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Examining the Field of Applied Sport Psychology in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

We examined sport psychology services in Denmark (e.g., educational and professional backgrounds) using a survey to gather data from 78 sport psychology practitioners. Descriptive statistics were used to generate an overview. The findings highlight the importance of considering accreditation because there are several different practitioner backgrounds. Most had a background in sport science ($n = 32$) or psychology ($n = 15$), corresponding with ISSP and FEPSAC guidelines. Yet, the remaining respondents ($n = 31$) covered several backgrounds (e.g., business coaching, occupational therapy). Also, educational institutions should focus on readying practitioners to work with children and adolescents, since 70% of clients were younger than 21 years old.

KEYWORDS

Accreditation; dual-role psychologist; mental health; practitioner development; youth athletes

It is increasingly relevant to examine how countries develop sport psychology practitioners because more sports clubs and organizations are looking for these services (Quartiroli et al., 2022). Researchers interested in individual practitioner support and development have mainly focused on reflective practice (Knowles et al., 2007), challenges for experienced and early career practitioners (Martin et al., 2021), and working with young athletes (Henriksen et al., 2014). At a systemic level, recent research by Quartiroli et al. (2022) attempts to provide multinational clarity on the sport psychology profession's identity by outlining legal, social, political, cultural, and contextual challenges. And at the national level, studies are showing the state of sport psychology practitioners in the Flemish part of Belgium, the French-speaking part of Belgium (Sanchez et al., 2005), New Zealand (Sullivan & Hodge, 1991), and the United States of America (Meyers et al., 2001). Whilst valuable, this research is dated. Yet, national studies can provide an essential backdrop to future development as they

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outline current strengths and challenges. Hence, we suggest that it is timely to investigate the current landscape of education and accreditation, especially in the light of Moesch et al. (2018) suggestion that these systems develop over time.

Studies examining sport psychology in specific regions or countries (e.g., Sanchez et al., 2005) suggest that degree-holding psychologists and people without credentials often coexist. Though practitioners without credentials can have strong abilities, it also makes it difficult for clients to gain the most suitable help if they are unsure of the different providers' abilities. To this end, Moesch et al. (2018) highlighted the need to develop specific training programmes in sport psychology and certify people working as sport psychologists. Although there has been an increased focus on ensuring the quality of sport psychology services, many countries still have unclear standards (Moesch et al., 2018). Hence, a need to clarify the status of applied sport psychology provisions in individual countries might be a critical next step for researchers to support practitioner development. Building the joint position of the ISSP, FEPSAC, ASPASP and AASP on professional accreditation (Moesch et al., 2018), we believe it is critical to examine the qualifications and knowledge base of sport psychology practitioners in countries touted for their ability to develop athletes in a socially desirable way.

Denmark as an important benchmark for national sports programmes

Denmark is often described as highly competitive in international elite sports despite a small population (close to 6 million citizens) and a significantly smaller budget for Olympic and professional sports (e.g., handball, ice hockey and football) compared to larger countries. Denmark's sports federations and professional clubs must be innovative to stay competitive internationally. The common understanding of the success is the Danish government's national elite sports law, which specifically highlights the need for developing athletes in a socially responsible way. The early formation of the sport psychology team at the Danish elite sports organization, Team Denmark¹, is an example of such socially responsible innovation (Diment et al., 2020). However, research (Henriksen et al., 2014) suggests that sport psychology practitioners unaffiliated with Team Denmark or other larger sports federations account for the majority operating in Denmark. To date, there is still limited knowledge about the backgrounds of the people practising sport psychology in Denmark.

The limited knowledge of provisions creates challenges with certification and ethical guidelines for most practitioners operating in Denmark. In Denmark, several trade associations might be associated with sport psychology practitioners, namely Dansk Psykologforening (Danish Psychologists

Association), Dansk Psykoterapeutiskforening (Danish Psychotherapists Association) and Dansk Idraetspsykologisk Forum (Danish Sport and Exercise Psychology Forum). Only Dansk Psykologforening has a protected title (i.e., psychologist), and there is currently no formal and protected accreditation for sport psychologists in Denmark, which is also the case in many other countries (Quartiroli et al., 2022).

Team Danmark states that sport psychology practitioners must have a relevant two-year master's degree in psychology (i.e., the Danish title of Cand. Psych) or Sport Science focused on sport psychology and relevant experience in elite sports. Danish Football Federation has more vague criteria stating that practitioners must have either (a) a two-year master's degree in psychology, (b) a two-year master's in sport science with a speciality in sport psychology/talent development, (c) a two-year master's in sport science or psychology as a primary or secondary subject (i.e., common for students studying to be a high school teacher in Denmark), (d) a one- or two-year master's degree in sport psychology, (e) an educational plan to reach one of the above educational criteria, or (f) have a competency certificate with recognized practical experience issued by the Danish Football Federation. The vagueness and differences in criteria create challenges regarding what qualifies a sport psychology practitioner, as outlined by Moesch et al. (2018) and the relationship between sport psychology practitioners and its parent discipline, psychology.

