Experienced Practitioners Use of Observation in Applied Sport Psychology

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Abstract

Within applied sport psychology, a relative paucity of information exists on the use of observation. The present study investigated experienced consultants’ perceptions of observing within their applied practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine applied sport psychologists. Thematic analysis identified the following themes: why practitioners observe, methods through which practitioners observe, and perceived challenges of observation. The study provides a valuable insight into the bespoke application of observation and serves to maximize the benefits of this flexible and adaptable tool. However, the need for an enhanced evidence base to underpin training in observation is required for the enhancement of sport psychology practitioners.

*Keywords:* assessment, behavioral approaches, consultancy, practice

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To be an effective applied sport psychology practitioner, it is generally accepted that a range of knowledge and skills are required, promoting competence and expertise (Collins, Burke, Martindale, & Cruikshank, 2015; Fletcher & Maher, 2013; 2014). Essential among these indicators of practice proficiency, are the quality and voracity of client assessment procedures. Psychological assessment allows the collection of athlete information, to identify and understand the cause of their performance challenges (Beckmann & Kellmann, 2003). From this process, sport psychology practitioners can accurately conceptualize client needs and make informed judgments regarding the most appropriate interventions (Martindale & Collins, 2005). The array of assessment approaches for gathering information to explore client experiences is broad, but can be logically divided into interviews, questionnaires, and observations.

Observation has long been employed as an extensive assessment procedure used for the recording and evaluation of behavioral actions (McKenzie & van der Mars, 2015). Undeniably, across a range of allied professions, the impact of observation on human effectiveness is apparent. For example, the use of observation within school classrooms (Gresham, 2011), clinical observations of psychiatric patients (Lewis-Smithson, Mogge, & LePage, 2010), family interactions (Markman, Leber, Cordova, & St. Peters, 1995) and medics training to become doctors (Hauer, Holmboe, & Kogan, 2011) provide exemplars where observation provides an appropriate method for collecting information to enhance practice effectiveness.

Observation is also of interest within the applied sport psychology domain, providing consultants with an opportunity to record overt behaviors outside of formal individual or team consultations, and monitor clients in the dynamic sporting environment (Gee, 2011; Watson II & Shannon, 2010). The use of observation can assist in gaining a range of performance-related information, for example: athletes’ responses to variations in performances; interactions and interpersonal relationships; indications of pre-competitive strategies; and levels of consistency in training and competition (Taylor, 1995). Thus, observation allows athlete behavior to be assessed in many settings, providing practitioners with indicators of psychosocial processes and/or links with performance outcomes. However, it is clear that the contribution that observation can make to assessment information is founded in the behavior of those being observed. Observation is often criticized because of its inability to causally account for ‘invisible’ factors such as cognition and intention, and can at best be considered an approximation of the true experience of the person being observed (Gillham, 2008). Regardless, there is currently a critical need to develop an understanding of these observational assessment practices within applied sport psychology.

Establishing a comprehensive understanding of observation procedures can help advance practitioner application of this approach, in a similar way to the design of questionnaires and interview protocols being tailored to address sport related applications. There is clearly an ever-expanding knowledge base and enhancement of sport psychology specific questionnaires, to assist practitioners in understanding particular aspects of a client (Ostrow, 2002). This development is supported by procedures that attest to the validity and reliability of such measures and, subsequently, enables practitioners to incorporate into their practice with confidence, assured that the information collected will be valuable to ongoing consultancy work (Tenenbaum, Eklund, & Kamata, 2011).

On a similar note, it is evident there is also a considerable base of knowledge on the approaches to, and skills required for, effective interviewing. A foundation structure of interviews has been proposed and substantial literature has explored the skills that need to be demonstrated in applied sport psychology practice to maximize the quality of information gathered from interviewing clients (e.g., Taylor & Schnieder, 1992). This literature attests to the importance of rapport development (Leach, 2005), questioning, and active listening (Katz & Hemmings, 2009). Further, the knowledge derived from counselling and other helping professions has provided additional guidance for the application of interviews with sporting clients (e.g., Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Ward, Sandstedt, Cox, & Beck, 2005).

