

**STEWART JAMES BICKER**

**PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE IN SPORT AND EXERCISE PSYCHOLOGY PORTFOLIO**

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Liverpool John Moores University for  
the degree of Professional Doctorate in Health Psychology Submission for Examination:

August 2021

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## **Abstract**

The present portfolio gives account of the research and applied experiences of a Professional Doctorate Candidate at Liverpool John Moores University. Contained within are a range of research and applied works that aim to inform and develop the sport and exercise psychology field. In parallel, the portfolio encompasses the professional development of the primary author as a trainee sport psychologist, and their journey to individuation (McEwan et al., 2019).

The portfolio contains three applied case studies and one teaching case study. The consultancy case studies demonstrate a wide range of psychological interventions from a variety of psychological schools. The first case study concerns an acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) intervention that is rooted in the school of cognitive behavioural psychology. The second is an existential approach to the consultancy that centres around the subjective lived experience of the client. These case studies contain unique outcomes that aim to provide informative and thoughtful implications for both the discipline of sport psychology and sport psychology practitioners. Within the present portfolio is a meta-study that aims to both develop and broaden the present body of organisational psychology literature, and provide insights into sport professionals' work-life balance, a concept that has become increasingly popular over the years. Two empirical studies, one concerning exercise dependency in CrossFit, and the other, a narrative exploration of athletes' return to sport following the COVID-19 pandemic, also demonstrate a variety of research skill and competencies required of the candidate.

Readers of this portfolio will also gain some insight into the philosophical development of the candidate throughout their professional doctorate enrolment. Ontological and epistemological positionings are examined, challenged, and subsequently evolve throughout the portfolio. In particular, the author demonstrates their development from a positivist/post-positivist to a constructivist paradigm concerning their underpinning philosophical paradigm. This development is also paralleled in their consultancy practice, where the practitioner's consultancy values move from a practitioner-led, performance focused lens to a person centred, client led consultancy style. This process of individuation

is examined through commentary and reflections, where the candidate seeks to understand their values and beliefs and face up to challenges associated in their development.

## **Declaration**

I confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with the publication of this professional doctorate.

I can confirm that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the following people, as without their support, this would have not been possible: James and Hazel Bicker, Mum and Dad, thank you for everything. Thank you for your love and support over the many years, thank you for supporting me and encouraging me to pursue my dreams and ambitions, and thank you for always believing in me. Emma and Mike Alexander; you two have been so kind, patient, and supportive of me even in my darkest of hours. Without your kindness and support, I could not have achieved this portfolio.

Thank you to the staff at Liverpool John Moores University for their support. Thank you to Martin Eubank, David Tod, Zoe Knowles, Joe Causer. You all provided the support, challenge, and opportunities that ultimately led me to be the practitioner I am today. I also thank you for your patience and understanding over what has been a very challenging three and a half years.

Finally, thank you to my colleagues and friends. I have learned so much from all of you. Working alongside you all conducting our research has been one of the highlights of my career to date and I look forward to what the future holds for all of us. Without you all, this portfolio would not be what it is and for that, I am eternally grateful.

## Professional Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology



### Practice Logbook

Please record all your Consultancy, Research, Dissemination and Professional Standards (incl. CPD) activity below

<b>Professional Standards (incl. CPD)</b>					
<b>Client details</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date(s)</b>	<b>Nature of the activity</b>	<b>Contact Hours</b>	<b>Placement Host details (if applicable)</b>
	Liverpool John Moores	05/02/2018	Prof Doc Session	1 Day	
	Liverpool John Moores	15/03/2018	Prof Doc Session	1 Day	
	Milton Keynes Open University	22/03/2018	Mental Health in Sport Conference	1 Day	
	LJMU	09/04/2018	Randex Health in Sport Seminar	1 Day	
	Manchester Metropolitan	27 & 28/04/2018	TASS TALS level 3	2 Days	
	Home	11/05/2018	Safeguarding online course	3 hrs	TASS
	Home	11/05/2018	UKAD advisor course	2 hrs	TASS
TASS	Manchester Metropolitan	17 & 18/05/2018	TASS TALS level 3	2 Days	TASS
TASS	London BPS	27/06/2018	Mental Health in Sport Conference	1 Day	BPS
	Staffordshire University	03/10/2018	Performance Psychology Conference	1 Day	

	Quaker meeting house	25 & 26/10/2018	Intermediate ACT course w/ Dr Ross White and Dr Ray Owen	2 Days	
LJMU	LJMU	November	3 Is Teacher Training	3 Days	LJMU
	Sheffield Hallam University	28/02/2019	Mental Health First Aid	1 Day	TASS
	LJMU	28/03/2019	Prof Doc Session – Jeff Breckon – MI	1 Day	
DSEP	Leeds Beckett University	05/04/2019	DSEP Northern Hub Bi-Annual Conference	1 Day	DSEP
TASS	TASS	09/05/2019	TASS Practitioner Conference	1 Day	TASS
LJMU	LJMU	10/05/2019	Power of Sport Conference	1 Day	LJMU
			Supporting Champions webinar; Buy In with Steve Ingham	1 Hr	
		26/06/2019	Sport Psychology MSc Development day	1 Day	
		27/06/2019	Prof Doc Session – Mark Nesti	1 Day	
		03/10/2019	Prof Doc Session	1 Day	
		17/10/2019	Prof Doc Session	1 Day	
		31/10/2019	Prof Doc Session – Rob and Chris	1 Day	
		28/11/2019	Prof Doc Session – Rob Harris & Emily Cartigny (ERASMUS+)	1 Day	
		12/12/2019	Prof Doc Session	1 Day	
LJMU	LJMU	24/01/2020	David Tod – Autoethnography	3 Hours	LJMU
	LJMU	30/01/2020	Prof Doc Session – Volunteer Presentations	1 Day	
UKAD	Durham University	18/02/2020 & 19/02/2020	UKAD Educator Course	2 days	
	LJMU	26/03/2020	Prof Doc Session	1 Day	
AASP		16/04/2020	Technology in sport webinar	2 hours	

Martin Verner		23/04/2020	REBT webinar	2 hours	
		28/05/2020	Prof Doc Session – Paula Watson	3 Hours	
		25/06/2020	Prof Doc Session	3 Hours	
APT Online Training	Online	August 2020	Motivational interviewing and How to Use it effectively	18 Hours	Online
		29/10/2020	Prof Doc Session – Mike Rotheram	3 Hours	
		10/12/2020	Prof Doc Session – Open Forum	3 Hours	
UKAD	UKAD	12/01/2021	2021 Code Education Webinar	30 Mins	Online
		28/01/2021	Prof Doc Session- Paula Watson (Exercise Interventions)	3 Hours	
		25/02/2021	Prof Doc Session - Amy Whitehead (TA)	3 Hours	
		04/03/2021	MIND seminar – when exercise becomes a problem	1.5 hours	
		25/03/2021	Prof Doc Session – Laura Carey	3 Hours	
		April 2021	BASES Mental Health in Sport Online Resources -Mental Health -Depression -Anxiety -PTSD -Eating Disorders -Addictive Behaviours -Mental Health Stigma -Mental Health Literacy	6 Hours	

Please insert additional rows as appropriate

<b>Consultancy</b>					
<b>Client details</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date(s)</b>	<b>Nature of the activity</b>	<b>Contact Hours</b>	<b>Placement Host details (if applicable)</b>
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	LJMU	01/02/2018	Meeting with eRacing team at LJMU. Team are required to present a case to governing body to support a racing excellence program. Sport psychology needed to a) justify how sport psychology can help motor racing. b) provide a bronze, silver, bronze sport psychology practice. Deadline June.	1hr	
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	Home	02/02/2018	Emailed X (cc Bernice) about potential for meeting with team and support team next week.		
LJMU e-racing team	LJMU	22/03/2018	Client needs analysis. Focus group semi-structured interview questions. Support/intervention to be implemented May time due to exams	1 hr	
TASS TALS	CETL reception	19/04/2018	Meeting with DM regarding TASS TALS course and needs of athlete's programme.	30 mins	
J18s	WRC	09/05/2018	Initial meet and greet with Warrington rowing club J18s and coach. Observation of training and meeting the players.	2.5 hr	WRC
J18s	WRC				

J18s	WRC	16/05/2018	Observation of training at Warrington Rowing Club	2.5 Hrs	WRC
J18s	WRC	19/05/2018	1 to 1 initial intake with X & Y	1 Hr	WRC
J18s	WRC	30/05/2018	Observation of training at Warrington Rowing Club	4 Hrs	WRC
J18s	WRC	02/06/2018	1to1 intake with X & Y	2 Hrs	WRC
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	04/06/2018	Simulator Demonstration	1 Hr	LJMU
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	20/06/2018	Introductory Intervention Presentation	2 Hrs	LJMU
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	21/06/2018	Practice run through to make sure all equipment and tasks were plausible	2 Hrs	LJMU
WRC	WRC	25/06/2018	Meeting with X and Y and coach to discuss recent injury to one of the other team members.	2 Hrs	WRC
WRC	WRC	02/07/2018	1-2-1 with Z and W.	2 Hrs	WRC
WRC	WRC	09/07/2018	1-2-1 with Z and W.	1.5 Hrs	WRC
TASS	Exchange station	10/07/2018	Meeting with David to discuss placement opportunities.	1 Hr	TASS
WRC	Nottingham Watersports Centre	21 & 22/07/2018	Junior National championships	2 Days	WRC
TASS	CETL centre	24/07/2018	Initial needs meeting with Emily	1 Hr	TASS
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	06/08/2018	First day intervention dual task.	4 Hours	LJMU
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	16/08/2018	Dual task intervention	2 Hrs	LJMU
TASS	CETL centre	23/08/2018	Meeting with Carl (head of S+C)	1 Hr	TASS
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	29/08/2018	Dual task intervention	2 Hrs	LJMU

LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	03/09/2018	Dual task intervention	2 Hrs	LJMU
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	06/09/2018	Dual task intervention	2 Hrs	LJMU
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	10/09/2018	Dual task intervention	4 Hrs	LJMU
TASS	Exchange Station	12/09/2018	Meeting with DM to review TASS course and discuss details of placement.	1 Hr	TASS
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	17/09/2018	Video review and simulator practice – A and B	3 Hrs	LJMU
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	28/09/2018	Dual task intervention (A), video review C and D	3 Hrs	LJMU
WRC	Runcorn Rowing Club	29/09/2018	Runcorn racing competition, 2 J18s and 1 J14	1 Day	WRC
WRC	WRC	06/09/2018	W needs analysis, performance profile	1 Hour	WRC
TASS	CETL reception	08/10/2018	Catch up, discussion of support network	30 mins	TASS
LJMU e-Racing Team	LJMU	12/10/2018	Mid intervention focus group	2 Hours	LJMU
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	CETL reception	31/10/2018	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> initial needs meeting w/ Sarah (parent)	30 mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	CETL reception	31/10/2018	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> initial needs meeting w/ N (parent)	30 mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	CETL reception	02/11/2018	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> initial needs and intro	30 mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	CETL reception	02/11/2018	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> initial needs and intro w/ parent	30 Mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	CETL reception	02/11/2018	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> initial needs and intro	30 Mins	TASS

<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	CETL reception	02/11/2018	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> initial needs and intro	30 mins	TASS
WRC	WRC	03/11/2018	L psychoeducation on MAC, anxiety, and its influence on performance	15 mins	WRC
WRC	WRC	03/11/2018	E performance profile	15 mins	WRC
WRC	WRC	14/11/2018	L 1-2-1 meeting re: injury	15 mins	WRC
WRC	WRC	14/11/2018	E 1-2-1 meeting re: competition and thoughts diary	15 mins	WRC
WRC	WRC	21/11/2018	L 1-2-1 Xray results, next steps, plans, and discussion of thoughts and feelings around rowing whilst injured.	1 Hour	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	06/12/2018	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> Initial needs and intro	30 Mins	TASS
Inverclyde Goliaths American Football Team	Greenock Wanderers RFC	13/01/2019	Values based workshop	2 Hrs	
WRC	WRC	19/01/2019	1-2-1 w/ E, G, and H.	2 Hrs	WRC
Leaf on Bold St.	LJMU	23/01/2019	Undergrad breakfast and meeting	1 Hr	LJMU
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	24/01/2019	Goal setting psychoeducation session.	30 Mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	25/01/2019	Goal setting psychoeducation session.	30 Mins	TASS
H	WRC	26/01/2019	1-2-1	20 Mins	WRC
G	WRC	26/01/2019	1-2-1	15 Mins	WRC
E	WRC	02/02/2019	1-2-1. [also met with Hannah S&C MSc LJMU placement]	10 Mins	WRC
Zoe Knowles	LJMU	04/02/2019	MSc Warrington Placement interviews	30 Mins	LJMU/WRC

<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	12/02/2019	1-2-1	45 Mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	16/02/2019	1-2-1	15 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	16/02/2019	1-2-1 Intake	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	16/02/2019	1-2-1	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	16/02/2019	1-2-1 Intake	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	20/02/2019	1-2-1	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	20/02/2019	1-2-1	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	20/02/2019	1-2-1 Intake	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	20/02/2019	1-2-1 Intake	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	22/02/2019	Lifestyle update	30 Mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	27/02/2019	1-2-1 Intake	30 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	02/03/2019	1-2-1 (MISSED)		WRC
Martin Eubank	LJMU	05/03/2019	Catch up. Ethics form discussion. General consultancy advice.	15 Mins	LJMU
Michaela (pseudonym)	WRC	06/03/2019	1-2-1 intro to act	30 mins	WRC
Michaela (pseudonym)	WRC	13/03/2019	1-2-1 ACT hexiflex	30 mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	13/03/2019	1-2-1 Intake	30 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	15/03/2019	Lifestyle Update	30 Mins	WRC

LJMU	Undergrad group one	15/03/2019	Preparation for rowing competition presentation by undergrad group 1. [supervisor role]	2 Hrs	WRC
Support staff meeting	TASS	19/02/2019	Review of athletes, and engagement levels	1 HR	TASS
Michaela	WRC	20/03/2019	1-2-1 ACT – Values	20 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	20/03/2019	1-2-1 General discussion, time keeping and management, ACT discussion	10 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	22/03/2019	1-2-1 Update	30 Mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	22/03/2019	1-2-1 Update	30 Mins	TASS
Undergraduates	LJMU	22/03/2019	Support at Warrington for cohort 2 “Cohesion” workshop	2 Hrs	WRC
G	WRC	23/03/2019	1-2-1 Catch up	15 Mins	WRC
LJMU	PROF DOC	28/03/2019	MI workshop	1 Day	LJMU
Michaela	WRC	30/03/2019	Values	30 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	30/03/2019	Behaviour change intro, exploring readiness and confidence in change	30 Mins	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	06/04/2019	Introduction to ACT	30 Mins	WRC
Northwich Rowing Club	WRC	07/04/2019	Race Day (observation)	1 Day	WRC
WRC	WRC	10/04/2019	WRC training (observation; E & G)	2 hrs	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	13/04/2019	1-2-1 CBT/ACT discussion	1 hr	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	13/04/2019	Observation with Ella/Zoe Knowles	1 Hr	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	16/04/2019	1-2-1 Discussion of future potential careers. Transferrable skills.	30 Mins	TASS

WRC/LJMU	WRC	April	1 HR contact and work towards GB rowing development pillars.	1 HR	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	02/05/2019	1-2-1/ intro to transitions	30 Mins	TASS
WRC/LJMU	WRC	08/05/2018	MSc meet and greet w/ Zoe Knowles at Warrington	1 HR	WRC
WRC/LJMU	WRC	08/05/2018	Creation of coaches' interview questions for BR pathway	1 HR	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	15/05/2019	1-2-1	30 mins	WRC
WRC/LJMU	WRC	15/05/2019	MSc Placement visit	1 HR	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	18/05/2019	1-2-1	30 Mins	WRC
Michaela	WRC	18/05/2019	1-2-1	30 Mins	WRC
T	WRC/LJMU	20/05/2019	Meeting	30 Mins	WRC
Martin Eubank	LJMU	20/05/2019	Meeting – WRC, Research	1 HR	LJMU
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>		24/05/2019	Constultancy prep Reading – association/dissociation self efficacy (rowing) WRC interview questions	6 hrs	
WRC	WRC	28/05/2019	Michaela and <i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> consultancy prep Perfectionism reading		
WRC		29/05/2019	WRC Travel (Cancelled)	2 Hrs	
Michaela	WRC	30/05/2019	Michaela – ACT refresher	1 Hr	
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	30/05/2019	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> – ACT refresher	1 Hr	
WRC/LJMU	WRC	31/05/2019	MSc Sport Psych emails		
WRC/LJMU	WRC	03/06/2019	Warrington MSc and Talent Development emails, work.	2 hrs	

WRC/LJMU	WRC	04/06/2019	Meeting with Zoe, MScs and Tansy – BR development	1 hr	
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	05/06/2019	PMR and breathing techniques Reading Consultancy	2 hrs	WRC
Michaela	WRC	12/06/2019	ACT consultation	1 hr	WRC
WRC/LJMU	WRC/LJMU	18/06/2019	Meeting with MSc students to finalise BR development framework questions	1 Hr	LJMU
WRC/LJMU	WRC/LJMU	10/07/2019	Meeting with Zoe and MSc Students	1 Hr	LJMU
WYR/LJMU	WYR/LJMU	12/07/2019	Warrington Youth Rowing meeting with R and David Todd.	1 Hr	LJMU
WRC	Nottingham	22 & 23/07/2019	British junior rowing national championships (observation of j14/15 j16s)	2 days	WRC
Michaela	WRC	03/08/2019	1-2-1	1 hr	WRC
Michaela	WRC	17/08/2019	1-2-1 recap	1 hr (4 hours background preparation for future sessions)	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	28/08/2019	1-2-1 (did not show)	2 hour (preparation and waiting)	TASS
WRC	WRC	04/09/2019	J14/15 Team meeting with parents	2 Hours	WRC
Michaela	WRC	07/09/2019	Psycho-educational session FUSION	1 Hr	WRC
David Tod	LJMU	09/09/2019	Meeting with David to discuss research and systematic review	30 mins	LJMU
T			Review and discussion of WRC performance pathway project	30 Mins	LJMU
DM	TASS	20/09/2019	Discussion of upcoming cohort of TASS athletes	30 Mins	LJMU

J14/15 WRC	WRC	21/09/2019	Introductory meet and greet to discuss Mental Skills workshop	30 Mins	WRC
J14/15 WRC	WRC	29/09/2019	TEACHING CASE STUDY - Mental Skills Session 1: Introduction to Sport Psychology and Goal Setting	1 Hr	WRC
Megan (pseudonym)		15/10/2019	Initial Consultation	1 Hr	Costa
WRC	WRC	17/10/2019	Teaching case study session 2 preparation	3 hrs	LJMU
J14/15	WRC	21/10/2019	TEACHING CASE STUDY – Mental skills session 2: Stress, Anxiety and Performance	1 Hr	WRC
TASS	TASS	22/10/2019	Initial Lifestyle advisor meeting with DM -community -enterprise -career	1 Hr	CETL
J14/15	WRC	01, 02/11/2019	Teaching Case study – Imagery preparation	3 Hrs	
J14/15	WRC	04/11/2019	TEACHING CASE STUDY- Mental skills session 3: Imagery	1 Hr	WRC
J14/15	WRC	19,20/11/2019	Workshop prep on confidence	2 hrs	
Bolton Uni	Bolton Uni	20/11/2019	Case study lecture prep	2 hrs	
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	21/11/2019	Initial needs introductory session	30 mins	TASS
J14/15	WRC	16/12/2019	Session 3.5 – mental skills recap	1 hr	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	17/12/2019	Dual career tool session	30 mins	TASS
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	13/01/2020	Catch up	1 hr	WRC
LJMU/WRC	LJMU/WRC	15/01/2020	Applied sport psychology clinic with undergrads		

TASS	TASS	15/01/2020	Discussion of injury and dual career	30 mins	TASS
J14/15	WRC	20/01/2020	Teaching case study	1 Hr	WRC
LJMU/WRC	LJMU/WRC	22/01/2020	Meeting with undergrads/placement meeting Leaf on Bold St.	3 hours	LJMU/WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	22/01/2020	Dual career tool online, discussion around strengths and opportunities	30 mins	TASS
WRC	WRC	01/02/2020	General visit to WRC. Discussion with <i>[removed for confidentiality]</i> . Attempt at discussion with Grace concerning wellbeing.	2 Hours	WRC
LJMU/WRC	LJMU/WRC	05/02/2020	ASP clinic – undergrad placement	1 hour	
Michaela	WRC	06/02/2020	Observation of training	2 Hours	
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	11/03/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	30 mins	TASS
Michaela	WRC	12/03/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 Hour	WRC
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	TASS	13/03/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	30 mins	TASS
Martin Eubank	LJMU	24/03/2020	Supervisory meeting	1 hour	
TASS	Lifestyle meeting	2/04/2020	Lifestyle meeting discussing covid and coping for dual career athletes	1 hour	
LJMU	Undergraduate placement students	2/04/2020	Supervisory meeting discussing student's final placement experience and write up	1 hour	
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	03/04/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	WRC	08/04/2020	Prep (practice programme) and consultancy prep (ACT)	2 hours	
	Martin Eubank	09/04/2020	Supervisory meeting		

