

**CRITICAL
ESSAYS**
IN
**APPLIED
SPORT
PSYCHOLOGY**

**DAVID GILBOURNE
MARK B. ANDERSEN**

EDITORS

CRITICAL ESSAYS IN APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

DAVID GILBOURNE, PHD

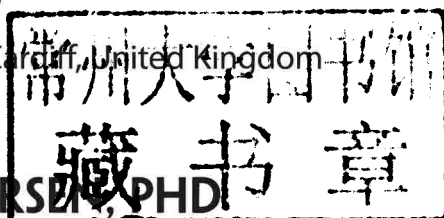
Editor

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, United Kingdom

MARK B. ANDERSEN, PHD

Editor

Victoria University, Australia



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Web site: www.HumanKinetics.com

United States: Human Kinetics

P.O. Box 5076

Champaign, IL 61825-5076

800-747-4457

e-mail: humank@hkusa.com

Canada: Human Kinetics

475 Devonshire Road Unit 100

Windsor, ON N8Y 2L5

800-465-7301 (in Canada only)

e-mail: info@hkcanada.com

Europe: Human Kinetics

107 Bradford Road

Stanningley

Leeds LS28 6AT, United Kingdom

+44 (0) 113 255 5665

e-mail: hk@hkeurope.com

Australia: Human Kinetics

57A Price Avenue

Lower Mitcham, South Australia

5062

08 8372 0999

e-mail: info@hkaustralia.com

New Zealand: Human Kinetics

P.O. Box 80

Torrens Park, South Australia 5062

0800 222 062

e-mail: info@hknewzealand.com

CONTRIBUTORS

David Carless

Leeds Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

Kitrina Douglas

University of Bristol, United Kingdom

Stephanie J. Hanrahan

University of Queensland, Australia

Robyn L. Jones

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, United Kingdom

Kieran Kingston

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, United Kingdom

Zoe Knowles

Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom

Michael Korzinski

Private practice, United Kingdom

David Lavallee

Aberystwyth University, United Kingdom

Trisha Leahy

Hong Kong Sports Institute

Martin Littlewood

Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom

David Llewellyn

Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom

John R. Lubker

West Texas A&M University, United States

Joe Mannion

Private practice, St. Louis, Missouri, United States

Dearbhla McCullough

Roehampton University, United Kingdom

Mark Nesti

Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom

Ailsa Niven

Herriot-Watt University, United Kingdom

David Priestley

Private practice, London, United Kingdom

Harriet D. Speed

Victoria University, Australia

Carly Stewart

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, United Kingdom

William B. Strean

University of Alberta, Canada

David Tod

Aberystwyth University, United Kingdom

Carmel Triggs

University of Chester, United Kingdom

Judy Van Raalte

Springfield College, United States

Jack C. Watson

West Virginia University, United States

DJ Williams

Idaho State University, United States

PREFACE

Researchers, academics, and practitioners with connections to sport and exercise psychology are found in a wide range of disciplines: mainstream psychology and counseling, philosophy, rehabilitation, education, coaching science, leisure and tourism, cultural studies, social science, and health. This breadth of interest in sport and exercise psychology suggested to us that the audience for this book might be extensive and wide ranging, and we hope that the essays included here fit well with a diverse audience. The authors of these essays come from a number of disciplines and persuasions and offer insights into the intoxicating yet sometimes dark cultures of professional, elite, and sub-elite sport. The essays draw from a broad-based menu of applied practice—for example, how to disseminate applied qualitative research through performance art; provide the chance to see alternative interpretations of people's lives through the lenses of differing counseling traditions; question the underlying ethics of practice; and examine the value, potential pitfalls, and challenges of reflection. In this regard, the book takes on sufficient academic scope and critical challenge to influence pedagogical practices, research approaches, and applied training in sport psychology service delivery curricula and research directions across a range of interrelated disciplines.

