

## Ethical dilemmas in sport and exercise psychology practice

Dr Claire Rossato, Kate Green, Dr Paul Gorczynski and Dr Emma Kavanagh share experiences and reflections as practitioners in Sport and Exercise Psychology.

### **Introduction**

As Sport and Exercise Psychologists we often are presented with many ethical issues. This article is derived from candidates currently undertaking SEPAR as part of a peer supervision group, with the purpose of sharing experiences. The reflections below are provided by professionals working in the field and highlight some pertinent experiences for us as practitioners to reflect upon.

### **Reflection one**

My organisation was funding in house counselling for an athlete that I worked closely with, yet it was not felt this could be relevant information to guide my work with him, the process of putting the athlete first was lost in my opinion. The athlete subsequently came to me confused about the work he was doing with another practitioner and feeling torn as to who he should be working with. His referral to see a counsellor had been mandatorily put on him by the organisation rather than being a self-elected choice. We decided to reach out to the other practitioner and work collaboratively (as requested by the athlete).

The experience created deep personal reflection on how I had presented myself and my role within the environment, which in turn triggered some challenging conversations in order to support staff to understand how well-being/welfare and psychology is not owned by any one person. Athlete support works most effectively when led by what is best for the athlete; open communication and trust between staff can facilitate this. No room for egos!

### **Reflection two**

In our careers, especially as practitioners, we face many ethical challenges. These challenges present us with many opportunities to better understand our practice, how we operate within our professional boundaries, and how we can provide care to individuals in the best possible way. Ethical challenges also provide us with an opportunity to better understand the way we work with and understand people. One of my greatest learning moments in my career came from an encounter with a clinician while working at a psychiatric hospital in Toronto, Canada. I was conducting field work, as part of a qualitative study, while working to better understand the built and social environment and how it impacted physical care services. It was during this field work where I learned about the importance of language. How we talk about mental health, the words we use, and how we frame the lived experiences of clients matters. These words shape our attitudes, and ultimately our behaviours. In a sense, our words shape how we treat people. So, be mindful of your language as it may result in how you view and treat others.

### **Reflection three**

Working full-time as an embedded performance psychology practitioner at one organisation can provide daily ethical dilemmas. I was working with a 17-year-old who had numerous adverse childhood experiences who was ambivalent to seeking help, and slowly became withdrawn and removed from online interactions during the pandemic. After signposting that parents would be contacted, the player reached out for confidential support. Meanwhile staff wanted disciplinary action to take place with the player for what they perceived as non-attendance, non-adherence and disrespect. I needed to consider various ethical guidelines without the need for parental permission or knowledge, in order to develop an intervention plan. The individual needs were met through the relationship (trust and confidentiality), agreed support, clinical referral, and permission for some of the information being shared with a wider multidisciplinary team. The system gained a greater understanding of the case formulation with support needs as well as disciplinary factors accounted for, agreeing clarity on next steps with a plan for re-integration of the player, and review of progress by staff and player.

### **Reflection four**

When working in sporting spaces, I can recount times when I would hear discriminatory language on a field, in a changing room, during a match, “That’s so gay, you play like a girl,” and other examples I’m not willing to repeat. All statements that I have heard many times leave me with a choice: to ignore it (often through fear of rocking the boat) or to address it. I had a turning point when I was involved in a project highlighting the difficulties that youth LGBT+ individuals face when engaging in sporting spaces. This gave me the push to choose not to ignore it. I have tried to address discriminatory language since this time, adopting a performance focused and educational lens. Such discussions can provide the opportunity to consider the power of language and the importance of the words we chose to use and the messages they send to those around us. The ISSP ethics statement (2020) reminds us that, as practitioners, our actions are based on the principle of social justice and responsibility, and we should understand the consequences of discrimination and work hard to foster spaces that protect the clients’ welfare and respect their rights. It might not be the popular choice but I will always try to tackle these issues head on where appropriate, but it isn’t always the easy road to follow.

### **Summary**

Collectively, these reflections describe situations we may experience as practitioners in Sport and Exercise Psychology, highlighting the diversity and complexity of our roles. We should look to share practice and share our experiences to highlight we are not alone with the dilemmas we may face.

### **Reference**

Quartioli, A. et al. (2020). The International Society of Sport Psychology Registry (ISSP-R) Ethical code for Sport Psychology Practice. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1789317>

Dr Claire Rossato

Claire is a Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society, BASES accredited sport and exercise scientist and Programme Director of the MSc in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Greenwich.

Kate Green

Kate is an applied practitioner in Personal Development and Performance psychology, having worked across Elite, Professional, Olympic, Paralympic, and International sport for the last 18 years. Her research and interest areas focus on well-being underpinning performance.

Dr Paul Gorczynski

Paul is a Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society and a Senior Lecturer of Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Portsmouth.

Dr Emma Kavanagh

Emma is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Psychology and Coaching Sciences at Bournemouth University. She is a BASES accredited sport and exercise scientist involved in research broadly on the topic of athlete welfare.