Assessing the Skills of Sport Psychology Supervisors

Mark B. Andersen
Victoria University of Technology

Judy L. Van Raalte and Britton W. Brewer
Springfield College

To assess the supervisory skills of sport psychologists who are training future practitioners, the Sport Psychology Supervisory Skills Inventory (SPSSI) was mailed to 201 potential applied sport psychology supervisors. Supervisors were associated with graduate programs that offered applied sport psychology practica and/or internships, as identified in the Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology (Sachs, Burke, & Salitsky, 1992). Supervisors rated themselves on 41 supervisory skills. The SPSSI was also mailed to 416 student members of AAASP, who were asked to rate their supervisors. There was a 35% return rate from supervisors and a 45% return rate from students. The findings suggest that supervised experience with athletes is limited for both supervisors and graduate students.

In virtually all human services fields, supervision of students and interns in applied settings is a crucial part of training. In many cases, supervision of services performed while in training is required to complete degrees or certifications (e.g., counseling psychology, teacher certification). Supervision’s central role in the training of new practitioners in applied sport psychology has been recognized by both the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP, 1991) and the British Association of Sports Sciences (BASS; Biddle, Bull, & Seheult, 1992).

There are three major reasons why supervision is a key issue for applied sport psychology. First, supervision can be a main vehicle for quality control of services to athletes and the general public. For example, discussing athlete cases with a competent supervisor may help the trainee or practitioner better formulate

Mark B. Andersen is with the Physical Education Department at Victoria University of Technology, Footscray Campus, Melbourne 3000, Australia. Judy L. Van Raalte and Britton Brewer are with the Department of Psychology at Springfield College, Springfield, MA 01109.
the case and gain new insights on how to proceed. Second, supervision can be a place for practitioners and trainees to hone skills, receive feedback, and grow as professionals. Trainees can practice sport psychology techniques in supervision and can benefit from close supervision. Skilled practitioners may use supervision when they are adding new techniques to their repertoire (e.g., hypnosis). Third, supervision can be a forum for training in ethical behavior. Using "what if?" scenarios can enhance discussion of ethical issues that emerge from athlete cases. For example, asking, "What if you found out that your client was using steroids and was sharing the needles?" gives the trainee a chance to do ethical problem solving (see Andersen, in press).

Supervision of applied sport psychology service should cover a wide variety of concerns, such as ethical (e.g., confidentiality, public statements), interpersonal (e.g., athlete-trainee and supervisor-supervisee relationships), intrapersonal (e.g., trainee personality, style, and needs), technique (e.g., relaxation induction, guided imagery), and organizational (e.g., dealing with athletic administrations, university policies) issues (Van Raalte & Andersen, 1993b). Thus, supervision requires a broad range of skills and knowledge in order to help trainees become competent practitioners. The question, which currently has no answer, is whether the supervision that is occurring in applied sport psychology today is extensive enough, consistent enough, and of sufficient quality to meet the needs of trainees working in a very complex field.

Although several conference presentations have emphasized the importance of supervision (Carr, Murphy, & McCann, 1992; Van Raalte & Andersen, 1993a, 1993b), the only empirical work that has addressed supervision in applied sport psychology is a portion of an ethics survey distributed by AAASP (Petitpas, Brewer, Rivera, Van Raalte, & Whelan, 1993). Of the 165 AAASP members who completed the survey, only 10 (6%) reported that they had received any formal training in supervision related to sport psychology or counseling.

Assessment of supervisory skills in the counseling and clinical literature has a substantial history (e.g., Dendinger & Kohn, 1989; Sleight, 1984, 1990; Worthington & Roehlke, 1979), and it is to this literature that applied sport psychology might turn when developing research designed to reveal the state of supervision in our field. Several instruments have been developed to assess supervisory skills in a variety of settings (e.g., Lafferty, 1982; Sleight, 1984, 1990; Worthington & Roehlke, 1979). The Supervisory Evaluation Form, developed by Sleight (1984, 1990) seems to best address the issues relevant for assessing applied sport psychology supervision.