We have brought together critical thinkers who offer differing points of view and promote alternative perspectives. The book is intended for those who teach, mentor, and practice in and around the field of sport and exercise psychology, but it extends beyond the traditional boundaries of applied sport psychology to reach interested clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, and research psychologists from a range of training and academic persuasions. The essays are grounded in the domain of applied practice and methodology, and we hope that they serve as valuable resources for people who work alongside, manage, or employ those who offer applied psychology support (e.g., coaches, professional sport administrators, player welfare officers, physical therapists). Each essay offers a distinct perspective on applied sport psychology practice, and we hope that together they stimulate applied debate, encourage diverse thinking about applied research directions, address applied training requirements and practices, and contest the status quo in a variety of ways.

In pedagogic terms, we also hope that this book helps students in and around the field of sport psychology to think and write critically. In order to write critically, students must refer (and sometimes defer) to the academic literature, yet examples of applied critique are relatively rare. We believe that this book provides a resource for contemporary ideas, illustrates critical thinking in action, and offers new ways of uncovering and representing applied knowledge. Finally, we hope that these essays, as a collected body of critical thinking, challenge, provoke, disturb, and excite practitioners, as well as encourage reflection and open a critical space in which researchers, practitioners, and teachers might be stimulated by new approaches and feel motivated to reevaluate their own developmental needs.

The contributors to this volume are recognized nationally and internationally for their applied thinking, and the body of critical essays presented here gets us beyond the limitations imposed when challenging ideas are spread across different journals, books, and book chapters—and across time. The authors purposefully attempt to move readers onto new landscapes, offer them different ideas, and extend the boundaries of what might be considered interesting, valuable, and relevant to professional practice and research. We feel that these essays have the capacity to influence how sport and exercise psychologists think about their own practice and research. The essays are eclectic in both style and content and, as editors, we want each essay to represent independent, not necessarily interconnected, viewpoints. Several essays, however, do share interweaving threads. Organizationally, we have divided the book into three sections, but there is no particular ordered way in which to approach this collection; readers can start anywhere. Part I covers diverse methods and inquiry in research and practice. The essays in part II engage with issues in professional service delivery, and part III addresses specific topics in sport psychology practice. One reader might wish to start with familiar topics, then progress into foreign territory. Another reader might prefer to jump right into the more iconoclastic essays. Whatever the approach, pick an essay and dive in. We hope readers find these essays engaging, infuriating, thought provoking, and entertaining. We certainly did!

INTRODUCTION

David Gilbourne

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, United Kingdom

Mark B. Andersen

Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

INTRODUCTION: DAVID GILBOURNE

As editors, Mark and I warmly welcome all readers to this text. Given what is to follow, it seems important from the onset to stress that we both believe that applied sport psychology is a central facet of athlete support, and we would defend this view to the last. With the same vigor, we also suggest that the profession risks failing those who might be most in need of help (winners and losers alike). We could rationalize this statement through any number of critical observations (and many of these are sketched out in the present book), but the positioning of applied sport psychology lies at the core of our dissatisfaction, and many other critiques stem from a disquietude over sport psychology's history and application. Through the various contributions and observations contained in this volume, we warn that an emerging profession that delimits its client base and intervention options by emphasizing performance before people is setting itself on a path that encourages practitioners to focus on behaviors and renders many professionals inadequately equipped to treat athletes.

Convincing Mark that we should think seriously about working on the critical essays project was not at all difficult. We had both recognized a need for an applied text that contained something different. I found Mark's support particularly gratifying because, over the years, moments when other colleagues have openly shared my concerns or appreciated my sense of genuine alarm and worry have been rare. With little evidence of support, I have sometimes wondered whether my critique of the profession, the one I once practiced and taught, as so far off the beam that no one *could* support it. I had begun to see my critique as somehow unacceptable, something others viewed as plain wrong.

Since we began this project, however, I have come to understand that many other applied practitioners, scholars, and commentators share a critical view of applied sport psychology (their critiques manifest in different ways and are articulated in different approaches). Later in this opening essay, Mark and I comment on the disparate nature of critique—how it often appeared, only to be lost in the primacy (and comfort) of the status quo. On reflection, and possibly as a consequence of the present project, I have come to see my past critique in more opaque and incomplete terms, as partial, implicit, even covert, and as a critique that might be easily missed or misinterpreted. In truth, my unease, and any critique that leaked out from this discomfort, was often shrouded in dry asides and questioning observations that tended to fade as the cadence of my sentences fell away. Therefore, I know that my critique was easily missed. However ineffectual I was at conveying critical messages, it was, nonetheless, a very real iceberg for many years (more beneath the surface than visible above it).

