A Parallel Approach to Performance and Sport Psychology Work in Esports Teams

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Abstract

Prompted by the paucity of existing literature on best-practice approaches to applied sport psychology in esports, this perspective paper proposes a parallel approach involving separate roles for a sport psychologist and a performance coach on the same esports team. This article briefly outlines a number of key practical and ethical considerations that underpin this approach as well as applied sport psychology work in esports more generally.

Keywords: sports psychology

Highlights

- A sport psychologist and an esports performance coach should work in parallel when possible
- Adopting the parallel approach reduces potentially problematic situations relating to confidentiality and conflict of interest that could arise when a staff member holds multiple roles
- Players and other staff members must be aware of the function and limitations of both roles

Background

Esports teams are increasingly appointing a staff member to provide applied sport psychology (ASP) support (Smith et al., 2019), which seems warranted considering the psychological demands experienced by competitive gamers (Smith et al., 2019; Poulus et al., 2020; Leis et al., 2020). However, the range of related role titles currently in use in esports has the potential to cause confusion and impede advances in esports performance. Moreover, a paucity of literature exists on best-practice approaches to ASP in esports (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020), which limits our ability to evaluate competence in this area and ethically and optimally support clients.

This paper advocates for two staff roles within an esports team. The first is a sport psychologist, ideally reserved for individuals who have either completed or are working towards training from a reputable representative body (e.g., the British Psychological Society, U.K.). One should be aware that "psychologist" including derivations thereof (e.g., "sport and exercise psychologist") is a protected title in some regions (e.g., Australia, U.K., U.S.A.). ASP practitioners that are certified and/or licensed (as opposed to holding a degree only or no credentials) typically adhere to an ethical code from a representative body, thus minimising potential harm to clients and protecting the practitioner themselves. Although no esports-specific training route currently exists (hence we discourage using the title "esports psychologist"), much of the ASP process (e.g., needs analysis, case formulation) seems transferable into this setting.

The second role is a "performance coach", an increasingly common role in esports teams that is sometimes seen as synonymous with a sport psychologist. This role, which has no formal definition nor is it a protected title, typically encompasses relevant expertise within one or more of the following areas: mental skills, sport and exercise science, personal training, nutrition, group dynamics and/or communication. Similar roles exist in traditional sports, for example, performance lifestyle advisors, performance knowledge specialists, and performance leads (Arnold et al., 2019). Although it may be advantageous for teams to employ someone that offers support in multiple areas, all parties should be aware of their professional limitations (Moore, 2003). For example, it may be appropriate for a performance coach to share general information about sports nutrition acquired from reputable sources (e.g., higher education, government guidelines) but personalised diet plans should be created by a dietician (a protected title in the U.K.). As budgets increase, it may be prudent to morph the performance coach role into a 'head of performance' role, responsible for coordinating licensed practitioners in relevant domains.

Parallel roles

One key advantage of appointing a sport psychologist and a performance coach is that it negates ethical concerns associated with combining roles, for example players withholding information from the sport psychologist-coach for fear that it might affect their status (Jones et al., 2007). This working relationship will now be delineated to avoid redundancy.

This perspective envisions that the sport psychologist is responsible for individual sport psychology consultations, in which they address the confidential needs of players in one-to-one settings. Indeed, confidentiality is one key reason for this as it lies at the heart of effective and ethical ASP practice (Cottrell, McMillen, & Harris, 2019) and is central to the ethical codes and professional training of most representative bodies. Certified ASP practitioners will be aware of the importance of informing players about the confidential nature of their working relationship, the exceptional cases in which breaking confidentiality may be warranted and

the consequences of breaking confidentiality without appropriate grounds or permission. Esports performance coaches may be less aware of these issues given the current lack of training routes and ethical practice standards specific to the profession.

Similarly, sport psychologists are likely to have the competence, understanding, and ASP 'tools' to support performance and well-being and to recognise when help is required beyond their remit (Moore, 2003). While a performance coach may have these tools, there are professional liability risks associated with practicing ASP without the appropriate credentials from a representative body. As such, we see the performance coach as part of–and concerned with coordinating and optimising–group activities with players and/or staff on a day-to-day basis. This may involve a process of observing and evaluating current team processes, providing education, implementing routines, and tracking health and performance habits. In cases where an esports performance coach has expertise in sport psychology, we are not precluding the provision of support, it is simply important that all parties understand the limits of their work.

