Land Ahoy! Guidelines for Navigating the Choppy Waters ofObservation Practice

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Abstract

Observation is recognized as a valued method of service delivery in professional practice. It has been credited for its capacity to not only assess and monitor client behavior but has also been linked with the development of relationships, enhancing the practitioner’s contextual understanding of the sporting landscape, and identifying key stakeholders in gaining entry. Despite being an accepted and acknowledged practice, there has been limited guidance on *how* to implement observation effectively into sport psychology consultancy. As a result, this article provides four practical guidelines aimed towards directing and enhancing observation practice for both trainee and experienced sport psychology practitioners.

*Keywords:* professional practice, sport psychology, consultancy

Land Ahoy! Guidelines for Navigating the Choppy Waters of Observation Practice

Assessing the psychological needs of a performer is a fundamental part of consultancy and often comprises the first stage of working with a client. Observation is a key aspect of this assessment and is regularly used for continued monitoring and re-assessment throughout the duration of the consultancy period. It provides direct evidence of a client’s overt behaviors, gestures, and interactions within the natural sporting environment (Holder & Winter, 2017). Consequently, observation builds a practitioner’s knowledge of a client’s specific sporting culture and helps to identify contextual and situational variables that define, trigger, and influence a client’s behavioral response. This understanding of the client’s sporting environment and their behaviors better positions the practitioner towards more effective judgement and decision-making for intervention (Martin, Winter, & Holder, 2017). Furthermore, specific advantages of using observation within applied practice have been identified. These include: a) first-hand evidence of behaviors and interactions within the sporting environment that can be triangulated with a client’s verbal (i.e., interviews), or written (i.e., paper and pen protocols) understanding and awareness of their own performance; b) supporting the development of relationships with both the client and support staff (i.e., coaches, performance director, and physiotherapists); c) heightening the contextual intelligence of the practitioner in gathering an understanding of the specific language and dynamics of the client’s sporting environment; and d) developing rapport and gaining entry with key stakeholders (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005; Holder & Winter, 2017; Holder, Winter, & Orr, 2018; Martin et al., 2017).

Importantly, it must be noted that observation is regarded as a skilled practice and therefore practitioners require training for its development (McMorris, 2015). However, despite the affordances of observation, when reviewing the sport psychology literature there is an absence of attention given to its practice (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007; Holder & Winter, 2017). Alongside a lack of presence in the literature, it has also been identified that observation is often untaught within the education and training process towards professional qualification (Martin et al., 2017). Unless an individual’s supervisor or mentor provides support and advice in observation practice, it can be considered that observation is largely overlooked. As a result, there is a need for greater guidance on when and how to implement observation into practice.

To summarise, observation has been specifically identified as a practice that has not received sufficient consideration or guidance on *how* to be effectively implemented within delivery, despite identifying that sport psychology practitioners frequently engage with its use (Holder & Winter, 2017; Martin et al., 2017). A lack of guidance can result in uncertainty which can be an uncomfortable experience for practitioners, particularly those early in their career (Baumeister et al., 2007). As such, it can be likened to feeling lost at sea. There are signs of land ahead (i.e., it is known that observation is valuable), but there is little direction in knowing how to ‘navigate the choppy waters’ towards effective observation practices. Accordingly, this article provides four practical guidelines for both trainee and experienced sport psychology practitioners. These are aimed to both identify the challenges associated with observing and to provoke a deeper consideration of how we might manage and engage more optimally with observation practices. Specifically, guideline one refers to *when* observation can be used, while guidelines two, three, and four provide specific recommendations on *how* to use observation.

Guideline 1: When to Use Observation

It is important to recognize when to use observation. The following suggestions outline when observation can be implemented with associated examples. Firstly, observation can take place at a macro-level in which there is consideration of the overall context that a client operates within, and includes training, competition, and social environments (Holder et al., 2018). Across these three environments there are several behaviors that can be noted: Moments of success, defeat, and error, both immediately after its occurrence, as well as its ensuing influence on the remainder of the performance. It also offers, but is not limited to, the chance to gain an understanding of motivation and commitment towards improving skills, pressures within the performance culture, values towards professionalism (e.g., time keeping, attitude and respect for teammates/management), interactions amongst support staff, the coach-athlete relationship, intra-team conflict, pre-competition strategies, coping with change, and behaviors during ‘downtime’ at a tournament.

When and how frequently it is appropriate to observe within each of these environments (training, competition, and social) may be governed by the stage of consultancy. For example, if at the early stages of consultancy, observation might be approached with increased openness to gain an overall sense and less biased understanding of the environment. Alternatively, if the practitioner has worked with a client for a period of time, and a particular skill is being worked on (i.e., breath control), observations might become more directed and structured in the behaviors that are identified. Consideration of how much time the client spends in each environment may also warrant greater observation in a specific context, i.e., training or competition. Alternatively, if travelling with a team or organization, there is greater time and opportunity to observe interactions within a social context.