The purposes of the present study were (a) to determine the amount of supervision and practicum experience occurring in applied sport psychology programs, (b) to assess the background and training of those doing supervision, (c) to find out how supervisors perceive their own supervisory skills, and (d) to compare those perceptions to how graduate students perceive their supervisors. In the counseling psychology literature on assessing supervisory skills, there appears to be a tendency for supervisors to rate their skills more favorably than their supervisees rate them (e.g., Krause & Allen, 1988; Sleight, 1984, 1990). This study sought to determine if this trend also occurred in applied sport psychology.
Method

Subjects

The Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology (Sachs, Burke, & Salitsky, 1992) served as the source for supervisor subjects. Of the 104 graduate programs listed in the main section of the directory, 79 offered applied internships (internship, as used in the Directory, could mean any supervised applied work from a practicum to a complete internship). An attempt was made to contact every faculty member listed for those 79 programs (n = 203). In addition, 4 sport psychology practitioners (AAASP members) associated with nationally known sport psychology internships (nonacademically based) were contacted for a total of 207 potential supervisor subjects. Six faculty members were no longer at the institutions listed in the Directory and contact was not possible. Thus, the total number of potential supervisors mailed materials was 201. Also, all student members of AAASP (n = 416) were contacted and asked to rate their supervisors.

Inventory

The Sport Psychology Supervisory Skills Inventory (SPSSI) was adapted from the Supervisory Evaluation Form (SEF; Sleight, 1984, 1990). The SEF was developed from forms commonly used in supervision research. The SEF was first used and adapted in clinics at The Pennsylvania State University. See Sleight (1984) for the details of making the SEF a valid instrument for supervision research.

The SPSSI is a 41-item inventory that covers five major domains of supervisory behaviors: (a) providing information and technical support, (b) fulfilling supervisory responsibilities, (c) facilitating interpersonal communication, (d) fostering student autonomy, and (e) providing a professional model. A few items from the original SEF were deleted due to lack of relevance to applied sport psychology training (e.g., “Returned lesson plans within reasonable time”) and several items were modified slightly to address sport psychology supervision specifically (e.g., “Conveys understanding of clinical supervisor’s role to student” was changed to “Conveys understanding of the sport psychology supervisor’s role to the students”). A panel of five doctoral level experts in psychology and sport psychology deemed all remaining items appropriate for assessing supervisory skills in applied sport psychology. Supervisors and supervisees rated each item on a 5-point scale, where 1 = unsatisfactory, 2 = marginally satisfactory, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = very satisfactory, and 5 = outstanding. A not applicable choice was also available for each item.

Two forms of the SPSSI were developed, one for supervisors and one for supervisees. The only difference between the two forms was the instructions. The form for supervisors instructed subjects to rate themselves on each item. The form for graduate students asked subjects to rate their supervisors on each item. The complete inventory is presented in the Appendix.

Along with the SPSSI, subjects indicated on a demographic form their age, sex, current department, terminal degree, major field, total contact hours with athletes/clients, and hours per month in supervision. These items differed slightly for graduate students and supervisors (see Results section).
Procedures

A packet containing a supervisor cover letter and a supervisor SPSSI was mailed to each of the individuals identified in the Directory and to the 4 other supervisors \((n = 207)\). Stamped return envelopes accompanied all SPSSIs. Six packets were returned unopened due to the individual having left that institution. There was also a separate mailing to all the student members of AAASP \((n = 416)\) that included a student cover letter, a student SPSSI, and a stamped return envelope. If the potential supervisor had not supervised in the past 5 years or if the student had not taken a practicum or internship in applied sport psychology, the instructions were to indicate that fact on the survey and return it to the investigators.

Results

The return rate for supervisors was 35\% \((n = 71)\). The return rate for students was 45\% \((n = 187)\). Of those potential supervisors returning the survey, 48\% \((n = 34)\) had served as supervisors in the past 5 years. For students, 50\% \((n = 94)\) responded that they had participated in a practicum or internship in sport psychology. All descriptive statistics and analyses were performed only on those subjects who had participated in supervision.

