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Reflections on decolonisation and enhancing inclusion in undergraduate teaching of sport and exercise psychology

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Sport and exercise psychologists work with a diverse range of client groups, but there is a need to promote cultural understanding in our training pathways and work toward the development of more diversity among the practitioners themselves. We need continually work on decolonising and enhancing inclusion in our undergraduate teaching and ensure that students can see that ours is a profession for anyone. This article includes reflections on this process, focusing on a third-year applied performance psychology module led by an academic aiming to learn more and make positive changes. The article outlines the steps taken, including understanding a new evidence base and seeking input from lived experience from a former athlete who now delivers teaching in psychology. Changes made to the module are discussed, including the addition of taught sessions on how on working with performers who may have faced discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation and impairments. The article finishes with reflections from a student who recently completed the module and has begun to pursue a career as a sport and exercise psychologist. The authors hope that this article will provide some simple and useful ideas for others to enhance diversity and inclusion in their own teaching.

Introduction

WITH THE murder of George Floyd in May of 2020 and the following campaigns for improvements in social justice, many educators and practitioners engaged in a period of self-reflection and discussion. This included reflections on the issues that are faced in sport, in sport and exercise psychology teaching, and how we as a community are preparing practitioners to support athletes who have and will suffer discrimination (e.g. see Bradbury et al., 2020; Burdsey, 2020; Farrington et al., 2012; Knoppers et al., 2021). Decolonised and inclusive teaching is a significant step in promoting this change. Here we understand decolonising the curriculum as an effort to critically assess western imperial- and colonial-focused thought and create space for diverse cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum (see Moncrieffe et al., 2019). This article reflect

on the first efforts made in learning more to work towards decolonising the curriculum, enhancing inclusivity (with the broad definition of education that includes represents everyone; see Haug, 2017) and integrating new content to educate future practitioners on the issues they could face in supporting diverse clientele. These are issues that, prior to this period, had (in the experience of the authors) rarely been taught in sport and exercise psychology education, perhaps with the exception of cultural sport psychology (see Blodgett et al., 2015). It is not entirely clear why this is the case, but it is possible that impacts of white privilege (e.g. inherent advantages possessed by being white) and other issues such as colour-blindness (e.g. the belief that colour does not affect socially created opportunity) may play a role. While this is by no means a perfect model, we

hope these reflections can help others start their journey towards teaching that promotes a more diverse sport and exercise psychology.

Evidence has been developed in other societies on the lack of focus being placed on diversity in our field. In their analysis of 3466 abstracts from the Association for Applied Sport Psychology between 2007 and 2017, Bejar and colleagues (2021) identified that 34.7 per cent of papers included a diverse sample and 15.3 per cent addressed a diversity issue. While this was a small increase on the initial 1986–2007 analysis (Kamphoff et al., 2010), the definitions used here were broad and the most prominently discussed issues were around gender in just 4.4 per cent of abstracts, and disability in just 3.7 per cent of abstracts. Prominent issues in our field, such as race/ethnicity (2.2 per cent) and social class (0.8 per cent), receive very little attention. An issue that is reflected in the evidence base (or lack of) and has knock-on effects when trying to develop evidence-informed teaching in these areas. Excluding these topics from our teaching because of a lack of evidence could produce a vicious cycle, in which future researchers and practitioners remain unaware of the issues, and the lack of discussion in our field continues. There is a need to start to include discussions around diversity in the field in our teaching.

Several events of 2021, such as the racist abuse faced by England Footballers after missing penalties in the European Championships and the testimonies of Azeem Rafi about his experience of racism in cricket, have solidified the clear need for practitioners to be aware of athletes facing discrimination and be well educated on equity, diversity and inclusion in the field. Although many sports have their own issues with both diversity (e.g. low participation numbers in certain groups) and inclusivity of those involved (e.g. cricket; Sport England, 2022), sport and exercise psychologists need to be prepared to support a diverse range of clients in their practice. However, there appears to be poor levels of diversity in sport and exercise psychology

practitioners themselves, not least from a socioeconomic perspective due to the financial burden of qualifying. Perhaps a key indicator of this issue is the challenge of finding data on the diversity of practitioners, researchers and educators in this division of our society. Evidence is available on the lack of diversity in other areas, such as clinical psychology (Longwill, 2015; Scior et al., 2016), but not in sport and exercise. This is an issue that directly affects athletes who may prefer to consult with practitioners who are of the same gender and race as themselves and have experience working with diverse client groups (Alexander et al., 2020; Woolway & Harwood, 2020). While some research exists on the experiences of athletes (Jowett & Frost, 2007) including in relation to discrimination (Kilvington & Price, 2019), there is a lack of research on supporting diverse client groups, and, as a result, a lack of education on dealing with issues such as discrimination based on race or gender.

