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Grow Up Together! Lessons and Perspectives From an International Intervision Group Experience That Begun During COVID-19 Restrictions

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ABSTRACT

Intervision practice has been supported by various psychology organizations and practitioners. Such need is rarely reinforced by everyday sport psychology practice with relevant literature limited in applied journals. Having organized an international intervention group for more than five years now – the first of its type to the best of our knowledge – we are suggesting a mode of operation serving the cause of such monthly online intervention meetings. In the current paper, each member discusses their current practices, personal views and aspirations around the operations of this International Intervention Group (IIG). Based on a thematic analysis of these views, members provide clear suggestions on what works best (structure, topics, size, etc.) and how similar groups could be formed in the future. Collaboration, synergy, a noncompetitive ethos, genuine care, clear norms and freedom of speech are some of the cornerstones expressed by the group members. Opportunities for best practices and cross fertilization of ideas using the international nature and frequent discussions of this IIG under an enthusiastic organizing leadership were also discussed, recommended and commended throughout this position statement related to works of this group of professionals.

KEYWORDS

International Intervention Group; practices; sport psychology; views

Introduction

The intervention procedure relates to a peer consultation process that is carried out in a group, where participants discuss professional practice issues by following a specified process with distributed and reversible roles (Staempfli & Fairtlough, 2019). Intervision is a necessary requirement for

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Sport Psychology accreditation in many countries, as practitioners get professional feedback from other experienced peers. Such praxis secures competence in the applied practice of the applicant (Schinke et al., 2018). Also, being an effective practitioner of sport and performance psychology does not entail just a mere adherence to theories and rigid theoretical proposals (Andersen, 2004). On the contrary, those can forestall, complicate and reverse a successful intervention in a sporting and performance context due to lack of flexibility, personal philosophy and understanding of inter-personal needs. Conversely, effective intervention practices need to appreciate the real needs of the individual (Anderson et al., 2004).

Various authors have argued about the necessity of the sport and performance psychology practitioner to reflect on their own standpoints. This reflection provides realization on several qualities linked to sport/task specific, psychological, contextual, cultural and social knowledge and abilities (Anderson et al., 2004; Chandler et al., 2016; Sly et al., 2020). One of the best practices to acquire professional skills as a sport and performance psychology practitioner comes from regular supervision which supports learning processes on effective ways to approach individuals in need (Anderson et al., 2004). Those skills require the formation of a personal philosophy, through each practitioner's values and core beliefs, adapted psychological framework, intervention goals and techniques (see Poczwadowski et al., 1998). During the past two decades such personal philosophy choices have led to a range of intervention models emanating from general psychology (Stoltenberg et al., 2014; Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2011). Without evaluating or critiquing these models, we believe that our intervention group practices are reflected through the constructs of Stoltenberg and McNeill's Integrative Developmental Model (IDM; 2010). The IDM simply provides three levels of development each trainee goes through during their professional development; Level one relates to self-awareness and the realization of personal strengths and weaknesses, during Level two the emphasis is directed to the client with an emphasis on greater empathy and perspective, and in Level three the practitioner gradually shifts toward an appreciation of the context, improved affective and cognitive abilities along with the highest empathy and perception of the client's needs (Stoltenberg et al., 2014). As this third Level is also associated with higher levels of competence, broader professional identity, autonomy, integrated types of motivation, enhanced reflectiveness, and an increasing context awareness, it does portray adequately the emphasis and processes (see following sessions' structure and themes) adhered by the intervention group introduced here.

Supervision sessions have presented important advantages such as creating appropriate communication patterns and professional boundaries, supporting confidence, providing professional assurance, and encouraging the application of personal care, with all those skills being unrelated to theoretical

knowledge and academic education (Sharp et al., 2021). To name some of these challenges existing in common sport and performance psychology practices, we refer to the ethical concerns and dilemmas especially when the sport and performance psychology expert needs to meet outside of office walls, mixing with various stakeholders and having to respond to unreasonable and unnecessary questions, risking breaching confidentiality and privacy agreements (Foltz et al., 2015). Similarly, there is limited research pertaining to the international requirements and practices of sport and performance psychology that is diverse across the globe, as accreditation programs provide limited support to the development of supervision methods and procedures (Schinke et al., 2018). With the variety and depth of expertise needed for an effective service in this area, there remains a need to provide opportunities for continuous development including post-accreditation (Andersen, 2004; Quartiroli et al., 2021; Wylleman et al., 2009).

