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ISSP Position Stand on the Use of the Internet in Sport Psychology

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Abstract

The development of the Internet has created many opportunities for expanding the way that knowledge and services have traditionally been disseminated in all businesses and fields of study. Along with these new opportunities for development comes the potential to misuse this technology. In a profession such as sport psychology, misuse of the Internet can easily damage the reputation of the field, and result in harm to individual clients. As a means of establishing standards for the proper use of the Internet, it is essential that ethical guidelines be expanded to include the use of the Internet in sport psychology. This Position Stand identifies several of the potential uses of the Internet in sport psychology, describes several problems and potential unethical practices that must be considered when using the Internet, provides a rationale for the development of Internet standards, and proposes an initial set of ethical standards for the use of the Internet in sport psychology.

Introduction

Consumer related computer technology seemingly changes on a daily basis. The Internet and other technologies also continue to grow and develop at a similarly estounding pace. As these changes occur, people continue to find new and innovative ways of utilizing these technological advancements for their personal and professional benefit. The field of sport psychology is not an exception to this trend. Professionals and laypersons both use the internet extensively in business, industry, communication, education and entertainment. The Internet provides a variety of services that enable individuals to obtain valuable information for their needs. These services are often rapid and inexpensive. The use of the Internet by sport psychology professionals has largely improved communication and the dissemination of information among professionals, students, and laypersons. These advancements in technology lead not only to positive consequences and the advancement of the field of sport psychology, but also bear ethical dilemmas, which are of interest to the sport psychology profession.

With the continuous development of new and more powerful forms of communication and information retrieval, it is inevitable that individuals in the field of sport psychology will harness these resources for personal and professional growth. The utilization of these resources can have both positive and negative effects upon the field of sport psychology, and the clients that are served. In order to excentuate the benefit of this technology and minimize the pitfalls, guidelines should be developed to help structure the manner in which the Internet is used. This Position Stand (a) provides a rationale for the continued study of the Internet as a viable means of service delivary in sport psychology, (b) outlines several developments related to the use of the Internet in sport psychology, (c) describes several problems and potential unethical practices related to the use of the Internet in sport psychology, (d) identifies a need for the development of Internet ethical standards within the field of sport psychology, and (e) provides a list of potential ethical standards to guide the use of the Internet in sport psychology.

The Use of the Internet in Sport Psychology: The need for Empirical Support

The effectiveness of the Internet in providing sport psychology services to athletes and coaches has not yet been sufficiently studied. Many sport psychology practitioners believe that the Internet has the potential to assist athletes and coaches in achieving a heightened level of proficiency. However, there are several issues related to the use of the Internet for professional consultation that have not been researched, and need to be examined. There are several crucial questions related to the use of the Internet that need to be answered before one can use and provide services which meet reliable, professional, and ethical standards. Questions such as "what effects do Internet based sport psychology services have on athletes?", "how does one assure that the sercices provided are appropriately used?" and "how confident can one be that negative effects are not experienced by the recipients of the services?"

Sophisticated and reliable methodology is required to account for all of the positive, neutral, and negative consequences that such services may have upon clients. Some attempts have already been made. For example, Walther and Burgoon (1992) and Colon (1996) have shown that individuals and groups

responded positively to the psychological services provided to them via the Internet. Their responses were similar to those of individuals and groups who were provided 'regular' psychological service (i.e., working 'face to face' with a consultant). In the future, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary investigations should be conducted to study how psychologists, sport psychologists, and clients can most benefit from the use of the Internet in the application of services.

Potential Uses of the Internet in Sport Psychology

The Internet and its related technology can be utilized within the field of sport psychology in many different ways. The following section briefly outlines several of the potential uses of the Internet in an academic field such as sport psychology. It should be noted that the list of uses of the Internet in sport psychology is in actuallity much greater than is mentioned in this article.

