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Supervision: Research Questions to Move the Field Forward

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**Supervision: Research Questions to Move the Field Forward**

Trainee sport psychologists often display anxieties about their initial attempts to help clients. They appreciate support from their supervisors. Equally, supervisors sometimes question their abilities to help trainees, and they may search the literature, hoping to find direction from the discipline’s bank of knowledge. Some supervisors realise, however, they need to expand their search into related disciplines, such as counselling and clinical psychology. Although counselling and clinical psychologists have a long history of discussing supervision, their sporting brethren are still becoming familiar with the topic and still grappling with how to translate the knowledge into practice. The first sport-related articles on supervision appeared in the mid-1990s (e.g., Andersen, 1994; Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1994), but they did not trigger research programmes on the topic. Additional research will help individuals learn to supervise practitioners stepping into service delivery.

Supervision involves an interpersonal relationship in which supervisors help supervisees examine their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours about their client interactions to achieve desirable outcomes (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). Primary outcomes include safeguarding clients’ welfare; ensuring athletes receive effective and ethical services; and helping supervisees develop as humane, skilful, informed, and self-aware practitioners. In this chapter, we review existing research and propose avenues to advance knowledge, allowing professionals in the discipline to address challenges within supervision.

**Summary of the “State of the Art” Literature**

The earliest discussion on supervision appears to be a presentation at the 1992 Association for Applied Sport Psychology conference (Carr, Murphy, & McCann, 1992). Andersen and his colleagues published the initial empirical and theoretical articles on
supervision in sport psychology (e.g., Andersen, 1994; Andersen et al., 1994). Since these seminal articles, researchers have seldom positioned supervision as the primary focus of their investigations. Instead, supervision is typically a side dish to the main meal and appears in studies focused on topics such as trainee learning experiences (Tod, Marchant, & Andersen, 2007), ethics (Etzel, Watson, & Zizzi, 2004), practitioner development (McEwan, Tod, & Eubank, 2019), and career outcomes (Fitzpatrick, Monda, & Wooding, 2016). Table 1 presents five studies in which supervision was the main meal, and these investigations represent the major topics researchers have focused on.

The studies in Table 1 illustrate the breadth of the area researchers have explored. They have provided data on the types and amount of supervision occurring in the field (e.g., Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker, 2004), although given the age of these studies the information is now likely outdated. Investigators have explored trainees’, practitioners’, and supervisors’ perceptions and experiences related to supervision (Fogaca, Zizzi, & Andersen, 2018; Foltz et al., 2015, Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, in press). Also, researchers have identified what trainees wish to learn in supervision (Hutter, Oldenhof-Veldman, & Oudejans, 2015). When reviewing these studies with a primary focus on supervision, several key observations emerge.

There are few studies on any one topic, knowledge is fragmented, and many gaps exist across the terrain. For example, prevailing studies typically focus on the supervision of trainee sport psychologists. Such dyads have an inherent power imbalance, because the supervisor is typically an experienced and qualified practitioner, who is evaluating the supervisee’s competence and acting as a gatekeeper to practice. Different types of relationships exist in supervision. Peer supervision is another type of relationship, involving colleagues of equal standing. Meta-supervision is a relationship where an individual supervises another person supervising a practitioner (Barney, & Andersen, 2014a).
Investigations on peer and meta-supervision are lacking, but if conducted would help guide practice.

More broadly, there is much scope for explorers to open up the supervision territory and stake a claim. The existing discipline-specific knowledge often rests on single studies, limiting our confidence in the transferability, credibility, and robustness of what we believe we know. We lack answers to many descriptive questions, such as what supervision is happening? Who is supervising and who is supervised? Why do people engage with or avoid supervision? When is supervision most likely to happen? How do people learn to supervise? What occurs during effective and healthy supervision?

