Self-Disclosure within the Sport Psychologist-Athlete Relationship

Abstract

This article explores the use of self-disclosure within the sport psychologist-athlete relationship. A summary of prior research relevant to concept definition, contextual factors, and typologies of self-disclosure is provided. The conscious use of self-disclosure as an effective consultancy skill, alongside both the organic and facilitative integration of self-disclosure is discussed. We then position self-disclosure within the dynamics and boundaries of a unique practitioner context, that of the sport psychologist-athlete relationship, using Katz and Hemmings' (2009) professional relationship framework. This article proposes that future research into self-disclosure explores its integration within published models of best practice for consulting.

Keywords: self-disclosure, typology, sport psychologist-athlete relationship, consultancy

Psychologists, pre-dominantly in clinical and counselling settings (Gaines, 2003; Ruddle & Dilks, 2015), have held a long-standing interest in the role of practitioner self-disclosure. Edwards and Murdock (1994) reported that 90% of therapists engaged in self-disclosure. Recent research has moved beyond examining the frequency of self-disclosure to offer concept definition (Barnett, 2011; Knox, Hess, Petersen & Hill, 1997), understanding of therapist and client factors influencing self-disclosure (Barnett, 2011; Hill & Knox, 2002), as well as meeting calls for the recognition of a self-disclosure typology (Knox & Hill, 2003; Zur, 2008). Most recently, Ruddle and Dilks (2015) situated self-disclosure within direct practical applications for effective delivery within therapy settings, whilst Henretty, Currier, Berman, and Levitt (2014) signaled towards the key role[s] wider contextual factors play in a practitioner's decision regarding why, when and how to self-disclose. Similarly, Way and Vosloo (2016) recently called for a more developed understanding of self-disclosure, as a key

influencing skill, within the context of applied sport psychology consultancy. Their research raised numerous practical considerations for self-disclosure (i.e. benefits, drawbacks, awareness of client individual differences, and the importance of timing), and concluded with a set of guidelines for practitioners in the application of self-disclosure within a sport environment. These guidelines suggested that self-disclosure should be infrequent, given prior consideration, be sensitive to the client's needs and feelings, and the content of which should not be emotionally-charged for the practitioner. Despite Way and Vosloo's (2016) excellent opening foray exploring self-disclosure within applied sport psychology there remains a paucity of research into this area, particularly with regard to its implications for the long-term boundaries and dynamics of the sport psychologist-athlete relationship.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is twofold; firstly, to extend the conversation on self-disclosure in applied sport psychology and more specifically to summarise self-disclosure focused applied sport psychology research utilising a typological framework (Zur, 2008), and secondly, to propose the use of a professional relationship model (Katz & Hemmings, 2009) for better understanding the role and function of self-disclosure as perceived by both consultant and athlete within a relational context.

Self-disclosure: What is it?

A significant challenge in conceptualising self-disclosure is posed through the quantity and diversity of published definitions (Hill & Knox, 2001; Knox et al., 1997). The definitions offered typically refer to various influential factors but tend to lack consistency. For example, Barnett (2011, p. 315) simply describes self-disclosure as "the sharing of personal information by the psychotherapist to the client", whereas Knox et al. (1997) suggest that self-disclosure be defined as, "an interaction in which the [practitioner] reveals personal information about him/herself, and/or reveals reactions and responses to the client as

they arise in the session" (p. 275). Consistent with Knox et al. (1997), Way and Vosloo (2016) position self-disclosure, in applied sport psychology, as a form of verbal or non-verbal communication that reveals information about the consultant and/or their responses to the client, directly, or indirectly, through the consultancy process. While universal consensus definition remains elusive, due to the range and complexity of factors influencing self-disclosure conceptualisation, there is sufficient research and experiential evidence to suggest that self-disclosure has the potential to significantly influence key consultancy process related factors and valued psychological outcomes (Ruddle & Dilks, 2015; Way & Vosloo, 2016).

