

**TITLE**

“Should I Stay, or Should I Go?” Making Sense of Physiotherapists’ Turning Point Experiences in Elite Sport.

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**“Should I Stay, or Should I Go?”**

**Making Sense of Physiotherapists’ Turning Point Experiences in Elite Sport.**

Thesis submitted by:

Sunita Kerai

For the award of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Sport, Allied Health, and Performance Sciences

St Mary’s University, London


November 2023

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## Abstract

This programme of research critically examined the experiences of elite sport physiotherapists throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle. Specifically, the purpose of this thesis was threefold. First, I provide an honest account of conducting longitudinal qualitative research within elite sport environments. I utilised the genre of the confessional tale to reflect on the challenges that I encountered, which although unplanned became an important contribution to this thesis. Data was collected through a reflexive journal and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five tales are discussed: *entering the world of elite sport*, *breaking the cycle of performative actions*, *vulnerable elites*, *breaking the code of silence in elite sport*, and *negotiating with elites*. Throughout the tales, I also provide recommendations and guidance for novice researchers and students who are currently or thinking about conducting qualitative research in elite sport environments.

Second, this thesis aimed to extend theoretical understanding of turnover and retention practices by explaining how elite sport physiotherapists make sense of their turning point experiences and examining the processes that led to turnover and retention outcomes throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle. A qualitative, longitudinal, and rigorous methodological grounded theory approach was used to understand turnover and retention experiences in an elite sport organisation. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, electronic application entries, timelining, and a reflexive journal and analysed using grounded theory analysis. Four core categories were identified: *socio-cultural context*, *experiencing turning points*, *sense-making*, and *sense-made and lessons learned*. These four categories helped me to build, develop, and produce a substantive theory (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*).

Third, this thesis aimed to bridge the theory-practice gap, by identifying how organisations can better support elite sport physiotherapists by developing a duty of care to inform practice, policies, and codes of conduct. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were identified and discussed: *person first, physio second; stronger together; aligning policy with practice; sustainability; and more collaboration and communication*. Throughout the themes, the recommendations are supported by physiotherapists' voices and contemporary empirical literature. Finally, the findings from all three empirical chapters were considered together and implications across empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical perspectives were discussed. The thesis closes with future research avenues comprised of worthy topic areas that warrant further attention and my concluding thoughts.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

## 1.0 What is this PhD about?

I've always been a pretty caring and compassionate person. It's why I joined the profession in the first place. I wanted to help athletes... But the workload is horrendous. It changed me. I became far less caring. Some days, I didn't recognize myself. I didn't like who I was becoming. The way I interacted with injured athletes. I just repaired them. Like a machine that needed to be fixed; a mechanic rather than a physio. The time demands I was under didn't allow the time to nurture them back to full health. They want everything yesterday! . . . I got to the point where I just didn't want to do the job anymore. They'd literally taken everything from me that I had to give, and they were still asking for more. If this is what it's like to work in elite sport, I do not want to be a part of it; it's not for me. I am not a machine. (Kerai et al., 2019, p. 260)

The excerpt above was from a study I had conducted which illustrates the pressures that physiotherapists are under whilst working in elite sport and the consequences of long-term organisational stress experiences (e.g., inauthenticity, leaving one's job). Upon completing this research, I was asked if I would collaborate with an elite sport organisation based in the United Kingdom (UK), to critically examine the experiences of physiotherapists working in their organisation throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle. A qualitative, longitudinal, and rigorous methodological grounded theory approach was used to examine turnover and retention experiences in this elite sport context. Throughout this programme of research, I aim to bridge the gap across different areas of research and disciplines (e.g., organisational psychology, sport sociology, sport psychology) and extend the research on the social-cultural aspects of working within elite sport, rather than just focusing on the individual level. For example, how physiotherapists are influenced by, and influence

others within the environment, and how elite sport culture shaped physiotherapists' experiences of working in elite sport. Additionally, the bridge between theory and practice has always been a challenge within sport psychology literature, thus this thesis aims to integrate theory and practice by constructing a new, original substantive theory and developing a duty of care to inform practice, policies, and codes of conduct.

## **1.1 Background**

Turnover is one of the most important issues that all sport organisations face due to the negative effects it can have at the individual, team, and organisational levels (Larner et al., 2017). This PhD focuses on voluntary turnover, which involves “voluntary cessation of membership in an organization by an individual who receives monetary compensation for participation in that organization” (Hom & Griffeth, 1995, p.5). The cost of turnover to organisations has been estimated to range from 90% to 200% of the current employee's salary, which includes cost associated with recruiting and replacing staff members, time involved in training new employees, and lower productivity and morale from the remaining team or organisational members (Park & Shaw, 2013; Shaw, 2011). However, a large volume of research within sport psychology literature pertaining to leaving or transitioning out of sport portrays this issue from an athlete's perspective (Park et al., 2013). Thus, more research examining why sport employees, such as physiotherapists are leaving their jobs and organisations warrants attention.

In 2022, according to the Health and Safety Executive in the UK, 50% of workers suffered from work-related stress, depression, or anxiety which accumulated to 17 million workdays lost due to ill-health. Moreover, in 2022 the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development conducted a health and well-being survey and found that 79% of respondents reported at least one stress-related absence in their

organisation within the past year. Furthermore, 1,501 adults who live in the United States and are employed (e.g., full-time, part-time) were recently surveyed and over 40% of the employees stated their intention to leave their job within the next year due to their experiences of organisational stress (American Psychological Association, 2021). Much of the research on stress within sport organisations has focused on the stressors (i.e., environmental demands) various actors have experienced and the impacts of these environmental demands on the employee's health, well-being, and performance (e.g., Arnold et al., 2017). Although, researchers often report employee turnover as one of many consequences of organisational stress experiences they have not thoroughly examined the turnover or retention process.

This thesis arose out of a partnership between St Mary's University, a UK-based elite sport organisation, and me. The sport organisation approached the university and me to conduct a programme of research that explored physiotherapists' experiences throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle. Following discussions with key stakeholders within the organisation, the specific focus on the retention of highly valued and experienced physiotherapists was identified, as this was an issue that the organisation was experiencing at the time. **This need was identified in response to the high turnover numbers of physiotherapists once an Olympic or Paralympic cycle comes to an end with one key stakeholder highlighting:**

**If this organisation employs over 80 physiotherapists and 40 to 45 physios want to leave their job, sports, or the profession at the end of a cycle; either voluntarily (e.g., choose to leave) or involuntarily (e.g., made redundant). That poses a massive issue for the organisation if over 50% of their physios potentially leave and need to be replaced. We stand to lose a lot of experience, knowledge, and skill which is difficult to replace.**

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (2022) have recognised the issue of turnover and retention in the physiotherapy profession by stating that urgent action was needed to retain existing staff within the National Health Service (NHS). Moreover, physiotherapists are leaving their jobs at a rate much higher than other allied health professionals (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2022). Furthermore, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (2023) conducted a review of the physiotherapy workforce in the UK and stated that each year approximately 15% of physiotherapists leave the NHS, with nearly half of the leavers quitting within the first five years of becoming physiotherapists. Thus, the higher rates that physiotherapists are leaving this elite sport organisation in comparison to other social-cultural-organisational environments warrants attention. Whilst key stakeholders had primarily anecdotal evidence and assumptions of why they thought there was a high turnover rate, they wanted to supplement their understanding with a rigorous programme of research, that could inform policy and practice. Specifically, one key stakeholder outlined their aims for the research:

I hope the research captures the journey that physiotherapists go on within and outside of sport. It's complex and I hope the PhD gives us an in-depth understanding (that would be really valuable) about why people are leaving, and ways in which we can support practitioners and the sports in the future.

## **1.2 Overview of the thesis**

This thesis has seven chapters. Chapter two sets the scene and provides a review of literature and key areas of the literature pertaining to this research context. This chapter begins with an exploration of what physiotherapy is; how physiotherapists are trained; what their roles, responsibilities, and duties are; how physiotherapists can transition into becoming a sport physiotherapist, followed by a



review of literature that pertains to healthcare professionals working in elite sport. The chapter then provides an overview of organisational stress research within sport psychology, my foray into this research area, and the methodological gaps within the research, particularly the lack of longitudinal and collaborative research. After speaking with members of an elite sport organisation, the practice problem identified was specifically suggested to be turnover and retention. Subsequently, the writing in chapter two therefore reflects this research area, considering studies conducted inside and outside of sport organisations, and provides a summary of the current knowledge gaps within the literature such as a lack of qualitative, context-, and population-specific research. To address these gaps, I examine the importance of theory and why grounded theory can be useful as a means of generating knowledge grounded in data. The chapter then closes with an outline of the aims and rationale of this thesis.

In chapter three, I introduce the research context, the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of this programme of research, and the research participants. I then give a detailed outline of the procedures of collecting and analysing data, techniques used to demonstrate methodological rigour, and quality criteria that can be used to judge this programme of research.

Chapter four utilises the confessional tale genre (van Manen, 1988) to highlight the challenges I encountered during the research process and to give an insight into the ethical dilemmas of conducting research within elite environments. Five main challenges are discussed: (1) entering the world of elite sport, (2) breaking the cycle of performative actions, (3) vulnerable elites, (4) breaking the code of silence in elite sport, and (5) negotiating with elites. As I discuss my experience of entering this elite sport organisation for the first time, interwoven throughout the themes are

recommendations for novice researchers and students who are thinking about or conducting qualitative research within elite sport contexts.

The next chapter moves away from my own experiences to physiotherapists' experiences of working in elite sport. Specifically, chapter five builds and develops a substantive theory (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*) which explains the ways that physiotherapists made sense of their turning points experiences throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle, leading to turnover or retention outcomes. Three specific questions are examined: 1) what factors lead physiotherapists to contemplate turnover, 2) how do physiotherapists make sense of their turnover intentions, and 3) what are the subsequent 'outcomes' once physiotherapists have made sense of their decision to stay or leave the organisation? This chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways the theory has extended previous research and literature across multiple areas (e.g., sense-making, turnover and retention, career transitions with sport psychology).

The next chapter turns the attention to how the sport organisation can retain their most knowledgeable and experienced physiotherapists. Specifically, chapter six focused on recommendations and strategies to support physiotherapists working in elite sport environments and promote a duty of care within sport organisations. Five themes are discussed: 1) person first, physio second; 2) stronger together; 3) aligning policy with practice; 4) sustainability; and 5) more collaboration and communication. Discussion of how the recommendations are supported by contemporary research and how strategies can be implemented are combined with physiotherapists' voices throughout the chapter.

Chapter seven brings the programme of research to an end by drawing conclusions across the entire thesis and summarising the contributions of this body of

research for both, our understanding of elite sport physiotherapists' experiences and applied sport psychology practice. It begins with the empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of this research. This is then followed by a discussion of areas that warrant attention and possible avenues for future research. This thesis closes with my concluding thoughts which draws together the core aspects of this research and its significant contribution to knowledge and practice.

**Chapter 2**  
**Literature Review**

## **2.0 Overview**

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature pertaining to topics underpinning this programme of research. The review begins with an exploration of what physiotherapy is, how physiotherapists are trained, and what they do in the UK, followed by an outline of how one becomes a sport physiotherapist. This is followed by an overview of research about being a healthcare professional and working in elite sport environments. The next section provides an overview of organisational stressors experienced by various members of elite sport environment; a critical appraisal of this literature reveals how the physiotherapist's voice has largely been neglected in the literature. Thus, there was a gap in the organisational stress literature which piqued my interest in the topic area and resulted in me entering this research field. This is then followed by a review of literature pertaining to models of turnover and/or retention outside of elite sport organisations and insight into factors that have influenced turnover or retention outcomes within elite sport from athlete, coach, and referee perspectives. Given the limited explanation of turnover, the final section focuses on the use of grounded theory in sport, in particular, on theory as a means of generating knowledge where there is little to no pre-existing literature about a social phenomenon of interest. Finally, the chapter closes with an outline of the aims for this programme of research.

## **2.1 Physiotherapy**

In 1894, the Society of Trained Masseuses was established by four nurses (Lucy Marianne Robinson, Rosalind Paget, Elizabeth Anne Manley, and Margaret Dora Palmer) who wished to protect their profession following many news stories which discredited their services (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2022). By 1920, the society merged with the Institute of Massage and Remedial Gymnastics to form

the Chartered Society of Massage and Medical Gymnastics and the four pillars relating to the scope of practice (i.e., massage, medical gymnastics, electrotherapy, and kindred methods of treatment) was granted by Royal Charter (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2021). In 1944, the society adopted its present name 'The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy' and over the next two decades, the society became a founding member of the World Confederation of Physical Therapy and merged with The Faculty of Physiotherapists (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2022). By 1992, physiotherapy became a graduate-entry profession and since 2003, it has been regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (formerly known as the Health Professional Council). In the UK, physiotherapy is a protected profession and only individuals registered with this council can call themselves a 'Physiotherapist' or 'Physical Therapist'. In December 2020, after consulting with over 2,000 physiotherapists about changes to the wording of the four pillars of physiotherapy to reflect the current scope of practice, the council for the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy announced the contemporary four pillars which are: (1) exercise, movement, and rehabilitation, (2) manual therapy and therapeutic handling, (3) therapeutic and diagnostic technologies, and (4) allied approaches. As of March 2023, 65,700 physiotherapists are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), which makes it the largest profession (by numbers) under the council ([www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org), 2023).

### **2.1.1 How do you become a physiotherapist?**

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) defined a physiotherapist as someone who helps “people affected by injury, illness or disability through movement and exercise, manual therapy, education, and advice. They maintain health for people of all ages, helping patients to manage pain and prevent disease.” (2023a para 1). To

become a physiotherapist in the UK, usually one would complete an undergraduate degree in physiotherapy that is accredited by the HCPC and the CSP. This process typically takes three years to finish, if studying full-time, and the course provides students with a rich knowledge of the fundamentals of physiotherapy through a combination of, teaching and 1,000 hours of practical learning, through clinical placements in different settings (e.g., hospital, care home, schools; Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2023b). During their degree, students will develop knowledge and skills pertaining to a variety of conditions associated with different systems of the body which are neurological (e.g., stroke, Parkinson’s), musculoskeletal (e.g., back pain, sports injuries, arthritis), cardiovascular (e.g., rehabilitation after a heart attack, chronic heart disease), and respiratory (e.g., asthma, cystic fibrosis, chronic respiratory diseases). Furthermore, once an individual has graduated from their degree programme, they can apply to register with the HCPC to practice physiotherapy in the UK. To register all physiotherapists must meet the 15-list criterion outlined in the standards of proficiency document which are presented in Table 2.1.1.

**Table 2.1.1:** An overview of the 15 standards of proficiency an individual must evidence to register as a physiotherapist in the UK (Health and Care Professions Council, 2023).

<b>Standards of proficiency</b>	
1.	Be able to practise safely and effectively within their scope of practice.
2.	Be able to practise within the legal and ethical boundaries of their profession.
3.	Be able to maintain fitness to practise.
4.	Be able to practise as an autonomous professional, exercising their own professional judgement.
5.	Be aware of the impact of culture, equality, and diversity on practice.
6.	Be able to practise in a non-discriminatory manner.
7.	Understand the importance of and be able to maintain confidentiality.

8. Be able to communicate effectively.
  9. Be able to work appropriately with others.
  10. Be able to maintain records appropriately.
  11. Be able to reflect on and review practice.
  12. Be able to assure the quality of their practice.
  13. Understand the key concepts of the knowledge base relevant to their profession.
  14. Be able to draw on appropriate knowledge and skills to inform practice.
  15. Understand the need to establish and maintain a safe practice environment.
- 

### **2.1.2 What do physiotherapists do?**

Physiotherapists are involved in various stages of patient care including making clinical assessments, diagnosis, writing treatment plans, rehabilitation, discharge, referral, and long-term management of chronic conditions (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2023a). Physiotherapists work within and across: a range of settings (e.g., NHS, private practice, care homes, sport environments); populations (e.g., children, athletes, older people, animals); health conditions (e.g., cystic fibrosis); clinical specialities (e.g., neurology, respiratory, musculoskeletal, cardiovascular); and specific techniques (e.g., acupuncture, aquatic therapy). Although physiotherapists do work alone and autonomously, they often make up a wider integrated team which includes multiple disciplines (e.g., psychologist, nutritionist, soft tissue, podiatrist). Due to the various strands of physiotherapy and different areas that one can specialise in, physiotherapy practice in the UK has been expanding, year on year and since April 2023, there are currently 29 distinct professional networks recognised by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (e.g., Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Sports and Exercise Medicine, Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists, Musculoskeletal Association of Chartered



Physiotherapists), thus each professional network focuses on different sectors of physiotherapy (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2023c).

## **2.2 Sport physiotherapy**

In 1952, the British Association of Sport and Medicine (BASM) was established, although in the UK, sports medicine was considered a hobby and a practice you engage with alongside your full-time job (Batt & Macleod, 1997). Through the establishment of national and international professional bodies in physiotherapy, the professionalisation of training pathways, and the qualifications needed to practice; practitioners developed greater clinical autonomy (Swisher & Page, 2005). By 1972, a professional network within the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy was established which focused on the clinical interest of sports medicine (i.e., the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Sports Medicine, which was later renamed the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Sports and Exercise Medicine). In 1988, sport national governing bodies and government agencies in the UK claimed that sports medicine was underdeveloped and that sportspeople needed to have better access to medical and scientific support (Green & Houlihan, 2005).

In 1999, Waddington and colleagues were invited by the Professional Footballers Association to examine medical care provisions in professional football in England (i.e., English Premiership, Championship and Football Leagues 1 and 2). They conducted a questionnaire survey with club doctors and then interviews with doctors, physiotherapists, and players. They found that there were poor employment practices and highlighted inappropriate selection and appointment procedures. For example, the report revealed that half of all the physiotherapists who responded were not chartered and many only held the Treatment of Injuries diploma from the Football Association. In addition, those acting as physiotherapists had no prior experience in a

medical occupation and were dependent on having personal relationships with the football managers for their appointment. The authors made ten recommendations encompassing education, training, and appointment of medical personnel within football clubs and of the ten recommendations, two were specifically aimed at physiotherapy. Firstly, all new physiotherapists appointed should be chartered and non-chartered employees should only work under the supervision of a chartered physiotherapist. Secondly, doctors should be involved in appointments for physiotherapists moving forward.

In 2005, sport and exercise medicine was established as a new medical speciality in the UK, with many postgraduate courses providing a route into elite sport for those who were working as physiotherapists. By 2017, Malcolm and colleagues provided an update on the medical care provisions in football (cf. Waddington et al., 1999), by comparing methods of appointment, qualifications, and occupational experiences of doctors and physiotherapists. They found that 88.1% of the physiotherapists surveyed stated that they were chartered, of the employees who were not chartered, three were physiotherapy graduates and two were sports therapy graduates. Moreover, 21.4% of physiotherapists stated they had postgraduate qualifications (e.g., masters in sport and exercise medicine) and 85.7% had relevant occupational experience (e.g., working for another football club or elite sport).

### **2.2.1 How do you become a sport physiotherapist?**

A sport physiotherapist is an integral part of the sports and exercise medicine team; providing care across a spectrum of musculoskeletal injuries (i.e., most common sport-related injuries) for many populations ranging from recreational to elite athletes (Kemp et al., 2023). Therefore, a sport physiotherapist can work in a range of contexts from private practice to elite sport environments. However, research focusing on sport

physiotherapy, to date, has largely focused on practitioners working in elite sport environments (Scott & Malcolm, 2015).

To transition into working in an elite sport organisation with elite athletes, typically it is advised by lecturers, senior physiotherapists, and employers that a junior practitioner should complete their hospital and clinical rotations to gain an all-round experience of different branches of physiotherapy before specialising in sport (Judd, 2020). Moreover, Judd (2020) recommends that for practitioners who want to become sport physiotherapists, it is crucial to volunteer with amateur sport clubs to gain experience and skills working with specific types of sport injuries. In addition, practitioners can also shadow an elite sport physiotherapist (see chapter three for further discussion in defining ‘elite’ in sport contexts) to experience a day in their lives. Furthermore, physiotherapists are encouraged to complete post-graduate qualifications, with a masters in sport physiotherapy or sport and exercise medicine being seen as the ideal, and a way of developing one’s skill set in a specialised area of the discipline (Scott-Bell, 2019).

### **2.2.2 What do sport physiotherapists do?**

Physiotherapists who work in elite sport environments make injury assessments and manage rehabilitation through comprehensive treatment plans to optimise an athlete’s return to fitness and enable them to perform (UK Sports Institute, n.d.). Elite sport conforms to the broader trend in healthcare environments by utilising different disciplines (e.g., physiotherapists, doctors, strength and conditioning coaches, biomechanists, and nutritionists) and taking a collaborative approach to managing injured athletes’ recoveries (Scott & Malcolm, 2015; Suddick & De Souza, 2006). However, a key difference between an elite sport physiotherapist and a physiotherapist treating sport injuries in a private practice, is that elite sport

physiotherapists proactively try to mitigate the threat of injury and illness in athletes (UK Sports Institute, n.d.). Thus, elite sport physiotherapists use strategies to address potential risk factors such as altitude, jetlag, climate, or training load management to reduce overuse injuries. Therefore, elite sport physiotherapists try to prevent athlete injury and illness as well as manage injuries if they occur (Fagher et al., 2022).

### **2.3 Operating within elite sport environments**

Over the last 70 years, as sports medicine has developed and become a prominent part of elite sport environments, physiotherapists and other sport medicine clinicians have had to learn how to *be* health care practitioners whilst employed by, and working in, a performance-orientated elite sport context driven by a “win at all cost” ethic (Scott, 2012; Waddington et al., 1999). Within everyday practice, Theberge (2007) argued that physiotherapists and other clinicians must consider performance as a central focal point in the model of athlete health care. In addition, the consumer-focused model of medical care within sport is a defining feature in negotiations of treatment between the physiotherapist and the injured athlete (Scott, 2012).

Drawing upon claims from sociology of sport researchers who have argued that athletes accept risk, pain, and injury as part and parcel of participating in sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Researchers have also identified this acceptance often comes from “sportsnets” and the broader culture, which influences athletes to rationalize and normalize pain and injury in sport (Curry, 1993; Nixon, 1992). Indeed, a physiotherapist is surrounded by several different sport personnel, networks, and dyads (e.g., coach-athlete, parent-athlete, performance director-line manager) which can impact on how they treat patients within sport. For example, Steinmann and colleagues (2019) explored coaches’ perceptions of the role of physiotherapists, and they identified that physiotherapists often found themselves in professional dilemmas

between risk and precaution by being forced to work with performance-dominant coaches who have input into the injury management of their athletes.

The term ‘culture of risk’ within sport refers to an athlete’s ‘over-conformity to the sports ethic’ (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Put another way, it is the extent to which the culture and interpersonal messages encourage athletes to accept risk in sport and keep playing as long as possible with pain and injuries or even to return to play as quickly as possible (Nixon, 1992). Thus, physiotherapists often find themselves caught between the performance-and-risk orientated philosophy of the sport environment and the long-term health-focused approach of their profession (Collier, 2017). Moreover, Safai (2003) examined the negotiation of treatment between sport medicine clinicians and injured athletes in Canadian intercollegiate sport and found that athletes did operate within a ‘culture of risk’. Athletes were found to hide or conceal injuries, play through injuries (especially if they knew the season was coming to an end), push the limits of their bodies, and in some cases look towards their teammates to judge if they should seek medical help.

During this research, Safai (2003) also highlighted that clinicians’ responses indicated that they too are influenced by, and influence a, ‘culture of risk’, which therefore impacted how physiotherapists interacted with athletes within elite sport environments. This echoed findings by Roderick et al. (2000) who interviewed 27 professional footballers, 12 club doctors, and 9 physiotherapists about athletes’ injury and rehabilitation experiences in English professional football. Physiotherapists within the study described how they had become caught up in the performance culture and ‘punished’ athletes who were injured. They reported how they would ‘inconvenience’ injured athletes so players would not feel comfortable or used to being in the treatment room. Physiotherapists expressed how they would ‘punish’ players

who had injuries through various actions such as, having injured players come to training earlier, working injured athletes harder so they would rather be fit and training with the rest of the team, and keeping injured players longer for extra treatment after fit players have gone home resulting in injured athletes being stuck in traffic on their drive home.

Research within sociology of sports medicine suggests that autonomy, power, and organisational hierarchies were found to be important factors in physiotherapists' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours within elite sport contexts. For example, in 2012, Scott interviewed 14 physiotherapists and 14 doctors and explored how they balanced the concerns about athlete health and performance. Factors which influenced treatment negotiations were: pressure from athletes, the consumer-focused model of medical care within sport, athletes seeking second opinions, pressure from coaches, and impact on decision making and clinical autonomy. Within, the organisational hierarchy in elite sport, physiotherapists are often in a 'weaker' position than that of the athlete or the coach (Scott, 2012). So, given their lack of autonomy relative to these individuals they need to be able to assert their professional status and remain respected. Thus, often physiotherapists conform to the desires of those in more powerful positions over what may be medically correct, which could grant them social validation and security in their role and ensure that their relationships with coaches and athletes continue (cf. Kerai et al., 2019).

However, Safai (2003) also found that some practitioners operated within the 'culture of precaution', whereby physiotherapists try to mitigate the influence of the 'culture of risk' and promote long-term athlete health by judging the boundaries of sensible risks after careful consideration, however, this is often inferior to short-term aspirations. This finding provides a glimpse into how difficult it is for physiotherapists

to challenge and confront the ‘culture of risk’ by resisting and contesting the dominant cultural practices within elite sport. To contextualise and interpret these findings, I draw upon previous research within sport psychology literature, which illustrates how athletes’ stories of alternative ways of being are often silenced or suppressed due to the dominant cultural practices and scripts that operate within sport (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Moreover, athletes often ‘play the part’ of what an athlete is supposed to do whilst in public to display a specific presentation of the self that is designed to influence or manage others’ responses and perceptions of the individual (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Goffman, 1959). Thus, although some physiotherapists want to prioritise the health care of the athlete ahead of performance, the dominant narrative which operates within elite sport is likely to influence their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The dominant narrative in elite sport culture is the performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006) which represents the totalitarian view of ‘life is sport and sport is life’, where performance outcomes (e.g., winning, being the best) are prioritised ahead of other values and ways of being (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Moreover, experiencing pain and making sacrifices (i.e., relegating other areas of your life) in the quest for success is accepted as ‘part and parcel’ of elite sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Nixon, 1992).

However, Carless and Douglas (2013) found that although some athletes’ stories align with the performance narrative, other athletes overtly resisted the dominant performance narrative by challenging cultural practices of what it takes to be a successful athlete (e.g., relational or discovery narratives; Douglas & Carless, 2006). The authors highlighted four ways that athletes resisted the totalitarian view of the performance narrative which were: (i) placing happiness before performance, (ii) put maintaining personal relationships and friendships alongside or ahead of training,

(iii) believing that there is more to life than sport, and (iv) refusing to be beholden to the sport. However, overtly resisting a dominant cultural narrative is not easy and individuals can endure negative consequences as a result of going against the status-quo (Carless & Douglas, 2013). For example, an individual risks being ostracized or excluded from the culture because of the perception they are going against norms and expectations, which can subsequently result in loss of earnings, lack of career development, and de-selection (Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Despite existing literature within the athlete population on the considerable psychological and sociological influences associated with over conformity to the sport ethic, there remains a dearth of research considering the socio-cultural-organisational impacts of working in elite sport settings outside of injury experiences for physiotherapists. Thus, there was a gap in knowledge as to the extent to which physiotherapists accept, rationalize, and normalize the choices and sacrifices they must make to engage with working in sport and how the sportsnet and dominant culture can influence this process. I now turn to research within organisational stress to illustrate the importance of researching beyond the athlete perspective, as the organisational context has been shown to have a significant impact on an individual's experiences in sport.

#### **2.4 The team behind the team**

Over the past 15 years, there has been a growing body of research which has focused on the experiences of the team behind the athlete. For example, there is literature which has focused on the environmental demands (i.e., organisational stressors) that coaches, parents, and support personnel (e.g., performance directors, strength and conditioning coaches, sport scientists, and physiotherapists) have experienced due to elite sport environments. Starting with the coach, Thelwell and



colleagues (2008) interviewed 11 elite coaches who worked across a range of team sports (e.g., football, cricket, rugby union, field hockey) and individual sports (e.g., golf, gymnastics, athletics, sailing) and identified 182 distinct organisational stressors that were placed within six general dimensions. The first dimension was performance-related –athlete, which referred to the demands that the coaches experienced from their athletes' performances (e.g., athlete coachability, training performance, competition preparation, competition performance, the athlete themselves, amount or level of competition, athlete injury, opponents). The second dimension, performance-related – coach, reflected stressors associated with the coach's own need to perform (e.g., training, competition preparation, competition issues, post-competition issues, the pressure to perform, opponents, officials). The third dimension was organizational – environmental (e.g., training environment, competition environment, finances, stability, selection, travel, safety, administration). The fourth dimension was organizational – leadership (e.g., organization, other coaches, athletes). The penultimate dimension was organizational – personal (e.g., private life, social life, contractual issues). The final dimension was organizational – team (e.g., team atmosphere referring to both athletes and support staff, roles within the team, communication, miscellaneous).

Organisational stress research with coaches was extended by Olusoga and colleagues (2009) when they interviewed 12 world-class sport coaches who had coached at international competitions including the Olympic Games, world championships, world cup, and/or Commonwealth Games. The organisational stressors that they identified were represented across 10 overarching themes which were: conflict, pressure and expectations, managing the competition environment, athlete concerns, coaching responsibilities to the athletes, consequences of sport

status, competition preparation, organisational management, sacrificing personal time, and isolation. Furthermore, the stressors identified by Thelwell et al. (2008) and Olusoga et al. (2009) were supported by Didymus (2017) who extended the previous findings by highlighting the importance of the timing of stressors in determining the potential of whether it will be appraised as stressful or not. For example, multiple stressors occurring simultaneously, occurring late in the season, and coinciding with personal or work commitments might be more likely to be appraised as harmful in comparison to stressors occurring at different time points.

Organisational stress research has also extended to population groups beyond the coach-athlete dyad to include other members of elite athletes' support networks such as parents of athletes. For example, Harwood et al (2010) conducted six focus groups with 41 parents of English academy footballers (e.g., under 9's to under 15's). They identified four general dimensions of parental stressors which were: academy processes and quality of communication (e.g., uncertainty around signing and release, poor feedback, communication throughout the season), match-related stressors (e.g., child's level of performance), sport-family role conflict (e.g., financial and work sacrifices for parents, heavy training routines), and school support and education issues (e.g., managing school demands alongside football obligations). Furthermore, Burgess et al., (2016) echoed the previous research findings when they interviewed seven parents of national and international level gymnasts aged 11 to 14 years old. They subsequently categorised stressors into three themes which were: organisational, which reflects demands related to personal sacrifices, the logistics, and systems in which parents operate (e.g., finances, child injury, level of gymnastics knowledge); competitive, which considers demands related to their child's participation in competitions (e.g., child's anxiety, watching their child perform, the level of the

competition); and developmental, which considers stressors specifically associated with their child's development in sport and life (e.g., child's potential to progress in sport, child's behaviour towards their sport, value of education alongside sport).

Turning to other members of athletes' support networks who had yet to be investigated, Arnold and colleagues (2017) examined the stressors experienced by 40 support personnel working in elite sport organisations such as performance directors and leads, strength and conditioning coaches, sport scientists, and physiotherapists. The authors grouped the stressors into four themes, firstly relationship and interpersonal issues, which encompassed disputes between support personnel and organisational personnel (e.g., leaders and owners, coaches, athletes, colleagues), scrutiny and judgments from the media, breakdown in communication and poor feedback, and expectations placed upon support personnel. The second theme was physical resource issues with facilities, equipment, technology and data collection, and personal safety. The third theme was contractual and performance development issues, which encompassed workload and hours, finances and pay, job security, performance measurement, and career and development. The fourth theme, organisational structure and logistical issues, reflected stressors associated with organisational processes and set-up, organisational culture, vision and goals, roles, travel and accommodation, sports rules and scheduling. The authors also highlighted the consequences (i.e., emotions and outcomes) associated with experiencing stressors. Emotions such as anger, frustration, and anxiety were reported alongside negative outcomes including cognitions and beliefs (e.g., "constantly questioning job"), mental health and well-being (e.g., depression), physical health (e.g., fatigue), work life balance (e.g., taking work home), and family and social life (e.g., pressure on family life).

Taken together, these findings illustrate how stressful elite sport environments can be for individuals in the athlete's support network both inside and outside of sport. However, given, the centrality of physiotherapists within multidisciplinary teams (Scott & Malcolm, 2015), and their role as primary healthcare practitioners or 'first practitioners' for athletes (Bury & Stokes, 2013), it is important to understand the nuance in stressor experiences for elite sport physiotherapists. Considering coaches and parents had unique and similar stressor experiences depending on the role that they played in supporting athletes within elite environments, one could assume that physiotherapists would experience a variety of stressors that a performance director will not (e.g., issues with finding a suitable treatment room). Therefore, when the population group is studied alongside other staff members who can have different stressor experiences relevant to their roles and responsibilities within elite sport contexts, it is difficult to ascertain the specific stressors that physiotherapists can experience, which warrants attention within the literature.

## **2.5 Giving physiotherapists a voice**

My interest in learning about physiotherapists' experiences started during my masters when one of the lecturers said, "If I want to really find out what is happening with an athlete, I'll ask the physio, as a sport psychologist the physio is the one you need to get to know as they will know how the athlete is *really* doing". That sentiment really intrigued me, firstly, I naively had not realised just how central the physiotherapist was within an athlete's sportsnet and secondly, how important they are to the functioning and flourishing of the multidisciplinary team (Scott & Malcolm, 2015). I spoke to my supervisor, Ross about potential topics for my Masters thesis and research areas that interested me such as the culture of sport, organisational sport psychology, and examining a population which had received limited research

attention. As we discussed novel population groups, I asked about wider research pertaining to the physiotherapist.

Over the past 50 years, researchers in sport injury psychology have presented a large evidence base on athletes' experiences of injury, with the focus often being on the injured athlete and rarely on the support team (Brewer & Redmond, 2017). For example, researchers have explored how physiotherapists can help injured athletes with their psychological, emotional, and behavioural responses to injury and rehabilitation (Clement et al., 2015; Zakrajsek et al., 2018). However, despite the merits of this body of research in helping to provide an evidence-base to support injured athletes' recovery, and the critical appraisal of the organisational stress literature, it was revealed that although physiotherapists have been identified as important individuals in athletes' support networks (e.g., Bianco, 2001; Tracy, 2008), there has been limited consideration of: (a) the physiotherapist as a 'performer' in their own right (e.g., their needs, challenges faced), and (b) how the broader socio-cultural-organisational environment influences physiotherapists' experiences within elite sport.

To address this knowledge gap, I interviewed 10 sport physiotherapists about the stressors (i.e., environmental demands) and consequences (e.g., emotions, outcomes) experienced whilst working in elite sport (Kerai et al., 2019). Following a thematic analysis, five themes were identified. First, *I am not a machine*, provided insight into the sport physiotherapists' workload and working hours (e.g., 'working 24/7', 'working beyond contractual hours', 'too much work'). For example, one physiotherapist reported:

You can end up working seven-day weeks. Plus, Christmas Day, Boxing Day, New Year's Eve, and New Year's Day. Your life revolves around a fixture list

[upcoming matches].... It's a difficult profession. You can't plan ahead because everything can change. Games can get rescheduled. You could do well in a Cup run and have extra games. You could have a cluster of injuries. The manager can decide to suddenly take the team abroad. You have no real control over your own time, your own life. You're pulled in different directions and that brings with it stress and anxiety; a feeling of letting people down all the time. It's okay for a while but it can become overwhelming.

Second, *this is sport*, reflected the demands of being a physiotherapist working in a performance-and-risk orientated culture (e.g., 'ruthless pursuit of success', 'win-at-all cost' 'sport comes first'). Third, *relationships are messy*, considered the interpersonal conflicts of working with athletes, coaches, and the multidisciplinary team, which included managing difficult relationships, negotiating power dynamics, lack of trust between team members, and the breakdown of communication. Fourth, *under the microscope*, contemplated physiotherapists having to make the 'right' decision under intense time pressure and beneath the glare of external sources (e.g., the athletes, coaches, other physiotherapists, the supporters, the media). Finally, *beyond one's remit*, reflected the moral and ethical conflicts imposed upon physiotherapists as healthcare professionals and employees of sport organisations.

Consequences of these demands included: psychological strain (e.g., burnout, anger, the devastation when athletes get reinjured, fear of getting it wrong, feeling alone); physical strain (e.g., fatigued and tired, racing heart rate, sweating profusely); relationship breakdowns (e.g., loss of trust, having no one to turn to); engaging in emotional labour (e.g., playing the part, feelings of inauthenticity, emotional exhaustion); and job-insecurity (e.g., if I do not do this I may be fired). For example, one physiotherapist reported:

I was really nervous about going into work because I was starting to reach the point where I was not supported in what I was doing or the decisions that I was making. So, for me the pressures were starting to come through, if I go along with this, then I could lose my professional registration, reputation; I've still got bills to pay at home, I've got to pay my mortgage, keep the roof over my head. It was eventually coming to that point of making that decision of well actually it is just a job; although there's all this nice romanticism of being involved in sport, at the end of the day you are a practitioner and you have set standards. I had reached boiling point, I did what I thought was right even if it meant losing my financial security, but not everyone will make this decision.

Taken together, these findings gave a voice to physiotherapists working in elite sport and illustrated the unsustainability of their jobs, which led to some physiotherapists deciding to eventually leave their job and elite sport altogether.

Moreover, the findings highlighted how physiotherapists' health and well-being was and continues to be compromised in elite sport contexts and the critical need to provide support for physiotherapists. However, since the publication of this study, there has been limited research within elite sport settings that has explored the mental health and well-being of physiotherapists. Recently, a few studies have examined the mental health and well-being of physiotherapists alongside other support staff members' (e.g., Hill et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2023). For example, Hill and colleagues (2021) conducted individual interviews and focus groups with 11 members of a support team (e.g., coaches, physiotherapist, sport psychologist, strength and conditioning coach, nutritionist, performance analyst, performance lifestyle advisor, and performance liaison advisor) working within a national sporting organisation and examined the factors that impacted on their mental health and well-

being whilst working in elite sport. The authors identified that excessive increases in workload lowered staff well-being and mental health, especially, when coupled with contextual factors such as low financial and staff resource allocation and distribution, additional and specific work demands, low experience levels, needing to be constantly available, and leading up to and attending major events or Games. However, the researchers also found that specific protective factors led to support staff maintaining or improving mental health and well-being outcomes, which were access to quality social support, transformational leadership, and an effective organisational culture. The researchers echoed organisational stress literature by highlighting how working in elite sport contexts is stressful and if the individual does not manage and appropriately cope with the stressors, they can experience negative outcomes (e.g., burnout, poor well-being, decrease in performance, turnover).

Although my research exploring physiotherapists' stressor experiences across various elite sport environments was novel in its conception and offered nuanced insights, to build upon this preliminary study to inform policy and practice, additional research is needed. This is because many scholars have claimed that single snap-shot interviews are inappropriate methodological approaches to use when aiming to provide recommendations for policy and practice (e.g., AlHashmi & Matthews, 2022). Indeed, researchers have stated that 'snapshot' methods can lead to issues such as limiting the participant's ability to express themselves or clarify answers leading to researchers producing static pictures of participants' experiences. That is, researchers are likely to produce reasonable knowledge of a particular experience rather than a rigorous representation of the participants' lives and broader cultures that researchers are seeking to understand. Thus, the findings and conclusions from snap-shot methods "rest on a foundation of empirical sand" (AlHashmi & Matthews, 2022, p. 446).



To combat the shortcomings of snap-shot methods, researchers have demonstrated how methodologies that prioritise multiple interviews overtime alongside various methods of data collection within sporting contexts can help produce a nuanced understanding of participants' knowledge and experience of working in elite sport environments (AlHashmi & Matthews, 2022; Day & Humphrey, 2020). Moreover, longitudinal methodologies encourage flexibility and openness allowing for different forms of knowledge to be captured. Additionally, affording space for potential inconsistencies, contradictions, and complexities of participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, which can rise to the surface rather than remain hidden during rigid snap-shot methods. Furthermore, as qualitative research continues to flourish, scholars have also advocated for more collaboration and working with individuals and organisations (Day & Humphrey, 2020). Indeed, Day and Humphrey's (2020) stated that researchers need to consider who the stakeholders in their research are and what they hope to gain from the research, which can help to inform methodologies. For example, during this programme of research, I reached out to two key stakeholders of an elite sport organisation during data collection. This led me to consider retention, as the high turnover of physiotherapists was a salient issue that the elite sport organisation was experiencing at the time.

## **2.6 Voluntary turnover and retention in organisations**

Over the past seventy years, scholars across disciplines and professions (e.g., organisational psychologists, human resource specialists, business leaders and management) have researched turnover (Grotto et al., 2017). **The potential positive effects of turnover have been studied across multiple levels. At the individual-level, employees may experience positive outcomes such as, finding a better fitting job, progressing career or skill levels elsewhere, and relocating to a desired region (Hom**

et al., 2020; Larner et al., 2017). Turnover can also be healthy for organisations, for instance, turnover can lead to a more diverse workplace, new knowledge and experiences, new ideas or fresh perspectives, and competence renewal (Cregård & Corin, 2019; Hom et al., 2020; Shapiro et al., 2016). However, the notion that ‘not all turnover is bad’ (Holtom et al., 2005, p. 338) suggests that turnover is viewed by in large, as a negative outcome for organisations and/or individuals. Indeed, the concept of voluntary turnover, which is defined as an individual choosing to leave their job and organisation under their own volition, remains one of the most salient issues for all organisations due to the negative effects it can have (e.g., Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Larner et al., 2017). Studies have estimated that turnover can cost an organisation from 90% to 200% of the existing employee’s salary (Allen et al., 2010). This cost includes replacing and recruiting new staff members, time taken to train new employees, decreases in productivity, and impact on the morale of the remaining organisational members (Park & Shaw, 2013; Shaw, 2011). Moreover, turnover can have a contagious effect, that is, individuals can decide to leave if other staff members who they have close relationships with are also leaving, which can impact on the work environment, reputation of the employer, and disrupt social relationships within the organisation (Shapiro et al. 2016; Cregård & Corin, 2019). Furthermore, knowledge and skills which practitioners have gained over time will also be lost if valuable members of staff choose to leave (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013).