Without a clear picture of the supervision that happens in the field, professionals need to draw on literature and research external to the discipline to advance theory and practice. Some professionals have drawn on counsellor supervision and development theory to inform their research and help them suggest applied implications (Fogaca et al., 2018; McEwan et al., 2019). To date, sport psychologists have drawn primarily on Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2013), and Stoltenberg’s (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2009), theories when researching and discussing practitioner development and supervision. Evidence supports parallels between these counsellor supervision and development theories and the findings on how sport psychologists mature and evolve (e.g., McEwan et al., 2019; Tod, Andersen, & Marchant, 2011). Counsellor psychologist supervision and development theories (and those from other helping professions) can enlighten sport psychology research and literature, but best serve as a starting point because they are not tailored towards understanding the journey of the sport psychologist. For example, they do not document the specific demands that sport psychologists face as trainees or autonomous practitioners. Discipline-specific studies will uncover the contexts and cultures shaping supervision in sport psychology and represent an avenue of work that can lead to concrete and specific applied implications.
Supervision has emerged, however, as a theme in research focused on other topics. The most visible body of related work in which the topic arises is practitioner development. Practitioners, for example, rate supervision as one of the most influential learning activities in their growth as sport psychologists (McEwan & Tod, 2015; Tod et al., 2007). Longitudinal studies reveal ways in which supervision contributes to consultants moving from being practitioner-led problem solvers to client-led collaborators (McEwan et al., 2019; Tod et al., 2011).

Despite the lack of research, professionals have not ignored supervision completely. Authors have written opinion pieces, reflective articles, review papers, and case studies addressing topics such as challenges, benefits, and logistics associated with supervision (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). In recent years, reflective articles have discussed the role of mindfulness in enhancing the supervision relationship (Andersen, Barney, & Waterson, 2016; Barney & Andersen, 2014). Nevertheless, researchers need to answer many questions before a useful understanding of supervision emerges that is grounded in empirical data.

**Five Major Questions to Guide Research**

**What are the amounts and types of supervision practitioners receive?**

Professional bodies, such as the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP; US), the British Psychological Society (BPS; UK), and the Australian Psychological Society (APS; Australia), prescribe the minimum hours and types of applied work and supervision students must achieve for certification or registration. The community, however, does not know if these requirements are being achieved or the quality of the contact. Some investigators have examined these questions when exploring sport psychology graduates’ early career plans and outcomes, but these studies are largely dated (Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). Understanding current supervision practices and graduates’ career outcomes will help
researchers to build theories that provide an accurate picture of the current supervision landscape, and will assist professional bodies and educators design and deliver supervisor training effectively.

Investigators could use quantitative surveys to describe the amount and types of current supervision practices and compare results against prescribed standards. Sound surveys will emerge if professional bodies and universities collaborate to avoid errors associated with surveys. For example, education providers could detail the number and types of individuals enrolling and completing postgraduate qualifications leading to registration or certification. These data will define the population of trainees to help eschew coverage, sampling, and nonresponse errors (Ponto, 2015). In countries where professional bodies accredit or oversee the quality of education programmes, communities could standardise data collection methods to evade measurement errors that erode confidence when pooling data from different training providers.

To compliment these surveys, investigators can examine participants’ experiences of supervision. Both quantitative and qualitative studies are relevant. Qualitative work could examine how people perceive, interpret, and structure their supervision experiences. Quantitative studies could explore the frequency of participants’ perceptions and interpretations, along with identifying correlates. For example, investigators could assess if a greater proportion of neophyte trainees prefer supervisors to provide direct guidance than their advanced comrades. Further, researchers could also check if preferences for supervisor behaviour correlate or predict trainees’ levels of anxiety and confidence. These specific suggestions speak to models of supervision, another area where research will advance knowledge.