Two different types of analyses were conducted. First, students’ ratings in the five domains of supervision were compared to supervisor self-ratings. Second, the variability (i.e., standard deviations) of students’ and supervisors’ responses on the SPSSI were compared. This sort of analysis is quite common in motor learning research in which one is interested not only in performance but also in the consistency of that performance (see Healey & Landers, 1973). In the present case, the interest was not only in mean differences between groups but also in whether students’ ratings were more, or less, variable than supervisors’ ratings. Originally, \(t\) tests for independent samples were planned, but after observing the large difference in standard deviations for students versus supervisors, it appeared that there might be heterogeneity of variance. Consequently, a nonparametric version of the \(t\) test (i.e., Mann-Whitney \(U\) test) was used to test for differences between the groups.

Description of the Sample

Some of the following percentages may not add up to 100\%. This is due to “other” categories that were endorsed (e.g., “cognitive psychology” as a main area of study).

Supervisors. Supervisors were 74\% male \((n = 25)\) and 26\% female \((n = 9)\), currently from predominantly physical education/exercise science departments (70\% vs. 27\% from psychology departments), with doctoral degrees in physical education/exercise science (68\% vs. 32\% with psychology degrees), and having sport psychology as a main area of study (65\% vs. 27\% specializing in clinical/counseling psychology). Supervisors averaged 7.2 years \((SD = 5.1)\) supervising sport psychology graduate students and had themselves received 0.8 years \((SD = 1.3)\) of supervision of their own work with athletes.
For the supervisors with degrees in physical education/exercise science, 70% had never received any supervision of their work with athletes, 17% reported being licensed or certified psychologists, and 49% were AAASP certified. Of the supervisors with psychology degrees, 27% had never received any supervision of their work with athletes, 64% were licensed or certified psychologists, and 46% were AAASP certified. Supervisors had supervised an average of 16 students in their careers ($SD = 21$) and spent an average of 6.8 hours per month ($SD = 7.8$) in supervisory sessions with trainees. The average age of the supervisors was 43.1 years ($SD = 7.3$).

Supervisees. Supervisees were 52% female ($n = 49$) and 48% male ($n = 45$), and studied in either physical education/exercise science (59%), clinical/counseling psychology (23%), or educational psychology (13%) departments. Supervisees had sport psychology (73%), clinical/counseling psychology (21%), or educational psychology (4%) main areas of study. Their supervisors were primarily male (75%). Fifty-four percent of supervisees were pursuing terminal master’s degrees, and 46% were in doctoral programs. The students averaged 3.1 years ($SD = 1.9$) of graduate school completed and 1.3 years ($SD = 1.1$) of sport psychology internships/practica. The students averaged 197 total contact hours ($SD = 258$) with clients and 5.6 hours per month ($SD = 6.1$) in supervisory sessions. The students’ average age was 29 years ($SD = 5.2$).

SPSSI

Each subject received an averaged composite score for each of the sections of the SPSSI and an overall rating score (i.e., Item 41). Means and standard deviations for the SPSSI composite scores are presented in Table 1. The inventory showed good internal consistency, with all alphas greater than .89 for the subscales. Contrary to the hypothesis that supervisors would rate themselves more favorably than supervisees would rate them, none of the Mann-Whitney $U$ tests comparing supervisors and supervisees on the composites or overall scores on the SPSSI were significant.

The variability in students’ composite score ratings of their supervisors ($SD$s ranged from 0.83 to 1.32) was substantially greater than supervisors’

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SPSSI Scores</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
<th></th>
<th>Supervisees</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing information</td>
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<td>0.54</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.95</td>
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<td>0.65</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate communication</td>
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<td>0.53</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster autonomy</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
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<td>Professional model</td>
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<td>0.50</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall rating</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.69</td>
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self-ratings for most of the subscales (SDs ranged from 0.50 to 0.69). A U test on standard deviations for the 41 SPSSI items revealed significantly more variability in student responses, $Z = 6.95$, $p < .0001$. For supervisees rating their supervisors, Items 11 through 18 (all in the Fulfilling Supervisory Responsibilities section), Item 27 ("Encourages student feedback"), and Item 41 ("Overall rating") had the greatest variability (i.e., $SDs > 1.25$, indicating very low consensus).

