

“Excellence is Never Easy”: The Importance of Building Professional Relationships in Research

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In this scholarly narrative, I emphasise the importance of building professional relationships for delivering excellence in research. The reader is introduced to the working alliance model applied to professional relationships within research settings, and two specific activities (peer mentoring and professional practice groups) are promoted for their collaborative benefits.

Keywords: professional relationships, working alliance, peer mentoring, professional practice groups

The statement “excellence is never easy” emerged about 15 years ago from an applied sport psychology consultancy session I had with an elite professional golfer. It is a truism that excellence is never easy in any field, however with appropriate resources, persistence, a clear process, and a goal, excellence is indeed attainable. In my roles as a university researcher, doctoral research supervisor, educator, and applied sport psychologist over nearly 30 years, the successful associations I have had (and continue to have) have largely come about through developing and maintaining human relationships and sustained professionalism with athletes, coaches, research students, and academic colleagues. Building these strong professional relationships has enabled me to excel in my work, which I believe has aided my graduate students and athletes in their abilities to perform with excellence.

Now, I am first to acknowledge in my early days as an applied sport psychologist, I was too focused disproportionately on implementing rote psychological strategies with my clients. Over the years, I have shared my career reflections, experiences, and influences (see Hemmings, 2014; 2015). It took time before I realized the relationship between the sport psychologist and

the athlete was critical for consultancy success (see Hemmings, 1999; Hemmings & Holder, 2009). Though the importance of the professional relationship in applied sport psychology practice is now firmly embedded in the literature (e.g., Katz & Hemmings, 2009), forging strong professional relationships should also be a goal for researchers. Gould (2012) pointed out that we should recognize those with whom we work, research, consult, or teach, such as colleagues, athletes, coaches, and students, are in fact sources of knowledge about psychology, and that we should try to learn from all of them. Herein, I reflect on the importance of building and maintaining professional relationships as a foundation for young researchers when identifying research goals and optimizing personal skills and resources. Such relationships can also assist young researchers in managing transitions along the research process and working through challenges and setbacks to achieve personal excellence in research.

The Working Alliance

Professional relationships in student-led research can be broadly defined as the connections the student-researcher creates and cultivates with their research supervisors/advisors, their student-peers, participants, and other potential collaborators. The creation and cultivation of these connections, just like in any other relationship, is deeply rooted in a working alliance, which consists of three broad features: agreement on goals, agreement on tasks, and the development of trust

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and rapport (Bordin, 1979). In my roles as a doctoral research supervisor and an applied sport psychology supervisor, my aim has always been to form a strong working alliance with the student/supervisee. I dedicate time to establish and agree upon our common goal; that is, we work collaboratively in a manner that benefits and improves the student's work. Existing literature provides insight to the student-researcher on working alliance, particularly in terms of agreement of research goals and tasks, the bond between the members of the research team, and the views about the professional relationship (for example, see Horvath & Greenberg, 1994).

I have always felt building rapport (the social bond of the working alliance) is a key aspect of all effective professional relationships. My approach to both research and applied practice essentially places great value on "getting to know" the people I work with. I am interested in discovering their background and strengths and identifying the current challenges before them. Some of the most important professional relationships the student researcher might establish could be with other teaching and research staff, laboratory technicians, research administrators, student-peers, and experts in the field who undoubtedly each offer a range of knowledge and expertise that can be harnessed to develop the skills of the student researcher. Indeed, the benefit of having myriad collaborative relationships and working closely with others brings many rich learning experiences.

Peer Mentoring and Professional Practice Groups

Based on my experiences, I would recommend two notable activities for developing professional relationships: peer mentoring and professional practice group meetings. Peer mentoring is an easily arranged activity weekly, fortnightly, or monthly and can bring a host of benefits. The range of benefits of peer (student-to-student) mentoring was extensively documented in the first issue of *JASPR* (Vissek et al., 2021) and includes the expansion of critical thinking and collaboration skills, heightened persistence and retention, improved social support and increased psychological well-being. My own experience is that the sharing of concerns, doubts, and questions with a trusted peer often leads to more positive actions and outcomes. Just like athletes, graduate student researchers are not immune to disappointments, dealing with difficulties, and personal stress. Peer mentoring, be it with fellow students in the same cohort or outside of it, can offer a powerful support system. Much like elite sports, graduate student research can also feel like an

isolated process at times (see Zizzi, 2021). As a research supervisor, I have witnessed instances where peer mentoring has been crucial, particularly when motivation in the neophyte student researcher may wane.

The activity that earns the top spot on my list of activities for cultivating professional relationships is professional practice group meetings. My experiences with professional practice groups date back to my early days as a doctoral student. A fellow graduate student facilitated a weekly "quality circle" meeting, which brought together senior members of the university's sport psychology staff and other doctoral research students. In this meeting, we discussed current issues in sport psychology consultancy, reviewed academic articles, gave conference/workshop attendance feedback, and reported our research progress. Meeting regularly with the group provided a great breadth of expertise and differing perspectives at the time when my own knowledge was in its infancy and my experiences limited. For many years, I facilitated a similar professional practice group with peers. The group was made up of ten sport psychologists and trainees of varying expertise and backgrounds and we met every month to discuss applied sport psychology consultancy reflections, research-related matters, and academic teaching-related issues. Individuals, who committed to the group and attended, took turns in "leading" the meetings with a focus on applied practice, research, or teaching. The mutually supportive and collegial approach cultivated through these professional practice meetings resulted in collaborative empirical research publications, book projects, and conference presentations. More importantly, the meetings fostered stronger professional relationships and continued professional growth.

Summary


In this short narrative scholarship, I reflected on the importance of building and maintaining professional relationships as a foundation for young researchers. In my experience, developing meaningful professional relationships in research (and applied work) takes time and effort. The working alliance provides a useful framework for explaining how effective relationships can stimulate research goals and tasks and act as a catalyst in the development of strong bonds between research supervisors/advisors and students, student-peers, participants, and other potential research collaborators. In this paper, I also described two activities that I have personally found useful for widening and strengthening professional relationships. I highly recommend regular

peer mentoring and professional practice group meetings for student-researchers as they have a host of collaborative benefits that can increase the quality of the research process, experience, and outcomes.

Much like sport performance, excellence in advancing research in sport psychology is never easy. It is no secret elite athletes are judged solely on their performances. Increasingly, the same applies to academia, as research excellence is judged in terms of performance, most notably through publications, impact factors, h- and g-indexes, and secured extramural research grant and contract funding. The development of professional relationships is a vital ingredient in the quest for excellence.

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