One-to-one supervision has been found to be effective for early career sport and performance psychologists (Tod et al., 2017). However, there is also a need to approach supervision as a collective task of specialists. As such, supervision sessions facilitated in a group setting encourage discussion of diverse action plans *via* mutual reflections on cases and events. Such discussions can potentially challenge existing approaches and viewpoints, offering alternative actions and ideas (Knowles et al., 2007). Authors have previously emphasized the need for an informed and effective professional practice reflecting ever needed balanced and well-established relationships among central stakeholders; and credible skills to work in what can often be demanding and complicated contexts. Alongside this, it is essential to exert a positive influence on performance no matter the conditions and situations (McDougall et al., 2015). Interested parties seem to realize the importance of the above skills for an effective sport and performance psychology practitioner (or Counsellor), with factors such as humility, authenticity and integrity having additional importance for the endeavor at hand (Chandler et al., 2016). Within this context, Poczwardowski et al.'s (2023) ISSP position stand on competent supervision argue about the requirement for multi-cultural applications of sport psychology practices. In more detail, the position refers to:

[a]...culturally competent supervision that is inclusive of various characteristics of human diversity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, age, ability, socioeconomic status, religion). In other words, culturally competent supervisors recognise the cultural aspects in human experience, manage their own and the supervisees' biases and assorted internalised "isms", and aspire to engage in socially just and culturally safe supervision (p. 16).

This position includes the need for safe, competent, ethical and culturally appropriate supervision education and practice for sport psychology practitioners throughout their career.

Covid-19 restrictions created a new reality for society with new guiding directions suggested based on social and behavioral sciences to support general public health (Bavel et al., 2020). Continuous threat to existence is a significant deterrent for quality of life, with athletes of all levels and backgrounds being humans and not able to be immune to it. This threatening reality increased the level of stress in sport actors and exposed athletes of all levels to several psychological struggles, with even the simplest daily tasks around preparation and training becoming overcomplicated and creating strains in private and social life (di Fronso et al., 2022; Lundqvist & Kristiansen, 2022; Santi et al., 2020). Psychologists had to react quickly in such an emergency and thanks to modern technology, a massive shift in psychological provision took place over one to two weeks *via* online conference platforms. Telepsychology became the norm of psychological provision and provided new opportunities for distance interventions (Sammons et al., 2020). Making the most out of this reality and with sport psychology practitioners providing telepsychology services supporting athletes' needs worldwide (Schinke et al., 2020), a need for a similar online connection of sport and performance psychology experts emerged (Giusti et al., 2020; Oblinger-Peters, 2024).

As a result, authors of this manuscript organized a series of monthly International Intervention Group (IIG) sessions to support the efficacy of professionals working in the sport and performance psychology setting. Sessions are ongoing and to date have been dealing with a discussion of cases stemming from everyday practice and a variety of interpersonal, performance and complex issues. With all the above in mind, the aim of the current paper is to present the form and structure of the IIG of sport and performance psychology practitioners based on shared impressions and ideal practices of its members. This may assist the formation of similar II Groups in the future with important implications for improving the quality of services by sharing international best practices.

How We came together As a group

Following the 2019 FEPSAC Congress in Munster (Germany) the first author started the conversation around the need to host an IIG to enhance professional growth and augment further discussions around everyday sport and performance psychology practices. The resurrection of this discussion almost a year later, led eight colleagues from four European countries to come together and start monthly IIG sessions. Fast forward to the current period, IIG sessions are running now for a fifth year with increased numbers and themes deriving from daily practices of colleagues working in six European countries, with practitioners from Australia and the US having recently joined the group; contributing to discussion

regarding potential topics and allowing for the intercontinental analysis of cases.

