Why Do We Do, What We Do?

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Abstract

The present study sought to ascertain a contextualized perspective of established practitioners' subjective reasoning underpinning their practices. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1996) was adopted as an in-depth qualitative approach to explore nine, UK-based applied sport psychologists' perceptions and experiences. Three superordinate themes emerged: literature underpinning professional practice, the importance of the sport setting and context, and the need for professional judgment. The study provides a valuable insight into the influences on sport psychologists' behavior, the role this plays when advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes and, how such advice is operationalized and applied.

Why Do We Do, What We Do?

Within the field of sport psychology, practitioners adopting an evidence-based approach follow a working model of theory-research-practice. This is an example of translational research, which involves the application of theories, research findings, and intervention techniques across psychological domains (Smith & Smoll, 2011). Attending to these three reciprocal linkages enables sport psychologists to ensure that the knowledge, research, and interventions will support one another and advance the field as a scientific and applied discipline.

Specifically in the realm of performance sport, appropriate self-directed thought processes prior to and during task execution have been shown to make a significant difference to the level of performance attained (Moran, 2009). This bearing that cognitions and mental strategies have upon performance, as well as the ability to suppress conscious activity as athletes seek to prepare for and then execute movements, constitutes a remarkably worthwhile area for applied practitioners to consider (Singer, 2000). An important consulting area therefore, is the manner in which experienced performers are advised to allocate their attentional resources (Jones, 1995).

Unfortunately, however, applied sport psychology may lack adequate guidelines of what constitutes a recommended approach to the optimal combination of techniques and methods regarding the bearing that cognitions and mental strategies have upon elite performance. Winter, MacPherson, and Collins (2014) examined some of the current issues in this ongoing debate, suggesting that there was a lack of clarity from the available literature to determine guidelines for best practice. Furthermore, experienced sport psychologists have emphasized the need for this related knowledge, in addition to the application of techniques to foster productive consultations in their applied work (Simons & Andersen, 1995). It is therefore in our professional interests to determine the influences on best practice from

experienced practitioners who are currently working in this field, both specific to this important topic and also, in a more general sense, as an exemplar of how professionals develop their practice.

Such a double thrust appears timely. Presently in the literature, substantial progress has been made in identifying the qualities and characteristics necessary for effective sport psychology consulting (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). Furthermore, research has supported the effectiveness of psychological interventions to enhance athletic performance and positively influence cognitive affective states (e.g., Greenspan & Feltz, 1989). However, there has been much less attention focused on how consultants can best implement and extemporize from these techniques (Gould & Damarjian, 1998). Reflecting this concern, recent review of the evidence base for the efficacy of interventions in applied sport psychology (Gardner & Moore, 2006) concluded that "empirical research on these interventions provides little guidance for the practitioner interested in best-practice procedures" (p. 83).

Throughout the consulting process, the goal for many sport psychology practitioners is to help athletes achieve at optimal levels by adopting an evidence-based approach. Of particular relevance here is the recognition that evidence-based practice is important for "allowing sport psychologists to make informed decisions regarding the most effective interventions" (Gardner & Moore, 2006, p. 67). However, it has been suggested that the evaluation of applied effectiveness and the development of an evidence-base to guide practice have been limited (Martindale & Collins, 2007).

Underpinning this, a practitioner's effective professional philosophy contributes to understanding what the athlete is experiencing and the specific interventions applied in practice (Stainback, Moncler, & Taylor, 2007). The predominant professional philosophy utilized by sport psychology consultants is the cognitive-behavioral approach (Ravizza, 2002). Implementing this philosophy requires the allocation of appropriate techniques to

allow the performer to transform maladaptive cognitions to those that are readily adaptable (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Notably and appropriately, however, intervention techniques and methods vary greatly as a result of the dynamic context within which the consultant operates and, importantly, current knowledge regarding effective sport psychology practice (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004).

If our field is to continue to progress then a greater understanding of effective practice must be obtained. Accordingly, the primary focus of this study was to ascertain a contextualized perspective of established practitioners' subjective reasoning underpinning their sport psychology practices. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the influences on sport psychologists, when advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes. Given the breadth of potential scope but the clear importance of this factor, investigation was delimited to the cognitions and attentional foci pertaining to the execution, practice, and preparation for performance.

Method

Methodology

An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2008) was adopted as an in-depth qualitative approach to explore applied sport psychologists' perceptions and experiences. The aim of IPA is to explore in detail the processes through which participants make sense of their own experiences, by looking at the respondent's account of the processes they have been through (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Therefore, "IPA offers psychologists the opportunity to learn from the insights of the experts – the research participants themselves" (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p.20). Additionally, IPA shares a connection with social and cognitive psychology in that it is concerned with mental processes (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005). Hence, given the purpose to examine the influences when experienced practitioners advise elite performers on allocation of their

thought processes, IPA enabled a consideration of personal and social worlds while retaining a focus on mental processes.

