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Citation:

Didymus, FF and Arnold, R and Maher, J (2012) Conference reports: Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) 2011 conference. *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*, 8 (1). 71 - 75.

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Conference Reports: Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) 2011

Conference

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About the Authors

Rachel Arnold and Faye Didymus are final year PhD students under the supervision of Dr David Fletcher at Loughborough University. Rachel's research interests include performance leadership and management and performance environments and cultures (with a specific focus on organizational stress). Faye is exploring the psychology of sporting excellence and, in particular, the cognitive and affective aspects of organizational stress in sport performers. Joanne Maher is a BASES Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist (Psychology support) and Team Leader in Higher Education at Loughborough College.

Introduction

On September 20th 2011, 500 individuals from 39 countries gathered in Waikiki, Hawaii for the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) annual five-day conference. The location of the conference provided attendees with a sensational view of the North Pacific Ocean and its beautiful surroundings; however, these settings did not detract from the calibre of presentations being delivered or the attendance at these sessions. A wide range of applied sport psychology topics were covered, presented in the form of four pre-conference workshops, 89 lectures, 124 posters, 26 symposia, 22 workshops, three panels, one invited scientist-practitioner interview, and a variety of significant interest group sessions. In addition, there were a variety of keynote speeches presented: the Coleman Griffith address delivered by Gloria Balague, the social psychology address by Dorothy Espelage, the performance psychology address by Darren Treasure, the ethics address by

William Parham, the health and exercise psychology address by Jay Maddock, the international distinguished scholar address by Sandy Gordon, and the presidential address by Jack Lesyk. The range of presentations at the conference enabled attendees to network and share research ideas, knowledge, and practical experiences with those who have similar passions and interests. Since space precludes a detailed discussion of each presentation, this review will present a personal conference highlight from each author.

Conference Highlight – Rachel Arnold

The highlight of the conference for me was the invited scientist practitioner interview conducted by Tara Scanlan with interviewee Todd Blackadder (former New Zealand ‘All Blacks’ captain) entitled “*Getting into the hearts and minds of athletes: A demonstration interview with an all black rugby great*”. The room was full for this session and a number of high-profile individuals within the sport psychology world were present in the audience, reflecting the positive interest in this session. To start, Graig Chow introduced the interviewer and interviewee, explained the structure of the interview that would be utilised, and defined the concept of commitment and its associated model to be explored. Beginning the interview, Tara explored Todd’s background in Rugby Union and informed him of the interview purpose with a specific emphasis on the commitment insights that he would gain from participation. In line with the interview theme, the focus then shifted to generating a bespoke definition of commitment with reference to playing for the ‘All Blacks’, before encouraging Todd to discuss his personal sources of commitment. These included: maintaining standards of excellence, living the dream, his family, the honour and responsibility of representing New Zealand at the highest level, establishing a point of difference, outworking other individuals, and his attitude. Once established, these personal sources of commitment were written on individual cards and placed on a board in front of both parties. Factors from the ‘Sport Commitment Model’ (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler, 1993) were then

introduced to Todd and he was asked, for each factor individually, to comment on their impact to his own commitment, whether he would like to keep them on the board, and if any of them linked to his pre-identified personal sources of commitment. Identified factors from the model which were perceived to connect with his personal sources of commitment were feeling encouraged and supported, valuable opportunities, other priorities in his life, tradition, and being in an elite team.