Marketing and the Dissemination of Information

One of the keys to the development of any business is marketing. Effective marketing strategies enable potential consumers to become aware of the quality and types of services available to them. The Internet can serve as an efficient and effective means of disseminating information to consumers. Marketing strategies commonly include the development of WWW home pages, and advertisements on web sites, search engines and bulletin boards. These WWW web sites go one step further than traditional marketing approaches, and provide a forum for question and answer services, self-help psycho-educational resources (e.g., imagery and goal setting exercises), and the procurement of professional resources (e.g., books, videos, tapes).

Distance Learning, Guidance and Supervision

Presently, several universities and organizations provide distance learning opportunities in sport psychology over the Internet. Through the use of web sites, individuals are able to learn about course assignments, read the necessary text assignments, watch lectures, ask questions of professors and

classmates, receive instructional guidance, and turn in assignments. These opportunities allow individuals to live and work in one geographic area of the world, and take specific classes offered in other geographic locations to round out their knowledge base.

Quality supervision is one of the keys to the development of effective skills in all areas of professional practice. The Internet can now be used as a tool to access the experience of domain specific specialists in distant locations. For example, this technology now makes individual and group supervision possible with experts from all domains worldwide (Marino, 1996; Myrick & Sabella, 1995), which can facilitate the dissemination of new and innovative skills, and enhance the professional development of both new and established practitioners worldwide.

Counseling/Performance Enhancement

Use of Internet technology allows individuals and teams/groups from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations to receive professional guidance from a sport psychology practitioner. Technology such as video-conferencing, e-mail, telephone and chat rooms make it possible for anybody with access to the appropriate resources to have contact with a service provider. Because of the limited number of sport psychology practitioners, there are many regions of the world where individuals do not have an opportunity to talk with a qualified practitioner. These Internet resources also make it much easier for physically disabled individuals with reduced mobility to receive services. Furthermore, the degree of anonymity created through the use of Internet services may also encourage some individuals to seek help who have been reluctant to do so in the past (Offer & Watts, 1997; Sampson, Kolodinsky & Greeno, 1997).

If used wisely, Internet technology can also make face-to-face meetings more efficient (Sampson, 1998b), by allowing both parties to improve their preparation for upcoming sessions. Clients can be sent basic intake forms, assessments, homework assignments, and exercises to be completed prior to meetings. Clients can also use these services to ask practitioners pertinent questions between sessions. This advanced preparation has the potential to speed the progress of sessions by allowing for more detailed discussions/treatments to develop during session.

Databases, which contain sport psychology information, can be stored for athletes and coaches on the Internet. Athletes can share their psychological experiences before, during and after training sessions, games and competitions. For example, athletes can report on the intervention techniques that they have used, and what impact these techniques had on their performances. They can also share with others their feelings about using drugs and alcohol, sexuality, and relationships with coaches, friends and family. Sport psychologists can use this information while working with athletes and teams. Similar databases have been used in the past, and continue to be used frequently in psychology (Wilson, 1995).

The Internet can provide athletes with self-guidelines to be implemented independently. The guidelines can be directed to specific athletic activities (e.g., how athletes can cope with anxiety before games and competitions, as well as to other aspects of life, or how to more efficiently organize their free time). In psychology, it has been shown that information in the form of self-guidelines that was introduced by psychologists via the Internet assisted sexual abuse survivors to overcome psychological barriers (Finn & Lavitt, 1994).

Through the Internet, a variety of sport psychology questionnaires, tests and devices can be made available on an as needed basis to clients. These instruments can be scored on line, and the results sent directly to a practitioner. These instruments can provide valuable information to both the client and practitioner, and can be used by clients as a means of making confidential information available to the practitioner at any time

Locating Practitioners and Referrals

The search for a qualified sport psychology practitioner is not always an easy one. When beginning this search process, athletes often contact professionals via the Internet who are not located in their geographic region. The Internet can then be used by practitioners to locate other qualified practitioners for referral in the athlete's geographic location. Once a referral has been made, the Internet can facilitate this transition by simplifying communication between all three parties, and enabling records to be electronically transferred.