Considering the negative consequences of voluntary turnover for the organisation and remaining employees, many organisational scholars have studied factors that impact turnover and represented this data in the form of models. The ‘turnover process models’ have strong roots in decision theory which is concerned with ‘how’ people leave (Steel and Lounsbury 2009), whilst ‘content turnover models’

reflect 'why' people leave which is mainly grounded in organisational behaviour theories such as the theory of attitude, motivation, or learning (Zimmerman et al. 2019). Attitudinal concepts such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment have been central to turnover models, whilst the decisional concept of intention to leave is regarded as a core process within turnover literature (Steel 2002; Steel & Lounsbury 2009). Although there is not a singular model within the literature that explains all turnover situations, since the seminal work of March and Simon (1958), models have been consistently published within turnover literature. March and Simon's (1958), Organisational Equilibrium Model, was the first formal model of turnover and illustrated how turnover was the outcome of two processes which were: the perceived desirability of movement (i.e., an individual's satisfaction with their job) and the perceived ease of movement (i.e., the more alternative options the easier it will be to move). Subsequently, many scholars have incorporated March and Simon's (1958) research into their own models of turnover and thus it remains a prominent model to date within turnover research (Zimmerman et al., 2019).

In the late 1970's Mobley and colleagues (e.g., Mobley, 1977; Mobley et al., 1978; Mobley et al., 1979) published a sequence of articles in which they proposed their own turnover model, "intermediate linkages" which became known as one of the most influential models of the era (Gupta et al., 2022). The researchers illustrated turnover as a cognitive process which reflects a linear sequence of steps, starting with experiencing job dissatisfaction, followed by thoughts of quitting, which produced assessments of seeking other employment (i.e., the chances of finding a comparable job) and turnover costs (i.e., consequences of leaving). If the individual evaluates that quitting will not be costly and that seeking alternative employment would be beneficial, then they will be encouraged to start searching for alternative options.

Employees will then make comparisons between their current job and alternative options which they have found. If the individual evaluates that the alternative option is more beneficial and attractive (i.e., quit intention post job offer), this then leads to an employee quitting. This model has its foundation in the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) and was the first model to mention the construct of ‘intention to leave’, which is a construct still used in contemporary turnover literature.

Disputing the linear process which had been frequently used within the literature and aligning with the paradigm shift happening in the 1990s which questioned the importance of attitudinal variables in turnover research, Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) unfolding model of turnover introduced two novel constructs. Firstly, a ‘shock’ or critical event (e.g., having a spouse transfer to another location, low tolerance for authority, working in a large/small organization, missing a promotion), which can lead to an employee evaluating their current job and thoughts of quitting. This construct expanded on Beach’s (1990) framework which suggested that humans make decisions by comparing a shocking situation (i.e., a significant life event) against internal images of goals and values, when an individual assesses that there is a discrepancy, this will trigger the turnover process.

The second construct was ‘script’ which depicted four pre-existing pathways of quitting. In the first pathway, the individual experiences a shock which is then followed by a comparison between past and present thought processes or decision frames that lead to a decision to stay or leave. For example, if an employee had previously decided to leave due to a similar event or situation, the employee will decide to implement the same decision frame to the current shock and thus decide to quit. In the second pathway, although the shock may be the same, employees will evaluate and assess to what extent the shock has affected one’s career and their

organisational commitment. In the third pathway, employees start to compare their current work life to other job opportunities that are on offer after they experience a shock. In the fourth and final pathway, the employee accrues negative shocks over time and evaluates their organisational commitment and will eventually decide to quit or bide their time until a new position becomes available.

Although Lee and Mitchell's model moved the literature forward by illustrating novel constructs, a critique of the research was that there was no description of the social context that the shocks took place within to understand the different ways that the shock could be interpreted. This is important, as interpretations of a shock depends on the social context that surrounds the employee which provides a frame of reference as to how an employee interprets the shock experience (Holtom et al., 2005). Thus, Mitchell and Lee (2001) developed the job embeddedness model of turnover which considers the extent to which an employee is enmeshed in their environment (i.e., work, and wider community context). Job embeddedness was explored through three constructs: (a) links, which reflects the extent individuals are strongly attached to people or groups within a job or community; (b) fit, considers the extent to which individuals suit or match with their job or community; and (c) sacrifice, which reflects the extent that individuals would consider giving up elements of their job or community to leave their work and organisation. High job embeddedness has become a salient research area within turnover literature because the concept has been highlighted as a factor which can reduce turnover and explain turnover variance more than other constructs such as job satisfaction (Jiang et al. 2012).

Over time, as scholars have extended their understanding of the turnover process there have been differences in theoretical explanations within the literature.

So, in 2009, Steel and Lounsbury conducted a systematic review of 16 turnover models to identify areas of theoretical convergence that focus on the process of turnover. Steel and Lounsbury argued that by highlighting similarities across models within different disciplines there can be greater understanding and consensus within the turnover literature. Following analysis of 16 turnover models, they found that the turnover process has been constructed around three core mechanisms which were attitudinal variables (i.e., job satisfaction and organizational commitment), job-search mechanisms (e.g., perceptual, or market-based), and turnover intentions (i.e., intentions to stay or quit). Furthermore, they identified 26 secondary mechanisms that are used to connect core mechanisms which were mentioned on multiple occasions across the 16 turnover models. These 26 secondary mechanisms were synthesized into five broad themes which were: personal factors (e.g., personal traits, values, age, family responsibilities), job and organizational factors (e.g., expectations of present job, costs of quitting, job stress, role conflict/compatibility), external and internal mechanisms for change (e.g., desirability of movement, expectations of future job, efforts to change situation, promotion possibility), consequences of quitting or staying (e.g., nonwork consequences, job performance), and decision process mechanisms (e.g., system shocks, thoughts of quitting). Steel and Lounsbury concluded their review by claiming that the diversity within turnover literature across disciplines and research areas illustrated that theoretical convergence was still a distant goal. However, a critique of Steel and Lounsbury's sentiments about theoretical convergence and consensus, I would argue is that the authors are searching for a singular 'truth' (i.e., realist ontology) rather than embracing multiple ways of knowing within literature.

Following a synthesis of turnover literature, Hom and colleagues (2012) sought to bring together different facets of prior models (e.g., unfolding model, the job embeddedness model, the eight motivational forces theory). One focus of their review was to synthesize turnover intention (i.e., staying or leaving) and perceived control of turnover (i.e., the extent to which employees had control over whether to stay or leave) into four constructs. Firstly, enthusiastic leavers, are individuals who intend or wish to leave and subsequently quit. Secondly, enthusiastic stayers, are employees who wish to stay and continue at the organisation. Thirdly, reluctant leavers, are employees who hope to stay but due to some reason must leave. Finally, reluctant stayers, are individuals who wish to leave but continue to work for the organisation. Their theory postulates that turnover is an outcome of an individual's preference in staying or leaving and the perceived control one has in the decision to stay or leave (Li et al. 2016). However, following the publication of their theory, fellow scholars critiqued their work, due to the study's lack of empirical findings. For example, Bergman et al., (2012) argued that the relationships between the four constructs and organisational outcomes (e.g., job performance, organisational citizenship behaviour) would need to be investigated to understand how well those outcomes predict turnover. Moreover, Bergman et al. (2012) highlighted how temporal aspects need to be further considered, as they are important to understanding the process of turnover and retention and help to explain how and why an employee goes from being in one withdrawal state to another (e.g., enthusiastic leaver to stayer). Furthermore, one critique that I would argue is by synthesising turnover research for theoretical convergence, the authors have not considered the impact of the context and culture that individuals work within and how the environment impacts individual and collective sense-making.

This section gives an overview of the history of turnover models, the development of key constructs throughout the literature, and critiques or limitations of the models. For example, job satisfaction was once positioned as a central construct in turnover models, however, Lee and Mitchell (1994) argued the idea that people quit their jobs because they are dissatisfied was not a sufficient explanation for turnover. Moreover, turnover intention was first introduced in the late 1970s and became the most significant predictor of actual turnover, however, contemporary scholars have found that although intention to leave has a direct effect on actual turnover, they state it is not as reliable of a predictor as once theorised in turnover literature (Cohen et al., 2016; Rubenstein et al. 2018). This suggests from a practical perspective that organisations should be cognisant of turnover intentions but not reliant on it as a construct to judge actual turnover outcomes. Furthermore, Gupta et al. (2022) claimed that due to the poor predictive nature of turnover intention, researchers turned to different ways to study turnover. Thus, the construct of job embeddedness became more prominent and shifted the focus away from leaving towards staying (Mitchell & Lee, 2001; Steel, 2002). Historically scholars assumed that turnover and retention were reciprocal processes, that is, a decision to stay is the exact opposite of a decision to leave. However, contemporary scholars have argued that turnover and retention are related processes and as such need to be examined concurrently as different reasons for staying or leaving can become more salient as individuals contemplate both outcomes (Hom et al. 2012). Thus, Steel and Lounsbury (2009) argued that by only focusing on why people are quitting, the explanatory power of models or theories will be limited.



## **2.7 Voluntary employee turnover and retention in sport organizations**

Before considering the dearth of research on sport physiotherapists, it is important to be cognizant of turnover and retention literature within the field of sport conducted with other members of sport organisations. To date, there has been a wealth of literature across disciplines (e.g., sport psychology, sociology of sport) which has examined athletes retiring or leaving sport (e.g., Hickey & Roderick; 2023; Knights et al., 2015; Park et al., 2013; Sparkes, 1998, 1999, 2002a). For example, Park and colleagues (2013) synthesized findings from 126 studies published between 1968 and the start of 2011 which explored athletes' career transition out of sport which is akin to turnover (i.e., leaving their job, occupation, and sport altogether). The authors identified 15 factors that affected the quality of athletic retirement which were: athletic identity, demographical issues, voluntariness of retirement decision, injuries or health problems, career and personal development, sport career achievement, educational status, financial status, self-perception, control of life, disengagement or drop-out, time passed after retirement, relationship with coach, life changes, and balance of life. Moreover, the quality of the transition out of sport was facilitated by planning for retirement, searching for new interests or careers, psychosocial and professional support programmes. Quality of adjustment to post-sport life varied among athletes, for example, athletes experiencing a loss of athletic identity took longer to adapt to life after sport or athletes who were forced to retire experienced high levels of negative emotions compared to athletes who had control over the decision to retire.

Sport psychology researchers have also considered the temporal aspects involved in the athlete retirement process and have employed the use of the transtheoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 2005) as a framework to guide their understanding of the decision-making process of athlete retirement. To expand, the

transtheoretical model is a prominent model in health psychology with two key mechanisms. First, the stages of change mechanism explains what an individual will go through during behaviour change by highlighting five different stages: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Second, the processes of change mechanism included 10 strategies (i.e., experiential, and behavioural) that facilitate progression through the five stages of change and included processes such as, self-re-evaluation, environmental re-evaluation, self-liberation, and social liberation. Two additional dimensions were added to understand various types of behaviour change: decisional balance (e.g., consideration of gains and losses during decision making) and self-efficacy (i.e., individuals' degree of confidence in the behaviour changes they are encountering).

This model has underpinned and helped to move athletic retirement literature forward, to illustrate, Park et al. (2012) conducted three focus groups with a total of 12 participants (i.e., four current players, five retired players, and three coaches) to explore Korean elite tennis player's retirement decision-making process. The authors identified three themes, firstly, readiness for retirement, which considered an individual's confidence to cope with life after sport and the potential pros or cons of leaving sport. The second theme captured the psychological and emotional responses during the decision-making process, with participants expressing both positive and negative responses during different stages of change. The third and final theme, coping strategies, reflected the techniques that participants used during the process such as social support, restraint, or venting emotions. The findings also indicated that athletes go through a series of stages during their decision-making process which included four from the transtheoretical model (i.e., precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, and action) and a novel stage was introduced, preparation moratorium, which is the

postponement of retirement. This stage highlights how dynamic and non-linear the process can be for athletes when deciding to end their careers in sport.

Moreover, there has been a growing body of research within sport management pertaining to why sport personnel were leaving their jobs and in some cases the occupation altogether. For example, Cunningham and Sagas (2004) examined the influence of various factors (e.g., age, ethnicity, and organisational tenure) on occupational commitment and turnover intent among 235 collegiate coaches in the United States. The authors gathered data through questionnaires and found that age was not a significant predictor of both occupational commitment and turnover intention. Meanwhile, as the coaching staff became more ethnically diverse, attitudes toward the occupation became poorer. Moreover, organisational tenure was positively associated with occupational turnover intent. More recently, Lee and Chelladurai (2018) conducted online questionnaires with 322 high school coaches in the United States which examined the impact of emotional labour, burnout, and job satisfaction on subsequent turnover intentions. They found that surface acting was considered a dysfunctional coping strategy, that is it was positively linked to coach burnout and negatively associated with job satisfaction. Meanwhile, deep acting and genuine expression were highlighted as functional coping strategies and therefore positively linked to job satisfaction and negatively associated with coach burnout. Moreover, turnover intention was positively associated with coach burnout and negatively correlated with job satisfaction. Altogether these findings highlighted the critical role that emotional labour, coach burnout, and job satisfaction play in coaches' turnover process.

Turning to factors salient to turnover in referees, Warner et al. (2013) interviewed 15 former basketball referees about their experiences in sport and what

caused them to leave their roles. The authors identified ten themes that were organised across three categories. Firstly, *recruitment* reflected the positive experiences that referees had and included themes such as staying part of the game, competition and challenge, remuneration, and socialization into the community. Secondly, *retention* considered the negative experiences that factored into officials leaving their role which were problematic social interaction, lack of training or mentoring, and lack of referee community. Finally, *advancement* represented key managerial issues that factored into referees' decisions to leave such as lack of administrator consideration, administrator decision-making, and sport policies.

Although this area of research is continually growing, and these studies have contributed to moving the sport employee turnover research forward, to date, specific factors pertaining to turnover experiences with physiotherapists have been neglected in the literature. There is currently a lack of research examining the factors that specifically impact and explain the process of physiotherapist turnover and retention, and what the subsequent positive and negative outcomes for physiotherapists. Of the few studies examining turnover, some researchers have included physiotherapists amongst other subgroups (e.g., coaches, performance directors, sport scientists and medics) when examining the role of emotional labour in the relationship between organisational stressor experience, burnout, turnover intentions, and actual turnover in sport organisations (Larner et al., 2017). Whereas other researchers have explored the impact of coach turnover on support staff remaining in the sport organisation and their experiences of organisational change (Wagstaff et al., 2015). The challenge with reporting on multiple subgroups is that it is difficult to extrapolate the nuanced differences between populations, which is important when considering the similar and unique turnover experiences within athlete, coach, and referee populations that have

previously been highlighted. Moreover, organisational stress research has shown the need to research populations separately to understand their experiences relative to their roles and responsibilities in elite sport environments.

Considering the importance of physiotherapists in supporting athletes with their health and performance and the close relationships that physiotherapists and athletes form within elite sport environments, there is a need for sport organisations to make every effort to retain the most knowledgeable, proficient, experienced, and trusted staff members (Kerai, 2020; Turner & Chelladurai, 2005). In 2017, Lerner and colleagues argued that voluntary staff turnover was a critical issue within sport organisations because of the negative organisational effects, it can have which included cost and time implications involved in the recruitment and training of new employees, issues within operational functioning, and low morale amongst remaining team and organisational members. These negative outcomes affected team: climate, culture, stability, and overall functioning within elite sport contexts. Thus, retention of staff was also a salient area of research within organisational sport psychology and sport management literature, with scholars advocating for organisations to understand what leads to voluntary employee turnover and factors which lead to retention of staff (Inglis et al., 1996; Turner & Chelladurai, 2005; Wagstaff, 2019).

For example, Inglis and colleagues (1996) conducted questionnaires with 359 Canadian and American intercollegiate coaches and athletic administrators to understand retention factors that are considered the most important to remaining in their jobs and/or organisation. The authors identified three salient factors: work balance and conditions, recognition and collegial support, and inclusivity. Firstly, *work balance and conditions* reflected aspects of time demands at work and at home in an individual's life, which included feelings of emotional support at work and what

is a healthy level of stress. Moreover, work conditions such as, how supported employees felt by their employers when they experienced family demands, and good communication within the work environment were highlighted, as they helped employees balance their work and family life. Secondly, *the recognition and collegial support* factor considered status, prestige, and public recognition associated with an individual's job within the organisation, in addition to recognition of an employee's contribution and efforts from fellow colleagues. Finally, the *inclusivity* factor represented aspects such as, to what extent the organisational-work environment has equal representation of both male and female employees, is accepting of different sexual orientations, free from sexual and racial discrimination and harassment, and champions individual differences amongst their staff members. The authors suggested that these three factors would create a positive work environment that would encourage employees to continue working in the organisation, thus increasing retention rates amongst sport employees. Furthermore, Turner and Chelladurai (2005) extended the research by conducting questionnaires with a sample of 328 intercollegiate coaches and analysed organisational commitment and intention to leave. A key finding was that coaches who had perceived that they had personally invested a lot in the organisation and had reasons for staying that reflected affective and normative commitment were more unlikely to leave. Thus, a key recommendation for sport organisations to retain staff members was to focus on enhancing coaches' and other sport employee's organisational commitment.

There is a growing need for key stakeholders of sport organisations to understand the reasons why employees are deciding to leave the organisation and why some employees have turnover intentions but decide to stay, which can also lead to insight into employee retention. Although there is a wealth of existing literature on

voluntary employee turnover and retention for some population groups (e.g., athletes, coaches), more qualitative research was needed in the field of sport psychology to move our understanding beyond the athlete and coach perspective. Moreover, given the critical role physiotherapists play in the health and well-being of athletes, there was a need to understand their experiences of turnover within elite sport and how organisations can better support physiotherapists and increase retention rates. Finally, researchers have argued that a more comprehensive and theoretical understanding of the process of turnover and/or retention is warranted to further understand nuanced experiences throughout the change process (Sounds & Lounsbury, 2009). Indeed, researchers need to move beyond striving for consensus and largely using quantitative methods to understand turnover and retention and shift towards a more contextual understanding. One way of gaining a contextual understanding is through qualitative research, which focuses on context alongside meaning, subjectivity, and process. Moreover, as previously mentioned qualitative researchers are encouraged to use multiple methods or interviews so that participants can reflect over time rather than short snap-shot methods. This is so researchers can gain an understanding of the individual, the context, and their wider network of support. One way of formulating and building a new theory is by using a specific methodology (i.e., grounded theory) which allows the researcher to draw explanations about particular social phenomena (i.e., employee turnover and retention) and fill the knowledge gap within existing literature.

## **2.8 The use of grounded theory in sport**

Before exploring grounded theory and its role in sport psychology research, it is important to define what is meant by the term ‘theory’. In a 2022 review of 35 grounded theories published in seven sport psychology journals between 2009 to

2021, it was acknowledged that the definition of theory remains vague in grounded theory studies (Holt et al., 2022). According to Charmaz (2006), theory ‘remains slippery in grounded theory discourse. Many grounded theorists talk about theory, but few define it’ (p. 123).

### **2.8.1 Defining theory in qualitative research**

Thornberg and Charmaz (2012) as a starting point defined theory as something that “states relationships between abstract concepts and may aim for either explanation or understanding” (p. 41). This definition distinguishes different objectives of grounded theories which Charmaz (2014) highlighted was dependent on the researchers’ philosophical assumptions. Within scientific research the most prevalent definition of theory derives from positivism, which treats theoretical concepts as variables, constructing operational definitions of their concepts for testing through reliable and validated empirical measures (Charmaz, 2014). Positivist definitions of theory favour deterministic explanations and emphasise prediction, generality, and universality, which is what turnover researchers that I have reviewed have largely done. However, these theories can result in narrow, reductionist explanations with simplistic models of action.

Theorists’ definitions which have some positivist and interpretivist views of theory, such as Corbin and Strauss (2015) state that theories of phenomena are more abstract and explanatory as well as emphasising relationships amongst concepts to form a theoretical framework. Corbin and Strauss suggested: “Theory denotes a set of well-developed categories (themes, concepts) that are systematically developed in terms of their properties and dimensions and are interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains something about a phenomenon.” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 62). Whereas interpretive definitions of



theory emphasise understanding rather than explanation. The understanding gained from the theory is co-constructed through the theorist's interpretation of the studied phenomenon. Thus, theories are “deconstructions of the way in which we construct realities and social conditions and ourselves as subjects in those realities” (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 382). Charmaz (2014) described theory as being able to “alter your viewpoint and change your consciousness. Through it, you can see the world from a different vantage point and create new meanings of it” (p. 233).

### **2.8.2 Grounded theory**

Grounded theory methodology is a qualitative research tradition in which the underlying principle is that theory is crucial for generating deep knowledge of social phenomena (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Through theoretical frameworks, researchers can explain and help readers understand how and why people, organisations, or communities experience and respond to events, challenges, or problematic situations (Corbin & Holt, 2011). Theories provide critical insight and make sense of complexities within data, thus relationships between social phenomena become visible (Charmaz, 2014). Holt (2016) argued that the term ‘grounded theory’ has been used to refer to both the methodology (i.e., process) and the subsequent theory (i.e., product) arising from the study. Within this programme of research, the distinction between the process and product will be maintained. Grounded theory methodology will be used to refer to the process and grounded theory to refer to the theory produced.

Constructivist grounded theorists focus on *how* and *why* participants construct meanings and actions in particular situations (Charmaz, 2014). A subtle difference between grounded theory and other qualitative analyses is the theoretical perspective (i.e., symbolic interactionism) that is most associated with grounded theory research. Symbolic interactionism has three major premises as illustrated by (Blumer, 1969):

the meaning that individuals hold for objects (physical, social, and abstract) determines their actions toward these objects; individuals generate meaning for objects during their interaction with others; individuals continuously interpret their situations, and these interpretations influence action. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes a naturalistic approach that engages directly with the empirical world and focuses on understanding human interaction and behaviour through meaning. Blumer (1969) also acknowledged Dewey's (1938) perspective on the role of interaction and temporality on experience as a key component, thus interactions that individuals have with their social world influence their experience and that past experiences impact on the future.

Constructivist grounded theory offers a way of exploring how, when, and to what extent the studied experiences (e.g., phenomena) are embedded in larger and, often, hidden structures, networks, situations, and relationships (Clarke, 2005). Thus, interpretive theorizing is not limited to individual experiences or immediate interactions but rather, it can include communities and institutions. As Charmaz (2014) explains:

Constructivists emphasize entering participants liminal world of meaning and action. What we see, when, how, and to what extent we see it are not straightforward. Much remains tacit; much remains silent. We exist in a world that is acted upon and interpreted – by our research participants and by us – as well as being affected by other people and circumstances. We also try to locate participants' meanings and actions in larger social structures and discourses of which they may be unaware. Their meanings may reflect ideologies; their actions may reproduce current ideologies, social conventions, discourses, and power relationships. (p. 241)

Therefore, differences and distinctions between individuals within a particular culture become visible. Moreover, the hierarchies of power, communication between organisational actors, and the maintenance and perpetuation of specific ideologies and behaviour within a particular cultural setting can also become visible. In elite sport contexts, grounded theory may provide us with not only an insight into the experiences of elite sports people but also the dominant culture operating within elite sport contexts which can impact how individuals construct meaning and action in a given environment.

### **2.8.3 Grounded theory in sport**

Grounded theory is particularly useful when there is little pre-existing theory within literature to explain or understand a certain social process, whilst recognising the complexities of the social world (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Holt, 2016). Grounded theory is also particularly suited where theories are lacking, underdeveloped, or incomplete for particular populations (Charmaz, 2006; Holt, 2016). Grounded theory methodology allows researchers to produce a set of “grounded concepts” (Holt, 2016), thus it is designed to develop theory based on, and grounded in, data collected from participants within specific social settings. Although grounded in data, theories are constructions and thus constructed from the data provided, which the researcher interprets, frames, and retells (Charmaz, 2006). The two types of theories produced within grounded theory research are differentiated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) into substantive (topic-focused) and formal (concept-focused) grounded theories. Substantive grounded theories are more specific to groups and places, whereas formal grounded theories akin to those presented in previous turnover literature, are more abstract and can be applied to a wider range of populations.

The three primary variants of grounded theory methodology used within sport psychology research are the Glaserian approach, the Straussian approach, and Charmaz's constructivist approach. The approaches are distinguished by the philosophical assumptions which underpin them. For instance, Weed (2017) stated that the Glaserian approach was realist-positivist, the Straussian variant was realist-interpretivist, and Charmaz's approach was constructivist-interpretivist. Although ontological and epistemological assumptions were not explicitly stated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), scholars have pointed out that the Glaserian approach was underpinned by realist assumptions (Timonen et al., 2018). For example, the title of their 1967 book was 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory', and thus if something is 'discoverable' there is a suggestion that there is a single reality that is waiting to be discovered. In a move away from a positivist positioning, Strauss and Corbin (1994) argued that interpretive studies must include the perspectives and voices of the people that are being studied. However, they also described "recognising bias" and "maintaining objectivity" which Charmaz (2000) argued was ontologically realist. As such, the Straussian approach is underpinned by post-positivism. Weed (2009) described, post-positivism as embracing some interpretivist assumptions, as it recognises that some aspects of the social world cannot be directly measured. However, post-positivists still want to retain an objective approach that is free from bias which contradicts some other interpretive assumptions. However, Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach embraced the importance of co-construction of meaning between participants and the researcher. As well as attending to the influences of social structures and processes at micro and macro levels during analyses and the reflexive role of the researcher throughout the grounded theory methodology (Birks et al., 2019).

Reflexivity is a crucial component of qualitative research and has been defined as “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself.” (Finlay, 2002a, p. 532). Although the practice of explicitly referencing undertaking reflexive journaling and reporting it in published studies has become an expectation, many researchers fail to expand on their positioning, biases, what challenges they overcame, and how certain decisions impacted the research process (Gentles et al., 2014). Since 2001, reflexivity has been a contentious topic, with authors debating the importance of reflexivity when conducting grounded theory. For example, Glaser (2001) viewed reflexivity as unnecessary because it takes focus away from the data and is a distraction for the researcher. Glaser also argued that the analytical tool of constant comparison would reveal, check, and minimise the researcher’s effect on the research process. However, some Glaserian grounded theorists have embraced reflexivity and stated it is an important tool within their studies because they can include an interpersonal component to their final report and depict how research relationships can impact the research process (e.g., Neill, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocated for researchers to keep a reflexive journal so that they could learn from their experiences, but they did not give practical advice on how grounded theorists could incorporate their learnings into their written work (Gentles et al., 2014). Reflexivity has explicitly been addressed within the constructivist variant of grounded theory with Charmaz (2014) stating that constructivist grounded theorists must include reflexivity as a strategy in their research process to account for taken-for-granted assumptions and how these assumptions can influence a researcher’s actions.

The use of grounded theory methodology in sport and exercise psychology was debated in a series of articles between Weed (2009, 2010) and Holt and Tamminen (2010a, 2010b). In 2009, Weed started the debate when he reviewed 12 grounded theory studies published within four sport and exercise psychology journals between 2000 to 2008. In his review, he found that only two out of the 12 studies had fully demonstrated the appropriate application of grounded theory and discussed the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning their research and subsequent variant of grounded theory used. As Weed (2009) explained, "...many studies laying claim to the label "grounded theory" in sport and exercise psychology fail the macro-level research quality assessment of the appropriate application of methods, as they fail even to consider which variant of the approach is being used." (p. 508). In response to Weed's review Holt and Tamminen (2010a) conducted their own review of the literature and although they disagreed with some of the criticism that Weed had raised (e.g., there was no identifiable "cadre of authors" with commitment to grounded theory methodology within sport and exercise psychology research), however they recognised that some criticism was far more prevalent (e.g., the need to conceptualise grounded theory as a "total methodology" rather than cherry-picking grounded theory techniques). Subsequently, Weed (2010) criticised the use of constructivist grounded theory in relation to macro-level contributions of the theory (e.g., formal theory) which is a recognised feature within the three variants of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Weed argued that if constructivist grounded theory is ontologically constructivist, then its potential contribution to knowledge is limited as some form of realism is needed to make generic formal theories across substantive fields of knowledge (Weed, 2009). Whilst Holt and Tamminen (2010b) recommended that grounded theorists should

focus on methodological coherence (i.e., ontology, epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methods of data collection) to aid in planning their grounded theory studies rather than focusing on creating formal grounded theories, which sport psychology researchers rarely do. Moreover, good substantive grounded theories can provide practical recommendations across different levels of application (Holt, 2016; Holt et al., 2022).

In 2022, Holt and colleagues conducted a rapid review of 35 grounded theory articles published in seven sport psychology journals from 2009 to 2021. They found that 32 articles produced substantive theories, and three had presented a list of descriptive themes which is problematic because “while thick and rich description provides concepts and tells an interesting story, it is not theory” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 12). Additionally, they reported that 11 out of 35 articles had addressed all the criteria for using grounded theory methodology as a total methodology. They also found that two variants of grounded theory were most used in sport psychology research, with 19 articles using a Straussian approach and 15 articles using Charmaz’s approach. Interestingly, of the articles using Charmaz’s approach, 12 were published post-2018, which shows an influx of authors using constructivist or constructionist philosophical positions. Poucher et al. (2020) reviewed 710 qualitative articles in sport psychology journals over the past 30 years and reported a particular increase in the use of constructivist approaches in qualitative articles. This increase could be due to more researchers explicitly stating what philosophical positions underpinned their research.

## **2.9 Aims and rationale of this research**

The aims of this programme of research are threefold. The first aim of the thesis is to illustrate the importance of reflexivity whilst engaging with qualitative

research methods (see chapter four). Considering the need for qualitative research within turnover and retention literature, it is also imperative to illustrate the process of reflexivity which researchers rarely showcase within journals and articles. Although an important process to engage with throughout this programme of research, it was not planned from the outset to write confessional tales about my experiences. However, chapter four makes an important (yet unplanned) contribution to this thesis by outlining the challenges that I encountered throughout the entire research process. I offer an insight into the struggles I faced from initially entering the field to collecting, analysing, and representing the data. Moreover, based on my own experiences, I provide advice and strategies for neophyte researchers and fellow academics who are thinking about engaging with qualitative research.

The second aim is to explain the process of voluntary physiotherapist turnover and retention within elite sport contexts. This aim will be met through a longitudinal grounded theory study within a sport organisation. Specifically, this research will explore physiotherapists' experiences throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle and the impact of these experiences on turnover or retention outcomes (chapter five). To date, most studies within turnover literature have conducted quantitative research and focused on descriptive factors influencing turnover or retention (i.e., intentions to stay or leave). Neglecting to explain how individuals make sense of their turnover or retention experiences (i.e., process from intention to outcome). Moreover, previous research has shown that the turnover process is non-linear and dynamic in various population groups. Thus, this thesis aims to provide a population-specific, contextual-specific, and temporal understanding of particular social phenomena (i.e., turnover and retention) using a qualitative research approach such as grounded theory methodology.



The final aim of this research is to outline recommendations for sport organisations by drawing upon participants' voices and contemporary research across disciplines (e.g., organisational sport psychology, sport sociology). I will elaborate on how sport organisations can support physiotherapists in their work and life outside of sport, which can have an impact on retention rates (chapter six). To date, a cluster of studies have provided evidence-based guidelines for sport populations (e.g., coaches, athletes, parents; Burgess et al., 2016; Didymus, 2017; Grey-Thompson, 2017) however, there are no guidelines for supporting elite sport physiotherapists, which warrants attention (Wagstaff, 2019). Overall, in this study I hope to produce context- and population-specific research, which is impactful and helpful to the physiotherapists, the elite sport organisations that employ them, and their wider social network.

## **2.10 Summary**

In this chapter, I have critically reviewed literature across an array of disciplines that pertain to key concepts underpinning this programme of research. Firstly, I explored physiotherapy as an occupation, which included how to become a physiotherapist and what physiotherapists do. I also described how physiotherapists can transition into working in elite sport and examined the differences between working in elite sport environments compared to other contexts (e.g., private practice). I reviewed literature pertaining to organisational stressors that members of sport organisations have experienced and the knowledge gap which led to my initial interest in researching challenges that physiotherapists experience whilst working in elite sport. I then outlined a history of the key models of turnover within organisational psychology alongside how researchers have moved the literature forward, critiques of the models, and a shift to retention as a related not reciprocal process. Subsequently,

I reviewed turnover and retention literature within sport organisations across different population groups (e.g., athletes, coaches, referees). Finally, I explored the use of grounded theory in elite sport contexts, whilst emphasising the importance of theory when there is little pre-existing literature pertaining to certain social processes and populations. This research aims to provide a reflexive account of the challenges qualitative researchers might encounter when conducting research in elite sport environments. The research also aims to explain the process of voluntary physiotherapist turnover and retention within elite sport environments. Finally, the research aims to provide recommendations that can promote a duty of care for physiotherapists working in elite sport, which can hopefully result in organisations retaining their most valuable and knowledgeable staff members.

**Chapter 3**  
**Methodology and Methods**

### **3.0 Overview**

This chapter provides an overview of, and justification for, the methodological approach chosen, and methods used to address the research aims and data collected throughout this programme of research. I begin by describing the research context, then I go on to discuss the research paradigm and methodology, which underpins the research. This is followed by an introduction to my participants and the sampling procedure. I then detail the procedures for data collection and analysis. Finally, I outline the techniques which were used to illustrate methodological rigour and judge quality across the course of this programme of research.

### **3.1 Research context**

This research arose through a partnership between St Mary's University and an elite sport organisation based in the UK. Members of the elite sport organisation (e.g., leadership and managers) were aware that there was a lack of understanding of what physiotherapists' day-to-day experiences are when working in their organisation. Moreover, although key stakeholders (e.g., heads of service, managers) within the organisation had informal anecdotal evidence about physiotherapists' experiences leading to turnover intentions (e.g., regularly working long, unsocial hours beyond their contractual obligation, the relegation of other areas of life, increasing travel commitments). They wanted empirical evidence to help inform support services as well as policies around working practices to help retain their highly valued and knowledgeable physiotherapists.

The elite sport organisation has sites located across England comprising of training areas, rehabilitation gyms, and consultation and meeting rooms. Supporting elite athletes with services including physiotherapy and soft tissue, nutrition, strength and conditioning, performance lifestyle support, performance analysis and

biomechanics. Athletes attending these sites participate in a multitude of sports across different areas such as: experience levels (i.e., amateur, or professional); age categories (i.e., junior, or senior); and competition levels (i.e., nationally, or internationally). The physiotherapists who work within this organisation are contracted to work with specific elite sports across a four-year Olympic or Paralympic cycle, either on a full or part-time basis, to provide health care support for athletes, in the prevention and rehabilitation of short or long-term injuries. Physiotherapists are on hand to assist athletes and their coaches during training sessions, which are either centralised in one location (i.e., base training facility) or non-centralised which means athletes train across various locations either in the UK or internationally at any one time. Due to the critical need for their service, physiotherapists are the biggest support staff contingent within the organisation. Physiotherapists also support athletes during training camps and competitions, both nationally and internationally, meaning practitioners travel for work and spend time away from their homes, which ranged from less than 30 days to more than 100 days per year. Furthermore, in addition to providing clinical delivery, some physiotherapists also work across different management structures within the organisation. At the very top, there is the head of service, who oversees the entire physiotherapy service within the organisation. Then two leadership teams provide different support services for the physiotherapists. Firstly, heads of performance support lead the sport science and medicine teams to maximise the impact of science, medicine, and technology for performance-related support (e.g., efficient injury rehabilitation and recovery). Secondly, technical leads, help physiotherapists identify their own performance-development needs, their objectives and ambitions, and provide individualised mentoring and social support (e.g., instrumental).

### **3.2 Research paradigm and methodology**

This interpretivist research is underpinned by a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology. That is, reality is believed to be multiple, created, and mind-dependent whilst knowledge is believed to be socially constructed and subjective (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The terms constructivism and constructionism have been used interchangeably by scholars including Charmaz, which makes differences between the philosophical positions unclear and can cause confusion within grounded theory literature (Ward et al., 2015). Constructivism has ties to learning theory, which was developed by Piaget and Vygotsky, which posits that knowledge is individually constructed through experience (Young & Collin, 2004). Therefore, although knowledge is constructed, there is an emphasis on individual constructions of reality (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Young & Collin, 2004). Thus, a constructivist grounded theory would emphasise the participant's reality without including or reporting the influence that the researcher has in the co-construction of knowledge. Whereas constructionism refers to reality being co-constructed by both individual experiences and through conversations with others (Birks and Mills, 2011). Moreover, knowledge and meaning are also recognised as being culturally and historically situated and contextually bound (Ward et al., 2015), thus constructionism, outlines the social aspects through which knowledge is co-constructed. In 2014, Charmaz noted that she intentionally distanced herself from social constructionists of the 1980s, because although impressive analyses were produced, social constructionists treated them as accurate 'truths' of these worlds rather than as constructions of them. Therefore, when choosing a term for her variant of grounded theory, she chose the term 'constructivist' to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the co-construction of findings and interpretations of the

data. However, Charmaz (2014) stated that her position aligned more closely with social constructionism and the form it takes on today rather than the 80s and 90s. Given the philosophical underpinning, Charmaz confirming that her variant of grounded theory aligns with present views of social constructionism, and the aims of this research, a social constructionist grounded theory was chosen. By prefixing ‘social’ before constructionism, I am situating the epistemology in a social context (i.e., elite sport).

The primary aim of grounded theory is to construct an explanatory theory (i.e., substantive theory) about phenomena of interest (i.e., staff turnover and retention). Put another way, it helps to explain how and why persons, organisations, and/or communities experience and respond to events, challenges, or problematic situations (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory has been recognized as a methodology that helps researchers investigate social processes that are being experienced in relation to sport contexts (Holt & Tamminen, 2010; Weed, 2009). Grounded theory differs from other forms of qualitative inquiry in that it focuses on the *process* of social phenomena and the relationships between categories and themes identified in the data. Thus, the research moves *beyond* descriptions of the data towards a coherent theory of a process, action, or interaction which has explanatory power (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Charmaz (2014) noted, grounded theory comprised of “... systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (p. 1). Therefore, grounded theory methodology allows researchers to develop theories, using an iterative process between data collection, analysis, and theoretical sampling that facilitates the construction of a theory that is grounded in (rather than imposed on) data (Charmaz, 2014). However, this methodology also considers the critical importance of the co-construction of knowledge between the

researcher and participants, acknowledging that the researcher's interpretation of the data and theory development of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction (Charmaz, 2014). As Weed (2017) stated, researchers using Charmaz's variant of grounded theory reject the idea of an objective truth (i.e., '*the* truth') rather than the theory co-constructed is one possible 'truth' among many (i.e., '*a* truth').

Grounded theory is traditionally employed when little is known about the studied phenomenon, or a relevant theory does not exist (Charmaz, 2014). To date, the research that has been published regarding staff turnover or retention in elite sport has focused on the experiences of athletes, coaches, and parents (e.g., Darvin, 2020; Elliott et al., 2020; Lindgren et al., 2017). Therefore, little is known about the experiences of physiotherapists throughout their employment within elite sport (cf. Kerai et al., 2019), as well as their decision to continue working in elite sport or to leave. Thus, there is a gap in the extant literature and a need to develop a theory that is 'grounded' in elite sport physiotherapists' experiences. As described in chapter two, grounded theory can also provide insight into the relational and cultural aspects of individuals' constructions of meaning and action within elite sport environments. In the context of this research, grounded theory was used to: (a) understand physiotherapists' lived experiences of working in elite sport throughout an entire Olympic and Paralympic cycle, and (b) explain *how* (i.e., the processes through which) these experiences impacted (or not) staff turnover and retention.

Aligned with the aims of this programme of research, a longitudinal approach was selected so I could explore the dynamic nature of physiotherapists' experiences and capture changes in processes over time, including exploration of taken-for-granted everyday experiences (e.g., good, and bad days) as well as critical moments (i.e., turnover intentions). Moreover, this approach allowed me to explore the phenomenon



of interest: inductively (e.g., participants' responses to the interview questions), reflexively (e.g., understanding my impact on the research process) deductively, and theoretically (i.e., using literature or frameworks as a lens through which to interpret and compare the data; Braun and Clarke 2022).

### **3.3 Defining 'elite' in a sporting context**

Before I introduce the participants in the study, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term elite. As Polman (2012) argued, over the years within sport psychology literature, there has been inconsistency and confusion among scholars regarding the criteria used to define the term "elite". In 2015, Swann and colleagues conducted a systematic review of 91 empirical articles in 28 sport and non-sport journals published between 2010 and 2013 which described their participants as elite and/or expert. They identified eight ways of defining elite athletes which were: competing at international or national level, experience level, professionalism, training frequency and duration, involvement in talent development pathways, regional level, sport, or country-specific measures, and competing at university level. Swann and colleagues concluded that many scholars took the relative approach, where athletes were categorised as elite (e.g., university level) relative to another group (e.g., novices) rather than the absolute approach, which samples a small amount of truly remarkable and exceptional athletes who are separated from the masses. Moreover, the categorisation provided is specific to elite athletes and ignores other population groups (e.g., physiotherapists) who work within elite sport environments.

Looking towards literature outside of sport, where elite participants have been studied to identify how scholars have defined elite suggested there are many factors pertaining to labelling someone as 'elite'. Mikecz (2012) argued that the term elite is not clearly defined and that it can mean different things across contexts with scholars

adopting different understandings depending on their line of inquiry (Harvey, 2011). Moreover, elite status has been described as dynamic and heterogeneous rather than static, due to individuals gaining and losing status over time (Plesner, 2011). When individuals do embody an elite status, they are said to be in close proximity to power or have a specific expertise, such as a medical professional (Becker, 1995; Morris, 2009). This proximity to power results in the ability to make key decisions and exert influence through “social networks, social capital, and strategic positioning within social structures” (Harvey, 2011, p. 433). This reiterates Ostrander’s (1995) sentiments that elite individuals are used to others asking for their opinions and what they say holds a great level of importance to other people’s lives. Thus, from a relational sense, the social position that elite participants hold compared to the researcher or the ‘average’ person is another defining characteristic (Stephens, 2007).