The world of pedagogy in applied sport psychology that I inhabited for 15 or more years offers a good example of my critical subterfuge. I taught the typical applied sport psychology curriculum to generations of students while at the same time feeling uneasy with the way psychological skills training (PST) had dominated the applied landscape for so long. One day (and deep down, I had always known such a day would arrive) I had to face the consequences of teaching one thing and thinking another.

“You lied to me,” said the postgraduate student; she was standing in the doorway of my office. We had known each other for several years, first as undergraduate student and lecturer, and later as PhD candidate and supervisor. Though a little taken aback, I instantly took her point; I had lived a lie of sorts for some time. If pushed, I would now say that for years I had spoken to a flawed applied agenda, one that I had failed to challenge—a failure based on critical omission. The motivation behind the present book can be traced back to that moment. My student made it clear that there is little merit in thinking critically and saying nothing.

In the minutes that followed, she made me ponder; she made me confront a need to talk more openly about what applied work entailed, and I thank her for that. I tried to explain that I hadn’t really lied. I was, however, culpable, and I said as much. My case was that I had demonstrated professional weakness by not challenging the status quo. I also admitted that, in the past, I had failed to fully confront my misgivings

about the utility of theory and the dominance of PST, and, over those years (during my procrastination born of professional anxieties and the usual worries over promotion and the like), she had listened to my neat lectures and responded by writing equally neat essays. Now living and researching in the messy, uneven, emotive, unpredictable, multilayered, unforgiving world of professional sport, she began to test me with stories: an athlete with an eating disorder, a parent taking money from a young player, a player and a coach on the edge of a physical confrontation, an unwanted pregnancy. . . . The tales went on. As she told the stories, I now see that she waited, in vain, for some reaction, maybe some sense of shock. When she realized I was not at all surprised by her tales, she concluded that I had withheld this reality from her and her fellow students. In short, I had knowingly misled by omission and failed to articulate the most important part of the applied world (ergo, I had lied). But to do so would have undermined the very theories and models that I was charged with explaining (and that the students were expected to write about), while also breaking a pedagogical contract between established learning outcomes and lecture content.

This excuse is hardly a defensible one, but I hope she understood my dilemma. Her stories provided contextually framed, culturally charged examples of human existence and illustrated what much of the academic applied sport psychology literature had failed to confront and articulate. Sometimes I retell elements of these stories to audiences at conferences and workshops. At one such event, a delegate referred to the story that I will present later in this essay and asked, "Why do you always focus on the negative aspects of sport?" I was reminded then that sport is good and that the goodness of sport is a truism. I would paraphrase the tone of the question as "and if you don't think it's good then you are *not* one of us." I realized then that I was (at last) happy to be outside gazing in but also disappointed that it had taken me so long to take the plunge. Later that evening, I wondered how many others are resigned (*de facto*) to reinforcing myths regardless of whether they have started to have doubts. When there is no constituency for genuine challenge, speaking out becomes risky. Anyway, here is the story, the one perceived by the delegate as being negative. An odd take on matters, for, to my mind, it's a rather beautiful story, one that speaks volumes about trust and care and so opens another window onto applied practice. I have partly fictionalized the tale to make it more accessible, but it is founded on an applied sport psychologist's account

of an actual consultation (the same sport psychologist who stood in my doorway several years ago):

I'm just sat up in bed ... reading ... and then the phone goes.... it's this player: "Can I talk?" I said, "No worries." ... He's never once spoken to me before so this all felt a bit weird ... then he tells me that his girlfriend's pregnant, and the club can't get to know ... his dad said.

So like I'm just reacting ... and I say, "We need to meet up. ... don't do anything or say anything till we meet, all right?". ... He said, "okay." ... We talk a bit more, then (just before the call's over) I say, "Can your girlfriend come to the meeting, can she come?" He said, "I'll ask." ... Should I have done that? Was that right, asking his girlfriend to come along?