<u>Medium for Discussion and Collaboration</u>

The field of sport psychology is a very specialized branch of psychology. Beyond the initial commitment to sport and exercise, practitioners often develop very specific interests within the field. This specialization often makes it difficult to locate informational resources and other professionals with interests in these same topics. The Internet, and technology such as list servers, chat rooms, and e-mail facilitate the processes of collaborating with other professionals and finding information and resources.

Potential Problems Surrounding the Use of the Internet in Sport Psychology

Based upon the above introduction of the potential uses of the Internet, it is obvious that as a resource, it has the power to improve the field of sport psychology, and help drive it into the 21st century. However, several concerns should also be noted when professionals utilize this technology for the purpose of helping others (Sampson, 1998b). Several concerns and potential unethical practices related to Internet use by sport psychology practitioners are outlined next.

<u>Training</u>

The ability to effectively and ethically use the Internet in applied sport psychology should be thought of as a competency area that should to be learned with practice and the guidance of professionals. As with other psychologically related techniques, individuals should only utilize the Internet in their practice after gaining appropriate education, training, and supervision. Without such training, practitioners are much more likely to make mistakes that may cause harm to a client. With this in mind, it would be beneficial for practitioners to gain pre-service and in-service training related to the use of Internet resources (Sampson, in press). A list of the basic competencies that sport psychology practitioners should develop may include (a) use of Internet search engines, (b) familiarity with current web sites in sport psychology, (c) evaluation of web site functioning, (d) integration of sport psychology interventions with Internet use, and (e) awareness of ethical issues and related professional standards.

<u>Confidentiality</u>

Confidentiality is one of the primary ethical concerns related to practitioner-client interactions. With this in mind, it it is important to note that information transmitted over the Internet should not be considered confidential. Although steps such as data encryption can be taken to increase the likelihood that information will not be accessed by others, there is no way of guarenteeing this. Therefore, there is always a risk that confidentiality will be breached when information is transmitted over the Internet (Hannon, 1996). With this in mind, it is essential that practitioners keep their knowledge of data security methods current, and make every effort to protect the confidentiality of their clients.

<u>Validity of Assessment</u>

It is important that assessment software delivered over the Internet be validated for use in this environment (Allen, Sampson, Herlihy, 1988). To ensure valid assessment of client problems, practitioners planning to develop a clientele for Internet based services would have to check the validity and reliability of all assessment instruments delivered over the Internet.

<u>Credentialing</u>

Using the Internet for delivering applied sport psychology training enables practitioners; at least physically; to provide these services to individual clients across state and federal boundaries (Bartram, 1997). Currently, both licensing boards and we as practitioners are not certain how licensure regulations pertain to the delivary of services by practitioners over the Internet and across such boundries (Sampson et al., 1997). This uncertainty about the application of services over the Internet is certain to strike a chord with many professionals in the field of sport psychology, where arguments over the boundries of servies abound.

<u>Relationship Development</u>

At the present time, the effect that services provided via the Internet, teleconferncing, and e-mail will have upon relationship formation and other essential aspect of counseling are unknown (Sanders & Rosenfield, 1998). It is likely that videoconferencing and face-to-face interactions are similar but not

identical when it comes to relationship development. Oravec (1996) states that videoconferencing often results in greater participant awareness of physical appearance as well as a more intense focus on the task at hand than does face-to-face interaction.

Fewer similarities exist between text based and face-to-face interactions. Text based interactions decrease the ability to exhibit and read several forms of nonverbal communication. This communication format can also limit the communication of empathy. In all, it is very likely that text based communications decrease one's ability to develop strong therapeutic relationships.