Once this was completed, ‘reactors’ were invited to the stage to provide their perspectives of the interview with reference to their own work and experiences within sport psychology. These reactors were Dan Gould (Michigan State University), Mike Chu (High performance coach development manager of New Zealand Rugby Union), and Sean McCann (United States Olympic Committee sport psychologist). From a science perspective, Dan praised the interview for its ability to take multiple perspectives into consideration, make the athlete a partner in the research process, and identify new constructs that might be missing from current models and theories. However, he also raised further questions regarding the extent to which the method could be modified before it becomes ineffective and the feasibility of adopting the method with athletes who are less in tune with their psychological makeup. From a coach development perspective, Mike discussed the use of the interview with different age groups (e.g. juniors versus those more experienced), genders (e.g. the male ‘All Blacks’ versus the female ‘Black Ferns’), and populations (e.g. athletes versus coaches). Also of interest to Mike was the ability of the interview method to establish how players can be retained in New Zealand rather than moving abroad to play rugby where they can generate a better income. From a practitioner perspective, Sean discussed the luxury of having a thorough, visual method to use in applied sport psychology (similar methods are also used in cognitive behavioural therapy), which could provide practitioners and athletes with one way of working together in partnership. Following Sean’s reactions, further discussion and debate

was encouraged by opening the floor to the audience for questions. In summary, I feel this session clearly outlined and demonstrated an interactive, feasible, and comprehensive interview method that can be used to advance future sport psychology research so that it is more congruent with athlete's actual sporting experiences.

Conference Highlight – Faye F. Didymus

One of my personal highlights of the conference was the Performance Psychology Keynote Address, delivered by Darren Treasure (High Performance Director of the Nike Oregon project). I found this session, which focused on Darren's journey into and through the Nike Oregon Project, particularly interesting and engaging. I especially enjoyed the ways in which Darren found a balance between storytelling, personal experiences, theory, research, and practical examples.

Darren introduced the session with a brief overview of his 10 years in American academia before moving on to explain his four tips about the art of combining science with consulting. First, Darren suggested that we should retain the relevance and importance of science-practitioner models when working in applied settings. Second, he highlighted the importance of making appropriate interpretations and use of theory, research, and best practice; and third, suggested that researchers and practitioners should continue to be critical consumers of the literature. Finally, Darren encouraged the audience to remember that the art of science and consulting is "all about the relationship [between the practitioner and the client]." He discussed each of these recommendations, which resonated with me as a young researcher who has a keen interest in applied sport psychology, with contagious passion and enthusiasm.

The session then moved onto an overview of the Nike Oregon project, which Darren has been involved with for the past four years. Darren explained that the project began after the 2002 Boston Marathon where a U.S.A. runner finished in 8th position; the best

performance by a U.S.A. distance runner for many years. Alberto Salazar (distance running coach) and Dr Tom Clarke (Nike President) subsequently had a conversation to decipher what could be done to improve future U.S.A. distance running performances. Consequently, a vision and a mission statement were created and the Nike Oregon Project was launched. The vision was “to revitalize American distance running” and the associated mission was “to medal at the Olympic Games and World championships.” In the years following, these aims began to be realised when Oregon Project supported runners collected medals for the U.S.A. at the Osaka 2007 World Championships and the 2009 IAAF World Half-Marathon Championships. These results and the increasing outreach of the project are testament to the success of the venture itself and the staff working within it.

The focus of the keynote address then shifted to a fascinating insight into the personality and career of Alberto Salazar, who transitioned into the role of head coach of the Nike Oregon Project when the scheme began in 2002. Humorous stories were told to guide attendees through Alberto’s career and his involvement with Nike. Darren then discussed his own research interests, which are focussed around achievement motivation and self-determination theory, and explained the specific elements of the theory that he has found most useful in his capacity as a high performance director. Darren concluded the keynote address with a selection of applied implications, which are grounded in theory and have driven his work on the Oregon Project. These implications include providing athletes and coaches with self-referenced standards and performance indicators, involving individuals in planning and decision-making, being receptive to feedback (including criticism), and having an authentic interest in the athletes we work with.

In conclusion, this session formed an engaging keynote address, which emphasised the importance of artfully combining science and consulting. This relationship between research and practice was demonstrated in both the balanced foci of the presentation itself

and in the success of the Nike Oregon Project. Overall, the presentation provided delegates with fascinating insights, lessons for career development, and inspiring take-home messages.