Recognizing the limited clarity should motivate further inquiry into who provides sport psychology services, as inadequate competencies can have high ethical and moral costs. Accordingly, we believe examining who carries out sport psychology services in Denmark is critical. A focused exploration can inspire similar countries (e.g., in size, culture, or stage of accreditation status) to propose ethical guidelines for practice. An examination of the country context of Denmark is in line with recommendations made by Moesch et al. (2018) to understand the current state of sport psychology in individual countries. Thus, the purpose of the study was to examine the field of practitioners in applied sport psychology in Denmark, independent of educational background, membership lists and certifications.

Methods

The study uses a quantitative approach to offer a snapshot of the current status of sport psychology services in Denmark using descriptive statistics. Such an approach is comparable to other studies examining sport psychology in other countries (Meyers et al., 2001; Sanchez et al., 2005; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991). This study complies with the Danish Integrity Act in research and Vancouver rules for authorship, see www.icmje.org.

Sampling and respondents

Cooperation with the Danish Sport and Exercise Psychology Forum and Team Danmark on the aim of the study help to reach a diverse practitioner field that might be working with athletes (e.g., licensed psychologists and mental health professionals, mental coaches, consultants, life coaches, etc.). Potential respondents were contacted through diverse channels: (1) Danish Sport and Exercise Psychology Forum social media accounts and newsletter (distributed to 115 potential respondents), (2) Team Danmark's sport psychology network (e-mail list of 25 potential respondents), which includes both licensed psychologists and other sport psychology practitioners, and (3) an executive coaching network (hosted by the University of Copenhagen). In total, the questionnaire is expected to have reached 200+ practitioners. Data collection occurred from January through March 2021. The final sample included 78 respondents, 56 men and 22 women, with a mean age of 37 years (from 22 to 79 years). The respondents had, on average, 7.7 years of experience (range 0–40 years) working in applied sport psychology.

Survey

The survey was pilot tested with a group of sports psychology practitioners, followed by dialogues with other researchers to minimize issues. The survey included multiple-choice and open-ended questions (contact the authors for the final questionnaire):

1. One section investigates general demographic questions like age, gender and ethnicity. Current employment status is also investigated by questions such as; do you work full-/part-time as a sport psychology practitioner? How are you organized (e.g., self-employed, employed by a club)? What best describes other types of employment (e.g., coach, clinical psychologist?). This sections contained 13 items in total.
2. Another section investigates educational background like university degrees, speciality area, professional training. Less typical educations within the field of sports psychology is also investigated such as life coach, stress coach, psychotherapist. We also scoped for respondents clinical qualifications, by questioning are you formally qualified to treat mental health disorders? Last but not least we assessed their membership status of/in professional and/or trade associations (e.g., union). This section contained 8 items in total.
3. The last section investigated the respondents work with clients, for instance their typical age groups, sporting level of clients, clients'

reasons for seeking support and primary initiator of client collaboration, understood as who contacts you to start working with clients [e.g., parents, coach, friends, the client]? This sections contained 10 items in total.

Results

Educational background and professional status

The survey showed a mix of accredited (i.e., psychologists) and unaccredited practitioners working in sport psychology in Denmark. Most practitioners entered the field of applied sport psychology with an educational background in sport science (n=32, 41%) or psychology (n=15, 19%). Accordingly, the 15 respondents with a psychology background were the only ones who reported being qualified to work with clinical issues. Further, the 15 respondents with a master's degree in psychology and the 32 respondents with a two-year master's degree in sport science correspond with the Team Danmark and suggested FEPSAC (Moesch et al., 2018) criteria for sport psychology practitioners in Denmark. The remaining respondents (n=31, 40%) come from various backgrounds, including philosophy, psychotherapy, education, business coaching, management, occupational therapy and health science. Yet, these educational backgrounds can have implications for the boundaries of applied practice, such as working within clinical psychology or treating disorders (see the section on clinical issues below). Our findings are comparable to Sanchez et al. (2005) in that practitioners may have several diverse backgrounds.

Being the coach to a sport psychology client

We found that 27 (35%) of the respondents had worked as a sports coach, and 16 (21%) currently occupied at least a dual role of being both a sports coach and a sport psychologist. Previous research on the dual- and multi-roles of psychologists in and out of sport suggests there may be benefits and drawbacks to such double roles (Feddersen et al., 2021).

