Against the Certification of Sport Psychology Consultants: A Response to Zaichkowsky and Perna

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Zaichkowsky and Perna (1992), in their rebuttal to my article (Anshel, 1992) against certification in sport psychology, failed to openly examine the issues and often resorted to misquotations and misinterpretations in my opinion. Rather than examining, or even touching upon, the philosophical issues that call AAASP’s certification procedures into question, the authors took a defensive, confrontative posture. For example, they claim that AAASP founders “bravely undertook the important yet arduous task of certification, and they should be commended for their foresight” (p. 294). As a member of AAASP since its inception in 1986, I heartily agree. However, I am not alone in doubting the efficacy of sport psychology certification, particularly as outlined by this well-intended but inappropriate process. Numerous conversations with other individuals from several countries who represent the fields of psychology, physical education, sport and exercise science (including sport psychology), and coaching reflect an undercurrent of unhappiness and concern about the process. The key to understanding these feelings, heretofore ignored by Zaichkowsky and Perna (1992), as well as the AAASP certification committee, are the words “appearance” or “perception.”

The arsenal of esoteric criteria in AAASP’s certification program goes far beyond what is necessary to ensure high quality, ethical, and professional practice. Therefore, the exhaustive list of qualifications for certification, equalled only by a similarly exhaustive list of individuals certified through the grandparenting clause, gives the appearance of a process that is self-serving, overly restrictive, self-promoting, and arrogant. The process reflects a perception that psychologists and psychology majors, by their refusal to accept sport science as an integral part of their educational training, may not promote themselves as sport psychologists. Perhaps to some extent this is a valid point, but there is a better way to establish standards and promote quality practice. Further, psychology, not sport and exercise science, currently possesses the legal qualifications for using the “psychologist” label.

In my article (Anshel, 1992) refuting the efficacy of sport psychology certification, particularly as presented by AAASP, I asserted that the certification process is inherently flawed for three primary reasons. First, certification is
overexclusionary in its failure to recognize the expertise of individuals who meet many, but not all, of the criteria for certification. The process of certification has the unintended effect of protecting less qualified individuals by allowing "certified" consultants to act as professionals when, in fact, they are no more qualified to practice than individuals who do not meet the vast number of certification criteria. For example, licensed clinical psychologists, void of academic expertise in the sport and exercise sciences, are disqualified from certification. Yet these individuals possess the skills, coupled in some cases with extensive experience working with athletes, to deal with various psychological problems, some quite serious—even life-threatening (e.g., eating disorders).

Ironically, AAASP includes a grandparenting clause that serves the purpose of granting certification status to highly respected researchers and writers in the sport psychology literature who would otherwise be ineligible. The concept of grandparenting is worthy, but why restrict its accessibility for new applicants? According to AAASP Certification Meeting minutes ("AAASP Certification," 1990, p. 7), the committee defeated a motion to alter this policy. To take one scenario, would a recent immigrant to the United States who has served as a sport psychologist with his or her country's Olympic team not be eligible for certification through grandparenting? Apparently—and wrongly—so. Why not examine the person's professional career and previous experience before automatically excluding this person from consideration? This is an example of an "appearance" of arrogance and overrestrictive control on the certification procedures.

The second primary issue is that certification is inherently discriminatory and self-serving. To clarify this point, the answers to a few questions are warranted. Who are members of the certification committee? The names of committee members are published in AAASP newsletters, but it appears that individuals are rotated on this committee. On what basis were they selected? Whose interests do they represent? Where are the voices of others who are most affected by certification, such as students who aspire to become sport psychologists, educators, and researchers from various segments of the sport psychology discipline and who are primarily responsible for professional preparation, coaches and athletes who are the primary users of consultation services, and university administrators who are being "required" to generate new courses and programs to meet certification criteria? Zaichkowsky and Perna (1992) refuse to engage in self-examination. Their self-aggrandizement of the certification process provides a shield against both the crucial strategy of investigating the ramifications of their program and the efficacy of improved alternatives.

We read ("Questions," 1991, p. 3) that the sport psychology profession is better served by the certification process (i.e., accountability, recognition, credibility, professional preparation, and public awareness), but we are not told "how" it is better served. For example, how will AAASP govern to ensure that these desirable certification outcomes are met? By what mechanism will professional practice be monitored to ensure accountability of remaining within the boundaries of the consultant's expertise rather than sliding into the role of clinician? How many university and college programs provide course work required for certification? AAASP has published a directory of graduate programs in sport psychology. With no intent to criticize this worthy and needed document, is each educational institution listed in this publication capable of producing a certified sport psychology consultant recognized by AAASP?