Taking the range of definitions of elite into account and the lack of previous literature to define elite workers in sport, I considered the participants who took part in this research to be elite performers for the following reasons: Firstly, the individuals who took part in this research personally make or greatly influence key decisions within this elite sport context, which directly impact on whether athletes are fit to perform in national and/or international competitions (e.g., World Championships, Commonwealth Games, Olympic and Paralympic Games). Secondly, people who possess elite status have access to information and experiences that are typically inaccessible to the public (Mikecz, 2012). Thus, it can be argued that physiotherapists should be looked at as ‘performers in their own rights’ (Kerai, 2020, p. 109) and given a platform to share their experiences of working in elite sport environments. Lastly, the professional expertise that the participants hold includes years of clinical practice, experience of working at and going to several international competitions, and the

social capital they possess in comparison to other support staff members shows their hierarchal position within this sport organisation.

### **3.4 Sampling and participants**

Ethical approval for the programme of research was granted by St Mary's University Research Ethics Committee (Appendix A). To participate, elite sport physiotherapists had to be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and currently or previously employed by the organisation. The rationale for these criteria was to ensure the participants were professionally accredited and ethically qualified to practice physiotherapy and the recruitment of physiotherapists previously employed by the organisation will be discussed later in this section. To recruit participants, I asked two gatekeepers within the sport organisation who I had direct access to and provided them with a recruitment poster which provided an overview of the research, outlined what participating in the research would involve, and I answered any questions the gatekeepers had about the research. Following on from this discussion the gatekeepers facilitated the recruitment of participants and considered maximum variation criteria when sharing the recruitment poster with physiotherapists in the organisation. Practitioners who were interested in participating could leave their contact information (i.e., name, email address) with the gatekeepers. Once contact information was shared, I approached all potential participants via email and provided them with an information sheet which detailed the purpose of the research and forms participants were required to complete (see appendices B, C, and D).

A pivotal component of grounded theory methodology is sampling, with theorists such as Charmaz (2014) advocating for two strategies, "initial sampling in grounded theory gets you started; theoretical sampling guides where you go" (p. 197).

Therefore, first I engaged with initial sampling, which is akin to purposive sampling, as researchers develop a criterion before they enter the field to reflect certain demographic statistics. Characteristics I accounted for included sex, sport worked in, employment status (i.e., full-time or part-time), level of experience (i.e., position held, years of working in elite sport, how many cycles completed), travel demands (i.e., number of days expected to travel nationally and internationally), and physiotherapist structure within the sport (i.e., lone/sole or team). Thus, 18 participants (12 full-time; 6 part-time) were initially recruited to represent a diverse population of elite sport physiotherapists in the initial dataset.

Upon analysis of the data collected so far, I engaged with theoretical sampling thereafter, which is a specific, systematic, and strategic technique that pertains only to the conceptual and theoretical development of your analysis and is used to refine, elaborate, and clarify theoretical categories which the researcher has identified (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, I identified a category (i.e., turning points) which I wanted to delineate to understand how physiotherapists were making sense of these moments when deciding whether to stay or leave the organisation. I asked earlier participants further questions to explore their experiences which I had not covered before. However, to develop the properties of the category, I needed to seek out participants who had left the organisation, as up until this point, I had only interviewed physiotherapists who were still employed by the organisation. Therefore, I approached the gatekeepers, and four participants were sampled to allow for further examination of why physiotherapists decided to leave. Following further analysis, and to fill in the gaps and saturate the category, two physiotherapists who had left but subsequently returned to the organisation were theoretically sampled to provide perspectives around iterative assessments across jobs and sustained sport involvement. Furthermore, two

senior leaders, who had their own experiences of working ‘on the ground’ but were now in positions of leadership and management were also recruited to further develop theoretical categories.

To summarise, a total of 26 elite sport physiotherapists (13 male, 13 female; age range 27 to 66 years old) were recruited using both initial and theoretical sampling strategies across this programme of research. Participants varied in the number of years they had worked in elite sport environments ranging from 2 to 27 years. Participants also worked across a range of team and individual Olympic and Paralympic sports which were: (para)archery, badminton, boccia, boxing, canoeing, diving, fencing, gymnastics, hockey, judo, modern pentathlon, multisport, powerlifting, rowing, sailing, short-track speed skating, skeleton, swimming, synchronised swimming, (para)triathlon, trampoline, weightlifting, wheelchair basketball. Participants’ experiences also included preparing and working alongside athletes at the last three summer Olympic and Paralympic Games (i.e., Beijing 2008, London, 2012, Rio de Janeiro 2016), Commonwealth Games, World Cups, and World Championships.

### **3.5 Data collection**

To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., turnover and retention) this programme of research uses multiple methods of collecting data to aid researcher reflexivity during the entire research process and provide prolonged engagement with participants. Engaging with participants on multiple occasions is valuable as it can illuminate cultural and contextual intricacies of turnover and retention outcomes, which are difficult to capture in data collected at a single time point (Barnes et al., 2021). The methods used were individual semi-structured interviews, reflexive journaling, an electronic

application (app), and timelining, which took place over a three-year period, between February 2018 and February 2021. Initially, the first method of data collection I proposed was an online qualitative survey which is a series of open-ended questions, constructed by the researcher around a specific topic to elicit a breadth of responses across the sample (Jansen, 2010), and gain an initial understanding of what working in elite sport was like for physiotherapists. However, upon discussions with the gatekeepers, they raised a few potential issues which others in the organisation have encountered when administering surveys including participant disengagement and fatigue which resulted in short or incomplete responses. Thus, an interview was chosen instead to provide an occasion for conversation and allow me to meet with and start to build rapport with participants. As Smith and Sparkes (2016) suggest, the use of interviews can allow researchers to collect indispensable, detailed, and rich knowledge about the personal and social aspects of people's lives. Moreover, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to further clarify or ask curiosity-led follow-up questions which cannot be prepared for or administered in methods such as online surveys. Furthermore, this decision highlights the collaborative nature of this programme of research from the outset and the importance of working with stakeholders who have invaluable contextual knowledge and understand the organisation and the participants when designing research studies.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained how there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and that I was interested in learning about the participants' experiences of working in elite sport and how these experiences can impact their lives outside of sport (and vice versa). Thus, in the opening interview, I drew upon Charmaz's (1991) research, and the interview involved three areas of interest: What is a typical day? What is a 'good' day? What is a 'bad' day? These topic areas allowed

me to develop rapport, which is a critical component of qualitative interviewing and longitudinal research (Prior, 2018), as without building rapport elite participants will have been unlikely to share and discuss sensitive and personal experiences (see chapter four). I also reiterated that identifiable information such as names, sports, and locations would be edited or omitted from the findings to maintain confidentiality. Moreover, where needed, I encouraged participants to elaborate upon their experiences or clarify interesting conversations or gaps in their stories with probes such as “Can you tell me more about...” used to illicit deeper insight (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). I also gave each participant the opportunity to discuss any experiences or topics not spoken about during each interview. Thus, semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore interesting experiences as the participants shared their accounts as opposed to being confined by the order of questions.

Reflexivity is a crucial element of doing qualitative research and has embedded itself across social scientific disciplines (Carrington, 2008; Gemignani, 2017; Townsend & Cushion, 2021). Finlay (2002a) defined reflexivity as “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself.” (p. 532). With scholars (e.g., Gemignani, 2017; Wilkinson, 1988) typically describing three categories of reflexivity within their work which include: personal reflections about the way the author’s identities and self-positions can influence the research; analysis of the researcher-participant relationship and the role it plays on the research process; and critical reflections on assumptions, expectations, and boundaries of the researcher’s discipline which might impact on the research.

Thus, at the end of each interview and throughout this programme of research, I engaged in the method of reflexive practice (i.e., reflexive journaling) which

involved paying close attention to how my thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviours impacted on, and were impacted by the research process (e.g., data collection, analysis, interpretation, representation of findings). In addition, it is crucial that researchers are aware of how their subjective positions (e.g., age, sex, ethnicity, occupation) can influence the interactions and outcome of the research process. To contextualise this process of reflexivity, it is imperative that I acknowledge that I have never worked or competed in elite sport environments, nor am I a physiotherapist, thus I was positioned as an ‘outsider’. This impacted on my interactions with participants and other people inside of sport environments which added another layer of opacity to the research process (Finlay, 2002b). Further discussion of my reflexive practice during the entire research process can be found in chapter four.

Following analysis of the opening interviews (see grounded theory analysis for further discussion), firstly, the theoretical category of ‘turning points’ was identified as a driver for movement, that is, a construct that could explain a social phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, I went back to the participants to understand how these turning points were impacting on participants’ decision to stay or leave the organisation. Thus, during the second interview, questions involved: What is a significant turning point you have experienced? What is a significant turning point that another physiotherapist has experienced that you have witnessed or heard about? Secondly, after analysis of the opening interviews, I identified that I was missing out on the fluctuations in every day or taken-for-granted experiences that were leading to or happening during turning points. One reason for this was because participants were finding it easier to talk about significant moments rather than everyday experiences, perhaps participants deemed them less important or exciting, and thus can often be forgotten when being interviewed retrospectively (Garcia et al., 2016).



To gain more information about daily fluctuations in experiences, an electronic app was also used, which I created and developed in collaboration with the elite sport organisation. At the end of the second round of interviews, I provided the participants with guidance about how to download the app (see appendix E) and answered any questions they had. The strengths of this method included making it easier for participants to input data daily (Garcia et al., 2016), which is a challenge with elite participants as they are constantly travelling abroad and have busy schedules, which makes it difficult to arrange a time to collect data. Additionally, as Day (2016) noted, documents of life (e.g., daily diaries) provide an invaluable resource for researchers who are interested in process and change over time. Thus, daily diaries can provide insight into small everyday experiences that occur which the researcher can use to open discussions with the participants. Finally, the app captures the participants' lives in 'real time' allowing the data to be understood in its context (Garcia et al., 2016).

To develop the app, I utilised a template of the app already used by the organisation with athletes and is also familiar to the participants, so they did not have to learn how to use another app or platform. In addition, I could adapt the questions already asked in the template to align with the research questions and aims. The first question asked was "Today is a day for" and participants were asked to select between the following options: training, international training camp, national competition, international competition, day off, and holiday. The second question was "What was your sleep duration?" Participants could input this in hours and minutes from a drop-down menu. The following question was to rate their sleep quality on a scale from very poor to very good. They were then asked to indicate their energy levels on a scale from very low to very high. They were asked to input how many hours they worked yesterday and rate how well they ate yesterday on a scale from very bad to very well.

The next two questions were adapted from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) where participants were asked to indicate using one word from a 10-item list for how they felt yesterday. The PANAS has been used as a measure to indicate subjective well-being within elite sport populations (Lundqvist, 2011). The final question was to rate how their day went yesterday on a scale from bad to good. At the end of the screen, before they submitted their answers, they also had the option to write an additional comment, this included extra commentary, more information about their day, or interesting or important experiences (see appendix E for a screenshot of the app). The participants were asked to complete the app, every morning when they woke up for a couple of minutes. The app captured everyday experiences between interviews, which were used as probes during later interviews. For example, participants shared details about turning points as they were experiencing them in the moment (e.g., caring for a sick relative). Thus, between interviews, participants divulged personal information to me on the app and as I became privy to these experiences, I would construct questions to help me understand these turning points further. Thus, in follow-up interviews, I would ask questions about what has happened in their lives since we last spoke and use the app entries as probes to help clarify some details (e.g., “I saw that you made an app entry about this and was wondering if you could tell me more about this experience?”)

During the analysis of the second round of interviews, I identified that my understanding of turning points was only from the perspective of physiotherapists currently employed by the organisation and working on the ground. Thus, to gain more insight, I theoretically sampled physiotherapists who had left the organisation and invited them to participate in a one-off interview. Topics focused on their specific experiences of turning points and why they decided to leave the organisation.

Furthermore, following more analysis, two physiotherapists who returned to the organisation were theoretically sampled to uncover insights across jobs and working environments. Questions included, what made you want to return to work for this organisation again? What changes did you need before you consider another role in the organisation? I then theoretically sampled two senior leaders within the organisation and questions involved, their perceptions of the challenges that physiotherapists experience, their experiences of being support providers to other physiotherapists, and barriers to implementing changes within elite sport environments.

At the start of the third interview, I asked participants to reflect on the timelines I had created based on their previous data. Timelines were constructed on an A4-sized sheet, on which I plotted participants' turning points along the horizontal axis. This visually represented how the participants made sense of their turning points over time, which was important because it showed how the turning points unfolded. The strength of timelining was that it allowed the participants to actively engage with their data (Kolar et al., 2015). Participants did this in multiple ways: 1) they were able to reflect on their data and 'fill in gaps' in their timeline, 2) they were able to make connections across turning points that previously had not been uncovered, and 3) they could provide insight into experiences which had not been discussed yet. By plotting turning points that had already been discussed and visually representing them, participants could also plot their hopes for the future (i.e., looking back to look forward). Thus, experiences were discussed through various temporal dimensions: historical (before they joined the organisation and whilst working within the organisation), cyclical (importance of the year leading up to the Olympic or Paralympic games), and future (looking forward to what will happen post-Tokyo). In this research, timelining was a

way to synthesize and visually represent data collected and encourage participants to share experiences that otherwise would have remained untold (Williams, 2018).

During the third interview, I also asked questions about applied recommendations to support physiotherapists working in elite sport. Participants were asked broad, open-ended questions such as “What in your opinion does a sustainable role for a physiotherapist look like?”, “What elements of working in sport have the biggest impact on your well-being?”, “Can you tell me what is the biggest change that needs to be made within the organisation to help support physiotherapists?,” and “What more can external organisations do to help support physiotherapists working in elite sport?”

Finally, the fourth interview was focused on working through a turning point that all the participants were experiencing at the same time (i.e., the coronavirus pandemic). This interview focused on questions such as: “What was your response when you found out the Games were going to be delayed?” “How did Covid-19 change your plans for what you envisioned post-Tokyo?” “How did your working practices change during Covid-19?” Further discussion of these recommendations and changes participants would like to see to promote support for physiotherapists working in elite sport environments can be found in chapter six.

Over the course of this programme of research, a total of 72 interviews (total = 4520 minutes) were conducted which ranged from 24 to 105 minutes (average = 62.7 minutes) with 17 participants taking part in multiple interviews and timelining, and 9 participants taking part in one interview. 18 participants were initially recruited and took part in the first round of interviews; however, one participant withdrew from the study because they had left the organisation and subsequently found another job in sport thus 17 participants took part in the second and third rounds of interviews.

Finally, during the coronavirus pandemic, 12 participants took part in the fourth round of interviews, due to scheduling conflicts and busy work periods five participants were unable to take part. As previously mentioned, eight participants were theoretically sampled and took part in one interview. Each interview took place at a time and location of the participant's choosing (e.g., in a meeting room or office, a coffee shop, or over the phone) to accommodate their busy schedules and subject to Covid-19 restrictions post-2020. Interviews took place either face-to-face (n = 25) or via telephone or video calling platforms such as, Skype, Zoom, or FaceTime (n = 47), and were audio recorded with the participant's permission. A total of 1851 entries were made to the app by 11 participants over an 18-month period.

In summary, during this programme of research, I collected multiple forms of data, which I have presented together to illustrate the iterative process of data collection, analysis, and reflexivity. As Williams (2018) noted, "Regardless of the methodology and/or type of data analysis employed, researchers should analyse and present the various forms of data together to ensure the fusion of separate methods into integrated meanings." (p. 232). The multiple methods of data collection were used to inform each other and to build on the data previously gathered. For instance, before a timeline or the app could be used, I needed to begin to develop rapport with my participants so I could gain some insight into their lives inside and outside of elite sport. Furthermore, the contrasts and contradictions within the multiple datasets forced me to reflect on and question my interpretations of the participants' experiences through reflexive processes. For example, the app provided insight into practitioners' everyday lives, so, when asked about bad days in interviews, some participants recalled not experiencing any bad days. However, when they filled in the app, they indicated that they had experienced bad days, this contradiction was followed up in

subsequent interviews to better understand fluctuations in physiotherapists' experiences. Therefore, the multiple methods of data collection revealed the complex and multiple ways that physiotherapists made sense of their experiences.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

Two methods of data analysis (i.e., reflexive thematic analysis and grounded theory analysis) were separately employed to make sense of the data collected across the three results chapters that follow. First, a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun and Clarke 2020) was chosen as the most appropriate method to analyse the data gathered through my written journal and the data pertaining to physiotherapists' recommendations to promote duty of care. Second, a grounded theory analysis was chosen to explain physiotherapists' sense-making leading to turnover or retention outcomes. The sections that follow outline how each method of analysis was conducted.

#### **3.6.1 Reflexive thematic analysis**

An RTA was used to analyse my written reflexive journal (results presented in chapter four) and interview transcripts pertaining to the duty of care challenges and practical recommendations (results presented in chapter six). An RTA was chosen as it allowed me to analyse the data: deductively (i.e., using pre-existing theory or frameworks as a lens through which to interpret the data; Braun and Clarke 2022), inductively (e.g., participants' responses to the interview questions), reflexively, and theoretically. Moreover, through exploring and unpacking semantic (surface, obvious, overt) and latent meanings (implicit, underlying, 'hidden') within the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2020), this method of analysis was also useful in eliciting an enriched understanding in how and why tensions, reactions, and responses may have occurred in my experiences (e.g., "I want to comfort them but I must remain professional") and

participants' experiences (e.g., "I love my job, but I couldn't do it anymore"). Below, I present two step-by-step guides of how I separately analysed both datasets.

Using RTA to explore written reflections of the research process, the first step of an RTA as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2022) involves familiarising myself with the data (i.e., my written journal) through immersion, which involved repeat reading of the data. Initial codes were then generated by highlighting interesting features across the entire dataset (e.g., "what to wear?", "where to meet?", "do I belong here?", and "being an outsider"). The next phase involved collating initial codes to form potential themes (e.g., entering a new field of research), this process involved thinking about the relationship between codes, themes, and different levels of themes (e.g., overarching- and sub-themes). Potential themes were then reviewed and developed, which involved looking at themes in relation to the coded extracts, the entire data set, the overall story they tell about my experiences throughout the research process and drawing upon theory to build analytical depth (e.g., impression management; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Themes were then clearly and concisely refined, defined, and named to reflect the overall "essence" and message of each theme which resulted in five reflexive themes: *entering the world of elite sport; breaking the cycle of performative actions; vulnerable elites; breaking the code of silence in elite sport; and negotiating with elites*. The final phase was producing a written report that provided vivid, compelling, and interesting extract examples alongside a coherent and nuanced analysis, as well as a rich overall account of the research process.

Using RTA to explore challenges and recommendations, the first step was familiarising myself with the data (25 interview transcripts) through repeat reading. Initial codes were then generated by highlighting interesting features across the entire dataset (e.g., "me time", "being selfish", "tensions in competing areas of life", and

“creating boundaries”). The next phase involved collating initial codes to form potential themes (e.g., managing others’ expectations of your time), this process involved thinking about the relationship between codes, themes, and different levels of themes. Potential themes were then reviewed and developed, which involved looking at themes in relation to the coded extracts, the entire data set, the overall story they tell about the participants’ experiences, and drawing upon theory to build analytical depth (e.g., self-care; Baker, 2003). Given the deductive orientation of RTA, I drew upon Wadey and Day’s (2018) work which demonstrated how Sallis et al.’s (1985) social-ecological model could be utilised to organise challenges and recommendations across five distinct levels of analysis (i.e., intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, cultural, policy). Themes were then clearly and concisely refined, defined, and named to reflect the overall “essence” and message of each theme which resulted in five reflexive themes: *person first, physio second; stronger together; aligning policy with practice; sustainability; and more collaboration and communication*. The final phase was producing a written report that provided vivid, compelling, and interesting extract examples alongside a coherent and nuanced analysis, as well as a rich overall account of the findings.

### **3.6.2 Grounded theory analysis**

Data analysis commenced following the first round of interviews which highlights the iterative process of data collection and analysis consistent with grounded theory and continued throughout and after subsequent data collection (Charmaz, 2014; Weed, 2017). A flexible approach to advancing theoretical analysis is recommended which keeps initial codes simple, precise, action-orientated, and open to reinterpretation (Charmaz, 2014). First, I transcribed each interview recording verbatim and initially engaged in (line-by-line and incident-by-incident) gerund-based



coding, which emphasised action, the interaction between participants and other individuals or their social context, how the dynamics of time, action or inaction, and change influenced participants decision making (Charmaz, 2014). This process fosters theoretical sensitivity and “helps to define implicit meanings and actions, gives researchers directions to explore, spurs making comparisons between data, and suggests emergent links between processes in the data to pursue and check” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 121). The next stage of analysis involved ‘focused’ coding, which was used to sort and group different initial codes and advance the theoretical direction of the research. I employed a constant comparison method between multiple datasets and with existing research. Thus, I compared participant experiences across the methods of data collection and research within the field, highlighting similarities and differences as well as gaps in the data and knowledge, which I was able to refine and address in questions asked in subsequent interviews (e.g., “how did you know you had reached a turning point?”).

Techniques which aided data analysis were memo-writing, reflexive journaling, and timelining, which helped me to remain grounded in the data, think conceptually rather than descriptively, visually represent codes, categories, and their relationships, and maintain reflexivity throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling and data collection concluded when the process of constant comparison no longer yielded new theoretical insights or additional properties of the categories, and thus the theory was sufficiently developed (Dey, 1999). Consistent with Charmaz’s (2014) recommendations, I determined that theoretical saturation had been reached when I could not identify any new theoretical leads in my data. Furthermore, conversations with my supervisors and engaging in reflexivity about the research process allowed me to identify when I had reached

researcher saturation (Wray et al, 2007), that is, when I felt emotionally and mentally overwhelmed by the amount of data collected. These two strategies helped me realise when I had reached the point of saturation.

During later stages of analysis, specific focused codes were further refined and evaluated which led me to identify core categories (Charmaz, 2014). These categories were important in understanding the social process in relation to staff turnover. For example, “experiencing turning points” became a core category which represented the start of the turnover process. Next, I explored the relationships between the core categories (i.e., turning points, sense-making, sense-made), and identified that the socio-cultural context was the relational thread which helped to explain physiotherapists’ choices. The iterative process between data collection, data analysis, reflexivity, theoretical sampling, and engaging with existing literature, allowed for the co-construction of theory between the participant, the wider research team, and I.

### **3.7 Assessing research quality and methodological rigour**

Guided by a relativist approach for judging the rigour of qualitative research (Smith & Sparkes, 2020; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) and Charmaz’s (2006, 2014) recommendations within a constructionist grounded theory. I invite the reader to consider the methodological rigour and quality of the research across six indicators. First, *credibility*: Does the data provide rich and in-depth illustrations to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ the readers about the context-specific actions and meanings within the studied phenomenon? Has the researcher taken the steps to understand how their own experiences and biases (i.e., reflexive journaling) can influence data collection, analysis, and subsequent written work? Second, *originality*: Does the researcher offer new insights, make a novel contribution to knowledge, and establish the significance of the analysis? Third, *resonance*: Do the findings resonate with either the reader’s

own experiences, other people's experiences that they have spoken with, or situations they have heard about or observed? Can the study's findings be transferable to other populations within elite sport or physiotherapists in other contexts? Fourth, *usefulness*: Does this research make important and meaningful contributions to policy recommendations and practical applications? Does it contribute to new lines of research? Fifth, *meaningful coherence*: Have the aims of the study been achieved? Do the methods and procedures used in the study align with the epistemology and ontology stated? Does the study meaningfully connect key literature, findings, and interpretations? Does the study provide meaningful practical and applied recommendations? Sixth, *rich rigour*: Did the researcher spend high quality time with participants gathering interesting, relevant, and significant data? Is the context and sample appropriate given the aims of the study? Is there enough data to support the study's claims? These questions are useful in encouraging the reader to think about the findings.

Aligning with these indicators and to enhance the study's methodological rigour and generalisability (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Smith, 2018) five practical strategies were drawn upon. First, this study used multiple methods of data collection, and the combination of the four methods helped generate a more nuanced understanding of the researcher's and participants' experiences (McGannon et al., 2019). Furthermore, *originality* was promoted by using an electronic app within qualitative data collection and the use of timelines to reflect on previous interviews as a method of data collection and analysis technique. No grounded theory studies in sport psychology to date have used these forms of data collection, combination of datasets, or analysis within their research. The second strategy was the use of thick, in-depth descriptions (i.e., detailed participant quotations) in the results chapters,

which provide the reader with detailed evidence, which they can reflect upon and potentially make connections to their own lives or the lives of others (Wadey & Day, 2018). Third, a reflexive journal (i.e., introspective reflexivity), was used as a way of reflecting, examining, scrutinising, and interrogating the research process. This technique included critically understanding how the researcher's subjectivity, the participants' experiences, and the research context impacted on data produced and subsequent analysis (see chapter four). Fourth, the researcher's academic supervisors acted as 'critical friends' (i.e., intersubjective reflexivity) when interpretations of the data were shared and provided a sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

The fifth and final strategy was external reflections (Wadey & Day, 2018), whereby key stakeholders were invited to take part in discussions (i.e., focus groups). Specifically, themes were presented to subgroups of various staff members independent from the participant sample such as staff who work with physiotherapists in a support role (e.g., leadership team), staff who can implement and enforce codes, policies, and practices within an organisation to support physiotherapists (e.g., members of human resources, heads of services). Upon learning about physiotherapists' experiences through hearing the participant's quotes alongside my analysis of the findings, staff members reported that the findings resonated with their own experiences, other physiotherapists that they know, and the experiences of other agents within elite sport contexts (e.g., coaches, support staff). Staff reported feelings of sadness and great sympathy when hearing the stories told by their peers and colleagues. With one stakeholder saying, "I'm as tough as old boots, mentally tough, robust, physically strong, but I've been there when lots of things happened at once that

were out of my control...There was no support I felt within the system because there had to be a job delivered.” These external reflections provide evidence for naturalistic generalisability and transferability (Smith, 2018).

### **3.8 Summary**

In this chapter, I have detailed my approach to conducting this programme of research. I have outlined the context in which this research took place, the research philosophy and underpinning methodology, followed by the procedures that were used to iteratively collect and analyse data, and detailed indicators and strategies to enhance the methodological rigour and quality of this PhD. In the next chapter, I utilise the genre of confessional tales to represent my reflections on interviewing elite participants and the impact on the entire research process.

## **Chapter 4**

**Elite Interviewing with Sport Physiotherapists:**

**Confessions of a Neophyte Researcher.**

#### 4.0 Overview

Within sport psychology literature there has been a lack of guidelines for novice researchers who are conducting interviews with elite participants within sport settings. Doing ‘good’ qualitative research is an art form and as a doctoral student with limited experience of conducting interviews with elite participants, I found that there was a lack of stories or tales from other researchers whom I could relate to and learn from within existing sport psychology literature. While reflective practice is often embedded into applied sport psychology practice (see Wadsworth et al., 2021) there is not a similar body of work for interviewing as a researcher. Although transparency within the qualitative research process has long been encouraged in the field of sport psychology (Sparkes, 2002b), published articles and journals usually do not include the challenges that authors encountered and how certain choices impacted on the research process (Bryman, 2016). Sparkes (2002b) suggested that confessional tales provide a platform for “the voice and concerns of the researcher, in a way that takes us behind the scenes of the “cleaned up” methodological discussions so often provided in realist tales” (p. 57). In line with this comment, Tuval-Mashiach (2017) recommended that by lifting the veil or ‘raising the curtain’, researchers can offer their audience a glimpse into what happens during the research process. Therefore, helping the audience understand the research process rather than just presenting a “sanitised account of how the research was produced” (Bryman, 2016, p. 13). Thus, scholars have recently been shifting their attention away from an exclusive focus on how qualitative research *should* be done to a broader understanding of how it is *actually* done and *why* certain decisions were made which usually were not reported in journals and articles (Waddington & Smith, 2014).

This chapter uses van Manen's (1988) genre of the confessional tale, which has been increasingly used as a way of discussing the challenges, tensions, and problems that researchers encountered during the research process (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, by expressing personal 'research journeys' scholars can give insight to novice researchers and students so they can gain a better understanding of what the process of doing qualitative research actually involves and the lessons learned. It is also hoped that by disclosing the challenges, problems, and unexpected turns that researchers experience, this disclosure will also improve the quality of future research (Smith et al., 2014; Tuval-Mashiach, 2017).

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The ways of 'doing' qualitative research and the criteria used to enhance quality in qualitative research (e.g., Tracy, 2010) have led to an increased number of scholars discussing the centrality of their subjective positions (e.g., age, gender, race, class) within the research process. Lafrance and Wigginton (2019) stated that reflecting on a researcher's personal identities, values, beliefs, and life experiences is a fundamental aspect of situating the knowledge produced in research articles. Individualistic self-reflexivity, through confessional tales (Van Maanen, 1988), represents the ways that researchers can write themselves and their backgrounds into the analysis and write-up process to show how their self-positions and experiences influenced researchers' interpretations (Berger, 2015). Moreover, reflexivity through confessional tales is valuable for providing 'behind the scenes' insight into the social problems that researchers contend with, such as negotiating power dynamics with participants, ethical and moral dilemmas, and interpretation of the participant's voice (Sparkes, 2002b). In this chapter, I provide a reflexive account of the challenges associated with interviewing in the elite sport context, which is the main method of



data collection in this programme of research, and specifically with physiotherapists as the elite participants, which to date have received little to no attention within sport psychology literature.

Over the past few decades, qualitative researchers have explored and examined the challenges of interviewing elite participants in various contexts such as politics (e.g., Mikecz, 2012), corporations (e.g., Welch et al., 2002), and policy-domains (Neal & McLaughlin, 2009). Drawing upon the elite interviewing body of literature, key challenges that interviewing elite participants can elicit for the researcher, not only includes the interview itself but also the lead up and aftermath of data collection. Challenges that have been widely examined are gaining access and building trust (Mikecz, 2012), with researchers recommending using personal connections and the researcher's own credentials as a technique for gaining access (Morris, 2009; Thuesen, 2011). Meanwhile, building trust and rapport with participants was imperative for collecting "useful" data (Ostrander, 1995), with scholars suggesting that in-depth knowledge of the research topic and familiarity with the interviewee's culture could facilitate trust and rapport building (Mikecz, 2012). However, there can be issues when considering the researcher's positionality (e.g., insider or outsider), thus if a researcher is an outsider there are no guidelines for how to become an insider or how to create points of connection with participants whilst being an outsider.

Another challenge which has been explored is the power asymmetry and privilege between interviewer and interviewee during data collection (Neal & Mclaughlin, 2009). Researchers have suggested that interviewees will hold a more powerful position than the interviewer (Mikecz, 2012), as the researcher relies on the participant for information for their work. However, interviewees might deny access, refuse to answer questions, or withdraw consent to participate to protect themselves

from criticism, which is possibly why elites are relatively under-studied across disciplines (Mikecz, 2012). However, scholars have argued that conceptualising power as linear and static overlooks the notions of vulnerability and sensitivity (Lancaster, 2017; Neal and Mclaughlin, 2009). The ebbs and flows of the whole research process and how power dynamics are fluid and continually shifting have rarely been examined within sport psychology literature. Moreover, there is a lack of research to help interviewers cope with the continual shifting of power between the researcher and participant.

Finally, the post-interview analysis and reporting of findings highlight the complexity of confidentiality and anonymity processes within research. For example, Lancaster (2017) explained how researchers must balance the reporting of findings with inadvertently exposing their participant's identities or choosing to withhold information to 'protect' their participants from harmful outcomes. Collectively, the key challenges described can give researchers great insight into the complexity of data collection with elites but also negatively influence researchers' experiences with interviewing. However, despite the merits of this body of research in helping to grapple with some of the challenges associated with conducting elite interviews, a critical appraisal of the literature reveals that the context of elite sport has received no attention in this area of research and remains open for examination. Thus, this chapter aims to contribute to the literature surrounding interviews with 'elite' participants and explore the impacts of interviewing within elite sport contexts by discussing: (a) the challenges I encountered as a novice researcher entering into an elite sport environment for the first time, and (b) the lessons I learned throughout the research process which other neophyte researchers in elite sport contexts can learn from and overcome if faced with similar challenges (see Table 4.3 for summary).

## 4.2 Summary of methods

To collect data on my experiences throughout the entire research process which included my thoughts, feelings, emotions, expectations, and biases; I kept a reflexive journal (i.e., introspective reflexivity). Entries made within the reflexive journal allowed me to reflect on, examine, scrutinise, and critically understand how I can influence on, and be influenced by, the research process. Moreover, the written journal allowed me to examine the ebbs and flows of the researcher-participant relationship (e.g., power dynamics) and how the socio-cultural context of elite sport can influence the entire research process (e.g., data collection, analysis, dissemination, and representation of findings). The written reflexive journal was analysed using an RTA (further discussion about the data analysis process can be found in chapter three). Throughout the analysis of the reflexive journal and write-up phase, I would share interpretations of the data with my supervisors who acted as ‘critical friends’ (i.e., intersubjective reflexivity). Engaging in intersubjective reflexivity allowed for the exploration of multiple explanations and interpretations of the data, a theoretical sounding board to encourage further reflection, and enhanced analytic choices and researcher reflexivity (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

## 4.3 Results

I use my own voice through reflexive journal extracts to explore and reflect upon the challenges of the research process from conducting interviews to sharing and representing the findings. Following an RTA of my reflexive notes (see chapter three), I will now discuss within this confessional tale the five themes that were identified: (a) entering the world of elite sport, (b) breaking the cycle of performative actions, (c) vulnerable elites, (d) breaking the code of silence in elite sport, and (e) negotiating with elites. Within each theme, lessons learnt and recommendations for fellow

researchers are interwoven alongside the challenges experienced. Finally, a summary table highlighting the recommendations to reflect on before, during, and after data collection is presented at the end of the results.

#### **4.3.1 Entering the world of elite sport**

My first face-to-face interview in an elite sport environment was daunting, to say the least. I was tasked with travelling to seven locations across England to conduct face-to-face interviews with elite participants in high performance environments that I had never been to before commencing this research programme. I wrote in my reflexive journal about the first day I travelled for an interview, I arranged my travel so that I had enough time to get from the train station to the location and had a 45-minute window in case I was caught in traffic or there were delays with transport. On this occasion, I arrived at the location 30 minutes before the interview was scheduled and I decided to make my way to the reception so that I could send a text message to the participant to let them know where I would be waiting. As I pressed the button to open the doors, I was in awe of what I was seeing, there was the organisation's logo and branding all over the walls, the countdown to the Tokyo Games, pictures of athletes holding medals, and motivational quotes and phrases on the walls. I could feel a lump in my throat develop as I realised the enormity and mystique of the world that I was entering. I walked into the reception area and decided to take a seat on the sofa that was available and did last-minute checks to make sure the battery in my digital voice recorder was working, that I had the interview guide, and looked through my notes of questions I wanted to ask the interviewee based on their previous interview which had been conducted on the phone. As I checked the time, for what seemed like the hundredth time in five minutes, I peeked up from my phone and noticed that the lady who was behind the reception desk was walking over to me. She asked if I was

ok and needed any help and I quickly responded with, “I’m ok, thank you for asking. I’ve got a meeting in 20 minutes and I’m meeting them here.”

Smith and Sparkes (2016) suggested that how an interviewer appears, and dresses will influence the interview, so researchers must think about what they are going to wear and how they will appear to the participant. In my experience, I should have also thought about how I would appear to staff and other individuals (e.g., athletes, coaches) within the environment. In my journal, I noted:

As I waited for the minutes to countdown, I started to recognise that people walking by would look at me, and I noticed that everyone seemed to be wearing similar attire. I stuck out like a sore thumb. All the staff were wearing branded kits with their sport, national governing body, or the elite sport organisation’s name on it and trainers. Athletes who walked past were also in activewear or sport clothing, trainers, and presumably ready to go to use the gym facilities. Yet here I was wearing a black leather jacket, black jeans, heeled ankle boots that made noise every time I walked, and a bright red shoulder bag.

I thought at the time that this outfit was smart yet casual and even though I realised that I stood out in this environment, I did not think it was an issue that I needed to pay close attention to in the moment. I did not know anyone else in the environment other than the participants I was interviewing, and I did not understand the importance of social and behavioural practices which were conventional in elite sport environments. Upon visiting more sites, I wrote in my journal:

Being in this environment has made me feel self-conscious and like I don’t belong here. I don’t look like anyone here. I don’t have a branded kit because I don’t work for the organisation, and I don’t want to wear sports clothing as I

don't want to appear as though I'm imitating the athletes or the participants. I don't know what I could wear to fit in and feel comfortable. I just wanted people to stop staring at me, it made me feel awkward and like they were singling me out as if they knew I didn't work here or occupy a role within this system. It was starting to make me feel anxious about how my participants would treat me.

The first impression a participant forms of the interviewer is likely to be very important as it helps to guide our actions and aid the development of social relationships (Woolway & Harwood, 2020). Looking towards extant literature around sport psychology consultants integrating into elite sport environments for the first time, researchers found that consultants were expected to dress to suit the sporting environment. Lovell and colleagues (2011) examined initial impressions when judging the competence of sport psychologists and found that consultants wearing sporting attire were favoured by athletes over those in formal dress wear. Furthermore, Barker and Winter (2014) interviewed elite coaches and found that it is advisable for consultants to wear team apparel if possible or sporting attire in general to help them integrate into the team and camouflage into the elite sport environment. This echoes the sentiments within elite interviewing literature as, Mikecz (2012) proposed that dressing appropriately for the environment helps the interviewer to "blend in" and build rapport by creating points of connection, which was considered a powerful resource for the qualitative interviewer to gain rapport (Broom et al., 2009). However, when deciding on what to wear, I also wanted to create a professional image of myself. The relationship between social status and sporting attire is considered in research about the "social sense" and Vandebroek (2021) illustrated how we recognise people

wearing sporting attire and associate that with 'low' social status and judge individuals' professionalism by what they wear.

As both a researcher and an interviewer, there was a lack of guidance around what was appropriate if team apparel was not available and what was the 'right' thing to wear. I was not an elite athlete, nor an elite sport physiotherapist, and I was not aware of the appropriate dress code considering the environment was also new to me. Although there are strengths to being different, finding points of connection can be immensely beneficial in building rapport, especially when interviewers have little time with each participant to nurture that relationship. While the process of building and maintaining relationships with participants is constantly evolving, so is the researcher's understanding of the environment that they have entered. To researchers who are thinking about undertaking research within elite sport contexts, I recommend having someone on the inside who can provide useful insight into the environment. To prepare myself for walking into the environment, I would ask the insider questions about clothes, kit, and what to wear. After my first face-to-face interview, I started changing my attire (e.g., wearing trainers instead of shoes or boots) to fit in and over time became more comfortable with wearing more casual clothing when I realised that my professionalism was not hindered by my clothing choices. In reality, my clothing choices allowed me to "blend into" the environment and develop rapport with my participants as well as others in the environment.

Being a neophyte qualitative researcher, immersed in the world of elite sport with individuals I had not met before, having some control in this process would have been nice and eased some nerves I had about the interview, however, another challenge that I encountered when entering this unfamiliar environment was the lack of control over where the interview would take place. My experience here is not

exceptional, in fact, looking at extant literature which included textbooks and journal articles, the advice is most often to let the participant choose the location of the interview. Moreover, Smith and Sparkes (2016) suggest that as an interviewer you need to think about a multitude of factors including seating, distance between you and the participant, what the furniture connotes about formality and power relations, and if your digital recorder can capture the interview clearly.

As an interviewer, I like to create a relaxed, calm setting where there are few distractions from the external environment, and I would ideally like the interview to be in a quiet setting so I can clearly hear the participant. However, when going to a participant's workplace, the element of control a researcher has over the setting of the interview is taken away, which left me feeling apprehensive and nervous about where the participant would choose to do the interview. For example, on one occasion that I noted in my reflexive diary, the participant chose to do the interview in a seating area by the entrance, which had two long sofas facing each other and were separated by a table. They positioned themselves so that they could see who was walking past, and I was left struggling to decide where was best to sit. Should I sit opposite the participant and lean across the table to try to hear them, or should I sit next to them on the sofa and put myself in an awkward position so that I could face them? I noticed during the interview that the participant would go quiet when certain people would walk past, or they would look around before answering a question to find out if anyone was close enough to hear the conversation. Thus, the participant chose where they could sit, where they felt comfortable, and positioned themselves so they were aware when they could be overheard. Although the participant being protected is good practice, they took ownership over their own protection which is usually the interviewer's role and they do not have the same knowledge as the interviewer about what may make a 'good'



interview location. Observing these interactions, made me realise how precarious elite environments are, one ‘inappropriate’ answer being overheard could have led to a loss of social capital for the participant (e.g., negatively labelled for speaking with an outsider), which likely made participants more secretive about their experiences. Inadvertently, the lack of control made me paranoid about who was around when I would ask personal questions or clarify certain answers. I wrote in my journal:

It was like I was treading on eggshells. I did not know who was around, if the participants knew them, or the implication of asking them about the people they work alongside. The participant’s paranoia about who was around was contagious. Instead of focusing on what was happening in the interview, I found myself being wary of who was around me whenever someone walked by irrespective of the participant’s reaction to them. I lost focus which detracted from listening to the participant this negatively impacted the interview process. Moreover, I’m sure the participant could see that I was looking around and averting eye contact, which would not have helped in maintaining rapport within the interview-interviewee relationship.

Although scholars recommend that elite interviews take place in neutral locations (e.g., coffee shops) to provide a less formal setting so participants can feel more comfortable sharing information (Ostrander, 1995; Purdy, 2014). The disadvantages of going to a coffee shop were loss of observational data by not seeing participants in elite sport settings, the levels of noise which impacted the interview recordings, and participants not being able to readily leave their site of work because they were “on-call” if needed. In addition, Purdy (2014) raised the issue of confidentiality when holding interviews in a public environment where members of the public could overhear conversations, which could limit how much the participant

felt comfortable discussing. In follow-up interviews, I requested a more private setting (e.g., a meeting room) so we could speak openly, not be overheard, and not have as many external distractions, but this was not always possible for the participants to arrange. Being an outsider in the environment, I was not able to provide the participant with another option or choose a location that was more conducive to conducting an interview, as I did not know what was available and how long it would take to find somewhere else that was more appropriate. I was very grateful that the physiotherapists were giving up their time to do these interviews, often during their lunch hours, so when I saw the location, I did not think I was in a position to ask the participants to find another place for the interview that I would be more comfortable in. Interestingly, research about conducting interviews focuses on the participant being comfortable, which ignores the two-way process that an interview inherently is and how the researcher being uncomfortable can impact how interviews are conducted, and the data collected.