Anyway, we met in a coffee shop—me, the player, and his girlfriend. She's really pretty and seems really quiet. ... she cried loads in the meeting, just cried loads. ... she kept saying, "What a mess" and stuff. He kept looking at her: "Don't cry," he said. ... I'd never seen him like that, being nice and gentle. Football doesn't allow him to be that way.

We made some plans. ...

Next day I saw him at the training ground. He stood next to me but at a distance so others wouldn't think he was talking to me, and then without looking towards me he said, "My girlfriend told me to say thanks ... for yesterday ... for wanting to meet her. ... she said for me to say 'thanks.'"

The story suggests to me that "being there" is not just an athlete thing; it might also relate to influential others who share the athlete's life. I sometimes wonder how the player got hold of my former student's phone number, and I wonder why he opted to call her at such a difficult time of day. I imagine him maybe asking another player for help, and maybe that player recommended he contact someone who has listened to and helped others in the past, someone who has gained trust and respect within the player's group. I also imagine the player's angst before he made the phone call and the vulnerability he felt during the coffee shop meeting. But most of all, as I recount the tale, I am always moved by his words as he passed on the gratitude of his girlfriend; moreover, and in the broad fabric of this short tale, I see much for the profession of applied sport psychology to be proud of.

INTRODUCTION: MARK ANDERSEN

I have had a long and difficult relationship with sport and physical education. Being a hand-eye motor moron, I was constantly chosen last for sport teams throughout primary and secondary school. Luckily, my father moved me toward sports in which I could enjoy some degree of success (e.g., swimming, skiing, sailing). In these sports, I was not required to catch, throw, or bounce anything. Since those times, and now stalking sport psychology as an avenging demon, I have sought to paint a different picture of sport, one that allows for the possibility that participation might damage or hurt. In terms of intervention, I have sought to right the wrongs of abusive practices and so shift the focus from performance to people and to look at the individual in the sport context as being far more complex and convoluted than has been portrayed in many applied sport psychology texts.

To help establish the germ of my own critical perspective on applied sport psychology I have decided to draw on ideas that I discussed in a lecture at Aberystwyth University on March 3, 2009. There I outlined a series of critical points, and I have selected a few extracts here:

Taking the performance enhancement approach to sport and exercise psychology service delivery is like a house painter who is more than happy to paint your home, but only if you want it one specific shade of blue. Athletes' and coaches' lives are not blue; their concerns cover a great deal of the visible spectrum. Their lives also delve into the usually unexamined infrared and ultraviolet realms of hidden fears, desires, abuse, trauma, and shattered dreams. I think we need to address the full spectrum of the issues psychologists, counselors, and consultants encounter when they focus on working with people, and not just when they dip their brushes into blue paint. I don't want to bag performance enhancement per se . . . Oh hell, yes I do, but it's not because I think such interventions are unimportant; I think they can be of tremendous value. What's a rainbow without some blue in it? But what are we to make of the rest of the spectrum? The full range of what may be encountered when we look at whole people rather than specific behaviors? Even when we focus on performance, we have to see how sport behavior fits, or doesn't fit, in the lives of those we serve. An 800-meter run does not take place in a vacuum.

All the relaxation exercises in the world will probably have little effect on competition anxiety if those fears are tied to some dire imagined or real consequences of failure, such as parental psychological abuse, the withdrawal of love, or feelings of worthlessness and emptiness.

I question the conventional mantra that “sport is good, and participation in sport is good for you,” and so my critique tends to drift (temporarily) away from the athlete and toward questions about how these positive views of sport might have negative consequences, both generally for the ways in which sport psychologists approach sporting environments and more specifically for how they work with athletes who reside within those environments. Here is another brief fictional narrative, again taken from the Aberystwyth presentation:

I believe sport is a good thing; I believe improving performance is a good thing. I believe athletes coming to me are interested in improving performance. I believe it is my job to help them improve. Then an athlete arrives at my door and talks about his performance anxiety and his fears of disappointing his coach and how that coach will go ballistic if the athlete makes an error. I have seen the coach in action and do not like his verbally and psychologically abusive style. He yells; he demeans athletes, and then he lavishes praise on good performance. His relationships with his athletes are chaotic, and his charges walk on eggshells around him. To serve this athlete, I teach him some cognitive skills and relaxation exercises to help with the anxiety he has about performance and to cope with the coach’s psychologically abusive practices. His anxiety response is exactly the sort of reaction that will nearly ensure that what he fears most will happen, does happen (he makes an error, and the coach starts screaming). So I help him out with that anxiety problem. He is a psychologically abused young man, and the abuse is ongoing. His sport environment is toxic, and his coach is a bully, but I still think sport is good, and I have colluded in helping him stay in his sport with this manipulative and horrible coach and continue to be abused. The athlete may see me as a really nice guy, but I am also part of the problem. I stand by and watch the abuse continue. It is odd that many people tolerate their children being yelled at

and demeaned by coaches, but if those same coach behaviors were brought into a child's classroom with a psychologically demeaning and abusive teacher, then parents would be calling for the teacher's head. Sport is good, and we stand by and watch abuse. I help the athlete change his anxiety response, but for how long? In the face of continued abuse, I have applied a band-aid to a deep (and possibly infected) wound. I have, by my action and my inaction, contributed to the continued abuse of someone in my care by not seriously asking the ethical question, "What is the right thing to do?" Such moral questions about what it is to "do the right thing" are difficult but need to be asked. But if sport is ultimately a good thing, such questions may never get asked, and abuse will continue.

As a helping profession, applied sport psychology seems in some ways to be moribund. It has not kept up with other sport professions that developed during the time when it was emerging as a sport science and an applied practice (Andersen, 2009; see also chapter 12 in this book). Signs of hope are coming from many researchers and practitioners who are carving new pathways and territories of service, but one begins to despair when articles appear in the literature with titles such as "At an Elite Level the Role of a Sport Psychologist Is Entirely About Performance Enhancement" (Brady & Maynard, 2010). I wonder if performance enhancement will ever give up the ghost of primacy and take a secondary or tertiary position behind an overarching agenda of the health, happiness, and welfare of athletes and coaches. Toward that end, we want this book to help expand the debate on the depth and breadth of potential service, and in the remainder of this introduction we discuss (in a kind of split-screen, talking heads manner) our motivations and our hopes for this profession we have been intimately involved with for decades.

OUR MOTIVATIONS

David (D): Some might say we are aging, angry, cranky old men (Mark's older, but he argues that I'm crankier by some margin). Well, we have certainly been in and around the business of academic and applied sport psychology for more years than we care to reveal and through that time have developed critical (some might say cynical) eyes on the field of applied sport psychology, both as practiced and as researched.

Mark (M): I have talked with David many times over many years, and I can say without hesitation that he can be extremely grumpy. That observation aside, David's applied critique resonates with many facets of my own experiences, so I have learned to listen carefully to his grumblings. As we sit and talk, it is clear that we approach the critical agenda from the constraints and possibilities offered through our own history and training. For example, David, as he emphasized earlier in this introduction, gets very agitated when our conversation moves toward the dominance of mental training techniques (PST). His own experiences, the experiences of his PhD students, and many of his applied contacts across the spectrum of sport convinced him long ago that PST should *not* be the cornerstone, or the primary focus, or the core challenge of applied practice. As Shane Murphy (2000), the former head of sport sciences at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, once wrote:

The sport psychology literature is filled with texts that describe techniques and interventions. Although many of these works are excellent, they leave the lingering impression that sport psychology is the sum of such interventions as goal setting, visualization, and attention-control training. Yet the practicing sport psychologist realizes that knowledge of such techniques is but the first step in a long journey toward gaining proficiency in actually being able to help athletes. . . . [R]eflect[ing] on my own work with elite athletes, . . . [I notice] how infrequently I ever do straightforward interventions such as those we see studied so often in our journals. (pp. 275–276)