IGG members have a mean age of 41.3 years ($SD = 10.12$), they are individually accredited with their national or international professional affiliation body, and they have practical experience of 13.2 mean years ($SD = 6.35$) as sport and performance psychology practitioners. They all had supervision opportunities in the past with most of them having an experience of at least three experts supporting their practices in the past. Three members have had also group intervention in the past. The majority of the IIG have been working with athletes from eight individual and team sports such as soccer, volleyball, basketball, skating, swimming, cycling, fencing, etc. Two members of the IIG are identifying themselves as psychodynamic psychologists, three as cognitive (CBT, ACT & Mindfulness), three as integrative, and one as existentialist and humanistic psychologist. In all eight countries the IIG members work as sport and performance psychology practitioners, where the psychology profession is protected. Even though, in some countries sport and performance psychology is taught as a separate degree, only in one country it is regulated as a field of professional practice.

Session structure

Sessions are held every month except for July and August of each year. Initially the group explored an unstructured format to allow ideas, views and dynamics to flow organically without the restrictions of a rigid session structure, which could detract from the intervention aims. Following this initial stage of flowing dynamics, the group consensus shifted toward trialing out the effectiveness of a more structured session (Haug-Benien, 1998). Adding structure to group meetings was found effective by all group members. Such a session is organized based on set priorities and normally includes dedicated sections related to the presentation of a case (10'), relevant questions for better understanding (20'), the hypotheses for case analysis (20'), the opinions expression (15'), the offered solutions and decisions (15'), and finally the reflection and emotions on the session (10'; all allocated times are in approximation) (Haug-Benien, 1998). Duration of each of those sections can vary according to the number of participants in each session, and it is the responsibility of the group organizer to make sure every group member has the opportunity to express opinions thoroughly and properly. Through such a structured session, all participants can state their thinking with the presenter of each case having the chance to attend, take notes, realize alternative options and decide additional routes of action pertaining to the case. Sessions are organized by the same group leader.

For the needs of this introductory paper, input from each member of this IIG was provided through responses in six distinct questions aiming to showcase views and reflections. Questions related to the most helpful parts of the IIG sessions, their most profound effects, preferred amendments, future suggestions and recommendations to other colleagues on ways to create similar groups and sessions (the list of questions, along with the extracted themes are presented in [Table 1](#)).

Thematic analysis based on the responses of the IIG members

Avoiding repetition, we performed a thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2023; Byrne, 2022) to “translate” and simplify the responses received by the IIG members. Separate analysis was performed for each of the questions since responses relate to a different area of the international intervision experience for each member. TA was performed by the lead author and later reviewed by the rest of the authors. For each question, codes were created based on the responses received, which led to sub-themes and themes. See [Table 1](#) for the organized themes based on the IIG members’ responses. In more detail these themes were;

The first and most prominent theme was related to the enhanced feelings of self-efficacy and opportunities for personal development expressed by the IIG members. Equally, by sharing best practices and applied perspectives on current issues, provided feelings of reassurance and professional development, especially during the period of COVID restrictions. An example quote of this first theme is:

It is the feeling of self-efficacy. Sharing my point of view and my approaches and noticing that colleges agree on it, maybe even benefit from it, strengthen my back in the work with my clients and in arguments with other stakeholders. (Practitioner E)

Table 1. Questions, and themes of the performed thematic analysis.