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval and informed consent, nine British applied sport psychologists were purposefully selected to participate in this study. The sample comprised five males (age: M = 41.8 years, SD = 4.76 years) and four females (age: M = 39.75 years, SD = 5.44 years). As an idiographic method, IPA sampling is purposive and broadly homogenous so a small sample size provides a sufficient perspective given adequate contextualization (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008). We employed the re-accreditation criterion stipulated by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), in which practitioners continue to spend a minimum of 150 hours per year on professional delivery. Collectively, participants reported having a mean of 18.67 years' experience as accredited practitioners (SD = 4.36 years) all of whom initially through BASES, while eight were now also British Psychological Society (BPS) chartered psychologist. Furthermore, all participants were registered as practicing sport and exercise psychologists with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the UK organization which governs standards of professional practice in this area. Participants' applied experiences ranged from working full-time with elite performers through the English Institute of Sport (EIS) or through their own private consultancy practices, through to consulting with a range of different sports alongside their academic positions within higher education institutions.

Interview Guide

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach. This method was adopted on the recommendation of previous research as the exemplary method for IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher and the participant to engage in a

mutual dialogue, where initial questions envisaged by the researcher are adjusted and restructured during the course of the interview in light of participant responses (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As the order of questions is subordinate, the researcher is free to explore interesting areas and follow the participant's interests (Smith, 1996).

Prior to data collection, a pilot interview (Gratton & Jones, 2003) was conducted with a BASES accredited practitioner who met the required study criteria. This allowed for revision, where necessary, of the interview guide and ensured the schedule provided enough opportunities to gather the required richness of data. Following the pilot interview, an evaluative discussion was held between both authors and an independent academic experienced in qualitative methods. No significant changes were made to the actual interview guide, but it was agreed greater time should be allocated explaining and providing an opportunity for answering any participant questions, before commencement of each interview.

The final interview guide commenced with the most general question: "Tell me about your experiences working as a sport psychologist?" as advised in IPA research (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Most importantly for this phenomenological approach, the researcher invited concrete accounts of actual experiences that had occurred. Therefore, following this initial rapport-building conversation, the interview guide progressed to allow participants to produce explanations about the influential factors on their evidence-based practice. The interview guide focused on the underpinning this has for the practitioners when advising elite performers on the allocation of their thought processes. As general questions can sometimes produce insufficient responses, an assortment of probing questions and prompts that were intended to elicit more specific information (Smith & Osborn, 2008) were utilized. These probes included questions such as: "In your experience / how would you describe?" "How do you feel about?" "Can you tell me about?" Collectively, these guiding questions provided a

basis for the participants to discuss their current advice and approaches to cognitive strategies based on their previous experiences of working in the elite environment.

Procedure

Prior to the interviews, information sheets were provided that explained the purpose and procedure of the study (Gratton & Jones, 2003). Participants were informed that all information would remain completely confidential and that they could stop the interview at any time. Following the completion of informed consent, convenient times and locations for the interviews were agreed. Interviews were conducted by the first author face to face in an environment comfortable for the participant. Interviews lasted approximately an hour (M = 64.75 min, SD = 16.72 min), which is typical for interviews in IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Data Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were read and reread in their entirety until an in-depth familiarization of the data was reached. Smith (2004) states through a process of interpretative engagement with the transcription and texts, the meanings of the individual's experiences can unravel. During this reading and rereading, the transcript was annotated in the left-hand margin, to ensure the researcher's understanding of the participants' accounts. In addition, preliminary comments, associations and summaries were also noted on the left margin. Using the preliminary notes as a guide, the emergent themes were then documented in the right-hand margin. The titles of themes represent more precise psychological terminology, whereas notes reflect participants' comments in vivo (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The emergent themes identified, reflecting the richness of the participants' experiences, were then collated and combined with quotations from the transcripts to ensure that the connections worked for the actual words of the participant (Nicholls et al., 2005). Such procedure enabled the clustering of the subordinate themes into the overarching

superordinate themes. During the course of analysis, the two authors had extensive discussions on the transcriptions and emerging themes to help uncover any biases in the lead author's analytic approach. In event of disagreement, the original transcripts were reread and further discussed until a consensus was reached (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Establishing Trustworthiness

Two specific techniques (bracketing and member checking) were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Bracketing. IPA acknowledges the role of the researcher in the research process. Access to an individual's personal account is both "dependent on, and complicated by, the researcher's own conceptions which are required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity" (Smith, 1996, p. 264). Therefore, the authors were careful to avoid imposing their own views onto the participants' accounts, or interpreting their words purely in the content of their own experiences. To help "bracket" personal views and consider the influence of personal values, and experiences on the research (Smith & Osborn, 2008), the lead author engaged in a reflexive journal. The second author facilitated this procedure through engaging in a process of advocacy and analytic discussions.