This plethora of information undoubtedly assists current and aspiring practitioners to understand and develop their practice (Tod, Andersen, & Marchant, 2009). It is therefore somewhat surprising, and a little concerning, that the knowledge and skills of observation as an assessment tool, has received scant attention in the applied sport psychology literature and developed little beyond descriptive overviews in key textbooks (e.g., Watson II & Shannon, 2010). It could thus be argued this is somewhat problematic for the profession, that a substantive body of evidence is not currently available to support the effective utilization of observation in the field of applied sport psychology (Winter & Collins, 2016). Furthermore, this is rather perplexing, as the benefits of behavioral observation seem clear and congruent with the dominant cognitive-behavioral philosophical framework adopted within applied sport psychology practice (Hemmings & Holder, 2009). The cognitive-behavioral philosophy proposes that athletes’ behaviors are subjectively and cognitively mediated through their perceptions (Beauchamp, Halliwell, Fournier, & Koestner, 1996; Cohn, Rotella, & Lloyd, 1990). However, it is our contention that there is, at this moment, an over-reliance on accessing the cognitive, as opposed to this behavioral dimension within current assessment literature.

As previously highlighted, the knowledge from which practitioners’ underpin their applied work is founded on the notion of evidence-based practice (Winter & Collins, 2015a). However, within the complex and dynamic world of sport, the challenges of a focused and valid evidence-base have been questioned and the advantages of practice-based knowledge must be considered as a significant contributor to practitioners’ development and skills. Thus a distinction can be made, between evidence-based knowledge generated from scientific research compared to practice-based knowledge developed over time by means of professional practice and experience. Such practice-based knowledge can support and direct both research and applied sport psychology practitioners in a unique and contextually appropriate manner (Ivarsson & Andersen, 2016; Winter & Collins, 2015b).

By ascertaining sport psychologists’ practice-based knowledge, a greater understanding of observation can therefore be obtained. Accordingly, this study aimed to provide experienced practitioners’ perceptions of their use of observation. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the practitioner’s reasoning behind using observation and the processes they employed.

**Method**

**Design**

The research was located within an interpretive paradigm to gather rich descriptions of practitioners’ perceptions regarding the use of observation within their sport psychology consultancy (Cresswell, 2007). From an ontological perspective, participants may have their own unique interpretation or perspective of their observational experiences (Creswell, 2003). The experienced practitioners’ perceptions were accordingly investigated through qualitative semi-structured interviews, employing inductive thematic analysis strategies to develop and describe themes that emerge from the data, while using the language of the participants to fully describe the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Within the framework of the interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative descriptive approach was hence employed. A qualitative descriptive approach aims to provide a rich account and understanding of the participants’ experience and is the pertinent choice when straight descriptions of phenomena are desired (Nayar & Stanley, 2015; Sandelowski, 2000). Furthermore, a qualitative descriptive approach is particularly useful in exploratory studies, such as this one, where little is known about the topic (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009).

**Participants**

Following institutional ethical approval and informed consent, nine UK-based applied sport psychologists with a minimum of 10 years’ experience as accredited practitioners, were selected to participate in this study. In addition, experienced practitioners were purposefully selected on the basis that they work with performers on a regular basis and have exposure to a range of different clients (Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015). The sample comprised seven males and two females, ranging in age from 35 to 53 years (*M* = 42.78, *SD* = 5.83). All participants were initially accredited as professional practitioners through the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), and were also British Psychological Society (BPS) chartered psychologists. Furthermore, all participants were registered as practicing sport and exercise psychologists with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the UK organization which governs standards of professional practice in this area. Participants reported having a mean of 17.72 years’ experience (*SD* = 4.96 years) as accredited practitioners. Reflecting the norms in current UK practice, two participants consulted with elite performers via full-time positions held with an institutional body, two participants worked full-time through their own private consultancy practices, and five participants consulted with a range of different sports alongside their academic positions within higher education institutions (Winter & Collins, 2015b).

