order to stick to my professional principles and fulfil the needs of the client, at the same time.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Romanian National Institute for Sport Research (INCS) for this opportunity. Also, many thanks to Ioana, Simina and Denisa for their support.
Experiences of a Volunteer

References


Experiences of a Volunteer


Appendix 1
Overview of coach support and intervention

First contact (6th March)

• Negotiate the collaboration

1. Training+ first individual meeting: building rapport (21st March)

• Debriefing
• Semi-structured interview
• Feedback
• Needs assessment

2. Preparing for the nationals: doubts and psyching up (29th March)

• Listening support (control vs. freedom)
• Feedback
• Action plan for the nationals

3. Goals and expectations: discussing change (2nd April)

• Reflective interview

4. Monitoring: dealing with ambivalence (20th April)

• Feedback
• Listening support

5. Follow-up (1st May)

• Final feedback
• Report and recommendations
Appendix 2

Overall intervention schedule (coach and athletes)

Training: first meeting with the athletes and parents (10\textsuperscript{th} March)
  - Initial meeting + needs assessment

Training: discussion + intervention goals (11\textsuperscript{th} March)
  - Setting the goals of the intervention

Training: building rapport (18\textsuperscript{th}, 21\textsuperscript{st} March)
  - Thematic game with the athletes
  - First individual meeting with the coach → semi-structured interview

Official rehearsal for the nationals (24\textsuperscript{th} March)
  - Social support + discussion of the event

Individual time (28\textsuperscript{th}, 29\textsuperscript{th} March)
  - Drawing and modelling sessions with the athletes
  - Assess importance and confidence regarding coaching → control vs. freedom

Training: team building (31\textsuperscript{st} March, 2\textsuperscript{nd} April)
  - Team games with coach and athletes → dealing with worry and fear
  - Discuss change and expectations with the coach + monitor the coach

National Championship (6\textsuperscript{th}, 7\textsuperscript{th} April)
  - Social support + debriefing

Follow up meeting (20\textsuperscript{th} April)
  - Evaluation of the collaboration with the coach → dealing with resistance and ambivalence
Training: final meeting with the athletes and their parents (29th April)

- Evaluation of the consultant

Final meeting with the coach (1st May)

- Evaluation of the intervention and of the consultant + feedback + recommendations
Appendix 3

Semi-structured interview guideline

So, tell me a bit about yourself!

For how long have you been coaching? Do you do it for a living or just part-time?

Do you like it?

Do you have any other job?

For how long have you been involved in gymnastics? What made you choose rhythmic gymnastics?

What was the cause of your retirement?

Can you tell me a bit more about your worst and best experiences in competition?

How did you come up with the idea of a club? What are your expectations and future plans?

Can you talk a little about your relationship with your family?

What are your expectations regarding your athletes?

What are your expectations regarding our collaboration?

What are your objectives in relation to this collaboration?

Is there anything in particular that you would like to work on? Can you give me more details? What does it mean to you? In what way would you like to improve?
What do you think about sport psychology? Do you have any knowledge in the area?

Do you use mental skills? Do you have any preference?

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