Member checking. Secondly, member checking was performed with all participants to ensure the themes identified accurately captured their experiences (Creswell, 2007) and offered the opportunity to add any additional points (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Participants were provided with a copy of their transcript, and a summary of findings for their interpretation and confirmation that they were a true and accurate reflection of their responses. Following this process, all participants confirmed to the authors that a precise portrayal of their experiences had been represented.

Results

A range of factors influenced the sport psychologists' personal experiences of

advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes. This section presents the emergent themes from the participants' interviews with representative verbatim quotes. In total, three superordinate themes emerged: literature underpinning professional practice, the importance of the sport setting and context, and the need for professional judgment. Notably, the first two superordinate themes underpinned the third, the need for professional judgment, with quotations integrated and demonstrating significant implications within these themes.

Literature Underpinning Professional Practice

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge. It is concerned with answering the questions of what is knowledge, how is it acquired, and how do we know what we know (Klein, 2011; Luper, 2004). In this superordinate theme, the participants discussed whether the literature was influencing their knowledge and subsequent advice when consulting with elite performers on the allocation of their thought processes. Specifically, three sub themes emerged as dominant: inconsistency in literature usefulness, positivist approach to sport psychology research, and importance of practice based evidence.

Inconsistency in literature usefulness. To develop control over cognitions, participants advocated the use of pre-performance routines, as a preparation tool for the performers they were working with. When discussing where the sport psychologists' knowledge regarding pre-performance routines was derived, the academic literature was not perceived as being completely supportive to practice:

> Pre-performance routines, that's an evidence base that you don't really want to try and work from. There are some components of it that you think well that's relatively sound but I think you would be branded a fool if you thought your work on routines was guided exclusively by the literature, because I've no idea what that pre-performance routine would look like or the duration of it. (Steve)

Practitioners documented the use of specific cognitive-behavioral techniques within these pre-performance routines, to control and direct performer's emotions, thoughts, and attention. For example, a strategy participants used when athletes are both preparing for, and during performance was through the use of self-talk and specifically cue-words: "A few very holistic cues they're looking at or thinking to help them to perform, simple holistic cue that represents the type of action they want to achieve" (Ben). Discussing the underpinning to these holistic cues, participants were unclear where exactly what they did came from, with a certain literature base advocated to only partially guide the participants in their practice:

> There's a link between those holistic cues and process goal literature. I think from an applied practitioner point of view there is some evidence to support the use of those in limited situations with limited numbers of people but it's yet to be nailed down as I think pretty much everything else. (Steve)

Offering an alternative viewpoint Paul stated: "The whole self-talk literature I think is a…I don't know…it's a bit of a mess." This was in stark contrast to the literature underpinning another commonly used cognitive-behavioral technique: "Imagery is one of the strategies that has a relatively substantial evidence base" (Emma), a similar view held by all the interviewed psychologists.

Overall, the literature supporting practice was conveyed with mixed emotions: "I think you do learn from academic literature, but there's very few papers in recent years where I read that and I think, oh that's had a profound effect on what I do" (Ryan). A similar opinion also emerged by this participant who now consults on a full-time basis:

> I probably don't read very much sports psychology literature now. That's partly I think because you stop being a lecturer, you stop reading journal articles a bit, and they also don't seem as relevant sometimes to the actual practice of what you do. (Jo)

Positivist approach to sport psychology research. Another interesting debate emerged surrounding the knowledge base underpinning the applied experiences of the participants, with the following quotation highlighting the potential for an epistemological divide between research and practice:

> So something that's meaningful for an applied practitioner is embracing the complexity and trying to deal with it and deal with that uncertainty, and the approach from a researcher is quite often to ignore the complexity and to reduce the uncertainty to a minimum and then say something about a very small amount of something which has meaning to a point. And then you throw in the fact that there's a specific type of sport, or specific number of people involved, and all of a sudden that starts to challenge the veracity of that information from that sort of reductionist approach. (Steve)

A further caveat highlighted was the research approach that had been used to investigate a particular characteristic or psychological strategy: "You're comparing apples and pears and it isn't appropriate. And so a single subject case study approach is certainly how I've tried to base a lot of my applied practice" (Tom). The following quotation demonstrates the difficulty of always being able to guide applied work from the academic literature:

> From an applied practitioner's perspective I guess there's so much that you see that you then look to try and establish what the foundation for that might be, and you come up short because the research isn't up to date. (Ben)

Conversely to this, Claire stated: "I feel uncomfortable if I'm not theory-research-practice because my effectiveness is so hard to measure, that's one tick box…I've done things which are evidence-based." A thought-provoking point regarding a philosophical questioning of the underpinning to applied practice was made: "So that whole thing of what

is evidence and what's appropriate for an applied practitioner to use that influences their practice is a really interesting debate" (Ryan).

Importance of practice based evidence. Further discussions emerged concerning how practice based evidence significantly influenced delivery: "I'd like to see there being more about what practice can do to influence theory than the classic theory influencing practice. I see too much top-down and not enough bottom-up" (Claire). The academic literature is widespread, with an increasing number of journals with an applied focus emerging. However, this participant highlighted a limitation to reporting practice based evidence: "I've wondered whether practice based evidence, there isn't a real forum for it, I wonder in the literature if that's the best way of communicating it" (Ryan). This was specifically explained by the constraints imposed by the academic journals:

> The style of academic writing and what's expected to get things accepted, gives it this rigidity that sometimes is very difficult to convey your messages, whereas I think verbally it's much easier to do that. Sometimes I think academia puts constraints that everything must be referenced and I think you run the risk of losing out on some of the richer experiences of people. (Ryan)

The following quotation summed up the perceived disparity between practice based evidence and research within the field of sport psychology:

> The unreported information you get from experience and there are fellow academics who would not consider that I have evidence unless it's a controlled trial. And my particular perspective on that as an applied practitioner is that they're deluded and they have a poor understanding of human functioning because the world of sport, you are unable to reduce and control variables. Because the whole nature of that scenario is to deal with the complexity and you can simplify but you can't dismiss it as if it doesn't matter. And if you do then coaches will tell you, performers will tell you that

> you're missing the point and that you will fail as an applied practitioner as a result of not embracing the true complexity of it. (Steve)

The Importance of the Sport Setting and Context

The next superordinate theme concerned the importance of understanding the specific context in which the sport psychologists were consulting, with three sub themes emerging: acquiring contextual intelligence, integration within the coaching team, and exposure to pressure situations.

Acquiring contextual intelligence. Participants advocated the development of sport-specific knowledge to aid their applied practice:

> Contextual intelligence, so this whole notion of understanding the context within which that person's experiencing their sporting world is the thing that's influenced my practice the most in the last couple of years, and what that's led to is me spending a greater amount of time understanding the context than I spend working on, say, classical mental skills with the performers. (Steve)

This was further discussed as the specific psychological demands of the sport within which the participants were consulting: "I'd say you look at the sports specific nature of what their event is, you use your understanding of the psychological demands of that particular sport" (Emma). The following example highlights the necessity of this sport-specific knowledge, integrated with the experience of the consulting sport psychologists:

> So for instance, if a golfer came in and said he knew what he wanted to work on, immediately I'd start thinking through my knowledge of the practice environment in golf where you've got sport specific knowledge and where you've encountered that sort of issue before and dealt with it successfully. (Ryan)

With regards to advising performers on the allocation of their attentional foci pertaining to execution, this was perceived as highly dependent on contextual factors:

> Take tennis as a sport…it demands assets that are played in very multi-dimensional ways, so there's a heavy cognitive demand on the player in terms of decision-making and information processing for long periods of time. (Paul)

Integration within the coaching team. The fundamental reason participants provided for developing contextual intelligence was dependent on their integration within their consulting sport:

> That's influenced significantly by the environment, and the attitudes of the coaches towards that integration into the training context, and sometimes that's clearly not an option, and sometimes it's encouraged and developed. (Lisa)

The following quotation highlights the need for immersion of the sport psychologist within the training environment, to be able to advise effectively in this specific context:

> I can be quite heavily involved in running practical sessions so they have a psychological theme with coach support as well. We do, wherever possible, try to mimic situation…so that then gives us a better idea to then work on some of those key strategies when they're in situ effectively. So for a lot of them it does come down to concentration and focus, which then provides us with an opportunity to go in and work on those interventions. (Tom)

During the preparation section, participants discussed the use of a number of cognitive-behavioral techniques with their clients. The training environment was deemed necessary for athletes to practice their strategies, with Tom emphasizing how this is beneficial in collaboration with the coaching team:

> It's kind of in action all the time rather than talking about it and then going to have to do it somewhere else. So they're modifying as they go, they're experimenting with what their routine might be and because the coaches are there as well they can then reinforce the things when I'm not present.