Quantity of Information

With the advent of the Internet, the amount of data available to individuals interested in sport psychology related topics have increased dramatically (Sampson, 1998b). Unfortunately, the information found on the Internet often overwhelms many individuals. One of the major side effects of becoming overwhelmed is that individuals become apathetic and discouraged. Such feelings tend to have a negative effect upon their decision making.

Inconsistent Quality of Information

Although much of the information found on the Internet is current, accurate and helpful, The quality of other information found on the Internet has been called into question (Sampson, 1998b). Since the information found on the Internet is not subject to a great amount of censure, anyone can post information that they would like to disseminate. For this reason, when non-professionals post information, it has a high likelihood of being inaccurate and/or out of date. Unfortunately, individuals are not always able to determine the quality of the information that they are receiving. Problems then arise when people access information on the Internet and automatically assume that it is factual, and make decisions based upon this assumption.

Limited Access to the Internet

Although the costs associated with Internet use have decreased, and access to the internet has increased, these resources continue to be unattainable to many people for financial and technical reasons

(Noll & Graves, 1996; Walz, 1996). With this in mind, practitioners from all psychological disciplines should work towards making public access to the Internet more widespraed and on making equal opportunities to all people around the world a possibility (Sampson, 1998b).

Addiction

Athletes and coaches who continually utilize psychological services offered via the Internet may develop an 'addicted behavior' (Brenner, 1997). Such behaviors are associatied with the lack of inhibition to any advice suggested to the user, and not questioning the usefulness of this advice. People with addictive behaviors look for any solution or experience of others without taking into account the suitability of such solutions to their own situation. Sport psychology practitioners should be aware of such behaviors, particularly among children and youth who look for fast and easy solutions. Sport psychology practitioners are encouraged to search for efficient solutions for this problem.

The Need for Ethical Guidelines

The field of sport psychology is in a postion to benefit greatly from the recent developments of the Internet and its related technology. For this field to fully benefit from these developments, it is essential that ethical guidelines be established to help promote the safe and effective use of these services. Such guidelines need to focus issues of confidentiality, data transmission and storage, credentialing, referrals, quality and quantity of information, training, and validating Internet resources (Sampson, 1998a). However, it should be noted that the promotion of the effective use of the Internet should not stop once these guidelines have been established. Once they have been established, it will be up to ethics committees to stay abreast of the evolution of the Internet. As the Internet changes, ethical guidelines must evolve to ensure that the field of sport psychology is promoting the safety of its members and the clients that utilize their services. Without such a commitment to evolution, the field of sport psychology will risk becoming stagnent, and may lose the trust of those individuals who utilize its services.

Proposed Ethical Standards for the Provision of Sport Psychology Services On the Internet

The following standards are proposed for the use of electronic communications over the Internet for the provision of sport psychology services. "Sport psychology services" is a general phrase used in this Position Stand to indicate services that are developed and implemented with the intention of improving participation and performance in a sport and/or exercise environment. Individuals who implement these skills will be referred to in this Position Stand as "sport psychology practitioners" regardless of their training background and licensure status. These guidelines have been adapted from statements made by the American Counseling Association (1999), the National Board of Certified Counselors (1999), and Bloom and Sampson (1998).

<u>Legal Considerations</u>

Sport psychology practitioners should confirm that their liability insurance provides coverage for on-line services. Practitioners should also confirm that the provision of such services does not violate applicable (i) state or local statutes, rules, regulations, or ordinances (ii) codes of professional membership, and/or (iii) statutes of state licensing boards.

Sport psychology practitioners seek appropriate legal and technical assistance in the development and implementation of their on-line services. Development and maintenance of such services requires specific core knowledge. Practitioners are responsible for developing and maintaining these technical competencies. Such competencies should include, but are not limited to the use of Internet services such as e-mail, web browsers and list servers, web site development, knowledge of appropriate legal and ethical codes, knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of internet services, and the ability to use audio, video and projection equipment.