**Interview Guide**

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, allowing the researchers to collect the important information about the topic of interest while giving the participants the opportunity to report on their own thoughts and feelings (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Therefore, although there was a certain element of structure to the interviews, the order of the questions was dependent on the response of the participant. This allowed the interviewee the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings while bearing in mind the broader aims of the study (Smith, 2008). The interview questions were open-ended to allow the respondent considerable scope to express their perceptions and expand on views offered (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Prior to data collection, a pilot interview was conducted with a BASES accredited practitioner. This allowed for the revision where necessary of the interview guide and ensured the schedule provided enough opportunities to gather the required richness of data (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Following the pilot interview, an evaluative discussion was held between both authors and a senior researcher experienced in the development and evaluation of qualitative methods. As a result, minor amendments were made to the structure of the interview guide. The final interview guide was structured around three key areas: general demographic and introductory information (Could you tell me a little about your sport psychology career?); practitioner rationale for using observation in their practice (Within your applied practice, could you describe the reasons you use observation?); and processes when using observation (How would you describe the approaches you adopt with regards to the way you use observation?). A variety of probe and elaboration questions were employed to ensure complete understanding of respondents’ comments and enable in-depth answers to be obtained (Malterud, 2001).

**Procedure**

Prior to the interviews, information sheets were provided that explained the purpose and procedure of the study (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Following the completion of informed consent, convenient times and locations for the interviews were agreed. Interviews were conducted by the first author and began with an explanation of the purpose of the study. All of the interviews were conducted face to face in an environment comfortable for the participant, lasting for a mean of 52 min (*SD* = 12.09). The lead author concluded each interview by thanking the sport psychologists for their participation and offering them the opportunity to express any further information they may have with regards to observation.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded with the participant’s written consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were read and reread in their entirety until both authors were familiar with the content in order to gain an overall sense of the sport psychologists’ experiences with observation. Using thematic analysis, similar meaning units were grouped to form themes and each theme was assigned a label that would best represent the grouped meaning unit (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytic process was carried out in an inductive fashion until data saturation was deemed to have occurred across all meaning units (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006: Marshall, 1996). Both researchers worked together throughout the analytic procedures and discussed and agreed upon all coding decisions together that encompassed the sport psychologists’ experiences of observation. The process of working as a coding team helps reduce individual researcher bias and enhances the trustworthiness of the findings (Nayar & Stanley, 2015). Pseudonyms were created for the participants to further protect participant identity (McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson, 2015).

**Establishing Trustworthiness**

Throughout this study several measures were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The first author engaged in a bracketing interview (requiring an ability to reflect on one’s assumptions, values, and experiences), prior to commencement of the study. The purpose of this was to identify and consider any biases that the primary investigator may have had throughout the process of data collection and analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Secondly, member checking was performed with all participants to ensure the categories identified from the raw data accurately captured their experiences (Malterud, 2001). Participants were each provided with a copy of the transcript and a summary of findings for their interpretation and confirmation that they were a true and accurate reflection of their responses. Following this process, all participants confirmed to the authors that a precise portrayal of their experiences had been represented.

**Results**

Three major themes emerged from all interviewed participants within the inductive analysis and are presented with representative verbatim quotes: a) why practitioners observe, b) methods through which practitioners observe, and c) perceived challenges of observation.

**Why Practitioners Observe**

In this theme, the participants discussed the different reasons why they adopted observation within their sport psychology consultancy and the perceived benefits to their professional practice. Specifically, three sub themes emerged: supplementary assessment evidence, impact on client engagement, and immersion in the sporting context.

**Supplementary assessment evidence.** The interviews revealed a consistent message that observation can be used as a significant strategy to collect evidence about the client’s situation. This evidence collecting approach influenced the ability of the practitioner to work effectively with clients:

I think observation gives you an opportunity to view the person in their real world context. Most of the initial assessment strategies that we employ would involve you and the client and/or the coach sitting down and discussing things…observation enables you the opportunity to go out and to view them within a training or competition context. (Simon)

Further, this evidence was often seen as an adjunct to other assessment methods commonly used in sport psychology consulting e.g., interviews and questionnaires: “I tend to use it as more of a supplementary method of assessment so…it’s more confirmatory in that sense rather than I suppose exploratory” (Ross). Consequently, by monitoring current behaviors, this contributed to the triangulation of assessment information: “It’s sort of a check in as much as anything, just to get a different, an alternative view…to what they might say in an interview” (Paul). Thus, observation was viewed as providing consultants with supplementary evidence, rather than a stand-alone assessment tool.