This article reflects on *how* we have tried to go about starting to decolonise, increase inclusion and discuss issues relating to supporting athletes facing discrimination in a Level 6 applied performance psychology module. OR is a Lecturer in Performance Psychology and the module lead who aims to learn more and start the process of decolonising and enhancing inclusivity in his modules. SH is a Lecturer in Psychology, a department diversity and inclusion supporter who supported this process. RT is an ex-athlete and now Lecturer in Psychology who here reflects on his own experiences. JW is now an MSc student in sport and exercise psychology who studied on the first iteration of the module before graduating with her BSc in Psychology. Reflection sections are written by individuals and other sections include contributions from all the authors.

Curriculum development context

During the spring and summer of 2020, a new third-year module called ‘Applied Performance Psychology’ was being developed that

would be available to BSc Psychology and BSc Sport and Exercise Medical Sciences students. The aim of this third-year module was to build on an optional second-year module where students learn fundamental theories about sport psychology and human performance. The third-year module would then focus on the application of this theory through the discussion of specific issues that may be faced while practicing. These included issues, such as supporting performance enhancement, injury, transitions, mental health and working with a multi-disciplinary team (MDT). As with much of our educational system, there was a need to decolonise the curriculum across the modules and incorporate content to directly address issues that can be faced by specific groups of athletes. The third-year module offered a perfect opportunity to develop and include specific content dedicated to discussing issues, such as racism, gender-based discrimination, sexuality and disability in sport. This was framed within the overall module approach of understanding issues faced in practice and was linked to other module topics, such as impacts on mental health and support from the MDT. The first steps in developing this content were seeking advice from colleagues with appropriate expertise, investigating the evidence base on promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in education, and being sure to integrate perspectives from athletes with lived experience.

An athlete-turned educator's perspective (RT)

As a black athlete-turned educator I (RT) have experienced the systemically racist, classist and colonialist legacy of athletics in the UK. However, I have also been lucky enough to experience the freedom and opportunity we now have as educators to free new minds from these biases and 'isms'. Sport is an amazing opportunity for a diverse group of people to come together to achieve a common goal, improve health,

practice discipline and express kinaesthetic beauty. However, sport in the former British Empire is inherently colonialist. The sports we compete in are, in part, dictated by the country and culture we live in, and that nation's history. The participation levels and experiences of cricket in South Asia and football in Ghana are examples of the continued influence of colonial history as are the experiences of minoritised groups playing sport in the UK (e.g. see Burdsey, 2010).

To educate support staff such as sport and exercise scientists to be anti-racist and decolonise sport, we must first embed into our education system an understanding of what racism is, how deeply embedded into our decision-making it is and how systemic racism can make any one individual just a cog in an unequal machine. To deeply understand how to support a diverse range of athletes, it could be useful to be taught and coached by a diverse range of educators. A common dichotomy of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) and working-class athletes and white and middle-class educated support staff adds to the stratification of roles within sport. If support staff can be aware of and supported in challenging their own privileges related to race, gender, disability, class and sexuality and understand the intersectionality of experiences they should be better equipped to support a diverse range of athletes. Allyship and recognising privilege are key parts of offering this support. However, recognising this privilege can be very challenging. Many people in positions of power, like the authors, will be privileged and allyship should empower marginalised groups and be one small step to reducing discrimination in sport.

Athletes as well as support staff have learning paths to travel to recognise their privilege. One important example of this is Korver's (2019) article on white privilege. Korver is a white NBA player who recognised that his attributing the police breaking his South African teammate's leg to a fault of the black player. Korver blamed his black

teammate for senseless violence by the police, and it was within introspection of his attribution that he recognised this was a racially discriminatory attribution. As more diverse voices contribute to the research and teaching that educates the sporting community, we can begin to better understand and support the intersectional diversity of athletes in a path to reduce discrimination in sport. This starts with education.