<u>Confidentiality</u>

A. Privacy of Information

Sport psychology practitioners take steps to ensure that clients are sufficiently informed of the limitations of (i) computer technology in the application of sport psychology services, and (ii) the problems associated with ensuring complete confidentiality of electronic communications transmitted over the Internet.

1. Secured Sites: To decrease the potential for breaches of confidentiality, sport psychology practitioners provide their on-line services through "secure" web sites or e-mail communications that use up-to-date encryption technology to protect the transmission of confidential information. Such secure web sites should also be utilized for other services (i.e., supervision) on the Internet.

2. Non-Secure Sites: To decrease the risk of potential breaches of confidentiality, sport psychology practitioners provide only general information on non-secure web sites and e-mail communication applications. Such general information may include non-client-specific topical information that may be of interest to all clients, such as third-party resources, referral information, addresses, phone numbers, and other contact information. Other information on a non-secure site may include links to third party web sites such as licensure boards, certification bodies, and psychoeducational resources. With such links, the onus of responsibility is on the practitioner to investigate and continually update the content, accuracy, and appropriateness of the material contained in any of these links.

B. Informational Notices

1. Security of Web Site: Sport psychology practitioners provide readily visible notice viewable from all web sites or e-mail locations from which the client may send information that (i) information transmitted over the Internet may not be secure, (ii) whether or not the practitioner's web site is secure, (iii) whether or not information transmitted between the parties will be encrypted, and (iv) whether or not special software is needed to access these transmissions, and how to get this software.

2. Professional Identification: Sport psychology practitioners should provide readily visible notice to clients as to the identities of all professionals who will have access to information transmitted by the client. The identities of these professionals should include their education, licensure, certification, and practice area. Should more than one practitioner have access to the electronically transmitted information, clients should be instructed how to direct information to a specific practitioner.

3. Client Identification: Sport psychology practitioners take steps to identify their clients, verify their identity, and obtain alternative methods for contacting clients in emergency situations. Imposter concerns (i.e., individuals who are not clients, but are posing as clients) should be addressed through the use of technology such as video conferencing, code words, numbers, or graphics.

C. Client Waiver

Sport psychology practitioners require clients to sign waiver agreements stating that the client (i) acknowledges the limitations inherent in ensuring client confidentiality of information transmitted through the provision of on-line services, and (ii) agrees to waive his/her privilege of confidentiality with respect to any confidential information transmitted on-line that may be accessed by a third party (a) without authorization of the client, and (b) despite the reasonable efforts of the practitioner to arrange a secure on-line environment.

D. Records of Electronic Communications

1. Safety and Confidentiality: Sport psychology practitioners develop and maintain appropriate procedures for ensuring the safety and confidentiality of client information acquired through electronic communications. Such procedures may include encryption software, proprietary on-site file servers with fire walls, saving all on-line or e-mail transmissions to a hard drive or file server,

creating regular tape or diskette back-up copies, creating hard copies of the transmissions, and keeping all such saved information protected by lock and key.

2. Saved Information: Clients should be informed of the length of time and method of preserving session transcripts, session notes, and assessment data. Clients should be informed of the possibility and/or frequency of technological failures.

E. Electronic Transfer of Client Information

Sport psychology practitioners transfer confidential client information electronically to third party recipients only when (i) both parties have secure transfer and/or acceptance capabilities, (ii) the recipient is able to effectively protect the confidentiality of the client's information, and (iii) an informed written consent of the client, acknowledging the limits of confidentiality, has been obtained.

Establishing the On-Line Counceling relationship

A. The Appropriateness of On-Line Counseling

Sport psychology practitioners develop an appropriate intake procedure for potential clients to determine whether on-line services would be appropriate for the needs of the client. Practitioners warn clients and potential clients that on-line services may not be appropriate with certain clients and topics. Clients should be informed of the topics that are believed to be inappropriate for services over the Internet (e.g., eating disorders, violence, etc.). Clients should be informed to the extent possible of the potential risks and benefits of their anticipated use of on-line services. Steps must be taken to ensure that clients are intellectually, emotionally, and physically capable of using and benefiting from the on-line services, and of understanding the potential risks and/or limitations of such services.