Key factors influencing practitioner self-disclosure

In the past, philosophically entrenched attitudes towards the use of self-disclosure have been somewhat negatively framed (Knox & Hill, 2003), with psychoanalytical practitioners in-particular suggesting that self-disclosure could only have a detrimental effect on the client, preferring to adopt the Freudian impenetrable mirror, i.e. not sharing or revealing anything at all personal, and reflecting the client's focus back to the individual themselves (Peterson, 2002), and arguing that "self-disclosure irrevocably contaminates and damages the therapeutic process" (Harmell, 2010, p. 27). Similarly, Way and Vosloo (2016) signpost towards the potential for less immediate and non-verbal forms of self-disclosure infiltrating the consultancy process with an unintended consequence of diverting attention more towards consultant, rather than client needs. In contrast, practitioners who advocate a working alliance (Joyce & Sills, 2014) report more favourable responses to therapist self-disclosure (Hill & Knox, 2002; Knox et al., 1997), with clients perceiving it with positive regard when it was related to a significant event, or when it normalised their own experiences, providing a positive model for behaviour change.

Practitioners guided by more humanistic and existentially framed philosophical traditions (Hill & Knox, 2001; Nesti, 2004) emphasising greater authenticity and trust within the client-consultant relationship may, however, utilise and experience self-disclosure differently. Within existential practice, practitioners use self-disclosure as a core higher order influencing skill and a vehicle by which storytelling is often used to inspire the client (Hill & O'Brien, 1999). In sport psychology, existentially grounded research and practice (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) has long made use of personal narratives in supporting athletes to confront 'issues' and, in so-doing, facilitated an enhanced awareness towards the realisation of a more self-fulfilling, authentic and resilient self-concept (Nesti, 2004). For existentialists, the primacy placed on the subjective experience and authentic self-disclosure between athletes and consultants reflects the need for the existence of a highly genuine, personal, and co-operative relationship within the immediacy of the consultancy encounter (Nesti, 2004), and beyond.

Significantly, however, instances of storytelling within applied sport psychology consultancy (Windsor, Barker, & McCarthy, 2011) may often reflect more instrumental motives for utilising self-disclosure and/or storytelling (e.g. normalising the consultancy experience; establishing 'buy-in' to psychological skills training programmes). Within some philosophical traditions (e.g. cognitive-behavioural, humanism) self-disclosure may be viewed as a technique or tool (e.g. questioning, imagery, goal setting), whereas others (e.g. existentialism) would position it as an implicit element of the relationship dynamics between athlete and consultant. The use of self-disclosure in the context of sport psychology consultancy is likely, therefore, to be significantly influenced by consultants' expertise in achieving congruence of philosophy and method (Lindsay, Thomas, Breckon, & Maynard, 2007), and also in recognising the implications for the nature and conditions supportive of 'effective' sport psychologist-athlete relationships.

The suggestion that self-disclosure plays an influential role in shaping valued facilitative conditions (e.g. establishing trust, developing an empathetic understanding, achieving congruence and unconditional positive regard) associated with effective practice has typically received more empirical attention in clinical psychology than in sport. Henretty et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis highlighted several client responses to therapist self-disclosure which resonate with some elemental relationship building factors such as similarity, familiarity and complementarity (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005), but also caution that there are significant moderators to the impact of self-disclosure such as timing, positive regard, and the duration of the professional relationship. It may be that in the context of applied sport psychology consultancy, self-disclosure is likely to be significantly influenced by individual differences factors (e.g. age, gender, appearance), as well as environment and contextual factors (e.g. intervention setting, consultant experience) and the subjective awareness and efficacy of consultants' meta-skills influencing self-disclosure regulation (e.g. reflective practice skill). Whilst acknowledging the over-riding sentiment that every self-disclosure carries with it an element of risk and potential threat to the perceived 'quality' and conditions associated with the consultant-client relationship, it is also important to recognise the potential for a more facilitative interpretation of self-disclosure within the context of the consultancy relationship.