Decolonisation and enhancing inclusion in teaching performance psychology

Calls from the literature to decolonise curriculums and promote inclusive practices in higher education teaching have highlighted that this has a real positive impact on students. This includes improvements in students' engagement with the university, their sense of belonging and leads to an improvement in their learning experience and overall attainment (Arday et al., 2021). Approaches to *curricular transformation* that promote the inclusion of minoritised students suggest that the presentation of content should allow all students to 'see themselves' within it; for example, in ensuring that examples, names and images represent the diverse groups and experiences that make up our university communities (Salazar et al., 2010). As well as creating more inclusive examples, applications and assessments, we must also acknowledge the historical contexts in which we teach that have manifested inequalities in the past and still do today and begin to shift the content of the curriculum itself to centre global and diverse perspectives, theories and experiences, and work to actively include students within this process (Arday et al., 2021).

Decolonising the curriculum

The process of curricular transformation can at first seem a daunting prospect, but, with the assistance of those with expertise in the area and the growing literature base in understanding this process, it can be broken down into simple steps. Fuentes et al. (2021)

outline eight considerations for rethinking a course syllabus in psychology teaching to promote equity, diversity and inclusion (see the original paper for all eight steps). The first step in this process is engaging in reflexivity and critically analysing the educator's sociocultural background, privileges and positions and how they may influence their position of power, the curriculum, and how they address the development of course content (see Moncrieffe et al., 2020 for in-depth analysis). Engaging in reflexivity for the module lead (OR), a white, middle-class, male, in a permanent academic role, was an important first step here. The influence of the educator's sociocultural background and privileges amplified the need to enhance decolonisation and inclusion in teaching. It became clear that the majority of the content focused on the sports and topics with which the module lead was familiar and were associated with his sociocultural background, representing a western-centric, white middle class, and male focus, with examples and images of athletes primarily of male cricket, golf, rugby union and English football. This is not only a clear focus on British sports that have been spread and developed as part of the British Empire but is also in stark contrast to the student body at the university that represents one of the most international in the world (Times Higher Education, 2021).

To address the need to represent our diverse population of students in the module being described here, the module lead (OR) conducted an audit of the examples used throughout all topics in the modules, and engaged other teaching staff and students to support the development of more representative examples, but also shifted to a focus on tasks that support students in applying theoretical concepts of human performance to their own experiences and interests, be it in sport or outside. This process led to an incredible breadth of discussion around the nuances of theoretical application across a vast variety of

domains and distinct cultures. For example, discussing the existing stigma around mental health in certain cultures (Ong & Harwood, 2018), or the lack of suitability to athlete-centred approaches to coaching youth athletes in cultures where respect for elders is central. Changes were also made in the assessment. This included coursework assessment in which students can write about the development of expertise in any area of performance and cultural context in which they are interested. For example, a third-year coursework assessment was developed where students engaged in a case study of supporting a performer in any culture and area of performance. These changes have led to a brilliant breadth in coursework writings from areas as diverse as ballet to eSports (and greatly enhances the enjoyment of marking!). These changes alone do not represent a decolonised curriculum that requires a continuous process of challenging privileges and that serves the white male majority, but we hope they do represent some real changes that readers can take to their own module designs.

Specific additions to module content

Alongside acknowledging the importance of reflecting on the privileges of the module lead (OR) and the need to encourage students to reflect on their own (as they do in other modules on our programme), specific topics were integrated to generate discussion on specific considerations for sport and exercise psychology practitioners and researchers. The starting point for developing new curriculum content was to focus on the needs of athletes and to consider the fact that undergraduate programmes are the first steps in preparing students to support a diverse athlete population.

A population that works in a field where they regularly receive abuse and discrimination, perhaps in a uniquely public setting where success and failures can be viewed by millions of observers and abuse can take a very place on public platforms

(e.g. social media or in a stadium). To this end, time was devoted to discussing considerations for supporting diverse populations of performers and how this interacts with other topics in the module, such as case formulation, mental health and working with coaches. However, when engaging in developing this content it became apparent that very little context-specific evidence exists on how to support these athletes and supporting those who face public discrimination in their job. This meant that much of the specific additions to curriculum content involved discussing the limited evidence base, outlining future needs and open conversations on these issues. Brief overviews on key areas of new content are outlined below. The authors do not profess to be experts in any of these areas, but include these summaries to give readers an idea and starting point for developing new topics in sport and exercise psychology teaching.