Conference Highlight – Jo Maher

On the final morning of the conference a panel including Steve Portenga (APA Division 47 Practice Committee Chair, University of Denver), Mark Aoyagi (University of Denver), Traci Statler (California State University), Jon Metzler (Science Applications International Corporation), and Robert Harmison (James Madison University) convened to discuss “*Competency in sport and performance psychology: Connecting practice and education*”. Steve opened the panel by describing how the accountability and public perception of applied sport psychology equates with the competency of practitioners within the field. He then moved on to define the essential aspects of a profession, as per the American College of Sport Medicine’s (ACSM) definition. One of these elements, which AASP Certification fails to encapsulate, is a standardised system to train practitioners. Furthermore, Steve highlighted that the different training backgrounds of practitioners working with sports performers is an issue that needs to be addressed.

In order to fully understand what it takes to be a competent practitioner within the field of applied sport psychology, Steve emphasised that it is important to identify the essential elements of what we *do* as practitioners as opposed to *who* we work with. To illustrate this point, Steve used the metaphor of a psychologist consulting a truck driver not being referred to as “truck psychologist”. Related to sport psychology, the distinction was made between licensed clinical psychologists working with sports performers with sub-clinical issues, aiming to return performance to the level that it was at prior to clinical issues; versus sport psychologists’ applied work with athletes seeking to optimise performance. Given the difficulties highlighted with how we define the profession and the differences in associated applied practice, the term ‘performance’ was viewed as the key distinguishing

feature of the practice of sport psychology from clinical practice. Performance can be defined as having an evaluative component at a distinct point in time, thus encompassing sport. Therefore, the discussants proposed a key shift in terminology with the profession being better described as 'psychology of performance' in order to encapsulate what we *do* as practitioners. Following this, the panel examined the implications for training practitioners.

A key focus of the discussion centred on the issue of individuals requiring a clinical training background (licensure) to practise as an applied sport psychologist, which is a result of current market demands in the USA. Traci gave an emotional example of how an exceptional student failed to gain employment as she did not have licensure, despite a strong academic profile through to Masters and AASP Certification. Traci went on to describe how she has subsequently made a paradigm shift in the delivery of her education program, in order to better prepare students for licensure. Within the UK, recent legislation from the Health Professionals Council (HPC), which protects the term 'sport psychologist', has led to changes in the training structure of sport psychologists. A clinical background is now required if UK citizens wish to practise under the title of sport psychologist. A grand-parenting scheme was opened for three years to allow conversion for practitioners from a sport science background. However, a number of students with their first degree in sport science and a pre-accredited Masters have essentially been frozen out of the profession due to both the changing requirements and the limited time period provided to convert through the grand-parenting scheme. Steve provided examples of more inclusive conversions in other professions, such as Chiropractic, whereby changes to training pathways were implemented, but ten years have been granted in order to effectively implement the changes. Steve then described how Division 47 will work more closely with AASP in the future and highlighted that the future recommendations regarding the training and development of practitioners will be gradually introduced. In summary, the need to train practitioners more appropriately and ensure

competency within the field of sport psychology is a key topical issue. However, it is hoped that AASP will provide enough time for those practitioners who are required to retrain, and, in doing so, avoid the danger of losing excellent professionals from the field of sport psychology.

Closing Thoughts

To conclude, the AASP 2011 conference was a memorable experience for us and other attendees alike. The variety of sessions presented, topics covered, and social activities on offer seamlessly came together to create a fantastic five-day stint in paradise. Waikiki Beach was an incredible location and the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel provided an excellent venue. The panoramic views over the North Pacific Ocean when exiting many of the presentation rooms made for a surreal but wonderful experience for those who were able to make the trip to Hawaii. Conferences such as that hosted by the AASP provide the ideal opportunity for academic reflection on applied research, and it is with fond memories and a new sense of inspiration that we eagerly await the next AASP annual conference to be held in Atlanta during October 2012.

All authors contributed equally to this report.

References

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