Clients

In our survey, we asked about the most common client age group among sport psychology practitioners in Denmark. Results suggest a broad group of clients from all age groups for sport psychology practitioners in Denmark. However, asking the sport psychology practitioners themselves who their primary or typical age groups are for sport psychology provisions, the majority responded 14–17 years (32%), 18–21 years (38%),

22–25 years (23%) and other age groups (7%). These results suggest that the typical client of a sport psychology practitioner is young, thus implying a particular focus on and educational need for sport psychology practitioners for adolescent and young athletes (relative to their sport).

Keeping in mind that many work with children, adolescents, and youth athletes, we also inquired whether the sport psychology practitioners had collected and given their employer a children's certificate (i.e., police record) in the last year. In total, 41% reported that they had done this within the previous year, while 49% reported not doing it (though it is a legal obligation in Denmark for sports providers working with participants under 18 years) (10% reported it as unimportant). This could imply a particular need to remind sport psychology practitioners and employers to do so in the future for ethical and legal reasons.

The research team also wanted to investigate the competitive level of the typical client of a Danish sport psychology practitioner. It was found that the client's level of competition was exclusively national or international, and athletes were either semiprofessional or professional (96%). Meanwhile, few clients were competing on a regional and amateur level (3%). This suggests that sport psychology in Denmark, primarily, is an option for highly specialized athletes with some formal living in/or of their sport.

Working conditions and organization

The survey also details sports psychology's working conditions and organization in Denmark. Only 27% of the sport psychology practitioners who answered the survey reported sport psychology as their full-time job. This could indicate either an overflow of sport psychology practitioners in Denmark or difficulty making a full-time living off sport psychology in Denmark under the current conditions and organization. Most reported being self-employed (50%), while a large group reported being appointed by a sport or leisure time club/sport provider (38%). A few worked in educational settings (such as school, gymnasium or similar) (11%). Very few were employed in a sport psychology company or partnership (1%). These numbers suggest that the organization of sport psychology in Denmark on the job market could be lacking. The survey indicates that the Danish Sport and Exercise Psychology Forum is the most common branch organization (55% of the participants are members). However, many sport psychology practitioners were not members of any organization or association (27%). These findings suggest that many practitioners fight their own battle as self-employed or face the challenges of working for a club/sports provider.

Discussion

The purpose of the current paper was to examine the field of sport psychology practitioners in Denmark. The primary findings include: (1) a mix of diverse educational backgrounds present within sport psychology practices in Denmark; (2) some sport psychology practitioners in Denmark filling a dual role as coach and sport psychologist (21%); (3) while (20%) are licensed to work with clinical issues, (4) most clients of sport psychology practitioners were young (between 14–25 years), live in Denmark (65%), and compete at national or international level; (5) relatively few (as it is considered mandatory) sport psychology practitioners who work with youth clients (41%) have handed in a child certificate to their employer, as Danish law demands; and (6) few sport psychology practitioners in Denmark are employed full time (27%), with most self-employed (50%). Large variations in educational background were found in this study, which can be seen as a sign of positive diversity within the field. Yet, it could also reflect the lack of an accreditation system, which could move the field forward (Moesch et al., 2018).

We also found that some sport psychology practitioners worked in at least a dual role (i.e., coach and sport psychologist). A recent study (Feddersen et al., 2021) found that coaches might experience ethical dilemmas navigating the boundaries between being the coach and delivering sport psychology simultaneously. At worst, mishandling these roles could profoundly challenge coach-athlete relationships if the coach exploits privileged knowledge to, for example, deselect an athlete to improve chances of winning. Nevertheless, it is often beneficial for coaches to know how their athletes are doing psychologically (Feddersen et al., 2021). Yet, dismissing the potential moral and ethical costs of overstepping in dual- or multi-role relationships would be unreflective considering the recent spotlight on mental health and proper support in sports (Reardon et al., 2019). Maintaining the coach-athlete relationship whilst also delivering sport psychology provisions could hinge on practitioners seeking domain-specific professional support, where a specialist provides independent guidance and supervision to navigate ethical dilemmas (Feddersen et al., 2021).

Reardon et al. (2019) explained that many athletes might not recognize mental health symptoms, such as those of depression. In Denmark, a recent study (Kuettel et al., 2021) found that 21% of athletes in a large sample across sports reported moderate to severe depression symptoms. Kuettel et al. (2021) also reported that 14% of Danish athletes experience moderate or severe anxiety symptoms. These numbers show that athletes may be vulnerable to several comorbid clinical issues. Kuettel et al. (2021) also suggested that stigma and the context of sport influence the threshold for contacting and engaging in psychotherapy. 80% of our sample were

not qualified to treat clinical issues, which, combined with a high threshold for help-seeking, may allow many mental health disorders to go undiagnosed and untreated. It is, therefore, imperative that sport psychology professionals have a high level of qualifications or at least know the limits of their practice. Thus, we urge the field to consider providing practitioners with the skills and competencies to understand the boundaries of their practice and when to refer clients to a specialist (e.g., clinical issues).