Michaela	WRC	15/04/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Michaela	WRC	24/04/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Michaela	WRC	1/05/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Megan		05/05/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
	Martin Eubank	06/05/2020	Supervisory meeting		
Michaela	WRC	11/05/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Megan		15/05/2020	1-2-1 consultancy (CLINICAL REFERRAL)	1.5 hours	
	Martin Eubank	15/05/2020	Supervisory meeting (referral)	1 hour	
Michaela	WRC	19/05/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Michaela	WRC	26/05/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Michaela	WRC	02/06/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Michaela	WRC	17/06/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 hour	
Fury	LJMU Fury	28/06/2020	Coach Development Webinar - Reflection	1 Hour	
Megan		11/07/2020	1-2-1 (Referral)	1 Hour	
	Marin Eubank	16/10/2020	Supervisory Meeting (general)	1 Hour	
	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	10/11/2020	1-2-1 consultancy	1 Hour	
	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	27/11/2020	MDT meeting	1 Hour	
	Martin Eubank	11/01/2021	Supervisory Meeting (portfolio and general)	30 Mins	
TASS	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	19/01/2021	1-2-1 Consultancy	1 Hour	
TASS	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	January 2021	General lifestyle support via emails	3 Hours	
TASS	<i>[removed for confidentiality]</i>	15/02/2021	MDT meeting	1 Hour	
WRC	Psych Team	06/05/2021	WRC psych team meeting	1 Hour	

<b>Research</b>					
<b>Client details</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date(s)</b>	<b>Nature of the activity</b>	<b>Contact Hours</b>	<b>Placement Host details (if applicable)</b>
	LJMU 1.06	25/09/2018	Meeting w/ Joe Causer to discuss eRacing Sim study, eye tracking technology, and the impact of anxiety and mastery level of motor athletes compared to regular drivers.	30 mins	
	SKYPE	28/09/2018	Meeting w/ David Tod to discuss exercise dependence, scales to use, and the potential correlates of exercise dependence (body image, esteem, reasons for exercise)	30 mins	
	LJMU 1.06	09/11/2018	Meeting with Joe Causer to further discuss research, shown around lab and shown eye tracking glasses.	30 mins	
	TRB 134	22/11/2018	Meeting with David Tod to discuss exercise dependence, next steps, ethics form etc.	15 mins	
	LJMU Sp and Ex. Psych Lab	05/12/2018	Meeting with Joe Causer to be shown demonstration of eye tracking glasses.	30 mins	
	LJMU SP and EX Psych Lab	04/04/2019	Quantitative analysis	1 hr	
	Ethics Submission – Exercise Dependence	February/March 2019	Completion of Ethics form	10 hrs	

	Ethics Resubmission	25/04/2019	Resubmission of ethics form	3 hrs	
	SurveyMonkey	03/05/2019	Creation of questionnaire	5 hrs	
	Facebook	21/02/2019	Contacting boxes	2 hrs	
	CrossFit recruitment	23/05/2019	Emails	1 Hr	
	CrossFit recruitment	24/05/2019	Facebook	2 hrs	
	CrossFit recruitment	25/05/2019	Facebook	1 hr	
	CrossFit recruitment	27/05/2019	Facebook	2 hrs	
			Discussion with Laura around participants not responding to certain questions. Mandatory vs voluntary responses.	10 mins	
	CrossFit recruitment	30/05/2019	Facebook	1 Hr	
	CrossFit recruitment	1-3/06/2019	Facebook	4 hrs	
	Systematic review	31/05/2019	Systematic review – synchronous music and performance in sport and exercise	3 hrs	
	CrossFit recruitment	04/05/2019	Facebook	2hrs	
	CrossFit recruitment	05/06/2019	Facebook	1 hr	
	CrossFit Recruitment	06/06/2019	Facebook	3 hrs	
	Reading	06/06/2019	Work family balance potential research reading	2 hrs	
	CrossFit Recruitment	10/06/2019	Facebook	2 hrs	

	CrossFit Recruitment	11/06/2019	Facebook	1 Hr	
	CrossFit Recruitment	17/06/2019	Email	4 Hrs	
	CrossFit Recruitment/ <i>end of CrossFit recruitment period</i>	18/06/2019	Email	2 Hrs	
	CrossFit Research	20-30/06/2019	Statistical Analysis Meeting with Joe Causer	8 hours 1 Hour	
	Research	10-15/06/2019	Reading; Exercise Dependence, reasons for exercise, esteem, body satisfaction, satisfaction with with	8 Hours	
	CrossFit Stats	15/06/2019-05/08/2019	Data analysis	16 hours	
	CrossFit stats	05-10/08/2019	Data analysis	10 hours	
	CrossFit write up	10-16/08/2019	Write up	10 hours	
	Systematic review	26-30/08/2019	Background reading on work life balance, work life conflict	8 hours	
	CrossFit write up	03/09/2019	Continued writing (Strobe checklist and formatting)	4 hours	
	Meeting Jan Burrel	02/09/2019	Online databases tutorial	30 mins	
	Systematic review	10/09/2019	Database search and collation of papers	5 hours	
	Systematic review	11/09/2019	Removed by title	4 Hours	
	Systematic Review	16/09/2019	Removed by title	5 Hours	
	CrossFit	17/09/2019	Estimation of population sample (72k)	1 hour	

	Systematic Review	17/09/2019	Removal by abstract	4 hours	
	Systematic review	18/09/2019	Removal by abstract	2 Hours	
	Systematic Review	19/09/2019	Removal by full text	4 Hours	
	Systematic Review	20/09/2019	Meeting with David Tod Discussion points; - S&C and Sport Psychology - Potential for S&C research in practitioner development - Potential for S&C Psychology teaching case study CrossFit research	-	
	Systematic Review	30/09/2019	Removed by full text and hand search/pearlgrow	4 Hours	
	Systematic review/empirical research	02/10/2019	Meeting with David Tod re: systematic review full text review and discussion on empirical paper “population size”	30 Mins	
	Systematic review	09/01/2020 & 10/01/2020 & 11/01/2020 & 12/01/2020	Full text review	13 hours	
	Systematic Review	14/01/2020	Full text review	5 hours	
	Research	16/01/2020	Meeting with David Tod, IPA vs Narrative	1 Hr	
	Research	27/01/2020	Meeting David Tod. Narrative research, ethics	1 hour	

	Research	11/02/2020	Meeting David Tod. Epistemology and Ontology in Narrative research.	1 hour	
	Systematic review	10/03/2020	Theory driven research, meta theory	2 hours	
	Work life balance (WLB) Narrative study	31/03/2020	Pilot study	1 hour	
	Work life balance (WLB) Narrative study	03/04/2020	Pilot study	1 hour	
	Narrative study (COVID)	07/04/2020	Meeting	1 hour	
	David Tod	08/04/2020	Supervisory meeting	1 hour	
	Narrative Study (COVID)	15/04/2020	Meeting	1 hour	
	Systematic review	15/04/2020		1 hour	
	Ethics submission (COVID)	15/04/2020		1 hour	
	Ethics submission (COVID)	20/04/2020		3 hours	
	Systematic review	20/04/2020		2 hours	
	COVID narrative meeting	21/04/2020		1 hour	
	Grant application (COVID)	23/04/2020		2 hours	
	Systematic review	24/04/2020		2 hours	

	Systematic review	27/04/2020		2 hours	
	Narrative COVID meeting	27/04/2020		1 hours	
	Systematic review	28/04/2020		4 hours	
	Systematic review	29/04/2020	2 <sup>nd</sup> search	2 hours	
	Systematic review	30/04/2020		5 hours	
David Tod		04/05/2020	Supervisory meeting	1 hour	
	Narrative (1)– COVID	04/05/2020	Data collection – Interview JB	1 hour	
	Narrative (1) – COVID	04/05/202	Data collection – Interview EC	1 hour	
	Narrative(1) – COVID	11/05/2020	transcription		
	Narrative(1) – COVID	15/05/2020	Transcription and transcript reading	2 hours	
	Narrative (1)– COVID	15/05/2020	Transcript reading	2 hours	
	Narrative(1) – COVID	27/05/2020	Transcript reading and analysis		
	Narrative (1)Study write up	16/06/2020	Methods write up	1 day	
	Narrative (1)study write up	17/06/2020	Methods write up	2 hours	
	Narrative (1)study write up	19/06/2020	Methods write up	2 hours	
	Narrative (2) data collection	26/09/2020	Data collection	2 Hours	

	Transcription	27-28/09/2020	Transcription	4 Hours	
	Narrative (2) Data collection	20/10/2020	Data collection	2 Hours	
	Transcription	22-23/10/2020	Transcription	5 Hours	
	Data Collection	16/11/2020	Data Collection	2 Hours	
	Transcription	October 2020	Transcription	20 Hours	
	Thematic analysis	November 2020	Reading and theme development	3 Days	
	Narrative structure	November 2020	Reading and narrative structure development		
	Write up	December 2020	Write up of Empirical paper 2		
	Meeting – Nick	11/01/2021	Peer reflection and paper (2) review	1 Hour	
	Narrative (2)Study	11/01/2021	Amendments	5 Hours	
	Narrative (2)study	12/01/2021	Amendments	5 Hours	
	Narrative (2)Study	15/01/2021	Amendments	1 Hours	
	Narrative (2)Study	18/01/2021	Amendments	1 Hour	
	Narrative (2)Study Submission	19/01/2021	Submission to The Sport Psychologist	2 Hours	
	Narrative (2)Study	14/03/2021	Alterations to manuscript per Reviewer comments	4 Hours	
	Narrative (2)Study	16/03/2021	Submission of manuscript to Psychology of Sport and Exercise	3 Hours	
	Systematic Review	March 2021	Systematic review writing and amendments	32 Hours	
	Systematic review	February and March	Write up	150 Hours	
	Meta Reflection	April	Write up and reading	20 Hours	

<b>Dissemination</b>					
<b>Client details</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date(s)</b>	<b>Nature of the activity</b>	<b>Contact Hours</b>	<b>Placement Host details (if applicable)</b>
		11/04/2019	Contact of P S, coach of the u16s Merseyside American football team re: educational psychology workshops.		
		23/05/2019	Prof Doc Session – Clinical and Cognite business	1 Day	
		02/05/2019	Strength and Conditioning Workshop -reading	2 hrs	
		20/06/2019	Meeting with Martin Eubank – discussion points; - WRC annual review - Consultancy - Research - Prof Doc Extension	30 Mins	
‘Coach’	WRC	29/06/2019	Meeting with ‘Coach’ -interview for British Rowing Pathway	1 Hr	WRC
		27/06/2019	Prof Doc Session – Mark Nesti, Existentialism in pro football	3 hrs	
	WRC	02/07/2019	Transcribing British Rowing Interview	1 Day	WRC
J14/15	WRC	23/09/2019	Teaching Case study planning and preparation (MST)	1 Day	WRC
J14/15	WRC	24&25&26/09/2019	Teaching literature reading	8 Hours	WRC
LJMU, Football Science BSc	3is	30/09/2019	Lecture observation – Rob Morris	1.5 Hours Observation , 1 Hour Observation reflection	LJMU
WRC/LJMU	Pillars project	01/10/2019	Collation of themes	4 Hours	LJMU

WRC/LJMU	Pillars project	03/04/05/08 10/19	Collation of themes	8 Hours total	LJMU
LJMU	Level 6 SpExPsych students	10/10/2019	Presentation of case study to level 6 students	2 hrs	Prof Zoe Knowles
WRC/LJMU	Pillars project	15/10/2019	Collation of themes	4 Hours	LJMU
Bolton University	Case Study lecture - Michaela	05/12/2019	Case study presentation to level 6 coaching students on module “sport psychology, theory to practice”	2 Hours	Bolton University
WRC	COVID19 and Warrington rowing club	07-15/06/2020	Creation of return to sport document	6 hours	WRC
TASS	TASS	28/10/2020	Athletes Experiences of Lockdown	1 Hour	TASS
	Amy Whitehead (Book)	June 2020	Myths of Sport Psych reading for book chapter	10 Hours	
	Amy Whitehead (Book)	September 2020	Myths of Sport Psych writing for book chapter	4 Hours	
	Amy Whitehead (Book)	October 2020	Myths of Sport Psych writing and review	8 Hours	
BPS	DSEP Virtual Conference	16-17 Dec 2020	Creation of video in disseminating Whitcomb-Khan et al. (2021) paper	2 Hours	
TASS	TASS	30/04/2021	Return to Sport Following Lockdown	1 Hour	

## **Reflective Diary**

### **Professional Standards and Ethics**

#### **Addressing Suicide Disclosure within WRC (25/02/2020)**

I was told yesterday by Zoe that during the undergraduate presentation on preparation towards race day, a task was administered by the students, 'ways that would not help you best prepare before a competition'. In response, one of the J16 rowers had said that 'suicide' would be an unhelpful strategy in race day preparation.

At first, I was surprised to hear that such a comment had been made. I had not been made aware by the undergraduates of such a comment following the meeting (I was present but situated outside the glass partition doors), and none of the undergraduates had contacted me since. I considered some of the possible options about why such a comment was made in front of the squad presentation. The individual who made the comment was male and the age group was 16 and under. This could have been an attempt to be funny or make a joke within the session. However, I could not assume that the comment was made as a joke and did not rule out the possibility of a cry for help. I was aware of the potential risks for additional stressors impacting on mental health as a consequence of sport (Roberts et al., 2016). Regardless, after discussion with Zoe, I had agreed to follow up the second undergraduate cohort with a short discussion around the comments made.

It was very helpful to me that the groups had been split into male and female. I knew that the individual who made the comment was in the male group. As I did not work at the time with the J16 squad, I explained to both squads who I was and what I did there at Warrington. I explained that during the preparation task last week suicide was mentioned. I explained that suicide is a subject that warrants addressing. As a member of the support staff and someone who works in sport psychology suicide should be discussed freely if we are to

address the stigma around mental health, and that if any of those present feel the need to reach out for themselves or are concerned about someone else, to approach me or any other coaches or staff members. We would be happy to help and refer to the relevant services. The athletes themselves seemed to be receptive to my comments about mental health and the offer of signposting services myself.

Going forward, I should aim to develop more of a rapport with the undergraduate or masters placement students so they might feel more comfortable with disclosing their sessions with me. They may have felt that such a comment would be best addressed to Zoe, but perhaps didn't recognise that as the resident sport psychologist, I would be the one likely need to address to subject with the group.

In the future, I will continue to look out for possible signs of mental ill health, follow the safeguarding protocol, and keep regular contact with the coaches to check if they have any concerns for any of the athletes that I do not have access to. This experience also stirred concerns that perhaps I had to address mental health stigma and mental health literacy within the club. At the time I had predominantly been working at an individual and squad level. I will endeavour to expand my services to assist in developing the mental health literacy (Gorczyński et al., 2019) from stakeholders down to individual athletes so that similar incidences might be better handled in the future.

## **References**

Gorczyński, P., Gibson, K., Thelwell, R., Papatomas, A., Harwood, C., & Kinnafick, F. (2019). The BASES expert statement on mental health literacy in elite sport. *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, 59, 6-7.

Roberts, C. M., Faull, A. L., & Tod, D. (2016). Blurred lines: performance enhancement, common mental disorders and referral in the UK athletic population. *Frontiers in psychology*, 7, 1067.

### **An Embrace between Practitioner and Athlete - Blurred Lines? (15/04/2020)**

#### **What?**

Following today's session I decided to reflect upon an incident that happened involving one of the J16 rowers and a volunteer performance psychologist who also assisted at the club. While sat at the table by the door doing some general preparation and reading, some of the J16 squad were gathered outside the meeting room. Something had clearly happened, and one of the girls was very upset. The volunteer performance psychologist proceeded to hug the child to console her, cradled her head, and spoke words of comfort to her.

I had several initial reactions. First, why was the child upset? Were they in any immediate danger? Had they received some tragic news? Second, I felt an initial jarring sensation as I watched the volunteer embrace the child.

#### **So What?**

I believe the main topics surrounding the 'jarring' experience of witnessing the embrace relates to both ethical standards of practice and my own approach and underlying philosophy of practice. First, practitioners should be aware of the boundaries between practitioner and client. Further, the power dynamic should also be considered when actions such as these are considered or executed. On the one hand, practitioners should demonstrate empathy, be genuine (Yalom, 1980) and show unconditional positive regard to the client (Rogers, 1961). On the other, crossing the physical boundary to console an individual might

bring forward ethical issues relating to power and perhaps developing ‘dual-roles’ (Andersen & Brewer, 2001). The child (or viewers) might view this as an appropriate response (transference) to when they are upset and expect a similar response from the practitioner in similar scenarios. If and when this happens, I question what might the result be. The relationship is thus affected and limits the ability to remain professional and objective within the consultancy practice. Failure to deny the child of such an experience might also harm potential adolescent development (Casico et al., 2019). Other research I subsequently read relating to this subject also strikes some disagreement whether physical touch is appropriate within the client-practitioner relationship (Holub & Lee, 1990; Smith & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

### **What now?**

I believe this experience has brought to the forefront my own values and beliefs in adhering to and delivering ethical practice. Despite the proposed benefits of physical contact with clients as discussed in Holub and Lee’s (1990) paper, a great deal of self-awareness of the context, the client, and who benefits from such actions is required from the practitioner. I hope to maintain this level of self-awareness in the future and will engage my peers in this reflection in the future. I believe this reflection has allowed me to examine my beliefs and values as a practitioner (Poczwadowski et al., 2004). It may also be a step in solidifying my practitioner identity, my delivery style, and might assist in staying authentic to these values (Nesti, 2004; Yalom, 1980)

### **References**

- Cascio, C. J., Moore, D., & McGlone, F. (2019). Social touch and human development. *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience, 35*, 5-11.
- Holub, E. A., & Lee, S. S. (1990). Therapist's use of nonerotic physical contact: Ethical concerns. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 21*(2), 115.

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- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Smith, D., & Fitzpatrick, M. (1995). Patient-therapist boundary issues: An integrative review of theory and research. *Professional psychology: research and practice*, 26(5), 499.
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### **Confidentiality (02/09/2021)**

During an online symposium, I believed there to be a breach in confidentiality of a high profile Olympic athlete. A guest speaker working as a Lifestyle Support practitioner to elite athletes was invited to talk about his work within the sporting field and his journey to becoming being a sport psychologist in Asia. During his session, he presented a case study activity. This was underpinned with a host of information that may have made the athlete identifiable (i.e. sport, level of sport, age, gender), along with the athlete's current circumstances and presenting issues.

I was shocked at first to hear that an individual would share this information and when he had joined us in our group discussion that he was seemingly open to sharing the information regarding the athlete. This was followed by feelings of anger and upset, that this high profile athlete's information had been shared, regardless of their willingness to do so. I

was further frustrated as within our group discussion, the consultant and their colleague were seemingly very laid back about their discussion of this athlete.

Confidentiality is critical within consultancy and is outlined within the BPS code of Conduct (BPS, 2018). I believed at the time the sharing of such information only served the consultant to use their client's circumstances as a centrepiece of discussion with other practitioners. This has wider implications surrounding other practitioners who are willing to use previous or current clients' within case study workshops (Anderson, 2005). From previous experience, delivering case study workshops, I am extremely cognizant about whether the athletes can be identified and ensure this is not the case. Therefore, my feelings surrounding this issue were understandably heightened.

Bound by governing body ethics, the BPS confidentiality statement is clear on the limits of this outside of the discussion with the client. I understand that *if* permission was granted by the client to share such information, that they still might not understand the risks and further implications of sharing such information. For example, the use of information to blackmail or sabotage the athlete's career, or an attempt to influence group dynamics by sharing such information to the press or stakeholders. This might then impact on selection for competitions or even result in termination of their contract.

Regardless of whether this was the case or not, I immediately emailed my supervisor to voice my concerns. Although I could not identify the athlete myself, I believed that the information provided could make the athlete identifiable to certain individuals. I also engaged in peer reflection with my peer group to assist in understanding whether my feelings surrounding the issue were shared (or not) (Christensen & Aoyagi 2014).

I believe my concerns are a direct reflection on the emphasis and importance I place on confidentiality. Going forward, I will endeavour to understand that this is both a strength, but can lead to me ‘jumping the gun’ and perhaps lead to issues that are taken out of context.

I definitely felt like I was perhaps being ‘hasty’ with my concerns. However, with the information that was provided by the practitioner and without a note that the information was perhaps altered or false to protect anonymity, many individuals within the symposium (e.g. undergraduates, masters students) may have viewed this as acceptable practice going forward with their careers that may risk further breaches of confidentiality in similar circumstances.

### **Post reflection (Following week)**

Why did I not bring this up at the time with the consultant? I perhaps did not possess the courage to voice my concerns at the time. As an aspiring registered practitioner, responsibility lies with everyone, practitioners and governing bodies alike to ensure that professional standards are maintained. If I had asked at the time if the information was true and that the current information might run a confidentiality breach then my initial feelings or concerns may have been addressed at the time.