**What are the optimal ways to match models of supervision with trainees’ development needs?**
Supervisors can draw from several models to tailor their assistance towards supervisees’ needs (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). Examples include behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, phenomenological, psychodynamic, and developmental models. Beginning trainees may benefit from behavioural models, because the focus is on skill development and supervisors offer direct answers to specific questions. Seasoned practitioners may profit from phenomenological or psychodynamic models where the emphasis is on inter- and intra-personal dynamics and supervisors collaborate with supervisees to explore issues arising in client sessions (Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000). Researchers have not explored, however, these conjectures in sport and exercise psychology contexts or even if supervisors are aware of supervision models.

These conjectures assume learning to help clients begins with mastering communication skills before gaining insights into relationships and human interactions. Skills and insights, however, are intertwined. For example, insights about human interaction inform decisions about how to apply particular communication skills. Numerous communication skills exist, and relationships involve an endless variety of interactions. Both trainees’ and autonomous practitioners’ competencies in these numerous communication skills varies considerably, along with their abilities to interpret interactions with clients. Rather than stating that behavioural models suit trainees, or that psychodynamic theories suit seasoned practitioners, a helpful suggestion is for supervisors to recognise the trainees’ current needs, strengths, and situations before tailoring any guidance to ensure it is effective. This suggestion assumes supervisors can tailor their assistance and they have developed competences to do so. The sport psychology literature does not contain evidence to help people decide when to apply, or move among, specific supervision models. Researchers who examine the role of supervision models in sport and exercise psychology will help stimulate
the development of theories tailored to the discipline, and provide data to ensure that applied practice is based on a solid foundation of evidence.

Longitudinal qualitative case studies describing supervision will allow for evidence-based decision-making. Researchers conducting longitudinal case studies will explore how supervisor skills and attributes, such as flexibility, humility, and ability to manage power, enhance trainee growth. The contributions that longitudinal case studies yield will be proportional to the extent they provide rich description of the supervision dyads examined. Fogaca, Zizzi, and Andersen’s (2018) longitudinal mixed method study of nine supervision dyads illustrates the type of investigation that can advance theory. They employed interviews, participant diaries, and a quantitative inventory, and they were able to propose a theoretical understanding of supervision grounded in data. Researchers who provide rich and evocative descriptions will enhance the transferability of knowledge in ways that allow readers to reflect on their circumstances and theorists to paint comprehensive landscapes. Detailed maps of supervision will serve well, those mentors wishing to learn how to guide their protégés and professional bodies wanting to design supervisor-training curricula.

**How can educators train supervisors effectively?**

Few countries have formal training pathways for sport psychology supervisors, and currently trainee education rests on the implicit assumption that qualified practitioners make suitable supervisors. Just as elite athletes do not always make helpful coaches, effective sport psychologists may not be useful or constructive supervisors. Some practitioners will be outstanding supervisors, whereas others will need support and training to gain supervision skills and knowledge. Research focused on how to prepare supervisors optimally will contribute to applied psychoeducational interventions, or training programmes that enhance the quality and effectiveness of supervision.
Supervisor training will yield individuals capable of establishing, maintaining, repairing, and terminating relationships with trainees. Various challenges exist that individuals need to navigate to ensure trainees benefit from supervision. Examples of these challenges include determining: the fit between trainee and supervisor, the handling of personal and ethical boundaries, the cost of the supervisor’s time and help; the frequency, duration, mode, and content of supervision meetings; and the way supervisors and supervisees handle disagreements.

Although professionals have not examined sport psychology supervisor training, research exists in related fields, such as clinical psychology, counselling, teaching, and coaching. An initial port of call for sport psychology researchers may be to conduct systematic reviews of supervisor training in related fields. Systematic review methodology has diversified in recent years (Tod, 2019), and scope exists to examine the supervisor training literature from multiple perspectives. Reviews of the topic in other disciplines will help sport psychology investigators from digging ground others have already ploughed (e.g., Wheeler & Richards, 2007). It may be possible to gather the fruit from seeds others have sown.