Results suggest that 40% of the participants in the current study hold education and/or knowledge from fields not considered adequate for sport psychology practice by international sport psychology associations (e.g., business coaching, philosophy) (Moesch et al., 2018). These findings suggest a substantial risk for athletes to receive unqualified support. Risks could be that sport psychology practitioners miss signs of weight changes, nonfunctional overreaching (i.e., accumulation of training load with adequate recovery) and overtraining, as these could be relevant signs of depressive symptoms (Reardon et al., 2019). However, based on this study's findings, a concern on behalf of the athletes could be whether the Danish practitioners (especially with inadequate training) are equipped and trained to detect such solely based on educational standards. Organizations such as Danish Sport and Exercise Psychology Forum and Team Danmark should guide athletes, parents, and clubs to ensure they receive qualified support. Also, these organizations should take their role within ethical and moral guidance for practitioners serious to develop the profession. For Danish practitioners in sport psychology, ethical boundaries of practice and how and where to refer clients should be fundamental to setting up an applied practice.

Suggestions for developing an accreditation and educational system

We now consider the current state of developing an accreditation system in Denmark. Our study and Sanchez et al. (2005; Belgium) were carried out in contexts without formal sport psychology accreditation. Thus, it might be different in countries like the United Kingdom, which has established pathways for sport psychology. Our findings showed that 45 potentially lived up to the criteria proposed by Team Danmark (of 78 respondents, approximately 73%) and, possibly, 56² lived up to those of the Danish Football Federation. The discrepancy shows that there are issues to overcome as sport psychology develops. We suggest that sport federations and national elite sport organizations (e.g., Team Danmark, the Danish National Olympic Committee [i.e., Dansk Idrætsforbund], and the Danish Football Association) should collaborate to outline a shared standard for practitioners to ensure ethical practice. Moving toward a shared standard could entail developing the current system in the direction of the FEPSAC

accreditation (Moesch et al., 2018) to take advantage of the established opportunities. Many participants in the present study are early on the pathway to a FEPSAC accreditation due to limited opportunities for and engagement with supervision (i.e., 31 or 40% of all participants had supervised practice (Moesch et al., 2018)). Professional development through supervision is standard within psychology. Setting up supervision practitioner development should be prioritized since a more structured approach could improve services (Quartiroli et al., 2022). Therefore, we believe that agreeing on a shared standard should entail outlining requirements for supervision and/or opportunities to engage in continued professional development. Future research should examine the barriers and benefits of supervision for sports psychological practitioners in Denmark.

Finally, we urge the sport psychology field (in particular in Denmark) to acknowledge that many practitioners work with youth athletes (Henriksen et al., 2014). The need for such provisions is only increasing, as with the example of Danish Football expanding the use of sport psychology, often related to youth players in football academies. This development is also in line with Henriksen et al. (2014), who report that many work with youth athletes, particularly early-career sport psychology practitioners. Consequently, the educational material and courses must focus on children and adolescents in sport to provide specific competencies and not treat youth athletes as mini-adults. Especially because youth athletes often face different challenges than adult athletes (Henriksen et al., 2014). The demand for sport psychology in Denmark is increasing, so it is up to the sport psychology field to meet this demand while strengthening the knowledge, abilities, and provisions being provided.

Strengths and limitations

It is a limitation that respondents were mainly recruited from the Danish Sport and Exercise Psychology Forum, coaching, and Team Denmark networks. This may lead to a bias in some results, as we were not given access to Danish Psychological Association members (e.g., as they may have provided more insight into clinical issues). Moreover, as a first investigation in Denmark, the scope has been broad and many themes were covered. The descriptive data thus suggests follow up studies investigating subjects such as practitioner boundaries in their role, or the need of their clients.

Conclusions

Our findings show that various educational backgrounds exist in Denmark, and some sports psychological practitioners have dual-roles as coach and

sport psychological practitioner. Few have a clinical background, and few work as sports psychological practitioners full-time. There seem to be missing guidelines on how practitioners must meet standards of providing mandatory child certificates (similar to the Disclosure and Barring services check in the UK or Working with Children Check in Australia). Besides these results, we also find that the next steps for developing sport psychology in Denmark are at the organizational and regulatory levels to enhance the profession's credibility and competencies. Educational institutions should consider focusing on youth and developmental psychology to prepare young practitioners for their jobs. The findings should also encourage governing bodies, such as the Danish Football Association, to consider the requirements they demand of clubs and psychology practitioners.

Notes

1. Team Danmark is a government funded organisation charged with promoting elite sports in Denmark. They aim to create the best conditions for Danish elite sports and the individual athletes through a whole person approach. Team Danmark supports sports and athletes based on their performance history and future potential, primarily in the top-8 at international competitions (e.g., world championships and Olympic Games).
2. Participants who were students in line to reach the education criteria were included in this estimate.

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