I had felt deeply about this and still do. Clearly these relate to my values as a practitioner (Poczwadowski et al., 2004) and have deeper existential themes that relate to my development as a practitioner, for example, courage and responsibility (Nesti, 2004; Yalom, 1980).

### **References**

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### **Race and Racism (16/06/2020)**

A colleague shared with me a Facebook post she had seen made by a mutual friend. She asked, “is this about you?” The Facebook post described an incident that had led to hospitalisation, and the experiences of the individual during the A&E visit. It had included experiences of racism and the difficulties of living in Scotland at the time. The individual mentioned that a “Scottish friend” had been present during the conversation, and that the individual proceeded to say that they had “only seen a black person when they went to University” and that this “was supposed to somehow lend some justification for my disgusting treatment”. On reading this Facebook post, the incident did indeed involve me; I believe I was the Scottish friend.

My own experience of the incident was as follows. Following a Prof Doc session, the individual and another colleague were sat together at the bottom of the room. I was at the

back on my laptop. We had been waiting for our supervisor meeting and during this time, the two had engaged in conversation. I had overheard some of the conversation, but was cognizant that I didn't, nor shouldn't perhaps be eavesdropping or contributing to the conversation as their conversation was their own and I was busy on my laptop. "What are your experiences?" I was asked. "About what?" I replied, as mentioned, I had zoned out and did not hear the subject of conversation. The individual clarified and asked what I believed Scotland to be like in relation to racism. I responded with the honest truth as I saw it. I told them that I was from a small island off the West coast of Scotland that was not culturally diverse and that I had not engaged with other cultures until I had been to university.

Clearly the post related to deeper, more systemic issues, including sensitive subjects relating to the individual's health. Unfortunately, I had not heard the subject of the conversation and this is perhaps why the incident had escalated as it had. Ironically, in a purposeful attempt to not eavesdrop and be rude, I had missed a lot of the context of the conversation, leading to the individual's response via Facebook.

On reading the Facebook post, I felt terribly guilty. I had a mix of emotions: panic, that this post had been related to me; fear: that this individual now thought of me as openly racist and would comment such a thing and not show any empathy, anger: that I had my own experiences of this incident and that I had missed the context, leading me to feel 'attacked'. I was also upset and I had also experienced a similar health incident to the individual. I wished I had known or had heard this part of the conversation so that I was able to relate and show empathy more.

I had decided to reach out to the individual to offer my apologies to them about the conversation. I had recognised that, unintentional or not, my actions had led to upset and the issues of race and racism within the Scottish culture is weaved through all levels of society.

Unfortunately, the individual did not respond to my email. Further, I acknowledged my initial ‘white fragility’ (Guardian, 2019), noticing one of my reactions to respond with anger and discount their own experience of the incident.

To have avoided or handled the situation better I could have explained myself further of my experience of growing up in a predominantly white town, with limited experience of engaging in other cultures. I recognise that I cannot whole heartedly prevent all my biases and prejudices, but can continue to monitor and reflect on them as a cis-white male.

Going forward I have engaged in conversations with colleagues and friends, attended webinars (race and racism in sport), donated to charities, and continued to educate myself around racism in all sectors, not just in sport. The experience has given me many things to consider when approaching and engaging in such conversations again

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## **Referral (14/07/2020)**

This reflection concerns the referral process put in place for a client and how the decision making process was handled by me and the client. It also concerns the ethical implications surrounding the referral process that includes levels of competence and the blurred lines that occur (in particular, when adopting an existential approach to sport psychology) within consultancy.

The decision to trigger the referral process occurred several sessions into the consultancy practice. Adopting an existential approach to sport psychology (Nesti, 2004; Yalom 1980), the topic areas covered related to the client's lived experience in a holistic manner, both in and out of sport. Subsequently, the presented issues and topics discussed tended to be more broad, meaning the client explored multiple non-sport related issues. My concerns were raised about the client's wellbeing beyond my competency was when she had mentioned a few times that she didn't wish to continue to be 'mopey' and that she was in constant tears. Along with the recurring themes relating to her parent's death, collaboratively, we had decided that there was a clear clinical intervention required to address the client's needs (Tod & Anderson, 2016; BPS, 2018).

During the session, I expressed my concerns of my own competency and despite working in a holistic sense, I could not delve deeper into some of the themes that could be discussed further (i.e. her parents' death and how this might relate to sport). The client was understanding and when asked how she felt about it, she said "annoyed". She explained further that she was not annoyed at my referral suggestion, but annoyed at herself at being unable to unhinge from these factors that had loomed over her life since her parents death. She felt great anxiety at the prospect at "opening a can of worms" surrounding the issue. She had also mentioned previously in sessions that she had seen bereavement counsellors and had previously bad experiences with other psychologists. I explained that part of my next steps were to find potential psychologists that were a good fit from what we had discussed that adopted a similar approach to me within their practice.

My feelings during up to and during the referral were that I was confident in the knowledge that I was doing the right thing. I had consulted the BPS code of conduct (BPS, 2018) and engaged my supervisor throughout the process who had also agreed and supported the referral process. I had felt some levels of inadequacy in that I wasn't able to help the

client further, at least not in an appropriately ethical manner. Given the circumstances, I believe to do so would only benefit me as the practitioner and could potentially bring harm to the client further down the line. I was also disappointed, as I had not encountered many athletes or positions with financial reimbursement. This meant terminating the consultancy would harm me financially.

Engaging in peer reflections with my colleague who also had experienced a similar scenario (Wadsworth et al., 2020), some questions were asked that allowed me to make further sense of why the referral was offered and what I might do in the future. First, “if the individual had denied the referral, what would I have done?” This was a difficult question to answer, but I by stated that each case would have to be examined closely and that the client would have to be reminded of my own competencies and roles as a sport psychologist. My peer went on to challenge me and say, “doing no harm” also might mean termination results in harm itself. A second question asked that if the relationship was integral, then would I consider myself ‘more competent’ than the clinical psychologist, given that the benefits of such a relationship were important therapeutically (Peptipas et al., 1999; Sharp et al., 2015). To answer I suggested that, again, to continue would only serve me, and that the issues were best suited to the clinical psychologist. To expand on this, the client had disclosed that they had found the transition difficult, as they had developed a good working relationship with me.

From this experience I would seek to better assist the transition from my consultancy to the clinical consultancy. I had endeavoured to make the transition as smooth as possible (i.e. sourcing multiple clinical psychologists, arranging first meeting, communicating the presenting issues with the permission of the client). However, given the client’s feedback, perhaps I could have tapered the process better before termination. Some practitioners have recommended a blended approach where clinical and sport psychologists work alongside

each other (Rotheram, 2016). However, I did not feel this was appropriate (more information on this found in case study 3).

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## **Interview 1 (30/03/2021)**

I had procured an interview for an assistant researcher as part of a ‘Take Time for You’ project, run by Glasgow Caledonian University and Scottish Association for Mental Health. The week prior to the interview, I familiarised myself with the project and the associated mixed-methods process evaluation approach to be conducted alongside the delivery of the project. My preparation included study of what process evaluation is and how it aims to evaluate complex interventions (Moore et al., 2015), the underpinning philosophy, and how mixed-methods ‘fits’ towards a relativist ontology, previous literature investigating the participant sample and associated psycho-biological impacts of COVID-19 (e.g. Cao et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2020), how interventions impact the participants in question (i.e. frontline workers), and fidelity of the research (e.g. Barrett & Stewart, 2021; Brunero et al., 2008; Spek et al., 2007; Weiner et al., 2020). Further, I ensured I was familiar with the psychological phenomena associated with stress (i.e. Self Determination Theory (SDT); Ryan and Deci, 2000; Transactional Model of Stress; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; and the Socio-Economic Model of Mental Health; McLeroy et al., 1988).

Given the time and effort devoted to ensuring I had covered all my bases, I was feeling confident prior to my interview that I had a solid understanding and knowledge base to convey my competence as the role requirements had outlined.

On entering the Teams Meeting, my first blunder was that my internet bandwidth apparently could not cope. Immediately filled with panic, knowing that first impressions were important, I swiftly rectified the issue by switching to a mobile hotspot. My first question by one of the research team asked why I applied for the role and I felt that I conveyed my reasons and justification of why I endeavoured to enter the public health realm adequately. The rest of the meeting did not go so well, with a steady decline as the meeting went on.

The majority of the questions orientated around my work as a researcher, which to the reader (and myself on reflection) seems like a justified topic of conversation. I feel both stupid and upset that I didn't think to examine my own research, what I did, and how this could help the role. Instead of looking internally in my preparation, I took a studied approach to look at the intervention itself, and demonstrate my knowledge and capability if I were to be given the position. My answers were weak; I was unable to articulate myself properly (no doubt due to the feelings of inadequacy at trying to navigate questions asked by three esteemed researchers), and the ability to *really* examine the panel's facial expressions meant that I assumed they were unimpressed with my answers.

The experience has given me the following lessons. First, expect more about me in interviews. Look at my work, and examine applied examples of situations and barriers I have faced. Second, show self-compassion; the field is difficult, but only so to ensure the best possible individual for the positions. Third, get better internet.

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## **Interview 2 (02/04/2021)**

I interviewed for the position of senior research for a university in Wales as part of a larger project investigating postponements or delays to the Olympians who were set to compete at the Tokyo Olympics.

Coming off the back of my last interview that I was unsuccessful for, I carried over some of the lessons I had learnt from the experience and the reflection I engaged in. Firstly, a better WIFI signal was sure to improve the first impressions. Second, I had worked on working with some potential questions that related to my own research and professional practice, as I had perhaps gave more attention to the research and theory side of the previous intended project.

I was tasked with a 10 minute presentation to begin the interview process. This concerned (a) who I was, (b) my intended methods, and (c) how I would go about securing funding for an online platform. All in all, I think my presentation was successful, and I believe I managed to put across many relevant and practical notes that could aid in the current proposed research.

The next section was 20-25 minutes of questioning. I believe I carried myself relatively well, however, in action reflections prompted me to notice that I had stumbled or struggled to answer some of the questions in a succinct manner. My worries about appearing nervous, being nervous, and attempts to acknowledge and move on with the interview despite these feelings were quite overwhelming. Regardless, I believe I managed to handle this much better than my previous interview. At one point I did notice one of the panellists perhaps being disinterested in my points, his body language closed off to the camera, and I believe he may have checked his phone during the interview process – however I did not see the phone

in hand, rather his eyes gazed down. This did not fill me with confidence that what I was trying to convey in my answers was good enough.

The interview finished and I thanked the panellists for their time and was told I should hear by close of the day as I was the last interviewee.

Later that day I received the news that I was unsuccessful. I was told I was a strong candidate, however there was one candidate that stood out who was offered the position. I was reassured as to not be disheartened and was told that perhaps I could have been clearer in some of my answers. Further, the lead panellist provided the following feedback points; (1) I seemed to struggle with a question relating to project management, either I did not understand the question or the answer was not given in a way they were looking for, (2) that I needed more energy, “not that I want you to be bouncing off the walls but...”.

I have taken these points on board and provide the following explanations and next steps in my development. First, I felt I had found a better balance between literature and researcher/practitioner preparation in the run up to this interview. Second, perhaps take a moment longer to think, or to pause to think during questioning to gather my thoughts about what points I am trying to make. Third, I believe my efforts to remain composed might have come across as ‘horizontal’ when being interviewed. I felt that if I tried to engage more of myself that this would elevate my anxiety levels while being interviewed. I will take this feedback point on as something to consider and use when I am in situations when I am better able to do so. I still want to remain authentic and engage with others in manner that allows me to function at an optimal level.

## **Consultancy**

### **Early Philosophy of Practice Reflection (12/04/2018)**

#### **Description**

A Professional Doctorate seminar was held on the 12th of April 2018 to discuss and collaborate on our Philosophy of Practice, which aimed to outline the Philosophy we use within our consultancies and the models we use to inform our philosophy of practice. The aim of this discussion drew upon Keegan's (2016) model of sport psychology service delivery and the 'Foundations and underpinnings' area of this model.

Martin presented Poczwardowski et al's (2004) hierarchical structure of professional philosophy to allow us to delve deeper into the 'why' of using and understanding one's own philosophy of practice. As a group we also explored the philosophy continuum that could cater to different philosophies and approaches to practice

As a group we also explored the EIS Performance Psychology model, giving a 'real life' example of the importance philosophy has within a governing body institute. A consultancy style activity was also given to allow us to further discover our own beliefs and values within our practice.

#### **Feelings**

I had previously discussed with Martin my concerns about my 'lack' of consultancy style and underpinning approach to practice. As I had yet to get going with my consultancies, I felt apprehensive of what I wanted to adopt as my own professional philosophy and consultancy style. I want to provide a calm and welcoming environment for my clients in order to develop a therapeutic alliance (Bordin, 1994) that helps bring about behaviour change through an effective therapeutic alliance (Fisher et al., 2016). This is typical of a

client-led, humanistic approach to consultancy (Rogers, 1959). On the other hand, I find it difficult coming away from the traditional cognitive-behavioural approach, given that much of my previous University studies orientated around it. I felt the need to provide structure within my consultancies, with evidence of effectiveness where the role of the sport psychologist is to enhance performance.

During the session, which was aimed to be collaborative between the Professional Doctorate students and Martin and between the other Prof Doc students in the group I felt I had much to contribute, I did not feel nervous or ashamed that I hadn't really solidified my professional practice philosophy. Furthermore, knowing that this process is like that of many other Stage 2 trainees, I was safe in the knowledge that this is part of the learning and development experience.

Following the session, I felt much more content about how to approach determining my philosophy of practice. Knowing that I was both able to provide a client centred environment for consultancy but also adopt some form of cognitive-behavioural intervention approach gave me a sense of relief that this was possible in the form of an integrated approach (Keegan, 2016), and was something I was keen to explore.

## **Evaluation**

From the literature, neophyte practitioners seem to approach their consultancy quite rigidly and base their practice using traditional modes of psychology (Tod et al., 2009; Stovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). I was clearly experiencing a similar predicament when examining my own default style against the philosophy of practice.

I could have become more familiar with these subject areas prior to the session and to the prof doc enrolment. This might have helped with my understanding and developing a philosophy of practice sooner.

## **Conclusion and action plan**

This prof doc session and reflection allowed me to examine my own developing consultancy style. Based on reading previous neophyte accounts of practitioner development (Tod et al., 2009; Stovholt & Rønnestad, 1992), I can see I am questioning ‘why’ I am practicing like I am. Going forward, I will examine my values and continue to evaluate the approaches to consultancy available to me. This will allow me to see if a traditional CBT ‘style’ of practice is actually what I resonate with, rather than holding a misassumption that this is what is ‘usually’ done within Sport Psychology.

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### **eRacing Day 1 of Intervention (06/08/2018)**

Today was the first day of the LJMU racing intervention. The intervention aims to provide motor racing drivers with a better ability to cope under pressure within a stress evoking task (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) via a stress inoculation training programme (Baldisserra et al., 2014). The day consisted of four of the motor athletes completing primary, secondary, and dual-task exercises. I decided to reflect following my first formal intervention experience to document my initial thoughts and reactions. .

I was nervous to felt slightly flustered at the beginning. This was a result of trying to make sure that the tasks were set up appropriately. A part of me felt the need to prove my worth and to show that I was familiar with the tasks at hand (despite never having done them before!). To combat this, I set aside a lot of time and resources to prepare ahead of time the plan and layout of the tasks. This way, if a slight hiccup occurred, then I was better able to remain calm and understand the potential issues at hand. I felt this might happen as the intervention itself had many moving parts.

I really enjoyed the intervention I had planned. It seemed that the drivers did too. To be able to give them an interactive and practical psychological intervention extended the traditional 'classroom' approach to sport psych consultancy. It was good to see the drivers

engage fully within the intervention, and I got the impression that they really bought in to the programme I had planned for them.

As mentioned previously, some hiccups did occur. For example, some athletes not fully understand the task provided to them, which ultimately influenced their performance and my evaluation. I decided to not let this affect the overall experience, but put it down to me still learning to plan and prepare effectively, given my neophyte status.. Despite my initial concerns that the results, and therefore my case study, will not show ‘good results’, I will remain open to the experience of making mistakes and allowing mistakes to contribute to my development. I believe being open and honest about these issues is important to express in our learning and outputs so that future researchers or practitioners can strengthen their own practice or research.

I feel that I could maybe have given myself more Plan B scenarios (if this happened what would I do) etc. The fact the intervention involved many different tools (e.g. laptop, stopwatch, video cameras, simulator), there were plenty of opportunities for issues to occur. The intervention was improving and evolving more effectively even from the first participant to the next. However, I believe that the loss of what could be vital data shows that from the start, the intervention design needs to work effectively.

Following this reflection and the information I have gathered from my first day of working with the drivers, if I were to implement such an intervention with so many moving parts, I would likely run a pilot so that I could identify possible avenues for improvement and potential trouble areas within the practical intervention.

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### **Working with Para-Athletes – First exposure (02/11/2018)**

As part of my placement with TASS, I was required to conduct introductory meetings for my assigned scholarship and dual-career athletes. Some of the athletes in my cohort were para-athletes. This included a blind footballer who played for the England National Squad and a CP footballer who also played for the national side.

I felt nervous about meeting these athletes as I had never worked with disabled athletes before. Being aware that para athletes sometimes had unique challenges in life and sport (Arnold et al., 2017, Martin, 2005), I felt ill-equipped and perceived myself as less competent due to my lack of experience within the client demographic.

I did not know the extent of the athlete's blindness or if he was partially blind. I attempted to be as diligent as possible, and considered seating areas, accessibility and providing verbal cues for the blind athlete to provide them with assistance should they need it. I felt torn in a way. Part of me felt that maybe he didn't need my help; he had managed and was successful thus far in his career. My assistance might have been condescending and unhelpful, perhaps even affecting the chances of building a therapeutic relationship. Despite this, I knew that at least the intentions were there to make him feel safe and comfortable. Through open discussion about the athlete's disability, I would learn how to provide the best possible consultancy experience for them.

My in-action reflections and present reflection have allowed me to recognise that new experiences within the professional doctorate are likely to evoke anxieties (Christensen &

Aoyagi, 2014), but that such feelings provide the foundation for growth (Nesti, 2004) and competence (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013; Tod et al., 2017). My anxieties might be a conflict of values and philosophy of practice (Lindsay et al., 2007). I may be approaching my consultancy as the ‘expert’, putting efforts into demonstrating competence, when I might be better keeping an open mind and approach to new experiences. I had read some research prior to my consultancy to prepare (Arnold et al., 2017; Martin, 2005) to allow me to understand some of the demographic considerations. However, if I remain congruent in my approach, which is to assume that I am *not* the expert, then this might provide a more coherent and effective service delivery.

I could have asked more questions concerning what I should expect or consider as a sport psychologist in the session. Perhaps the use of self-disclosure might be helpful in the future in the appropriate circumstances. By doing this, the athlete knows I may require some education about their situation, which may serve to develop our relationship more, build rapport and ultimately pave the way for a better therapeutic environment.

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### **An Athlete's Continuation or Termination of Sport? (20/01/2019)**

I have been currently giving one-to-one support to two of the J18 female rowers during the end of their season. Today, the coach introduced me to one of the J14 rowers, mentioning he thought that she had great potential and currently performed very well for her age group. To the side, the coach asked if I could have a word with the J14 before training started. This caught me slightly off guard, as I always like to be prepared for a meeting with a potential client. However, after a quick risk assessment, I deemed that an introductory chat to establish some rapport and get to know the rower was acceptable. I introduced myself to her and laid out the ethical and boundary practices within my consultancy (e.g. confidentiality; BPS, 2018) and my role as a trainee sport psychologist within the club. After some general questions surrounding her thoughts and feelings during her current lifestyle and performance, the athlete mentioned periods of low motivation during training, and that she sometimes was not interested in participating in the sport altogether. She was recently entered into a competition and felt like her low motivation was ultimately going to lead her to not perform well. We also discussed several other external factors that seemed to impact how she was feeling about her engagement with rowing.

My thoughts and feelings with this event were mixed and caused somewhat internal conflict. On one hand, I am a trainee on a placement, working with athletes who have been assigned by the coach to provide psychological support to promote performance. On the other hand, my values and philosophy of practice are to deliver a holistic approach (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). It did seem that participating in sport was causing some unease in the athletes' life, and upon further discussion, that this might be a continuation on behalf of significant others.

My initial urges were to encourage the athlete to pursue a performance focus as a rower. After all, the coach had told me her performance for her age was extremely good. However, it seemed like participating in this sport was also causing a great deal of distress. This being said, I was aware in the moment that it was not my place to promote continuation, but to explore the athletes' experience alongside them. I was obviously experiencing pressures from the expectation to provide performance from internal and external sources (Brady & Maynard, 2010). This in turn caused conflict with my values and approach to practice (Lindsay et al., 2007). I believe this to be first, viewing the client as an individual outside of being an athlete. The conflict I was feeling may be a result of my perceived pressure to assist the client to continue (pressure from others and some internal) against the held belief that the individual's wellbeing holds precedence above all, even if it means they terminate their sport (internal values).

