Ethical Considerations For Psychologists When Working With College Student-Athletes

College student-athletes are often faced with a multitude of unique challenges as they maneuver the responsibilities that are inherent with being a college student as well as a top-performing athlete. Not only do college student-athletes have to grapple with the academic demands that every college student is routinely faced with, but they must also maintain their poise and excellence out of the classroom and on the field (Etzel & Watson II, 2007). Due to the increasing demands and strain that is often placed upon student-athletes, academic institutions have began to increase the amount of support that is available to college student-athletes by way of professional coaches, academic tutors and advisors, as well as sports psychologists or sports psychology consultants.

One of the most useful sources of support for college student-athletes are sports psychologists due to their extensive training, psychoeducational philosophies, and applicable skills that are designed to facilitate the well-being of student-athletes as well as their personal development (Flowers, 2007). Due to the complexity of a sports psychologist’s role when working with athletes, especially college student-athletes, there is often a plethora of ethical considerations that need to be taken into consideration including professional training and competence, confidentiality, multiple relationships and boundaries, and space and place (Anderson, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001).

In all areas of professional psychology, regardless of the population or context, ethical considerations and guidelines must be adhered to in order to ensure client safety and welfare. Due to the vast array of specialty areas within the field of psychology and the complexity and uniqueness of ethical issues that commonly arise, there is no traditional way to effectively apply the ethical standards across all possible situations. Sport psychologists working with college student-athletes not only have to contend with ethical challenges routinely faced by clinical and counseling psychologists, but also those ethical dilemmas that often arise due to the specific demands that occur.
when working with a client base as unique as student-athletes, coaches, athletic trainers, and athletic directors (Ward, Sandstedt, Cox, & Beck, 2005).

Similar to psychologists in other fields of professional psychology, sports psychologists adhere to the ethical guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2002) in response to ethical dilemmas and challenges. These guidelines are intended to aid licensed psychologists in ethically resolving dilemmas in a way that fits with their professional role as well as the needs of the client. Due to the nontraditional setting of sport psychology, sport psychologists may be presented with an ethical dilemma where a clear resolution doesn’t exist (Gardner, 2001). As indicated by Moore (2003), “it is particularly problematic for psychologists practicing in rural settings (Catalano, 1997; Faulkner & Faulkner, 1997; Schank & Skovholt, 1997), military settings (Hines, Ader, Chang, & Rundell, 1998; Johnson, 1995), and other nontraditional settings, as these psychologists quickly discover that many of the ethical guidelines do not in fact represent their common clientele, the particular demands of the setting, or the exceptional necessities that accompany their professional work and delivery of services” (p. 601).

As a result of the aforementioned ethical challenges that sports psychologists are often presented with and the high frequency in which they often occur, the primary purpose of this paper is to review ethical issues related to professional training and competence, confidentiality, multiple relationships and boundaries, and space and place that need to be considered when working with college student-athletes in university settings. In addition to reviewing relevant concerns specific to each ethical issue, hypothetical vignettes will be presented in order to allow for further investigation into each concern in order for valuable insight to be gathered in regards to how such issues can be resolved.

Issues of Training and Professional Competence
The field of sports psychology is considered to be a specialized domain within the larger arena of professional psychology that requires specialized training that is specific to sport and athletes in order to become a competent practitioner within the field (Brown & Cogan, 2006). As defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2008), “sport psychology is a multi-disciplinary field spanning psychology, sport science, and medicine.” There is not currently an established sport psychology training curriculum set forth by APA, the only recognized measure of training competence in the area is the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP, 1994) criteria for certification as a sport psychology consultant. Historically, sports psychologists have most often been formally trained in either counseling or clinical psychology and received some form of specialized training (i.e., Master’s degree, workshops, continuing education, etc.). It is difficult to identify the best source of education for sport psychology practitioners, as is noted by Pauline et al. (2006). It is important that sports psychologists not only attain adequate formal education and training specific to sport psychology, but that “a competent sport psychologist also receives supervised experience in this subdiscipline of psychology” (Stapleton et al., 2010, p. 144).

It is clearly indicated in the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2002) that psychologists will only practice within their scope of competence. As indicated by Stapleton et al., (2010), Hack (2005) noted that “using the word ‘sport’ in front of ‘psychologist’ indicates that a person has obtained additional specialized education and training, in order to fully understand the various aspects of athletics, the science and specific culture of sport, and how to apply this knowledge to athletes, coaches, and parents” (p. 294). In addition to receiving formal applied training and supervision, it is important that sport psychologists continue to develop their competence through consulting with other professionals, consulting relevant research in the field, and/or enrolling in continuing education courses. Etzel, Watson II, and Zizzi (2004) conducted a web-based survey investigating the personal ethical beliefs and practices specific to the practice of
applied sport psychology of 332 members of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP). Results indicated that maintaining professional competency through continuing education and training was a nearly universal ethical behavior.

