Worlds Apart or Worlds United? A roundtable discussion at the Northern Ireland Branch of the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference: A brief report
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AT THE Northern Ireland Branch of the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference in Belfast in April 2014, the SGCP was invited to participate in a roundtable discussion to consider emergent issues relating to professional development and the contribution of applied psychology to the work place. The panel comprised representatives from the disciplines of Coaching Psychology (Sarah Corrie and Alison Clarke), Sport and Exercise Psychology (John Kremer and Gavin Breslin) and Organisational Psychology (Yvonne Cooke), and was convened by Gavin Breslin (University of Ulster).

The roundtable discussion was preceded by a presentation from John Kremer entitled Worlds Apart? Applying Sport Psychology in the Workplace which sought to examine factors associated with individual and team performance. These factors included leadership, team cohesion, causal attribution, motivation, confidence and mental toughness. Although the underpinning ideas were couched within the discipline of sport and exercise psychology, the presentation provided the backdrop for identifying and discussing shared concerns.

A starting point for panel discussion concerned the nature of applied psychology itself, and the extent to which individual disciplines are distinct and should seek to promote themselves as such, or whether the disciplines should seek to unify around areas of similarity and promote themselves and their work under a new identity of ‘Applied Psychologist’. This question is far from academic; as the Society reviews its strategic priorities for the next five years, critical issues include the relationship between the member networks and the Society as a whole, the need to become more outward facing so that the public understands what psychology can offer, and seeking ways to ensure that our knowledge, evidence and approaches to enquiry are used to effect positive change for individuals, organisations and at societal level. Within the context of this discussion, the following themes emerged:

1. The diversity of the work that applied psychologists now undertake
The panel acknowledged the diverse environments in which applied psychology is now practiced and adds value. This can be seen as a positive consequence of how an increasingly broad range of groups within society recognise the contribution of psychological knowledge. Nonetheless, this development also raises questions about the scope of what we can offer, how we organise our professional development to meet this growing demand, how we relate to other
professional groups who profess the ability to apply our knowledge and skill (at perhaps a lower cost to the consumer), and being able to identify and work within the limits of our individual competence.

2. The importance of continued professional development (CPD)

The importance and value of CPD was highlighted. A shared value was ensuring that reflective practice was firmly embedded within any approach to CPD, alongside the ability to deliver innovative practices when designing bespoke solutions for coachees. Although historically CPD has tended to be located within individual sub-disciplines, opportunities for ‘cross-fertilisation’ was identified as a potentially welcome development for equipping applied psychologists to work with the diverse range of clients who now seek our services.

3. Guarding the profession

A current tension in the evolution of applied psychology was identified as concerning the extent to which effort should be devoted by practitioners to ‘guarding’ the profession and the risk of our being too ‘precious’ about our knowledge-base. Should, for example, we welcome knowledge developed outside of psychology or retain a degree of distance until we have systems for testing the credentials of that knowledge and those who have produced it?

The consensus was that whilst maintaining professional standards is critical, applied psychology could perhaps aspire to a greater broad-mindedness and accept that valid contributions can come from many quarters, albeit with warnings from some. Along with this, our horizons can be broadened by welcoming and more actively facilitating multi-disciplinary enterprises.

4. Spheres of competence

Recognising the limits of our individual competence was identified as an issue requiring particular consideration in the current climate as the services of applied psychologists are sought by an increasingly diverse range of clients. The potential for professional psychologists to find themselves working in areas of application in which they have not been trained is an emerging dilemma. An example from sport and exercise psychology would be an athlete who presents with the symptoms of an eating disorder, or where a coachee exhibits levels of distress in a coaching session that may suggest the presence of depression. Whilst referral to the relevant specialism is important, identifying the boundary between coaching and clinical work for individual clients can be a challenge. Cross-disciplinary collaborations may enable us to think creatively about these kinds of dilemmas and where the boundary of our individual competence lies.

5. Facilitating self-reliance in those who engage in our services

Regardless of whether, as professionals, we approach clients from the position of a single discipline or through collaboration with colleagues working in other domains, there was agreement that a shared goal is to nurture our clients’ self-reliance. Members of the panel concurred that nurturing self-reliance in clients is both commercially and ethically valid and beneficial and therefore, a shared aspiration.

Corrie (2013) has observed that at times of economic political and professional pressure, disciplines can tend to seek security through differentiation and division. However, both coaching and the psychological professions may be strengthened through a collaborative approach to scholastic enquiry. The bringing together of these different sub-disciplines in the context of this panel discussion speaks to this agenda. Despite being separate disciplines within applied psychology, the panel highlighted more similarities than differences in their understanding of some of the current critical issues with which we need to engage – both within and beyond the Society. The consensus was that the existence of the
multiple environments within which psychologists operate should not necessarily mean each area must first provide original theoretical underpinnings and then guard them from other disciplines to justify their existence. Rather, by promoting and celebrating the diversity of application of similar theories across sub-disciplines, we can learn, refine and ultimately achieve more together.

Coaching psychology has, of course, always championed this perspective. Since its inception, coaching psychology has actively embraced the contribution of a wide range of disciplines, adopted a trans-disciplinary approach to knowledge creation and welcomed collaboration with psychologists from other disciplines around the identification of key issues to shape its contribution. It was, therefore, a welcome development to hear other disciplines within applied psychology sharing this view.

Through the dialogue that took place at the Conference, as well as the desire to collaborate to produce this brief report and working together to co-author a fuller account of the proceedings for the *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*, the Division of Sports and Exercise Psychology’s international publication, we would see this event as an example of the type of shared exploration that can be enriching for coaching psychology specifically, and the psychological professions generally – one that inspires collaborations and works towards change at multiple levels. We hope this brief report might foster reflection and discussion on the opportunities afforded by collaboration amongst the psychological sub-disciplines, and encourage others to do the same.

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**Reference**