The degree of specificity in which observations are approached can therefore vary. Holder and Winter (2017) identified a micro-level approach to observation which refers to non-verbal communication and emotional listening. Often this type of observation takes place when working in one-to-one consultancy. It acknowledges discreet changes in a client’s tone, breathing, facial expression, or body language, and can help towards an increased understanding and interpretation of a client’s verbal response to questions. Practitioners often do not consider observation beyond the traditional macro-level, however it is encouraged that micro-level observations are used and recognized to facilitate towards understanding and interpretation of clients (Holder & Winter, 2017).

A key determining factor for the integration of observation rests on the context and opportunities that are available. Opportunity and learning are intrinsically linked and deemed imperative for the growth and advancement of practitioners (Hutter, Oldenhof-Veldman, & Oudejans, 2015). An increased frequency of observation experience is therefore likely to prosper enhanced comfort and confidence in its practice. It must, however, be noted that there are challenges associated with observing that may present limitations to practitioners, in terms of how much it can be engaged with. Examples include: access in a competitive environment (i.e., an applied practitioner may not be granted permission to access the changing rooms to observe team talks), the client may wish for their psychological support to remain confidential which does not comply with a practitioner being visibly present in their sporting environment, or the type of sport not being conducive to observation (i.e., marathon runner). Without an opportunity to observe, the extent to which observation is engaged with and developed is therefore limited. For many practitioners these might be barriers to the frequent use of observation, particularly those that are self-employed and work with individual clients due to logistical challenges (e.g., time and distance) limiting opportunities that are available. In these circumstances, it is proposed that practitioners obtain video footage as a solution towards enabling observation opportunity. For individuals employed by an organization in which hours are contracted to a set number per week, it might be easier to embed observation as time can be split to the practitioner’s preference to enable its integration. As such, it is encouraged to identify opportunities for the integration of observation into a practitioner’s typical practice where possible.

**Guideline 2: How to Facilitate ‘Buy-In’ Within the Contractual Phase**

Despite the positives of observation, it is evidenced that practitioners have an associated hesitation with its practice, in particular, charging for this service (Martin et al., 2017). Consequently, if practitioners are apprehensive about charging for observation, there is a concern regarding the frequency with which observation is, or indeed, is not used. When considering other professions and their practices of observation, it is very common for them to ‘take a look’ before conducting and diagnosing their work, for example, it would be expected that a car mechanic look under the bonnet of the car and ‘observe’ what needs to be done before undertaking any work on the vehicle. Confidence should be taken from this, and the same philosophy transferred to applied sport psychology and observation. We encourage practitioners to appropriately educate clients on the intention and value of observation during the early contractual period in efforts to suitably outline the reasons for its use and thus to manage expectations.

Careful consideration of the specific requirements of each type of clientele (e.g., athlete, parent, team, national organization) will help towards an effective ‘sales pitch’ to facilitate buy in. Depending on who has hired the practitioner may determine how this contract is negotiated. If self-employed and working with individual clients, observation might be endorsed at intervals throughout the contractual period, i.e., at the start, middle and end to assist with contextualising practice, monitoring, and assessing. Alternatively, if employed by an organization there might be greater scope to negotiate more frequent use of observation as an integral aspect of your contract, for example, a period of observation regularly takes place prior to or following one-to-one consultancy, or group workshops.

Guideline 3: How to Use Observation to Elevate Contextual Understanding

Observation can be approached in two ways to improve practitioner understanding of the client and their sporting demands. Firstly, observation can be used to increase a practitioner’s contextual intelligence in which a better understanding of the context the performer operates in is established. An observer should spend time becoming accustomed to the environment and begin to develop an awareness of the cultural mechanisms, and intricate subtleties that drive and operate the performance environment (Brown et al., 2005; Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014; Holder & Winter, 2017). Dependent on contractual negotiations (as highlighted in guideline 2) and the capacity through which observation has been agreed and can be accessed, this could be completed through either watching video footage of the client, or via the practitioner’s physical presence in the environment. By possessing greater understanding of the client’s sporting culture, language, and demands, the practitioner is in a better position to successfully respond to the client’s reality and effectively implement intervention (Brown et al., 2005). Information from guideline 4 should be used to provide an idea of how to structure an observation in this context.

The second approach to utilising observation is through immersing oneself into the sporting context rather than being stood away from the training group in an isolated position. Typically, this type of observation is used when contracted to a team or organization and there is extended time spent with the client. In this way, the practitioner is still developing contextual understanding, however, there is an intention to develop trust and rapport to build upon relationships within an organization. Practitioner immersion can identify itself as shadowing the coach, travelling with the team to competitions, attending training camps, putting out equipment, and assisting with miscellaneous jobs. An outward display of will and enthusiasm to integrate and become involved with the team in roles beyond the expected norm, is likely to gain the practitioner greater respect and trust from not only the athletes, but also management, coaches, and support staff (Martin et al., 2017). Importantly, immersion serves as a function towards an appreciation of the team/organizations culture and decision-making hierarchy which is inherently associated with gaining entry (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Holder et al., 2018). Once established, it is important the practitioner uses this valued position, and the relationships that have been built, to strategically identify key stakeholders within the organization that are likely to be influential as a catalyst for any potential organizational change deemed appropriate (Eubank et al., 2014). For example, identifying a need to clarify and implement team values across a team/organization.