Another challenge with the location of the interview was associated with travelling to various sites across England. This meant that I had to be flexible with my schedule and be prepared to spend money and time in a bid to conduct face-to-face interviews. Due to the elite interviewees' schedules and geographic locations, it meant that travelling to London to do the interviews with me was unfeasible and highly unlikely given their busy travel schedules for competitions and training camps, thus I had to adapt to the participant's schedule. The conflict that arose for me was when participants would cancel minutes before the interview was scheduled to take place due to an unforeseen problem that had arisen on the day. In my journal, I noted one specific experience:

I can't believe they've just cancelled on me, by text message, minutes before we were supposed to start our interview. I had travelled for over three hours to get to this interview and now I have to go back to the station with zero interviews collected and wait hours for my return train. I thought to myself, "what an absolute waste of my time". The participant had to cancel because something came up, but I wasn't given an explanation or reason. I just felt so frustrated. I felt like the time and cost that I invested to do these interviews didn't matter to them. They were showing me that their work was more important than my research and that they were in control. Moreover, I couldn't tell them that I was unhappy about the situation and not being able to find a solution that worked for both parties, because I had to maintain a good relationship with them.

The importance of elite participants' work coupled with them not needing to participate, meant that I was supposed to feel grateful for any efforts participants made to attend the interviews. However, I did not feel grateful in that moment, I felt frustrated, but I couldn't relay this to the participant because this was a longitudinal piece of research and I needed to maintain rapport for future data collection. In a bid to remain professional, I offered to rearrange the interview at their earliest convenience. I decided that the benefit of maintaining positive relationships with the participants and retaining their continued participation in my research outweighed the potential cost in terms of lost data collection and my hurt feelings. Thus, the relationship dynamic between the interviewer and elite participants is an obstacle that other neophyte researchers need to be aware of and manage consistently throughout the research process. Moreover, although frustrating, through these experiences, I gained some insight into their world and how participants or their friends and family

might feel when physiotherapists are kept from important social events due to their work.

To claim some control over the location of the interview with elite participants, scholars have recommended researchers arrive early and familiarise themselves with the environment before the interview (Ostrander, 1995). Furthermore, if the interview does take place in a participant's place of work, it is advised to not comment on the surroundings and be impressed or taken aback by the environment (Ostrander, 1995), which would again give more power and control to the interviewees. On the other hand, I would also recommend others who are entering into elite sport contexts for the first time to be prepared to surrender control to elite participants, not be awe-struck or get swept away by the elite sport environment, and claim back a sense of control in other ways (e.g., clothing choice). Despite the difficulties I encountered, I was still able to gain informative, rich data whilst gaining an understanding of the participants' socio-cultural environment.

#### **4.3.2 Breaking the cycle of performative actions**

From findings in this programme of research, I have come to know that elite participants are typically very private individuals and if they were to share their experiences it would be with a few trusted individuals within their social support network. Moreover, Mikecz (2012) stated that many elite research participants have been trained to know how to represent their organisation to an outside audience. Adding that it is not surprising for researchers to hear a sanitised or "public relations" version of events rather than participants' personal experiences of the event in question. In line with this comment, Kristiansen and colleagues (2017) stated that elite sport organisations provide media training to their athletes, coaches, and employees before major events to show them how to handle interview questions, so they do not

offer controversial sound bites or create headlines with their responses. Goffman (1959b) developed what he termed the 'dramaturgical theory', which outlined how self-presentation, impressions, and behaviours are dictated by social situations. Self-presentation refers to the conscious effort an individual dedicates to controlling how they are perceived by others (Piwinger & Ebert, 2001; Schlenker & Barry, 1980). Therefore, Goffman (1959b) illustrated how an individual presents an idealised version of themselves in public rather than their authentic selves. Within the dramaturgical theory, Goffman viewed life as akin to a stage production where individuals would perform for their audiences and present themselves in a way to control others' responses to their self-presentation. Then those in the audience will make judgements of the individual onstage according to the impression the individual gives. This point is illustrated through the following excerpt from an interview with one of my participants:

Participant: I don't have bad days. So, one of the mottos we have here is 'control the controllables', control what you can control. I think the use of language, of good and bad is incorrect, I don't agree with that language because in sport we are always working towards something, ticking boxes every day.

Randall and Phoenix (2009) suggested that how interviewees tell their experiences will reflect the environment in which they have been living and working in, and the environment will inevitably shape the ways in which participants share and interpret their experiences (e.g., "one of the mottos *we* have", "*we* are always working"). I came to this realisation as I was conducting more of these interviews that, the answers I heard became repetitive, which was a tell-tell sign that the way participants were answering my questions was due to the dominant culture they were immersed in within elite sport (i.e., performance narrative; Carless & Douglas, 2013). Furthermore, the

embodiment of an elite sport physiotherapist identity meant that this dominant culture had become a part of their habitual identity (Goffman, 1959b), influencing their interactions with me, as a researcher and their presentation of self in everyday life. Moreover, impression management theory postulates that an individual will manage their self-image by revealing select parts of themselves while interacting with others (Goffman, 1959b; Chovanec, 2021).

Within the elite interviewing literature, scholars have postulated that interviewees think they are going to be lied to and argued that elite participants use subtle techniques to deflect questions, neglect crucial details in their accounts of events, provide justification for certain actions which outsiders might deem negative, or present themselves and what they do in a good light (Ball, 1994; Batteson & Ball, 1995; Berry, 2002). Randall and Phoenix (2009) suggested that one of the most important judgements an interviewer will make is about whether the information they are hearing is an accurate depiction about their participants' lives and if researchers have gained a deep insight into their participants' thoughts and feelings on a specific topic.

I had to decipher if the answers I was hearing were rehearsed and performative or a reflection of the participants' lived experiences. One technique I would recommend for neophyte researchers is to attend to the subtle micromarkers (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999), which included both verbal and nonverbal signs that provided insight into the way the physiotherapists were processing events and situations they were speaking about in the interviews. For example, verbal micromarkers that I noticed included changes from rehearsed versions of events to tentative, careful, and slow responses to questions. I noted in my journal:

During my initial interviews, I think participants were quick to respond to my questions without taking the time to process and think about their experiences. For example, when I asked participants if they had bad days, they were quick to respond with “I don’t have any bad days” to shut down the conversation. In that moment, I felt like participants did not trust me, and did not want to tell me any information perhaps out of fear of putting themselves in a precarious position. Over time and once I established rapport, I started spotting differences in how they would answer my questions. For instance, I could see that they were being more deliberate with their answers and really pondering the question, which was reinforced by participants saying, “that’s a good question” before taking a long pause to answer.

Indeed, in addition to the verbal signs, participants’ nonverbal micromarkers included hesitation before responses, facial expressions (e.g., frowning), gaze and eye movement (e.g., avoiding eye contact, looking at the floor), incongruent expressions (e.g., smiling or laughing although describing a sad or upsetting event, using laughter to lighten the mood) and indications of physiological changes (e.g., tears, flushed skin, trembling lip), body language and posture (e.g., squirming in their seat, would look over their shoulder to see who was around). One instance I wrote about in my journal is presented below:

The participant spoke about how the sport has gone through personnel changes recently. So, I asked how that might have changed the culture within the team and sport that they worked in. I noticed that they started to look around as soon as I asked this question. They had picked a public location for the interview, possibly because they wanted to speak more freely outside of the elite environment, but now they were concerned about who could hear them. They

spoke in a lower volume to ensure that only I could hear and kept looking over my shoulder to see if anyone was coming.

Whilst misalignment between verbal and nonverbal signs was also an indicator that participants were performing. Moreover, the combination of verbal and nonverbal micromarkers aided in spotting inconsistencies between participants' accounts across interviews. The signs helped me judge whether I thought I was hearing a truthful account or if there was more to their story than they had shared during a previous interview. Once I developed rapport with the participants, I was able to challenge them about the inconsistencies in their accounts, which I reflected on in my journal:

I previously spoke to this participant about how working in sport has impacted their life, they spoke about the breakdown of their relationship and reiterated the saying "it is what it is", it was like they were just going through the motions, they even used humour as a way of lightening the tone by making a comment about their hair turning grey due to working in sport. However, when I spoke to them today, I sought clarification about their relationship breakdown as I felt it was an important part of their story. I noticed them playing with the palm of their hand and avoiding eye contact with me. They told me details that they previously did not mention including when the breakdown happened, how they coped, how it impacted their life, and the regrets they had. I thought to myself, 'Yes, finally they've let their mask down and they have told me something personal'. However, this was not something that happened instantly, it took time in the field and multiple interviews for me to build a relationship with my participants, so they felt they could be vulnerable and disclose personal information to me.



Another useful way to judge if elite interviewees were performing was to consider narrative suggestions about ‘big story’ and ‘small story’ accounts (Bamberg, 2006; Freeman, 2006; Gubrium, 2006). Within narrative literature, the ‘big story’ focuses on the biographical contents of an individual’s past experiences and specific turning points which have shaped an individual’s life. Meanwhile, ‘small stories’ refer to experiences told during interactions with others, usually within everyday settings (e.g., at work), about typical, everyday occurrences. Small stories are usually heard in informal settings and can be fleeting, quickly forgotten, or not particularly interesting (Bamberg, 2006). However, paying attention to the small stories or fleeting interactions with an elite interviewee can aid our understanding of ways in which interviews can become a performance or tactic used to accomplish something that the individual wishes to convey to the researcher (Gubrium, 2006). I reflected on one fleeting interaction in my journal:

Before the interview, as we were walking to a meeting room, the participant told me about the hectic morning she had and proceeded to tell me about how she forgot to pack her child’s swimming kit for school. She spoke of how lucky she was that her dad could step in and come to the rescue and drop off the swimming kit for her because she did not know what she would have done if her dad was not able to do it.

A common strategy that participants reported to manage the impact of working in sport was to keep their personal and professional lives separate. So, when they are at work they are focused on work and when they are at home, they can concentrate on the other roles that they occupy (e.g., parent, spouse). Participants discussed how they compartmentalise and switch between roles when they needed. However, the example above highlights how physiotherapists cannot completely switch off and when there

is an overlap they need to pick between their roles. Through small interactions like this, I was able to spot subtle inconsistencies and contradictions in participants' interviews.

As interviews are a two-way process, I also reflected on what impact my own performance as 'the interviewer' might have had on the data collection process. For example, I had to appear as though I was totally engaged with what the interviewee was saying, however, I had heard a lot of repetitive information for topic areas I was asking about (e.g., typical good days and bad days), and thus over time the interviews became more monotonous because I had reached researcher saturation (Wray et al., 2007). However, I could not show that in my behaviour or facial expressions. I realised that by performing, I had given the impression that the answers to the questions were what I wanted to hear and thus potentially missed out on hearing answers that could have taken the interview on another tangent. Although researchers advocate for interviewers to look engaged (e.g., nod your head) to gain and maintain rapport, by 'not' performing, I could have potentially created a space for participants to be more honest, which challenges current recommendations of best practice when conducting interviews.

Having been afforded the opportunity to interview the participants multiple times, I began sharing more of my own personal experiences in an effort to stop performing as 'the interviewer' and the interviews became more conversational. Even though I was an "outsider" in elite sport context, I found points of connection with the participants when they spoke about personal experiences away from sport, which offered me a way of maintaining rapport and providing participants with 'empathetic moments' (Prior, 2018). Empathy is often understood as "an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or

condition” (Heritage, 2011, p. 161). With empathy requiring a high degree of relational and emotional involvement from the interviewer (Prior, 2018). Scholars have advocated for researchers to strive for empathy in qualitative interviewing, as it increases the interviewer’s ability to generate “rich” data and significant knowledge about human experiences (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Moreover, elite performers are socialised to act in a way that reinforces dominant cultural values (e.g., being tough, not showing any weakness) and taught to play their part in elite sport contexts (Carless & Douglas, 2013). However, by creating space for empathetic moments, interviewers can allow participants to speak openly about experiences they may not otherwise share in elite contexts which allows the researcher to see beyond the performance. I reflected on one of these empathetic moments in my journal:

Today a participant shared a personal moment with me about a family member who had been diagnosed with an illness and I could not help but think of my own experiences as they spoke. They told me that they had not discussed this with other staff members as they did not want to burden them. As the participant became visibly upset, I could see they were in a vulnerable position, and it felt familiar like I knew what they were going through, and the emotions that they felt I have felt as well. Sadness, anger, frustration, all the above. I felt that sharing my own experiences could offer them some comfort and support.

Whilst the participant may feel a sense of relief that someone else understands their experience and is ‘in the same boat’ (Andersen, 2000, p. 6), scholars have called for sport psychology researchers to be aware of and reflexive about the limits of empathy (Smith et al., 2009). That is, the boundary between “showing empathy for another person, listening with concern and belief, and overrapport, identifying so much with those you study that you forget who you are, is easily crossed” (Rubin &

Rubin, p. 119). This poses interesting questions about how much interviewers reveal about themselves and what the interviewer's motivations are for sharing their experiences. Although I was aiming to comfort, help, and support the participant, upon reflection by saying "I know how you feel", I showed an inability to recognise the limits of empathy. There are aspects of the participant's experience that I can never know or feel, thus claims of knowing how others feel is where empathy can turn into projection (Frank, 2005), whereby interviewers end up projecting their own fears and hopes onto the interviewee, misrepresent the participant's views or needs, and make inappropriate moral judgments (Mackenzie & Scully, 2007). Thus, I recommend neophyte researchers who are interviewing elite participants and trying to find points of connection with interviewees to remain cognisant of the limits of empathy, as well as reflecting empathy enactments during interviews.

#### **4.3.3 Vulnerable elites**

Literature pertaining to interviewing elite participants suggests that one of the main challenges for researchers is that the power usually is with the 'elite' participants (Mikecz, 2012; Welch et al., 2002). However, Neal and McLaughlin (2009) described the notion of 'vulnerable elites' whereby participants can become vulnerable despite their elite status through emotional recall and retelling of personal experiences, which provides a way of understanding power as fluid, relational, and negotiated between the researcher and the participant (Lancaster, 2017). The process of getting the participants to open up required the physiotherapists to be vulnerable and honest about the struggles and challenges which they had experienced in their lives and within elite sport settings. Some of the revelations that I had heard were unexpected when I embarked on this programme of research. For example, some participants shared intimate details about their worst or dark days, a few spoke about coping after the

bereavement of a loved one or caring for a sick relative. As participants divulged personal information to me, there was a change in power dynamics between the participant and myself, as I became privy to their stories and experiences. Thus, in this confessional tale, I will unpack what the impacts were of interviewees sharing their traumatic experiences for the participant, the researcher, and the relationship.

When I entered this elite sport organisation and met with the participants, I held a belief that as healthcare professionals and members of elite sport contexts, the participants would be committed to enacting emotional labour. That is, the regulation of emotional display to meet with organisationally based expectations and requirements (Hochschild, 1983). However, on occasions, participants became tearful or visibly upset when they answered my questions. Did I go too far? What is too far? I reflected on these questions and considered the impact of research on the participants and the researcher-participant relationship. Wolcott (1995) wrote about the darker side of fieldwork and argued that as researchers we believe we are making the world a better place, but we ignore the benefits and advancements we are gaining for ourselves from other people's lives. In line with this comment, Andersen and Ivarsson (2016) argued that "interviewing research participants was a fundamentally exploitative process" (p. 1) and as researchers we are using participants to accomplish our academic agendas. As an early-career qualitative researcher, I found it difficult to know what to do when a participant disclosed traumatic and deeply personal experiences to me. Additionally, I did not expect the participants to be as emotionally vulnerable as they were when they shared their traumatic experiences, which often they had not revealed to others within sport or in some cases outside of sport environments.

On the one hand, if the researcher is an attentive and non-judgemental listener, there is a cathartic element to talking about one's experiences. For example, I would ask participants for feedback on how they thought the interview went and they would thank me for asking about their experiences as they did not typically speak about themselves or their personal lives within elite sport environments. They stated how it was nice to have someone who would listen to them, and they felt like a weight had been lifted by being able to share their experiences. This can happen when participants feel like the interviews are akin to therapeutic encounters where they could disclose sensitive and confidential information (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, Taylor, 2005). I was provided with a sense of comfort, and I felt happy that I could do this for the participants who had given up their time to take part in my research. However, on the other hand, there is a blurred boundary between therapeutic encounters and interviews that researchers need to navigate as there can be difficulties that arise after these therapeutic moments.

Firstly, talking about difficult personal experiences can lead to psychological issues such as feelings of anxiety, distress, or guilt which can impact on the participant's subjective and emotional well-being, and researchers may inadvertently re-traumatise participants (Alessi & Kahn, 2023; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As researchers, we are told we need to reiterate our role (i.e., a researcher) and gently remind participants we are not therapists whilst also directing them to pathways where they can get support (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). **Thus, when these sensitive issues arose during the interviews, I directed them towards support services available which included their organisations' own health insurance services, the NHS website, online support groups, and charities.** However, as identified in other chapters within this programme of research (e.g., chapter five and chapter six), participants within elite

sport contexts believed that there is a stigma attached to seeking help for mental ill-health. Thus, although researchers may reiterate therapeutic contacts, physiotherapists may view seeking help as not being mentally tough and detrimental to their sporting role (Souter et al., 2018). The second issue I had not considered was that I was asking participants difficult questions during their workday, as such, after my interviews, a lot of the participants went back to elite sport environments and had to carry on with their 'normal' day. For participants, who spoke about their traumatic experiences and were emotionally vulnerable, I cannot imagine how difficult this may have been and it was not something I had anticipated and prepared for, which poses ethical dilemmas about how interviewers leave the research scene.

Whilst trying to navigate participants' responses to their own experiences of trauma, researchers also need to consider the impact of interviews on themselves. Specifically, how they manage their own emotional responses to participants' experiences in the moment and how they cope with hearing about shocking or traumatic experiences. In 2007, Morse declared that "Safety of the researcher is one of the least addressed yet most important considerations in qualitative inquiry" (p. 1005). For Morse, this was not just about the physical safety of the researcher, but also about the emotional impact of research topics and one's emotional well-being. One moment which I reflected on was, the first time a participant cried in an interview, because I was not sure what to do and what my boundaries should be as a researcher. In addition, as interviews can be emotionally reflexive processes and thus when participants show vulnerability, power can become 'much looser, messier, and multidirectional' (Neal & McLaughlin, 2009, p. 699), which challenges elite interviewing literature that states elite participants always have the control and power in interviews. I noted my thoughts in my journal:

It took me by surprise when they broke down in front of me. All I could think about was do not cry, do not make this about you. I was looking at a spot on the wall just to the side of them to avoid looking them in the eyes. I found it incredibly difficult to hear their story as I could relate to it from my own experience of a similar situation. I felt my own emotions building up inside threatening to overwhelm me.

After this interview, I asked myself some questions: Why did I not express my emotions? What was stopping me? In the moment, I was unsure about how I would be perceived by the participant if I cried during the interview. I kept thinking about what participants had told me about when athletes become emotional due to injury and even when the physiotherapists are emotionally impacted, they have to control their expressions. Within elite sport contexts, sports medics and scientists often put on an act, fake, and control emotional expressions in a bid to appear professional in certain situations (Hings et al., 2018). Therefore, the more interviews I did, I became immersed in their culture through the stories they told, and I thought the participants would think I was “weak”, unprofessional, and overly emotional. Moreover, if I cried, the participant might have felt the urge to comfort and take care of me which would have halted the conversation. This echoes sentiments by Alessi and Kahn (2023) who stated that if the participant could sense interviewers are overwhelmed by hearing about their experiences, interviewees can become concerned about the interviewer’s well-being and shut down, which can impact the richness of the data collected.

Did I care more about the data than my own feelings? Yes, I did because in that moment despite the discrepancy between how I felt and my expressed emotions, the necessity to act professionally was prioritised. Furthermore, there is a lack of guidance about emotional expressions during qualitative interviews for neophyte



researchers. Drawing upon psychotherapy literature about whether therapists cry in sessions with clients, one study found that more experienced therapists would cry in sessions in comparison to students and trainees (Blume-Marcovici et al., 2013). With several therapists expressing that they became more comfortable with crying over the years as they became more confident and less rigid with their boundaries through years of practical experience, life experience, and therapist training. Therefore, with more experience interviewing participants and confidence in my professional credentials, perhaps I would react differently and not be afraid to show my emotions during vulnerable moments.

Exploring the experiences of others can be emotionally draining and mentally exhausting for the researcher, especially when dealing with adverse or traumatic events within elite cultures (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In their ethnography, Brewer and Sparkes (2011) explored how young people experienced parental death and the role of physical activity as a method of coping. Jo Brewer, who had experienced parental bereavement noted in her field diary that she came away from interviews feeling euphoric and inspired or other times she felt anxious and disturbed. When my participants were speaking about the trauma they experienced and were still experiencing, it filled me with dread and anxiety about what our future interviews could entail. For example, one participant spoke candidly about experiencing the worst days of their lives and knew that there could be more ahead, which left me feeling helpless as I had no way of ‘fixing’ the situation. Even though, as a researcher, I was there to observe and document without offering continued support that is customary in therapeutic and clinical relationships, the need to ‘help’ without having any solutions left me overwhelmed with uncertainty and fear. This aligns with Alessi and Kahn’s (2023) comments, which illustrates how researchers feeling the need to ‘fix’

the situation for their participant but refrain from doing so, can end up experiencing a sense of disempowerment.

Before every interview I would prepare myself for hearing bad news, I would plan for the interview by running through ‘what if’ scenarios and speaking to my supervisors about how I was feeling and advice about what to do in the eventuality the worst had or was going to happen. However, there were still feelings of anxiousness and dread as I turned up for the interview regardless of preparation which was akin to what scholars such as Martinelli and Day (2020) have referred to as, vicarious trauma (i.e., traumatisation through witnessing or listening to explicit accounts). Often trauma-based issues are unpredictable at the start of the research and from a procedural ethics point of view, researchers need to consider these issues as they arise to minimise harm to their participants and themselves.

During data collection, I did not anticipate hearing so many emotional and vulnerable stories from the elite participants, but as researchers, we need to recognise that anyone who we interview may have experienced trauma which might be discussed during interviews. Even when research questions do not involve trauma, I would recommend that all qualitative researchers engage in training in trauma-informed practice. Alessi and Kahn (2023) recently synthesised five trauma-informed research guidelines that can be applied to the research process within elite sport contexts. These five guidelines were: (1) Preparing for community entry: Learning about the impacts of traumatic events and historical trauma on individuals and communities; (2) Preparing for the qualitative interview or focus group: Establishing safety and trust in the research environment; (3) Extending safety and trust into the qualitative interview or focus group; (4) Knowing when to change course to avoid re-traumatization in

interviews and focus groups; (5) Committing to regular and radical self-reflection and self-care in the research process.

Elite participants are likely to be media trained therefore when they reveal personal stories it is often surprising, but the first practical strategy is to be prepared for emotions that are elicited when participants let their guards down. I would advise novice researchers to learn how to manage emotions that may be evoked when interviewing participants and understand how the social context (i.e., elite sport environments) can impact on emotional expression for both researcher and participant. The second strategy is to be open with your supervisors or fellow colleagues about challenges you are experiencing and if you need additional support. During the first few interviews, I did not vocalise how I felt after hearing about participants' traumatic experiences. Over time, I found one technique that was beneficial for me was doing regular debriefs with my supervisors after I experienced a particularly difficult or challenging interview, this afforded me a safe space for sharing my experiences. In addition, my supervisors could provide support and help me develop coping strategies that I could use throughout the interviewing process. The third strategy is to keep a reflexive diary, self-reflection was useful for me to understand, what in hindsight, I could have done differently, helped me to unpack how I felt during and after interviews, and how I would cope with similar situations moving forward.

#### **4.3.4 Breaking the code of silence in elite sport**

Getting participants to speak to me and talk frankly about their experiences gave me confidence in my interviewing techniques and it showed evidence of rapport and trust that I had built over time with my participants (Prior, 2018). However, some participants shared shocking revelations and disclosed information that was potentially detrimental to members of their teams and damaging for the reputation of

the elite sport organisation. As a novice researcher entering an elite sport organisation for the first time, I was presented with ethical, moral, and political ‘minefields’ that needed to be navigated carefully and this confessional tale unpicks how I negotiated these dilemmas.

When researchers disseminate their findings, they need to justify to themselves why certain ‘data’ should remain private or should be shared with a wider audience. They also need to make this decision under the watchful eye of the participants who have shared their stories, academic supervisors, and in some cases members of elite organisations who have invited researchers to study their employees. Thus, choosing what to include and what not to report in the findings was a contentious issue that needed to be navigated. For example, one participant spoke candidly about a physical violation that occurred to another staff member whilst on a work trip abroad with the sport. The participant spoke about the lack of support from individuals working in the sport after that incident and how the staff member was blamed for what happened. I was shocked by what I had heard. I felt concerned that there was a lack of safeguarding for staff members when they travelled with the sport and frustrated listening to the participant talk about the blame culture that operated within the environment. Moreover, the participant spoke about how even though they felt uncomfortable when travelling abroad, they did not speak to members of the sport about it due to a fear of being put in a bad position (e.g., being labelled a troublemaker, losing their job).

Suppressing and silencing experiences that others deem ‘controversial’ has been referred to as the “code of silence” within elite sport cultures and between members of sport organisations (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). According to scholars, sport actors are expected to be committed to their team and make sacrifices for the sport, therefore, everyday interactions can produce and normalise a culture of silence

when it comes to speaking out about deviant and corrupt behaviours (Smits et al., 2017; Whitaker et al., 2014). Consequently, the ‘code of silence’ that operates within elite sport contexts, acts as a barrier to reporting wrongdoing, leading to sport actors turning a blind eye to unethical practices (Moriconi & de Cima, 2020). Against the backdrop of the cultural practices that operate in elite sport environments, I was conflicted about how to proceed with sharing experiences that I had become privy to hearing during the interviews with members of the elite sport organisation and perceived there to be only two options.

Firstly, I could suppress this data as it is ‘too controversial’ and risks exposing my participant’s identity. When conducting member reflections, Cavallerio and colleagues (2019) wrote about the upper boundary of tellability, which has been described as the ‘dark side’ of a story (Norrick, 2005). This can upset readers and audiences by going beyond what is deemed to be appropriate to discuss within the elite sport context as well as challenging an individual’s sense of self and identity. Thus, I was aware that by sharing these stories within the elite sport culture and environment, I could be breaching that upper boundary with some individuals, which had the potential to lead to conflict and negative responses (e.g., anger, sadness, breakdown of professional relationships). The second choice was to share the data with powerful leadership groups within the elite sport organisation, hoping it would contribute to future policy-making and enforcing codes of conduct that are already in place, irrespective of the participant potentially being identified. I asked my supervisors for advice about the situation, as I was unsure whether to include certain data excerpts in my findings. The excerpt from my journal is presented below:

**Supervisor One:** It’s a thorny issue. Often, your job as a researcher is to make people feel uncomfortable and show problems within their organisation to

move things forward. This story has been suppressed and we can bury it again but that comes with consequences. Let me ask you, what do you want from this PhD?

**Me:** I want to make a difference; I want to help make changes that will help my participants moving forward. By doing this research, the participants hoped that I could shine a light on what is happening on the ground so the ‘higher ups’ can’t keep ignoring the issues...but I also do not want to jeopardise my participants’ livelihoods and reputations in the process.

In negotiating this dilemma, Lancaster (2017) suggested that disclosure of information and accounts provided by participants in some cases could potentially expose them to retaliation from others within their organisation and in severe cases potential job losses. Furthermore, if participants were identified it could lead to irreparable damage to relationships as well as compromise my organisational partnership. As I contemplated this situation, I was confused about what my role as a researcher was and there were glaring contradictions in my positionality. For example, I signed a contract with this elite sport organisation that I could not publish anything without their agreement in exchange for access to do my research. On the one hand not signing the contract would have meant that the participants’ experiences would never have been heard, but on the other hand, did I unknowingly agree to suppress data collected that was deemed ‘too controversial’? I did not know what the best outcome would be for everyone involved in the research process (e.g., the elite participant, the elite sport organisation, and myself). I spoke to my industry supervisor who was a member of the organisation about what they thought I should do. I’ve added excerpts to show how the conversation unfolded:

**Me:** So, there's a quote in my presentation that I'm unsure about including. It's a controversial quote and it can lead to a can of worms being opened. I also do not know if this participant can be identified due to the context of the situation within the quote.

**Supervisor 2:** I think you need to include that in. We asked you to do this research because we had our own theories and ideas about what was going on. If you have participants who have stories which go beyond what we could have imagined, of course, we need to hear that. We cannot help these participants if you give us a positive account and tell us everything is fine. What happens after this PhD is our responsibility.

As I deliberated with my supervisors, I realised that if I did bury this data, I would be contributing to the code of silence that operates in elite sport environments. Therefore, I had to think about the message it would send to my participants and what harm could be caused by not making these untold stories public. If I keep quiet about these stories, am I just feeding into a system that wants to keep certain topics private? Another worry was that my participants would think because I have kept quiet about these topics that they should also remain silent. Near and Miceli (1985) defined whistleblowing as "the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations who may be able to effect action" (p. 4). This definition left me wondering whether, the interview itself created a safe space for the elite participants to share stories that had otherwise been suppressed or silenced in the hopes that I could use my position as a researcher, to highlight their experiences in a way that could enact change within elite sport environments without putting the interviewees at risk. The purpose of the research was to make a difference that would

lead to change to help support physiotherapists within elite sport environments. If I was not prepared to have uncomfortable conversations with members of the organisation, how could I expect my participants to disclose information in the future? Upon reflection and guidance from my supervisors and participants, I knew that I had to include the excerpts when I presented the findings, but I also had to try and ensure that participants' confidentiality was not breached. Researchers often have to deal with the precarious balance of wanting to share direct quotes from their participants to stay true to what the interviewees have said whilst also being cognisant of identifiable information that needs to be omitted without changing the meaning of the quote (Lancaster, 2017).

This confessional tale has important recommendations for researchers in similar contentious situations. Firstly, researchers need to think about the upper boundary of tellability (i.e., 'untold' stories within elite environments that are often silenced or suppressed). In addition, how we as academics can adapt or prepare for the varying degrees of upper limit that different individuals can have, as that boundary might not be the same for everyone. I struggled with the ethical, moral, and political problems associated with wanting to give participants a voice but also wanting to protect them against potential backlash. However, upon speaking to my supervisors and others within the environment (e.g., participants and staff members), I realised that I needed to provide a platform to share participants' stories whilst not shying away from uncomfortable or difficult conversations with other members of the organisation. The staff members I spoke to resonated with the physiotherapists' experiences and were happy to engage with discussions that would better support practitioners within the field. On this basis, I believe it is important that researchers are open about ethical, moral, and political struggles they face whilst conducting research within elite sport



environments, as it gives insight into the precarious balance between not telling the whole truth and telling too much truth (Eakin, 2004).

The second recommendation is for novice researchers to ask participants and external members of elite organisations to not only reflect on the data but ask how they would like to be represented by visiting the topic of confidentiality and the use of quotations. Indeed, whilst the dominant way of representing qualitative research findings in sport psychology literature remains realist tales, there are creative analytical practices that researchers can use to communicate their findings such as creative non-fiction (Smith & Sparkes, 2020). One of the benefits of using creative non-fiction relates to the ethical dilemmas presented in this confessional tale, which is the anonymity of the elite participant (Smith & Sparkes, 2020). By using creative non-fiction, researchers can keep the rawness of real experiences without potentially compromising elite participants' identities. Thus, I would encourage researchers to work with their elite participants to ensure that they feel represented, validated, heard, and protected during the dissemination of research findings.

Thirdly, I would implore researchers who are conducting their studies within elite sport organisations to think about confidentiality and ways to minimise harm to their participants when assessing procedural ethical requirements. I interviewed a core group of participants over time and the pool of who I could draw from within this elite sport organisation was a small group. Participants could be identifiable to members of the sport organisation and other participants involved in the study. In qualitative research, although confidentiality is an essential ethics assurance, confidentiality has limits (Tolich & Tumilty, 2020), which as researchers we are not challenged about during university ethics applications. Moreover, within ethics applications, researchers acknowledge external confidentiality (Tolich, 2004), whereby they know

who the participant is, but they will omit identifiable information (e.g., names, location, sports) from the final publication. Conversely, the less obvious aspect is internal confidentiality (Tolich, 2004), which is the ability of other elite participants involved in the study to identify each other in the final written reports or during preliminary dissemination of findings (e.g., during external reflections), which usually goes unacknowledged in formal ethical review processes (Tolich & Tumilty, 2020). Thus, as I was researching members of a singular elite sport organisation, there was an inherent threat to confidentiality by fellow colleagues which I needed to navigate and reflect on throughout the research process.

#### **4.3.5 Negotiating with elites**

This confessional tale concerns the method of member reflections and the challenges that researchers might face when sharing results and interpretations of findings with participants. Engaging with methods such as member reflections is a way to explore any gaps in the findings and to acknowledge contradictions and differences in knowing (Schinke et al., 2013; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Within grounded theory methodology, researchers are encouraged to collect and analyse data in an iterative process, thus going back to participants after analysing data is a part of the process of doing grounded theory. Although not referred to as member reflections, constructivist grounded theorists embrace the process of co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participant to aid understanding or explanation for the social phenomenon being studied (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, rather than asking for reflections once all data had been collected and analysed, I asked participants to reflect on their own data as well as subsequent findings throughout the data collection process. As qualitative research continues to flourish and rapidly grow within sport psychology literature, the increasing debates around contemporary issues pertaining

to rigour in qualitative research have also been at the forefront when scholars discuss the topic of quality (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

During data collection, the participants were asked to reflect on previous interview data when they were presented with a timeline of the significant turning points they had discussed in their life and career. During this process, some participants opted to reflect on certain experiences and provide me with different accounts which contradicted what they had said in previous interviews. For example, the following reflexive notes provide insight into an exchange with one participant who took a different stance than previously discussed:

The participant today seemed quite nonchalant about their experience, portraying this turning point as ‘not my problem...I shouldn’t have got involved and if it does not impact me directly, I should have thought about whether my input was necessary’. When presented with an experience which they had revealed in great detail in front of them, it was almost as if with hindsight they had wished they had not told me about that experience in the way that they had. They responded in a calm and collected manner, ‘I think I could have probably chosen to compartmentalise that more. So just because I work in that sport, and that’s how that sport operates doesn’t mean that I need to. I could have kept ‘work’ me and ‘emotional’ me separate’. I challenged them on how difficult it can be to separate your personal values and morals from who they are at work, they immediately stated ‘I think you probably have to be more pragmatic about stuff’.

I was taken aback by the change in the participant’s perspective around this specific turning point as it was so different to what they said in their previous interview. This could imply that the participant removed their mask and stopped performing to give

me insight into a significant turning point. However, when the participant saw what they had said previously in written format, they realised they had given me too much of a glimpse behind the scenes of elite sport environments and needed to put their mask on again and do damage control. Bradshaw (2001) when adopting member checking, emphasised the possibility of researchers getting ‘too close’ to and being silenced by research participants. I probed further into the conflicting information that I was receiving about the situation and challenged the participant to try to better understand and contextualise their experience. Drawing upon existing sport psychology literature, I offer explanations as to why participants might present conflicting accounts when asked to reflect on data and findings. Firstly, sport personnel (e.g., athletes, coaches, physiotherapists) often have to ‘play the part’ within elite sport settings, which involves carefully curating personal experiences to fit with the dominant cultural script (Carless & Douglas 2013). Physiotherapists who embody the performance narrative or ‘play the part’ in professional settings will display the self-position that dominates their repertoire which in performance cultures is that of being an elite physiotherapist, and it is from this position that participants can deflect or become defensive to protect themselves when questioned, challenged, or presented with information they do not want to be made public. Furthermore, within this dominant cultural script and narrative, individuals tend to “downplay the significance of other people and of environmental constraints on their actions” (Ezzy, 2000, p. 616) whilst the narrative encourages personal agency and separation (Carless & Douglas 2013; Josselson, 1996). Thus, rather than reaffirming their concerns about the culture, participants are likely to take the blame for situations which is indicative of neoliberal cultures, which embed ideas and beliefs about personal responsibility (John & McDonald, 2020). I would encourage other researchers who receive conflicting

accounts to reflect on Josselson (2011) sentiments about finding a balance between respecting the participants' subjective experiences whilst at the same time being sensitive to their own interpretative understanding and the co-construction of knowledge.

Individuals going against the grain within a performance narrative risk being ostracised by their sportsnet (Nixon, 1992) and hence alternative opinions and explanations are often suppressed or silenced (Douglas & Carless, 2010). This was another challenge that I faced when presenting findings to a small group within the elite sport organisation, which consisted of external contributors and participants from the study. I was pleasantly surprised by the reaction to the findings and found that external contributors by and large found transferability between the participants' experiences and their own journey within the sport organisation. They also resonated with the turning points that participants were experiencing and noted that they had either faced similar situations or knew of other physiotherapists who had gone through the same turning points. However, when you have a group that is collectively in agreement, voicing your reflections can be difficult especially if a participant's interpretation is different from other members of the organisation. I noted in my journal:

I just received an email from a participant today, they told me that although they did not agree with all of the interpretations of the findings, they did not voice their opinions to the wider group and wanted to keep it between us and off the record. They reiterated a concern I had about the meeting, I prepared for members of staff to reflect on the data and disagree with my interpretations of the data so that we could explore any gaps in the findings. Therefore, the overall agreement with my interpretations left me surprised. This was not about

my interpretations being right or wrong, more so that when a group are in agreement, going against the collective and providing different interpretations is not easy, and thus members of organisations can choose not to rock the boat.

Baez (2002) argued that confidentiality and secrecy are intricately linked, and researchers who support the right to secrecy under the convention of confidentiality might be contributing to problematic research practices. To expand, one issue with keeping a participant's data off the record is that the very secrets that participants tell could sometimes help the researcher in answering research questions that they set out to explore and answer. Another problem which arises in respecting a participant's wishes about the use of specific data is that it can maintain and perpetuate power dynamics within the researcher-participant relationship. As Baez, (2002, p. 52) suggested, 'hidden power arrangements are maintained by secrets', therefore decisions to keep 'secrets' or leave information 'off the record' at the request of participants should be acknowledged by scholars and academics as political choices to maintain relationships with their participants. In addition, researchers should be cognisant of the continuous shifting in power dynamics at various points of data collection and analysis between the researcher and the participant.

By bringing these tensions to the forefront, I hope that fellow early-career qualitative researchers who are entering into elite sport contexts have an awareness of the part that the environment and other individuals can play in shaping participants' answers and how they react within interviews and during reflective practices. When disseminating findings to a group, it is important that researchers skilfully negotiate between members of the group so that less confident or quieter individuals can also have their voices heard. Moreover, certain individuals in the group may be more articulate or assertive than others, and thus their thoughts, opinions, and interpretations

may dominate the proceedings leading to other group members suppressing alternative viewpoints (Sim, 1998; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A researcher can frame the aim of the proceedings by stating that there is no singular interpretation of the findings, thus if individuals have different understandings of the data presented, they should be vocal as it will help to generate additional data and insight (Schinke et al., 2013; Smith & McGannon, 2018). In addition, by including complementary and contradictory findings in written reports, researchers can further develop and enrich their understanding of the elite contexts that they are studying (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

**Table 4.3:** Summary of recommendations and lessons learned for neophyte researchers.

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Lesson Learned</b>
<i>Before the interview</i>	
Consider what you wear	Your dresswear can assist in impression management, developing rapport, and finding points of connection with your participants.
Consider the location of the interview	Most researchers recommend a neutral, quiet location however if this is not possible and the participant chooses the location be prepared to surrender control of where the interview might take place and arrive early to familiarise yourself with the environment.
<i>During the interview</i>	
Attend to micromarkers (i.e., verbal and non-verbal signs)	Pay attention to subtle signs within the interview to judge whether you are hearing a rehearsed account.
Pay attention to the small stories	Attend to fleeting interactions before, during, and after interviews, which might seem insignificant but can build a picture when coupled up with other data.

Be aware of your own performance as the interviewer	Be aware of one's own performative actions during interviews and how they can impact on data collection (e.g., limits of empathy)
Emotion management	Be prepared for emotions that can be elicited when participants tell their personal stories for both participant and interviewer.
<i>After and between the interviews</i>	
Intersubjective reflexivity	Reflect on challenging interviews by sharing experiences with your support network (e.g., supervisors, peers).
Self-reflexivity	Keep a reflexive diary during data collection so you can record your thoughts and feelings about interviews.
Understand the upper boundary of tellability	The upper boundary of tellability is not the same for all participants and researchers need to understand this especially when reporting data back to participants.
Explore different ways of representing the data.	Consider asking participants how best to represent the data to ensure confidentiality is kept.
Awareness of internal confidentiality	Gain understanding of internal ethics when doing research within an organisation or institution and how it can be compromised when participants know each other.
Finding a balance in reporting findings.	When receiving conflicting accounts from participants about the same experiences, researchers must find a balance between respecting participants' subjective experiences and the researchers own subjective interpretations.
Attend to shifts in power dynamics.	Awareness of shifting power dynamics between the interviewer and participant throughout the research process.
Skilfully negotiate discussions within groups	When disseminating results to a group think about how to collect opinions from everyone to potentially gain multiple interpretations of the findings and not just from the most vocal.



#### **4.4 Conclusion**

To conclude, the confessional tales presented in this chapter provide an honest account of my experiences of conducting interviews within an elite sport organisation as an early-career qualitative researcher. By sharing my own experiences, I hope to offer a novel account of elite interviewing which, as yet, has remained unaddressed in sport psychology literature. That is, as a neophyte qualitative researcher with limited experience in conducting interviews with sport physiotherapists within an elite sport organisation. When preparing for this programme of research, I found the lack of articles and stories from other early-career researchers in a similar position disappointing, as I thought there would be more guidance available. I had fears about my lack of experience interviewing elite participants, being an outsider, not knowing what role, if any, that I occupied within this system, and feeling insecure about my lack of credentials and professional status within elite sport environments. The need for scholars to be reflexive about how they influence, and are influenced by, the research process is imperative to lifting the veil and inviting the reader to have a broader understanding of the challenges involved in conducting research.