According to old grumpy, Shane's observation offers an optimistic view of the applied practitioner, and David remains unconvinced that the research or pedagogy of the UK sport psychology system demonstrates much, if any, evidence of the progressions Shane suggested. For David, "getting critical" is a kind of default setting. In one exchange, at the 2007 meeting of FEPSAC (the European Federation of Sport Psychology), he argued that sport psychology training and practice had developed an inward and uncritical quality, one typified by the narrow and predictable application of a small number of unconnected social-cognitive theories compounded by (often unconnected) PST-based interventions. As he spoke, I'm sure I could hear tumbleweeds rolling; that is, as David suggested earlier, one-off asides often get missed, so perhaps the audience

was just thinking about the coffee and muffins to follow. The moment came and went and, we both feel, made little impression. We do not wish, however, to set up a PST straw man and take potshots at him. David's experiences in the UK differ greatly from mine in Australia. In the Land Down Under, sport psychology training and practice have taken a decidedly different path than the ones in North America and the UK. In Australia, the education, training, and supervision of sport psychologists are all housed within the parent discipline of psychology. We train sport psychologists to be *psychologists* first, and PST is just one small part in the education of our graduate students on their paths to becoming fully registered psychologists. PST is not the dominant paradigm in the Australian context, and our graduates often go on to careers as psychologists in many areas outside of sport. I am fortunate to live in a country where applied sport psychology is much more about individuals' lives than it is about their performances. Performance enhancement is not our *raison d'être*; people are.

THE ABUSE OF LANGUAGE

(D): Both Mark and I have a thing about language. I love to see it being used creatively, and we both see language as a medium that might help us capture, and so possibly understand, the experience of being. Language and the opening of discourses and discourse media emerge as underlying themes throughout this book. That said, we both go ballistic when we hear language used in a way that creates popular but suspect attributes (e.g., mental toughness). Our reading of the history of academic applied sport psychology finds that false gods are all too easily created and that, once established, they morph into truisms that make the resulting prejudices and biases legitimate, almost corporeal. For example, early in the 1970s and 1980s, many sport psychologists conducted research into personality and success in sport. Because all sorts of successful athletes have all sorts of personalities, personality is not a good predictor of sporting prowess, and this line of research did not greatly advance knowledge about psychology and sport. This line of research, however, has not faded away, and one personality-like disposition, mental toughness, is currently all the rage in research. The "toughness" part of mental toughness is what really gets Mark and me. It reeks of much that is bad in sport. We wonder whether applied sport psychologists have much stomach for the dark side; we wonder whether researchers want to tread paths that might highlight pain

and disturbance and get under the skin of the glamour, the medals, the championships, and the other adornments of sport that capture the headlines. When we hear the phrases “I want to be tough” from a 14-year-old boy or “I’m a winner” from a 15-year-old girl, we begin to worry about language and labels.

(M): As part of my brief stay in the UK to work on this book, David invited me to his own institution, the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, to deliver a symposium on applied practice. Here is a short extract from that presentation to help illustrate my own concern about how language might be manipulated dangerously:

So ... if you are not “tough,” then you are “soft”—just about the worst thing you can say about someone in sport. Toughness smacks of “no pain, no gain,” “play with pain,” “play when injured,” “don’t be a girl,” “don’t be a sissy,” and all that other macho bullshit that permeates the hypermasculine world of sport. So when sport psychologists become pushers of mental toughness, we begin to worry that they are also part of the problem.

Like me, David is suspicious of the mental toughness agenda, and he shares my concerns about the connotations of the word *tough*, one that is easily twisted and abused. He worries about whether, in the wrong hands, the notion of toughness might be used to justify dubious applied practices. To his way of thinking, toughness speak is getting out of control, and he has little faith in the term being applied sensibly. Some might wave their hands and dismiss such views as little more than a rant, but I believe his worry is thoughtful and held with a degree of passion. He also hates the word *tough*. He often asks me to imagine the lifelong consequences of being told, explicitly or implicitly, “You are not mentally tough enough.” David knows a good number of applied sport psychologists; he has great affection for many of them as people, and he respects the important work they do. He also knows that although they all acknowledge the challenges of consistency in high-level sport, none of them would use the “T” word when working with their clients.

(D): It may be harsh for us to illustrate our worries over language by focusing on mental toughness because sport psychology has become hostage to a range of “I’m tough” terms, and they are all connected to the same agenda—the agenda of being a winner and selling the efficacy of practice as a process that leads to winning). We should also recognize and acknowledge the genuine research that has taken place