

Sport Advocacy

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Sport psychologists are uniquely positioned to serve in the role of advocate. This follows from the deliberate ethical foundations of practice, expertise in human behavior, a core focus on mental health and well-being, and the likelihood that relevant issues will arise in the course of their work.

The sport psychologist may be called on to act as an advocate on behalf of principles or persons. Advocacy on behalf of principles, typically in the realm of social justice, has long been a part of the landscape of sport. The progress with gender equity that culminated in Title IX legislation was preceded by substantial advocacy. More recently, widespread efforts throughout Sports Medicine and Science to raise awareness about head injury, have led to improved assessment and treatment.

Psychologists may encounter situations where advocating for an individual appears prudent, or may even be mandated. Advocacy for individuals is likely to be prompted by situations deemed inappropriate or unreasonable according to the conventional societal standards, where an issue in question is driven by the behavior of empowered others, and where that behavior is outside the ability of the individual to reasonably change. The nature of the behavior in question may be arguably dangerous (e.g., practices within a sport bearing on head injury risk) or outright illegal (e.g, sexual encounters with children by adults).

Correspondingly, the need for and urgency of action will also vary. The appropriate course of action in advocacy is also influenced by whether the behavior arises from an individual (e.g. bullying), a group (e.g., hazing), or an organization (e.g., lack of institutional control) – or some combination of these.

The sport psychologist may need to act on behalf of an athlete or coach, or any of the other stakeholders within the sport enterprise. Whereas, in one situation, the sport psychologist may need to advocate on behalf of the athlete regarding the behavior of a coach, another situation may lead to action on behalf of the coach

regarding the behavior of an athlete. Where there is a fiduciary relationship, the sport psychologist may also act on behalf of a sport organization.

For the psychologist, this may simply be an extension of the consulting experience, or part of a collective effort with a potentially diverse set of allies, such as is the case with position papers issued by professional organizations. The pursuit of advocacy may lead the sport psychologist to interact with a broad range of entities, including but not limited to: other psychological and medical professionals, sports organizations and governing bodies, law enforcement and governmental agencies, and the media.

Instances of social, moral, ethical and legal injustice may be overlooked, perhaps because there are many factors that make it easy to do so. The most well documented of these obstacles, diffusion of responsibility, was called into focus by the famous stabbing death of Kitty Genovese in New York City in 1964. The lesson from this controversy and the social psychological research that followed is that first and foremost, one must embrace responsibility to feel a mandate to act.

It is also difficult to buck the trend, that is, to move against established practices. Where “getting your bell rung” and getting back in the game is a sign of toughness, it can be difficult to effect change, as has been demonstrated -- but not impossible, as has also been demonstrated. This is an example of an enculturated blind spot, one that can be difficult to see around for those that have grown in a culture where such beliefs are endemic.

Even as light may come to be shed on issues, denial can be a spoiler – some things are just difficult to believe, even when the evidence is there, as is the case in the Penn State sex scandal. There is also self-interest and institutional recalcitrance to consider. Sadly, even with the best of intentions in the most just of causes, efforts often may not succeed.

It is noteworthy that the successes of Title IX and head injury came after years of small steps forward, interspersed with many setbacks. By embracing advocacy as a foundation of professional practice, the sustained and enduring action that drives change becomes more likely.

Working as an advocate is further compounded by the potential for the sport psychologist to be adversely effected personally and professionally. Those whose behaviors are called into question may adapt an adversarial stance, as was the case with Lance Armstrong. This may result in actions, taken formally or informally, against sport psychologists affecting their standing within the sport enterprise and undermining their ability to effectively practice. That is, the sport psychologist may fall prey to the skewed power dynamic that is driving the need for advocacy itself.

Advocacy is a responsibility that presents a substantial challenge to the sport psychologist, given the broad landscape of potential situations, the possibility for the incidents to be emotionally provocative, the varied paths of entry into the role of advocate, ethical and legal constraints and responsibilities, unanticipated consequences, and the often uncharted course toward a reasonable solution.

Much remains to be said and done in this area. Comments are welcomed.

Note: The perspectives presented above were initially prepared for and presented to the Coalition for the Advancement of Graduate Education and Training in the Practice of Sport Psychology in support of codifying the role of advocacy in graduate education and training.