However, reflecting is not an easy task as it can be time consuming, monotonous, emotionally draining, and it can challenge the researchers' beliefs and values. Reflection can act as an outlet for scholars to be vulnerable, whilst helping researchers voice the ethical, moral, and political dimensions of their fieldwork, and how the power dynamics between interviewer-interviewee shape interactions that have occurred (Smith, 2006). By writing these confessional tales, I first tried to provide a coherent story of the tensions that arose throughout the whole research process from gaining access and scheduling interviews to tensions around representing the findings and what to share with wider audiences. Secondly, I have offered practical

recommendations and strategies (see Table 4.3 for summary) for fellow researchers and students who are embarking on projects in elite sport contexts and are unsure of what to expect when entering the environment. Finally, I have provided useful topics of debates around notions of power dynamics and performativity within the researcher-participant relationship; ethical, moral, and political dilemmas within the field; as well as navigating uncomfortable and shocking discussions within elite sport contexts. I hope that by providing guidelines and advice that I wish I had when I started conducting this programme of research, novice researchers and sport psychology students can learn from my experiences within elite sport and overcome challenges they might encounter within the field.

#### **4.5 Summary**

In this chapter, I have used the genre of the confessional tale to explore my experiences as an early-career qualitative researcher entering elite sport environments for the first time. I have discussed five main challenges of interviewing elite participants: (1) entering the world of elite sport, (2) breaking the cycle of performative actions, (3) vulnerable elites, (4) breaking the code of silence in elite sport, and (5) negotiating with elites. I hope that I have offered an honest account that acknowledges the tensions and issues that may arise when interviewing elite participants, in addition to challenges, that at times undermine the research efforts of novice researchers within elite contexts. The next chapter moves away from reflections of my own experiences to a grounded theory which explains how physiotherapists make sense of significant turning points in their lives whilst working within elite sport environments.

## **Chapter 5**

**A Grounded Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport:**

**Making Sense of Physiotherapists' Turning Points.**

## **5.0 Overview**

Although previous research has shown that being an athlete or working within elite sport environments which were highly pressurised, complex, volatile, and stressful can lead to members of organisations considering turnover (e.g., Lerner et al., 2017), research on turnover and retention within elite environments remains largely descriptive. This study aimed to address this by developing a substantive theory to explain the processes through which physiotherapists make sense of their turning point experiences throughout an Olympic and Paralympic Games cycle, leading to turnover or retention outcomes. The grounded theory produced using Charmaz's (2006, 2014) variant of grounded theory, (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*) suggests three ways of sense-making (i.e., living, resisting, playing the part) that helped physiotherapists make sense of their turning points experiences and decide if they should stay or leave their elite sport organisation. Furthermore, the mechanisms of sense-making were found to occur across different levels: individual (i.e., personal agency in decision-making), relational (e.g., through interactions with others inside and outside of sport), and cultural (e.g., how the dominant culture influences and shapes interactions and behaviours). This theory illustrates a number of ways in which it has extended previous research and provides elite sport organisations with a detailed explanation of how physiotherapists make sense of their turning points and factors that lead to turnover or retention experiences across an Olympic or Paralympic cycle.

## **5.1 Introduction**

A salient issue within sport organisations is turnover (i.e., leaving one's job and organisation) because of the effect it can have at the individual and organisational level. At the organisational level, turnover can have consequences across various

factors such as, time taken to recruit and replace the organisational member, knowledge loss and time taken to train someone new, overall team functioning, and negative impact on the remaining team members (Larner et al., 2017). To expand on the latter consequence, one study examined the impact of constant managerial changes on employees within two English Premier League clubs. Wagstaff and colleagues (2016) interviewed 10 employees and found that repeated organisational change (i.e., managerial changes) negatively affected employees' attitudes towards their employers and the organisation across seven themes. The first theme was *trust*, there was a decline in trust which led to an erosion of employee identity over time within the organisation. The second theme, *cynicism*, included changes in employees' attitudes regarding the motive and behaviour of organisational leaders. The third theme, *lack of organisational learning*, encompassed employees' frustrations at repeated change without any learning across change events. The fourth theme, *motivation*, included a lack of motivation and willingness to invest effort to develop new relationships. The fifth theme, *intention to leave*, considered employees responses to repeated uncertainty. The penultimate theme, *engagement*, referred to a reduction in creativity and citizenship behaviours. The final theme, *commitment*, outlined how employees reduced their emotional commitment to their manager, employer, and organisation. This study illustrated the negative impacts of constant managerial change, which add to the precarity and uncertainty of living and working within elite sport environments.

At the individual level, sport psychology researchers have predominantly focused on turnover from the athlete's perspective within areas of dropout, career transitions, and career termination. In 2013, Park and colleagues conducted a systematic review of athletic retirement across 126 studies published between 1968 and 2010. They summarised that the quality of post-sport career transition is

influenced by 15 personal and developmental factors: athletic identity, demographical issues, the voluntariness of retirement decision, injuries or health problems, career and personal development, sport career achievement, educational status, financial status, self-perception, control of life, disengagement or drop-out, time passed after retirement, relationship with coach, life changes, and balance of life. The quality of career transition out of sport was also facilitated by coping strategies, pre-retirement planning, psychosocial support, and support programme involvement.

Meanwhile, sport management scholars have recently explored employee turnover within elite sport from a coach perspective. In 2018, Lee and Chelladurai administered online questionnaires to 322 high school coaches in the United States and explored the relationship between emotional labour, burnout, and job satisfaction and coaches' subsequent turnover intentions (i.e., individual's plan to quit one's job; Meyer et al., 1993). They found that coaches who experienced burnout were more likely to have turnover intentions and coaches who were satisfied with their jobs were less likely to have turnover intentions. Moreover, Darvin (2020) interviewed 12 former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) women assistant coaches to examine their voluntary turnover experiences. To clarify, voluntary turnover refers to individuals choosing to leave their jobs and/or organisation on their own terms, whereas involuntary turnover, indicates the coach was forced out of their job or organisation due to being fired, not rehired the following season, or being made redundant (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004). The findings revealed women assistant coaches' reasons for leaving their work and organisation across four themes. Firstly, *recruiting toxicity*, which highlighted the toxic organisational cultures the coaches worked within which emphasised success at all cost, and the subsequent moral and ethical challenges experienced. The second theme, *destructive leadership*, which

encompassed assistant coaches' experiences of controlling environments and controlling behaviours from head coaches. The third theme, *burnout*, described what led to burnout experiences for the coaches which included, the hours worked, the salary earned, and the recruitment process. The final theme, *non-nuclear family balance*, encompassed the coach's lack of balance between their professional and personal life.

Collectively scholars across disciplines have made significant contributions to turnover literature within elite sport through the extensive research surrounding athletic retirement and career transitions, or recent examination of coaches' turnover experiences and employees' responses to coach or managerial turnover. However, significant gaps remain, primarily no attention has been paid to physiotherapists' turnover intentions and actual turnover within elite sport organisations. This seems surprising given the critical role physiotherapists have in supporting athletes with their rehabilitation from injury, injury prevention during training, and helping keep athletes fit for performance. Turnover is a critical line of inquiry within sport organisations to fully understand why physiotherapists are choosing to leave their jobs, the organisation, and potentially the industry altogether. In addition, considering the challenges that voluntary turnover poses for organisations, understanding employee turnover is an integral part of future planning for organisational labour, as organisations try to limit turnover and keep their most competent, knowledgeable, and experienced employees (Darvin, 2020). However, the relationship between intention and actual turnover remains a contentious issue within sport management and organisational psychology literature, as turnover intention albeit important, was not found to be a strong predictor of actual turnover (Cohen et al., 2016; Larner et al.,

2017). Therefore, it is imperative to understand why some decide to stay or leave after expressing turnover intentions and what factors impact on one's decision over time.

The rationale for this chapter is fourfold. Firstly, this piece of research was requested by key stakeholders within the elite sport organisation, as physiotherapist turnover was a salient issue which they wanted to understand. Secondly, given the lack of literature within sport psychology on staff turnover in elite sport organisations, a comprehensive understanding of the process of turnover and retention experiences over time with physiotherapists is warranted. Thirdly, the dominant culture that operates in elite sport environments has been shown to impact on athletes' and coaches' decisions to retire or leave their jobs. Therefore, it is critical that we understand, and are aware of, what impacts working and living within elite sport contexts has on physiotherapists' experiences. Finally, by understanding physiotherapists' experiences of factors contributing to turnover intentions and actual turnover, we can raise the sport organisation's awareness of areas where physiotherapists need more support. Thus, this chapter aims to examine the process of how physiotherapists make sense of their turnover intentions and understand the impacts of their sense-making (i.e., deciding to stay or leave the organisation and well-being outcomes). Three specific questions will be examined: first, what factors lead physiotherapists to contemplate turnover? Second, how do physiotherapists make sense of their turnover intentions? Finally, what are the subsequent 'outcomes' once physiotherapists have made their decision to stay or leave the organisation? The final question aims to explore and understand turnover and retention over time, which will contribute to turnover literature by offering a novel perspective of physiotherapists' experiences, across and within jobs. It is hoped that by providing insight into the processes leading to turnover outcomes, this chapter will aid organisations to identify



physiotherapists who are contemplating turnover and offer support that is needed, which can hopefully lead to organisations retaining their highly valued organisational members. This was a key objective and what senior leadership members wanted to understand within the elite sport organisation.

## **5.2 Summary of methods**

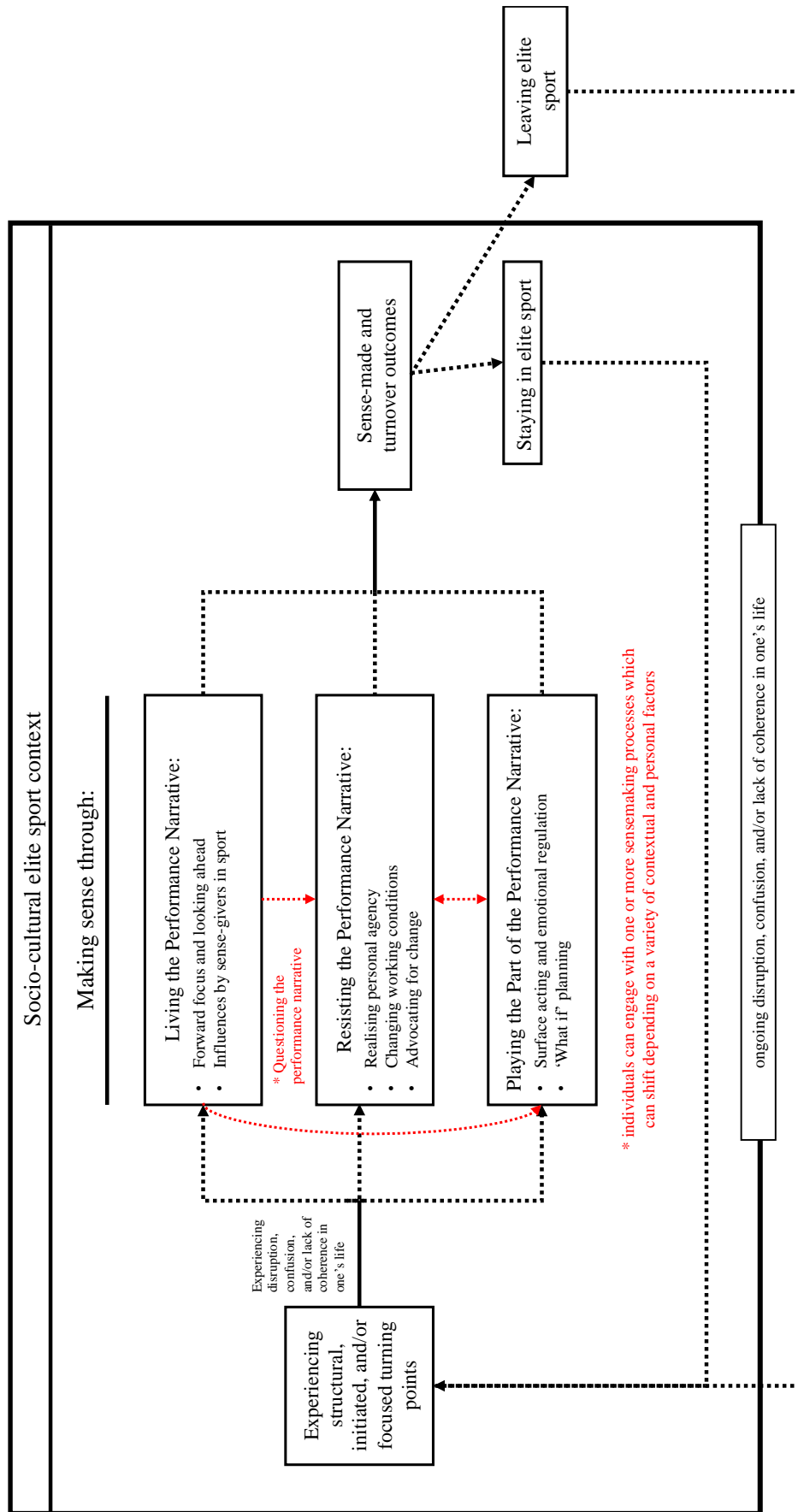
To collect data on physiotherapists' turning point experiences, how they make sense of their experiences, and the impacts of their sense-making processes (i.e., deciding to stay or leave the organisation and well-being outcomes), I utilised three methods: (a) semi-structured interviews, (b) an electronic app, and (c) timelining. First, **semi-structured interviews** were used in the first instance, this helped me to introduce myself to the physiotherapists, build rapport, and give participants a chance to share their experiences both inside and outside of sport. Conducting multiple interviews with the physiotherapists employed by the elite sport organisation also allowed me to capture how the participant's sense-making can shift over time. During this grounded theory study, I conducted 72 interviews totalling 4520 minutes with 17 participants taking part in multiple interviews and 9 participants taking part in one (see chapter three for detailed discussion about sampling and participants). Whilst interview data is a good foundation, it was primarily retrospective and due to the gaps between interviews I was missing out on understanding daily fluctuations in everyday experiences and how these can impact on participants' experiences over time. Thus, the second method of data collection, **an electronic app** was developed with the organisation, and I asked 17 participants currently working for the organisation to participate. The app was in place over an 18-month period and in total 1851 entries were made by 11 participants. The data from this app was monitored by myself and I would use the information gained as probes in follow up interviews. Finally, I

constructed 17 **timelines**, which offered a visual representation of significant moments in physiotherapists' lives which I had constructed using data from their previous interviews and the electronic app. This method allowed the 17 participants to engage with their experiences both reflectively and actively whilst concurrently allowing me to open dialogue and fill in any gaps in my understanding. Moreover, I was also able to gain prospective data by asking them about their hopes for the future both inside and outside of sport once the current cycle came to an end. The multiple methods of data collection were used to inform and build on previously gathered data. From a temporal viewpoint, the data collection methods allowed me to gain a retrospective, every day, prospective, and reflective understanding of physiotherapists' experiences which revealed the complexity, contradictions, and multiple ways that physiotherapists made sense of their experiences. The data was analysed using Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach (full details about grounded theory methodology and specifically the grounded theory analysis can be found in chapter three). Throughout the data collection, analysis, and write-up stages I engaged with reflexive practices (i.e., reflexive journaling, discussions with critical friends) and further detail about this can be found in chapters three and four.

### **5.3 Results**

This results section presents four core categories that were identified to explain the relationship between turning points and staff turnover and retention in an elite sport organisation throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle (i.e., from the start to the end). The core categories were *socio-cultural context*, *experiencing turning points*, *sense-making*, *sense-made* and *lessons learned*. These core categories depict physiotherapists making sense of turning points through understanding their place in the cultural context and how turning points were experienced, to sense-made and

understanding if the decisions they made were right for them. Figure 5.2 provides a schematic representation of the core categories and illustrates the relationships between categories in a substantive theory (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*). Although the theory appears linear, it is a dynamic and iterative process. In this chapter, each category is explained, providing the reader with a nuanced understanding of the complex, cyclical, and iterative relationships between experiencing turning points and the subsequent lessons learned after physiotherapists make sense of their turning points.



**Figure 5.2.** Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport

### 5.3.1 Socio-cultural context of elite sport

To make sense of physiotherapists' experiences whilst working in this Olympic and Paralympic sport organisation, it is first important to contextualise the culture that the physiotherapists worked and operated within. The physiotherapists described operating within a performance culture (cf. Douglas & Carless, 2006), where 'sport is life and life is sport'. Here, the focus was on winning medals and being the best, as Isaac proclaimed, "... elite sport is about performance, medals, and retaining funding". Physiotherapists described the contrasting sporting environment when athletes were winning or losing. For example, Tony stated, "It's crap when it's not successful and the environment is not pleasant when you're not winning. But when you're winning it's just great fun to be a part of". As Tony's quotation exemplifies, within the performance narrative performance-related outcomes are prioritised above all else and achieving these outcomes impacts on the working environment (cf. Douglas & Carless, 2006). This performance focus often meant that other areas of life were relegated or diminished, as Steph reflected:

The sport has to come first and that's the way it is. This is what you're signing up for; if you want to be a part of this organisation and if you want to be part of Team GB or British whatever, this is what it is. It's long unsocial hours, you do have to give up your soul to do it, the sport comes first. Within sport there was always this kind of fear that if we didn't achieve medals, our money would be cut, and none of us were going to have jobs. I think those sorts of discussions did go on. You know, it puts people under immense pressure. That's the environment that it is, so you either adapt and learn to deal with it or you don't, and you leave your job.

This quotation shows how physiotherapists and other sports personnel were and continue to be socialised into a way of being within the performance culture. The ‘win at all cost’ culture was perpetuated through the participant’s fears of losing their job, which was contingent on athletes’ performing and winning medals. With elite sport organisations being results-based businesses, any ‘wins’ were temporary and fleeting until the next event came along or, indeed, the next Olympic or Paralympic cycle began. This notion of temporary gains is similar to Gotwals and Tamminen’s (2022) concept of ‘forward momentum’, which focuses on continual progress, improvement, and looking ahead to what is next, consequently orientating away from current accomplishments and experiences. Thus, the findings support the suggestion that those living in the performance narrative were continually driven to achieve more (e.g., more effort, more wins, more medals, more success).

However, funding is ever-changing and not always related to performance outcomes, as Lewis reflected “The athletes had a medal target which they achieved, they had the most successful Olympic Games ever, and we still didn’t manage to maintain their funding.” Thus, athletes, coaches, and support staff were all in a precarious position where they perceived that employment and funding were not only related to performance but the amount of work they do on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, if there were redundancies, physiotherapists would need to evidence their hard work (e.g., working long hours, commitment to additional training camps) to show why they should stay in employment over their peers. For example, Lewis expressed his perception that all physiotherapists choose to work beyond their contracted hours:

I choose to work more hours than I should because I take pride in my work, and I want to do a job to a certain standard. If I didn’t work those [extra] hours,

I couldn't do it...I had some interesting chats with [a member of leadership], and he said, 'we talk about work-life balance, that doesn't exist, it's about life balance because this is a lifestyle.' So yes, we can fill in an app, and it would show you how many hours we work, and I can sit here and say to you 'that we shouldn't work as many hours that we do'. But then we all do it, and we all choose to make that decision.

In the example above, Lewis makes generalisations about the lives of all physiotherapists, imposing his ways of being on other physiotherapists in a totalitarian approach (e.g., "we all do it", "If I didn't work those [extra] hours, I couldn't do it"). Through being socialised into sport, performance stories normalise and naturalise (Nelson, 2001) specific behaviours (e.g., working extra hours) as necessary for performance. Although Lewis perceived it to be a choice, the working conditions did not allow for another option. If individuals fail to adhere to the requirements of the performance narrative, they risk being isolated, alienated, and, labelled by their peers. The latter was demonstrated by Justin who claimed, "Some of the 'coasters' have left since Rio, the ones that didn't want to put in that extra effort to be working in sport." Additionally, participants expressed that sport personnel would perceive them as not caring about their work and being uncommitted, as Steph reflected, "members of the sport made me feel like I wasn't committed to them unless I give up all my time to work here."

Physiotherapists are socialised into understanding the performance narrative as linear (Ezzy, 2000) because it follows a specific trajectory towards a single goal (i.e., winning in competitive sport). Performance stories or tales circulating in elite settings suggest that this single goal is the only one that matters and that it can only be achieved in one specific way. However, physiotherapists described that the

consequences of prioritising performance outcomes was the relegation or sacrifice of other areas of their lives (e.g., family, hobbies, interests). Making sacrifices for sport was one dimension of the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) which involved sport person's excessive overconformity to the norms and values that the elite sport environments embodied, to prove their commitment and continue participating in elite sport. Thus, physiotherapists stated that life in sport was all-consuming, exhausting, and lonely, as Sam reflected, "I don't have a family or a significant other, and the chances are slim of actually meeting someone when I'm constantly travelling and so invested in sport." Some physiotherapists also described radical changes to their life circumstances in the pursuit of working in elite sport and performance outcomes. As Isaac reflected:

I spend most of my time in a week working here, so it defines parts of my character...It's impacted on my ability to sustain a relationship for a long period of time...I am sacrificing time with my child, and I've sacrificed my marriage in order to engage with sport and with what I do. I'm knowledgeable of that, and I've had to accept that it is the price that I'm paying for what I do.

This quote highlights how an exclusive focus on performance outcomes and working long hours impacts on physiotherapists' lives outside of sport. Spending time with family, long-term relationships, or other aspects of life are routinely sacrificed, and they are storied in performance tales as necessary sacrifices in the pursuit of success. In short, this category illustrates how the performance culture that physiotherapists operate within 'gets under their skin' and how the performance culture has the capacity to act in a way that guides their thoughts, behaviours, and actions.

### **5.3.2 Experiencing turning points**



During the Olympic and Paralympic Cycle, turning points (e.g., ‘bumps’ in the road, ‘forks’ in the path, reaching a ‘crossroad’) were experienced by physiotherapists that were structural, initiated, and/or forced. The core category of turning points can be described as moments that led physiotherapists to question their employment in their organisation and elite sport altogether, and an opportunity to reinforce their commitment to themselves and others. Thus, turning points were psycho-social events which can be interpreted as positive and/or negative that caused disruption and uncertainty in physiotherapists’ lives. The subjective assessment of the turning point as significant prompted individuals to understand the situation and to know what to do next. The turning points described by physiotherapists resonated with Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997) sociological theory of career decision making and three types of turning points presented in this study (i.e., structural, initiated, and forced) have been constructed using their framework.

The first type of turning point experienced by the physiotherapists was *structural*, which represented turning points that were predictable and derived through institutional transitions (e.g., sports calendar, policies, and codes within the organisation). Structural turning points that participants reported were: starting their career with the elite sport organisation, transitioning from junior to senior physiotherapist, funding allocation announcements, and the beginning and end of an Olympic or Paralympic cycle. The second type of turning point was *initiated*, where the physiotherapist, someone (e.g., a spouse or partner), or their social world (e.g., organisational climate) were instrumental in driving potential change. Initiated turning points that participants described were self-driven (e.g., one’s health and well-being, career, or life stagnation), relational (e.g., becoming a parent, personal and professional relationship changes; getting married or divorced, experiencing bullying,

lack of appropriate social support) and organisational (e.g., misalignment between individual and organisational values; safeguarding issues). The third type of turning point was *forced* on individuals by external events. Forced turning points are different to structural (i.e., predictable and planned) and initiated (i.e., driven, and gradual), because they are sudden, unexpected, and require the physiotherapist to react immediately or swiftly. The forced turning points that physiotherapists reported were organisational restructuring and redundancy due to funding cuts, the declining health of loved ones, or bereavement.

When experiencing different types of turning points, participants expressed that they continued to display their commitment to their team, the sport, and the organisation. Within the performance narrative, any action that suggests that someone is uncommitted to the team is a threat to performance (Carless & Douglas, 2013). However, structural turning points (e.g., the transition between the end of one cycle and the beginning of another) marked a time when physiotherapists could decide whether they were willing to make a further four-year commitment to the sport, at the expense of other aspects of their lives. As Lisa reflected:

People stay, either happy or unhappy, for longer because it's prolonged over a four-year period. So, you have people pushing through unhappiness or burnout, and then there's an "ahh" moment when you finish the Games and the bubble bursts, and you can think about what's next...After the games, you have to make the decision about whether you want to stay for another four years. You can't just say, 'I'm going to stay for another year or two,' and it's not for the sport or the organisation; it's for the athletes and coaches whom you've committed to.

This quote provides insight into the length of time that physiotherapists perceived they must adhere to the job (i.e., four-year period). Indeed, as Lisa explained, making turnover decisions within the timeframe of an Olympic or Paralympic cycle would be deemed unthinkable and would risk causing unnecessary disruption for other members of the sport (e.g., athletes, coaches). However, waiting for a more appropriate time (i.e., the end of a Games cycle) to vocalise with others in the environment (e.g., line managers, peers) about turning points occurring, led to participants hiding what they were experiencing. In a bid to separate their lives within and outside of sport, participants described how they would regulate their emotions within elite sport environments, as Alex explains:

I would describe myself, and I don't drink, by the way, so this is a metaphor. I would describe myself as a functional alcoholic. Like *I* dealt with [my divorce]. No one saw...but yeah, it was just getting on with it. I was knackered all the time, so people probably thought that's what he's like all the time... I did isolate myself, so I left myself to deal with it, but you know isolation is one of those things that are not a trigger, what's the right word...signs to look for and kind of you look at the list that you're given and told to look out for when people are struggling like, yeah that was me... I probably should have gone off, had some mental health help probably around the time of my divorce.... I wasn't in a great place. There were feelings of regret, feelings of guilt; I was in an absolute state, but then for me, there was a little bit of well; of course, you should be upset like it's okay to be in a shit place.

Alex's statement of "no one saw", reflects his experience of what Grandey and colleagues (2013), termed emotional labour, which is the emotion regulation performed in response to job-based emotional requirements. Physiotherapists reported

that while experiencing turning points, they still had to convey professionalism within elite sport environments. This professionalism was performed in accordance with the sport ethic, whereby individuals do not seek help, admit they are struggling, and are expected to display coolness and composure as they confront and overcome their challenges (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Thus, impression management practices such as emotion regulation and surface acting, became normalised for physiotherapists to follow publicly, to present a version of themselves that aligns with what is expected in performance cultures, even when they were experiencing uncertainty and disruptions in their lives.

The disruption and uncertainty caused by turning points over a prolonged period, coupled with a lack of control over the trajectory of the path one might take, resulted in further turning points (e.g., poor mental health and well-being). Physiotherapists reported that they found it difficult to ask for time off whilst they were experiencing turning points and were judged by others in the performance environment if they did take time off, as Alex expressed, “you get some funny comments like the athletes try to make a joke of it and they’ll say, ‘are you off on another toil day?’ or ‘are you in all day this week or are you only working part-time.’” The impact of the turning points experienced by participants were gradual changes to their physical health (e.g., feeling exhausted and fatigued all the time), mental health (e.g., emotional exhaustion, isolation from loved ones, alienation, feeling like a burden), and well-being (e.g., feeling unhappy with life, relationship breakdowns). Experiencing a decline in health and well-being led physiotherapists to act (e.g., what could they do to alleviate negative experiences) and participants reported questioning their own priorities (e.g., ‘what do I do next?’, “what is best for me and my family?”). The following quote illustrates Oscar’s experience of a forced turning point (e.g., an

unexpected medical diagnosis within his family) and the subsequent weeks that followed:

The doctor said, 'there's been a positive test result, something's flagged up', and that's when we got the diagnosis...My first response was just to go back to where we grew up, where our families were, where we knew we had family support, I suppose just where our friends were. If the opportunity had arisen without thinking about work, if we could have found somewhere to live back at home, we would've upped sticks and gone...But like all the things you've planned...all that is tainted by this cloud of it's not going to be okay...But yeah, that continued for a while. My wife got very ill, which was tough. I probably did as well but just didn't get the diagnosis that she did... And then you start making decisions that are knee-jerk. We're not a knee-jerk family; we are quite planned and calculated. So, it was out of our comfort zone... I could tell we were panicking, but I couldn't do anything about it... I couldn't tell you how I coped; I just did. I just got up and faced things. I can't beat around the bush. I had horrendously low moments like as low as I ever want to go again. They were the worst days of my life.

This excerpt gives insight into the gradual and long-term impacts that turning points have (e.g., ill-being and mental illness) when physiotherapists experience ongoing disruption within their lives without adequate support or resolution. When experiencing turning points which were highly emotive (e.g., family illness, terminal diagnosis, bereavement), physiotherapists were left to manage the only way they knew how: keep working. In elite sports environments 'effort' and 'being tough' are valued commodities (Carless & Douglas, 2013). However, as Oscar's example illustrated, the magnitude of a turning point can cause chaos in the lives of individuals and their

families, as they struggle to cope and live with their turning points which forces physiotherapists to make unforeseen decisions (e.g., turnover). Ellis (2001) described a ‘metamorphosis’ that can occur within an individual when a loved one is in need and thus turning points can lead to self-reflection and a chance to make a change when they can no longer overcome these challenges. In contrast to the often linear path of the performance narrative, turning points can represent opportunities for different paths that physiotherapists can take or draw upon to make sense of and understand their lives and their experiences inside and outside of sport.

### **5.3.3 Sense-making of turning points**

This category explores the process of sense-making to explain how physiotherapists navigated from experiencing significant turning points to making sense of their experiences. Physiotherapists described that whilst experiencing turning points, they would gather information through interactions with and observing others (inside and outside of sport) and exploring the job market. As such, the process of sense-making was found to be individual, relational, and cultural. Firstly, sensemaking is individual, as there is a degree of personal agency where the person experiencing a turning point has a choice in the direction of their professional and personal lives. Secondly, sense-making is relational, because it occurs between people inside and outside of sport, and through these interactions, meaning is negotiated, contested, and mutually co-constructed and sense is made. Finally, sense-making is cultural, as people interpret elite sport environments through interactions with other individuals inside and outside of the organisation, which enables them to understand the social world, the available resources, and constraints during sense-making and act accordingly. The three sense-making processes (i.e., living, resisting, playing the part of the performance narrative) represented in this category identified diverse ways that

practitioners made sense of their turning points. Each of these three sense-making processes will be explained in the subsections that follow, as well as illustrating how, over time, physiotherapists sense-making can shift depending on a variety of personal and contextual factors (e.g., age, relationship status, family requirements, experience level).

### **5.3.3.1 Making sense through living the performance narrative**

When physiotherapists first entered the elite sport organisation or started another Games cycle, their focus was on the future (e.g., going to the Games). Participants stated that as soon as a new cycle began the messaging and strategy around the environment would be about the next four years (e.g., “it will go from the road to Tokyo to the road to Paris. Everything will be about looking forward”). Physiotherapists stated that at the start of an Olympic or Paralympic cycle, there is a high staff turnover, with new staff coming in and others leaving the sport or the organisation. Physiotherapists described how their social interactions within sport reinforced characteristics of the performance narrative (e.g., relegating other areas of lives) at the start of the Games cycle. Which led to changes in their sense-making and behaviour (e.g., delay in having children), which Lauren explained when reflecting on her experience at the start of a Games cycle:

A few years ago, I was told frequently, “oh, I should put it in your contract that you can’t have children,” and that stuck with me because I was thinking at the time, “oh god, I can’t believe you’ve just said that” and that was somebody very high up in management and I think, yeah he might have said it in a jokey way, but it was still said and if that’s your opinion joking or not, where is the support? If ever I was to have children and obviously, I can’t do the travel anymore; are they then not going to want me to do the work that I do on a day-

to-day basis? ... I don't want to sacrifice my career, but I also am not going to sacrifice what I want from my life in general for what ultimately is a job.

This social exchange illustrates how individuals within the performance narrative push their sense-making onto others and provides an example of the relational process of "sense-giving". Sense-giving is whereby powerful individuals within an organisation "influence the sense-making and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organisational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Put another way, the sense-giver (e.g., someone in management) reinforces to their staff the desired behaviour and discredits, dismisses, or disregards the physiotherapist's prospective turning points (e.g., having children). In this case, sense-givers reframed the physiotherapist's sense-making to align with the performance narrative (e.g., having children detracts from working in sport therefore you need to relegate this area of your life). This echoes previous research from McGannon and colleagues (2015) who outlined the forced choice between motherhood or a career in sport for athletes. Yet, it extends our understanding by highlighting those similar choices are being made by physiotherapists. Through sense-giving processes, physiotherapists learn what is and is not accepted behaviour in their organisation leading to binary sense-making in the future (e.g., career versus family, life versus sport). This illustrates how sense-making was a temporally embedded process, informed by retrospective sense-making of past experiences (e.g., comments made by management), but also oriented toward the future and prospective sense-making (e.g., I cannot have both, so I must pick one).

Conforming to, identifying with, and living the performance narrative when experiencing turning points was influenced by factors including status and recognition gained by going to the Games, as Isaac expressed, "I'm a part of an environment that



people look up to, people love. I'm in a privileged position." Participants also described the Olympic and Paralympic Games as "the pinnacle of amateur and professional sport" and that going to the Games was a "dream". Additionally, participants recalled moments where they conformed to the performance narrative and realigned their sense-making with sense-givers (e.g., management, peers) because they wanted to be socially accepted in the environment and reduce the possibility of stigmatisation. As Carly describes:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

This excerpt illustrates how organizational power and dominant assumptions about one's behaviour led to the sense-making of what makes a "good employee". Physiotherapists would internalise and learn from previous situations that if they were to speak out about specific turning points (e.g., safeguarding issues) within the environment it would be detrimental to them (e.g., loss of social capital, being pushed out of the job). Moreover, being labelled a 'troublemaker' poses a threat to the participants' self-image, therefore they are reluctant to speak on controversial issues as they believe it will put them at risk. The prospect of being ostracised in the environment influenced physiotherapists sense-making to align with what is expected in the performance narrative. Goffman (1963) called this the 'politics of identity' whereby individuals were either considered the 'normals' (i.e., those who align with social expectations and perform roles expected in the environment) or the 'stigmatized' (i.e., those who go against the grain and are not socially accepted by the group). However, physiotherapists expressed that the more they were pushed to look past what they thought was morally wrong but culturally accepted, practitioners saw themselves becoming someone they were not (i.e., inauthentic selves). Within organisations, an 'artificial person' (Wolgast, 1992) speaks and acts in the name of or on behalf of more powerful organisational members, thus losing autonomy in their choices (Smith, 2013).

Physiotherapists who made sense of their turning points through living the performance narrative explained that they did not turn to their friends or family for support as they felt those outside the sportsnet (Nixon, 1992) would not understand their sport world, as Lisa stated, "your friends don't understand that you don't work 9

to 5. Like don't criticise me for a job I enjoy." Therefore, when it came to the end of a Games cycle, participants expressed that they continued to turn inward for support from sportsnet members (e.g., other physiotherapists, managers, members of leadership) as they were the only people, they felt would be able to understand the context of their turning points and provide the support that they needed. However, turning to individuals who embodied the performance narrative resulted in support that did not meet their needs, as Lisa expressed when describing her experiences of burnout post Games:

After the Olympics is the time when people leave, athletes may be nursing injuries and a few other bits and bobs, and I just felt completely burnt out, and I raised it with my line manager at the time, who was unsympathetic. Even though I'm a person that doesn't raise issues often, when I raise an issue, I expect to be listened to. But my line manager was quite dismissive and kind of went, 'well, you'll just have to get on with this'... I felt like I wasn't being listened to, and I think that was what probably what got me more than the workload; it was the feeling that I didn't have support from somebody who I thought I could go to and say, 'let's sit down and have a conversation about this'.

This example highlights how physiotherapists continually turned to their sportsnet for support after experiencing turning points (e.g., end of a cycle, burnout) and that their sportsnet reinforced the performance narrative (e.g., "you'll just have to get on with this"). This echoes Nixon's (1992) sentiments that leaders within the sportsnet will rationalise behaviours and expectations considered beneficial for organisational leaders rather than the individual (i.e., staff or employee). The support from managers (e.g., "We all work long hours. I've been there and I just got on with it") illustrates

how leaders themselves are constrained by organisational rules and behaviours that have been instilled in them, which limits the availability of alternative sense-making that they can choose from within elite sport settings. Over time as physiotherapists experienced inappropriate support for their needs, they made sense of similar turning points in the future by reflecting on past situations. For instance, physiotherapists were more reluctant to ask for support in the future as they assumed their sportsnet would not meet their expectations of the support they needed. Temporality within sense-making processes has long been a debate in organisational sense-making literature with Weick (1995) framing sense-making as a retrospective process. However, Wiebe (2010) in his examination of organisational change concluded that conceptualising sense-making as a retrospective process neglects the present (where sense-making takes place). However, this study showed that sense-making was an ongoing process that is temporally indivisible and as such engages with all three dimensions of temporality (i.e., past, present, future) with an interplay between retrospective and prospective sense-making.

### **5.3.3.2 Making sense through resisting the performance narrative**

This sub-category explains how over time the reliance on a single dominant narrative to make sense of their turning points became an issue for some physiotherapists whose experiences no longer aligned with the performance narrative. Resisting the performance narrative, was an action that physiotherapists took which presented itself as changes in behaviour and going against the dominant culture of elite sport (e.g., putting their happiness above working in sport, maintaining personal relationships which were equal or more important than work, more to life than helping athletes win medals, and no longer wanting to be at the beck and call of athletes and coaches). By resisting the performance narrative, physiotherapists also showed that

they had agency in their choices (e.g., what would make me happy, what is best for my family). Resisting can have different meanings for different people however in this study there were three specific ways that physiotherapists resisted the performance narrative: choosing to leave their job and the organisation, making the environment work for them (e.g., changes to working hours, changing to another sport), and challenging the system.

Through their own experiences and witnessing what happened to other physiotherapists and colleagues in the elite sport organisation, participants reported that there was a lack of appropriate support, care, and action from individuals in the sport organisation when physiotherapists were struggling with their turning points and unable to overcome them. This left them feeling like they were not valued by their team and the wider sport organisation, and the allure of working in sport began to fade. Realising that the environment and culture were not right for the physiotherapist and their lives, they started questioning the sense-making within the performance narrative which led to participants wanting change (i.e., resisting). This was illustrated by Juliet:

After going through two Olympic cycles and seeing the carnage that happens after the Olympics where funding gets reassessed, do you still have your job? Do your colleagues still have their jobs? Do the athletes still have money? But after seeing what it's all about and going through that cycle twice, it just makes you realise there's more to life than Olympic gold, and it is just a job... That's the thing I learned when you begin, you feel like the sport, the athletes, and the coaches really care about you and are invested in you being a part of the team. But now you're just a cog, and that cog is replaceable. ... I barely saw my husband during the summer because of training camps and competitions and that was terrible, it really affected our relationship. It was dreadful, absolutely

dreadful, because I hadn't seen him for weeks and he was like a stranger, and it was lonely. So, I said to myself "I'm not letting [sport] ruin my marriage it's just not worth it". So, it's interesting, [sport] isn't my 'be all and end all'.

Being 'cogs in a system' has dehumanising connotations, where individuals' capacity to actively engage with their sense-making was compromised (Foucault, 1995; Weick, 1995). Due to the precarious nature of elite sport, physiotherapists learned over time that organisational personnel cared more about performances than the well-being of physiotherapists. They learned that they were expendable to the sport organisation, which Juliet likens to being a "cog", something essential to an organisation's functioning but easily taken out and replaced if it stops 'working'. This led physiotherapists to evaluate their lives and prioritise relationships outside of sport and believe that there was 'more to life than Olympic gold'. Due to this sense-making, physiotherapists began to view their work as a 'job' as opposed to a 'career' where they could progress, or a 'calling' where their work was worth sacrificing other areas of life and personal relationships (Bellah et al., 1985).

By resisting the cultural demands of elite sports environments, physiotherapists became active agents in their sense-making and subsequent decision-making. As Lewis stated, "everything has a tolerance, and once you reach the limit, you will have to make a decision. That's an invisible glass ceiling of how willingly you accept that 'thing' that goes against or challenges your beliefs, values, or morals." The process of reaching one's limit was illustrated in the following excerpt in which Lilly describes reaching the point where she did not want to be 'consumed' by working in sport:

I've been in sport a long time, it's what I've always done, and it was *all-consuming*. I spent Monday to Thursday basically living in a Premier Inn

around the country... When your marriage breaks up, you re-evaluate your life, and I knew I was already done with sport, and I wanted my own life. It's very difficult in sport to have your life alongside it... I think that's what working in sport is, but because of that, I think you do have a shelf life, or I then think you then get the people that are married to their job, and they've become so ingrained in it. I also think that's not healthy. There has to be a happy medium, but at the end of the day, that's what working in sport is, those are the demands, and if that's what you want to do, then part of it is maybe accepting that's what it is...but then it gets the point that as I say, I wanted a 'normal' life and wanting a 'normal' life became a bigger *priority* for me than working in sport and I knew I needed to leave.

To make sense of their turning points, physiotherapists would make social comparisons to other physiotherapists (more, less, similar experience level) which helped participants construct a potential vision for the future within the organisation (e.g., 'they've become so ingrained in it') and whether that is what they wanted (e.g., "married to their job"). Additionally, physiotherapists would also make comparisons and interact with individuals outside of sport (e.g., friends, family) who provided them with sense-giving regarding life away from their sport career. Thus, physiotherapists were able to gain different and alternative viewpoints about ways of life, expanding the opportunities available to them when making their decision (i.e., turnover outcome). This echoes previous research from Brown and colleagues (2019) who outlined the crucial role family and friends play in providing support to athletes transitioning out of sport by helping athletes find other work opportunities, career assistance, and emotional support. Yet extends our understanding by demonstrating

that physiotherapists seek support from non-sporting sources when there is limited availability and quality support from their sportsnet and sports organisations.

For some physiotherapists, resisting meant making changes to their working hours to achieve a work-life balance that was manageable whilst they developed or maintained other areas of their lives. Physiotherapists described how they made the environment work for them by being clear about what they wanted and looking for roles or jobs that would work for them. As Casey expressed, “The hours I had done in the past, that’s a big reason why I’m working part-time now, it’s the right thing for me personally... I don’t want to be away all the time.” Any changes to working hours were a bottom-up process, the onus was on the individual to explain how changes would benefit the sport, solutions for barriers that could arise, and a clear strategy moving forwards. As Danielle explained when she illustrated the lengths it took to negotiate a change in her job (e.g., travel requirements) that was mutually beneficial for her, her family, and the sport:

I’ve done two cycles, and it just got to a point where I just thought enough is enough, and I needed to make a change for my family...I think I had to sit down and understand what I wanted and be clear on that and then look at potential solutions to how it could be addressed within the sport. So, my main factor was that I wanted to reduce travel... Once I’d made that decision, I had to then try and make it work, or I would have left the sport. That was the best way of doing it. So, when I went to the PD [Performance Director] with the conversation, which was obviously difficult... I’d done all the financials, and I got all the potential solutions so that he could go away and reflect and make a decision around how that might work... But I had a plan in the background,



a backup plan, but I was prepared to leave the sport. You have to be clear [on what you need] because it doesn't always work.