Further reflection has caused me to realise that not all the athletes I will encounter will want to pursue their career. With so much possibility for individuals like this athlete to become dual-career athletes, I cannot expect that all athletes' paths will be a linear one towards high-level performance. I recognise that what is important first and foremost is the client. Asking myself "who is the client?" was also important (Harberl & Peterson, 2006). Even though I see the club and working beside the head coach as the 'clients', I would not

prevent or aim to deny the individual's free will to terminate their career in sport.

Practitioners have a duty of care to those we help (BPS, 2018) and it is our role to facilitate an environment that allows for athletes to explore their current thoughts and feelings in a safe and comfortable manner.

I think I could have outlined and discussed my role in the club more clearly with the coach. This is a form of role clarity (Gardner, 2001; Waumsley et al., 2010) within sport practitioner's responsibilities in the club or organisation and can promote effective practice. I understand that I have to I may also need to be flexible (Larsen, 2010) in my approach. In the future I aim to be cognizant of the fluidity of sport but also work in a way that does not exceed my roles and values as a practitioner.

Using this reflection to aid and develop my future practice, I endeavour to create a safe and comfortable environment to allow the athlete to explore her current situation. I will continue to monitor and support this athlete, as this may be the only space in which she feels that she can.

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### **Missed Sessions, Ineffective Relationships, and Counter-transference. (14/03/2019)**

Saturday mornings are usually the days I meet with a recurring client, Fiona (pseudonym). However, today the rower attended the rowing club late and missed our session. I had arrived at 9am as sometimes she attends the club early, so I got there ahead of time, in the knowledge that I could use any spare time preparing further for the session and having general conversation with the coach. I had spoken to the coach, indicating that we usually meet at between at 9am however, it was now 10am and the room was unable to be used beyond this time. I made the coach aware the athlete had missed our session and he proceeded to scorn her for her tardiness. This was an extremely uncomfortable moment. The coach had mentioned that if she wanted to be top 10 in the UK and make the GB squad, she would have to stop acting like an “amateur”.

Between 9am and 9:30am I felt frustrated. I was also not surprised that the athlete had not attended. In our previous sessions, I had felt the involvement and discussion from the athlete pointed towards a lack of buy-in and that perhaps they were not interested in sport psychology support. I was also aware that she might be attending because the consultancy had been 'prescribed' by the coach. After her arrival, she apologised and I explained that misunderstandings of time and communication can happen, and this was as much my responsibility as it was hers. I also felt sorry for her in that moment; she had been scolded by the coach and was clearly upset about the circumstances.

It's clear that there are several issues here to consider. First, establishing boundaries and expectations at the beginning of consultancies are paramount. Second, that I had been experiencing counter-transference (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). The athletes' actions had elicited an emotional response and affected my judgement of them. Further, after witnessing the scolding, I had felt sorry for them.

I could of established expectations and boundaries more clearly regarding consultancy. I will reach out to my supervisor to advice and support regarding the current experience. From the client's resistance (Strean & Strean, 1998), I am cognizant that feelings of counter-transference are emerging and thoughts that the athlete is perhaps not 'bothered' about the sessions (Strean & Strean, 1998). Although the athlete has stated they forgot this morning, it might be that this is a reason used because the sessions have been 'prescribed' by the coach. The athlete might feel they have no autonomy surrounding the sessions, which leaves them no choice but to attend.

This consultancy clearly is not working at present. I have made mistakes in navigating the issues of established ground-rules within my consultancy and this has caused counter-transference issues. Moving forward I will aim to have an open, honest conversation with the

athlete surrounding the sessions so far, how I perceive them to be, and how we can proceed. It will be a waste of time and resources for both parties if the athlete themselves do not wish to attend, but does so anyway because of outside pressures. If the athlete wishes to continue working with me, I will make clear the date and time of all sessions, indicating the protocol if the individual is unable to attend. Responsibility lies with both client and practitioner to ensure adequate communication and to be honest and open within the consultancy setting, which I feel has not been fully delivered on my part.

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### **Mid placement visit (03/04/2019)**

My placement supervisor had agreed attend as part of a mid-placement visit and shadow one of my sessions at Warrington Rowing Club. There were a few hiccups during this session. Unfortunately, the head coach was unable to attend the session, as he was overseas at the time. One of my clients had also told me that she was unable to make our meeting the night before. However, the placement supervisor agreed to come along anyway, providing the opportunity to engage in placement shadowing and to discuss current any issues or themes that had emerged from the professional doctorate, the rowing club, and my own development as a practitioner.

One of the athletes attended a session. The sessions thus far had been quite slow, and the client had been somewhat unreceptive to sport psychology support. The agreed role with

the coach was to provide general support until an effective rapport was built to then perhaps initiate a formal intervention. In the session, we discussed her previous competition, how she had done, and her thoughts concerning her upcoming trip to Germany as part of the GB J18 squad. After the session, I debriefed with Zoe. I explained the situation I had found myself in with this client and we discussed potential steps going forward.

I was very nervous during the session. I was mindful that I was nervous, and understood that this was likely a result of wanting to demonstrate the skills and competency I had as a practitioner (Tod, 2007). At the same time, I did not make any mistakes in front of my placement supervisor. I was also a bit embarrassed as one of the clients whom I had entered the psychoeducational phase of our ACT intervention had not shown and I felt that I had somewhat wasted the placement provider's time.

Through further discussion and opening up to my placement provider about the client I had met with, she had agreed that the athlete was not ready for intervention. Some useful information was provided to me and advice was given towards next steps. This included gaining further insight on the athlete's current ability to recognise and verbalise her thoughts and feelings. This was very helpful in gaining a new perspective and understanding through a shared experience, which ultimately served to enhance my motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and provided new insights to my present consultancy and client.

The benefits of this experience included gaining knowledge and information from an experienced supervisor practitioner. Further, I was able to challenge some of my apprehensions surrounding my competence and being 'found out'. The potential negative sides was my temptation to over prepare and ruminate over the scenario, however I was able to engage mindfully, recognise the 'recurring story', utilise 'defusion' and engage meaningfully (Hayes et al., 2006)

On reflection, I could have ensured that my clients were definitely going to be at training today. That way I could have adapted or arranged for a time when my placement supervisor could shadow more than one of my sessions. Going forward, I will remind myself of my values and philosophy of practice that allows me to provide effective practice. I think this experience has shown me that I may have felt unease in conducting the session to prove my worth (Tod et al., 2007, which then took away from the client's experience and demonstrated an inauthentic experience (Nesti, 2004). This being said, I am able to recognise that supervisors in such a scenario are well trained and understand that they will only see a 'snapshot' of a consultancy, and that they are present to develop and foster effective practice, not simply to point out mistakes.

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## **Team Meeting With Parents (04/09/2019)**

### **What Happened?**

Tonight the coach held the first J14/15/16 team meeting with parents as a general meet and greet and to lay out expectations and goals for the club and for the individual squads. The meeting also aimed to outline and reinforce club ethos and cultural norms and to provide an overview of the safeguarding and health and safety protocol. Part of this was an introduction to myself and my services. When I introduced myself and gave an overview of what I did at the club and my background, I had made some verbal errors. Although these were minor, the emotions and events led me to try and come to terms with how this can inform my development as a practitioner (Andersen et al., 2004).

### **Thoughts and Feelings.**

I was nervous as there were quite a number of rowers and parents in the room. I felt like I had something to prove, to show I was a professional and come across as knowledgeable. This was magnified as I assumed that the parents wanted the best for their children in relation to the services available. If I was unable to live up to that expectation I would be seen as a failure.

### **What was good and bad?**

It is always good that I am able to 'do' things despite the anxiety. I was able to introduce myself to the team and parents and establish my role within the club and "open the door" to my services. Stumbling over words and not articulating myself can always be embarrassing, particularly when some kids might not buy in to the services if their parents do not.

### **Why did it happen like it did?**

I recognise that when it comes to their children, parents can be understandably protective and want what's best for them. In my reading over the years, I am aware of the potential for parents to be over involved, have high expectations, and live vicariously through their children (Bean et al., 2016). Parents are thought to be sceptical about sport psychology provision and may have a lack of knowledge of the subject area, thus, it may be up to the sport psychologist to inform and develop their knowledge and understanding (Knight & Newport, 2017).

I also recognise that this might be an unjustified assumption, as I hadn't even interacted with the parents. This way of thinking only serves to hinder my services. It may be a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby, a) I experience anxiety and unhelpful thoughts that then b) impacts my ability to function and perform at my optimum, which then in turn might actually inform the parents' opinion of me!

### **What now for the future?**

I believe experience with working alongside parents will be key in developing confidence. I will likely interact with, present to, and work alongside parents as part of my consultancy in the future. This reflection has allowed me to recognise my own thought patterns and how they likely affect my ability to present myself effectively in a consultancy setting.

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### **WRC: Coach-Consultant Annual Review Reflection (February 2019)**

After a year of working with Warrington Rowing Club (WRC), I had arranged for an end of year placement discussion with the coach (for the purposes of confidentiality the coaches' name has been replaced with a pseudonym and henceforth will be known as Liam). The purpose of this was to, a) review previous goals set at the beginning of the placement, b) gain feedback to further own practitioner development, c) discuss progress of athletes and d) discuss the continuation of work at WRC. Regarding the goals set, we had agreed that the previous goals set out at the beginning of the year had been adhered to and Liam was happy with my progress and work ethic at the club. In discussing the point of feedback from my own practice, Liam was not able to think of any criticisms or points of feedback. We agreed this might be due to some injury issues with certain athletes that had affected how much performance work I could do with them, and the holistic approach I was taking to my consultancy. Liam was happy for my work to continue with the J18s and Liam had also mentioned the possibility of working with the J15/J16s.

I was mindful that sitting with a coach and discussing one's own 'performance' in working with their athletes can be a daunting task, particularly if there is a preconception that the practitioner is there to deliver performance enhancement (Larsen, 2017). I was able to recognise that I was nervous as I did not have any tangible 'outcomes' to report with the athletes I had been working with (Tod, 2007). These feelings of nervousness quickly subsided when Liam mentioned that he himself was concerned that I wasn't getting anything out of the sessions because of injury and the nature of amateur sport (i.e. lack of consistent attendance). This triggered an "in action" reflection (Anderson et al., 2006), and I found it

funny that both of us were in the same boat without realising it. After further discussion, I explained that from a practitioner development stand point, these ‘issues’ were in themselves interesting areas to explore and provided excellent challenges to work around, problem solve, and reflect upon (McEwan & Tod, 2014; Anderson et al., 2006). After the session had finished, I felt a sense of relief and a new sense of motivation and drive emerged towards my work at WRC.

Upon reflection, I feel that I had neglected the benefit of sitting down and spending time with Liam to discuss progress along with any concerns or ideas. We did have many informational meetings to discuss athlete progress, upcoming events, environmental and organisational issues, but perhaps less about *my* work in particular. Despite not working directly through Liam, I feel that through this exercise I had built upon our working relationship in developing honesty, sharing thoughts and feelings towards my work and progress within the club. It also proved as a form of social validation and brought a sense of belonging to me personally as a practitioner working within the club.

My next steps moving forward would be to conduct more regular ‘formal’ meetings with Liam. Now that my first annual progress report is over, I feel like I will be less nervous and concerned about having tangible results to report. It will also be worth reiterating my professional philosophy (Poczwardowski, et al., 2004) and my approach to sport psychology consultancy. This might help manage expectations and enhance role clarity (Gardner, 2001). After our discussion, it was surprising to see that it was he who was the one concerned for my benefits of being at the club and that the athletes were providing useful and useable material for my own portfolio.

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### **An Existential Encounter (November 2019)**

“Existential thoughts during a depersonalization episode are no joke. They rattle the very core of your being. No one knows where these thoughts come from. Suddenly, you feel like you are peering through a crack in the universe and you do not like what you see. You feel like you are losing control with these questions.” (Swamy G, 2020)

“To experience existence in this manner is a dizzying sensation. Nothing is as it seemed. The very ground beneath one seems to open up. Indeed, groundlessness is a commonly used term for a subjective experience of responsibility awareness.” Yalom (1980, p. 221).

I had been watching a YouTube video describing the life of Jean-Paul Sartre, with the intention of gaining a bit more insight into philosophy, existentialism, and existential psychology. The video described Sartre's early life and the existential propositions. Sartre's first novel, *Nausea* (translated from the original title *La Nausee* in 1938) was discussed, where the hero is unable to recognise a seat on a tram for its obvious purpose and the seat's 'name' losing all meaning to him. This was the moment I found myself in a very obscure and terrifying space.

All of a sudden I felt I had become the man on the train. I felt in that moment I had been 'unlocked' to the strange and obscure phenomenon that was life itself. The world around me no longer had significance to me. I should clarify that it wasn't as if I did not care about my surroundings – the table I was sat at, the people around me, my coffee cup. Rather, it was that I did not relate to these 'things' that had been constructed, both in a physical sense (the table was made by man and machine, as was the coffee cup and the coffee inside), and in a relational/linguistic sense (the word table dictates an object sat at, the coffee cup holds coffee so as to drink from).

At this moment I was terrified. I was unable to grasp my own reality. I had no link between my mind and what was my body (or as it seemed at the time, the vessel I possessed). Phenomenological descriptions from Sierra and Berrio's (2001) accounts of depersonalization highlight some of the sensations and experiences I was having. These include; emotional numbing, heightened self-observation, changes in experiences of time, feelings of not being in control of movement and the inability to focus and sustain attention.

Despite being a terrifying experience, I did not feel in anyway a danger to myself or others. I stood up (or 'something' stood up) and proceeded to walk in the direction of my supervisor's office. This was my first instinct and to be honest, I am glad I had the self-

awareness to do that. A couple of thoughts did enter my mind, however. “I really don’t want to cause a fuss about my current situation, it’s highly obscure and I am not inclined to cause or be the cause of any drama.” Secondly, “What if this ‘episode’ now excludes me from being able to work as a Sport Psychologist, the powers that be may revoke my ability to work due to this?” This provided a couple of key insights that comforted me: (a) I was ‘worried’ about my future - therefore I had not completely lost all comprehension of reality and my place in it, and (b) if I was able to process these thoughts, recognise them, relate to them, then this experience may fade eventually. I did draw some similarities to previous experiences, and although the situational, environmental, and particular intricacies of the sensations themselves were not totally alike - I compared it to the time I had eaten one too many ‘brownies’ as a teenager.

Recreational tray bakes aside, I headed to my supervisors office. After peering into the window and noticing his absence I decided to head home. I was surprised when I bumped into him on the stairs on the way out. This was my chance to open up to my experience. I was unable to vocalise the experiences I was having, I brushed over what I was going through with some minor small talk and proceeded to grab the nearest seat after we went our separate ways. Utilising some form of grounding techniques I had learned whilst delivering ACT interventions (*see dropping an anchor*; Harris, 2019) I attempted to gain some foothold into my ever-descending freefall into the space around me. I started writing notes on my phone to describe my current sensations, thoughts and general experience of the last ten minutes. Unfortunately, I did not remember to save the notes but I am confident I have been able to articulate this experience effectively in this text.

The week following, our monthly professional doctorate session was held. I was able to book time with my supervisor to open up about this experience, the possible antecedents, the experience of detachment and groundlessness, and the events that had followed after I had

met him on the stairs. Relating back to my thoughts of what the consequences might be concerning my continuation on this course, I was worried what he would think. He was supportive, and despite having little experience around the areas of existentialism in the field, he drew on his conversations with a recently retired colleague had worked with in the same department for several years. He was able to reassure me about any thoughts or feelings that might seem dramatic or non-sensical, and suggested a plan for me to explore the scenario with the recently retired colleague whose expertise lies within existentialism. Unfortunately, this meeting never came to fruition. I passed my details on to him but I never heard from this individual. I reached out to one of my colleagues instead and they had agreed that attempting to learn and understand about existential psychology had caused similar feelings, but nothing quite like the groundlessness I had experienced.

Depersonalisation is described within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V; APA, 2013). Many accounts online tell the stories of those individuals who are plagued with existential questions when suffering from this condition. I believe my experience was acute and I felt a sense of equilibrium after a few days. Perhaps I will openly share this experience with other colleagues or neophyte practitioners interested in the field of existential psychology of sport. It could perhaps provide some considerations about existential psychology and the process of self-awareness, understand the self, and the main existential concerns. By doing so, one is inevitably going to be faced with existential anxiety and practitioners should be ready to face up to and work through such instances if they are to do so with clients.

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### **“Just tell me what to do!” (06/05/2020)**

Advice giving and reluctance to assume the role of expert has been a difficult task within my practitioner role so far, given that my own journey in the academic and professional field had originated from a traditional positivist, post-positivist background (). I believe a lot of energy within sessions was perhaps used for ‘in action’ reflection and perhaps created some barriers in the pursuit of an ‘I-Thou’ encounter. Thus, the more I spent on ‘what’ I should say or ‘how’ I should say it, the more I was missing out or not attending to Megan (the client) in that moment in time. Although ‘self-awareness’ is deemed a strength in one’s professional practice (Peptipas et al., 1999), I believe I could have achieved more effective ‘present-ness’ by *being* rather than questioning ‘*how am I being?*’. This might be a result of still learning to ‘get out of my own way’ whilst working with clients and perhaps too much self-coaching and cognition during sessions (Tod et al., 2017).

“Just tell me what to do!” Although this was said in jest my Megan, it was something that had occurred numerous times during sessions and is worth reflecting upon. Megan would

regularly attend sessions with a note pad, ready to learn, ready to glean information that could explain her current situations. Examples included, “Well you’re supposed to be the expert, I was hoping you would tell me?”, “That’s it?! But I have nothing written down, no nuggets!”

The ‘presumed’ role of expert can be an area of difficulty for practitioners to address with their clients, given the traditional sport psychology model of ‘experts’ in performance enhancement or mental skills etcetera. This is illuminated by Van Deurzen in how the practitioner interacts with the client and the assumed role of the practitioner: “you tell me what to do, you are the expert” (Van Deurzen, 1988, p56).

I believe that this experience helped reinforce my identity as a practitioner and approach to my delivery as ‘active listener’. I assume the role of a guide through the clients’ journeys, and at times, nudge the clients towards information that may be of benefit to investigate further or face up to (Van Deurzen, 1988, p. 56). Despite difficult situations arising due to clients expecting results, or to be ‘fixed’ by the practitioner, I felt I have dealt with such circumstances well. It provides an opportunity for me to explore what their expectations are from me as the practitioner and them as the client. Moreover, who is responsible for the development of the self? From an existential perspective, it is ultimately the client (Yalom, 1980).

Going forward, this experience has helped with my own practitioner individuation (McEwen et al., 2019; Tod & Bond, 2010). I believe I have shown courage to acknowledge and resist the temptation to provide ‘advice-giving’ within the conduction of existential interventions with clients (Nesti, 2004). While this is a significant step in my individuation as a practitioner, I should attempt to examine its applicability across a multitude of settings and clients. This will allow me to flex appropriately and determine the extent to which I am comfortable doing so.

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## **COVID-19 Pandemic (part 1; June 2020)**

### **What?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated over the last few months. The UK government has implemented a nationwide lockdown and all non-essential business have been ordered to close. This includes sport. The week before the pandemic I was still living in Liverpool in my single studio flat. The rumours that had begun to spread had caused me some anxiety with my current scenario. Reaching out to my family, we decided that I would move temporarily back home. This would allow some interaction and social support, rather than being stuck alone in my studio for an unknown period of time.

### **So What?**

With the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, I realised that my sport psychology services would be affected also. All my placements and clients were situated in

and around the Liverpool area. I was worried that these clients might ‘drop off’ or that they might not be interested in tele-psychological services (Cooper et al, 2019). I spoke to my supervisor regarding my concerns, and he explained the University’s ‘no detriment’ policies and that my work thus far, both in hours and breath of work I had carried out within the doctorate, should be enough for my portfolio.

### **Now What?**

Although the situation is uncertain and evolving rapidly day to day, it is best that I reach out to my clients, give them updates on my living situation and provide them with options with regards to my services. I should also endeavour to ensure that they are in safe situations and coping effectively with the news. The infection rate is increasing along with the death toll. This might bring forward some anxiety with my clients that I should be aware of.

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### **COVID-19 Pandemic- (part 2; August 2020)**

#### **What?**

The nationwide lockdown has been implemented for at least 12 weeks and I have taken the decision to move back to Scotland. Given the uncertainty of the situation and my rent of my studio in Liverpool up for renewal in June, it makes little sense to renew when the pandemic will affect whether I will return at all.

My consultancy has continued to some extent. Two of my clients have agreed to follow on with tele-psychological support. I am half way through an ACT intervention with

one of the WRC athletes and it is progressing well. It seems that the availability of the client, given they are confined to their own home has allowed us to book a session every week, and to avoid the hiccups that might have happened without the pandemic.