Let us consider a hypothetical case example in order to highlight the ethical issue of competence in even more detail. Dave, a licensed staff psychologist (received his Ph.D. in counseling psychology) at a university counseling center, has been seeing Lee, the starting quarterback of the university’s football team, for eight sessions. Much of the work that Dave and Lee have done has focused on Lee’s anxious feelings regarding his large academic load. During their last three sessions, Lee brings up concerns regarding performance enhancement. Even though Dave does not have extensive training in the field of sport psychology, how should he proceed with working with Lee?

When considering the above mentioned example, it is important to take into account the nature of Dave and Lee’s relationship, the extent of Dave’s training specific to sport psychology, the resources that Lee has to other professionals with knowledge specific to sport psychology, as well as the potential harm that Lee may be subjected to if sport psychology services are provided or denied by Dave.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is considered to be the foundational component of trust in which the therapeutic relationship is built upon (Glossoff, Herlihy, Herlihy, & Spence, 1997; Moore, 2003). As outlined by the APA ethics code, psychologists, regardless of their area of specialization, have a primary obligation to protect and maintain confidential information as well as recognize the limits of confidentially within a professional relationship (APA, 2002). A licensed psychologist who specializes in the area of sport is responsible to uphold the professional standards of psychologists as well as the legislative requirements pertaining to maintaining confidentiality (Brown & Cogan,
2006). For a sports psychologist employed by a university athletic department, it is imperative “that issues of confidentiality be discussed and agreed upon by all involved parties at the onset of services so that all individuals are aware of the limitations of confidentiality and the potential difficulties may be minimized” (Moore, 2003, p. 602). The use of appropriate informed consent is absolutely crucial in terms of ethics as well as from a legal risk-management perspective. Ideally, an informed consent document is a “contract delineating the roles and responsibilities of both the professional and the client, and it defines what, why, how, when, and where services will be provided” (Moore, 2003, p. 603).

Ethical considerations specific to issues of confidentiality are often significantly more complicated when working with student-athletes due to the addition of other individuals such as coaches, athletic trainers, professors, athletic directors, and parents (Carr, 2007). The sports psychologist must clearly establish the boundaries of confidentiality with the student-athlete in regards to what information is confidential, when confidentiality may be broken, and who is privy to confidential information in the event that confidentiality is broken. Boundaries of confidentiality must also be explicitly established between outside parties such as referral sources, athletic department personnel, coaches, athletic trainers, and athletic directors in order to maintain the confidentiality of the student-athlete. In the event that another such individual play an active role in the treatment process of the athlete and/or need confidential information, it is very important to discuss the release of such information with the athlete and to be clear about the parameters and limits of the disclosure (Brown & Cogan, 2006).

It is often possible for a coach or athletic trainer to ask a sport psychologist for information regarding what they have been working on with an athlete. Often times a coach is aware that the sport psychologist is working with the athlete and has observed that he/she has been playing much better or has progressed substantially since working with him/her. For example, an athletic trainer
may say, “Kelly played excellent during her last few games, she has shown a real improvement since she has been talking with you! What have you two been talking about?” In this case, the athletic trainer could be asking because he wants to know what has been helpful to Kelly in order to assist other players or he could just want to know how he can assist Kelly in similar ways in the future. One response may be to say, “Yeah, she has been playing very well lately! You may want to ask her what she has learned during our time together.” This may provide the athletic trainer with the information that he is intending to receive as well as allow him to feel comfortable approaching the athlete at a later date.

Multiple Relationships

Unlike other areas in professional psychology, navigating ethical issues related to multiple relationships is almost commonplace in the field of sport psychology. Multiple relationships are defined as “those situations in which the psychologist functions in more than one professional relationship, as well as those in which the psychologist functions in a professional role and another definitive and intended role” (Sonne, 1999, p. 227). Although psychologists are not banned from entering into a multiple relationship, they are encouraged to “refrain from entering into a multiple relationship” (APA, 2002) and must be aware of the possible harmful effects that can occur when entering into a multiple relationship (i.e., loss of objectivity, damage to therapeutic alliance, and the exploitation of the client).

When true multiple relationships exist between the student-athlete and the sport psychologist, the potential for uncomfortable and distressful interactions is often increased (Watson, Etzel, & Shapiro, 2009). Often times these multiple relationships cannot be avoided and/or there is potentially more harm that could be inflicted upon the student-athlete if the multiple relationships was avoided or negated. It is a common misconception that all multiple relationship situations result in a boundary violation (Knapp & Slattery, 2004). There is an important difference to consider
between boundary crossings and boundary violations when thinking about multiple relationships. “Boundary crossings involve a deviation from the typical therapist client interaction, but do not cause harm and may in fact be helpful and constructive. On the other hand, boundary violations are deviations in the professional relationship that are clearly harmful or exploitative of the client” (Aoyagi & Portenga, 2010, p. 256).

Consider the example of Jeff, a sports psychologist that is employed by an athletic department at a Division I institution. Along with being responsible for meeting with student-athletes individually to discuss performance enhancement, psychological, and relational concerns, Jeff is also routinely called upon by coaches to perform performance enhancement workshops and consultations for their teams. Jeff is currently working individually with Stephanie, a member of the women’s volleyball team, on concerns related to her relationship with her coach and other teammates. Much of the things that Jeff and Stephanie discuss are not related to performance enhancement issues, but rather are more clinical in nature. After Jeff’s seventh session with Stephanie the head coach of the women’s volleyball team contacts him and schedules him to present a workshop on goal setting to his entire team. What ethical considerations must Jeff consider in regards to multiple relationships if he chooses to perform the goal setting workshop with the volleyball team even though Stephanie is currently an individual client of his?