This example illustrated a shift of power away from the performance narrative and emphasised the physiotherapist's sense of agency in their sense-making processes. Having gained their stripes (e.g., "I've done two cycles") physiotherapists were motivated to make a change due to their life circumstances (e.g., "I needed to make a change for my family"). Thus, making sense of their turning point moved away from a singular focus of the performance narrative towards other narrative types within elite sport such as relational and discovery (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006) or more to me (Everard et al., 2021). Physiotherapists in this group had an awareness that if appropriate changes did not materialise, they were prepared to leave which showed they were willing to play 'the system' to survive and flourish within elite sport. Larner et al's (2017) questioned whether the relationship between turnover intentions and actual turnover might be stronger in individuals with greater perceived behavioural control and self-efficacy. Thus, the findings extend our previous understanding by highlighting physiotherapists with greater self-efficacy have an increase in confidence in their ability to exert control over their own behaviour and social environment, therefore if they continued to experience disruptions, they would choose to leave the organisation.

For other physiotherapists, resisting meant staying within the system but advocating for support and change that would help physiotherapists do their role to the best of their ability (e.g., more staff, better well-being support, restricting what athletes could ask of them) whilst experiencing turning points (e.g., relationship breakdowns, poor mental health). However, challenging the status quo and resisting characteristics of the performance narrative from within the environment were viewed

negatively by individuals who reinforced the dominant cultural values. Thus, those who challenged the system were seen as a ‘problem’ and their sense-making and actions were used against them. Steph described her experience of being seen as a ‘problem’ resulting in breakdowns of relationships within sport:

I can recall one incident where one athlete just wanted a rub basically and I said ‘look, I’m not going to do soft tissue stuff, this is not how I operate, this is what I’ve been told’. The [athlete] wasn’t very pleased about it, so they went behind my back to our head of performance, who was out for lunch with their partner and texting this athlete under the table and I got some cryptic message from them a bit later saying, “if this athlete wants treatment will you just treat him”. The situation they created was that I was doing something wrong and that they were doing what made the athlete happy and I ended up getting completely sold down the river...I raised that incident when I got home, and my line manager was aware, and he basically told me to have a conversation with the head of performance... I was vocal in saying there was an increase demand that was put on the physio service and that I needed support in terms of staff numbers or restricting what the athletes could or couldn’t ask of me... I felt that I was labelled as a “problem” and so that’s how I was perceived and how I was treated in a lot of scenarios that were negative which impacted on my mental health.

Steph’s example demonstrates the consequences of challenging the culture and the loss of social capital (e.g., lack of cohesion, breakdown in communication, labelling, presentation of self to others) whilst trying to make small changes to working conditions to help physiotherapists before they experience disruptions caused by turning points. The loss of social capital had consequences for physiotherapists in

different ways. Firstly, the lack of social support left individuals to become ostracized and alienated and feeling as though he or she was not cared for or valued, leading to a decrease in a sense of belonging. Secondly, a loss of social capital resulted in physiotherapists' ideas for meaningful collective action to be perceived as negative or a "problem" and thus unlikely to result in tangible change to policies and practices. Physiotherapists recognised through their sense-making processes and the reaction of others, that they had limited control over their environment. Thus, individuals were both active agents and passive recipients within their environment.

### **5.3.3.3 Making sense through playing the part of the performance narrative**

This final sub-category explains how physiotherapists who were reluctant to overtly resist the performance narrative consciously played the part by publicly enacting what was expected of them within elite sport settings whilst privately maintaining a multidimensional life outside of sport. In this study, playing the part was a deliberate decision that participants made when experiencing turning points to survive (and thrive) in elite sport environments and they displayed diverse ways to manage the performance culture. For some physiotherapists, playing the part meant creating separation between their personal and professional lives, in a bid to perform as expected in elite sport and maintain their lives outside of sport. Other physiotherapists displayed emotional labour (Grandey et al., 2013), where practitioners adapted their behaviour to 'perform' in a way that was deemed more appropriate in elite sport environments, irrespective of the consequences it had on their lives. Finally, some physiotherapists played the part by displaying commitment to the 'team' whilst simultaneously forward planning if they were forced to leave their job or the sport organisation.

Some physiotherapists described how they became socialised into playing the part as they gained experience in elite sport and realised that living the performance narrative left little time for other areas of their lives, as Tony reports, “When I was single and young, [sport and work] just becomes your life but actually probably one of my biggest learning curves I’ve had is to separate life at home from life at work otherwise, it just takes over”. Thus, physiotherapists reported shifting towards this sense-making process once they started experiencing turning points (e.g., relationships, marriage) and when they were more experienced and established in the organisation. For physiotherapists who developed this understanding, it appeared to be prompted by an awareness of what was expected of them in elite sport as well as within their personal relationships. Thus, physiotherapists would present a version of themselves intended to manage or influence the responses of others (Goffman, 1959b).

As Pat reports:

I suppose it is doing my role. That’s what I’m there for it’s my job. I’m proud to be there so it’s making sure that I’m in a position to give my best to support the athlete and the performance team. So, for me that’s important that I do my duty if you like when I’m [at work] because I can’t do my other duty which is of course be a father and be a husband. When I’m on the shop floor then my priority is with the health and well-being of the athletes. When I’m home I can put the work away and it gives me a clear head to really just enjoy being dad and spending time with friends and family.

Creating separation between personal and professional lives within elite sport was a way of managing the performance culture and prioritising other individuals (e.g., athletes, coaches, spouse, children) based on the environments that physiotherapists found themselves in. Yet, this separation between their career and

personal lives was not always possible when physiotherapists experienced turning points in relation to their jobs (e.g., clashes with colleagues, career stagnation) and playing the part caused tensions within and outside of elite settings. For example, some physiotherapists described how playing the part in elite settings early on in their career had negative consequences on their mental health, as they would have to act the part in front of athletes, coaches, and their colleagues, even when they were experiencing negative effects of turning points (e.g., breakdown of relationships). Participants who ‘performed’ as expected within the performance narrative reported feeling unhappy, frustrated, and demotivated, leading to detrimental outcomes (e.g., burnout, depression, “dark days”, feeling trapped). As Steph reported:

The clashes with the coaches and staff members, the lack of well-being support, and the lack of clarity on what the role of the physio was – was very challenging. My mental health was really suffering... There were times when I would just want to shut myself away, and I’d be teary, and I’d try not to be emotional and show that when I was outside, it took all my energy to put on a happy work face and do my job for the athletes and the staff... When I was away, I would just sit and be miserable and not have the energy to do anything and even if there was an opportunity to exercise, it got to the point where I probably wouldn’t have had the energy to go, and it probably would have put me in a worse place.

This excerpt reflects on the mental tug-of-war that playing the part creates for physiotherapists sense-making when they are unable to overcome their turning points by adapting their behaviour to suit what is expected in the performance narrative. Steph’s sentiment “to put on a happy work face”, reflected Grandey and Gabriel’s (2015) three-part conceptualisation of emotional labour (i.e., emotion requirements,

emotion regulation, emotion performance). When making sense of their turning points within elite settings, participants inferred that they had to regulate their emotions. That is, concerted effort given by the employee to meet the socioemotional demands of the job by modifying their feelings or expressions within elite sport. Thus, playing the part required physiotherapists to partake in surface acting (Gabriel et al., 2015), where employees simulated the desired emotional expressions by suppressing, faking, and amplifying emotions within a particular situation. In this study, emotions were understood to be a part of the sense-making process, from influencing if sense-making occurs, how individuals interact with their emotions, to the emotions physiotherapists experienced persisting through the sense-making process if there was a continuation of disruption and confusion.

Physiotherapists who played the part were aware of how precarious and uncertain the environment was and planned for possible turning points (e.g., funding cuts, lack of career progression). Knowing when and how to walk away if turning points were to occur but still portraying how committed they were to the athlete, coaches, and the elite sport organisation was an important lesson that physiotherapists gradually learned. They learned this through their own experiences of turning points, as well as observations and interactions with other physiotherapists and sports colleagues within elite settings. Physiotherapists who had experienced forced turning points (e.g., funding cuts, health diagnosis for a family member) described feeling blindsided, shocked, and devastated by turning points when they were occurring and not knowing how they would cope. Physiotherapists who played the part reported that if they experienced a forced turning point and they had to walk away from sport, they knew that they could do it. One physiotherapist described the importance of privately

planning for uncertainty and unforeseen circumstances during turning points, as Tony reported:

I think having that continuous ‘what if’ planning done is important. I think a lot of people don’t involve and engage themselves in that, and that then means that when the rug gets pulled, they’re then scrambling to think ‘what they would do,’ and that’s how I create an anchor point for me. It’s going well; I know if the money or rug gets pulled next week, I will go into private practice, or I’d look at doing some locum work, and that’s how I would support my family, and that makes it easier for me to know I can cope with it. Then you have those that have stayed in unhappy jobs as well and not knowing when to walk away. Yeah, very important problem that you create if you invest everything in just this world. It’s going to hurt you. You’ve got to know that there’s other opportunities out there because if this is your only world [that] you’ve got, it’s going to spit you out the other side (in a negative way) because you haven’t invested time and effort into other things.

The example above highlights that the participants felt it imperative to have a safety net from the ‘dangers’ of the precariousness of elite sport (e.g., “when the rug gets pulled”, “it’s going to hurt you”, “it’s going to spit you out”). This excerpt illustrates prospective sense-making processes in ‘what if’ planning, which shows that although physiotherapists are committed to their jobs they are covertly planning for eventualities if they had to leave the sport organisation. Forward planning privately allowed the physiotherapists to perform or act in the way that is expected (i.e., commitment to their role, working hard for the team and organisation). However, by not relegating areas of their lives and not investing everything in sport, physiotherapists who play the part were able to survive and thrive in professional sport

cultures as well as avoiding certain negative implications from performing or acting the part. By learning and enacting how to play the part physiotherapists inferred that they could have longevity in their sport careers and maintain relationships with their colleagues as well as explore other identities. Thus, if they were to experience turning points they would be better prepared to cope with and manage their turning points and make decisions that were best for themselves and their families.

#### **5.3.4 Sense-made and lessons learned**

Facilitated by the processes of sense-making, participants reported two distinct outcomes: *restored sense and action* and *no restored sense and action*. The participants described that alongside their decision to stay or leave their sport and organisation, they experienced an increase or decrease in health and well-being outcomes which reinforced whether they thought they made the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ decision. Over time, participants evaluated the sense-made of their turning points, considering to what extent, it restored a sense of coherence in their lives. **Thus, once participants decide to stay or leave, they then gather more information within their environment and if the disruption or confusion caused by their turning points is not satisfactorily restored (i.e., no restored sense and action), this will lead to individuals experiencing another turning point and further iterations of their sense-making processes.** Outlining the lessons learned within this category allowed for the illustration of the iterative and continuous process of sense-making and sense-made over time across physiotherapists’ lives and careers.

The first outcome, *restored sense and action*, described participants’ decision to stay or leave the organisation, which was accompanied by positive health and well-being outcomes that indicated to the participants, a restored sense of coherence in their lives. Participants described feeling happy, a sense of clarity and resolution, better



quality of life, increased self-confidence, increased autonomy in decision-making with respect to their lives, regained a sense of purpose and direction, and increased self-awareness. Participants who experienced this outcome described how their positive responses to their decisions to stay or leave helped them to understand the sense-made was 'right' or 'appropriate' for them at that moment in time (e.g., "it was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders"). Steph illustrated this when describing the moments after she handed in her notice:

I wasn't the best version of myself anymore. I was a depressed, miserable, and anxious person. When I handed in my notice, and I knew I was leaving, a couple of the athletes commented that "I was just so much more confident and happier since I told them that I was leaving". So, I think having that light at the end of the tunnel, of getting out, and wanting my life back... I think, you know, people start to get worried when I'd burst into tears in front of [the head of medicine] in the middle of a meeting. I think it says a lot when, when I told my head of performance that I was leaving, he was like, 'I'm sad, but I'm not surprised with everything that you've had to put up with the last few months.' They clearly knew that there was a problem, and they've done nothing about it, and it's been going on for ages.

As Steph's example demonstrates, the act of handing in one's notice provided a resolution to her turning point experiences which facilitated positive well-being (e.g., sense of direction and purpose). Moreover, sense-givers reactions reinforced Steph's decision because others in the system (e.g., athletes, staff members) saw changes in her behaviour (e.g., more confidence) and recognised the challenges that she has faced in elite settings. These findings echoed previous research from Weick (1995) who outlined that sense-made is based on 'plausible' accounts, that provide a sense of

coherence and “makes sense” of what they had experienced. That is, the participant’s sense-making was strengthened because of their reaction to their decision and others acknowledging that leaving was ‘plausible’ given what had occurred.

Additionally, participants who did leave the organisation could reflect across jobs (i.e., inside and outside the organisation) to further evaluate their sense-made. Participants described positive outcomes such as increased financial capital, fewer travel demands, more varied experiences (e.g., managerial, working in different environments with different injuries), a better quality of life, ability to prioritise what they thought was important in their lives. Participants who continued to experience positive outcomes because of their sense-made expressed how that reinforced their sense-making processes, as Juliet reflected:

I didn't realise how demanding having a child in school would be, the hours you would need to drop off or pick up, achievement assemblies, Nativity plays, all the holidays they have, that I wouldn't have been able to have. I didn't fully appreciate how much I would have missed if I'd stayed in [sport]. So that's been a real plus that I've been able to free myself up to spend more time with him and my family, which has been brilliant. That's probably been like the best thing about [leaving], and I wouldn't change that for the world.

Furthermore, participants who decided to stay but did not explicitly communicate their sense-making and turnover intentions within elite sport settings reported that their sense-made had a positive impact on their relationships both inside and outside of sport. By not publicly sharing their sense-making and sense-made with members of the sport environment, participants continued to have positive relationships within elite sport settings and demonstrated their continued commitment to the athletes, coaches, and the organisation. Participants also expressed that they

could maintain positive relationships outside of sport (e.g., with partner, spouse, family members) as they could make sense of turning points with significant others and come to an agreement about the sense-made. As Alex explained:

The time away certainly puts strain on a relationship. My other half wants to have kids but doesn't want to have kids while I'm doing all this travel because I'm not around to help, so it's delaying us from having a family... We are in the process of buying a house as well, so that is settling down roots...but the other thing I think there's a bit of rush [for my partner] to have children...and what I don't want is for us to have a family and my partner feels they missed out on an opportunity or regrets having children early, we have those conversations. Is there a right time to have kids? No, but when we are in our own house, we've got it all set up, and then we'll try... The other factor in not leaving is because I've made a commitment through to Tokyo...so it's stability in instability. I think it was a conscious decision knowing that there is an end to it, and it's not permanent.

Participants who made sense of their turning points privately were aware that their decision to stay was temporary and could be re-evaluated if another significant turning point were to occur. Thus, the process of sense-making was continual and iterative, with participants expressing that over time they had to understand to what extent, the restored sense was still appropriate and right for them.

The second outcome, *no restored sense or action*, was expressed by another group of participants, who described how their decision to stay, or leave was accompanied by negative health and well-being outcomes. For example, some participants in this group believed they had nowhere else to go and described how they felt trapped into staying. As Isaac reflected: "With my life commitments, I felt stuck.

So, certain commitments made me realise that it's not as easy as packing up and leaving and going somewhere else... it did get frustrating at times.” As a result, their sense-making led to no restored sense as they were left frustrated as they still did not feel a sense of coherence in their lives and their turning point had not been resolved. Furthermore, physiotherapists who suggested that they felt trapped expressed that they felt a lack of direction in their lives, lack of autonomy in their decision-making, and negative feelings (e.g., anger, frustration, unhappiness).

Participants who reluctantly left the organisation due to forced turning points (e.g., personal tragedy, organisational restructuring, or funding cuts) and did not find another job in elite sport, expressed how they struggled to assimilate or accept a new identity as they still had a strong attachment to their previous identity (i.e., being a sports physiotherapist). As Alice voiced, “Similar to athletes, as physios, we have an identity around being a sports physio... your identity is tied up in what you do, and I think that's where it can get difficult.” This identity struggle led to feelings of inauthenticity, which Charley described when reflecting on his sense-made:

There weren't opportunities available in the [organisation] and the one that did become available was outside [of sport] ...I stepped out of [the organisation] and thought, go, and do that to see if you enjoy it. You don't jump from competitions, and you can be at home more. So, I did that for 18 months, but to be honest with you, I wasn't too happy with work outside of sport, and it made me realise that I missed sport too much and the excitement and the challenge of working with athletes on a proactive basis...I think sometimes you don't always realise what you've got until you go.

When decisions were made outside of the control of the participants, they were forced to embrace new opportunities even if they did not want to leave. For participants who

experienced identity foreclosure (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017), that is they were committed to an exclusive sport physiotherapist identity, they reported experiencing difficulties and failing to adequately adapt to alternative career options. Participants expressed that the unceremonious loss of their sport physiotherapist identity coupled with the lure of sport was too intense to ignore.

Moreover, participants who experienced poor health and well-being outcomes over a prolonged period because of their sense-making processes were hurtled into experiencing another turning point as they struggled to understand the non-sense and further disruptions that ensued. As Ashley reflected:

My mental health had a big impact when I moved to my next job, which also wasn't ideal. So, I left [my last sport], and I'd hoped to go back to the club where I played all my life and work with the academy and senior team. There were a few people and incidents there that were going on before I arrived that created more problems and going into that, I wasn't in a great place [mentally], so, I almost wasn't strong enough to deal with what was coming.

Participants who had experienced poor mental health and well-being for a long time before leaving realised that the action of leaving was a buffer and respite to their struggles. However, they still had not made sense of the person they had become because of their turning points and the elite sport environments that they were immersed in. A large portion of studies that have reviewed sense-making processes and outcomes have focused on restored sense whereas only a handful have explored the outcome of non-sense or no restored action (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

Exploring various outcomes of sense-making processes, this study extends our understanding by illustrating how sense-making is an iterative and continual process, where individuals are constantly engaging with their environment as they make sense

of their experiences. This knowledge is important for individuals and organisations to understand because previous turnover scholars (e.g., Hom et al., 2012) had viewed turnover intentions and decision-making as distinct episodes that are overcome and moved on from once a decision was made. However, the findings extend previous research by highlighting the temporal and continuous aspects of sense-making by highlighting the ongoing process. This has implications for members of organisations and how they provide ongoing support for physiotherapists experiencing turning points.

Before concluding this chapter, it is important to address that I examined 17 physiotherapists who were currently working for the elite sport organisation over the course of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic cycle. Following the culmination of the Games cycle and at the time of writing this PhD thesis, 11 participants (65%) had left the organisation, 5 participants (29%) were still working for the organisation, and 1 (6%) participant's employment status is unknown. This overview illustrates just how salient the issue of turnover and retention of physiotherapists is within the organisation.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to develop a grounded theory that explains the complex relationship between experiencing turning points and turnover or retention outcomes in an elite sport organisation. The theory produced (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*) makes a significant contribution to research by identifying the individual, relational, and cultural processes contributing to making sense of turning point experiences (i.e., making sense through living, resisting, and playing the part of the performance narrative) that impact on turnover or retention outcomes.

The theory postulates that physiotherapists who experience turning points and make sense through living the performance narrative are more likely to want to stay within the organisation. This is because physiotherapists who embody the performance narrative are likely to be forward-focused and look ahead to what could be achieved in sport irrespective of the mental health and well-being consequences. These physiotherapists also struggled when they experienced forced turning points and had to leave the organisation, as they have a strong attachment to their elite sport physiotherapist identity. Moreover, sense-givers within sport are more likely to influence a physiotherapist's sense-making when they identify with the performance narrative. This is because participants typically turned inward for support from their sportsnet, who reinforced cultural behaviours and expectations considered beneficial for the organisation.

Whereas the physiotherapists who make sense through resisting the performance narrative had a greater degree of personal agency in their decision-making. The physiotherapists in this group were more likely to leave if they thought the job and organisation no longer was sustainable and suitable for their lives. They were also more likely to try and make the environment work for them by challenging the ways of being in elite contexts or by finding roles that suited their lives rather than adapting to what the sport organisation needed. The third way physiotherapists made sense of their turning points was by playing the part of the performance narrative. Physiotherapists in this group were likely to have turnover intentions but continued to play the part to appear committed to the team whilst simultaneously forward planning if they were to leave the organisation.

This chapter extends our understanding in several important ways. Firstly, the theory proposes the core concept, *turning points*, to create a more unified, identifiable,

and context-specific conceptualization of factors that lead to physiotherapists considering turnover within elite sport organisations. Moreover, this theory extends previous organisational stress research by examining the relationship between turning points and gradual and long-term impacts of ongoing disruption at both the individual (e.g., ill-being and mental illness) and organisational level (e.g., turnover intentions, actual turnover).

Secondly, there is a substantial body of research about sense-making in the field of organisational psychology where studies have shown how different populations (e.g., emergency health care providers, firefighters, film crews) make sense of crises or sudden disasters, within highly pressurised environments (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Bechky, 2006; Christianson & Sutcliffe, 2009). However, the context of elite sport within sense-making literature has received no attention, which is strange considering elite sport environments have been characterised as highly pressurised, volatile, uncertain, and complex (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Thus, the findings in this chapter have extended previous organisational psychology research by examining physiotherapists' sense-making processes within elite sport contexts. This offers novel insights into how individuals within elite sport organisations collectively make sense of turning points in their lives.

Thirdly, these findings have pushed the sense-making literature forward by distinguishing and highlighting the relationship between individual, relational, and cultural sense-making processes within elite sport contexts. Within organisational psychology, there has remained a debate about whether sense-making is an individual or social process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Some scholars framed sense-making as a cognitive process whereby individuals make sense of stimuli by comparing them to existing frameworks, schemata, and mental models which then guide one's



appraisals and interpretations (Elsbach et al., 2005; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Whereas Maitlis (2005) described sense-making as a “fundamentally social process” (p. 21), where individuals interpret and explain their environment cues through interactions with other members of the organisation. However, this theory has highlighted how sense-making is both individual and social. That is people have agency in how they shape and act on social interactions and the cultural environment, but individuals’ sense-making is also influenced by interactions with others, and narratives that circulate within elite sport culture and wider society. Thus, by adapting Carless and Douglas’ (2013) framework, this chapter provides vivid insights into the ways participants made sense of their turning points, and the extent to which the performance narrative became integral to the physiotherapist’s sense-making within elite sport environments.

Fourthly, this theory also extends sense-making literature by explaining the role of temporality in how people made and remade sense of their experiences. Previously, Weick (1995) stated that a core characteristic of sense-making was that it was “retrospective”, and the prospective aspect was largely ignored. Moreover, scholars were also divided on if sense-making was a process that was continuous or episodic (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Therefore, this theory extends our understanding by highlighting how participants drew on all three dimensions of temporality (i.e., past, present, and future) when making sense of their turning points. Furthermore, this theory illustrates the continual, ongoing process of sense-making by examining how a participant’s sense is made and remade over time and highlighting the impacts of sense-making when participants experience ongoing disruption.

Finally, the theory produced is novel and can be used to inform future research avenues and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Indeed, there currently is a

dearth of research examining staff turnover within elite sport organisations across sport psychology literature, as researchers have largely focused on athlete retirement and career transitions. Thus, the theory can inform new directions of enquiry in many different areas of sport psychology research in the quest to better understand, explain, and support physiotherapists working in elite sport organisations (see chapter seven for future research avenues).

### **5.5 Summary**

In this chapter, I have developed a theory that explains how physiotherapists make sense of their turning points in elite sport environments, leading to turnover or retention outcomes (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*). The core categories that were identified in this theory were: 1) *socio-cultural context*, 2) *experiencing turning points*, 3) *sense-making*, 4) *sense-made and lessons learned*. There is currently a dearth of research within sport psychology literature about physiotherapists' turnover and retention outcomes, thus the use of grounded theory in this chapter builds our understanding of the factors leading to physiotherapists deciding to stay or leave elite sport organisations. This chapter also offers insights into relational and cultural practices that can impact physiotherapists' sense-making processes; thus, this theory illustrates how the socio-cultural context of elite sport can impact an individual's turnover or retention outcomes. Moreover, considering retention of physiotherapists is a salient issue given that turnover can have many negative effects on sport organisations (e.g., loss of knowledge, trouble finding the right replacement, training another person, new physiotherapists quickly need to build relationships with members of the sport, athletes, and coaches). These findings can help sport organisations retain physiotherapists who have become valued members of the sport organisation by identifying practitioners who might be on the verge of

turnover and providing them with the support that they need before it is too late. The next chapter will focus on recommendations and strategies to support physiotherapists working in elite sport environments and promote a duty of care within sport organisations.

## **Chapter 6**

### **A Duty of Care for Physiotherapists Working in Elite Sport**

## 6.0 Overview

In 2019, Chris Wagstaff critically reviewed the literature in the field of organisational sport psychology and concluded that “...sport organizations, professional societies and regulatory bodies, and education and training providers are currently failing in their duty of care to individuals in sport” (p. 142). This synthesis has been further supported by recent researchers who have illustrated how the mental health and well-being of support staff members was negatively impacted by working in elite sport contexts (Hill et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2023). Despite organisational sport psychology scholars stating there is a need for greater duty of care for individuals working in sport beyond the athlete (Wagstaff, 2019), published articles do not include organisational interventions and policies that could be implemented to support the mental health and well-being of *all* members of elite sport organisations. For example, given the broad scope of the duty of care report (Grey-Thompson, 2017), it is difficult to extrapolate information in relation to the duty of care for specific participants (e.g., physiotherapists) as many of the recommendations focus primarily on supporting the welfare of the athlete. While evidence-based recommendations are starting to surface for certain populations (e.g., coaches, athletes, parents; Burgess et al., 2016; Didymus, 2017; Grey-Thompson, 2017), there are currently no guidelines for physiotherapists working in elite sport. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is original and timely in that it aims to provide duty of care recommendations that are grounded in the lived experiences and recommendations of sport physiotherapists. Following an RTA (see chapter three), findings are discussed across five themes: 1) person first, physio second; 2) stronger together; 3) aligning policy with practice; 4) sustainability; and 5) more collaboration and communication. Within each theme, the challenges of duty of care are

accompanied by recommendations (e.g., strategies, practical implications), which are supported by the physiotherapists' own voices and contemporary empirical research.

## **6.1 Introduction**

In 2017, an independent report on issues surrounding the “Duty of Care” that sport organisations have towards their participants (e.g., athletes, coaches, employees, volunteers) was requested by the Minister of Sport from the Department of Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport in the United Kingdom. Grey-Thompson (2017) described the current challenges posed to individuals in elite sport as well as recommendations that should be implemented and monitored throughout National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) across seven key themes. Firstly, “education” reflects how young sportspeople can be supported to help them balance education with their sporting activities. Secondly, “transition” looked at the support sportspeople receive as they transition through sport including entering and leaving elite sport systems. Thirdly, “representation of the participant’s voice” considered the views and experiences of sportspeople in the decision-making that impacts them in elite sport. Fourthly, “equality, diversity, and inclusion” reflects on diversity concerns, including participating within sport across the world. The fifth theme, “safeguarding” identified the protection needs of people participating in sport across all levels of sport (e.g., elite, professional, community) and what more could be done by sporting bodies. The penultimate theme, “mental welfare” considered the issues related to sportspeople’s mental health and well-being, including preventative action, or identification and management of problems that may arise. Finally, the seventh theme, “safety, injury, and medical issues” reflected on sporting injuries including support around underlying medical conditions, injury prevention, and short and long-term rehabilitation. Perhaps of most interest, was that the report challenged common practices in sport, in

particular, the importance placed on winning medals rather than the welfare of individuals within elite environments. Moreover, the report was critical of the climate of high-performance sport stating that the success of sport relies on “putting people – their safety, well-being and welfare – at the centre of what sport does” (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 5). However, Prior and colleagues (2022) critiqued recent government agency reports, including the Duty of Care Report, stating that although reports do include mental health and well-being considerations at the policy level, they do not provide contemporary research to support their recommendations.

Since the report was published, the term ‘duty of care’ has been increasingly adopted within the sporting world and organisational sport psychology literature in a bid to develop and maintain a healthy culture and promote the well-being of individuals within elite sport environments (Kavanagh et al., 2021; Wagstaff, 2019). Whereas Grey-Thompson (2017) adopted a broad definition of duty of care which encompassed everything from “personal safety and injury, to mental health issues, to the support given to people at the elite level” (p. 4). Meanwhile, definitions of duty of care have varied across disciplines (e.g., nursing, teaching, healthcare professionals), with important distinctions being made between moral, ethical, and legal obligations that individuals and organisations have towards another person (Kavanagh et al., 2021). Firstly, from a legal perspective, duty of care is often linked with contractual obligations, professional regulations, and not upholding a legal standard of care resulting in gross negligence and negative outcomes (Gordon, 2016). Secondly, the concept of ethical caring (Noddings, 2002), requires conscious effort on behalf of an individual to care for another person. Indeed, Noddings (2010) stated that “caring, in every approach, involves attention, empathetic response, and a commitment to respond to legitimate needs” (p. 28). Therefore, ethical caring refers to the relational

element of duty of care, thus the interactions between individuals, or with the organisation itself is a key characteristic. Finally, from a moral standpoint, duty of care is linked to the obligation placed upon an individual (e.g., physiotherapist, manager) to understand their role in the prevention of harmful outcomes as well as to ensure the safety and well-being of their clients or employees (Kavanagh et al., 2021). Thus, a moral duty of care means that a sporting organisation and individuals working across the system need to take reasonable actions to ensure an individual's safety (e.g., physically, or psychologically) whilst they are participating or working in elite sport organisations (Kavanagh et al., 2021; Wagstaff 2019).

Elite sport organisations have been characterised as complex, turbulent, and volatile social systems (Wagstaff, 2017) and individuals who work within them often experience chaotic and precarious environments (Gilmore et al., 2018). **To promote duty of care in elite sport environments, researchers must consider the mental health and well-being of all the individuals involved in sport (Grey-Thompson, 2017).** The World Health Organization has defined mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community” (2022, para. 2). In contrast, well-being can broadly be understood as one's perception of happiness and “how satisfied people are with their life as a whole, their sense of purpose, and how in control they feel” (Mental Health Foundation, 2015, para. 1). To expand, within sport psychology literature researchers examining well-being have often considered two philosophical traditions, hedonic and eudaimonic, which are distinct, yet related constructs (Lundqvist, 2011). The hedonic perspective is associated with subjective well-being which encompasses an individual's happiness with their lives and the experience of positive and negative effects (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In contrast, from the eudaimonic



viewpoint, well-being is linked to the meaningfulness of one's life and realising one's inherent potential; this position is associated with psychological and social well-being (Lundqvist, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Ryff (1989) theorised that psychological well-being is comprised of six core constructs. The first construct is self-acceptance, and it is defined as holding positive attitudes towards oneself. Second is positive relations with others, which emphasises the importance of warm, trusting interpersonal relationships. The third construct is autonomy, which comprises of qualities such as self-determination, independence, and internal behaviour regulation. Fourth is environmental mastery, which is the ability for individuals to create or choose environments that are suitable for their needs. Fifth is purpose in life, which consists of goals, intentions, and a sense of direction that contributes to a meaningful life. The sixth construct is personal growth, which includes the continued development of one's potential whilst achieving the previous five constructs.

Shifting from the personal to the social, Keyes (1998) defined social well-being as an individual's social functioning and perceived flourishing in one's social life. Social well-being consists of five core dimensions. The first dimension is social integration which is the evaluation of the quality of one's relationship to the communities and societies they are a part of and belong to. Second is social acceptance, which is demonstrated by positive attitudes towards others. The third dimension is social contribution, which is one's belief that their contribution to society is both valuable and valued. The fourth dimension is social actualisation, is the positive attitude towards society's potential and development. Finally, the fifth dimension is social coherence, and it is operationalised as the perception that the social world is interesting, logical, and predictable. Thus, three distinct constructs of well-

being (subjective, psychological, and social) and mental health will be considered to promote duty of care for physiotherapists in elite sport within this research.

In recent years, scholars have started to explore the mental health and well-being impact of working in elite sport environments across different population groups beyond the athlete. For example, Hill and colleagues (2021) examined the factors perceived to affect the well-being and mental health of various employees within a national sporting organisation. Using individual interviews and focus groups, 11 participants were recruited: three coaches, a performance director, and seven sport science practitioners (e.g., strength and conditioning coach, sport psychologist, physiotherapist, nutritionist, performance analyst, performance lifestyle advisor, and performance liaison advisor). They identified excessive workload, post-competitive loss, and a feeling of isolation as main risk factors which could lead to a decrease in well-being and poor mental health. Key protective factors to maintain or improve well-being and mental health outcomes were access to quality social support, transformational leadership, and an effective organisational culture. **This suggests that recommendations that strengthen outlined protective factors that maintain and improve mental health and well-being could promote duty of care for staff members in elite sport organisations.**

In 2022, Pilkington and colleagues surveyed 78 coaches and 174 high-performance support staff working across Australia's high-performance sports system and examined the prevalence and correlates of mental health symptoms in their sample compared to published elite athlete samples. They found that 1 in 3 of the participants (coaches, 34.6%; support staff, 34.4%) reported that they had at some stage sought treatment for mental health problems or psychological issues. Moreover, approximately 40% of coaches and support staff reported experiencing mental health

symptoms that would warrant professional treatment, which was higher than what was observed in comparable elite athlete samples (35%). They also found that key factors in preventing mental ill health for elite coaches and support staff were satisfaction with life balance and social support. Thus, they recommended that those key factors should be strengthened, especially during the season when there is an increase in workload and pressure (e.g., leading up to major competitions). However, it is unclear whether the recommendations are aimed at the individual level or whether the organisation should assist in increasing work-life balance and strengthening social support networks for their staff members. Nonetheless, taken together, these findings give insight into the mental health and well-being concerns of coaches and support staff working in sport, indicating a critical need for a duty of care recommendations to support them.

However, when researchers explore mental health and well-being experiences across various population groups, nuanced experiences for specific sub-groups can be overlooked. To illustrate this point, sport psychology scholars have examined organisational stressors within specific subgroups which revealed the multifaceted relationship between organisational contexts and individual experiences within elite sport environments (Wagstaff, 2019). For example, researchers have identified several organisational stressors that can significantly impact on an athlete's well-being and performance (Fletcher et al., 2012; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Fletcher and colleagues interviewed 12 sport performers (6 elite, 6 non-elite) and identified 339 distinct organisational stressors (e.g., training and competition load, role conflict, position insecurity, coaching and/or management styles, media attention). Moreover, over the last 15 years, there has also been research conducted to give voice to other individuals who operate within elite sport contexts and their experiences of

organisational stressors. Turning to stressors experienced by coaches, researchers continue to examine the unique pressures that coaches experience within elite sport environments (e.g., Didymus, 2017; Olusoga et al., 2009; Thelwell et al., 2008). For example, Didymus (2017) interviewed 15 Olympic or international-level coaches and found that they experienced several stressors across 10 themes (e.g., athlete concern, coaching responsibility, expectations, finance, governance, interference, organisational management, performance, preparation, selection).

Scholars have also investigated beyond the coach-athlete dyad and examined the stressors experienced by others who operate within elite sport context such as sport psychologists. For example, Fletcher and colleagues (2012) interviewed 12 accredited sport psychologists (6 academics, 6 practitioners) and stressors were identified over five dimensions: factors intrinsic to sport psychology, roles in the organization, sport relationships and interpersonal demands, career and performance development issues, and organizational structure and climate of the profession. For practitioners working in elite sport, their most frequently cited stressors were related to, workload and hours, consultancy, career advancement, and evaluation of the workplace. In contrast, those who worked in academia frequently cited workload and hours, income and funding, teaching, and research. Thus, illustrating how sport psychologists can experience unique pressures due to working within different environments. Furthermore, researchers have also explored the stress experienced by parents of athletes. For instance, Burgess et al., (2016) interviewed seven parents of elite youth gymnasts and stressors were categorised across three themes: organisational (e.g., personal sacrifices, other gymnastics parents, finances), competitive (e.g., children's anxiety, parental anxiety watching their child perform), and developmental (e.g., managing children's potential to progress in sport with educational demands).

Although these studies have contributed to moving the organisational stress research forward, specific stressors experienced by physiotherapists have been neglected in the literature. In addition, if physiotherapists were recruited as participants, they were grouped with other sport medicine and sport scientists (e.g., Arnold et al., 2017), which made it difficult to extrapolate data for specific populations and understand the unique pressures that particular subgroups experience given their specific role within elite sport. To address this knowledge gap, Kerai et al., (2019) interviewed 10 sport physiotherapists and explored the organisational stressors they experienced. Five overarching themes were identified: I am not a machine (e.g., “working 24/7”, “working beyond contractual hours”, “too much work”), this is sport (e.g., “ruthless pursuit of success”, “sport comes first”, “play through injury”), relationships are messy (e.g., conflicts with coaches and athletes, conflicts within multidisciplinary team), under the microscope (e.g., making the “right” decision under intense external pressures), beyond one’s remit (e.g., moral and ethical conflicts of working in elite sport as health care professionals and employees of a sport organisation).

Collectively, the findings within organisational stress research illustrate that elite sport environments are stressful for athletes, coaches, sport psychologists, parents of athletes, and sport physiotherapists. **Moreover, the stressors experienced and the increased attention on the mental health and well-being of *all* individuals involved in sport (e.g., coach, support staff) is recognised to be a critical driver in the promotion of duty of care in elite settings (Grey-Thompson, 2017). Indeed, the idea of a duty of care was put forward as a solution to the challenges faced by elite sport personnel (Kavanagh et al., 2021; Kerai et al., 2019). Moreover, each subgroup experienced a wide variety of similar and unique stressors given their specified roles,**

responsibilities, and expectations, highlighting the importance of researching specific populations when considering duty of care recommendations. Furthermore, if these stress experiences are not properly managed, they can have an adverse effect on one's own mental health and well-being, as well as others (e.g., athletes, coaches) within elite sport organisations that they assist (Kerai et al., 2019). To build upon these preliminary studies to inform policy and practice within sport organisations, additional exploration is needed. For example, the use of cross-sectional data (e.g., surveys) does not allow for considerations around fluctuations in mental health and well-being outcomes across different time points in a competitive season (e.g., leading up to and during competitions) and between or within an Olympic or Paralympic cycle. Therefore, longitudinal studies where researchers immerse themselves within a sport organisation for a prolonged period of time, can enhance understanding and nuances of specific population groups that work within that context over time. Moreover, Wagstaff (2019) advocated for researchers and sports psychologists to support sport organisations in their understanding of the importance of monitoring and managing the climate and culture of their sport environments. In addition to educating and guiding organisations on the relationship between organisational culture and climate and potential detrimental outcomes (e.g., burnout, turnover, identity foreclosure, lack of commitment or engagement, poor well-being, decrease in performance).

Building on chapter five, which made sense of physiotherapists' retention and turnover outcomes, the aim of this chapter is to provide recommendations for improving duty of care for physiotherapists working in elite sport to reduce staff turnover. The rationale for this chapter is fivefold. Firstly, upon disseminating preliminary chapter findings to key stakeholders within the elite sport organisation where this research took place (see chapter three), I was asked to highlight key

recommendations to support physiotherapists who are working “on the ground”. Secondly, although there has been previous literature about the need for duty of care of all individuals in elite sport environments, specific insight into physiotherapists’ experiences of working in elite sport settings has been ignored. Thirdly, elite sport organisations have been observed to impact on the mental health and well-being of support staff (Hill et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022). Therefore, it is critical that we understand and are aware of the nuanced duty of care needs for physiotherapists so that their mental health and well-being are not compromised. Fourthly, considering the relational element of duty of care (Noddings, 2010), it is important to understand physiotherapists’ lived experiences of working in elite sport and the support they receive, to identify whether specific practices impact on their mental health and well-being. Finally, by understanding physiotherapists’ experiences “in the field” over time, we can raise sport organisations, governing bodies, and government agency’s awareness of current policies and practices which are providing insufficient duty of care, and changes which can be mutually beneficial to both physiotherapists and sport organisations. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to contribute to the literature surrounding duty of care in elite sport by highlighting novel insights into physiotherapists’ experiences of support provided within elite environments. In addition, this chapter will provide recommendations supported by physiotherapists’ own voices and empirical research. Specifically, the aims are: (a) to understand the challenges experienced by physiotherapists related to duty of care within elite sport environments; and (b) to outline recommendations (i.e., strategies, practical implications) for promoting a duty of care for physiotherapists in elite sport which are supported by participants’ own voices and contemporary research.

## 6.2 Summary of methods used

To collect data on physiotherapists' experiences of the challenges and impacts of working in elite sport and applied recommendations to support elite sport physiotherapists, a semi-structured interview was chosen. The rationale for using this method to collect data was that it would provide the participants with the freedom to discuss their experiences, while also ensuring areas of interest pertinent to the study were discussed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). An interview guide was developed, and participants were asked broad, open-ended questions in addition to elaboration or clarification probes such as "can you tell me more?" to ensure understanding (see chapter three for full detail). In total 25 participants took part in this study (17 physiotherapists currently working for the elite sport organisation, 6 physiotherapists who had left the organisation, and 2 stakeholders). The interviews ranged from 48 to 105 minutes (average = 67.72 minutes) and took place alongside data collection for the grounded theory study presented in the previous chapter. Thus, physiotherapists currently working for the organisation were asked about applied recommendations during the third round of interviews, and those theoretically sampled (i.e., past employees and stakeholders) were asked within their one-off interviews about changes they would like to make to support elite sport physiotherapists. The interview data pertaining to challenges and applied recommendations were analysed using an RTA (further discussion into why this analytical method was chosen and a step-by-step process can be found in chapter three).