### **So What?**

Recent articles have started to emerge from researchers about the importance of tele-psychological services during this crisis transition (Hames et al., 2020; Schinke, 2020a, 2020b). I have also made observations from some of my clients in that they seem to be examining 'who they are' outside sport, resulting in some emotional conversations about the impact that unanticipated events can have on athletes who risk identity foreclosure early in their careers (Aquilina, 2013; Murphy et al., 1996).

I have also endeavoured to keep an effective routine and focusing my energy and time to some of the research that is currently outstanding for the portfolio (e.g. systematic review). I've recognised that just as athletes might concentrate in other aspects of their performance during transitions (e.g. injury), so am I! Other opportunities have also arisen out of the pandemic. One of my colleagues has invited me to be part of a research team to investigate the impact of pandemic on athletes.

### **Now What?**

I have been able to fill my time nicely with empirical paper write ups and conducting research during the pandemic. Doing this will also contribute to my portfolio submission. I am pleased that I have the self-awareness that my current life situation and recent transition could have negative impacts on my progress and development. This being said, I should acknowledge the significance of an event such as this, and should show self-compassion and monitor my own wellbeing.

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### **COVID-19 Pandemic (part 3; October)**

#### **What?**

It has been over six months and the COVID-19 pandemic is still affecting the day-to-day lives of people throughout the UK. I am currently still living with family and despite progress made with my professional doctorate, both in relation to writing up case studies and consultancy, I am beginning to feel exhausted and unable to commit my full self to the work required. I believe that I may be experiencing a variety of issues relating to burnout, with a general sense of fatigue from living at home and attempting to work in the same way each day. The monotony of this has clearly had an effect on my wellbeing and this has prompted the current reflection. I have been experiencing low mood, low motivation towards tasks, sleep disturbance, as well as a general feeling of fatigue (Skovholt et al., 2001).

#### **So What?**

I am aware sport psychology practitioners work within an emotive setting. I myself must be at a desired or rather optimal level of functioning to provide effective and ethical

care for clients. During lockdown, practitioners and athletes are ‘in the same boat’, with the potential for the pandemic to also cause stress and mental health difficulties for practitioners (Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2020). Given the likelihood that a large portion of consultancy will pertain to experiences of, and dealing with, the lockdown, I have decided to take a break from consultancy until such a time where I believe I am able to function fully as a practitioner again. As I myself am unable to fully ‘park’ my own issues at the door, it is likely that I will not be able to fully be present with the client, with a high chance of countertransference occurring in the sessions (Winstone & Gervis, 2006). I don’t believe I would be able to fully attend to the client in front of me without my own current issues emerging throughout the consultancy process.

### **What Now?**

I am currently not seeing any clients. I have set aside time off from that activity and look to speak to my supervisor to explain my current situation and to confide in. The empirical study I have been working as part of a research team investigating the impacts of COVID on athletes is almost finished. Working alongside the team has also given me valued time to open up and discuss how other practitioners are coping with the pandemic and consultancy (McEwan & Tod, 2015; Tod & Bond, 2010).

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### **Value, Worth, and Marketing (20/01/2021)**

A peer and I engaged in some general discussion regarding annual progress reviews and our work as sport psychologists. We further looked into our value and providing ‘worth’ within the sport field. My colleague asked how I was doing and how I was feeling presently, after I had disclosed that I had not been coping well with my current academic and life situation. I continued by saying that it was difficult to buy in to my own work when I was not currently working, had no salary, and did not currently live at my own home. I had moved back with family during the COVID-19 pandemic and was clearly languishing (Keyes, 2002).

I continued and disclosed that I felt I had to continually approach clients/stakeholders etc in order to gain hours. This made me feel like perhaps they were doing a service to me, rather than me providing the service for them. Even when I am able to get work and continue to engage with clients, some engagement seems to fade over time.

To explain perhaps why I am languishing at the moment is likely due to the ongoing pandemic. All sport and services are unsure when and how they will return to sport. I also believe one area I am lacking is 'marketing' myself and providing a 'product' as a sport psychology. I have great difficulty in selling myself in a way that is perhaps achieved over social media (twitter etc). I am struggling to choose whether this is an avoidance behaviour or that it is because of my rooted values as a practitioner, namely that I wish my work to speak for itself. The idea of continually having to sell myself to the wider sport community is something I have found a struggle. This was further affirmed when an 'elevator pitch' task (Simpson, 2016) assigned to level 6 students was something I did not myself feel comfortable doing. There are undoubtedly benefits to marketing and possessing a sport psychology 'product' and many sport psychologists and performance psychologists are clearly very skilled in these areas. This might be the difference in securing positions in elite institutions and teams.

Sport psychologists provide support that requires a great deal of effort in design and delivery of service provision. Previous conversations with peers surrounding applied experiences included expressions of client sessions as 'useful', yet we agreed that sometimes these sessions were 'tick box' exercises, rather than something that is viewed as imperative to the team or organisation. It leads me to think why I should put all this effort into a job that doesn't seem to value the services we provide as much as I think it should. It feels like an uphill struggle that does not seem to be getting easier. Should I not steer my energy and resources to a career considered as a necessity, rather than an optional extra? There is no

doubt I wish to be in a field that utilises psychological support for those in need, but I am beginning to question whether I should start to expand my options.

I think this is a reminder of the harsh reality of sport psychology within the applied field. My persistent feelings of a lack of impact and meaning to my applied work has meant that I have started to look into other fields such as Clinical Psychology (Tod et al., 2009). I feel that there will always be a 'need' for clinical psychology, with clients being 'assigned' to the practitioner. Perhaps this field might resonate more with my values as a practitioner.

I will continue to engage with my supervisor and peers to express my concerns and experiences of my sport psychology journey as this has given me clarity and provided support during these times (McEwan & Tod, 2014; Rønnestad and Skovholt, 2003; Tod et al., 2007). Along with this, a full-time role might provide me with some more meaning to my work and I will continue to apply for applied, research, and assistant roles both in sport and the clinical field.

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## Research

### Performance Narratives (23/03/2018)

I attended the Mental Health in Sport conference at the Open University in Milton Keynes. This provided an opportunity to learn from academics from across the field and hear some open, honest, and thought provoking experiences from elite athletes, telling their stories of their own mental health struggles. The final presentation came from two colleagues who had investigated mental health stories in athletes. The first 10 minutes consisted of a monologue, which after she told us it was her own experience and how she was feeling participating in sport. I began to wonder when this was written, it certainly seemed like it was written in hindsight, potentially decades after this event had happened.

The monologue was certainly thought provoking:

*“Who was the girl? What happened after? She is having a conversation with herself, almost like an angel and devil on her shoulder, describing the battle of not wanting to be competitive but feeling compelled to do so.”*

These were some of the thoughts running through my head as she stood in front of the audience. It was refreshing to see, however I couldn't help but wonder of all the potential biases within this story (it's her own reflection, written in her own book, maybe written years after competitive participation). I tried to keep an open mind, 'I am only a first year Prof Doc student, this individual is a Doctor, so I shouldn't be so critical of her presentation'. The presentation went on to describe 'performance narratives' and 'discovery narratives' of athletes telling their stories of participation in sport, and how these journeys can find different endings. I struggled again to immerse myself in the stories. At first it seemed as though 'real life' interview clips were put together to give us an insight into these journeys – actors were hired to narrate the chosen key interview themes - which I thought was understandable given

the nature of confidentiality. However again, I didn't feel I was 'buying' into the research methods used for this presentation. I continued to feel guilty, these were excellent points being put across but given the 'scientific' nature of Sport Psychology I have been studying throughout my academic career, my thoughts came back to "What is the purpose, what is the take home message?"

Given that this had been playing on my mind on the way home, I decided to do some research the next day. There is no question that a narrative approach to telling these athletes' stories was used, however, I needed to know more. I wanted to inform myself, inform my practice and most of all, get some more knowledge behind why I was thinking the thoughts I was during the presentation.

Having a narrative perspective can give us as researchers a more insightful view into an individual's journey and it can explore deeper the meaning behind what is seen as a strict barrier in research of theory and models. However, I still feel that for Sport Psychology, a discipline still in its infancy and still (in my opinion) yet to receive the full respect of other disciplines, should endeavour to examine and investigate psychological phenomena with sound, grounded methodological measures. If narrative research is told by the individual to the researcher, who then portrays the athletes story, how do we as researchers ensure the appropriate representation of that story? How do we battle the 'crisis of representation'? (Sparkes, 2002). This reflection is not to say we can't experiment, develop and explore new insightful ways of research. However, as Sandelowski (1991) describes, certain research methods boast scientific claims from autobiographical accounts. Developing my critical knowledge on the subject area and how it can both help, but also cause certain methodological issues in research has made me a more informed researcher and established a better understanding of how this approach might be useful when undertaking applied / practice informed research in the field.

A particular comment I found in a response written by Gard (2014, p.93) provided me with some solace.

*“It is striking how often social science work of this kind is justified in terms of its ‘potential’; its potential to ‘create debate’ or ‘encourage reflection’ or ‘transgress’. In the absence of any evidence, on the face of it this seems a very weak justification.”*

I will use this experience to try to keep an open mind in gaining new and useful experiences to aid my own research in the field. I believe that in order for Sport Psychology to grow and develop we must always be striving for new, intuitive research methods. I am glad I was aware of my own thoughts during the presentation, as those thoughts allow me to research and investigate a research method I was unfamiliar with.. The knowledge of this experience will allow me to take a more unbiased approach towards future research methods.

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## **Difficulty in Recruitment (June, 2019)**

It has been difficult recruiting participants for my CrossFit: exercise dependence study. At first, the prospect of gaining 380 participants (the number that is required as the

population size is unknown) seemed not too difficult. Perhaps it was a naïve thought, however the number of CrossFit affiliated boxes (gyms) within the UK stands currently at 600. The law of averages, or as I saw it, would perhaps favour that with enough boxes contacted, some were bound to respond. I failed to see however that in some respect, CrossFit prides itself as a tight knit community: one that strives towards excellence, commitment, and peak physical performance (Dawson, 2017). Some could argue that a message to the gatekeeper (controlled by the admin, usually the owner) from an individual who (a) has no practical experience in CrossFit and (b) would like their members to participate in a study investigating exercise dependency and their associated factors, is a very quick way of being ignored.

I was feeling disheartened, second guessing myself, unsure of my own place within Sport Psychology literature. I never wanted to “specialise” in any particular area of research. As a trainee, my goal was to be as broad and well-rounded within my competency acquisition as I could, having the capability to work in a broad range of sports etc. I thought (and perhaps still do) that given my inexperience, my research within the field will become widely discredited to those who had more experience within exercise literature. I was also afraid that perhaps this study might cause a backlash leading me to be ‘seen’ as someone who is attacking the community.

I think I have yet to solidify my identity within sport psychology literature. Despite these reservations, I had to start somewhere. Perhaps my results will show nothing, or perhaps I could even promote my findings in a ‘positive’ manner that might not come across as an ‘attack’. My lack of confidence in the study’s impact might be a result of my expectation to strive to achieve ground breaking findings so as to prove my worth as a researcher. However, given the lack of research into such areas as exercise dependence, I hope this research can at least allow us to have a conversation around exercise, why we

exercise, and examine the question of ‘how much is too much?’ (Hausenblas & Downs, 2002; Paradis et al., 2013).

Although participants are trickling in, many more boxes have yet to be contacted. I’m feeling confident that I will make the target with this information. I will continue to push on, trust the research process, and acknowledge that as a neophyte practitioner-researcher thoughts of inadequacy and proving one’s worth are bound to appear (Skovholt and Rønnestad, 1992; Tonn & Harminson, 2004).

I could have perhaps visited some boxes in the area to recruit participants and to immerse myself more in the field I was studying. This might have yielded contacts and allowed conversation surrounding the research area. For future research, a more robust back up plan in case recruitment is difficult will be considered, and perhaps solely relying on gatekeepers can be avoided. If I intend to follow up this research, perhaps as a larger project, then having participants able to leave their email addresses for me to contact them will help recruitment.

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### **Research reflection – CrossFit (09/07/2019)**

Whilst working through the preliminary stages of my data, cleaning and testing reliability and validity of the scales, most of the Cronbach's had come back with pleasing results. On further investigation of the data analysis i.e. correlations and investigating my hypothesis, I had found little to no interactions or any indication that proved my hypothesis.

At first, I felt happy that I had managed to get to grips with SPSS after a hiatus since my Masters degree and this in turn helped my motivation to persevere with what was a large study. I was able to refresh my memory of statistical analysis using online resources, textbooks (ref), and I enrolled in quantitative research seminars through the University. As the analysis developed, I felt deflated and defeated at the sight of little to no interactions between my variables, no correlations, and no differences between the subgroups.

Based on my reading and experiences of the topic, I had been expecting for some outcome that would inevitably lead to, "here's something interesting to talk about". Instead (apart from one small correlation) I had nothing to report that would break boundaries, add towards understanding exercise dependence or show my impact as a researcher.

From further discussion with supervisors, it was clear I had perhaps bitten off more than I could chew on this particular topic, especially with the number of scales involved. One supervisor even said it could have been a PhD topic in itself with the number of questionnaires I had utilized. I perhaps could have done a bit more research, spoke more to supervisors, and really nailed down my research question. On the other hand, when do we

stop with justifying every move and just go for it? This is a balance I should consider further in the future.

I enjoyed the research thus far, and felt it was something relevant and relatively novel within the field of Sport and Exercise Psychology. This research has also provided the opportunity to contribute the reliability and internal consistency of several scales within a population sample of over 280 participants. The negative side of this experience was the knock to my confidence, where I felt a sense of failure in own perceived ability to develop and conduct novel research that contributes to the sport and exercise research field.

Moving forward I will continue to develop my own knowledge of methodologies and theory to understand and develop my research questions to be in a better place for my next research area. I will also aim to discuss with supervisors relevant subject areas and suggestions that they may have for research areas within my particular areas of interest.

### **Learning about Narrative (May 2020)**

I am currently in the process of conducting research surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Myself and the research team have opted to utilize a narrative approach (Smith & Sparkes, 2009a) to understand the experiences of athletes during the lockdown. While my experience at the Mental Health in Sport Conference had led to understand more about the approach, I had not conducted narrative or any qualitative method of inquiry.

I began to study and read the underpinning philosophy of methodological approach to narrative. Attempting to understand this new approach has been difficult. I have been struggling to understand the broad, somewhat abstract concepts. The process has been demoralizing. While struggling to learn the concepts to conduct NA, I often felt embarrassed during my meetings with my research supervisor when discussing qualitative inquiry. My perceived lack of knowledge and subsequent feelings of incompetence often led me to

bumble, unable to articulate the concepts and ideas of the research. Such feelings often make me feel like this Professional Doctorate is beyond my intellectual scope.

This experience and subsequent feelings might be explained by my development and skills thus far in my research and practice education and training . I am utilizing qualitative methods that I have yet to do, and I am learning about new epistemological and ontological positions and approaches to qualitative inquiry.

I could have been more honest with my supervisor, understanding that the supervisory team is there to help and not judge, similar to my own consultancy approach! If I had been more open and shared my feelings, perhaps I could have gained more insight into my own development and sources of information to assist in my learning.

As this research is being conducted as part of a team, I will endeavour to engage my colleagues to learn collaboratively about the narrative approach. I will also continue to research independently, and through discussion with the research team, the ontological and epistemological positioning of the study to further develop my knowledge. A collaborative approach to learning might assist my own and my other team members who perhaps are going through similar experiences.

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## **Ontology and Epistemology Reflection (June 2020)**

**What?**

I believe I am going through some form of ontological and epistemological transition with regards to my research philosophy. Learning about qualitative research in my reading (e.g. Smith and Sparkes, 2013), and through my own consultancy development where I have begun to utilize more of a humanistic-existential approach to my psychological support (Nesti, 2004), have ultimately led me to question how I view the 'existence' of knowledge and how knowledge is measured and acquired.

My undergraduate and masters degree major projects and dissertations were quantitative. What I did not understand at the time, but have come to learn through my developed knowledge and understanding throughout the professional doctorate, is that I was mainly working from a positivist research paradigm. That is, a single reality that can be measured and known, that reality can be measured via the use of reliable and valid tools.

From what I understand about adopting a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm; there is no single reality or truth, reality is created by individuals through interaction and from socially constructed norms, language, gender, race (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Further, knowledge is constructed by the observer and the observed, is subject to historical, temporal, cultural, and subjective factors, and exists in many forms (Smith and Sparkes, 2013).

### **So What?**

This recent epistemological and ontological development has been quite challenging. I feel in a way that my previous endeavours to conduct and understand psychology have somewhat been dismissed from this new position. The endeavour to understand ontological relativism and epistemological constructivism from a philosophical standpoint has also been difficult, as I find the concepts quite abstract. However, in my readings of existential psychology (e.g. Nesti, 2004; Spinelli, 2007; Van Deurzen, 1988; Yalom, 1980), I believe I have come to understand these concepts somewhat better.

The educational transition that I have encountered has now led me to recognise the usefulness of qualitative research, particularly from a constructivist standpoint. I have read many qualitative studies that have predominantly used standard methods thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016) but within a post-positivist philosophy. While I understand the usefulness of utilizing such methods [thematic analysis], I feel sometimes the participant's individual experience is 'lost' in the representation of the data. Reading some narrative studies, for example in Sparkes and Smith's (2002) and Smith and Sparkes's (2005) studies, I feel like I really get to 'know' the individual and their experience of events and meanings they construct. Some of these studies are emotionally stirring and have significant impact upon reading! I feel this will ultimately lead to a development in what I value within my own research topics, and the methodology I use to approach research in the future. Having read hard hitting, emotionally stirring qualitative research, I now believe this is better aligned to my own values compared to the research paradigm I was working on before.

### **Now What?**

I will continue to try and become familiar with the epistemological and ontological concepts that are rooted in the qualitative inquiry that I am perhaps now more drawn too. I have also noticed that 'pragmatism' is another paradigm that actually might provide me with the opportunity to use both quantitative and qualitative methods in my research. I will speak to my research supervisor to gain further insight into the approaches, how and when they are used, and if a pragmatic approach can allow us as researchers to be flexible in our approach depending on the question at hand.

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### **COVID Narrative First Interview (04/05/2020)**

#### **What happened?**

Today I conducted the first interview with a research participant for our study on athlete's experiences of lockdown during COVID-19. The interview was conducted via Zoom due to the current pandemic and the participant was an elite athlete.

#### **How did I feel?**

I was a bit nervous as this was a professional athlete signed with a premier league club in Wales. I wanted to gather 'good' data as I had been told previously that this athlete had contracted the virus. I had felt like his data would be invaluable to our research and this perhaps put some pressure on me.

### **What was good and bad?**

I felt we gathered data that fitted into the narrative journey (the beginning middle and end of the story). I felt a good connection with the athlete and that he was comfortable enough to share his experiences of the lockdown.

There were a few technical difficulties with the internet connection, which resulted in me having to pause and restart the interview half way through. I felt like this may have impeded the flow of the story, as I had to interrupt him to ensure the connection did not affect the data. The data would have been useless (and likely a waste of both of our times) if it was unusable for transcription.

### **What sense can I make of the situation?**

Given the circumstances, there are multiple reasons as to why the experience was the way it was. Firstly, as a relatively new researcher both in the fields of qualitative research and in narrative, it was understandable I may have been nervous and a bit disjointed. There was perhaps some level of anxiety, as his status of professionalism might have impacted my own ability to keep a level head or create some feelings of unease prior to and at the start of the interview. However, I was able to recognise these feelings ‘in action’ (Andersen et al., 2004), and acknowledge that my feelings of anxiety were linked to my own concerns to conduct a fruitful interview because I believed that the research project was novel and impactful (Nesti, 2004). I was able to utilize my skills in mindfulness, re-centre myself and carry on despite these feelings (Hayes et al., 2009). As with all technology, and given my experience in the past, quick and decisive action when dealing with occurrences such as these are important. I recognised that perhaps feelings of guilt or incompetence at the time were likely due to a commitment to professionalism in front of athletes that were part of my larger values as a practitioner

### **What else could I have done?**

Despite allowing the participant to lead the interview and assuming the role of ‘active listener’ (Carless & Douglas, 2009), I perhaps did not ask the right questions at some points in the interview. In order to feel more prepared, or in case of any moments in the interview where my questioning was not the best, a ‘cheat sheet’ of potential questions that might provide insight to the participant’s experience might have been useful.

### **Action plan**

My next steps are to engage with the research team and discuss the interview with them. As I feel the research team are open and engaging, doing so might stimulate questions and reflections for me as a researcher (Andersen et al., 2004). I also feel like we can challenge each other in a safe manner, which serves to enhance this reflection.

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### **Data Collection Exhaustion (June, 2020)**

## **What?**

During the data collection phase of the COVID narrative study (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021), I was tasked with participant interviews. Two of the interviews I had arranged for the same day. I found myself mentally and physically exhausted following the interviews, despite allowing for an hour between them. I had not anticipated this to happen as I had previously conducted face-to-face interviews during my consultancy practice in a similar manner. I did not believe this impacted the interviews, however, I recognised that the rest of my work for the rest of the day following the interviews had been impacted negatively.