Within professional practice, the participants also discussed how they used observation to identify the application of psychological skills often as a measure of current practice in clients: “I’m looking at overt signs of the use of mental skills, so the use of pre-shot routines and some sort of timing and content of those routines” (Carl). In addition, to the initial assessment practices and further into the consulting relationship, observation was used to evidence the application of techniques that were a focus of current work with clients: “To have some kind of measurement…to what we have been working on with athletes” (Charlotte).

Lastly, within this sub-theme, observation skills most regularly associated with assessment and deriving evidence within sporting encounters were also critical to the practitioners work in a one-to-one consultancy setting:

Observe very carefully their immediate reaction behaviorally, physically, and physiologically as well as verbally, to see whether that was hitting a nerve emotionally-psychologically in some way. (Tom)

This exemplifies the benefits of access to subtle responses from clients that may further contribute to client understanding beyond the verbal information conveyed in a one-to-one consultancy:

If they avert their eyes from you or if they feel they are talking about something sensitive or their breathing changes or they look down. You can sense those movements and that through an observation that isn’t just through people’s words. Because you don’t just observe with your eyes you can observe with your ears in terms of how people say things. (John)

Thus extending the common assumption of observation only being used in training and competition environments, where sporting performance is the primary focus. In essence, this demonstrates the opportunities inherent in a micro-observation of behaviors, in addition to those macro behaviors observed in the field.

**Impact on client engagement.** Practitioners identified that the use of observation provided opportunities for them to enhance and develop the rapport that had previously been established: “I found it particularly important in building up rapport with performers, so that I can actually talk to them about things I have seen happen” (Nicola). In concert with this, a number of practitioners voiced the potential perceived benefits of being present as an observer to the clients. These perceived benefits were seen to go beyond the rapport development aspects stated previously, and extend to impacts on focus and remembering strategies to apply within performance:

Their observation of me being present reminds them to do certain things that perhaps otherwise they might not do as consciously. So my physical presence may serve as a, it’s been called the behavioral reminder hasn’t it? (Charlotte)

The opportunities afforded to practitioners who were able to observe by physically being present within the clients’ context were noted. The possibility of clients feeling more able to access the practitioner’s services and offering opportunities for ‘teachable moments’ were seen as benefits of observation: “You can observe I think, you can be out there watching the game, then they might come off and speak to you” (Steven). Specifically in relation to this, practitioners described the use of reflective conversations with the client related to the content of their observations:

One of the benefits of using observation I think is to go back to the player and ask them to chat through what they did in a certain situation knowing that I have an opinion of what they did and I made observations of that. (Tom)

In addition, the observation provided information to the practitioner that can aid engagement in future sessions due to the applicability to the client of examples used: “Sometimes they’ll engage more in the conversation when they can remember those times happening or something noticeable happened to them and they picked up on it” (Paul).

**Immersion in the sporting context.** The participants identified that it is not enough to focus their observation in a narrow manner on the individual performer alone. Such an approach would limit the richness of understanding the context within which the client is performing. The practitioners stressed the importance of being open to a range of information, including observing the wider structure: “I think that trying to get a feel for the culture and the organizational set up is for me sometimes the richer information, especially working at youth sport levels” (Steven). Information relating to knowing the culture and context of the specific setting in which the client operates; commonly referred to as contextual intelligence, was evident within this subtheme.

In line with this concept, the practitioners discussed how the opportunity to engage with observation was intrinsically linked to being, or becoming, part of the culture of the environment within which a client may be performing: “I think that is really important for a number of different sports, where I think sometimes as a sport psychologist you’re in the dark as to what does go on in a day.” (Nicola). This practitioner further discussed how the specific communication within a sporting culture reinforced the links between observation and potential client attitude towards service provision: “I think I approach my consultancy differently because I was aware of the banter that went on out and around the game…that was really useful for me being accepted into their culture” (Nicola). Being a part of this culture therefore had clear tangible impacts on the perceived credibility of the practitioner: “I think actually going out and watching them shows that I am interested and I am enthusiastic to watch them and be part of the consultancy process” (Nicola).