Conversely, the following example highlights the necessity of the participants developed contextual intelligence within this different consulting arena: "In motor sport they get very little practice time, so I've always believed that they have to make more use of imagery skills because they lack physical practice time" (Ryan).

Exposure to pressure situations. Through the participants developed experience of the sporting environment, they advised the exposure of their clients to stressful situations:

> People need to understand themselves, expose themselves to chaos, pressure, and then learn to cope, because that's in reality the environment they're going to go and perform in. So that's what a lot of work with the coaches is. Looking to see the gap between what they do in training and competition, and if they're miles apart, highlighting that and thinking of ways to make them more similar. (Jo)

With regards to attentional resources per se, the purpose of developing these contextually relevant situations was to stimulate similar thought processes to the competitive environment:

> You're trying to make practice as contextually relevant as you can, so the thinking process is the same…so the setting up situations which are more a simulation of what happens psychologically in the game as well as physically. (Ryan)

This was further demonstrated in the following quotation, where Ryan highlighted how the pressure of the performance environment can affect the performer's cognitions in relation to their skill execution:

> In something like golf where if you become more highly aroused or anxious, people start getting very technical with their swing. It's how do I do this, and numerous thoughts, and they get quite mechanical and jerky, they become more effortful and because it isn't a sport where you can place physical effort into the thing, you place that effort into thinking, and I do believe that.

The Need for Professional Judgment

In ascertaining a contextualized perspective of established practitioners' sport psychology practices, the inclusion of professional judgment and decision-making was advocated as an important underpinning factor. The following sub themes emerged within this superordinate theme: philosophical approach underpinning practice, importance of underlying cognitions, and advising in the technical development setting.

Philosophical approach underpinning practice. Participants initially discussed the importance of reflection as influencing effectiveness in their working context:

> I would say that the two biggest influences on my development have been knowledge and that ability to reflect on what I do and identify the key markers that make me more or less effective and try to change as a result of that. (Steve)

It was described by participants that those who adopt a reflective stance are willing to explore the assumptions that inform behavior, by making sense of experiences and increasing effectiveness. Having a network of professional psychologists to share these reflective experiences was emphasized as a crucial component of good practice: "The real value is having a wide network, both within and out of sport psychology, so a lot of my ideas about developing have come from clinical or organizational psychologists" (Jo).

All participants discussed their practice as being underpinned by a cognitive-behavioral stance. In addition, two participants stated they were predominantly cognitive-behaviorist in orientation, but aware of humanistic principles when interacting with clients, and one participant said they adopted a mixture of gestaltism, and cognitive-behavioral, depending on the athlete and situation they were in. Participants noted how professional judgment has influenced the philosophical approach they adopted in relation to their applied work in the elite environment:

> Beyond traditional performance enhancement type of techniques, I certainly started to look more deeply at the cognitive behavioral philosophy, as in really looking at the types of cognitions, and beliefs that athletes were possessing. (Paul)

The cognitive-behaviorist approach was the dominant philosophy expressed by these sport psychologists. Relative to this approach, and advising performers on the allocation of their thought processes, participants emphasized the importance of cognitions:

> It's a mix of further training and recognition of what's made a difference for those people I've worked with. I've been most effective when I've influenced the thoughts that the performers are having in relation to their performance. (Steve)

The types of thoughts were perceived to have differing impacts on performers, with this participant reflecting on how they are looking to influence them: "You're trying to displace those dysfunctional cognitions with more appropriate, controllable thoughts in order to help them to perform more successfully" (Ben). Implementing this approach required the allocation of cognitive-behavioral techniques. However, participants highlighted how the research can be misleading to the universal application of these preparation techniques:

> When you know the performers, if you've had consistent input with them, there's an element of where you've got professional judgment that you can go, 'Well that sort of strategy is never going to work for them, they're not going to take that on very easily, I'll try a different approach.' I would say most of them are effective in some way, shape or form and that's why I use them. (Lisa)

Importance of underlying cognitions. Cognitive-behavioral techniques were seen as an invaluable approach, but discussions also arose following the participants' experience with athletes requiring more fundamental changes in core beliefs to overcome performance-disrupting issues. The following quotation highlights how, through a process of professional judgment, Steve decided to engage in further training courses: "It was a desire to develop

myself, no one suggested it, I just tried to find something that I felt was going to take me to a different place in terms of my applied practice, extend my skillset." As a result of further training, a limitation to the traditional mental skills training (MST) approach was highlighted and a move towards rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1957):