On the surface, Jeff could avoid entering into a multiple relationship with Stephanie by turning down the opportunity to present the goal setting workshop to the entire volleyball team. Although if he were to turn down the speaking engagement than he may be neglecting the other players on the volleyball team that he is not currently professional involved with on an individual level of his professional sport psychology services, which is a responsibility and requirement inherent in his job title. Jeff could also decided to perform the goal setting workshop with the entire team regardless of his multiple relationship with Stephanie. What is the best way for Jeff to ethically respond
concerning this situation of multiple relationships?

Regardless of how Jeff resolves the ethical dilemma, there are a few considerations that could be adhered to in order to remain ethical in a similar situation. It is important to discuss the possible multiple relationship that you and the student-athlete could be in as early as possible once a professional relationship has been initiated. It could also be useful to discuss the parameters of a possible multiple relationship with a student-athlete as soon as there is a likely chance that would occur. It would also be necessary for the sport psychologist to evaluate the nature of the multiple relationship situation in order to determine the potential harm that the student-athlete could be subject to if a multiple relationship was entering into.

Another important consideration in terms of multiple relationships is that of determining who the client is. When employed by a university as a sport psychologist, one may be technically employed by the athletic department, a specific team, the university-wide counseling service, and/or may have a joint appointment comprised of any of the abovementioned agencies. This often becomes a large concern for sport psychologists that are specifically employed by athletic departments, opposed to university counseling centers, and paid to provide clinical services to student-athletes. The primary issues appears to center around the staff members of the athletic department believing that they have a right to know not only if and who is seeking services but also what is being discussed and/or done in session (Etzel & Watson II, 2007). Coaches and athletic department administrators often approach athletes in a different manner than do sport psychologists and may view athletes as an investment, commodity, and/or asset. As would be imagined, it could be very difficult for a sport psychologist to negotiate appeasing his boss, serving the student-athlete, and fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of his university position, while adhering to the ethical guidelines. Once again, it is of utmost importance to clarify the boundaries of confidentiality and informed consent with all parities involved at the onset of the professional relationship.
Imagine the case of Roger, an athletic administrative director at a Division I university, and Jill, a newly hired sport psychologist employed by the athletic department. As Jill’s boss, Roger is involved with the development of all athletes and takes a very “hands on” approach in his position. Roger approaches Jill on Friday afternoon and demands information pertaining to what she has been discussing with Bob, a top football athlete whom has just informed Roger of his desire to transfer to another rival university. Taking into consideration Jill’s responsibilities to the student-athlete, the university, her boss (Roger), and her ethical obligations as a psychologists, how should Jill proceed with Roger?

Space and Place

Sport psychologists often find themselves providing services in less than ideal environments when compared to psychologists that serve more traditional populations due to the demands specific to their role (Aoyagi & Portenga, 2010). One may provide services to student-athletes in his/her office, in the locker room, on the bus or airplane ride to and/or from a competition, on the walk to and/or from practice or a game, and even in other more impromptu situations such as at a dinner table in a public restaurant or in a hotel lobby.

Ideally, it would be nice to be able to have a designated office to meet with student-athlete clients individually, however, this is not always the case. In the instance that a sport psychologists working within a university setting does have an office, the question arises pertaining to where the office is located and who else has access to the office. With an office that is centrally located on campus, it may mean that individuals going to and from the office are highly visible, thus potentially compromising the student-athletes confidentiality. With an office located within the athlete department, it may be convenient for the student-athlete to access you due to the frequency of which he/she is in the department, but the same concerns of confidentiality may arise.

When faced with such a situation, the sport psychologist should inform and discuss the limits
to confidentiality with the student-athlete in order for the athlete to understand the potential risks on communicating in an open setting. The sport psychologists should also place emphasis on professional judgment regarding what the best form of practice would be given a particular setting and context specific to the needs and demands of the student-athlete.

Conclusion

It is clear that professional sport psychologists who provide clinical services to college student-athletes while being employed by a university may face a wide array of unique ethical dilemmas. Among the most common ethical dilemmas that may be encountered are specific to training and practicing within the scope of ones competence, confidential information and the sharing of such information as well as issues related to informed consent, considerations of when to enter into a multiple relationship and how to maneuver boundary crossings and violations, as well as concerns specific to issues related to space and place of psychological practice. It is important that ethical dilemmas similar to those listed above be taken into consideration with respect to the current ethical standards of professional practice (Brown & Cogan, 2006). As mentioned earlier, it is also important to adequately discuss such concerns with the necessary individuals including but not limited to the student-athlete, the coach, the athletic trainer, and/or the athletic department personnel. When confronted with an ethical dilemma it is also important to remember the value that can be gained by consulting with a trusted colleague.
References