In addition, attendance in their sporting context provides opportunities to enhance practitioner understanding:

The less you know about the athletes’ sporting context and the demands that are being placed upon that athlete the less effective you can be and the less connected you can be to that athlete. So if they don’t really feel you understand what’s happening to them then maybe they’ll be less likely to buy into what you’re actually doing as a consequence. (Paul)

**Methods through which Practitioners Observe**

The next theme concerned the importance of understanding the different methods the sport psychology practitioners employed within their consulting, with two sub themes emerging: informal and formal approaches to observing.

**Informal approaches.** The approach practitioners took towards observation was to use it to get an overall feel for a situation and to be open to a full range of possible material emerging from the observational opportunity. This seemed to exemplify an informal approach to observation devoid of restrictive foci: “I’m trying to go in with a blank slate, just to see what crops up from the observation” (Charlotte). This information served as the basis for the discussion and guided the conversation as a reflection on performance: “Rather than have a particular formal observation guide or things, just trying to pick up on things to discuss with the athlete at a later date?” (Steven).

Practitioners identified a range of observation methods that assisted in raising awareness of client behaviors. Specifically, the use of video as a form of indirect observation provided practitioners with additional information and perspectives that could enhance the assessment effectiveness:

If you had the actual visual mechanism of them seeing what they were doing rather than you just saying this is what you were like and them saying I don’t think I was, well I think you were, and I think having the reality there is maybe easier. (Tom)

The benefits of being able to reinforce observations through the use of video, can therefore strengthen awareness for both the practitioner and client. However, limitations on the access to video were also highlighted due to ethical considerations of consent:

Sometimes I’ve asked for videos from athletes…there are problems with that in the sense that they need to get consent of the person that playing at the other side, the chairman, director, the umpire, the parents of anyone else, so it then become quite a difficult thing to get that video in that sort of context. (Carl)

**Formal approaches.** In contrast to the aforementioned informal approaches,when discussing the methods adopted in relation to observation, the formalized use of a tool to measure and track certain types of behaviors was identified by three of the participants. In this example, the practitioner explains how they would use a formal chart to record behaviors within their tennis consultancy: “I would chart the match, chart match flow…if the player wins the point, you go up on a piece of graph paper, the line goes up, if you lose a point the line goes down” (Carl). Such an approach differs to the more informal ‘noticing’ approaches, identified earlier in this theme. The use of checklists was based on establishing targeted behaviors as the focus of the observation, which the following quotation from cricket exemplifies:

Trying to be reasonably targeted in identifying certain behaviors or situations that you want to look at them…I might have some sort of tabular format that I’ve just constructed myself where I would have positive or negative behaviors, or responses, or factors contributing to behavior, or the consequence of type of thing. (Simon)

These target behaviors were established prior to the observation based upon previous knowledge of the client. Although targeted behaviors can benefit the observational process, they can also create the possibility of unhelpful biasing of attention, which will be discussed further in this section.

**Perceived Challenges of Observation**

In discovering the experienced practitioners’ perceived challenges of observing within their practice, the following sub themes emerged: potential biases, practitioner demands, and limited evidence-base.

**Potential biases.** Many of the participants cautioned against making assumptions or interpreting behavior based on limited information from one observation:

I think it’s quite difficult to draw anything from an observation, unless you’re comparing it with some other observation of that person. A snap shot of just watching someone perform or train. I think it’s difficult to make any judgments on that unless you know what the norm is or how that relates to another situation. (John)

This sentiment is in concert with a previous sub theme, whereby observation was regarded as a supplementary method of attaining assessment evidence and thereby the importance of triangulating client information was noted.

As highlighted by Ross, a significant limitation identified by a number of the interviewed practitioners was the potential to observe in a biased manner:

We might have our own biases with regards to what we are looking for, which may be appropriate, they might be inappropriate, but we then might base our judgments on our preferences of what we are looking for.