**Discussion**

The return rates for the SPSSI were acceptable (Babbie, 1979) and previous studies with sport psychologists and AAASP members have had similar return rates (e.g., Butki & Andersen, 1994; Van Raalte, Brewer, Brewer, & Linder, 1993). There were a few surprises in the demographic and historical data. Probably the most striking result was that 56% of all supervisors had never received any supervision of their work with athletes. To enhance the quality of sport psychology supervision, it may be helpful for supervisors to have some experience as a supervisee and some additional training in the process of supervision itself.

In terms of applied experience, students averaged 1.3 years of practicum/internship experience and 197 contact hours with athletes. These numbers should be interpreted with caution because the data are positively skewed (skewness = 1.89). That is, a few subjects were in the 800–1,000 hour range, but 53% of the students had 100 or fewer supervised contact hours with athletes. In comparison to other fields, athletic trainers are required to have at least 1,500 supervised contact hours before they can become certified (National Athletic Trainers Association, Inc., Board of Certification, 1990). Depending on the state licensing board, a counseling or clinical psychologist needs between 2,000 and 4,000 supervised contact hours. The United States Olympic Committee requires 800 contact hours for sport psychologists to be placed on their registry (United States Olympic Committee, 1983). AAASP certification requires that one have supervised experience, but no certain number of hours is indicated (AAASP, 1991). Establishing a minimum number of supervised contact hours to become a competent sport psychologist is needed. AAASP is in the process of examining this central training issue for applied sport psychology.

The greatest variability of responses to the SPSSI items for supervisees came in the section Fulfilling Supervisory Responsibilities. While all sections of the SPSSI are important, this section gets at the essence of what a supervisor does (e.g., stays up to date on cases, helps the student with strengths and weaknesses, provides sufficient time for supervision, and evaluates the supervisee). Although there were no significant differences in mean ratings, the large standard deviations and the lack of student consensus on the items may indicate that although many supervisors are perceived as being good or outstanding, a substantial number are perceived as performing much more poorly in central supervisory responsibilities.

The good news, however, is that the majority of supervisees believe they receive adequate supervision. The results of the SPSSI also indicate that supervisors are satisfied with the quality of the supervision they provide. Further, supervisors' perceptions of themselves did not differ from the perceptions of their
supervisees. These apparently positive results should also receive cautious interpretation. Satisfaction with what appears to be quite minimal supervision and practicum experience may be based on ignorance of what constitutes reasonably adequate supervision and practicum standards.

What might supervisors in sport psychology do to gain more experience in supervision and improve the quality of their own supervision of trainees? A first suggestion would be for supervisors to ask to audit graduate classes in supervision. Though not available at all schools, many clinical and counseling doctoral programs offer complete courses dedicated to supervisory skills, theories, models, and research. Much in those courses would apply directly to the supervision of sport psychology services. Also, this is an area in which cooperation between exercise science and psychology departments could allow exercise science graduate students access to clinical and counseling graduate courses in supervision.

Organizations such as AAASP and Division 47 of APA could offer continuing education workshops in supervision during or right before their annual conferences. Recently, AAASP has taken up the issue of supervision as it relates to certification. The certification committee is beginning to consider setting more explicit standards for supervised experience (C. Oglesby, personal communication, January 19, 1994). Finally, more empirical examinations seem warranted. This study is the first data-based research on supervision to appear in the sport psychology literature.