Self-disclosure as an 'effective' intervention strategy

Knox and Hill (2003) suggested that self-disclosure be viewed as a useful intervention strategy, asserting its judicious use guided by client need and practitioner preference. However, while there are certain involuntary elements of practitioner self-disclosure which may be impossible to avoid (Mahalik, van Ormer, & Simi, 2000), an overriding principle of self-disclosure is that it is consented to by the client. Although, to assume only a conscious

verbal disclosure, fails to acknowledge the more emotional self-disclosures (Mahalik et al., 2000), for example body language, gestures, facial expressions, which are often unconsciously transmitted via non-verbal responses to the client's dialogue, as well as reflected through a sport psychology consultant's immersion within applied sport settings i.e. visible presence at early-morning training sessions, wearing the team colours/kit, or attendance at competitions. Despite the recent emergence of typologies and classification systems for self-disclosure (Knox & Hill, 2003; Zur, 2008), there remains little consensus regarding an organised structure for understanding the diverse types and efficacious (or not) uses of self-disclosure based on empirical evidence across a range of populations or disciplines. Ultimately for any practitioner, be it in a clinical, counselling, or sports psychology setting, the active use of self-disclosure as an intervention or technique is likely to be highly subjective, sensitive to situational determinants governing its efficacious use, and may vary on a case-by-case basis.

It is also important, at this stage, to advance the assertion that the relationships created between *sport* psychology consultants and athletes are often forged in radically different environments and governed by potentially differing philosophies (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004) and often using different processes and models (Keegan, 2016), to those in therapeutic and clinical settings. Therefore, to fully understand and appreciate the potential for self-disclosure to influence the practice of applied sport psychologists, it is important to conceptualise self-disclosure in the context of the specific demands and challenges facing applied sport psychologists rather than viewed through a 'therapeutic' lens.

Self-disclosure in the context of applied sport psychology consultancy

In the sport psychology literature, despite some empirical evidence locating self-disclosure as a key inter-personal professional skill influencing athlete attitudes and

expectations (Martin et al., 2001) as well as athletes' overall perceptions (Sharp & Hodge, 2013; Windsor, Barker & McCarthy, 2011) of sport psychologist effectiveness, there is a relative lack of research attention afforded to understanding how self-disclosure is used and influenced, in the context of applied sport psychology practice. Unlike psychological practice in a clinical setting, "the professional context of peripatetic work environments place particular demands on sport psychologists in ensuring and maintaining effective professional relationships" (Katz & Hemmings, 2009, p.19), as such the relationship may fluctuate dependent on the client and the consultant successfully navigating not only complex interpersonal dynamics, but also highly variable and potentially pressure-infused organisational and environmental backdrops to the consultancy. For example, travel to competitions with a team or individual athlete will incur a variety of social situations such as dining, socialising, presence at training and/or competition environments, all of which may potentially reveal another layer of both the athlete and/or the sport psychology consultant (Sharp & Hodge, 2013). Furthermore, the aforementioned research would suggest a need for acute awareness and understanding of the contextually sensitive tacit knowledge and skills associated with on-going monitoring, management, and evaluation of the consultancy (Katz & Hemmings, 2009). It is imperative, therefore, that the sport psychologist is aware of the potential consequences and opportunities this presents for rationalising the use of self-disclosure, and importantly how this fits into their own ethos of best practice (Barnett, 2011; Hill & Knox, 2001; Ruddle & Dilks, 2015).

A typology of self-disclosure in applied sport psychology research

As previously mentioned, self-disclosure plays an influential role in shaping valued facilitative conditions (e.g. establishing trust, developing an empathic understanding, achieving congruence and unconditional positive regard) associated with effective sport

psychology practice. Significantly, much of the literature reflecting self-disclosure (see Table 1) within the context of the sport psychology consultancy process has not sought to examine the strengths, limitations, or professional practice implications of self-disclosure to the same extent as in clinical settings. This lack of consideration is surprising given that self-disclosure represents a skill capable of orchestrating an effective working alliance, promoting authenticity, and supplementing the conditions for positive professional relationships (Ruddle & Dilks, 2015).