Furthermore, practitioners discussed how biases could also affect the client, in that if they know they are being observed then they may act slightly differently. However, as this practitioner highlighted, this tends to only be a passing issue:

Within the competition context because they are in the heat of the actual competition, while they may be aware that you are there at the start that dissipates away after a period of time because they’re so immersed in what they’re doing and therefore any sort of bias they may be showing tends to disappear over time. (Simon)

**Practitioner demands.** It could therefore be suggested, that to be effective, practitioners would need to conduct multiple observations. However, in using observation effectively the practitioners stressed the demands placed upon them:

It is quite constantly challenging to be observing, to be looking for behaviors, and to be involved it’s quite an intense process…it’s very difficult to keep up that level of concentration. (Nicola)

Specifically, practitioners commented on the demands placed upon their concentration, to focus on relevant sources of information for extended periods of time:

I can lose attention myself, my mind can wander, or you get involved in a conversation with somebody and sometimes you go into a bit of….not away with the fairies, but you are not as clued in to whatever is going on. (John)

This was therefore seen as a high intensity activity, where it was a requirement to be alert to nuances within behavior that could be of importance:

We need to see how they’re behaving between (training) drills so I suppose our concentration funnel doesn’t go down so far we’re kind of at that intensity level a lot more than athletes may be…because it’s our duty to be able to identify some of those subtle changes…which you know is quite tiring. (Carl)

**Limited evidence-base.** Finally, when discussing observation, a critical challenge for professional training was identified by a number of the practitioners:

It would be quite interesting to find out how other people observe and why they observe and how they observe and when they observe, what they observe…because I think it is something that…pretty much every single practitioner could benefit from, given that we really haven’t been trained. (Ross)

The practitioners noted the lack of evidence to support the use of observation within their work, and identified a paucity of training programs to develop optimal effectiveness in their use of observation:

No one really said well what are you observing, how are you observing or when do you observe, why do you observe? It’s something that I’ve kind of developed myself. You know we are in a profession which is evidence based, there’s very little evidence with regard to how observations should be conducted. (Ross)

There was a unanimous lack of perceived guidance conveyed by these experienced practitioners on the effective use of observations that, interestingly is in contrast to the guidance available for other forms of assessment, such as questionnaires or even interviews:

There’s a lack of structure or clear guidance as to how to observe effectively…it would appear to be a really simple activity to carry out, yet I think there is a lack of guidance maybe helping individuals to be able to observe effectively. (Simon)

**Discussion**

The interviews revealed a consistent message that observation allows assessment of overt behaviors (Gee, 2011; Watson II & Shannon, 2010). Furthermore, these overt behavioral experiences are likely to be triggered by situational and contextual variables. Therefore observing performers in their sporting environment helps to better understand and relate to the client’s circumstances (McKenzie & van der Mars, 2015). Additionally, participants noted how the evidence gained from observing was often seen as an adjunct to other assessment methods, for example, interviews and standardized questionnaires. This becomes particularly pertinent when considering most philosophical approaches adopted by practicing sport psychologists regard the interrelationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004).

The aforementioned interviews and questionnaires have been researched extensively and are considered to provide increased knowledge and understanding of the client (Lines, Schwartzman, Tkachuk, Leslie-Toogood, & Martin, 1999). However, both these types of assessment are dependent on how self-aware athletes are to what affects their performances (Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder, & Van Raalte, 1991). Conversely, and what was evident in this study, observation provides the practitioner with an opportunity to witness behaviors first-hand in their sporting environment (Hauer et al., 2011). Triangulation of assessment evidence therefore enables a more comprehensive and accurate account of the performer (Hemmings & Holder, 2009). This was advocated in the study through allowing a comparison of expressed information gathered from interviews and questionnaires (e.g., self-perceptions, attitudes, beliefs) with observed behavior.

In addition to the more traditional information gathering and assessment-focused impact of observations, our findings highlighted that there are other pertinent outcomes from this process. Observation was perceived to influence client engagement, the immersion in their environment, the ability to build rapport, viewing the client in their world, being open and approachable, and learning about the client’s sporting context. It has widely been acknowledged that the quality of the relationship between practitioner and client is a fundamental factor in successful sport psychology consulting (Andersen, 2000; Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011). Of note, these concepts have all previously been cited in relation to the key characteristics essential for applied sport psychology consultant effectiveness (e.g., Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002; Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson, 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Sharp & Hodge, 2013). The positive impact of the act of observing on these important relationship components therefore enhances our understanding and highlights the numerous benefits of applied sport psychologists adopting observation within their practice.