B. Counseling Plans

Sport psychology practitioners develop individual on-line treatment plans that are consistent with

both the client's individual circumstances and the limitations of on-line services. Factors that should be considered include, but are not limited to initial client appraisal, diagnosis, and assessment methods. Should on-line services be considered inappropriate for a specific client, the practitioner should avoid entering into or immediately terminate the on-line relationship, and encourage the client to continue the relationship through an appropriate alternative method.

C. Continuing Coverage

1. Scheduled Contact Times: Sport psychology practitioners provide clients with a schedule of times during which the on-line services will be available, including reasonable anticipated response times. Clients should be aware of exactly how often messages will be accessed.

2. Alternative Communication: Clients should be provided with an alternative means of contacting the professional at other times, including emergencies. Sport psychology practitioners should obtain from clients and provide to clients, alternative means of communication such as telephone numbers and pager numbers for the event that the on-line services are unavailable for some reason.

3. Alternative Practitioners: Sport psychology practitioners provide the name of at least one professional who will be able to respond to the client in the event that the practitioner is unable to do so for any extended period of time.

4. Local Back-Up: Sport psychology practitioners provide the client with a list of local resources that are available to them in an emergency. Such resources may include the number and address of a local practitioner who is trained to handle individuals in crisis, and the number to a local telephone counseling service. Such information should be gathered before a consulting relationship is entered into.

D. Boundaries of Competence

Sport psychology practitioners provide on-line services only in practice areas within their expertise. Areas of competence should be defined as areas in which one has obtained adequate education, training and supervision.

E. Minor or Incompetent Clients

Sport psychology practitioners must take steps to verify that clients are above the age of minority, are competent to enter into the professional relationship, and are able to give informed consent. In the event of minor children, incompetent clients, or clients who are incapable of giving informed consent, sport psychology professionals obtain the written consent of the legal guardian or other authorized legal representative of the client prior to commencing the on-line services with the client. Steps should also be taken to verify the identity of the consenting individual.

F. Clarifying Potential Misunderstandings

Potential misunderstandings may arise during the provision of on-line services as a result of the lack of visual cues. Clients should be informed as to the process of clarifying such misunderstandings.

G. Practitioner Disclosure

Sport psychology practitioners may wish to ensure that, minimally, the client has the same data available about his/her service provider as would be available if the sessions were to take place face to face (e.g., gender, ethnicity, etc).

H. Equity Issues

Sport psychology practitioners need to be aware of the disparity in access to Internet services caused by the cost of such services. Practitioners should take steps to promote equal access to all individuals through the development of free access points in schools, public libraries, and other public

places.

I. *Awareness of Local Conditions and Events*

Sport psychology practitioners must be aware of the effect that local conditions and events (e.g., weather, local tragedies, and yearly events) can have upon a client and the therapeutic relationship. The practitioner must take reasonable steps to become aware of significant local events and conditions that may affect clients. Such steps may include monitoring the client's local newspaper if it can be found online, conducting web searches for major events in the client's region, and being consistent about asking the client about local events.

Conclusion

The Internet has emerged as an extremely powerful tool for the development and promotion of sport psychology. This technology makes it easier for individuals both within and outside of the field of sport psychology to gain access to sport psychology information and resources. For this technology to reach its optimal potential, both students and professionals in sport psychology must develop competencies in this area, and become aware of the potential benefits, problems and concerns associated with its use. For this to occur systematically across the profession, it is necessary for ethical standards to be developed that provide guidance for the use of this technology. Only when this occurs, will the Internet reach its potential as a vehicle for improving the field through enhanced knowledge production and dissemination, while still limiting the adverse effects that it can have upon the field of sport psychology.

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