Despite the relative proliferation of research into self-disclosure from a clinical psychology perspective, compared with sport psychology; there remains a paucity of research that seeks to contextualise self-disclosure beyond the clinical setting and approach it from both consultant and client perspectives. Zur (2008, 2009) offers a unique digitally-mediated advance on self-disclosure, suggesting that research into practitioner and client self-disclosure (either sub-conscious or strategic) needs to move beyond the consulting room and be understood in terms of a wide range of potential factors (e.g. internet searches, spirituality, and political ideology) influencing self-disclosure aetiology, application, interpretation, and possible outcome[s] across settings. For example; with more and more sport psychology consultants engaging in self-promotion and advertising their services online, there is increasing opportunity for curious athletes (or ‘clients’) to uncover personal and professional ‘disclosures’ (e.g. sexual orientation, client testimonials, social media ‘posts’), that might contaminate the sport psychologist-athlete relationship and/or significantly influence the outcome of any future consultancy. Therefore, future research into the effective practice of applied sport psychology consultants, both experienced and neophyte, should be mindful of, and seek to further explore, the personal, professional, and ethical implications of self-disclosure use, in applied sport psychology settings.

Pragmatically, for a sport psychologist to decide when, and how, to use self-disclosure intentionally within the consultancy process, there needs to be a much clearer understanding of the diverse types of self-disclosure and how sport psychology consultants might intentionally, as well as unintentionally, apply self-disclosure to benefit the athlete and ensure congruence with the intervention goals. In other words, a broader and multi-layered understanding of self-disclosure will better ensure a wider and more critical approach in considering this aspect of applied practice (Ziv-Beiman, 2013). In light of this, a review of the applied sport psychology literature - exploring for examples of self-disclosure use within applied sport psychology research, utilising Zur's (2008) typology as an a-priori framework – is provided (see Table 1) to not only stimulate further research, but also raise awareness as to consultants' own use of self-disclosure and to facilitate relevant professional development.

Zur (2008) proposes five types of self-disclosure: deliberate, unavoidable, accidental, inappropriate, and client-initiated. 'Deliberate' self-disclosure either refers to the intentional, and/or strategic, revealing of personal information (*self-revealing*; e.g. consultant disclosing sensitive information from their past), and/or the consultant's self-disclosure occurring in response to the athlete in the context of the consultancy (*self-involving*; e.g. showing concern in response to the athlete's own disclosures, perhaps represented by a sensitively timed touch on the arm and/or accompanying empathic statement). 'Unavoidable' self-disclosure includes individual differences (e.g. age, gender, disability), personal factors (e.g. family background, religion, spirituality), specific behavioural responses (e.g. body language, frowns), and environmental factors (e.g. work location, competition travel/support); all of which may not be fully under control. 'Accidental' self-disclosure refers to unplanned moments whereby consultants unwittingly disclose information to athletes (e.g. being observed talking with a coach, or a team mate, either prior to or post consultation). 'Inappropriate' self-disclosure involves consultants sharing their own struggles and/or sacrifices with the athlete, which may

have the un-intended consequence of psychologically burdening the athlete (e.g. disclosing marital/relational difficulties, time-pressure, or a heavy work-load). Finally, 'client-initiated' self-disclosure is when athletes (or clients) deliberately seek out information on the consultant which may have consciously (e.g. business card, website, social media posts) or unwittingly (e.g. internet search results, online social media posts and social networks) been disclosed.

INSERT TABLE 1

The extant sport psychology literature (see Table 1) reveals more frequent (compared with unavoidable, accidental, inappropriate, client-initiated) instances of deliberate self-disclosures in the context of sport psychology practice. Therefore, it could be that deliberate self-disclosure is pre-dominantly used by sport psychology consultants as a means of inviting athlete self-disclosure as an entry point to the opening-up and relationship-building process (Way & Vosloo, 2016), and in creating facilitative conditions underpinning effective practice (Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Sharp, Hodge & Danish, 2015; Windsor, Barker & McCarthy, 2011). Adopting this point-of-view, however, poses some interesting paradoxes of practice. Firstly, despite deliberate self-disclosure being the most prevalent type of self-disclosure found within the professional practice evidence-base, there is little explicit acknowledgment of the term 'self-disclosure', and next to no evidence of more refined references to the specific type (e.g. deliberate) of self-disclosure being utilised by sport psychology consultants. Secondly, if deliberate self-disclosure is considered important to the opening-up and/or maintenance of the sport psychologist-athlete relationship, then it might be reasonable to expect to see more empirical evidence addressing cause and effect of deliberate self-disclosure (either planned for, or unwittingly) at different stages throughout the consultancy process. However, this does not appear to be the case with the evidence base reflecting a