The experienced sport psychologists in this study also discussed how the opportunity to engage with observation was intrinsically linked to being, or becoming, part of the culture of their client’s environment. Contextual intelligence involves knowing the culture and context of the specific setting in which the individual operates (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005). As such it is considered a strong predictor of real-world success in professional practice (Terenzini, 1993). However, from a UK perspective, a minority of sport psychology practitioners hold full-time positions, allowing them to be fully immersed in the sporting environment. The benefit of observing in person, as highlighted by the practitioners, can therefore be an invaluable tool to facilitate practitioner immersion, an understanding of the sporting context within which they are working, and ultimately an enhanced contextual intelligence.

Furthermore, the development of contextual intelligence requires an understanding of values and attitudes of the people at all levels of the sporting organization (Brown et al., 2005). The participants in this study stressed the importance of being open to a range of information, including observing the wider structure and organizational set up. Widening the lens to include an even broader context and potential scope of practice goes beyond traditional work with performers and coaches alone. For example, understanding the structure of a sporting context (e.g., who makes key decisions, the hierarchical structure of the sport) can therefore be critical for work at an organizational level, which is increasingly becoming accepted as part of the role of the sport psychology practitioner (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012).

Pertinently to these ideas, Hays and Brown (2004) interviewed 22 expert performance consultants, the majority of whom were originally trained in sport psychology. These consultants consistently identified factors related to contextual intelligence as crucial to consulting success. Specifically, paying particular attention to the variations in language within a performance setting was discussed. The practitioners in this study, who reinforced the important link between being aware of the specific communication and being accepted into a sporting culture, held a similar belief. A recent article by MacIntyre, Campbell, and Turner (2014) exemplified this: “Maybe this is our problem as a field. Maybe we don’t have enough knowledge and performance specific lingo to really cut it with performers” (p. 67).

As previously discussed, observation enables practitioners the opportunity to go out and to view athletes within a training or competition context, where sporting performance is the primary focus. This macro-level approach describes those occasions where the focus of the observation is on understanding a breadth of factors, including the application of psychological skills, effectiveness of a mental skills training program, communication links, decision-making hierarchies, and other factors within the sports environment. In addition, to this commonly held view of observation and of interest to applied sport psychology, the practitioners in this study discussed a use of observation skills in a more nuanced manner within one-to-one consultancy situations. Micro-level observations take the focus from the context or environment to the subtle and nuanced verbal and nonverbal behaviors and communications exhibited by an individual. This alludes to the impact of observation in understanding particular client responses to questions raised during the consultancy setting, through the concept of emotional listening ([Sauter](http://www.pnas.org/search?author1=Disa+A.+Sauter&sortspec=date&submit=Submit), [Eisner](http://www.pnas.org/search?author1=Frank+Eisner&sortspec=date&submit=Submit), [Ekman](http://www.pnas.org/search?author1=Paul+Ekman&sortspec=date&submit=Submit), & [Scott](http://www.pnas.org/search?author1=Sophie+K.+Scott&sortspec=date&submit=Submit), 2015). As highlighted by the practitioners, this can be focused on client’s behavioral responses and any changes in interaction and communication style that can be identified (Lloyd & Trudel, 1999). Therefore, we are suggesting the range of opportunities, such as training and competition situations to use observation skills, reach beyond the traditional conception of assessment from the field into the consultancy room.

In regard to the methods practitioners took when implementing observation within their consultancy, these were reported as being highly varied. A range of approaches were discussed including the use of formalized checklists to monitor specific behaviors (e.g., Hastie, 1999; Lines et al., 1999) and the use of an open, non-formal observation where the intention was to ‘notice’ what was happening in a more global manner. These methods can be dichotomized by the use of formal or informal approaches. In relation to formal approaches, three of the practitioners chose to use checklists that can enable the monitoring of particular behaviors of relevance within their practice (e.g., Martin, Leslie-Toogood, & Tkachuk, 1997; Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, & Petitpas, 1994). Such formalized approaches have parallels to data collection methods in behavioral research, where behaviors can be objectively quantified and validated (Webster et al., 2013). However, the use of such formal behavioral checklist approaches within the sporting context are open to critique, due to the numerous and diverse range of information and scenarios that can be assessed within this unique cultural environment.