Cultural sport psychology (CSP)

For the last 30 years, scholars have been observing the lack of consideration for race and ethnicity in sport and exercise psychology (Duda & Allison, 1990). However, the idea of cultural sport psychology as a branch of sport and exercise research is relatively new (see Blodgett et al., 2015) and addresses a broader set of cultural issues. This growing field argues that culture and cultural identities are a key consideration in understanding human performance and aims to facilitate understanding of marginalised topics and cultural identities, such as incorporating minoritised groups in the development of psychological theory. Generally adopting a broad set of underlying epistemologies from social constructionism to more recent experimental work, CSP covers a range of topics important to supporting athletes from across cultures, supports and enhances the delivery of other key areas such as culture as part of athletic identity and athlete's transitions into a new culture or society (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Ryba, 2017).

Stereotype threat

Stereotypes are defined as ‘beliefs or associations that link whole groups of people with certain traits or characteristics’ (Kassin et al., 2011, p.148). Stereotypes are common in a variety of performance domains, including sport. For example, ignoring individual differences and associating a certain group with enhanced or decrements in performance in a particular sport or skill (e.g. ‘women are bad at ball sports’). Stereotype threat then refers to anxiety associated with fulfilling such a stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and addressing this threat is key to enhancing practice in educational and sporting settings (Casad & Bryant, 2016). In this module, we used the topic as a precursor for discussion of supporting particular populations and focused on recommendations for practitioners, including preventative strategies, working to support individuals and organisational level approaches (see Smith & Martiny, 2018).

Racism in sport

Building on an understanding of cultural sport psychology and stereotype threat, the module incorporated time to discuss specific issues around racism in sport. This included outlining the clear issues that sport has with racism, examples of stereotype threat based on race, supporting athletes who suffer racist abuse, including appropriate use of referral pathways and the link between racism and mental health (Williams & Etkins, 2021). While there is evidence of the online abuse that can be faced (Kilvington & Price, 2019), there is a surprising lack of sport-specific literature supporting the wellbeing of athletes who are suffering. Particularly on issues unique to our field, such as the public-facing nature of high-level performance and the abuse that can be received on a routine basis.

One study from Anshel (1990) identified that black football players reported a general lack of sensitivity from coaches on the individual sociocultural needs of black players and a general lack of communica-

tion, trust and honesty. Discussion on this topic focused on understanding the needs of clients and developing applied research to generate context-specific evidence on the unique types of discrimination faced by athletes.

Working with female athletes

This was included as an individual area of discussion due to unique issues faced when supporting female athletes. There is literature available in the coaching and sociology spheres on issues, such as power and coach-athlete relations (Knoppers et al., 2021; Norman, 2015; Norman & French, 2013; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). However, we also wished to highlight the significant lack of research in sport and exercise sciences (including psychology) that has been conducted specifically in supporting women in sport.

As with the teaching on racism, a discussion started with stereotype threats faced by female athletes, cultural issues and intersectionality. The BBC Elite Sportswomen’s Survey (BBC, 2020) was used to discuss some specifics that practitioners might have to consider, such as 60 per cent of 537 elite women who responded make less than £10,000 per year from sport. Evidence from the academic literature around sexism (Fink, 2016), risk of disordered eating (McGannon & McMahan, 2019), differences in injury risk (Yu, Garrett, 2007, performative bodies (Cosh et al., 2019) and power dynamics related to males in senior coaching and organisational roles (de Haan & Norman, 2020) were discussed in relation to how they could affect practice with female athletes.

Supporting LGBTQ athletes

As with race and gender, there are specific considerations for practitioners to be aware of when supporting LGBTQ athletes. Again, there was a need to consider intersectionality here and understand the discrimination that can be faced and the effects it can have. For example, Symons et al. (2017) outlined

the impact of sexist and homophobic discrimination faced in sports settings and the different effects these can have based on gender. While the module content was framed on supporting athletes, it is also important to consider the inclusion of practitioners. Calls from Krane and Waldron (2021), which outline the current state of play in a masculine, positivist-focused sport psychology, and advocate for greater LGBTQ inclusion across the field, were discussed.