Questions	1. Which part of the monthly IIG sessions has been more helpful to you as a sport and performance psychology practitioner and why? 2. What did the international element of the sessions add to the intervision experience? 3. Was there a profound effect on the way you approach your practice due to the Intervision sessions? If yes, which areas of your practice were mostly affected? 4. Which areas of the Intervision sessions would you amend to increase their efficiency? 5. What would you recommend to a group of international sport and performance psychology practitioners who would like to form a new Intervision group in the future? 6. Which are the best ways forward for the IIG sessions?
Theme 1	Personal and professional development
Theme 2	Feeling supported and free to express ideas
Theme 3	Appreciation of culturally divert practices
Theme 4	Forming international and social links with other practitioners
Theme 5	Improving communication and preparation over next meeting
Theme 6	Review past cases
Theme 7	Add external expertise and variety
Theme 8	Consistent leadership, rules and norms
Theme 9	Group philosophy, motivation and expertise

Having the freedom of expressing personal views and equality in all modes of operation allowed IIG members to feel supported throughout the intervention processes. Existing rules and norms set by the organizer and leader of the meetings which were embraced by all members, created the feeling of shared trust and autonomy to express personal opinions in IIG members. This shared impression shaped the second theme of TA, with a representative quote being: “[every session] has influenced my personal growth as a practitioner. Bonding over similarities and differences helps you become and feel more of a global citizen” (Practitioner A).

IIG members highlighted the importance of realizing performed practices from different countries and cultures. Discovering new horizons *via* the connections with culturally diverse cases, allowed members to realize similarities in the athlete-practitioner relationship that remains unique no matter the cultural background. Such realization led members to express their gratitude for being part of the IIG. Hence, the appreciation of culturally diverse practices shaped the third theme of the TA. Based on the quote of Practitioner D: “...the input of my international clinical colleges, I got to differentiate better, where the border is of cases I can handle myself, cases I need to help myself and cases that need to see another kind of practitioner.”

Sharing personal experiences, struggles and realizing other approaches in daily practice, allowed members to grow and feel socially connected. IIG members expressed that forming social and professional connections by sharing personal experiences and considerations on their practices, provided unique opportunities for professional reflection and metacognition around followed methods. Apparently, forming new processes and goals through reflections of daily practice may be enhanced *via* the creation of social and professional bonds with other like-minded professionals. IIG evidently served as a vehicle of such bonding. An example of this fourth theme of the TA is: “... it enables our group to work with each other from culturally different backgrounds where we have taken a variety of professional psychological routes to becoming applied practitioners, increasing the depth of interest to our work and breadth of experiences.” (Practitioner A).

Sessions’ structure was created gradually based on best practices and felt right to the IIG members. Members found both the allocated time for expressing opinions during the sessions and the creation of a list of topics to discuss in the following sessions, helpful and important. Having time to prepare for the upcoming sessions with each presenter sharing the main characteristics of their case prior to the IIG session, was also important for members. These IIG prevailing practices and procedures created the fifth theme of the TA, with an example quote being: “Structure the sessions in order to stay focused on the established objectives and to give the right time to each participant” (Practitioner B).

A request of the IIG members was to follow up already discussed cases during a subsequent session. Having this chance allowed IIG members to check the progress of each case and whether proposals stated during the IIG session hold practical value. This created the sixth theme of the TA, with a relevant quote referring to:

A follow up session of the actions taken by the participants some weeks or months after having feedback on the way we have handled specific issues would enhance the accountability aspect of the group and allow us to see the concrete impact of advices on each participant. (Practitioner B).

Fertilizing the IIG with additional expertise, other experts' opinions and stakeholders' views was acknowledged as important by the IIG members. The recognition of diverse voices in the field and the need for further development *via* best practices of -external to the IIG- individuals was also expressed. Such need created the seventh theme of the TA, which according to Practitioner E is expressed as: "Inviting a specialist depending on the topic of the meeting should be another aid for our empowerment."

Having a reliable and capable group leader/facilitator who defines objectives and structure of the IIG sessions was emphasized by the majority of the IIG members. The role of the facilitator is not only significant for organizing interactions and regular meetings but also for creating equal opportunities of participation, freedom of expression and shared values to form. Leadership characteristics and stability over the IIG values and norms formed the eight themes. One of the most representative quotes here is: "...find a natural leader, who is reliable, sensitive, a good communicator and who has natural people skills." (Practitioner E)

Having similar motivation to grow, an equal level of expertise and professional experience leading to comparable theoretical and practical work, was also conveyed by the IIG practitioners. These were seen as contributing to the IIG philosophy and collegial links of its members. They were also perceived as important qualities forming the group dynamics of a similar IIG. Such requirement forms the ninth and final theme of the TA: "...a source of empowerment also on a social level through the expansion of one's network and with new colleagues becoming valuable and trustful international collaborators." (Practitioner F).