An alternative to the formalized approach to observation was, therefore, a more informal approach where the emphasis is on noticing what is going on in the environment and being open to a range of potential sources of information relevant to the practitioner. As a consequence, the majority of the sport psychology practitioners in this study developed creative and bespoke applications of observation specific to the environment in which it is intended (Watson II & Shannon, 2010). These approaches were used in different ways and dependent upon the previous information obtained in relation to the client. Ultimately, the practitioners used these informal approaches to get an overall feel for a situation and to be open to a full range of possible information emerging from the observational opportunity devoid of any restrictive foci. It was clear that these methods were being used to gain information to enable the accuracy and appropriateness of decisions made by practitioners, in relation to client goals and need (see Martindale & Collins, 2005).

A characteristic of the applied sport psychology profession relates to practice grounded upon firm theoretical and empirical research findings (Winter & Collins, 2015a, 2016). Therefore, it is increasingly seen as fundamental to engage in evidence-based practice regarding the provision of applied sport psychology (Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010; Moore, 2007). Conversely, there was a lack of evidence and perceived guidance conveyed by these experienced practitioners on the effective use of observation in applied sport psychology. This is in contrast to the more established evidence-base of observation in allied professions (e.g., Madan, Conn, Dubo, Voore, & Wiesenfeld, 2012; Regan-Smith, Hirschmann, & Iobst, 2007). Due to the lack of evidence-based guidance, the applied sport psychologists stated they can be reliant on intuition when observing, owing to deficient knowledge.

While the present study exemplifies a range of interesting findings regarding the use of observation within applied sport psychology, they are not without their limitations. Though a strength of the investigation was the range and depth of experience of the applied practitioners, all of them worked primarily with elite performers in the United Kingdom, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other countries and expertise of the performers. Although, as Sharp, Hodge, and Danish (2014) stated, “sport psychology consultants working at the elite level are a small and unique population and therefore there is much we can learn from these individuals” (p. 86). Furthermore, Carradice, Shankland, and Beail (2002) believe that, when considering a qualitative study, the research should be evaluated by applicability of the concepts to other situations and to others involved in the phenomenon. We therefore encourage readers to look for overlaps in their own consultancy with the findings in the current investigation and selectively transfer the applied findings into their own practice.

Due to the lack of evidence and perceived guidance conveyed by the experienced practitioners in this study, we suggest a number of potential avenues for further research. Ultimately, what has emerged from the findings is a substantial need for greater evidence to underpin how observation can be effectively applied in sport psychology practice. We recommend drawing upon allied professions, such as clinical psychology (Lewis-Smithson et al., 2010), sport coaching (Webster et al., 2013), and the medical literature (Hauer et al., 2011) as disciplines who have recognized the importance placed upon evaluating behavior and hence developed their observational evidence. These allied disciplines, may therefore have parallels and transferrable recommendations to the effective use of observation within applied sport psychology. A concern also arose from the experienced practitioners in this study, regarding the potential biases that may exist when using observation. Future research is therefore required to access both the sport psychologists and clients’ perspective on this experience. For example, it would be interesting to know if biases affect the client, in that if they know they are being observed do they behave differently. Likewise, are practitioners sometimes biased with regards to preferences they are looking for and the subsequent effect this may have on their professional judgment and decision-making.

Overall this study has highlighted a number of important benefits for successful sport psychology consulting when applied practitioners engage in observational processes. In addition to the more traditional information gathering and assessment-focused impact of observations, our research findings provide further insight into observation than previously offered in the extant litertaure. Specifically, observation was perceived as an invaluable tool to facilitate an enhanced contextual intelligence and subsequent organizational level understanding of the sporting context within which practitioners are working. Furthermore, this research has contributed to a developed understanding and novel application away from the field, where micro-level observations take the focus to subtle and nuanced verbal and nonverbal behaviors and communications exhibited by an individual in the consultancy room. Nonetheless, what has emerged is a unanimous call for greater development of observation skills within the training of applied practitioners. Professional organizations (such as the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, BASES, and the BPS) should take heed of this and promote the importance of becoming skilled in observation through their required professional competencies, educational, and continued professional development opportunities. However, before such training can be developed the current gap of observation research within applied sport psychology needs to be developed to extend the findings provided within this study.

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