The yields from reviews of other disciplines will compliment empirical studies of supervisor training. Action research designs (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), for example, will advance knowledge, but also assist practitioners, professional bodies, educators, and researchers in implementing and assessing principles, strategies, and programmes associated with supervisor training. Participative action research designs allow for researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to collaborate, helping ensure that training programmes fit well with local landscapes and that relevant people have faith in the interventions (e.g., that diversity is celebrated, Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

What are the active ingredients in supervision?
Active ingredients are variables allowing people to benefit from helping relationships (Tod, Hardy, Lavallee, Eubank, & Ronkainen, 2019). Few researchers have examined factors ensuring trainees benefit from supervision (Fogaca et al., 2018). In light of the limited number of studies in the area, research on the active ingredients in supervision will fuel theory development. Also, professionals will profit in several ways from studies exploring the topic. Supervisors, for example, will gain insights into facilitating supervision relationships, so that trainees have opportunities to grow as practitioners. Professional bodies will be able to develop evidence-based policies, guidelines, and supervisor training pathways. The benefits practitioners and professional organizations accrue may foster high levels of supervision that underpin trainee and consultant growth, which may contribute to improved athlete-client outcomes and service delivery relationships.

Investigators can advance knowledge about the active ingredients in supervision by conducting quantitative experiments and qualitative studies underpinned by narrative analysis. Experiments, especially randomized controlled trials, will let researchers address the question “which variables cause positive outcomes in supervision?” A dismantling study is a useful experiment to conduct. Dismantling studies help researchers assess which elements in a supervision package cause change (Behar & Borkovec, 2003). Investigators randomly assign some participants to receive all components in a supervision package, whereas other individuals receive only some components. A principle advantage is that researchers hold many variables constant across the conditions, and dismantling studies control threats to internal validity, such as maturation, repeated testing, and regression to the mean.

Investigations underpinned by narrative analysis will examine the stories people tell about supervision. Researchers will gather data about the content, structure, and performance of supervision stories. The data will document how participants interpret their supervision
experiences and the influence of cultural and social scripts. Through narrative analysis, investigators will generate understanding about individuals’ beliefs regarding the active ingredients in supervision and how their stories shape their future behaviours.

**How does culture and context shape supervision?**

In the parlance of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory on ecological systems, the previous questions have focused on the microsystem in which trainees interact directly with their supervisors. The supervision relationship exists within a wider context (i.e., the macrosystem), which impinges on and colours the processes within it. Across the world, for example in Australia, New Zealand, the US, and the UK, there are different ways to achieving recognition as a psychologist (with or without an endorsement in sport psychology), certified mental performance consultant, or accredited sport and exercise scientist. Further, within some countries (e.g., UK) there are multiple pathways to attaining professional recognition. These different pathways vary in their structure, content, delivery, supervision requirements, and minimum number of work experience hours. While training pathways are designed to ensure that regulators’ standards and competencies are met, researchers could examine if the variations across the pathways (e.g., supervised work experience hours) are associated with the knowledge and skills graduates attain, their career outcomes, and client satisfaction. Research on this topic will lead to applied interventions or educational programmes that prepare practitioners optimally for satisfying and meaningful careers.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) macro system level indicates that social and cultural values influence a person’s development. The cultures of the sports and education environments where trainees operate may shape their development and supervision experiences. Researchers who explore cultural and social variables associated with supervision will provide knowledge that contributes to supervisor training, and helps trainees and supervisors
manage any such influences. For example, by understanding their own ethical, ethnic, cultural, sexual, and gender biases and prejudices, both supervisors and supervisees can become aware of the lenses through which they experience supervision and client interactions.

Ethnographies can provide detailed knowledge about the contexts and cultures associated with supervision. Although ethnography is still an emerging research method in sport psychology, investigators have used it to explore practitioner development and identity (Champ, Ronkainen, Nesti, Tod, & Littlewood, in press). The long-term engagement associated with ethnography will likely contribute to the understanding of several of the above questions, and not just about the influence of culture and context. Equally, although we have tethered specific research methods to each of the five major questions above, our suggestions do not preclude investigators from matching study designs to questions in ways that suit their needs, circumstances, and philosophies (we do not wish to encourage methodolatry). The lion’s share of the research on supervision has employed descriptive quantitative surveys and qualitative studies with a realist aroma. Investigators who adopted alternative methods, such as those presented above, will help build a broader and more detailed knowledge base than might otherwise result from reliance on just two designs.