Regarding group or organisational level support, the sport psychologist will have the skills to lead group sessions to provide ASP support to teams (e.g., team building) and organisations (e.g., culture change; McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016), although this may be unfeasible due to budgetary constraints or concurrent workload (e.g., other clients, professional coursework; Fletcher et al., 2011). A performance coach may also have these skills, or may be able to provide expertise in other disciplines (e.g., physical activity). Notably, group-based 'performance sessions' are valuable for esports teams and recognised as such. Deciding which role is responsible will depend on the relationship each has with the group, their level of engagement, and their expertise.

Role awareness

Establishing role awareness amongst all members of a team is important for reducing ambiguity, negativity, and overload (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Fletcher et al., 2011), especially within the current approach as the roles may be perceived as similar. It is vital that team management and coaching staff accept the approach as they hold the decision-making power to support or suppress the function of both roles (McCalla & Fitzpatrick, 2016). An initial team meeting to explain the responsibilities of each role, the potential benefits of a multidisciplinary staff and the decision-making structure may be effective to achieve this. Regarding the latter, although collaborative decision making and open communication seems preferable, this will be determined by the team's values.

An initial meeting can also be used to inform members that the individual work of the sport psychologist is bound by confidentiality (although informed consent forms should still be obtained prior to player consultations). Likewise, explaining that the performance coach is a member of the coaching staff and not bound by confidentiality may negate potential conflicts that could arise in 'dual role' situations (Jones et al., 2007).

We suggest that players and coaches are made aware that the performance coach typically participates in all team events (e.g., scrims) in order to stay abreast of developments in team dynamics and identify team needs, whereas the sport psychologist may not be contractually obligated to do so. Clarifying this will prevent players or coaches from making erroneous assumptions (e.g., the performance coach is assessing players' mental states whilst the sport psychologist appears not committed). When the sport psychologist is absent from events, the performance coach is responsible for relaying relevant issues and context. Indeed, the two roles should consider themselves as a 'team within a team' and frequently exchange information (within confidentiality limits) to avoid delivering contradictory information to

players. It also seems pertinent to be mindful of burdening the sport psychologist with inessential bureaucracy and meetings, as these are known stressors (Fletcher et al., 2011).

It's worth noting that sport psychologist should be encouraged to attend scrims as this may help build rapport with players. Furthermore it helps with understanding the context of work although, this level of engagement may be unfeasible for lower-level and online organisations whose scrims take place in the evening or on weekends. One possible exception to this, however, is the trial period in which players are selected. As the sport psychologist will work with all selected players, it seems professionally more appropriate to remain neutral in this phase (e.g., to avoid using a psychological opinion to determine a player's selection; Moore, 2003). In contrast, the performance coach is encouraged to attend 'trials' to offer the coaching staff observations (about players' communication or leadership skills, for example).

Ensuring all team members are informed about the two roles within the parallel approach allows them to work in close collaboration and be of greater benefit to the team. This working relationship may also further serve as a positive model for the team (i.e., 'practicing what they preach'; Fletcher et al., 2011), whilst the presence of a peer on staff may alleviate stressors common in ASP work (e.g., a lack of social support, perceived pressure to deliver results, perceived isolation; Fletcher et al., 2011).

Conclusion

A sport psychologist and performance coach should work in a parallel and complementary fashion in order to provide optimal and ethical support to an esports team. Both roles and the division of labour between them must be clearly explained to players and staff in order to avoid potential confusion or conflicts of interest. Further research to evaluate this specific approach and ASP in esports is required in order to provide a more substantial hierarchy of evidence on which practitioners can base their practice (i.e., evidence-based practice). Grounded theory and phenomenological approaches are particularly encouraged in order to capture the experiences of esports players and facilitate understanding of this unique performance domain.

Acknowledgements

Conflicts of Interest

The author confirm that there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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