Lessons learned

The aim of this paper was to present the form and structure of the IIG of sport and performance psychology practitioners. To the best of our knowledge this is the first attempt to create such a Group. Modern technology supports online meetings (or else telepsychology) making the creation of such groups viable. The current paper suggests their usefulness

to improve sport and performance psychology practices. Group members had the opportunity to explain personal views and ways the international intervention group enhanced their daily practices, with the intention to continue the same pathway in the foreseeable future.

Taking in perspective the main themes of responses from the group members, it is evident that a sense of collaboration and synergy needs to be adapted from the very beginning of intervention sessions in an IIG. In other words, given the level of specialization and expertise existing in the group, a noncompetitive ethos along with the principles of genuine care and freedom of expression need to be the cornerstones of collaboration in each session. The transformational role of the IIG sessions for the group members has been emphasized confirming the third development level of the Stoltenberg and McNeill's IDM (Stoltenberg et al., 2014). Especially, the opportunities for personal growth, new goals and novel ideas taking place *via* a reflection and metacognition in daily sport and performance psychology practice that was emphasized in the results of the thematic analysis, provides evidence of the motivational, autonomy and self-identity transformational nature of the IIG participation for its members.

Given the international nature of this group, sessions have been enriched with working conditions and realities from eight countries around the globe. This enables comparisons, cross-fertilisations and the discussion of best practices to appear unforced and as a normal product of sessions. Such advantage has been emphasized also in the professional and cultural growth in sport psychology practices by Quartiroli et al. (2021). This multicultural approach in the works of the IIG group is clearly in line with the proposed ISSP position stand on competent, culturally safe and informed supervision experience (Poczwardowski et al., 2023). Based on the views expressed in the current paper within the IIG monthly practices members reach culturally justified case formulations, showing multicultural competence and strong intervention connections. All features of a healthy, adept and properly didactic environment of mutual professional growth.

The importance of having an enthusiastic organizer behind the IIG and its sessions appeared repeatedly in the members' responses. Having a stable flow of scheduling sessions, with alternative topics, requests and discussions, seems to be an important element of encouraging participation and willingness to continue being a member of the group. The opportunity to voice concerns and requests for each yearly circle of sessions seems to provide another motive for participating in the group with every member having the opportunity to propose changes, while being an active part of the progress and evolution of the IIG. These characteristics have been emphasized in past literature regarding crucial skills of psychology (Roe, 2002)

and sport psychology practitioners (Wylleman, 2019). They seem to be important during intervision sessions as well.

Elements like the intervision group size, the structure and topics of sessions, the opportunities to reflect on professional practice, the norms and rules, and the flexibility of sessions act as glueing factors in the way members feel a part of the group and its regulations. Common decisions over those, seem to bring the IIG together creating a cohesive group with not only similar but identical goals and inspirations over the betterment of daily professional practices. International intervision practices seem to support these components. They appear to be critical for the quality of intervision sessions as recognized in psychological deeds both before (Ricou & Marina, 2020) and during the recent pandemic (Miu et al., 2022).

Sport and performance psychology practice requires among other abilities, frequent reflection, adaptability, cultural awareness, ethical rigor, continuous education, connection with peers, and regular supervision experiences (Fogaça et al., 2024; Poczwadowski et al., 2023). With the current paper we want to encourage similar practices in the future, supporting sport psychology performing skills in a rapidly evolving and transforming sporting context. We encourage the formation of similar international intervision groups for sport and performance psychology practitioners, and we will happily share collective experiences to assist such efforts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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