> The first thing is the impact of beliefs, the training I did there reinforced the impact of that belief element and that certainly affects the types of approach I take with investigating the underpinning cognitive influences on a performer. (Paul)

The participants discussed how athletes can develop an ability to alter their beliefs; in addition, however, the 'disputational' nature of REBT was noted as requiring professional judgment:

> I'm always working with an eye to looking at how I can get a depth of change and that's probably going to come from the core beliefs than from the surface talk. If I can influence the core beliefs more fundamentally then that's where I'm aiming at really, it takes a bit more time and guts. (Steve)

Advising in the technical development setting. When discussing advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes within the training environment, participants debated whether they would have an input when it came to skill learning: "If they're learning, and I say 'if' because I don't meet that experience very much, coaches being open to saying 'come and help me' it doesn't happen that often" (Claire). Ultimately, this was perceived to either be dependent on the coaches the sport psychologists were working with, or how the athletes had already been taught the skills they possessed: "I think most of the time you're dealing with people who've been taught explicitly" (Lisa). Two different learning approaches were mentioned by the participants, which are conceptualized in the literature as explicit and implicit motor learning. However, this seemed to be a somewhat

questionable area, testing the participants' professional judgment regarding the transferability of implicit motor learning to the practice arena:

> Part of me still feels uneasy because part of me still doesn't know how to do it properly yet, I don't think there's enough, when we spoke about self-talk and imagery I could reel of 10-15 papers that specifically talk about interventions and what they did and how they did it, even though I'd like more of those, where as with the explicit-implicit it's very experimental in nature, it's talking about random-letter generation, it's constrained to particular activities. (Claire)

A further applied issue arose regarding the levels of training and education of the participants as to whether, through their professional judgment they felt competent advising in this technical development setting. Irrespective of knowledge base, however, this was perceived to be a somewhat challenging area for sport psychologists to advise coaches on:

> Very hard to make any in-roads with coaches in that area, and I guess from an applied perspective you've got to choose your battles. So you may see things going on which you think well that's contrary to the literature but it's probably going to take you back in trust and rapport with those key people because you're challenging something which is fundamental to their knowledge base. (Steve)

Participants acknowledged that the literature is only going to influence their practice to a certain extent and that, once again, a requirement for professional judgment was apparent: "While there are an increasing number of applied studies they can only provide a framework for you…it's then the professional skill to take the findings and apply it to the situation" (Tom). This was demonstrated in the following example, where participants noted that a potential discrepancy existed in the literature between the concepts of athletes being in an automated state, compared to feeling in conscious control when they are performing. Accordingly, this discrepancy required the participant's professional judgment and

consideration of the situation they were consulting in: "The principles of automaticity are absolutely inherent in what I do. It's almost like the purpose of training is to release from that motor and cognitive involvement" (Lisa). In opposition to automaticity where conscious activity is suppressed, participants also supported the preference for performer's to feel in control of their attentional resources:

> Actually you think, in a game, you think, you make decisions and then you…it's how you go from conscious to less conscious, and having that ability to use both. At some stage people want to feel in conscious control, don't they? (Jo)

Discussion

The current study extends literature by exemplifying a range of influences on best practice from experienced sport psychologists who are currently working in this field, and holds implications for the professional development of practitioners. Interpreted as a whole, the findings suggest literature underpinning professional practice, the importance of the sport setting and context, and the need for professional judgment influenced the sport psychologists' personal experiences of advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes. To a large extent, much of the reporting in our field is still saying 'what we did' as a form of sharing practice, so others can do this too. This type of reporting has served a valuable purpose, but to develop our field further we also need to consider 'why' practitioners are doing what they are doing (see Martindale & Collins, 2013). This paper specifically addressed this issue in relation to understanding the influences on applied sport psychologists, when advising elite performers on allocation of their thought processes.

As we seek to understand the most effective allocation of the thought processes for the sports performers we are working with, evidence-based practitioners require specific empirical literature to guide and inform professional practice. Through translational research, practitioners can ensure that the knowledge, research, and interventions will support one

another and advance the field as an applied discipline (Smith & Smoll, 2011). However, this notion of translational research is potentially challenged when noting the views expressed by the experienced practitioners currently working in the field. Specifically, participants articulated their dissatisfaction with the usefulness/effectiveness of the literature, resulting in some stating they use limited research from applied sport psychology to inform practice. Additionally, it was felt the academic journals were not always the best medium for conveying the applied consulting experiences of the practitioners.