## 6.3 Results

Five main themes were identified that described the challenges physiotherapists experienced relating to duty of care and recommendations to better support them in elite sport. The first theme, *person first, physio second*, reflects sport



physiotherapists' own struggles with maintaining their mental health and well-being and challenges around engaging with self-care strategies. The second theme, *stronger together*, reflects the relational conflicts which emerged due to inadequate support from physiotherapists' social networks within their sport organisation. The third theme, *aligning policy with practice*, represents the working practices within sport which impact on physiotherapists' health and well-being. The fourth theme, *sustainability*, considers physiotherapists' roles and identities beyond sport. The final theme, *more collaboration and communication*, concerns the gap between internal and external organisational policies and knowledge and what physiotherapists are experiencing on the ground level. Within each theme, challenges to duty of care (i.e., environmental demands) and recommendations (e.g., strategies, applied implications) are represented together to provide more compelling insights into participants' experiences and how contemporary research can be utilized to support physiotherapists working in elite sport (see **Table 6.3.** for a summary of the recommendations).

### **6.3.1 Person first, physio second**

This theme reflects the challenges that physiotherapists encountered when trying to maintain their own mental health and well-being and how they learned and developed strategies to manage themselves over time. The participants described how work-related demands (e.g., long hours, trips abroad, unsocial hours) coupled with experiencing negative outcomes (e.g., burnout, exhaustion, fatigue) posed a significant challenge to their health and well-being. The participants recalled various situations when they would travel abroad for competitions and return emotionally, mentally, and physically drained. Due to the demand for physiotherapy services, participants reported often having no "me time", especially during busy periods of the

competitive season. The participants were expected to manage athletes' rehabilitation, whether there were any new significant strains or injuries post-competition, reach out to athletes who were already seeking treatment, as well as planning ahead for international competitions. Consequently, participants described not having the energy to engage with maintaining their own well-being, as Lisa reflected:

You do feel emotionally and physically drained, to the point you may not even want to see anyone else or do anything when you get home. You just want to sleep. It's almost like you've been through something traumatic. But people in the real world don't understand it, they just think you're working with athletes, travelling to different countries, enjoying yourself, and it can cause some friction at home. If you've got multiple trips away in a row, especially during competition season, by the end of the season you could be in a really bad place, if you're not careful.

Participants expressed the importance of physiotherapists developing a "toolkit" of personal strategies that can provide ways of coping with the pressures of working in elite sport and assist in maintaining their well-being. As Isaac conveyed, "You have to have your own strategies to manage yourself. For me, it's important that I have a workout in the morning, this sets me up for the day ahead physically and mentally." Other strategies that participants described which enabled them to practice self-care included: meditation (e.g., focused attention, walking), horse-riding, quality sleep, use of emotional and instrumental social support (e.g., quality time with loved ones, socialising with friends and family, venting of emotions), mental disengagement (e.g., "to be a better practitioner you need to allow yourself the time for a break away from the environment, to do something non-sport related that's just about you and feeling good"), suppression of competing activities (e.g., setting boundaries between

your personal and professional lives, “if something is going on in my personal life I park that when I am at work and pick it up later and vice versa”), and acceptance (e.g., “I accept that I might not always have the time while working in elite sport to engage with activities that are good for well-being”). To expand on the last strategy, all the participants spoke about being at the beck and call of their sport and needing to be available if an injury happens. However, over time they learned how to prioritise and say, “no” to less important tasks to protect their private time, as Lewis described:

For me working in elite sport is not a job, it's a lifestyle. I don't have set hours, if someone calls me on a Saturday and it's important, I need to pick up the phone. It is acceptance, it's not ideal but it is what it is. You do have to protect yourself; you need to be comfortable and confident in managing yourself appropriately and take opportunities to look after yourself physically and mentally. My health is a priority and I have to make sure I'm not putting myself into a hole. I have learnt over time to keep up my training; I'm more productive and my brain works better. If I've committed time to my family, my wife, my friends and if someone else [work-related] wants me to do something which is not urgent you have to stick to your guns and say, “no, I'm not working”, but it's easier said than done for most practitioners, especially younger ones.

This example demonstrates that instead of being proactive, self-care strategies appeared to be reactive so that practitioners would not end up “in a hole” again. Therefore, participants have learned the hard way, that they will experience burnout if they do not look after their own mental health and well-being. Thus, physiotherapists appear to have caught rather than been taught self-care behaviours. That is, rather than someone teaching them various strategies, first they have experienced stress or struggled, then because of this had to learn what works for them and develop these

practices over time. Furthermore, senior practitioners reported that they learnt over time that looking after their well-being meant they would be more productive and better at their job. With participants describing the positive impact of self-care strategies and activities on their professional lives (e.g., more productive, better rested, feeling fulfilled, enjoyment and job satisfaction, and more effective with clients). Furthermore, learning to carve out time for themselves also had an impact on their personal lives (e.g., maintaining long-term relationships, managing various roles and identities, ability to socialise with friends and family).

Over time as participants' circumstances changed based on a variety of personal factors (e.g., age, socio-economic status, relationship status, family dynamics, employment status, sport they work in) and so did their self-care practices. That is, what works now, might not work later, so participants need a breadth of strategies rather than relying on a few practices. Furthermore, participants with multiple roles and identities across professional and personal domains often struggled to find time for themselves and prioritise their needs, as Alice reflected:

When you're a mum, you've got a husband in the military, and you're working in sport... that I'm at the bottom of that pile. Actually, I think from the personality that I am, as well as the job that I do, that I always put others above myself. I realised over time that to successfully do a good job at work, be a good mum, have a relationship that is mainly working well, that I need to make time for me. I guess I've tried to be a bit more selfish, although I'm not naturally a selfish person. I just try and make sure that I do carve out that time and whether it's five or 10 minutes of meditation, or I've booked a weekend away to see my best friend or my sisters.

Although healthcare providers routinely promote self-care strategies to their patients, many struggle to practice personal self-care. This finding aligns with research conducted with other healthcare professions such as counselling, whereby counsellors struggled to direct compassion inward and create a space for a kind, authentic response to the challenges they encountered in their jobs, which puts them at an increased risk of burning out (Coaston, 2017). Furthermore, engaging in self-care is arguably ethically imperative (Norcross & VandenBos, 2018), given ethical codes of conducts for many health professionals include the need to maintain awareness of personal problems that may interfere with adequately performing work-related duties. For example, the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017) guides psychologists to be aware "of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work" (p. 3). Thus, deliberate effort guided by self-compassion and intentional engagement with self-care practices was required to make one's health and well-being a priority and to ensure performance is not impacted.

Collectively, these findings extend self-care literature within elite sport by showing that self-care strategies (e.g., exercising, meditation, horse riding, quality sleep, emotional and instrumental social support, mental disengagement, suppression of competing activities, acceptance), are needed to manage the stress associated with physiotherapists' role. Moreover, these findings are also consistent with recent self-care research with neophyte and senior sport psychologists working in elite sport. Where practitioners illustrated that self-care is a skill that is refined over time and is also a dynamic process, that requires flexibility from practitioners to navigate the unpredictable and precarious nature of elite sport (Martin et al., 2022; Quartiroli et al., 2019; Quartiroli et al., 2022). Therefore, another recommendation would be for

managers, mentors, or sport psychologists, to proactively teach physiotherapists about the importance of developing and maintaining a ‘toolkit’ of self-care strategies from the outset of their careers (e.g., during university training, when physiotherapists start working in sport, during continual professional development courses). Indeed, while self-care is important at the intrapersonal level, participants reported that they had to learn over time to develop and engage with self-care practices and were not taught by others within their organisation. Thus, rather than promoting a neoliberal health role (Smith & Perrier, 2014), which calls on the individual to be solely responsible for their own health and well-being, organisations can be proactive and teach physiotherapists about the importance of having individualised self-care strategies based on their personal circumstances and what works for them. Furthermore, organisational members can give insight into how different strategies can be useful in multiple settings whilst others are context-specific (e.g., what they use at home, what they use when they are travelling, what they use at the Games).

### **6.3.2 Stronger together**

This theme reflects the inadequate social support from organisational personnel (e.g., physiotherapists, managers, leadership personnel, staff members) towards physiotherapists resulting in poor mental health and well-being outcomes. Additionally, this theme considers how others within and outside the elite sport network can work together to promote the duty of care for physiotherapists. Participants described how they needed to foster and maintain relationships with athletes, coaches, other support staff (e.g., other physiotherapists, strength and conditioning coaches, sport psychologists, doctors), and the leadership team (e.g., performance directors, operations managers, heads of performance services). The interpersonal challenges identified to hinder relationships and negatively impact on

the physiotherapist's duty of care were inadequate social support (e.g., emotional, informational, tangible) from their formal support networks within the organisation, lack of interpersonal skills within dyads (e.g., care, compassion, empathy, compatibility, conflict resolution), and leadership and coaching behaviours (e.g., communication styles, misalignment of values). For example, past experiences of negative attitudes from peers and staff members in response to mental health or well-being challenges were identified as barriers to seeking help within elite sport environments. Although there has been increased awareness around reducing stigma and having open discussions about athletes' mental health and well-being, participants expressed that the stigma experienced by physiotherapists who discuss their own mental health and well-being journeys in the sport environment has not been addressed, as Steph reflected:

I don't think the [organisation] were fully aware of the mental health stuff [I was experiencing] because I think there's still a stigma about mental health being discussed at work. So, I wasn't as open with them...My line manager knew certain little bits, but I almost wish I hadn't told them because I felt that they then used that over me. I wish that there was more done to remove the stigma of discussing mental health and there were clearer routes of support and people that I could have had discussions with a bit more openly. I think it says a lot when I told [someone in a leadership role] that I was leaving they said, 'I'm sad, but I'm not surprised with everything that you've had to put up with in the last few months.' So, they clearly knew that there was a problem going on and they've not done anything about it, and it's been going on for ages. People could tell that I wasn't happy and that I was struggling, but I didn't feel that there was any kind of specific support. It was kind of like there's a helpline

here and you can access it. But when you're feeling like I was, you don't really know how to go and help yourself you need to be supported in getting there.

This example highlights the important role that others within the organisation (e.g., managers, other physiotherapists, support staff) play in providing mental health and well-being support within elite sport systems. Participants recommended that peers, managers, and leaders should take obligatory mental health first aid training courses, which could lead to more effective support and care for physiotherapists in relation to their own mental health and well-being (Poucher et al., 2021). If individuals in positions of leadership or management can learn to spot the warning signs that a physiotherapist is struggling with their well-being or mental health (e.g., being quieter than usual, spotting uncharacteristic emotional reactions to certain situations). Leaders might be able to provide social support (e.g., emotional, instrumental) which can proactively prevent physiotherapists from reaching crisis points and leaving the organisation because of poor mental health or a decrease in well-being and help to reduce the stigma surrounding talking about mental health within elite environments.

As Steph's example demonstrates, organisational members (e.g., other physiotherapists, managers, leaders) who are ill-equipped to support staff can consequently lead physiotherapists to experience feelings of isolation, helplessness, and lack of support. Drawing upon physiotherapists' own voices, another recommendation would be to cultivate employees who are compassionate (Tietsort et al., 2023). Within compassion literature, Atkins and Parker (2012) have theorised that compassion has four key components: attending (e.g., paying attention to, and noticing when others are suffering), understanding (e.g., appraising what is causing others' distress, through dialogue or observation), empathising (e.g., having a shared understanding of how others are feeling), and helping (e.g., taking appropriate, well-



considered action to lessen others' suffering or assist them with more effective coping strategies). Through informal support exchanges, strategies such as buddy systems where organisational members (e.g., fellow physiotherapists, support staff) can check in with one another regularly. Thus, compassionate staff can help to alleviate the suffering experienced by fellow employees leading to a variety of positive relational and organisational outcomes. From a relational perspective, compassion can foster a sense of connection with others, make individuals feel cared for, as well as provide a sense of personal satisfaction for helping another. At the organisational level, experiencing compassion from organisational personnel can lead to a greater sense of commitment to the organisation, increased collaboration and supportive exchanges, and employees are likely to pay it forward (i.e., greater motivation to help others in the environment). However, an important consideration in any support exchange is the recognition that exchanges can be negative, especially if both individuals are experiencing similar situations (Wadey & Day, 2018). Indeed, organisations need to be mindful that individuals in support roles (e.g., leadership and management) can also experience strain and distressing situations which they also need support to be able to cope and manage those moments.

Some participants reported that they felt uncomfortable speaking to someone they worked with about mental health and well-being concerns due to what they had previously experienced, witnessed, or heard about that happened in the environment. Subsequently, this led to a breakdown of trust within professional relationships, which as Alex states is a barrier to seeking help within the organisation:

It's personal and it's uncomfortable for me to share things anyway. I can speak for myself, if I had a mental health issue, I would find people that I can speak to, but I don't want them to be someone at work. If I don't trust someone, I'm

not going to talk to them. I want to speak to someone external to work about it. I play my cards close to my chest, I play my part [in the environment] and if I do need to speak to someone, it would be my partner.

As this example illustrates once trust within a relationship is broken participants will not disclose personal information to those individuals within sport. Although Alex reported that he would speak to his partner if he had any concerns. Participants expressed that people outside of their elite sport “bubble” did not understand the sport environment, and therefore they found it difficult to contextualise their problems with their friends and family. Thus, participants advocated for a pathway where they could speak to someone who could understand their context (i.e., working in elite sport), even if they did not work for the organisation, and have conversations that remained confidential. Therefore, participants who do seek help can be assured that their job or reputation will not be put in jeopardy if they were to openly discuss challenges that they are encountering, as Sarah reflected:

It's a service that's a bit more bespoke, we have a general service that's available for practitioners through [health insurance] but I think from an organisational standpoint, it would be really nice if we had somebody assigned to a site, whose role was to check-in or you're able to book in to chat with. I think having it more widely spoken about and definitely more widely available... because I think what tends to happen, from my experience and what I've observed is that they only become available when it hits a crisis point. I think from a mental health point of view, from a wellness perspective, if there was a service that was available, I think people would definitely use it and I know I would for sure.

As Sarah's example demonstrates, another useful strategy is to have formal support exchange networks which physiotherapists could access either face-to-face or online. Physiotherapists can discuss the challenges and problems that they are facing with empathetic and compassionate individuals who can offer both emotional and instrumental social support. Hill and colleagues (2021) found that coaches and support staff's well-being and mental health were protected by having social support networks within the organisation who they could trust, confide in, and get advice from about difficult situations. As Tony reflected, "there's probably not enough talking therapies available in this space for physiotherapists going through the emotional aspects of their role and their life inside and outside the sport". One way of establishing a formal support network is by utilising sport psychology practitioners and performance lifestyle advisors who have developed organisational service delivery competencies. Indeed, Wagstaff (2019), proclaimed that sport psychologists are more than mental skills coaches and can offer their services to *all* members of the organisation due to their understanding of a variety of areas (e.g., stress management and self-care, emotion regulation strategies, understanding leadership and coaching behaviours, cultural and climatic awareness). Moreover, Rice and colleagues (2020) provided details of how other elite sport organisations could implement an initiative akin to the Mental Health Referral Network (Australian Institute of Sport), where athletes can access mental health and well-being support from psychologists, which has recently been rolled out to coaches and support staff. Furthermore, sport organisations can also draw inspiration from healthcare environments such as the NHS, where staff now have access to mental health and well-being hubs. These hubs provide clinical assessments and referrals to local evidence-based mental health services (e.g., talking therapies,

counselling) that offer support where needed, which is confidential and independent from the organisation.

Overall, the recommendations physiotherapists have advocated for in this theme are fourfold. The first strategy is implementing mental health first aid training courses for everyone in the environment from managers, leaders, support staff, coaches, to operational staff, so that they can spot warning signs, provide support, and guide physiotherapists to referral pathways. This echoes research findings in trauma-informed care literature which suggests that everyone in the environment should be knowledgeable about trauma-informed care practices which in turn creates psychologically safe, healing ecosystems for all organisational members (Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019). For example, organisations that support people in leadership positions in improving their mental health literacy can also raise people's awareness of the realities of stigma surrounding mental health within sport (Moore et al., 2022). The second recommendation was to train organisational members in compassion-focused support giving. This will create safe environments where physiotherapists feel as though they are cared for by members of the organisation and they feel comfortable disclosing mental health concerns. The third recommendation is to create a space for informal support exchanges between peers and colleagues so they check in with each other or have a buddy within the system who they trust that they can turn to for support. The final recommendation was establishing support exchange networks which physiotherapists could access across an Olympic and Paralympic cycle, where they can speak with someone confidentially either online or face-to-face across various locations, who can provide social support (e.g., emotional, instrumental) and if appropriate, referrals to local organisations for further support. This service can be provided by organisational sport psychologists who are key social agents for change

(Wagstaff, 2019) and performance lifestyle advisors. Due to physiotherapists often travelling for their role in some capacity, it is important that support is available virtually so that practitioners can access support during highly pressurised points of the cycle (e.g., during competitions or the Olympic or Paralympic Games). Moreover, certain services may be needed more than others at different time points in the season, for example, performance lifestyle support might be more needed at the end of a cycle when contract negotiations are happening for all practitioners.

### **6.3.3 Aligning policy with practice**

This theme encompasses participants' experiences of working in elite sport and support needed relating to working practices (e.g., not being able to take annual leave, lack of remuneration for weekend work, consistently working more hours than contracted, lack of recovery and rest time). For example, participants across all sports reported travelling for a large part of the year and spending much time away from their families, friends, and homes. One key source of tension that participants reported was not being able to take their entitled annual leave and their time off in lieu (TOIL) which had been accrued during trips abroad with the sport, which Tony describes as an ongoing issue that over time led to negative outcomes:

The biggest change is to stop lying about the TOIL (time off in lieu) and the annual leave debate. Members of the board tell us that there's no problems with people taking TOIL and annual leave but that doesn't reflect what's happening on the ground. So, either they don't know what's happening or they are lying about it. Practitioners can't take all their TOIL and annual leave and when you raise that at board level, they go, "Oh, we had this conversation, it's all sorted" but we're not seeing that. Then when staff flag it, they've been told, "I don't know why this is happening rather than actually acknowledging there's a

problem”. Then what practitioners do is they either agree with the sport and they lose their TOIL and annual leave, or they agree with the [organisation’s policy] and they get driven out of the sport for taking leave they are entitled to...nobody actually wants to deal with it. The people at the top are just ignoring it, and then people at the bottom are trying to make it work, so some grin and bear it or others just give up and make that decision to jump...

Participants reported that there was a discrepancy between what their sport organisation have in their policy, what the sport expects in terms of physiotherapy delivery, and what the practitioners are doing “on the ground”. For example, James spoke about his team’s schedule in the lead-up to the Games, “This August to the Games, we’ll get one week off for Christmas, that’s everybody (so staff), so almost 12 months, you’ll get one week off and the sports are “surprised” that staff burnout.” Indeed, during competition season, as their workload increased there was a greater need for recovery, however due to the constant back-to-back weeks of competition, it was challenging to find appropriate time to rest. Moreover, participants stated as their workload increased, they would take work home with them as it needed to be completed and they found it hard to switch off from work. This finding aligns with research within organisational psychology which has coined this the “recovery paradox” (Sonnentag, 2018). Whereby, individuals find it difficult to psychologically detach when work is too challenging, which reduces recovery attempts when rest is needed the most and can clash with self-care.

Strategies that participants suggested which have the potential to enforce some much-needed change for physiotherapists was educating others in the environment (e.g., leaders, managers, coaches, athletes) on the importance of staff well-being, how

staff well-being impacts on others in the environment and vice versa, and implementing rest and recovery days after trips away, as Steph advocated:

It's more around the sport and education to the coaches. You get scenarios where a physio might go away with the national team, where some of the athletes didn't travel and stayed behind. So, the physio flies long haul travel, and they expect them to go into work the following day after they've returned to pick up the athlete's they've left behind. They're knackered, need to rest, and the last thing they want to do is go back to work; but the coaching expectation is that they just get back and pick up where they left off because that coach wasn't on that trip. So, there's work around retention, looking after practitioners' well-being, and safeguarding around travel; to make sure that physiotherapists don't get burnt out. I think practitioners like to please, feel they can't say 'no', and they get swallowed up and just battle through which is to the detriment of their health.

Within sport psychology literature, rest is often conceptualised as a key component to athlete recovery, and it is often synonymous with physical inactivity following training or competitions (Eccles & Riley, 2014; Kellmann et al., 2018). Considering Steph's quotation, the findings resonate with the psychology of rest literature, where researchers have found that rest is critical for well-being and performance (Eccles et al., 2023; Eccles & Kazmier, 2019). For example, poorly rested coaches reported experiencing low energy, which subsequently led to problems with concentrating, thinking clearly, making mistakes, and low perceptions of effectiveness at work (Eccles et al., 2023). Poorly rested coaches also reported feeling emotionally and physically exhausted, thus they showed signs consistent with burnout syndrome (Eccles et al., 2023; Olusoga et al., 2019). To mentally rest, scholars have advocated

for wakeful resting. In 2023, Eccles and colleagues proposed wakeful resting experiences in coaches involved self-care practices that included breaks from thinking about work, breaks from effortful thinking generally, and engaging in life outside coaching. Coaches reported that when they were mentally rested, they felt “fresh” and had a “positive” outlook. Furthermore, coaches valued, appreciated, enjoyed, and felt motivated to engage in their work (Eccles et al., 2023). Therefore, sport organisations should promote the importance of rest and recovery coupled with leaders or managers within the team proactively asking physiotherapists to plan downtime or relaxing events during stressful and busy periods of the Games cycle, so physiotherapists can engage with physical (i.e., sleep) and psychological inactivity (i.e., wakeful resting). This strategy can promote an increase in psychological and subjective well-being (e.g., “it’s feeling valued and feeling like your employers care about you as a person”).

One barrier to implementing rest and recovery days for physiotherapists is the dominant culture within sport, characterized by the “performance narrative” (Douglas & Carless, 2015) and “sport ethic” (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) which place priority on relentless effort, resilience, and risk-taking behaviours to achieve performance. These cultural norms and values influence attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and behaviours of members of this sport organisation, which provides insight into why rest and recovery of physiotherapists might be undervalued at the organisational level. Participants reported that they did not speak about needing time off to rest and recover, especially in the lead-up to major competitions as they can be ostracized by their teammates for not being committed and fearful of their job security, which invariably means they are discouraged from taking days off, as Tony reported:

The biggest thing is that we [members of the organisation] don’t create a culture of fear, where people can’t miss a trip abroad, days in the gym, or do



something different or against the grain. Because they think they'll get ostracized for not being committed to the cause, get in trouble for not doing something a particular way, or it's your fault if the risk didn't pay off, which then implicitly means you have to do things one way...managers need to question staff, "do you need to be in at 7 o'clock and stay until 7 o'clock every night?" "Why have you not had annual leave?" That should be more than norm, we should be challenging the staff, instead of applauding them being in from 7am to 7pm all the time... We need physiotherapists to perform when they need to perform. Athletes aren't expected to produce PBs every single week, they're expected to produce PBs at the Games, and we're expected to build and sustain them to deliver that. For staff, you're expected to stay at the top and then find a way to raise it when it gets to the Games. Well as humans, we all know that human physiology doesn't like you to do that, so why would you expect it to happen, and we expect it from staff.

The quotation above resonated with research on psychological safety, which is defined as "a belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, such as asking for help, admitting one's errors, or seeking feedback from others" (Fransen et al., 2020, p. 2). It's a sense of confidence that physiotherapists' voices will be heard and valued, even if others disagree, which creates an environment of trust and mutual respect. However, when individuals feel they do not have psychological safety in their work environment, they can suppress how they are feeling and are reluctant to ask for help leading to deleterious consequences for performance and well-being (Eccles and Kazmier, 2019). Tony's example provides a recommendation for heads of departments and managers to challenge employees who regularly work long, unsocial hours, and do not take annual leave. This would change the high value attached to

working long hours and not taking time off, and it would transform the implicit assumption that you can only be successful in elite sport if you work long, unsociable hours and do not take time off. Moreover, talking more about the importance of rest within the environment can open conversations and challenge the dominant narrative.

Moreover, in addition to supporting the physiotherapists, more can be done within the organisation to understand and reduce the stressors or pressures that physiotherapists are experiencing within elite settings. Within sport contexts, secondary management interventions have typically been implemented which focus on the development of psychological resources (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2017). However, rather than just training organisational members to cope better, primary stress management interventions can be utilised to adapt the environment to reduce and eliminate the frequency, intensity, and duration of organisational stressors (Randall et al., 2019). One primary intervention is job redesign, where organisations change the content of work tasks, for example, by adjusting the amount, type, and intensity of cognitive, emotional, and physical workload (Parker, 2014). Organisational psychologists have evaluated primary stress management interventions by examining the changes to environmental conditions and the significant improvements that were self-reported were job satisfaction, better health, and performance increases (Holman & Axtell, 2016). Given the benefits of this type of intervention, this strategy can be implemented when individuals are in need of rest and recovery, whilst also promoting control over one's own schedule (Arnold et al., 2017).

In summary, the recommendations presented in this theme are firstly, educating members of sport organisation about the psychology of rest and the important role rest plays in staff well-being. Secondly, leaders need to reconsider the meaning of rest; not as being lazy or inactive, but critical to a physiotherapist's well-

being and performance whilst challenging staff who regularly work long, unsocial hours. Moreover, if leaders themselves are shown to take time off and show how important rest is to their health and well-being they can also act as role models to other staff members. This should create an organisational culture where practitioners can take time off without negative repercussions and in turn create psychologically safe environments. The third recommendation was implementing rest and recovery days after travel for physiotherapists across the organisation and widely promoted across all sports so that individuals in the elite sports environments are aware of the expectations surrounding physiotherapist and staff well-being. Fourth, the policy surrounding remunerating physiotherapists for extra days worked needs to be visibly supported by the HR team, managers, and leadership personnel. This will influence physiotherapists' assumptions that leadership teams throughout the organisation take rest and recovery, remuneration of hours worked, and staff well-being seriously. Finally, the implementation of primary stress management interventions (e.g., job redesign) which focuses on adapting the environment to reduce or eliminate organisational stressors.

#### **6.3.4 Sustainability**

This theme considers the challenges of role sustainability as physiotherapists look to develop their psychological well-being (e.g., career progression) and subjective well-being (e.g., happiness in life outside of sport) whilst working and living within a performance culture where sport is life (cf. Carless & Douglas, 2013). Participants described how working in elite sport has an impact on their personal lives, due to the expectation that physiotherapists have to be at the 'beck and call' of the athletes, coaches, and other sport personnel. Thus, there is an expectation from individuals in sport that whenever they want and need physiotherapy delivery,

physiotherapists will be there for them, regardless of what they have committed to in other areas of their lives. Physiotherapists expressed that as younger practitioners, they managed to be 'on-call' and adjusted to what the athletes and sport needed, because they had limited or no personal commitments (e.g., no long-term relationships, no children). However, over time participants questioned the sustainability of a role where they must relegate other areas of their lives to fulfil expectations, as Lewis expressed:

In this building, four of the senior physios are single and/or don't have children. So, is that a life choice? Is that an outcome of their work choice?... I'm in a relationship and I have a child...so is this job role sustainable for me long-term, probably not... What's ok and sustainable for one person might not be okay for another, so there's no specific criteria. But to make this role sustainable there needs to be more flexibility. So, it's that flexibility against rigidity. For me a sustainable role is one that develops you and rewards you for what you're doing in lots of different ways and accepts that circumstances and things change over time... Accepting differences and accepting that diversity is what makes us great, rather than trying to push everybody into fitting this very narrow model which isn't representative of wider society.

As Lewis' example highlights, role sustainability is an individualised concept rather than a one-size-fits-all philosophy, thus, what may be sustainable for someone might not be the same for another physiotherapist. Moreover, participants expressed that having individualised context-specific help with developing and maintaining a balanced life throughout all stages of the physiotherapist socialisation process (e.g., entering the system, during the games cycle, transitioning out of clinical delivery) would be beneficial for longevity in their sport careers. The needs that participants

reported to ensure they can practice role sustainability were having a balanced life (e.g., “it’s important to me to have my life away from sport”), learning and developing in their career beyond being a physiotherapist providing clinical delivery, and support from other individuals in sport (e.g., peers, mentors, leadership) to move beyond that narrow model of what a physiotherapist can do in elite sport.

A key recommendation that participants advocated for would be performance lifestyle support, which has the potential to lead to a sustainable long-term role in sport (e.g., creating diverse career opportunities in different areas of the organisation) or a positive transition out of sport (e.g., informational, and emotional social support when faced with redundancy due to loss of funding for sport, planning for life after sport). As Sam reports:

I think the [sport organisation] is great for a physio from the age of 25-35 to build your career. So, you've got somebody working within sport for 10 years, what does life after sport look like? Do they stay in sport? Does their role change? I think sometimes you just need that kind of help in terms of lifestyle support, not specifically mental health, just more of the practical, how do you go about the next stages of your life? You may have a group who do want to branch out into other areas and it's how you nurture them.

These findings are consistent with recent research into the sustainability of elite sport, where athletes reported that having a balanced life enabled them to cope with performance results and believed it would improve their overall health and well-being (Dohlsten et al., 2021). Thus, identifying physiotherapists who do want to move beyond clinical delivery or need support in leading a balanced life is imperative. A recent sustainability campaign with the athlete population such as, “More to Me” (English Institute of Sport, 2019), aims to help improve an athlete’s sport-life balance

and aids in planning for life after sport, using performance lifestyle advisors can provide a template for support for physiotherapists in elite sport. Moreover, recent research with injured athletes has highlighted how reducing stigma surrounding prioritising life outside of sport, can help individuals maintain well-being when experiencing disruptive or tumultuous times in elite environments (Everard et al., 2021).

Although there is also an increased cultural awareness and rising acceptance of athletes being more than sports people, this has not yet been extended to physiotherapists within elite settings. For example, there have recently been campaigns and guidance to support female athletes in their efforts to combine motherhood and sport (UK Sport, 2021). However, female participants expressed that they decided to delay having children whilst working in sport, so they could fulfil the expectations of their role. Another factor in the decision was that they did not know what their role would look like once they did have a family or if there would be a job for them when they came back from maternity leave. Female participants spoke in length about having to delay starting a family for four years or until the end of an Olympic or Paralympic cycle, which became a source of tension for participants, as there was not a clear pathway that they could follow that combined motherhood with working in elite sport, as Lauren expressed:

What's the pathway for female physios who do want to have children? What would their role look like? Would there be a role to come back to? It's a massive factor in my personal life of planning when I potentially start for a family because you don't know how long it could take and you don't want to leave it too late and I'm sure other female physios are in a similar position.

Considering the performance-orientated dominant cultural narrative within elite sport, pursuing significant changes in one's life which will take the sole focus away from sporting endeavours is unlikely to be advocated by individuals in sport that want regular competitive success (e.g., sport governing bodies, sport organisations, coaches, athletes, sponsors). Thus, alternative narratives (e.g., relational or discovery) are likely to be suppressed and not openly spoken about within the elite sport environment (Carless & Douglas, 2013). For example, during external reflections female physiotherapists who do have children and are currently working in elite sport, reported having private discussions with younger female practitioners who were seeking advice about motherhood and reported that there were very few role models that they could look to for support about starting a family. Thus, another recommendation would be, rather than conversations only happening behind closed doors, mentors and managers within the organisation should openly encourage conversations around starting a family, so physiotherapists are aware of the support and options available to them within the organisation. Therefore, providing physiotherapists with guided support, whereby they can develop their careers in different ways, which can also align with changes in their personal lives.

To summarise, the first key recommendation within this theme was to provide performance lifestyle support for physiotherapists. By rolling this initiative out to physiotherapists, it could reduce the negative connotations surrounding life outside of elite sport, provide pathways for support to manage significant changes in physiotherapists' lives, they can speak with someone independent from their team who can provide unbiased support without feeling as though their job could be in jeopardy, and attempt to reduce the emotional outcomes associated with the unpredictable nature of elite sport. Moreover, there is an opportunity to holistically understand the

physiotherapist's journey, to develop them in different ways, and to create a workforce that can grow in a multitude of areas within the organisation. This has implications for retaining physiotherapists and the knowledge they have acquired through their time in the system. Additionally, working in elite sport can have fewer unsustainable consequences (e.g., burnout, lack of career progression, identity foreclosure, negative turnover outcomes). The second recommendation was for physiotherapists to have open discussions about what working in elite sport would look like if they were to start a family. This will increase their awareness of role opportunities and options available throughout the organisation, additionally, physiotherapists will be better supported in combining parenthood and a career in elite sport.

### **6.3.5 More collaboration and communication**

This theme considers how the wider social contexts that physiotherapists learn (e.g., University courses) and operate within such as, national governing bodies (NGBs), government agencies (e.g., UK Sport), can help support physiotherapists working in elite sport. Participants recalled that during their undergraduate degrees when they initially expressed a desire to go into sport, they were told by their academic tutors and supervisors that sport was a small strain of physiotherapy, and they were deterred from focusing on it because it was highly competitive and difficult to find employment. Furthermore, participants reported that their degree courses gave them the technical knowledge to rehabilitate injuries, but it did not prepare them for the realities of working in sport (e.g., socio-cultural-organisational factors) and becoming embedded within a team. For example, when participants first entered elite sport environments, they had to quickly learn and adapt to the pre-existing culture and established ways of working. In addition, due to the ongoing relationship participants develop with the athletes in elite sport contexts, the psychological impacts of patient



injury that the physiotherapist can experience is different to other environments, as Alex described:

You feel like you have a responsibility to them, you're like a surrogate parent for them, you don't want your kids to get hurt. You are with them day in and day out and sometimes you do blame yourself, you think "why didn't I spot it or should I have spotted it". It is elite sport that makes you feel like this as you don't have the same sense of responsibility for someone in the NHS or private practice who is coming to you already injured.

Considering the above extract, these findings align with recent research within sport coaching literature, which has illustrated the interpersonal nature of injury and recognised that members of the injured athlete's network can be impacted by the injury event (Martinelli, Day, & Lowry, 2017). Furthermore, Martinelli and Day (2020) explored the relational quality of athlete injury by considering the guilt that coaches can feel when their athletes get injured. The findings align with previous injury literature which states that injury, rehabilitation, and recovery do not occur in a social vacuum (Brewer et al., 2002; Martinelli & Day, 2020). Although currently the psychological support after injury is exclusively reserved for the injured athlete, other agents within the athlete's network are impacted by athlete injury. This needs to be considered and understood by policymakers so that sport organisations can offer support beyond the athlete and prepare physiotherapists for the psychological impacts that injury to one of their athletes can have and provide them with coping mechanisms but also a safe space to speak about injury events.

Participants also advocated for stronger relationships between external bodies (e.g., UK Sport, NGBs) and their organisation, so that they could bridge the gap between organisations and work together to support physiotherapists during the most

crucial moments of the Games cycle. However, participants reported that they felt there was a significant gap between where they were “on the field” and the support that they could receive from outside of their organisation for issues pertaining to funding, employment status, and career development. As Isaac reported:

Better communication between practitioner, [sport organisation], the sports about what is realistic for everyone. More discussions need to happen before the games around what will happen after, so Sports and the [sport organisation] can pinpoint those that want to progress, that might be sitting on the fence, or those that will be leaving. I know sports will say ‘we can’t make or commit to decisions until after the games’, well that’s true but you can make temporary arrangements, for example, “it will depend on funding achieved...” But you can at least have those chats, so everyone is on the same page rather than avoiding conversations.

Due to the lack of communication between governing bodies, sport, and their sport organisation, a significant source of tension stemmed from clarity around funding allocations for sport and what that meant for the physiotherapist’s employment status and development at the end of a cycle. Participants expressed that the end of a Games cycle was a mixture of emotions, they described relief that the Games were over so that they could have a well-deserved break, in addition to feelings of uncertainty and worry about what will happen for the next cycle. Moreover, participants reported that due to the metaphorical gap between external bodies and where the physiotherapists sit in their organisational hierarchy, they did not know who they could speak with, and they felt as though they were left to deal with any issues and problems by themselves with the resources that they perceived were available to them. As Tony stated, “End of cycle everyone’s contracts are up, you don’t know if

you have a job, the management don't know, the coaches don't know, and nobody is looking out for you and everyone's looking out for themselves much more and jockeying for positions." Participants described feeling as though they were "stuck in limbo" and did not know where they could turn to for support, which impacted on their well-being, as they did not know who they could trust. The post-Games blues have been recognised as a period of the cycle where staff (e.g., coaches, physiotherapists) receive the least amount of support (DeWolfe & Dithurbide, 2022). This research extends previous findings by examining the separation between team members and the lack of trust that arises post Games.

Furthermore, the lack of physiotherapist representation at the board level within government agencies and NGB's was identified as a barrier to creating change and implementing a duty of care for practitioners within sport organisations. Specifically, the lack of representation led to physiotherapists feeling as though policies and practices were created which did not reflect what they were experiencing on a day-to-day basis and during highly pressurised parts of the season (i.e., during international competitions). Moreover, an increase in physiotherapist representation at the board level would help sport organisations to shape their policies, procedures, and codes of conduct by using physiotherapists' own experiences and voices of other colleagues to better promote duty of care to a wider community. As Pat reported:

The sports are accountable to the [sport organisation] based on funding, based on medal targets, and they have to produce specific reviews, document check-in points, that dictate athlete health and performance. Physiotherapists' well-being should be included within that. The sport has to demonstrate that they have a certain amount of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) driven around athlete health and mental well-being. Okay, well how many KPIs currently do

they have around a physiotherapist's well-being, a physiotherapist's leave, how the physiotherapists work? None. There's still a gap in real understanding from higher levels as to what frontline people do, you know, really understanding what a day in the life of a physio is like: the hours, the expectations, the relationships, the pressures, the travel. What that does to people, how it impacts health and well-being. Is it just about medals or is it about the people?

The example above highlights how physiotherapists' mental health and well-being are not a priority for the sports that they worked within, even though their sport organisation outlined that *care* was a key value that underpins their brand ethos. As Pat suggested, one way to address this is to broaden the existing funding criteria to include physiotherapist well-being. This finding resonates with amendments to funding criteria in Canada, which stated that funding could be withheld from sports or sport organisations that do not demonstrate their commitment to fostering safe sport environments (Government of Canada, 2019). Therefore, existing criteria can be modified to include a requirement that sport, and sport organisations implement a duty of care for physiotherapists to maintain their funding. Another recommendation is to continue giving a platform for physiotherapists to share their experiences through research programmes. The knowledge gained through research is invaluable for board members, so they can develop an understanding of the lived, nuanced, and diverse experiences of physiotherapists across different elite sport contexts (e.g., summer or winter sports, Paralympic or Olympic).

This theme encompassed the areas where participants felt that duty of care was lacking, and the recommendations across different bodies and organisations. The first key recommendation from an academic perspective was for this research to be

embedded into the curriculum to proactively teach students about the realities of working in elite sport. Secondly, students and early-career physiotherapists should receive ongoing psychological support to help them develop coping mechanisms for dealing with athlete injuries. Thirdly, physiotherapists called for better collaboration between themselves, their organisation, the sport, and external bodies (UK Sport, NGBs) to support physiotherapists in planning for after the Games. To foster better collaboration, the fourth recommendation is for external bodies to have physiotherapist representation at the board level. It would be valuable to get their unique insight on decision-making and issues facing the profession in diverse elite sport contexts. The fifth recommendation is for funding bodies to include physiotherapist well-being as a key performance indicator, for sports to maintain their funding. This will hold members of the sport accountable for maintaining safe environments for the physiotherapists, and in turn, this will prioritise the importance of physiotherapists' well-being. The sixth recommendation is to continue giving physiotherapists a voice through research programmes to allow them to share their lived experiences. The knowledge gained by giving practitioners this platform will continue to help organisations to better support physiotherapists' duty of care.

**Table 6.3:** Summary of duty of care recommendations for physiotherapists in elite sports.

<b>Recommendations</b>
<b>Person first, physio second</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop individualised self-care practices overtime that work for them and add or change strategies as their circumstances change.</li> <li>• To support and provide guidance about the importance of self-care within elite settings and developing their own “toolkit”.</li> <li>• To teach students and physiotherapists about self-care during university training and when practitioners first enter the organisation.</li> </ul>

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### **Stronger together**

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- To provide staff members (e.g., managers, leaders, physiotherapists, other support staff) with mental first aid training.
- To provide employees with compassion-focused training.
- To establish informal support exchange network, for example, a buddy system.
- To establish a formal support exchange network, where practitioners can access confidential support from sport psychologists or performance lifestyle advisors and referrals for extra support from mental health professionals.

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### **Aligning policy with practice**

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- To challenge staff behaviours of regularly working long, unsocial hours and not taking annual leave.
- To support and promote their own rest and recovery policy within the organisation and across sports.
- Educating organisational members on the importance and critical need for physiotherapists to rest and recover.
- To implement policy around rest and recovery days after travel for physiotherapists.
- To implement primary stress management interventions (e.g., job redesign) to reduce or eliminate stressors and pressures on the physiotherapists.

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### **Sustainability**

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- To provide performance lifestyle advisors for support staff.
- To provide advice combining parenthood and working in elite sport and for physiotherapists to speak with openly.

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### **More collaboration and communication**

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- To embed this research into the curriculum so students learn about the realities of working in elite sport
  - To provide support around the psychological impacts of injury which is currently given to the athlete.
  - Better collaboration between the physiotherapists, their organisation, the sport, and external bodies to support forward planning for after the Games.
  - To implement physiotherapist representation at board level to provide contextualised knowledge to help make informed policy decisions.
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- To put provisions in funding criteria around physiotherapists' mental health and well-being to hold sports accountable.
  - To keep giving physiotherapists a platform through funding research so practitioners can share their experiences.
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## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter provides an original and rigorous account of the challenges that physiotherapists experience in an elite sport organisation and the duty of care recommendations across five distinct themes: 1) *person first, physio second*; 2) *stronger together*; 3) *aligning policy with practice*; 4) *sustainability*; and 5) *more collaboration and communication*. This chapter has extended previous stressor research with physiotherapists (Kerai et al., 2019) and reports on the duty of care within sport (Grey-Thompson, 2017), by including recommendations for change with a representation of the participants' voices through quotations and supporting contemporary research within elite sport. In the past, reports written on behalf of NGBs, or government agencies rarely provided any guidance on how to support individuals working within elite sport other than the athlete. For example, in 2017 British Gymnastics published the Safeguarding Children: Safe Environment report and stated at the beginning of the duty of care section "All clubs and gymnastics activity providers have a responsibility for the safety and welfare of gymnasts, coaches, volunteers, officials, visitors and others. This responsibility applies to all British Gymnastics (BG) registered clubs, regardless of their size or structure." (p. 4). However, the report proceeded to focus on what members of sport organisations can do to ensure the duty of care towards children is adhered to, which although very important highlights how there has been a lack of guidelines around the duty of care for *all* members in the environment. It was crucial that this was addressed as elite sport

organisations, coaches, and most importantly athletes rely so heavily on daily physiotherapy delivery.