## **So What?**

Experiencing fatigue within professional practice can be common, particularly in vocations that involve psychological 'care' (Van Der Merwe, 2019; Yanay & Shahar 1998). From my past experience, exhaustion following a day's work was common, not only working with individual athletes, but attending to and experiencing organisational stressors, maintaining self-awareness and attempting to gather as much information as I could to assist in my professional development (Tod, 2007). Despite these challenges and from my own interest in work-life balance research (Quartirolì, 2019), I was confident that I was maintaining my optimum service delivery and ensuring best practice.

What struck me in this instance was that despite conducting these interviews from the comfort of my own home, I was struck down by a surge of exhaustion after only interviewing two participants from our study. This may have been caused by increased stressors outside of the 'work' setting, such as those elicited by the global pandemic, or utilizing a relatively new, broad approach to data collection and interviewing (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). I had not interviewed these participants before, so perhaps my own efforts to maintain my professional

composure (e.g. slight nerves at meeting new athletes) and to develop rapport with the participants had utilized my cognitive resources.

This experience showed me that I should always consider the impact external stressors might have on my professional practice, and not to take for granted the toll novel experiences have for me, not only as a practitioner, but also as a researcher.

### **What now?**

I will continue to be cognizant and self-aware of my energy levels and to plan ahead of potential outside stressors when arranging and conducting interviews. This might require spreading out interviewees with more time in between, or on different days. I will also continue to immerse myself in literature that investigates this subject area and method, as it is something that interests me as a practitioner and researcher.

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## **Teaching and Dissemination**

### **Education and Pedagogy (23/09/2019- 30/09/2019)**

I am currently conducting background reading and compiling literature along with attempting to understand theoretical frameworks to use within my teaching case study. My teaching case study is intended to be in the form of over five workshops delivered to 15-20 J14/15 rowers in the areas of mental skills.

I currently feel somewhat overwhelmed at attempting to understand educational literature and pedagogical literature. I find it frustrating because I already find it difficult to keep myself fresh on the different theories and frameworks specific to sport psychology, let alone from another generalizable field! There also seems to be little specific literature that examines the experiences of neophyte practitioners who are engaged in teaching as part of their journeys to becoming qualified sport psychologists. In my previous reading surrounding practitioner development, there are some parallels with how I'm feeling and my development stage (Skovholt & Rønnestad 1992; Tod et al., 2009). First, there is a sense of incompetency as this is a relatively new experience for me and I am still developing within the role of sport psychologists as educator and trainer. However, I am able to acknowledge I have skills that have become transferable from my time so far as a trainee.

I have identified some theoretical crossover from education to sport psychology, particularly in the links between underpinning literature that develops knowledge in learners, such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2010), and how it has been used in sport to help clients with their strive for autonomy and practitioners to create autonomy-supportive learning environments. I have also found myself utilizing a lot of teaching techniques that relate to my consultancy style. For example, by reading and learning about constructivist theory, I was better able to understand learners as individuals with unique perspectives (Bada

& Olusegun, 2015). This allowed me to find the ‘common thread’ between my pedagogical approach and my philosophical approach as a practitioner (Poczwadowski et al., 2004).

On reflection, I would have explored the pedagogical literature further and integrated education literature reading earlier to help with the learning curve of what seemed to be a novel subject area. I will continue to immerse myself within the literature and continue to examine my values as a practitioner and how these align with my pedagogical assumptions as a teacher.

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## **Education and Pedagogy; part two. (October 2019)**

I decided to revisit my education and pedagogy reflection as I believe I have come to understand and have solidified my approach to teaching much more than I had previously in my reflection above. I have completed my teaching case study, and upon immersing myself in the literature, I am better able to articulate what my values and beliefs are concerning my approach to teaching.

My experience thus far has taught me that I do ‘default’ to an ‘expert’ position at times, with the presenting style of such sessions likely due to my own preconceptions of teaching (Boyd & Harris, 2010). However, I have been able to recognise this and develop an integrated approach to the teaching process, much like my own approach within my consultancy. While understanding that I was the assumed ‘expert’ and ‘leader’ of the sessions, I took into consideration ways to develop a ‘learner centred’ environment (Prawat, 1992).

My rooted values of viewing individuals as unique with their own constructed beliefs played an integral part of developing my pedagogy. I was aware that a history of being taught in a didactic style might cause me to ‘default’ to this style. However, this may also result in a clash with my philosophy of practice, causing feelings of unease and anxiety (Lindsay et al. 2007). From a constructivist perspective, students construct their own meanings, and involving students in the learning process allows them to develop unique and individual ways of understanding (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). This includes allowing learners to raise their own questions, generate their own hypotheses and models as possibilities and test them for validity. I had come across a passage in Weimer’s (2002) paper whereby Ramsden (1988, p.271) notes that “learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person’s way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world— rather than as a quantitative change in the amount of knowledge someone possesses” (Cited in Weimer, 2002, p.11). This is something that resonated with me and that I endeavoured to facilitate within my teaching.

With an awareness of potential anxiety that was associated with assuming the ‘expert’ role, I was able to incorporate a mode of social constructivism congruent with my philosophy of practice within education sessions. Further, by engaging and emphasising a collaborative environment (e.g. regularly acknowledging the learner’s individual contribution) I had

integrated a level of ‘student-centred learning’ (Prawat, 1992) in my sessions. I felt much more at ease when adopting this approach, and enjoyed engaging the learners by asking open-ended questions, allowing them to discuss particular topics or themes relevant to the subject areas amongst themselves. This also allowed me to take a flexible approach to the sessions and meant I was able to cover certain topics over multiple sessions without any detriment to the learning outcomes.

This meant that my approach to teaching and my teaching style had now become recognised and static, perhaps like the process of ‘individuation’ in practitioner development (McEwan et al., 2019). I was able to examine my values and beliefs, my ‘approach’, and align it in a way that fitted well with my own practitioner philosophy (Poczwadowski et al., 2004).

I think this mode of staged reflection (following reflection after a prior reflection) has allowed me to recognise the constant process of learning and developing my practitioner identity and underpinning philosophical frameworks and modes of practice; whether that be consultancy, research, or teaching based.

I will aim to look back on my reflections to examine my progress and to examine how my attitudes and knowledge has developed since the initial reflection. I have done this previously, revealing interesting developments in my own opinions (e.g. reflections on narrative inquiry). This will perhaps further my motivation towards the professional doctorate portfolio and my own perceptions of competency by examining my progress through reflection (Andersen et al., 2004).

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### **Case Study lecture to Level 6 Placement Students (10/10/2019)**

#### **What happened?**

I was invited to present my journey so far as a trainee sport and exercise psychologist by Prof Zoe Knowles and include a 'real life' case study scenario about an applied experience. Due to technical difficulties beyond our control at the start, we were limited in group discussion around case studies.

#### **How did I feel?**

I was nervous, I usually feel nerves before talking in front of groups. I usually catch myself shaking, which impacts my flow of thought, however I regularly find that I accept this as a normal and unavoidable part of the way I react under pressure.

### **What was good and bad?**

I enjoyed potentially impacting student's future career choices and challenging students on their views of my work in the applied field. I felt there was good engagement with all groups thanks to Zoe overseeing the session and it was good to network with the other two guest speakers.

I perhaps did not make the link between my applied experiences and those encountered by the placement students as well as I might have done. My presentation was more around being an applied sport psychologist as opposed to the synthesis between that and the placement learning of the undergraduates.

### **Evaluation**

I believe my talk and case study overall was relevant for those students who are passionate about sport psychology and intend to follow the career path. Due to my lack of knowledge around the module levels, this is perhaps why I may have missed the opportunity for synthesis between my learning experiences and those of the students, although I do feel that I met the brief I was given.

### **What would I do differently?**

Continue to understand that just because I approach a task potentially differently, this does not mean I am doing it wrong. As two other presentations were before mine, perhaps it would have been good for students to experience something they weren't necessarily expecting or had seen in previous presentations.

### **Conclusions**

Despite being nervous, I can use this experience to learn about next potential dissemination tasks, such as the lecture for Masters students in Bolton in December. I should aim to gain feedback from peers/students/supervisors on performance.

### **Bolton Case Study Lecture and Formal Observation (06/12/2019)**

I had been asked by Nick to come along to Bolton University to present a case study lecture on some of my applied work. I had decided to deliver my work with ‘Michaela’ (pseudonym) as I believed this case study was novel and could provide some interesting insights into applied sport psychology. I was able to prepare theory-based and applied examples of our work together. This included perfectionism (Anshel & Eom, 2003; Hal et al., 1998), injury in relation to identity and meaning (Nesti, 2004; Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998), and my own philosophical approach to consultancy (Poczwardowski et al., 2004) while leaving time to engage the group with tasks and discussions in a collaborative nature. I had prepared my lecture well in advance as this was my first formal guest lecture at a University. On the day, I arrived in good time and met Nick to discuss any relevant details before the class arrived.

On the whole, the session went very well. I felt confident in the subjects I had delivered and how the class responded to these. With the help of group discussions and an ‘open’ style to the lecture, I felt like I did not assume the ‘expert’ or ‘teacher’ role as much, therefore I was more comfortable throughout the session compared to if I had done this. After the session I felt very proud of my delivery and how the lecture went overall. I felt like the session had impacted the learners and I had delivered an overall engaging session. This left me very satisfied and even a sense of joy that it had gone so well!

Looking at the feedback form filled out by Nick, I picked up on some themes that could contribute to my development and provide some further positive reinforcement about

my session. Themes that emerged included how I presented and delivered the lecture. My delivery style and communication skills were also identified as a strength. Feedback points from the microteaching session included “engagement with groups” and feedback from the formal observation included “build effective relationships in a very short time!!!”. Research has suggested that this is key in effective service delivery (Stronge, 2018). There were several comments on the clear concise nature of the activities as well as encouraging engagement in the session and including a variety of tasks from individual to group tasks. By providing a variety of tasks, I was able to ensure active learning was facilitated (Jarvis, 2011).

Areas to work on included perhaps how I move around, or my body language during the session. Based on my feedback, although my delivery style is clear and thoughtful, there were definitely some aspects I could improve on. This includes how I walk/sit/stand in the room as well as altering the tone and pace of my delivery style. I feel I need to make clear some of the tasks I pose to groups. I understand that at times I give broad questions in order to stimulate discussion points, which aren’t ‘boxed’ in to one area and create an opportunity for a very open discussion that may include many subject areas. However, this broad approach may not be appropriate for those who are unable to glean what is being asked of them. Perhaps as I gain more experience then I will be able to attend to my body language more, as a result of feeling more relaxed and comfortable in my environment. I noticed that some lack of confidence in preparation perhaps leads to me over prepare for formal teaching.

Going forward I will seek out further opportunities to build my experience, which will allow me to enhance my self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). This might strike a balance between preparedness and the ability to conduct sessions with limited slides and rigid structure. While the formal observation can cause some anxiety and a pressure to provide excellent results, I believe doing this contributed highly to my teaching development. Identifying and providing details on my strengths is not something I do often, and much of my own reflections are

about something ‘bad’ or something that has gone awry (Andersen et al., 2004). I will aim to focus more on my strengths while acknowledging areas to improve. A formal observation such as this can help facilitate that process.

<b>Teaching Observation Criteria</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Met</b>	<b>Not* fully met</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>Preparation:</b> Was the tutor prepared for the session?	<i>Presentation well prepared. Turned up early to session</i>	✓		
<b>Structure and Organisation:</b> How did the tutor interact with the students? Was he/she supportive? Did he/she enable learning?	<i>Great flow to the presentation</i>	✓		
<b>Interaction:</b> How did the tutor interact with the students? Was he/she supportive? Did he/she enable learning?	<i>Answered all questions asked. Encouraged engagement. Praised correct answers.</i>	✓		<i>Choice to sit down at times???</i> <i>Turned back on students???</i>
Was the time management of the session appropriate to the needs of the group?	<i>Appropriate</i>	✓		
<b>Level:</b> Was the support provided at the appropriate level?	<i>Very supportive of student learning</i>	✓		
<b>Learning Resources:</b> Did the tutor make appropriate use of handouts or other study materials?	<i>N/A for type of session delivered</i>	✓		
<b>Audibility:</b> Could the tutor be clearly heard?	<i>Loud and good pace of delivery style</i>	✓		
<b>Enthusiasm &amp; Interest:</b> Did the tutor attempt to present the	<i>Clear passion and interest for the topic was apparent throughout.</i>	✓		

materials in an appropriate and interesting way?				
<b>Overall comments and recommendations</b>				
<p>-Slow and thoughtful delivery style which engaged the audience from the very beginning of the session.</p> <p>-Delivered potentially complex material/theory/content in a way that was understandable and relevant to the target audience.</p> <p>-Great use of videos/pictures/metaphors to ensure students understand the point being made</p> <p>-Consider using more questions at the start to set the scene/expectations for them engaging from the start and throughout the presentation</p> <p>-Use of group tasks and challenging questions to engage the audience and check understanding</p> <p>-Probed understanding by asking further questions based on students' responses</p> <p>-Consider changing the pace of the delivery style throughout the lecture so students don't become complacent (think about the energy in the room!)</p> <p>-Built effective relationships in a very short time!!</p>				

Table 1: Formal Teaching Observation

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## **Empirical Paper Two Dissemination (01/05/2021)**

### **What?**

Today I delivered a seminar on my second empirical study: COVID-19 Return to Sport Following Lockdown. This was to be delivered to fellow TASS practitioners and was attended by my line manager in this work context. Given my previous reflections and being aware that I had the tendency to overprepare and ruminate on lectures and seminars prior to delivery, I had ensured that I both left myself adequate time to prepare prior to the session whilst engaging in my day to day duties.

The session began, and three other practitioners attended all within the psychology/lifestyle discipline. I was a little disappointed at the turn out, given that some

fellow practitioners had also confirmed their attendance prior to the delivery. Attendance aside, I began with an open question to explore what the rest of the group had experienced in relation to athletes returning to sport. I then delivered a PowerPoint presentation with my details of my study and findings. The session concluded with general thoughts from the group and I sent out a feedback form.

The one down side was that I felt I had rushed through some of the slides due to time issues. As Zoom only allows for 40 minutes, we ended up stopping and setting up a new call to facilitate the delivery of a thorough session.

### **So What?**

I really felt like this was potentially my best ever session. Leading with an opening question, to allow me and my fellow practitioners to discuss our own experiences was helpful. It also acted as a precursor to some of the findings that were to be discussed later on. I believe it also helped me to draw on some of the skills I had learnt throughout my teaching and experiences when presenting to others, where engaging with the group sets expectations for them to be active participants and contribute to the session.

It was clear to me how I was drawing on some of the constructivist presenting and teaching skills from Bada and Olusegun's (2015) paradigm, an approach I referred to and used in my Prof Doc teaching and training case study assignment and commentary. I was less preoccupied with the fact I was using PowerPoint, understanding it's place within my style of teaching and presenting. I can feel I've moved from a 'read from the slides' teacher approach to a more fluid discussion around the points I have made within the slide.

Taken together, this session really hit home that I have found my style and o 'identity' as a practitioner within this work setting. The session was discursive, informative, and I believe the group benefitted from the findings. Further, the fact that I brought into my own

research from a philosophical standpoint (i.e. narrative inquiry), really came through in my presentation. I was able to explain the practical and theoretical implications well and I felt extremely satisfied and confident after the session had finished.

### **Now What?**

Two of the attendees completed a google form feedback form I had created prior to the session. I have included this in the *Now What?* section, as the feedback may provide helpful ideas and recommendations for the future, or reinforce the strengths of the session. The questions and responses were as follows: (a) How would you rate the overall session? (excellent, n=2), (b) Was the content relevant to your role in the workplace (e.g. TASS, LJMU)? (Yes, n=2), (c) How would you rate the presentation of the content? (excellent, n=2). A box for attendees to write general comments and recommendations for the future was given after and the responses were as follows:

*“Research and findings were relevant to today’s challenges when working with athletes and staff in sport. I found the conversation about meaning and identity especially thought provoking and left the meeting considering how to have further conversations with MDT on these topics” (H)*

*“Really liked the discussion at the start, set the tone for the meeting” (R)*

Given my reflection and the feedback provided. It is hard to say what I can do to improve future sessions, although I will continue to learn how to refine my teaching and training approach as I continue to gain more experience! Continuing to implement open discussion prior to presentations might be something I consider more in the future when it is relevant. I believe the relatively small number of attendees allowed for this to happen more effectively than say a group of 10 or more attendees.

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## **Consultancy Case Study One**

### **The Dual-Task Scenario: Stress Exposure Training in Motorsport**

#### **Abstract**

The present case study concerns a stress exposure training (SET) intervention delivered to a group of student motor-drivers. The clients' needs were identified using performance profiling, revealing "performing under pressure" and "keeping a level head" as the main psychological factors that were to be developed. As part of the intervention, a dual-task scenario was implemented using a fully immersive driving simulator, requiring motor drivers to execute tasks alongside their standard simulator training. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected throughout the three SET sessions. Through monitoring and evaluation of the SET programme, lap times, scores from the Single Ease Questionnaire and NASA-TLX revealed that the addition of the dual-task scenario affected drivers' cognitive load and performance driving and in responding to the secondary tasks whilst driving. However, by the end of the third session, drivers' lap times improved, along with perceived difficulty of the tasks. The present case study also presents qualitative evaluation through social validation, with motor-drivers' accounts of the benefits of the intervention, along with recommendations for any future SET simulation training. Lastly, reflections concerning practitioner philosophical considerations in the implementation of a performance focused intervention are discussed, along with technical difficulties that had resulted in the termination of the intervention.

**Keywords:** Stress exposure, performance, motor-racing, simulator

## **Background to the Case and Initial Intake**

This case study concerns Sport Psychology consultancies with a Formula e-Racing team at University level from June 2018. The clients were all students within the engineering department at the University. As part of their course, they were required to build and race a car, meeting the requirements of the formula student judging committee. The competition, held at Silverstone race course, hosts multiple engineering teams from around the world and the car is judged in multiple static and dynamic events. One of these events is a business “Dragons Den” type presentation, with the motor students present their design, cost, and sustainability analysis to a panel of judges. The crew aimed to develop a sport science team, recruiting practitioners (e.g. sport psychology, strength and conditioning) as part of this business design, which had to be justified as part of the team’s revenue to the panel. Through my supervisor, the team approached me to be a part of this support network. The work involved the creation of potential psychological skills “packages” that could be made available to support the race team and be included in the business proposal at Silverstone race course. The team also requested the development and delivery of the psychological support package within the motor racing team to enhance driver performance.

It was agreed that the consultancy and intervention could take place after discussion with the team. I was to be enrolled as part of the team’s support staff, assisting in the development of a intervention that focused on developing the drivers’ performance. I ensured to outline the boundaries and competencies of my role as a trainee sport psychologist as part of the professional doctorate programme at the University, giving details of my supervisor and outlining the confidentiality agreement as part of the BPS Code of Conduct and Ethics guidelines (BPS, 2009) and the details of the referral process should it be required.

## **Philosophy of Practice**

My practitioner philosophy is rooted in developing the athlete in a holistic manner, taking a constructivist philosophical approach (Keegan, 2015) that forms the basis of an integrated approach to consultancy. First, I aim to develop the whole person, not just the athlete, to help ensure wellbeing and the ability to cope with everyday emotions, both in life and in sport (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). Performance enhancement is a secondary aim, either through direct intervention (provided the first aim is achieved) or as a result of the continued holistic development of the individual. I believe psychological theory to be an important facet in Sport Psychology. As a science, I adopt psychological research, theory, and frameworks to underpin and inform my interventions (Keegan, 2015). That being said, I believe it is important to realise the uniqueness of the individual, including the environmental and situational factors that present themselves (Keegan, 2015). Therefore, I believe I am able to adapt my approach and develop a programme of psychological support to ensure a tailored intervention that effectively meets the client's needs, whilst striving to remain as authentic as possible towards my philosophy of practice (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). The clients' initial needs and subsequent time restraints that were dictated by the other responsibilities (i.e. being students, building a car) meant that the intervention was tailored towards performance enhancement.

Despite the programme not directly focusing on the 'holistic' development of the motor drivers, I was a new practitioner that was eager to start my consultancy practice in the field of sport psychology. I was aware that face time with athletes can be difficult to come by (Eubank & Hudson, 2013) and I felt that I was able to 'flex' effectively to maintain my own practitioner philosophy to meet the clients' needs and established objectives for the intervention (Stovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Larsen, 2017).

### **Needs Analysis and Case Formulation**

Because research in motorsport is limited (Potkanowicz & Mendel, 2013), I aimed to approach the initial needs analysis as broadly as possible to assist in the development of the intervention programme. This was to gain an understanding of what the perceived main psychological factors of the motor drivers were in their sport. The first phase of the needs analysis was a semi-structured interview that was delivered to the team. This was to gain a further understanding of the sport, what pressures or stressors they felt were present whilst racing, and any other relevant psychological factors that could be important within a racing environment. Examples included: “What do you believe are the main tools a driver needs to be effective?”, “Do you believe some of these to be more important than others?”, “Based on this information, do you believe that Sport Psychology can help you as a driver?” After the semi-structured interview, I sent out a performance profile (Butler & Hardy, 1992) for the motor drivers to complete. The performance profile first asked the motor drivers to identify a number of psychological factors they believed contributed to successful performance in motor racing. I believed it could also be helpful in the monitoring and evaluation of the drivers’ psychological factors that they wished to improve on.