In this regard, Silva, Conroy, and Zizzi (1999) believe that applied sport psychology has taken on two very different meanings. "One interpretation focuses on conducting applied research, while the second interpretation describes the application of sport psychology principles with clients" (p.301). In slight contrast, Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, and Robinson (2002) added that both the research-oriented and the practice-oriented branch of applied sport psychology influence and inform each other. The Anderson et al. (2002) viewpoint may be viewed as an idealistic epistemological stance, rather than a true reflection of our applied discipline, when taking into account the perspectives of the participants. Furthermore, there is a growing concern within the profession of sport psychology over whether we are providing evidence-driven models for understanding, conceptualizing, assessing, and intervening with athletes (cf. Gardner & Moore, 2006). Therefore, the reasons why literature in our domain is often not seen to inform practice, is something we feel requires further discussion.

The applied sport psychology work delivered from those practitioners who work in academia, is often not valued in the same vein as those publishing research. For example, the research excellence framework (REF) is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). The primary purpose of the REF is to produce assessment outcomes for each submission to inform the funding bodies' selective allocation

of their research funding to HEIs. On a similar note, research publications are usually the most important requirement for colleagues from the United States and Canada seeking to obtain the most prestigious, and the most coveted 'tenured' positions.

It seems that sport psychologists who wish to practice or apply their specialization could be differentiated from that of research specialists whose primary aims are related to REF/Tenure eligibility. Whether this is/would be a positive or negative differentiation is a topic for significant debate! Meanwhile, the contention underpinning this situation is that different aims within any scientific discipline generate distinctly different types of knowledge. In our field of sport psychology this relates to: psychology through, of, and for performance (Collins, 2008; Collins & Kamin, 2012). The more descriptive ideographic material from psychology 'for' performance knowledge is most likely to drive forward support-practitioner behavior, compared to psychology through, or of performance resulting in the generation of literature that is publication-focused rather than on the applied implications per se. The participants in this study expressed concern if their practice could not be evidence-based. However, as Cascio (2008) stated "to date, much of the effort by academics to reach out to practitioners has focused on the diffusion of scientific knowledge, not its creation. For genuine change to occur, it is necessary to promote much closer collaboration between academics and practitioners" (p.455). Gaining an understanding of how this knowledge underpins subsequent judgments and decisions that has the potential to offer significant insight into the construction of expertise in applied sport psychology, (Martindale & Collins, 2007) is an issue we will return to later in this section.

The experienced sport psychologists in this study acknowledged their consultation involved more than knowledge of techniques and cognitive strategies. It also required an understanding of the context in which they are consulting (i.e., knowing what to do, and how to do it) termed contextual intelligence (Brown, Gould, & Foster, 2005). Contextual

intelligence involves knowing the culture and context of the specific setting in which the individual operates, and is the foundation by which consultants earn legitimacy, trust, and respect, and is thereby considered a strong predictor of real-world success in professional practice (Terenzini, 1993). However, contextual intelligence is considered tacit knowledge, and so difficulties may exist in terms of verbalizing, teaching, and learning from this perspective (Brown et al., 2005).

This ide also holds implications for the professional development of sport psychologists. Tod, Andersen, and Marchant (2011) highlighted that it can often be difficult to fully prepare practitioners within a sterile learning environment and, therefore, it is likely that the necessary experiences for developing contextual intelligence can only be gained through practice. However, a disparity existed from the participants in this study as to the level of integration and immersion they held within their consulting contexts. This was seen as dependent on a number of factors including the sport environment, attitudes of the coaches towards that integration, nature of the consulting role (i.e. whether utilized in the practice environment) and whether the participants themselves felt competent advising in the technical development setting.

The influences on sport psychologists advising in the training environment, when athletes are learning, practicing, or technically developing their skills received the most uncertainty from the participants, compared to the preparation and competitive contexts. This was partly due to underpinning research areas such as implicit motor learning, which are experimental in nature and constrained to particular activities (Masters, 2000). Hence resulting in participants expressing unease with the application, due to a perceived lack of transferability to the high-performance sporting environment. Therefore, if contextual intelligence is the foundation by which sport psychologists earn legitimacy, trust, and respect,

a need for further research designed to be impactful in applied settings is greatly required (see Winter et al., 2014).

Contextual intelligence is typically associated with practical know-how that rarely is formally described or taught directly (Wagner, 1987). Rather than assuming that contextual intelligence is an unalterable tacit skill, however, the emphasis within our profession has been on developing skills that help the consultant provide contextually intelligent, and therefore culturally appropriate, interventions. In this regard, Terenzini's (1993) research has straightforward implications for sport psychology programs that seek to train intelligent performance, by providing frameworks for determining contextually appropriate interventions. However, as Brown et al. (2005) stated "there are few, if any, models for actually navigating the vicissitudes of the context in which performance occurs" (p.55). Our field therefore needs to better address contextual intelligence in continuing education and professional training programs, if we expect sport psychologists to engage in intelligent consultation, and aid their professional judgment.