This chapter also showcases how some recommendations that are already offered to athletes and common practice within the organisation are yet to be available to physiotherapists. Given that physiotherapists are often employed full-time as part of the sport medicine team and are at the ‘front-line’ of athletes’ health care whilst working in highly pressurised performance climates, it is imperative that the organisation provide similar services or support systems to physiotherapists. In addition, this research has also incorporated strategies which have been promoted in other environments (e.g., healthcare services) that provide further information about the recommendation, such as, the benefits, how to implement the intervention within the environment, and evaluations of said technique relating to duty of care for staff members.

## **6.5 Summary**

This chapter offers novel insights into critical areas of duty of care which need to be addressed by elite sport organisations to provide long-term mental health and well-being support for physiotherapists working in elite sport. In this chapter, recommendations are provided to help individuals across different levels of elite sport organisation including, staff members (e.g., HR team), managers and leadership personnel, and board members within external bodies (e.g., NGBs, regulatory societies), to better understand the challenges and consequences of a lack of duty of care from a physiotherapist’s perspective. From a practical viewpoint, this chapter highlights how policies, codes of conduct, and working practices can be changed or implemented to provide better nuanced and long-term support for physiotherapists in elite sport contexts. Lastly, from an applied perspective, this chapter provides potential



avenues for sport psychology researchers and consultants who are interested in organisational change and implementing interventions that positively impact on the long-term health and well-being of physiotherapists working in elite sport. The following chapter will address the implications of this programme of research by drawing together findings from chapters four, five, and six.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

## **7.0 Overview**

This programme of research provides a rigorous and nuanced theoretical understanding of physiotherapists' turnover and retention experiences within elite sport (i.e., theory). This thesis has also investigated the duty of care provisions for physiotherapists working in an elite sport organisation and used participants' own voices and contemporary literature to support the recommendations provided (i.e., practice). In this final chapter, the findings from the studies are brought together and the empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of this thesis are critically discussed. This chapter and thesis then closes with an exploration of future research avenues, questions that remain unanswered, and finally some concluding thoughts about the importance and significance of this thesis.

### **7.1 Summary of studies**

The objective of this research is threefold. From a researcher's perspective, engaging in this research led to an important but unplanned contribution of highlighting the challenges that neophyte researchers might encounter when conducting longitudinal qualitative research within elite sport environments (chapter four). Although reflexivity is an integral aspect of doing qualitative research, often researchers do not expand on this process within journal articles, thus it was not planned from the outset of this programme of research to write chapter four, but by doing so, I highlight important recommendations for researchers and students who are looking to or are currently conducting qualitative research in elite sport contexts. From a theoretical perspective, the aim was to explain how elite sport physiotherapists make sense of their turning point experiences and the processes that lead to turnover and retention outcomes throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle (chapter five). From an applied perspective, the aim was to identify how elite sport organisations can better

support physiotherapists working in elite sport by promoting a duty of care (chapter six).

The first study in this thesis was presented in chapter four. This chapter utilised the genre of confessional tales and explored my experiences of conducting research within an elite sport context. In this study, I discussed my experiences of elite interviewing throughout the entire research process which included reflecting on data: collection, analysis, representation, and dissemination. Drawing on my reflexive journal and discussions with my supervisory team, five main themes were identified: 1) entering the world of elite sport, 2) breaking the cycle of performative actions, 3) vulnerable elites, 4) breaking the code of silence in elite sport, and 5) negotiating with elites. Lessons that I had learned and recommendations for neophyte researchers thinking of conducting interviews (and research) within elite sport contexts were interwoven throughout the themes. Fourteen recommendations were grouped into three stages: before the interview (e.g., think about what to wear, interview location), during the interview (e.g., one's own performance and emotion management, attending to micromarkers and small stories), and after and between interviews (e.g., self-, and intersubjective- reflexivity, representing and disseminating findings, issues surrounding confidentiality and power dynamics within the interviewer-interviewee relationship).

The second study (chapter five) aimed to explain the processes through which physiotherapists make sense of their turning point experiences and the subsequent outcomes of their sense-made (i.e., staying or leaving their jobs, well-being outcomes). By using grounded theory methodology to underpin the study, I developed a substantive theory that was context- and population-specific. Three broad questions were examined: first, what factors lead physiotherapists to contemplate turnover?

Second, how do physiotherapists make sense of their turnover intentions? Finally, what are the subsequent ‘outcomes’ once physiotherapists have made sense regarding staying or leaving their jobs and organisation? During this study, I sampled 26 physiotherapists overall and utilised a combination of methods (i.e., semi-structured interview, electronic app, and timelining) during a three-year period. Four core categories were identified: 1) socio-cultural context, 2) experiencing turning points, 3) sense-making, and 4) sense-made and lessons learned. The theory produced (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*) depicts how physiotherapists make sense of turning points through understanding their place in the cultural context and how turning points were experienced, to sense-made (i.e., turnover or retention) and understanding if the decisions they made were right for them (e.g., positive, or negative well-being experiences). The theory illustrated how dynamic, complex, cyclical, and iterative the relationship is between sense-making, sense-made, and lessons learned. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated how the performance culture within elite sport environments can guide how physiotherapists think, behave, and act when experiencing turning points. However, some physiotherapists displayed covert or overt resistance to dominant cultural scripts, which influenced their sense-making and their experiences once physiotherapists made sense of their turning points. Participants also reflected upon the implications of their sense-made on their lives inside and outside of sport, across and within jobs, and expectations that they had and if they were met. Altogether, these findings provided important context for the subsequent recommendations and strategies to support physiotherapists working in sport and promote a duty of care within elite environments.

The final study in this thesis was presented in chapter six. This study utilised the concept of duty of care to explore the areas of support physiotherapists need whilst

working in elite sport. This chapter aimed to: (a) understand the challenges experienced by physiotherapists working in elite sport environments; and (b) outline recommendations (i.e., strategies, practical implications) that promoted a duty of care for physiotherapists in elite sport which were supported by participants' own voices and contemporary research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 physiotherapists and reflective thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Five themes were identified and discussed: 1) person first, physio second; 2) stronger together; 3) aligning policy with practice; 4) sustainability; and 5) more collaboration and communication. The recommendations focused on how physiotherapists themselves, support networks, organisational members, communities, and external agencies can support physiotherapists working in elite sport. Furthermore, the recommendations presented in this chapter offer new ways of conceptualising services that sport psychologists can offer and how they can help organisational members beyond the athlete. In addition, there are implications for physiotherapists themselves, organisational members, and the sport organisation.

## **7.2 Empirical implications**

This section addresses the empirical implications of this thesis. This programme of research aimed to build a rigorous and nuanced understanding of the turnover and retention experiences of physiotherapists working in elite sport, and to identify the duty of care needs of these physiotherapists that will help their sport organisation to provide appropriate support throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle. In doing so, this thesis makes several novel contributions to the literature. Firstly, at the time of writing, this is the only turnover and retention theory, that I am aware of, that has adopted a grounded theory approach and explored the experiences of physiotherapists throughout a Games cycle. In doing so, I have built and developed

a theory that is both context- and population-specific, highlighting how physiotherapists make sense of their experiences over time, and what influences and resources they draw upon to aid this process. Grounded theory research is gaining momentum in sport psychology research, with many researching athlete and coaching populations (for an overview see Holt et al., 2022), but turnover and retention of other sport personnel has received no attention. Existing literature has shown the value of grounded theory for generating rich and in-depth knowledge of social phenomena that can help audiences understand *how* and *why* people, organisations, and communities experience certain events or situations (Corbin & Holt, 2011). The novel categories identified in chapter five provide a way of depicting and representing turnover and retention processes that physiotherapists are experiencing whilst working in elite sport environments. These categories give an insight into the cognitive, relational, and cultural sense-making processes which helped physiotherapists to make sense of their experiences, which is important to understand given that high turnover rates of valuable and knowledgeable physiotherapists were and continue to be a salient issue in this organisation.

Secondly, exploring physiotherapists' turning point experiences in relation to their career and life history adds to our empirical understanding of the combined and cumulative effect of sporting and non-sporting turning points over time. Thus, rather than focus on one single event (e.g., end of a Games cycle), which undermines and ignores the significance of other moments in elite sport physiotherapists' lives, the aim was to understand the wider and holistic view of individuals' experiences (Howells & Fletcher, 2015). The exploration of physiotherapists' experiences through their career and lifespan enabled the participants to reveal significant moments, memories,

evocative conversations, and share their beliefs and values, thus, this wide lens provides a more holistic perspective.

Recent studies have examined the impacts of lifetime stressor exposure occurring over a sport performer's lifespan (McLoughlin et al., 2023) and explored life events which are acute (e.g., a loved one's death) and chronic (e.g., ongoing health issues; Mayer et al., 2019). These events are akin to some of the initiated and forced turning points identified in chapter five. Extending previous research, during the multiple interviews conducted, structural turning points, which are predictable and dictated by organisational transitions (e.g., sport calendar, policies, and practices within the organisation) were also identified as important factors in physiotherapists' sense-making. For example, if a physiotherapist is experiencing a long-term turning point (e.g., ongoing health issues), reaching a structural turning point (i.e., end of a cycle) can influence physiotherapists sense-making about whether to stay in their existing role, job, and organisation. Therefore, I was also able to understand how specific time points in the cycle influenced and led to physiotherapists considering whether to stay or leave their organisation. Additionally, due to the longitudinal approach, I was able to gain insight into how experiencing one turning point (e.g., funding cuts) could lead to others (e.g., career stagnation), and could influence how physiotherapists respond to future turning points. Thus, providing a more comprehensive understanding of turning point experiences than in my previous snapshot work investigating elite physiotherapists' stressor experiences (Kerai et al., 2019).

Thirdly, bringing together experiences from physiotherapists who used to or currently do work for the elite sport organisation provided a more comprehensive account of the turnover and retention process, as previous research has largely



examined one perspective (i.e., former, or current) rather than both (e.g., Turner & Chelladurai, 2005; Warner et al., 2013). By incorporating both perspectives, this research has illustrated why physiotherapists leave (e.g., to pursue new opportunities), why physiotherapists stay (e.g., commitment to the team, lack of appropriate options), and the impacts of their choices on their well-being (e.g., increase and decrease in well-being). The experiences shared by past employees provided depth and a novel aspect for the theory, building a picture of what happens once practitioners decide to leave their jobs and the organisation. Indeed, Day and colleagues (2022) have highlighted the benefits of hindsight for qualitative researchers, as participants can reflect on and consider how specific events are experienced and their significance and meaning to them. Thus, past employees could reflect on their sense-making outcomes and in hindsight consider if the sense-made was the 'right' choice for them given what they had experienced since leaving the organisation.

It was essential that I had an information-rich sample that accounted for the diverse experiences that employees encountered, as it provided me with relevant knowledge that I would need to build and develop the substantive theory. Given that studies often focused on turnover intention rather than actual turnover (e.g., Larner et al., 2017), my understanding of what happens once an individual leaves their job and organisation was crucial for this theory. During the analysis of data which had been gathered so far, I realised I was not able to gain that perspective from current employees and therefore, I recruited past employees and physiotherapists who had previously left but decided to return to the organisation. This illustrates the critical importance of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014) for grounded theory research and highlights the iterative process that guided the subsequent interviews and theory construction. Additionally, theoretically sampling participants with specific

characteristics (e.g., past employees, or physiotherapists who had left and returned to the organisation) helped to showcase how iterative and dynamic the sense-making process is and how sense-making occurs across jobs and organisations.

Finally, this programme of research has also identified novel empirical findings concerning the duty of care needs for elite sport physiotherapists. Providing context-specific insights into the demands and struggles that elite sport physiotherapists experience has important considerations as to how organisations support the mental health and well-being of physiotherapists. Currently, there is a plethora of research surrounding how organisations can support the well-being of athletes and coaches (e.g., Grey-Thompson, 2017), however, they do not consider the athletes' or coaches' voices in the research. Additionally, some of the recommendations suggested in chapter six are currently offered to athletes and coaches, therefore even though they are common practice in the organisation they are not yet available to physiotherapists. Given the nature of the job in a performance climate, the organisation needs to provide similar services and support systems to physiotherapists, however, until now there has been no research attention on how to specifically support physiotherapists in elite environments. Furthermore, I used physiotherapists' own voices to highlight how current policies, practices, and social structures surrounding practitioners can hinder the physiotherapist's well-being leading to a shorter career in elite sport. By raising awareness of salient issues that impact on a physiotherapist's well-being and implicate different groups in the organisation (e.g., leaders, human resources, policy makers, governors), the hope is that more robust policies and practices are put in place or existing ones are better enforced to support physiotherapists and promote their duty of care (Kerai et al., 2019; Wagstaff, 2019).

### 7.3 Theoretical considerations

This section will discuss the theoretical contributions of this programme of research. To start, much of the turnover and retention literature that was reviewed in chapter two mainly used quantitative research methods, such as questionnaires and surveys. Additionally, Grotto et al., 2017 synthesized that many cross-cultural studies set out to empirically test and validate theories that had been conducted with participants in the US. Therefore, rather than ‘build’ context-specific theory many scholars opted to test the theory. However, there was a growing need for an in-depth, temporal exploration of turnover and retention processes, which quantitative research does not do well. Moreover, although not explicitly stated, one can assume that much of the previous turnover research was underpinned by realist assumptions, due to the focus placed on testing and predicting when an employee would leave an organisation, rather than understanding what would lead to turnover and the temporal aspects involved in the process. Thus, there was a growing need for this sport organisation to understand the reasons why some physiotherapists were deciding to leave whilst others stayed, and why some practitioners had turnover intentions but chose to stay. Therefore, using grounded theory methodology which was underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, I have developed and presented an original and substantiative theory (i.e., *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport*).

Grounded theory is particularly useful in developing a theory that is grounded in data collected from participants within specific socio-cultural contexts. Thus, grounded theory can be useful in explaining how the broader socio-cultural environment influences on an individual’s experience (i.e., ‘thin’ individual and ‘thick’ social-cultural perspective). Thus, this thesis expands on previous turnover literature as it moves beyond the ‘thick’ individual and ‘thin’ social-cultural

perspective, which has primarily been the focus of researchers across populations, including understanding athletes' career transitions and retirement from sport (Park et al., 2012). The cognitive lens is focused on how employees think and feel about their current work predicament and their interpretations of the situation they are in. The research produced within chapter five extends turnover research by providing insight into how physiotherapists make sense of their turning point experiences and how this "sense" is socially and culturally constructed.

This research also extends the theoretical understanding of the sense-making process in relation to turnover. The three ways of making sense (i.e., living, resisting, and playing the part of the performance narrative) offered novel insights into the different ways physiotherapists interact with their social and cultural worlds to make sense of their turning points. Indeed, chapter five drew attention to the sense-giving process, which illustrated how individuals inside and outside of sport, and the broader culture within their sport organisation and communities (e.g., norms, values, discourses, and resources available) can influence a physiotherapist's sense-making. Thus, the theoretical understanding generated from this category has extended our understanding of how physiotherapists' sense-making processes are constrained or enabled by their social world and cultural environment. In addition, how the socio-cultural contexts and larger social structures and discourses influence an individual's meaning-making and actions were missing from previous turnover research. Therefore, this thesis advances our theoretical understanding of turnover and retention across cognitive, relational, and cultural perspectives and how these perspectives intertwined with each other as physiotherapists interpreted, negotiated, and made sense of the situations they found themselves in (see chapter five).

The findings in this thesis also support and extend other models and theories within turnover literature namely, the job embeddedness model (Mitchel & Lee, 2001) and proximal withdrawal states theory (Hom et al., 2012). According to the job embeddedness model, if an individual is highly embedded in their organisation and community, they are less likely to consider leaving their job and organisation. This is reinforced by the findings in chapter five, which illustrated that those who made sense of their turning points through living the performance narrative, were less likely to leave their job as they were not willing to sacrifice working in elite sport. Yet, the *Theory of Turnover and Retention in Elite Sport* also extends this model by illustrating how those who are living the performance narrative can over time shift their sense-making to playing the part or resisting the performance narrative due to various socio-cultural factors (e.g., misalignment between individual and organisational values, thinking about and becoming a parent). Therefore, job embeddedness was found to be a temporal construct and impacted by turning point experiences, what was happening in their careers and lives at that moment, and the organisational climate.

The findings in this thesis also supported and extended Hom and colleagues' proximal withdrawal states theory (2012). According to this theory, the decision to stay or leave was accompanied by the individual's perceived control over the decision. Thus, those who were enthusiastic stayers or leavers had more control over their turnover or retention outcome as opposed to reluctant stayers or leavers who had less control over their choice. Yet, in the substantive theory presented in this thesis, I highlighted how some participants were neither enthusiastic nor reluctant, but in an in-between space, which Turner (1967) summarised as 'neither one thing or another; or maybe both' (p. 96). This finding supported the work of Cavallerio et al. (2017) who explored this 'in-between' phase in their 'making sense' narrative which, they

argued, had an undefined, unclear storyline, and some tension between the safety of past events and an individual's hopes for the future. Furthermore, due to the longitudinal approach taken throughout this thesis, I learnt that physiotherapists' sense-making processes were iterative and dynamic rather than static, thus someone could be enthusiastic about staying but over time become a reluctant stayer.

The theoretical contribution within the sense-making literature was also advanced due to the understanding of the temporal orientation of the process. According to Weick (1995), sense-making was an inherently retrospective process, with other scholars arguing that forward-looking sense-making involves a retrospective interpretation of a desired future event as if the event has already happened (Gioia et al., 2002). However, more contemporary sense-making scholars have stated the importance of past, present, and future temporal orientations in the sense-making process (Gephart et al., 2010, Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Wiebe, 2010). Moreover, Maitlis and Christianson (2014) called for the examination of the temporality of sense-making to greatly enrich theorising, specifically, whether or when sense-making starts and stops, and how sense is made and remade. The findings within this thesis aligned with the views of contemporary scholars as participants described how they would look back at past events and look forward to what they wanted or desired to try and make sense of their present turning point. Furthermore, within this thesis, it was highlighted how sense-making was a continuous and iterative process, as participants would make sense of their sense-made (i.e., the decision to stay or leave) and judge whether they made the right choice for themselves, or if sense needed to be remade again.

#### **7.4 Methodological considerations**

This section will outline the methodological contributions and highlight the novel and diverse methodological approaches used during this thesis (i.e., grounded theory, multiple methods of data collection, reflexivity, external reflections). Firstly, drawing upon the work of Charmaz (2006, 2014), this programme of research makes a novel contribution to the turnover and retention literature, by adopting grounded theory methodology to underpin why physiotherapists are staying or leaving their jobs and the elite sport organisation (chapter five). In doing so, this study extends the literature in a multitude of ways. Firstly, this research was population-specific and thus this approach was appropriate as theories surrounding retaining physiotherapists were lacking. Secondly, the theory produced is grounded in data collected from participants within elite sport environments, thus the research is context-specific. Thirdly, much of the previous research on turnover and retention was quantitative and therefore the use of longitudinal qualitative research allowed for a more comprehensive, in-depth, and temporal understanding of the process which is difficult to gain from snap-shot methods (e.g., questionnaires, single-interviews).

Secondly, the combination of the multiple methods of data collection used in this thesis (e.g., interviews, electronic app, timelining, reflexive journaling) was novel within sport psychology literature pertaining to grounded theory studies. By illustrating how each method built on the previous method(s), I developed a comprehensive understanding of elite sport physiotherapists' lives from significant life events (e.g., turning points) to everyday experiences (e.g., interactions with colleagues). Moreover, two methods used in this programme of research presented original ways of collecting and asking participants to reflect on their own data. Firstly, using electronic app entries, gave me additional insight into participants' lives, what

they do on a day-to-day basis, fleeting moments that would have been missed in interview settings, and significant moments that warranted further exploration. The innovative use of an electronic app as a document of life (e.g., daily diary), which can be downloaded to a mobile device meant participants had access to the app wherever they were, allowing them to capture their experiences in ‘real-time’. Secondly, drawing upon creative methods such as, timelining to visually represent the turning points that participants had previously reported, allowed participants to actively engage with their data (Kolar et al., 2015). In doing so, participants reflected on what they had spoken about, filled in any gaps, made connections across turning points which had not yet been discussed, and provided insight into further turning points that included their hopes for the future.

Thirdly, due to the need for more qualitative research within the turnover literature, a reflexive account was necessary to ‘lift the veil’ and give readers a glimpse into what happens during the research process (Tuval-Mashiach; 2017). In chapter four, I (a neophyte researcher) offered an honest, critical, and nuanced insight into the entire process, which included collecting, analysing, representing, and disseminating the data. By writing these confessional tales, I highlighted how reflexivity can be a useful tool to illustrate *why* I made certain decisions, and *how* I conducted the research, and *what* lessons I learned that I could apply to future research. Moreover, the chapter can be used as a resource and tool for novice researchers and students who are looking to undertake qualitative research and are unsure how to navigate the challenges they might encounter. Thus, giving a glimpse into a part of the research process (i.e., reflexivity), which typically researchers say they do but often do not disclose or discuss within qualitative research articles, further reiterates the methodological contributions of this thesis.



Finally, I answered the calls for more collaboration between researchers, individuals, and organisations to create valuable and impactful research (Day & Humphrey, 2020). This programme of research was collaborative from the outset, for instance, this research was commissioned by the organisation and the research question was decided by them. Moreover, organisational members also advised on the types of methods to use (e.g., surveys would not work, an electronic app to gather information). Additionally, I conducted external reflections with key stakeholders and groups within the organisation (e.g., policymakers, human resources, support teams) and disseminated findings from chapters five and six. By using these techniques, issues can be identified, and questions can be discussed amongst many different stakeholders who each have their own expertise which can generate multiple viewpoints and perspectives that might not have been addressed. For example, by working ‘with’ organisational members who are positioned to provide social support for physiotherapists due to their organisational role, I gained multiple perspectives on how recommendations could be applied in practice and the barriers within the organisation which needed to be overcome (e.g., costs of implementing a formal support network).

### **7.5 Practical implications**

The practical implications of this thesis reside in the applied value of each of the studies presented in this programme of research. Firstly, chapter four enhances understanding of conducting research with elite participants and within elite sport contexts. When reflecting on the challenges that I encountered throughout the research process, I realised that there was a lack of guidelines within sport psychology literature which I could draw upon and learn from. Thus, in chapter four it was imperative that I was open and honest about the hurdles I faced so that fellow novice researchers and

students could relate to and learn from these, whilst also providing practical advice and recommendations to help them avoid or overcome similar obstacles. Secondly, the efforts to make impactful research, where the findings were accessible and applicable to a wider audience within the organisation were highlighted in chapter five. The use of a figure to present the findings from the grounded theory study helped to explain the process of turnover and retention within elite sport. Moreover, using evocative, poignant, and rich quotations helped to illustrate participants' experiences and enhance the impact, naturalistic generalisability, and transferability of the research findings.

Building upon chapter five, the findings from chapter six further extended the practical implications of this PhD, by illustrating the recommendations to promote duty of care for physiotherapists in elite sport organisations. Whilst researchers have provided evidence-based recommendations to support elite athletes, coaches, and parents of junior athletes, chapter six was the first study to empirically explore the challenges to a physiotherapist's duty of care. Furthermore, it is the first study to present these challenges with recommendations to help support physiotherapists alongside contemporary research and participants' own voices. By working 'with' rather than 'on' participants, the recommendations in this chapter are grounded in participants' experiences in elite sport and how they need further support from their organisation. Moreover, although there are recommendations aimed at the individual level (e.g., importance of having self-care strategies), rather than focus on neoliberal recommendations (e.g., how to enhance a physiotherapist's resilience), this chapter focuses on recommendations across interpersonal, organisational, cultural, and policy levels. Finally, this chapter offers many future research and practical avenues for sport psychologists to implement, evaluate, and refine recommendations so that

physiotherapists have access to support, and elite sport organisations can promote the duty of care for physiotherapists. For example, sport psychologists can provide guidance about the importance of self-care within elite sport settings and help physiotherapists develop their own “toolkit” of strategies, implement and evaluate primary stress management interventions (e.g., job redesign), and help educate organisational members about the importance and critical need for physiotherapists to rest and recover.

## **7.6 Strengths and limitations**

Although the significant contributions and implications across the entire programme of research have been discussed, it is also worth mentioning some of the strengths and limitations associated with this PhD thesis. First, a main strength is the range of elite sport physiotherapists sampled and involved across this programme of research. To expand, within this thesis I collected data from 26 elite sport physiotherapists who ranged in sex, age, sports they have worked in, employment type, experience level, and roles within the organisation. Moreover, when conducting the external reflections, physiotherapists who did not participate in the studies discussed, related to, and refined the findings. Therefore, this thesis has ensured that the findings are relevant and transferable to elite sport physiotherapists in a variety of different contexts within the organisation.

Moreover, there has been an increased interest during the past decade about the experiences of the team behind the team (Arnold et al., 2017) and the mental health and well-being of support staff members (Hill et al., 2021; Pilkington et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2023). Thus, a strength of this programme of research is that it is timely and generated new knowledge about physiotherapists’ experiences of working in elite

sport environments, an understanding of their lives inside and outside of sport, and how organisations can better support them.

Another strength of the thesis was the different methodological approaches (e.g., study design, methods, data representation) that were employed throughout this research programme to help gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of elite sport physiotherapists' experiences. Specifically, this thesis utilised a longitudinal approach for collecting data with participants working within the organisation which helped me to understand the ebbs and flows of their experiences without constricting the participants to snap-shot interviews. Moreover, the use of visual ways to collect data (i.e., timelining), encouraged participants to engage with and reflect on their experiences in greater depth which helped me to gain greater insight and understanding about their turning point experiences. Furthermore, by undertaking different forms of data representation via confessional tales, the accessibility of the findings to different audiences (e.g., academic and non-academic, individuals who work within or outside of elite sport) is increased.

Another important strength throughout this thesis was the importance I placed upon and the demonstration of rigour. Scholars view rigour as a marker of quality within research, but the definition of rigour can vary among scholars (Smith & McGannon, 2018). One specific definition refers to the methodological cohesiveness (i.e., methodological rigour) of the research which encapsulates the ontology, epistemology, methods of data collection used, analytical techniques, and the research output or product (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Within this programme of research, I made decisions whilst being cognisant of the underlying assumptions associated with certain methodological choices (e.g., strategies to demonstrate methodological rigour,

the data collection methods utilised) to ensure coherence throughout the entire research process.

Finally, a key strength of the programme of research is the potential it has to create impactful change for physiotherapists working in elite sport. For disciplines such as sport psychology or sociology of sport, where demonstrable impactful change such as policy or culture change could take a significant length of time, it is worth considering the potential reach of the research beyond academia (Evans, 2020). I collaborated with an elite sport organisation for this PhD, that employs or contracts over 80 physiotherapists nationally and the organisation creates policies and procedures for how they work with their physiotherapists. Thus, in terms of impactful change, the new knowledge generated throughout this thesis can potentially help to change policy and working practices for elite sport physiotherapists across the UK.

Although this programme of research has made significant contributions to the literature and demonstrated key strengths, this thesis is not without its limitations. Firstly, although this thesis utilised an electronic app as a way of collecting daily experiences akin to daily diaries which was novel and innovative. Some issues arose with this method which researchers would need to bear in mind if they were to adopt this approach in their research. Firstly, the app was created using a pre-existing template which although is a familiar format for the participants, I was restricted by what I could realistically do with the app and the elements I could add to make the platform more user-friendly. For example, some of the participants found the PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988) to be restrictive and they thought other words would be more context-specific and accurate for how they were feeling at that moment. Moreover, there were discussions with participants and the app team around the use of emojis as a better way of reflecting how participants felt, unfortunately, due to the

restrictions around what the IT team could add to the app, additional time and cost to build it into the app, and the lack of budget this idea never came to fruition. Another issue with the app was continued participation from the physiotherapists. Initially, 17 participants were recruited to complete the app, and only 11 participants submitted data over 18 months. Although I did not think I would have 100% compliance and participation rates, I found it difficult to enhance adherence and motivate the participants to complete daily entries. Scholars have previously stated that one of the biggest challenges of using diary methods is the high participant dropout rate and the lack of compliance in submitting data (Day, 2016). As a result, future research should account for these challenges and have proactive strategies in place to combat the challenges (e.g., sending reminders to participants to complete their entries).

Next, despite this programme of research adopting a longitudinal approach, the use of one-shot interview data within Study 3 (i.e., chapter six), potentially limits some of the applicability of the recommendations provided. Although one-shot interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of challenges physiotherapists experienced whilst working in elite sport and where their working practices can be improved. Moreover, due to the longitudinal approach of this thesis, I was able to learn about potential barriers (e.g., costs related to implementing interventions). However, future researchers would do well to embed the knowledge back into the organisation and assess the facilitators and barriers to the knowledge generated in chapter six. Thus, allowing researchers to select, tailor, and implement interventions, uncover any additional resources that may be needed, and monitor and evaluate the strategies.

## **7.7 Avenues for future research**

One of the strengths of this research is that the findings were disseminated to key groups within the sport organisation with the goal of supporting physiotherapists

prior to the commencement of the current Olympic and Paralympic cycle. Although this programme of research has advanced understandings of turnover and retention by bringing together and utilising multiple disciplines (e.g., sport psychology, sport management, organisational psychology), there are still areas of research which warrant further attention. In this section, I discuss the avenues for future research alongside suggestions of how researchers can expand upon this thesis to address these knowledge gaps.

Firstly, building upon the grounded theory presented in this PhD thesis, future researchers could look towards different qualitative practices to show the theory in action. For example, future researchers could draw upon narrative inquiry to story and represent data in creative and visual ways to provide illustrative examples of how physiotherapists make sense of turning points in their lives. Creative analytical practices (e.g., poetic representation, ethnodrama, video and performance-based mediums; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005) can be useful in producing powerful and evocative representations of experiences to help researchers “show rather than tell theory in and through story” (Smith, 2013, p.135). Moreover, the use of different creative methods (e.g., poetry, creative nonfiction, infographics) to represent research findings has been increasing within sport, exercise, and health research (Day & Humphrey, 2020). Not only could these methods provide a way of making research more accessible to different audiences, but they could also help researchers who are conducting research within organisations to promote internal confidentiality (Tolich, 2004). Finally, Day and Humphrey (2020) claimed that one of the key advantages of using creative methods to represent the data is that individuals and organisations can co-produce and co-construct information and resources with the researcher, which can lead to creating more valuable and impactful research.

Secondly, this thesis has illustrated the impact that social interactions (i.e., sense-giving) have on a physiotherapist's sense-making. For example, the significance of physiotherapist-manager and physiotherapist-physiotherapist interactions were shown to impact on physiotherapists' turnover and retention outcomes. Throughout this programme of research, physiotherapists have described the importance of building and nurturing trusting relationships with their line managers is, whilst also reporting how negative interactions with members of management have led to consequences (e.g., ill-being, poor mental health). Sport psychology researchers need to start thinking more dyadically rather than focusing on one group (e.g., physiotherapists), so future research needs to consider shared relationships rather than focusing on individual groups. Research in sport psychology has yet to account for both the physiotherapist and the manager's experience in the same study (over time or in "real-time"), therefore ignoring complex, multifaceted dynamics, and creating an incomplete picture of this nuanced relationship. By looking at research on the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., Jowett, 2007; Wachsmuth et al., 2018; Yang & Jowett, 2016), future researchers could, for example, develop a specific model or theory of the physiotherapist-manager relationship to help inform subsequent programs of research, professional practice, and specific training aimed at fostering healthy, positive, and supportive relationships.

Thirdly, this programme of research has demonstrated the important role that physiotherapists' families and friends play in providing them with social support (e.g., emotional, instrumental), in addition to being an important factor in a participant's decision to leave their jobs. However, research beyond the athletes' or coaches' support networks is lacking. One way to better understand the development, need, use, and availability of social support over time, is through longitudinal research designs.



Furthermore, visual representations of social support networks using sociograms have been useful in coaching populations (e.g., Norris et al., 2020) and can be helpful in understanding the sources of support (e.g., colleagues, friends, partner), what type of support different individuals provide (e.g., informational, emotional, instrumental, appraisal), and what times of the cycle they are likely to need more support (e.g., during competition). Thus, exploring physiotherapists' social network structures and resources would make an important contribution to existent literature by offering insight into how social relationships support physiotherapists throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle (e.g., mundane, or stressful periods) and how these impact on well-being and performance. Thus, research looking at support outside of elite contexts can help organisations understand how to support physiotherapists optimally and effectively

Fourth and penultimately, although this programme of research aimed to have a broad understanding of physiotherapists' experiences (e.g., male and female, types of sport worked in, employment status, variety of turning points). There are cultural factors (e.g., gender, identity, social structures) that warrant further exploration and in-depth understanding. For example, participants highlighted that experienced female physiotherapists were more likely to leave their role and the organisation than their male colleagues. Thus, future researchers would do well to examine female physiotherapists' experiences and the gendered barriers that impact on sustained involvement in elite sport. This will not only enhance our understanding of gendered experiences for physiotherapists working in elite sport but also inform how organisations can provide more specific support for female practitioners across sport whose needs may vary from their male colleagues. This is an important line of inquiry, given that 70% of physiotherapists in the UK are female ([www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org), 2023),

however male physiotherapists more frequently work in elite sport environments (*The Gender Balance in Physiotherapy*, 2021), therefore there is a need for research to explore how a female-dominated discipline intersects with a historically male-dominated industry. Furthermore, researchers can draw upon interdisciplinary research (e.g., sociology of sport, organizational psychology, cultural sport psychology), where researchers have explored how women in sport (e.g., coaches, leaders) are included and excluded in male-dominated contexts (Bryan et al., 2021; Piggott & Matthews, 2020; Solanas et al., 2022).

In terms of practical implications, although recommendations were presented in chapter six, to bridge the knowledge gap between theory and practice, implementation and evaluation of strategies is needed. Indeed, Graham and Tetroe (2007) claimed that a key part of integrated knowledge translation is the implementation of the research results. Drawing upon a recent article by Leggat et al., (2021), which highlighted how an impactful research approach like integrated knowledge translation, has the potential to enhance the lives of those who participate (e.g., physiotherapists) and those who govern in sport (e.g., policymakers, national governing bodies). Future researchers could look to build upon the findings in chapters five and six and conduct more longitudinal research with physiotherapists. In doing so, researchers can observe, over time, if the interventions are suitable for the population or if additional resources are needed, and scholars can engage with others in the environment (stakeholders, managers, staff members) during this process to gain valuable insight and thus work in a collaborative manner.

## **7.8 Concluding thoughts**

The aim of this thesis was threefold. First, to outline the challenges that neophyte researchers might encounter when conducting longitudinal qualitative

research within elite sport environments. Second, to explain how elite sport physiotherapists make sense of their turning point experiences and the processes that lead to turnover and retention outcomes throughout an Olympic and Paralympic cycle. Third, to identify how elite sport organisations can better support physiotherapists working in elite sport by promoting a duty of care. By doing this research, this thesis has advanced the understanding of why physiotherapists are staying or leaving their jobs and/or organisation, how physiotherapists interpret, understand, and make sense of their turning point experiences, and how sense-making is also socially and culturally constructed. Moreover, throughout this programme of research, I have provided detailed recommendations and practical implications for various individuals (e.g., students, neophyte researchers, sport psychologists, organisational members, policymakers).

In this final chapter, I have given an overview of the empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical implications and contributions of this thesis for sport psychology literature and how organisations can support elite sport physiotherapists. I also reflected on the research process and suggested future research avenues which are worthy of exploration and investigation. From a research perspective, I hope that neophyte researchers can use my confessional tales as a resource for conducting qualitative research in elite sport environments. Given, that my interest in elite sport physiotherapists' experiences began before this programme of research, I have seen scholars within organisational sport psychology call for a duty of care for *all* members of elite sport. I also hope that this research not only gives a voice to elite sport physiotherapists' experiences but reinforces the critical need for organisations to support a physiotherapist's duty of care.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Ethical approval



Dear Sunita,

Re. Physiotherapists' Experiences of Working in Elite Sport

Thank you for submitting your ethics application for consideration.

I can confirm that your application has been considered by the SHAS Ethics Committee and that ethical approval is granted. Please find attached your signed approval form.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'J. Hill'.

J.Hill

School of SHAS Ethics Committee

## Appendix B: Participant information sheet



### Physiotherapists' Experiences of Working in Elite Sport

You are being invited to take part in this program of research which is being conducted in collaboration between [REDACTED] and St Mary's University. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and please ask if anything is unclear or if you'd like more information.

The aim of this program of research is to develop policies and practices to facilitate support for physiotherapists. To gain valuable insight, the aim is to learn from physiotherapists across different sports and differing levels of experience to help understand what it is like for physiotherapists working in elite sport. This study involves participating in up to five one-to-one interviews about your experiences of being a physiotherapist in elite sport across a two year period. Questions will evolve over time based on the information provided, however initial questions will focus on your daily experiences at work. For example, what constitutes a typical day/ good day/ bad day? Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Findings from this programme of research will be used to inform practices and policies to support physiotherapists working in elite sport.

A group of physiotherapists employed by [REDACTED] will be invited to participate. Full-ethical approval has been granted from St Mary's University Ethics Committee. Data will be stored on an encrypted computer. Your identity will remain confidential to all but the lead researcher who will conduct the interviews. Interviews will be transcribed, and all identifiable information will be removed (e.g., sport, all names, context). If you have any other questions, please contact me directly.

*Sunita Kerai*

PhD Student

St Mary's University

School of Sport, Health, and Applied Science

Waldegrave Road, Twickenham, TW1 4SX

Email /Tel: [165957@live.stmarys.ac.uk](mailto:165957@live.stmarys.ac.uk) / 020 8240 4177

**Appendix C: Participant consent form**



**Physiotherapists' Experiences of Working in Elite Sport**

**Main investigator and contact details:** Sunita Kerai ([165957@live.stmarys.ac.uk](mailto:165957@live.stmarys.ac.uk))

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet which is attached to this form. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
3. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.
4. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
5. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.
6. I consent to the researcher submitting the data obtained as part of their doctoral thesis and any further potential publications (e.g. peer-reviewed journals).

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

Name of participant  
(print).....

Signed..... Date.....

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If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the main investigator named above.

Title of Project:  
\_\_\_\_\_

**I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D: Demographic sheet**



**St Mary's  
University  
Twickenham  
London**

**Physiotherapists' Experiences of Working in Elite Sport**

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Years of experience working in elite sport:

Sport(s) currently working for in :

Previous sport(s) worked for in :

Currently full-time or part-time:

## Appendix E: Electronic application guide

### PDMS Physio App Guidance

#### New mobile app for physiotherapists to use

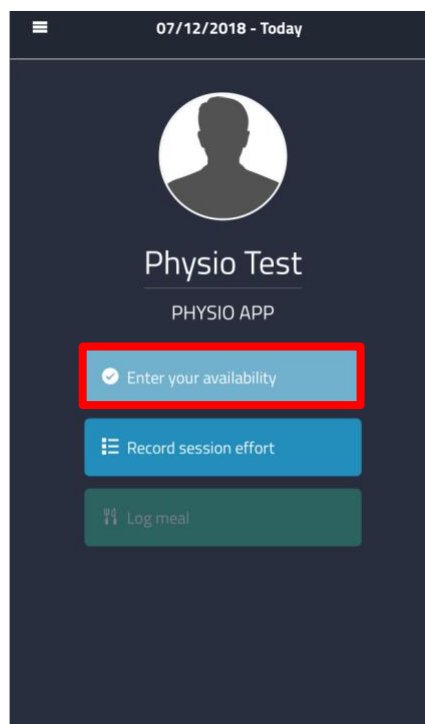
Here are some instructions in relation to downloading and accessing the PDMS Physio App.

Once you have provided an email address, one of the PDMS team will add an account for you. When the account has been created, an automated email is generated and sent. It may well find its way into the spam or junk folders.

The next thing to do is to follow the links on the email and create a password along with reading/agreeing to the terms and conditions. The password needs to have at least eight characters, an upper- and lower-case letters, a number and special character.

To download the app, all you need to do is type “PDMS Athlete” into your app store – it’s free of charge and only a small app in terms of download size. Once downloaded you can login using the email address provided and the password you have just created.

When you log on, click the ‘Enter your availability’ button (see below) and all the questions will be there to answer.



Answers for different days can be viewed by clicking on the date at the top of the screen.

You can select the type of day you had (for example; training (based in England), international training camp, national competition, international competition, day off, and holiday).

The image displays two screenshots of a mobile application interface. The left screenshot shows the main screen for logging a day's activities. At the top, the date '07/12/2018 - Today' is circled in red. Below the date, the text 'Today is a day for' is followed by the word 'Training' and a play button icon. There are three circular icons: a green checkmark, a grey 'X', and a grey question mark. Below these are four input sections: 'WHAT WAS YOUR SLEEP DURATION?:' with 'hours' and 'mins' dropdowns; 'HOW WAS YOUR SLEEP QUALITY?:' with a slider; 'HOW ARE YOUR ENERGY LEVELS?:' with a slider; and 'HOW MANY HOURS DID YOU WORK YESTERDAY?:' with 'hours' and 'mins' dropdowns. The right screenshot shows a detailed view of the 'Yesterday' data. At the top, the date '07/12/2018 - Today' is displayed. Below are four input sections: 'HOW WELL DID YOU EAT YESTERDAY?:' with a slider; 'ONE WORD TO INDICATE HOW YOU FELT YESTERDAY?:' with a dropdown menu showing 'Not Selected'; 'ONE WORD TO INDICATE HOW YOU FELT YESTERDAY?:' with a dropdown menu showing 'Not Selected'; and 'YOUR RATING OF YESTERDAY ON THE BAD TO GOOD SCALE?:' with a slider. At the bottom, there is a 'COMMENT:' text box and a green 'Submit' button.

**Questions:**

All questions are mandatory to complete before you submit your answers. There is a comment box added for each day if you would like to add any additional comments about your day (however, this is not mandatory).

**Offline:**

You can upload answers whilst offline for the date last viewed. Note that data will only be as up to date as when the app was last connected to the internet.