Guideline 4: How to Structure an Observation

Observations can be implemented through either a structured or an unstructured approach. A highly structured observation is characterized by the objective recording and evaluation of pre-defined behaviors and gestures via frequency counts. Whereas, an unstructured observation has no specified method through which to record behaviors and is therefore attributable to the observer’s discretion (Holder & Winter, 2017; Holder et al., 2018). However, it is important to recognize these methods are not dichotomous, and instead can be represented on a continuum. Alternatively, a blend of both styles is possible, in which a structured observation becomes less rigid in protocol, and an unstructured observation is given greater direction through embedded structured principles.

Practitioners’ can facilitate enhanced effectiveness in their observation through devising a template tailored to align with personal requirements and preference. The following three key principles and guidelines are suggested for consideration when designing your own template:

1. It is important to enter an observation with an intention. Having clear, thought out objectives prior to observing is considered to facilitate and maintain both focus and productivity, allowing for a more effective practice (please refer to Figure 1. Example observation template one). For example, observing the interaction and communication of a team and how this might alter depending on levels of fatigue, pressure, or challenge. Without this, the practitioner could fall into the habit of *watching* in which there is a passive consumption of information, aligning more with a spectator of the sport, as opposed to the skilled utilisation of *observation* to monitor and acknowledge behavior and interaction (Martin et al., 2017). Intention is the determining variable that differentiates between anybody (e.g., untrained professional) observing, versus a skilled trained professional. Having an intention provides purpose going into an observation and can be considered the difference between merely looking and seeing.
2. Acknowledge and note information that can provide context to an observation. Examples of this includes:

* Context: For example, training vs. competition (please refer to Figure 2. Example observation template two). A competitive context immediately signifies potential implications, such as pressure, that a training context may not simulate. Continual observation in only one context may skew a practitioner’s perception of a client’s interaction with their environment, therefore it is important to ensure observation occurs amongst different settings. This enables practitioners to make comparisons across both contexts and to determine how transferrable a client’s behaviors are.
* Venue: For example, home or away. At their home ground the client may feel an increased sense of comfort and familiarity, or alternatively provoke more pressure. If away, the venue could have historical associations which might affect the client’s preference for performing there, and thus influence cognitive appraisal and subsequent affect and behavior.
* Time and date: It is important to note when an observation takes place. For instance, a mid-week training session following a full day of school/work, versus a morning training session following a full day’s rest, might result in the observation of different behavioral responses. Alternatively, time can be considered with regards to monitoring behaviors across the entirety of performance. It could be suggested that a practitioner intentionally enters an observation with specific behaviors to observe (e.g., team communication), and includes the headings, start, middle, and end to signify how the specified objective changes across the duration of performance rather than taking a brief snapshot in time (please refer to Figure 1. Example observation template one).
* Incidence mapping: This concept infers the importance of taking note of the timing of behavioral or emotive incidents, to enable it to be traced to specified events. For instance, an observation could note a player to have had a loss of emotional control during a rugby match however, this becomes meaningless unless there is additional information to contextualize the incident, e.g., following a perceived unfair decision from the referee.

Inclusion of such detail provides essential information when explaining, recognizing, and understanding behavioral patterns and triggers. Consequently, the purpose of embedding structure to an observation through contextual indicators provides significance and meaning to otherwise unidentifiable behavioral events.

1. Once an observation has been completed it is important to feedback the information that has been gathered to the client. The nature of this feedback is determined firstly by who the client is, and secondly the intention of the observation. Feedback could range from the provision of tangible evidence of contracted time via a written report of observed findings specific to the requirements of the client, to an informal discussion with the client post-observation. The important consideration here is the necessity to feedback to the client in order to verify observed findings and to make sense of behavioral actions, via an understanding of its associated cognition and affect.

**Closing Remarks**

Observation has been likened to ‘navigating choppy waters’. It is understood to be a credible practice which provides rationale for its use. Yet, with only limited existing guidance, the navigation of its practice is not ‘plain sailing’ and as a result can provoke a tentative and apprehensive approach. As identified in the introduction of this article, observation is a skill which indicates that it can be learnt and developed. To aid the facilitation of learning and sense-making of observation experiences, it is highly encouraged that practitioners reflect on their practice (Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010). However, caution must be taken when reflecting in isolation due to the susceptibility to consolidate a negative self-focus and heightened internal critique. Instead, we strongly recommended that practitioners seek opportunities to engage in reflective conversations with peers. Sharing observation experiences can help to negate feelings of uncertainty and can support the normalization of doubts towards the legitimization of practices. It is intended that the four guidelines outlined encourage practitioner’s to more frequently and confidently navigate the ‘choppy waters’ of observation towards a developing skilled practice. Land Ahoy!

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