Professional judgment and decision-making (PJDM) literature has an empirically based rationale and is already effectively used in other branches of mainstream psychology such as psychotherapy (e.g., Eells, 2002). The critical analysis and evaluation of PJDM in sport psychology however, is currently lacking formal content, method, and criteria against which to reflect (Martindale & Collins, 2007). The exploration of why sport psychology practitioners are doing what they are doing is an initial step in this direction. Interestingly, determining the factors that guide and influence the practitioners' professional judgment in this study were multifaceted, and certainly not generic across participants.

The case for engaging in reflective practice was reported, and has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004). However, by its very nature, reflective practice is a reactive process focusing on understanding what has

happened for the purpose of refining future practice (Martindale & Collins, 2007). Arguably, a more optimal approach is proactive thinking, involving foresight in anticipation of future decisions. Hence applied sport psychologists' professional judgment and subsequent decision-making can be defined as a proactive process (taking place before and refined during the event). Thus, in effect, PJDM has the capability to represent the entire perspective, which reflective practice is, arguably, unable to capture.

Pertinently to these ideas, Martindale and Collins (2013) highlighted this current gap in reflective practice; we have a tendency to reflect more so on 'what' we have done than 'why' we have done it. In addition, we could reflect on 'why' with greater complexity. The professional philosophy adopted by the practitioners was another influential factor influencing their subsequent judgments and decisions why specific interventions were applied in their practice (Stainback et al., 2007). The predominant philosophy utilized by the consultants was the cognitive-behavioral approach: a major premise being that athletes may need to learn cognitive strategies, through mental skills training (MST) to cope with the various demands of training and competition (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). However, a limitation to the traditional MST approach was reported through the participants' experience and a move towards REBT (Ellis, 1957).

Notably, the use of REBT is seldom documented in the sport psychology literature (Turner & Barker, 2014), even though the beliefs of athletes have an important influence on performance. The disputational nature of REBT was noted as particularly requiring the sport psychologists' professional judgment. In accordance with this approach, the participants deliberately challenged their clients, displaying characteristics that may be considered unfavorable but judged appropriate by the consultants (e.g., disputing the client's thoughts and core beliefs). However, this was deemed necessary if a depth of change was to be achieved, through investigating the underpinning cognitive influences on a performer.

Interestingly, it was the participants' own professional judgment to engage in this further training, not a requirement of their professional bodies (e.g., BPS, BASES).

It has been highlighted in this study that effective practice relies on the careful consideration of knowledge base, professional philosophy, and theoretical orientation adopted, client needs, past experience, and situational context, among other factors. Reflecting on PJDM encourages a deeper level of conceptualization and coherence of practice, providing a platform from which to further develop our expertise in providing applied sport psychology support (Martindale & Collins, 2013). A scenario-based approach could be adopted to incorporate the use of case studies in an attempt to facilitate the acquisition of decision-making expertise in applied practice. Furthermore, this information would indicate which areas require development, and be invaluable for the professional training of novice sport psychology practitioners.

While the present findings exemplify a range of influences on best practice from experienced sport psychologists who are currently working in this field, they are not without their limitations. The themes that emerged from the interviews represent the experiences of the current participants and not necessarily those of all practicing sport psychologists. Though an IPA analysis may not strive for generalizability, however, neither should it merely be the retelling of respondents' accounts (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Carradice, Shankland, and Beail (2002) believe that, when considering a qualitative study, the research should be evaluated by applicability of the concepts to other situations and to others involved in the phenomenon. The inductive nature of IPA allowed the authors to discuss their analysis in the light of varied existing psychological literature, and apply to both neophyte and professionals in the field.

Overall this study provides a valuable insight into the influences on practitioners' behavior, the role this plays when advising elite performers on allocation of their thought

processes and, how such advice is operationalized, and applied. It was demonstrated that literature, contextual intelligence, and professional judgment were the key factors influencing why sport psychologists do what they do. However, it was clearly conveyed that further research, designed to be impactful in the applied setting, and addressing the needs of the practitioners is needed if our discipline is to advance and remain as evidence-based. Furthermore, the sport psychologists who sometimes felt constrained by the rigidity imposed by the academic journals would welcome alternative methods of presenting the richer experiences of applied practice. Finally, we would advocate the importance of PJDM and developing contextual intelligence in continuing education and professional training programs of novice sport psychology practitioners.

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