preponderance of deliberate self-disclosure use in the early phases of the consultancy process and being more focused towards trust and rapport-building (e.g. Windsor, Barker & McCarthy, 2011; Woodcock, Richards & Mugford, 2008; see Table 1). The implication being, perhaps, that relationship-building between consultant and athlete, utilising deliberate self-disclosure intervention[s], is prioritised during early phases of consultancy as a function of consultants' reliance on neatly defined, and sequentially organised, consultancy process models (e.g. Keegan, 2016). It may also be that sport psychologists lack the professional language, culturally and contextually sensitive training practices, and a sufficient professional evidence base to accurately identify self-disclosure in all its forms, thus restricting its efficacious use across the entire consultancy encounter.

It would therefore appear warranted, to explore how self-disclosure might be deliberately applied within the broader consultancy framework of a consultancy process model (Keegan, 2016). For example, understanding self-disclosure in the context of different phases (e.g. case formulation, needs analysis, strategy formulation and intervention plan). However, it is also feasible that other types of self-disclosure, in the context of applied sport psychology consultancy, may permeate the consultancy process and sport psychologist-athlete relationship. These may be dynamically influenced by a wide-range of personal, environmental, contextual, and cultural factors, which extend beyond deliberate self-disclosures and include more unavoidable and client-initiated self-disclosures (Bull, 1995; Sarker, Hill & Parker, 2014; Windsor et al., 2011). During consultation it is likely that consultants' meta-skills (e.g. self-awareness, self-regulation, empathic accuracy, and reflection) will be key determinants in the timing and appropriateness of self-disclosure and will exert significant influence over on-going client and consultant perception of self-disclosure use (Cropley, Miles, Hanton & Niven, 2007), as the consultancy unfolds.

A worthwhile exploration would be to investigate the determinants of successful self-disclosure beyond the relational factors previously discussed. It appears evident that several factors could shape the perception and outcome of more unavoidable, accidental, and client-initiated self-disclosures. For example, thanks to social media both parties respectively may have formed an impression of the other long before they have even met, therefore careful consideration and attention to privacy settings must be a priority for any practitioner starting out. Additionally, the disclosure of one's religious beliefs may inadvertently create tension within the sport psychologist-athlete relationship where dissonance exists, and the potential for a shift to a more 'personal' stance in instances of congruence in spiritual or religious beliefs. There is little evidence supporting this assumption, but perhaps the question has just not been asked in sport consultancy settings.

From a professional development perspective, therefore, the use of a typology poses important professional practice-related questions for the sport psychologist as to the pertinence and qualified use of self-disclosure in practice. The consultant must initially consider not only the source of the [deliberate] self-disclosure in terms of personal and/or professional origins, but also ensure that it is something that is already resolved on a personal level and that self-disclosures of a professional nature are subjected to appropriate reflexive self-enquiry. The sport psychology consultant must also consider how the self-disclosure will be perceived by the client on a personal and professional level, and the resultant implications for the relationship and future professional judgment and decision-making (Martindale & Collins, 2013).

Navigating self-disclosure within the sport psychologist-athlete relationship

It is important to consider the multi-faceted nature of the sport psychologist-athlete relationship – professional and personal – and the key roles played by the facilitative