The first exercise involved in completing the performance profile, specifically, the importance of the psychological factors. Next, the motor drivers identified what they perceived their current score was for each factor using a score from zero to ten. After this, they were then asked to identify what they believed a “champion’s” score would be. For example, a motorsport athlete that they could think of that represented the highest level of driving for their skill level. I was then able create a hierarchy of factors by calculating the difference between ‘champion’ and ‘self’ and multiplying this score by the importance score. All scores over 27 were collated and similar performance factors (e.g. strategy/tactical/awareness, anticipation/foresight) across motor drivers were grouped. The main performance psychology factors identified were ‘keeping a level head’ and ‘performance under pressure’.

The team had access to a fully immersive “Force Dynamics” simulator, with “Live for Speed” driving simulator software. I believed this to be an excellent resource in the development of an intervention aimed to address the psychological variables the drivers’ had identified through their performance profiles. The simulator was a 360° rotating device with hydraulics to simulate force to the sides and back of the driver seat, along with a steering wheel that was set to recreate the resistance and feedback of the car’s performance on the track. Three screens designed to occupy the driver’s visual field and recreate the what the driver would see on the track were above the steering wheel. The simulator was a useful resource for the intervention as it provided a much safer environment to conduct psychological interventions compared to real racing conditions. We therefore agreed that the simulator could assist in the driver’s ability to deal with the agreed goals of the intervention.

### *Theoretical Considerations*

Salas et al. (1996) defines stress as:

“a process whereby environmental demands evoke an appraisal process in which perceived demand exceeds resources, and that results in undesirable physiological, psychological, behavioural, or social outcomes”.

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984, p.19) sport specific definition of stress is described as, “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her wellbeing.” The effect of stress on performance has been documented by Driskell et al. (2014) as “*The Big Five*”. Specifically, Driskell et al. (2014) outline the following: (1) stress increases distraction and decreases attentional focus, (2) stress increases cognitive load and demand on capacity, (3) stress increases fear and anxiety, (4) stress increases other negative emotions, and (5) stress increases social impairment. Given the theoretical considerations surrounding

stress and performance, I determined the that impact of an intervention using the simulator could generate desirable psychological outcomes in a stressful encounter by increasing coping effectiveness, where psychological resources are appraised as not being exceeded, or taxed as greatly, by the prevailing environmental demands (stressors).

Motor racing is a high-demand high-risk sport, is highly dangerous, and has a long history of accidents and fatalities (Lippi et al., 2007). Such demands are related to Driskell's (2014) 'Big Five' factors that affect the driver's performance. For example, the nature of racing demands that drivers must deal with extensive pressure and must be able to cope with anxiety and stress by trying to keep a calm and focused composure (an increase in fear and anxiety). This is expected whilst also driving at high speeds and executing multiple motor and cognitive skills simultaneously (increase in cognitive demand). Furthermore, drivers are sometimes required to complete fast motor actions to avoid collision, managing the steering wheel and on-board data (distraction and attentional focus), communicating effectively with the pit manager (social impairment), and being subject to G-loading stress. With this in mind, motor racing is a high stress environment, with the potential for stressors to have a significant impact on performance, as outlined by Driskell et al's (2014) 'Big Five' stress-performance factors.

Using the evidence gleaned from the literature and the performance profile, I aimed to use Baldisserrri et al's (2014) "Motorsport Driver Workload Estimation Dual-Task Scenario" and evolve it into a form of pressure training. The dual-task scenario is originally aimed to investigate the performance of possible driving 'supertaskers', that is, those individuals who possess the ability to attend to multiple tasks that test driver's cognitive resources (Baldisserrri et al, 2014). It involves performing a secondary task while driving, such as counting numbers or identifying how many letters are in a given word. Pressure training and stress exposure training (SET) has been used within contexts such as the military, law enforcement, and other

high demand professions (Driskell & Johnson, 1998; Driskell et al., 2006; Hancock & Szalma, 2008; Johnson & Cannon-Bowers, 1996; Saunders et al., 1996). In particular, SET aims to: (i) familiarise the individual with the stress environment to reduce reactivity to the stress response, (ii) provide mental practice and allow the individual to be adaptable and flexible within their performance by continued skill development through practice, and (iii) provide stressors with ‘real-world’ conditions where the individual executes their performance to improve cognitive and psychomotor performance (Driskel et al., 2014). As motor-racing requires individuals to attend to multiple tasks and subjects the driver to stress responses posited by the ‘Big Five’ (Driskell et al., 2014), I aimed to use the dual-task scenario along with the simulator set up to: (a) monitor how the impact of stress (in the form of cognitive load via a dual-task scenario) impacts driver’s performance and, (b) utilize the dual-task scenario (Baldessarri et al., 2014) to subsequently enhance the motor driver’s ability to cope with performance stressors through stress exposure training (SET).

#### *Dual-Task Scenario as SET*

I aimed to develop Baldissarri et al’s (2014) Dual-Task scenario in simulation training as a SET programme. As the dual-task scenario gradually increases the cognitive workload that can elicit a stress response, the programme could provide the driver’s the ability to maintain a level head under race stress and perform under pressure. I concluded that I would be able to deliver the tasks verbally and record the results using paper and pen and video recording methods to monitor and evaluate the intervention. The dual-tasks set out by Baldissarri et al’s (2014) are as follows:

- Task 1 : Identification if an assigned number is greater or less than 45.
- Task 2 : Count backwards in increments of 3, step by step, starting from an assigned number.

- Task 3: Count backwards in increments of 7, step by step, starting from an assigned number.
- Task 4: Count backwards in increments of 13, step by step, starting from an assigned number.
- Task 5: Count the number of letters of a given word.

### **Intervention: Proposal Presentation**

An ‘information provision’ session similar to Driskell et. al’s (2014) was provided that consisted of a psychoeducational presentation. The session intended to cover three objectives:

1. To provide information to the motor drivers of what the intervention would look like, setting boundaries, and expectations of the motor drivers.
2. How stress within the driving environment can affect performance; including physical, emotional, and cognitive effects that motor drivers may face whilst driving.
3. How SET works, and the overall benefits of SET.

This was followed by an informal discussion to build rapport with the motor drivers and for the athletes to ask any questions around what was expected of them during the intervention.

### **Intervention 1: SET**

The first practical session was held in July 2018, and acted as an introduction for the motor athletes to become familiar with the SET programme and the intervention as a whole. I explained that they would be required to train as usual using their simulator alongside performing other tasks using ‘dual-task scenario’. Their lap times and responses were recorded, along with a battery of questionnaires were also part of the intervention.

A total of seven motor drivers were in attendance. Three of the motor athletes subsequently withdrew from the intervention due to work and university commitments. I was also able to conduct a baseline lap time on the simulator for each of the motor drivers for monitoring and evaluation purposes. Similar to Baldisserri's (2014) dual-task scenario, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. Quantitative data included: lap times, the number of driving errors/crashes, number of secondary task errors, Single Ease Questionnaire (SEQ; Sauro & Dumas, 2009), and the NASA-TLX (Hart & Staveland, 1988). The SEQ is a single item likert scale that investigates individual's perceived difficulty of a task. The scale runs from 1 (very easy) to 7 (very difficult). The NASA-TLX is a multidimensional workload assessment tool that documents the motor driver's perceived performance workload, specifically; mental demand, temporal demand, physical demand, performance rating, effort rating, and frustration rating. Quantitative data included asking the motor driver how they felt the dual-task went following the completion of the eight laps in both driving scenarios. The use of quantitative and qualitative data allowed me to monitor the intervention's effectiveness, athlete's perceptions surrounding the task, how they felt they were performing, and what difficulties they faced. As this was a novel SET programme, it was important for me to be able to adjust the intervention if and when it was necessary.

As an immersive simulator was to be used in the intervention, myself and all motorsport athletes to be briefed with health and safety regulations of the simulator. Due to the 360 degree movement of the simulator, only one motor driver was allowed in the simulation booth at a time. I recorded all footage over the motor drivers' shoulders (see appendix for set up) using a Samsung S9 Android mobile phone. The footage was then analysed for performance data (e.g. lap times, responses, driving errors etc.). All footage was immediately transferred to a password protected laptop that only I had access to on the University's internal drive.

### *Phase 1: Driving Task*

This required each athlete completed eight laps on the simulator as a baseline (driving only). The comfort lap (slowest lap and fastest lap) was taken. After the eight laps the motor driver completed the SEQ and NASA TLX.

### *Phase 2: Secondary Task (no driving)*

The second phased involved each athlete responding to a number of secondary tasks only (no driving). The tasks were randomised to account for order effects (using random.org). Each motor driver was given 40 seconds to complete the task as accurately and quickly and accurately as possible. I used 40 seconds as this was an estimate given to me by the motor drivers of an average single lap. The tasks are assumed to increase with difficulty (Baldisserri et al, 2014). Therefore, Task 1 (T1) should be the task the motor drivers find the easiest and perform best at, compared to Task 5 (T5), which would be the most difficult. Following the task, I conducted the qualitative interview and administered the SEQ and NASA-TLX.

Having the motor drivers carry out the secondary task alone served two purposes. First, it gave a response rate baseline that I could compare the dual-task scenario to. Secondly, it allowed the motor drivers to become familiar with the tasks they would be performing whilst driving. To make the SET as realistic as possible, the motor drivers chose a track circuit most similar to what they would normally be required to race on. The driving software also contained a formula student car that would be most similar to the car that the motor drivers were building.

Lap 1 : FREE LAP

Lap 2 : Task 3

Lap 3 : Task 1

Lap 4: FREE LAP

Lap 5: Task 2

Lap 6: Task 5

Lap 7 : Task 4

Lap 8 : FREE LAP

*Phase 3: Example of SET session using randomised Dual-Task Scenarios (driving with secondary task) with Lap 1, 4, & 8 as 'free laps' that do not include a task (driving only).*

In the dual task scenario, motor drivers were required to perform both the driving task and secondary task simultaneously. Drivers were asked to complete eight laps of the course whilst executing the tasks performed during phase two, which were again randomised. Athletes were given 'free' laps on the first, middle, and last lap. Each task was randomised to account for bias.

Sessions ran for approximately 30-40 minutes. Secondary tasks were administered verbally by me outside the simulator and motor drivers were asked to respond verbally once the task had been called. Motor drivers were to verbally call "end of lap" at the completion of the lap, signalling the start of the next task. Following the dual-task scenario, the motor drivers were presented with the SEQ and NASA TLX to complete and were asked several questions on how the session had gone, including difficulties and improvements as the sessions progressed. Each motor driver was given five minutes rest between each task. The motor drivers and I found that due to the mentally taxing nature of the sessions, especially the

dual-task scenario, 5 minutes rest was appropriate for the athletes to recover to an acceptable level. Any less than this, the motor drivers' were still suffering from mental fatigue. Any longer, drivers' felt that they had recovered too much, were able to recover to a baseline level, and had lost some momentum as a result of being 'off the track'.

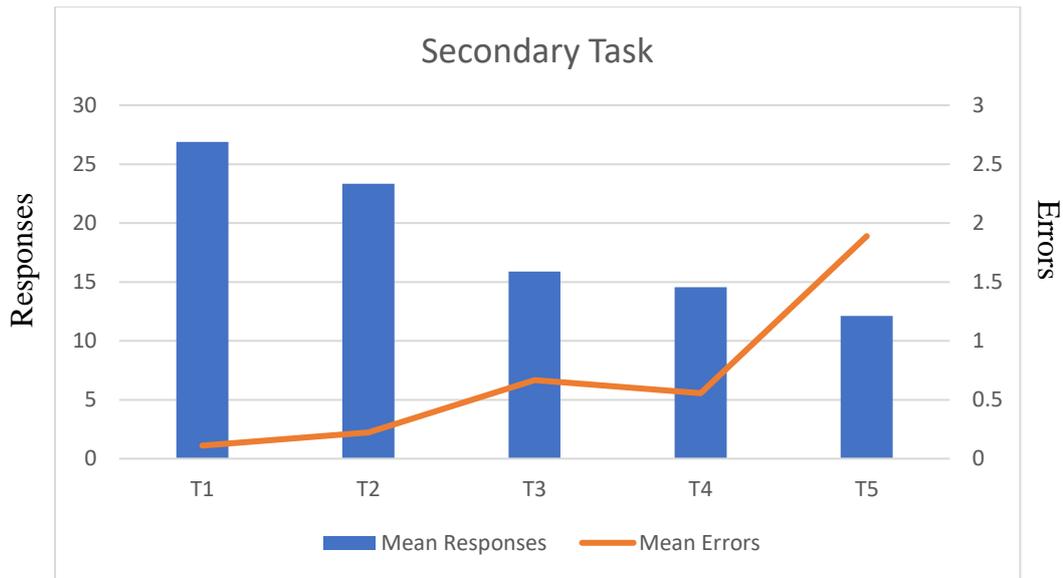
### **Video Reflection**

The video analysis session occurred after the second pressure training session. I created a homework task for the motor drivers to do using the video footage I had gathered of the dual-task scenario (Ives et al., 2002). Although used frequently by coaches, the advance of technology has allowed practitioners to advance their consultancy and use video as a tool for modelling and observational learning (Groom et al., 2011; McCullagh & Weiss, 2001). Each of the motor drivers most recent dual-task scenario laps were sent out via Dropbox. I asked the motor drivers for three positives in relation to their performance (such as approach line, speed, braking etc.) and two areas for improvement. The purpose was to allow athletes to gain confidence in their ability and use their past achievements to enhance motivation and assist in skill improvement. Interestingly, reviewing the dual-task footage prompted the motor drivers to reflect on the impact of cognitive load and pick up on seemingly obvious mistakes. This included incorrect braking points, incorrect gear shifting, and corner approach.

### **Intervention Monitoring and Evaluation**

#### *Secondary Task (no driving)*

During the secondary task, motor drivers' response rate generally decreased as the difficulty increased from T1 to T5. There was generally an increase in response errors as the difficulty increased (see Figure 1). By session three, motor drivers response rate was generally higher and response rate had significantly improved (see Table 1), for example, there was a 100% response accuracy from Tasks 1 to 4.



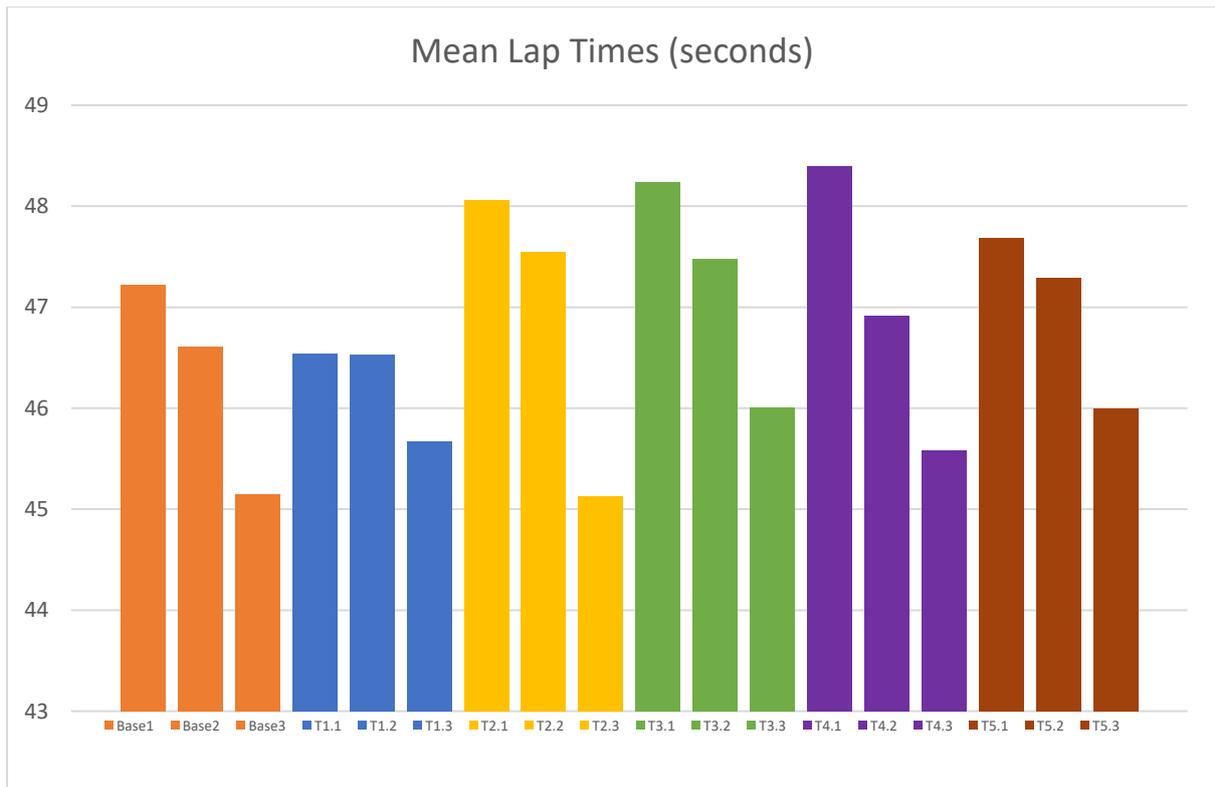
*Figure 1: Secondary task total mean responses and mean errors combined over the three sessions. T1= Higher or lower than 45, T2= counting down from in increments of 3, T3= increments of 7, T4= increments of 13, T5= number of letters in a word*

<b>Session 1</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>T4</b>	<b>T5</b>
Reponses	26.25	22.25	15.25	13.25	12.25
Errors	0.00	0.25	1.00	0.50	2.25
Accuracy (%)	100.00	97.75	94.00	96.25	80.95
<b>Session 2</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>T4</b>	<b>T5</b>
Reponses	27.25	24.25	15.50	15.50	12.25
Errors	0.25	0.25	0.50	0.75	1.75
Accuracy (%)	98.96	99.04	82.08	95.87	86.82
<b>Session 3</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>T4</b>	<b>T5</b>
Reponses	28.00	23.00	20.00	16.00	10.00
Errors	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Accuracy (%)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	90.00

*Table 1: Mean responses, errors, and percentage accuracy of secondary task only over the three sessions.*

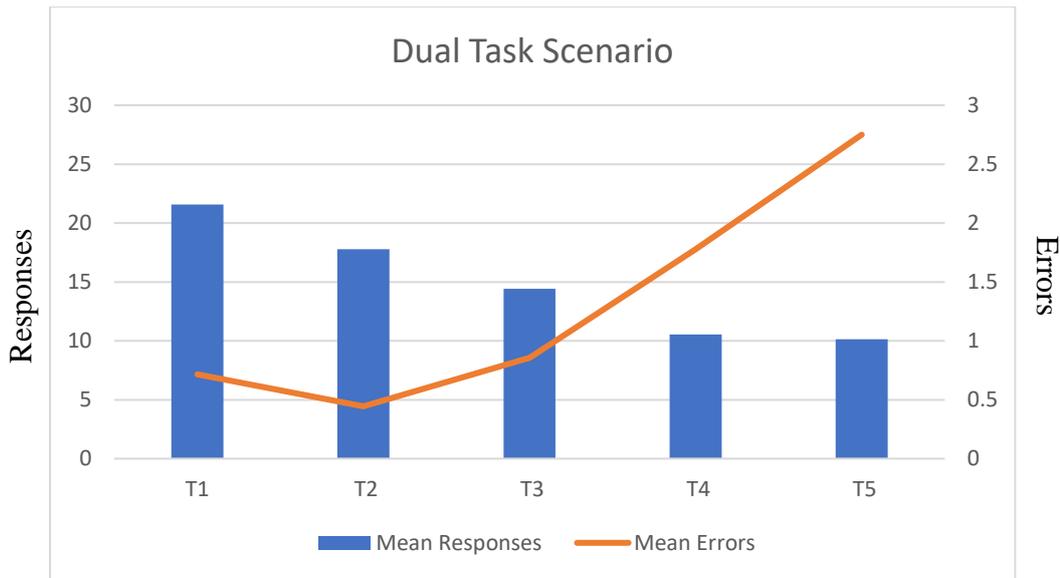
#### *Dual-Task Scenario Performance*

Figure 2 shows mean lap times across all tasks over the three sessions. Lap times reduced throughout each of the sessions, with an improvement of lap times of up to three seconds. Overall, compared to the baseline, the addition of the dual-task scenario had a detrimental effect on driver's times and performance. Compared to the first sessions, there were less crashes by the third session and driving errors increased. However, given that crashes in real life likely result in significant time penalties, car damage, injury, or worse – this was viewed as an improvement in the drivers' driving performance.