Working in parasport

With the growth of paralympic sport, many aspiring practitioners will be on a path to supporting paralympic athletes in their careers. As with LGBTQ and female athletes, the focus of teaching here was on understanding specific considerations for working with this population. This is a comparatively well-researched area compared to others we have discussed (see Martin, 2018) but is still hugely underrepresented in the evidence base compared to Olympic sport. Para athletes may have different motivations to perform (Martin, 2017), encounter issues associated with injury and pain that are distinct to their individual needs (Derman et al., 2013), and must face the significant stress of classification (Powis & Macbeth, 2020). The module discussed the needs of practitioners to reflect on specifics prior to consulting, such as reflecting on their own beliefs and ensuring they are educated in the nuances of para sport (Guerrero, Martin & Prokesova, 2020).

Reflections on the development and running of the module

Developments across the modules discussed here were received extremely positively from students and were an excellent development experience for the module lead. Both the second- and third-year modules received excellent student feedback (4.8 and 5 out of 5 for module satisfaction, respectively). Students mentioned their enjoyment and the emotional engagement they experienced

from discussing diversity and inclusion issues in their qualitative comments.

Reflections from a student (JW)

When I (JW) first heard that our new electives included modules on human performance, I was quite excited. I attribute a lot of my success in life to skills I learned through my youth involvement in sport, such as discipline and tenacity. However, I'd never truly reflected on or researched the psychological mechanisms that governed the development and maintenance of these skills. Additionally, like my initial interest in psychology, I liked the idea of studying what made the perceived 'successful' humans unique. I was enamoured by the idea of studying research conducted on psychological mechanisms governing a human being's ability to perform (physically or mentally) that were probably compared across individuals performing at their best. I thought that was just amazing.

I specifically enjoyed the focus on topics like the experiences of female athletes. I didn't find the limited number of studies across women's sports very surprising, and it did feel discouraging initially. It was very relatable as well because where I went to school, I had not been given the opportunity to play my sports of choice because they were perceived as 'men's sports'. The discussion that we had were quite interesting in my opinion, because I do find that certain experiences in sport are very unique to certain genders and cultures, which sometimes is not accounted for when research is conducted in sport. For example, with some studies not mentioning gender in their participant sections when studying 'men sports' and issues associated with gender differences in injury. I hope to go through stage 2 of the BPS accreditation. After which I hope to work with the eSports teams based in the UK.

Reflections and conclusions from the module lead (OR)

I (OR) started on the journey to decolonising and enhancing inclusivity in my teaching

from a desire to eventually have an impact on the way my students, who are future practitioners and researchers in the field, can support athletes, enhance the evidence base and make a difference as they advance in their careers. This motivation was not fully matched with an understanding of how to go about this process. The learning journey required an open-mindedness and willingness to be reflexive and feel uncomfortable about my own position in the field, challenge my current practices, and in particular, a willingness to engage with learning from more experienced colleagues and those with lived experience. However, I feel I could have done a better job to encourage my students more to challenge and be aware of their own potential positions of privilege. Taking some time to read around the issues in our field, higher education more broadly, attending training sessions and speaking to colleagues, brought me to a point where decolonising the curriculum and inclusive content is not just part of my modules but is central to the way I develop my teaching.

I feel I could have developed more of an understanding of challenging my own assumptions and decolonising by delving more into the extant literature from other fields (such as sociology) of which I had little awareness or understanding. I have found that once the time has been invested in developing understanding, and initial progress has been made, my intimidation at starting the process was replaced by an enthusiasm for the enhanced quality of engagement and assessment in my modules. Following these developments, student feedback has regularly focused on the value of the topics we have outlined here and on the engaging nature of applying theory to their own interests and cultures.

In the future, I would like to develop more time in the modules to discuss specific issues and specific groups and I will move the content earlier in the module so that students incorporate an understanding of these topics in all the cases and applied research examples we work through in our sessions where we regularly discuss cultural barriers to making change. In short, decolonising and enhancing inclusivity is central to delivering quality education. I hope that writing this article can help others begin this process and begin to create sport and exercise psychologists who experience inclusive teaching, understand the issues that our field faces, and go on to have a positive impact on their careers.

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