**Conclusion**

The supervisor-supervisee relationship can be a rewarding vehicle to ride when running smoothly. Both parties can learn about themselves, about each other, and about how to help athletes. They can also find time to enjoy the scenery as they navigate the twists and turns in the road. If, however, the fan belt breaks, a tire blows out, or oil levels drop to critical, then the individuals can lose their way, their momentum, and their goodwill towards each other. When learning how to drive, maintain, or even restore a car, drivers can often locate help from a manual tailored to their vehicle. In comparison, few manuals on sport
psychology supervision exist. Nevertheless, helpful studies have been published that shine their headlights on avenues of future research. We present some avenues that if upgraded into highways, would allow trainees and their professional elders to access the larger supervision territory. Increased access to the territory would pave the way for a well-maintained supervision super highway or autobahn. Sound running supervision will lead to trainees with the skills, insights, and competencies to assist clients and benefit the wider profession.
References


Table 1

*Methodological Design Characteristics and Key Findings from Five Studies Focused on Supervision*

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<th>Authors</th>
<th>Methodological Design</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
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| Fogaca, Zizzi, & Andersen (2018) | Mixed method study of 9 supervision dyads involving the Consulting Skills Inventory, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals | • Supervisees’ growth occurred when supervision involved regular meetings, close relationships, feedback, opportunities for trainee self-reflection, and supervisors adapting their guidance to students’ developmental levels.  
• Supervisee background (e.g., knowledge, education, and previous experience) and the placement context (e.g., client variety, number, and interactions, and intern structure) also influence supervisee growth |
| Foltz et al. (2015) | Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with nine trainee sport psychologists about their supervision experiences | • Data clustered into domains on *programme factors*, *supervision process*, and *supervision content*

• Programme factors described elements shaping supervision experience such as: structure of supervision, modalities of delivery, inclusion of multiple perspectives, and the lack of an articulated model of supervision.

• Supervision process reflected aspects of the supervisory relationship contributing to a positive and effective experience, including: desired supervisor qualities, development of trust, receiving guidance, and collaboration.

• Supervision content reflected factors needing to be addressed in supervision, and included:
<table>
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<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Content analysis of the central issue 14 trainee sport psychologists wished to address, as self-reported in written supervision preparation assessments</th>
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| Hutter, Oldenhof-Veldman, & Oudejans (2015) | - The two higher themes were *know-how* and *professional development*  
- Know-how focused on learning how to act, with lower order themes related to (a) intake, (b) treatment planning, and (c) execution of interventions, evaluation, and termination.  
- Professional development focused on trainees’ growth as practitioners, with lower order themes related to self-reflections, |
| Sharp, Hodge, & Danish (in press) | Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 10 experienced sport psychologists about the ethical challenges they have experienced and their engagement with supervision. | Working principles, and coping with dilemmas
| • Practitioners believed that supervision is essential. • Supervision enabled consultants to monitor boundaries. • Supervision helped practitioners feel supported. • Supervision helped consultants get to know and care for themselves. |

| Watson, Zizzi, Etzel, & Lubker (2004) | Quantitative survey of 171 professional and 142 student members of AASP, using a self-generated inventory | A greater proportion of students received supervision than professionals (and received weekly supervision). |
• A greater proportion of students received supervision about programme design and delivery than professionals.

• The majority of professional members were not providing supervision, and had received no training in supervision.

• A minority of professionals received supervision, with no licensed certified individuals being supervised

• No differences emerged between sport science-based and psychology-based participants on supervision amount, frequency, or content.