conditions (e.g. self-disclosure, empathy, trust, genuineness) supporting the relationship. Indeed, the boundaries and dynamics of the personal-professional roles implicit within the consultancy process will shape the very nature of the ongoing consultant-athlete relationship itself. For example, an internet search might yield a client-initiated and somewhat unavoidable self-disclosure (e.g., that the sport psychologist supports a particular team, a photo out socialising with friends) that shapes the athlete's perception of the sport psychologist as a person and might be reflected upon with reference to the athlete's beliefs and values of the sport psychologist as a person and a professional, which might subsequently influence the dynamics of the professional relationship. Alternatively, the sport psychologist might deliberately self-disclose within a consultation (e.g. that they support a particular team), reflecting the athlete's own interest in that sport, with the intention to build trust and authenticity, generating a personal connection, which subsequently influences the professional relationship. Katz and Hemmings' (2009) 1:1 Consultation Model provides an appropriate framework for exploring the aforementioned boundaries and dynamics of the sport psychologist-athlete relationship (see Figure 1). The impact of such revelations, such as the examples described above, could be perceived as either constructive or destructive dependent upon a number of contextual factors (i.e. nature/culture of the sport, stage of relationship, athlete values and interests, sport psychologist-athlete goals) and the subjective perceptions of both parties. Therefore, a dynamic and contextually sensitive understanding of self-disclosure which is more representative of the multitude of considerations facing applied practitioners, both immersed and/or consulting in applied sport settings, is needed.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Further applied sport psychology research and reflections from both neophyte and experienced practitioners would provide greater understanding of experiences of the varying

types of self-disclosure and their practical application within the context of sport psychology. Moreover, positioning this construct within published models of good practice and effective consulting (Keegan, 2016; Martin et al., 2001; Partington & Orlick, 1987, Poczwardowski et al., 1998; Poczwardowski, et al., 2004; Sharp et al., 2015; Windsor et al., 2011) to assist in formulating and maintaining effective sport psychologist-athlete relationships, may in turn further understanding of the unique and evolving role of the applied practitioner within a sporting context.

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Table 1:

Overview of Zur's (2008) self-disclosure types applied to sport psychology

SD Types	Description	Applied Examples	Strengths/Weaknesses	Practice Implications
Deliberate	*Intentional disclosure of personal information, verbal or otherwise. Either self-revealing or self-involving (reactive)*	➢ *Barker et al. (2011)* - Complete integration within the environment; presence at training / events ➢ *Cropley et al. (2007); Sharp & Hodge, (2013)* – Sharing personal stories to engage athletes, group sharing, and emphasise salient points ➢ *Woodcock et al. (2008)* – Honest and informal ➢ *Windsor et al. (2011); Barker et al. (2014)* – Mutual sharing for team building	➢ Enhances rapport and credibility with athletes; provides support to coaches; ➢ Strengthens relationship; asserts genuine support in athlete's development; normalises concerns ➢ Encourages trust; enhances team cohesion; increases understanding and knowledge of others	➢ Authenticity of disclosure required for building trust ➢ Avoid excessive deliberate disclosure ➢ Take time to consider the timing, context, appropriateness and athletes' individual differences ➢ Ensure disclosure is brief and focus is promptly brought back to the athlete
Unavoidable	*Gender, age, physical appearance, life outside the office.*	➢ *Bull (1995)* – Gender & social interactions ➢ *Ryba et al. (2013)* – Cultural awareness ➢ *Sarkar et al. (2014)* – Religious and spiritual beliefs	➢ Both athlete and practitioner bring their own cultural, appearance and personal beliefs to the relationship ➢ Little guidance on self-disclosure with regards to religion or spirituality	➢ Engage in supervision ➢ Ethical code of conduct ➢ Practitioners engage in reflection and be mindful of personal beliefs
Accidental	*Spontaneous reaction*	➢ No evidence found	➢ n/a	➢ Further investigation required
Inappropriate	*Beneficial to practitioner, may burden the client with information about self*	➢ *Petitpas et al. (1999)* – Considering motives behind disclosure ➢ *Brewer & Petitpas (2005)* – Sharing experiences to prove credibility/knowledge	➢ Lack of self-awareness may compromise relationship ➢ Sharing of emotionally unresolved information	➢ Ensure disclosure is for benefit of the athlete ➢ Avoid emotionally unresolved information
Client-initiated	*Client seeks professional and personal information about the practitioner*	➢ *Windsor et al. (2011)* - PDMS ➢ *Giges (1998)* – Meeting clients' needs	➢ Information obtained by client via other sources (i.e. social media, websites). Disclosed to satisfy client needs.	➢ Professional judgment needed regarding response to client ➢ Manage information published

Figure 1:

Katz and Hemmings' (2009) 1:1 Consultation Model