Who is My Client?

Amy Baltzell, Robert J. Schinke & Jack Watson

It is easy to know who your client is when you have a private practice and performers contact you directly for your expertise as a consultant. During such instances it might well be your client paying you, setting up sessions and working independently of a family or sport system. However, when you begin working with clients in circumstances where one person is paying for the service and another person is receiving it, ethical challenges sometimes result. At the time, the question might become whether your client is the performer, a parent, a coach, a manager, the athletic department, sports medicine staff, or several of the aforementioned? There is often required some honest reflection on the sport psychology consultant’s (SPC) part to figure out whom we are serving, who we report to, what we report and how to conduct ourselves to maintain confidentiality in an effort to do no harm and maximize the good of our work.

Briefly consider the following two scenarios: consider who your client(s) would be, where your loyalties would lie, and what the two scenarios have in common:

Scenario 1: You’ve been hired to work with a 13-year old Olympic hopeful gymnast. She is having a tough time with the pressure of competing and falters in her easier moves when competing. Her mother is a full-force helicopter (i.e., over-involved) parent and is insistent on knowing about the content of your sessions.

Scenario 2: You’ve been hired by the manager of a Triple-A baseball team. You provide the players with basic mental skills and one-on-one consulting. A few weeks into the job, the coaches want to know which players you are talking to and how they are progressing with their mental readiness.

The gymnast and the players on the baseball team are clearly the primary clients. Yet there also exists the possibility that the consultant has some investment with others on the periphery of the exchange when payment is made by a third-party. Often those hiring the consultant will assume a right to know ongoing, the content of the SPC – athlete exchange. In such instances, it is important for the consultant to sort out what to share with the invested parties while maintaining the confidentiality of the formal client – in the scenarios above, both being the athletes. Hence, we refer to the athletes above as primary clients and those on the periphery of the service as secondary clients.

Are we more obligated to the people we are working with as primary clients, or those paying for our service? We suggest that SPC’s can have obligations to both types of clients. Arguably, the loyalties to each are different and both need to be respected without
putting at risk one of the essential contributions of the sport psychology consultant – that of maintaining confidentiality with the primary client. The question is: How might there be an agreement that accounts for loyalties and boundaries? Below, we provide a few key ideas that will help you navigate the complexity of working with multiple relationships within a sport system.

**Clarify your relationship at the beginning.** The key to avoiding misunderstandings around how information from confidential meetings are handled is to set up boundaries and parameters about services before beginning a new contract with multiple layers of clients (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001). Consentual agreement from the outset is necessary pertaining to what will be kept confidential and also, what will be shared with the secondary clients (Moore, 2003). One tidy and ethically sound way to create working boundaries is to clarify up front how confidentiality will be handled in a written informed consent form (IC) with the formal client. The IC could (a) include a description of the services offered, (b) highlight any potential limits to confidentiality, (c) the financial costs, and (d) the likely risks and benefits of the sport psychology services (Moore, 2003). In addition, it is important to explain the contents of the IC to the client / athlete. All primary clients need to be in charge of deciding what will be shared among the layers of the organization (the coach, manager, owner and other players) and what will remain private within their client - consultant relationship.

To achieve consentual agreement with the secondary clients requires a more careful consideration. The consultant will require some contextual intelligence, meaning an understanding of how the sport organization works (Brown, Gould & Foster, 2005). Often, coaches (and parents) will expect that you will share confidential information with them (Wolfson, 2002). In such moments, to maintain positive relationships and secondary client trust, you can encourage those on the periphery to directly ask the athletes about the content of their sessions all the while indicating that what is shared should be at the discretion of the athlete (Brown & Cogan, 2006). Concurrently, through athlete and SPC dialog it is important for the athlete(s) to maintain an open and transparent line of communication with those assisting in the sport context (Haberl & Peterson, 2006).

**Don’t be a Lone Ranger.** It is also important for SPCs to have support to make ethical choices in their practice. When working in the multi-layered competitive sport terrain, SPCs can benefit from the maintenance of checks and balances. Our suggestion is for the consultant not to work in isolation (Mason & Hayes, 2007). The authors have developed a peer relationship with an SPC at arm’s length from our work, with an extensive ethics background and also a familiarity of the complexities we are challenged by. In addition, all SPCs can refer to AASP’s Ethical Guidelines throughout consulting and even pose a question to the ethics committee via the internet.

**Conclusions**

What follows are several suggestions in relation to the present topic of professional practice.

1. **Consider how all members of the sport context will perceive your consulting.** Even if you are vigilant about maintaining confidentiality, the relationships that you develop
with the multiple layers of clients can influence the athletes’ perception of your ability to maintain confidentiality. Your ability to maintain confidentiality may be questioned if you are perceived as becoming too friendly with a coach, a parent, the sports medicine team or a team owner. Note that if you work in higher level sports – at the elite amateur and professional levels – you may find that players are slower to trust you because of their fears of who you might be loyal to, beyond them.

2. **Being able to maintain confidentiality is one of the most powerful tools that the SPC has to retain clients.** Clarify in advance with the formal clients and others in the sport organization (from parents to owners) what will be shared (Stapleton, Hanks, Hayes & Parham, 2010). Thus, when you sit down one-on-one with a performer, all people involved within the sport context will understand the boundaries of confidentiality.

3. **Stay morally and ethically engaged.** Given the complexities associated with multiple layers of clients, our suggestions is that you make sure to set up checks and balances within your practice. Establish and maintain peer consultation as part of your commitment to effective practice. None of us are above the call to be trustworthy to all parties with whom we consult.

**References**