Supervision is a new area for inquiry in applied sport psychology and deserves further attention. This study was primarily exploratory and does have some weaknesses. First, it is a "snapshot" approach. Supervision and supervisory relationships are dynamic and undoubtedly change over time. Future research might take a smaller sample of supervisors and supervisees and follow them for a year or two, assessing skills and development several times during the study. Second, there was no way to connect students to supervisors. Students' views and supervisors' views were assessed independently and anonymously to reduce reporting biases. The anonymous response format made it impossible to compare responses of specific students to those of their supervisors. A longitudinal study, as mentioned above, could be designed so that all supervisees would rate specific supervisors.

It is hoped this study will provide impetus for future examination of one of the most important things applied sport psychologists do: train future sport psychologists. Supervision experience and practicum experience in applied sport psychology could benefit from more extensive guidelines, especially if program accreditation becomes a serious issue. Further inquiry may help present and future sport psychologists decide what is necessary and adequate supervision for training and practice. Raising the quality and extent of supervision experiences can only help improve the services that sport psychologists provide to their clients.

References


Appendix

Sport Psychology Supervisory Skills Inventory

For the following sections evaluate yourself on each of the items by circling the number which best represents your opinion of yourself. Circle NA only if the item is in no way applicable to you or your supervisory services, otherwise use a 5-point scale in which 1 = unsatisfactory, 2 = marginally satisfactory, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = very satisfactory, and 5 = outstanding.

Providing Information and Technical Support

1. Conveys practicum requirements to the students. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
2. Conveys understanding of the sport psychology supervisor’s role to the students. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
3. Provides information to supplement the students’ theoretical knowledge. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
4. Communicates knowledge effectively. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
5. Suggests appropriate outside reading material. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
6. Demonstrates sufficient sport psychology expertise with the presenting concerns of athletes. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
7. Provides direct suggestions for interventions when needed or requested. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
8. Demonstrates intervention techniques when needed or requested. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
9. Provides guidance in implementing diagnostic procedures. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
10. Provides guidance for maintaining records and report writing tasks. 1 2 3 4 5 NA

Fulfilling Supervisory Responsibilities

11. Remains up-to-date regarding graduate students’ ongoing cases. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
12. Provides adequate amount of direct supervision. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
13. Conveys opinions regarding graduate students’ specific consulting/counseling strengths. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
14. Conveys opinions regarding graduate students’ specific consulting/counseling weaknesses. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
15. Suggests ways for students to improve areas of weakness. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
16. Appropriately confronts students for not fulfilling practicum/internship requirements. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
17. Provides opportunities for sufficient number of supervisory conferences. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
18. Provides comprehensive supervisory evaluations periodically. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
19. Evaluates students’ performance fairly. 1 2 3 4 5 NA

Facilitating Interpersonal Communication

20. Encourages students’ expression of feelings and opinions relevant to their development as sport psychologists/counselors. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
21. Listens attentively to students. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
22. Demonstrates empathy and respect toward students. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
23. Communicates at a level consistent with the students' professional development. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
24. Maintains emotional stability during supervisory encounters. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
25. Exhibits an appropriate sense of humor. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
26. Allows the students sufficient opportunity to interact during the supervisory conferences. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
27. Encourages student feedback concerning the supervisory process. 1 2 3 4 5 NA

Fostering Student Autonomy
28. Remains receptive to student ideas concerning intervention strategies. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
29. Shows flexibility in permitting a variety of valid procedures for psychological intervention. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
30. Motivates the students to develop consulting and/or counseling skills. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
31. Encourages the students' self appraisals of their consulting and/or counseling skills. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
32. Encourages students to become increasingly more independent and autonomous professionals. 1 2 3 4 5 NA

Providing Professional Model
33. Maintains an appropriate ethical responsibility to the athletes served. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
34. Maintains confidentiality regarding the students' performance in practicum/internship. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
35. Discusses with the students the ethical standards regarding intimacies with clients. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
36. Discusses with the students ethical behavior regarding supervisee interactions. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
37. Demonstrates interest and enthusiasm regarding the profession. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
38. Provides an appropriate model of speech and language. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
39. Maintains an appropriate professional appearance. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
40. Provides an appropriate professional model overall. 1 2 3 4 5 NA
41. Overall rating of supervisory effectiveness. 1 2 3 4 5 NA

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