*Figure 2: Mean lap times over the three sessions.*

Figure 2 presents the drivers mean lap times, with a mean baseline lap time with no dual-task assigned. The five of the dual task scenarios (e.g. counting down in increments of three, seven, etc.) shows an increase in difficulty with each task (five being the most difficult). Base1, T1.1, T2.1, T3.1, T4.1, T5.1 are all the tasks from session one. Base2, T1.2, T2.2, T3.2...etc are the mean lap times from the second intervention session. Base3, T3.1, T3.2, T3.3...etc are the mean lap times from the third intervention session.



*Figure 3: Total mean Dual-Task responses and response errors over the three sessions.*

Generally, the mean responses decreased and mean errors increased with task difficulty, as shown in figure 3. One explanation could be that with cognitive load, the motor drivers seemed to have less ability to respond and attend to the secondary task as well as the primary task of driving which has been shown in Baldersserri's (2014) investigation in motor sport drivers.

<b>Session 1</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>T4</b>	<b>T5</b>
Reponses	13.33	16.67	14.67	12.00	9.50
Errors	2.00	0.75	0.33	2.50	3.33
Accuracy (%)	92.97	97.50	95.00	67.24	74.58
<b>Session 2</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>T4</b>	<b>T5</b>
Reponses	23.00	19.25	15.00	10.25	11.75
Errors	0.50	0.25	1.33	1.50	2.25
Accuracy (%)	97.83	99.04	91.67	71.88	80.99
<b>Session 3</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>T4</b>	<b>T5</b>
Reponses	19.00	17.00	12.00	12.00	8.00
Errors	0.00	0.00	1.00	2.00	3.00
Accuracy (%)	100.00	100.00	91.66	83.33	62.50

*Table 2: Dual-Task mean response rates, errors, and percentage accuracy over the three sessions.*

### *SEQ*

As shown in figure 4, the perceived difficulty of the task increased in a stepwise fashion for the most part, with the dual-task being perceived as the most difficult. The athletes seemed to find tasks one to four easier (with the exception of T2 in session 2) by the end of the intervention. The dual-task scores decreased by the end of the intervention. The mean results show that by the end of the intervention, the motor drivers perceived the difficulty of some of the tasks the same as the initial baseline measurement, for example, the scores reported for T1.3, T2.3, T3.2, & T3.3. With this in mind, the motor driver's

engagement in the SET intervention reported better performance scores and a decrease in the dual-tasks difficulty by the conclusion of the program. Despite a perceived increase in performance, I cannot attribute the intervention as the cause of the improvement of score. It would be difficult to determine if the intervention had a direct impact of the motor drivers scores without a control group.

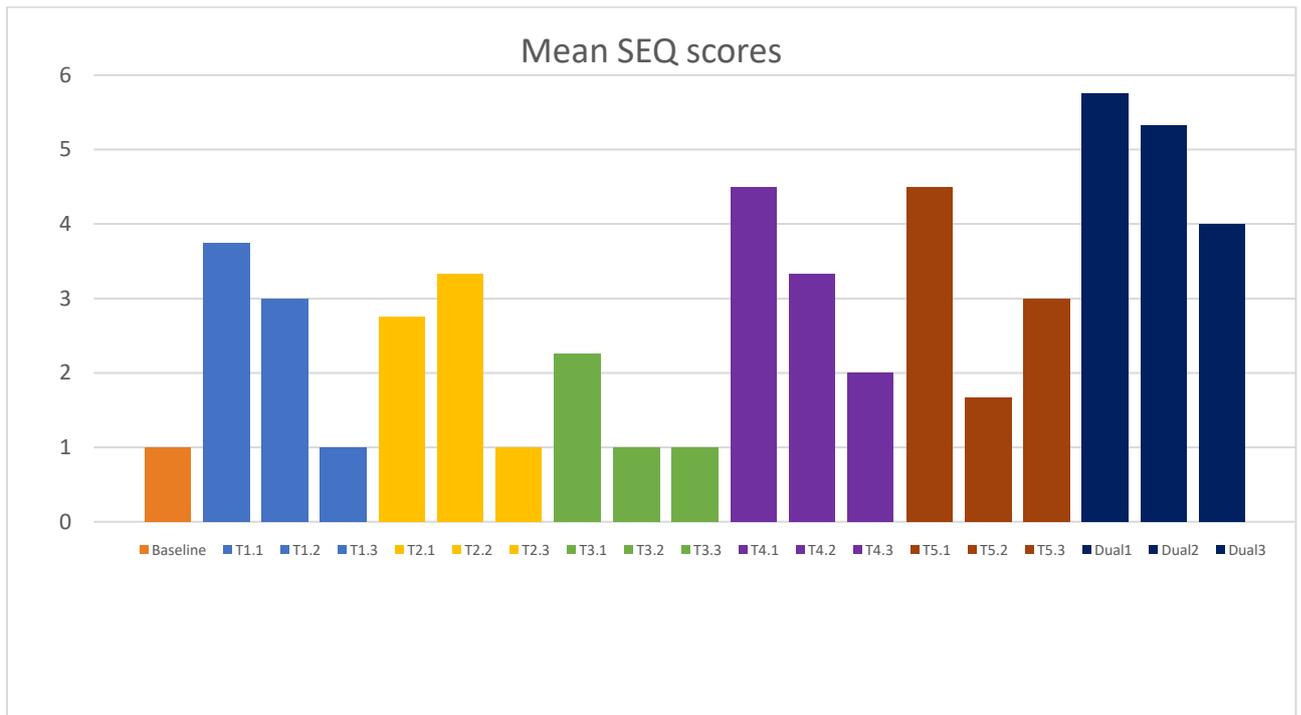


Figure 4: Mean SEQ scores over the three sessions. (Baseline pertains to driving the lap only, all T measures pertain to the drivers perceived difficulty of the tasks administered without driving, Dual1, 2, & 3 pertain to drivers performing the tasks while driving).

#### NASA-TLX

Even by the third session, mean scores of the mental demand factor within the NASA-TLX saw up to 4.9 times more perceived mental workload compared to the baseline laps and three and a half times more perceived temporal demand compared to baseline laps. In the mean frustration scores, there was a reduction of perceived frustration in the dual-task scenario by session three compared to the first session. Generally, the factors measured by the

NASA-TLX saw a large increase compared to baseline. This provided valuable information on the effect of the dual-task, not only on performance, but also how the motor drivers perceived workload was affected.

### ***End of Intervention Social Validation Debrief***

Unfortunately, we encountered prolonged technical issues rendering the simulator unusable by the third session. Therefore, what was originally the mid-intervention point was used as a formal end of intervention evaluation. A focus group style de-brief was conducted with the four motor drivers (Longhurst, 2003) that contained semi-structured questions. These aimed to explore the motor driver's evaluation of the intervention and if the intervention had achieved their needs. Through a 'round robin' style discussion, motor drivers could share their experience of the intervention. The motor drivers were asked to re-evaluate their performance profiles prior to the meeting and bring them along. This would act as another evaluative tool for the intervention's effectiveness. The debrief was mainly concerned with: (a) how the intervention affected their pre and post-performance profile, (b) how the dual-task SET had affected their driving abilities, (c) whether they thought this intervention was effective overall and met the agreed goals, and (d) recommendations for intervention improvement.

Concerning (a), how the intervention affected their pre and post-performance profile, J (pseudonym) discussed he had a greater perspective on both his ability and confidence to execute certain tasks after the SET:

How you rate yourself at the start compared to what it is now, 'cos looking at mine I wasn't sure where I was. So I marked myself lower on some stuff and now I realise I can actually do it more than I thought I could. (J)

This provides applied considerations when using performance profiling. While J's measures of the agreed psychological constructs 'keeping a level head' and 'performing under pressure' improved by the end of the SET intervention, there seemed to be a development of self-awareness concerning own capabilities by the end of the program compared to the start. Practitioners where possible may wish to include significant others such as coaches in the formulation sessions, as this may help with ratings due to the athlete's lack of self-awareness, lack of competency, or lack of confidence in their ability to rate themselves (Butler & Hardy, 1992).

Concerning (b), how the dual-task affected their driving abilities, R describes the impact of the cognitive load and attempting to execute the dual-tasks:

One of the big ones for me was getting a certain level of familiarity... the whole thing of speaking your answers out loud, mentioning each time you completed a lap. That would throw me a bit. And then once I was four or five laps in I got used to it. (R)

It seemed that from the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the intervention, the dual-task scenario did have a significant impact on cognitive load and thus, the ability to perform. However, there is some evidence to suggest that this cognitive load can be trained and improved. The drivers seemed to enjoy how the intervention was set out, specifically the experimental nature of the tasks. This included the procedure of the sessions that allowed them to first process what was required of them by doing the tasks separately to begin with:

Just doing the tasks you want to be doing without any pressure on it. At your own pace. Then its adding what would be the pressure element but in a separate environment, so that's the only element you have to deal with. It doesn't feel like you have pressure at that stage so you can get used to that element before you combine them together. (C)

Next, the motor drivers and I discussed if intervention was effective overall given their initial needs and agreed goals. The dual-task seemed to be difficult and elicited a sufficient amount of cognitive load to impact the motor drivers' psycho-physiological responses without impacting the driver's confidence. Without effective monitoring and planning, the difficulty of the task might have impacted the motor driver's confidence, which could lead to drop out to the intervention programme. J discusses the benefits of the intervention and how this related to the 'real life' competition that they would be competing in:

It's definitely improved like taking information in and processing that information. The drivers' going to basically have to take in all the data of what the feeling is in driving the car.(J)

Whilst engaging in the intervention, the motor drivers were also building their own vehicle set to be judged and raced at Silverstone racecourse. Therefore, it seemed that the ability to attend to not only the track, but the car itself was an important factor. J alludes to the multi-tasking nature of motor athletes and that the intervention had helped with managing both these tasks more effectively. This would ultimately aid in fine tuning and making alterations that would be required over the course of the Silverstone weekend.

Finally, improvements going forward were discussed and areas such as; progression of more difficult numbers in tasks, 'real-life' scenarios such as 'blue-flag' exercises, as well as fatigue scenarios. When asked how the sessions could be improved going forward one of the group members suggested that a group video analysis, similar to the reflection homework, might be useful. This could help with the transfer of knowledge between motor drivers, to give potential hints or tips or ways to approach certain corners etc. P states:

Perhaps having group footage where they're doing the third task, instead of trial and error of a line, if somebody has already got it, 'maybe if you try a little more to the left'.

(P)

### **Termination of consultancy**

The simulator had broken down and was unfortunately out of commission for the long-term by the end of the third session. This had resulted in months passing since my last session with the motor drivers. In discussion with the team, the simulator was unlikely to be fixed any time soon. After consideration and reaching a reasonable stage within the intervention (mid intervention monitoring and review), this 'clear-cut' point seemed appropriate to end the SET intervention.

Despite the end of the formal intervention, I felt it was important to 'leave the door open' and I made it clear to the motor drivers that if they were willing to engage in similar sessions in the future, or would like any other sport psychology assistance then I would be happy to work with them. I attempted to keep contact with the group via a WhatsApp group that had been created to organise the SET sessions. However, the group did not engage with any offers to continue sport psychology support.

### **Reflections**

My first reflection concerns the application of my beliefs and values as a practitioner in the holistic development of athletes and clients (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). During the intervention I felt some incongruence in the delivery of the intervention (Lindsay et al., 2007). This seemed to orient around the performance driven nature of the intervention. To address my concerns, I sought advice from my supervisor and to discuss my philosophy of practice and my intervention choice. Particularly within the field of sport, practitioners are required more and more to fit the needs of their clients. Given the time restraints of the client

and being a new trainee (Eubank & Hudson, 2013), I was happy to proceed and ‘flex’ with this (Larsen, 2017; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). With the help of further reading and engaging with conversation with my supervisor, I realised that my concerns were a result of my underlying values as a consultant. I concluded that for me as a practitioner, a performance-based intervention would be acceptable as long as I continued to reflect on my values and beliefs as a practitioner.

Any interventions in the future that allow for more face-time and opportunity to work on the holistic aspect of athlete development might include the addition of an Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2009 ) or Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment (MAC; Gardner & Moore, 2007) programme that is delivered parallel to the SET intervention. This could provide valuable psychological flexibility required to attend to task relevant cues whilst driving, increasing the likelihood of flow states and the impact of stressors on performance (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

The present case study presents a novel intervention that adopted a form of SET simulation training to develop motor drivers’ capability of performing under pressure. Overall, this new, innovative dual-task SET has proven to be successful within a group of student motor drivers. Baldersserri et al’s (2014) Dual-Task scenario was developed to develop motor drivers’ ability to cope with the identified performance factors using performance profiling (“keeping a level head” & “performance under pressure”). Using Driskell et al’s (2014) ‘Big Five’ theoretical underpinning to stress and performance, the addition of the dual-task scenario to driver’s laps significantly impacted the motor-driver’s cognitive load. This resulted in an increase of driving errors and response errors. However, over the three sessions, the motor drivers showed improvement in overall performance both

in their accuracy of responses in the secondary only and dual-task scenarios. The motor drivers' generally found the dual-tasks easier as the sessions progressed and showed an overall improvement in lap times, crashed the simulator car less, and generally improved on the secondary tasks that were assigned to them whilst they were driving.

This case study was not without its set-backs, and despite the termination of the intervention cut short due to an out of action simulator, sport practitioners may find valuable insights in the adaptation of similar interventions within motorsport. Despite motorsport being a widely popular, lucrative sport, the literature surrounding the sport is still lacking and future researchers and applied practitioners should endeavour to investigate such a psychologically challenging, high-risk, high-reward sport.

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## **Consultancy Case Study Two**

### **An Acceptance Commitment Therapy Intervention with a Female Rower**

#### **Abstract**

The present case study concerns an Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) intervention in the development of psychological flexibility and performance for a adult female rower. The intervention was delivered over the course of 14 weeks during the COVID-19 pandemic and was predominantly delivered using remote video calling. The addition of ACT to the client's training saw an increase in performance measures, mindfulness and psychological flexibility. These were measured and monitored using psychometrics and a practice diary. Applied recommendations concerning ACT in rowing are discussed along with considerations using a tele-psychological formal when working with athletes.

**Keywords:** mindfulness, performance, rowing, remote consultancy

## Introduction

The end of 2019 saw a new and unprecedented strain of coronavirus, and over the course of the following months was responsible for thousands of deaths across the globe. The virus, named COVID-19, attacks the body's respiratory system. Symptoms include coughing, flu-like fever and loss of taste or smell. As more scientific research was conducted on COVID-19, it was apparent that individuals could also experience not only mild symptoms, but could also be asymptomatic (NHS, 2020). As the infection rate and death toll began to rise, primarily throughout China and Italy during March 2020, governments across the world were forced to take immediate action to prevent the infection and mortality rates.

The UK government announced a full lockdown for all non-essential workers. Citizens across the UK were forced to isolate in their homes for months at a time, with the majority of shops and business buildings also restricted from operating in their premises. For sport, this was no different. Athletes, clubs and organisations across the UK stopped training and competing with immediate effect (Parnell, 2020), meaning regular season competitions and Olympic qualifiers were subject to postponement and cancellation, most notably the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics to 2021. Recent research has investigated the psychosocial ramifications of athletes isolating in lockdown. Through narrative, Whitcomb-Khan et al. (2021) found that the lockdown period had an impact on identity, increase in stress, caused financial concerns for athletes and being removed from team-mates and coaches, with uncertainty for the future. During this 'critical pause' (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021), a new challenge arose for staff to support athletes during these potentially difficult times, with service delivery to athletes focusing on additional mental health 'check ins' and proactive holistic development (Schinke et al., 2020a; 2020b; Toresdahl & Asif, 2020). With the restriction of face-to-face contact due to the nature of the lockdown protocols, sport psychologists were faced with the task of providing psychological support by remote means.

Although support from a remote perspective may not necessarily be a novel tool for the provision of consultancy, the use of software such as Zoom and Skype were available to foster connections during the isolation period for athletes (Toresdahl & Asif, 2020). This was utilized by support staff, team-mates and friends and family in an attempt to buffer potential stress and anxiety that may accompany the removal of sport from athlete's lives (Schinke et al., 2020a; 2020b).

## **Context**

### **Practitioner**

I currently am and was at the time of the consultancy process, a professional doctorate sport and exercise psychology candidate at Liverpool John Moores University completing my HCPC stage two British Psychological Society (BPS) accreditation.

### **Philosophy of Practice and Values**

My approach to my practice is one of holistic development, with performance and wellbeing being intertwined, and my consultancy is typical of an integrated approach to service delivery. I would consider my philosophy of practice to be that of a construalist, rooted in a constructivist/interpretivist epistemological paradigm (Keegan, 2015). My practice places emphasis on developing trust, providing a safe environment for athlete to explore their lives to further develop self-awareness and understanding, while maintaining that many athletes' goals rooted in developing performance. My previous interventions (for example, case study 1), utilized an intervention-based, outcome orientated perspective to athlete development. While this present case study is somewhat orientated towards the goal of performance development, the choice of intervention is much more aligned with an overall holistic approach to developing the athlete (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). While intervention choices may be dynamic in nature and can flex towards the needs of the client (Larsen, 2017;

Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992), the values and beliefs that underpin my consultancy remain static (Poczwardowski et al., 2004).

This being said, it is important to note that during this time, as a practitioner I had begun to immerse myself in humanistic-existential reading (e.g. Nesti, 2004; Van-Deurzen, 2012; Yalom, 1980). Despite my philosophy of practice taking an integrated approach, I felt that the values reflected in a person-centred consultancy style may align closer with my own beliefs and values, that is, the overall development of the person, as well as the athlete. I began to explore the potential for a more pragmatic style of practice, particularly when I was willing to adopt psychometric measures within my consultancy (Keegan, 2015). Further, the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I had to adopt a much more pragmatic approach, given that I had moved from a face-to-face to a virtual form of consultancy practice.

I was happy to proceed as I believed I could continue to implement the intervention used within this case study, given the aims of the chosen intervention were rooted in the holistic development of the client. Further, I believed I possessed the self-awareness of my own potential philosophical development as a practitioner that may be shifting (Stovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). This was assisted and managed by engaging in reflective practice (McEwen & Tod, 2015), along with supervisor and peer reflection (Stovholt & Rønnestad, 1992).

### **The client**

The client, Michaela (a pseudonym), was a 21-year-old female rower at the time of the consultancy process. Michaela predominantly participated in single sculling (rowing with the use of two oars, one in each hand). Michaela and I had first met two years prior to the present case study at a rowing club placement as part of the professional doctorate

programme. The club is relatively small, but is renowned for the development of elite athletes, particularly from the adolescent and under-21 level. Michaela was also a student at a nearby University and was dedicated towards rowing, engaging in any chance to train, either as a single or as part of a double or quad during training. The lack of resources and coaches at the club meant that Michaela often had to be flexible in her training schedule. Recently she had been assigned a new coach that was better able to commit to providing one-on-one coaching that also provided more opportunity for training as a single skull rower.

## **The Consultancy Process**

### **Service delivery**

As a practitioner I predominantly utilize Keegan's (2015) sport psychology service delivery model. I believe the model to be effective in that it provides the underpinning principles of the consultancy process for effective service delivery and at the same time acknowledges that is not intended to be a 'universal' or 'one size fits' all approach to consultancy. Neither, as this case study demonstrates, does the model always serve to be linear in nature. However, it does provide invaluable guidelines to inform effective practice; even more so for a trainee sport psychologist.

### **Intake**

As part of my placement at the rowing club, Michaela and I had engaged in multiple sessions over the two-year period. This timeline could be described as a somewhat unstructured "on and off" consultancy process. This was a result of a myriad of factors, which included limited time for sessions and space and availability to conduct 'formal' sessions. Michaela and I found ourselves 'to-ing' and 'fro-ing' between certain stages of the consultancy process (Keegan, 2015). The club itself only had a single room in the premises

that could accommodate a quiet, safe space to conduct our sessions. This can be typical of service delivery within sport psychology and exemplifies some of the challenges practitioners face whilst consulting with athletes (Andersen et al., 2001). For the present intervention, Michaela and I had already established and maintained an effective client-practitioner relationship (Petitpas et al., 1999) and I felt that Michaela was open and honest within our sessions together. This was achieved partly as a result of the slow, steady and regular meetings that had occurred up until the formal intervention phase of our consultancy. Boundaries and ethical considerations had already been set and Michaela was aware of my philosophy of practice. Michaela had previously overcome a substantial period of setbacks during her career, experiencing with multiple injuries over time, including exercise induced laryngeal obstruction (EILO; Neilson et al., 2013). Therefore, the areas Michaela and I had previously explored and worked on during sessions were mainly concerning the impact of injury on her sport career aspirations (Wiese-Bjornstal et al., 1998), coping with adversity (Galli & Vealey, 2008) and exploring the impact injury and perceived failures had on her identity as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993).

After approximately six months of specialist tests, which had resulted in a lot of frustration for Michaela, she was finally able to be treated and with careful supervision, begin to work her way back to pre-injury level training. After being given the ‘all clear’, Michaela had disclosed to myself and the coach that she wished to compete for a place for the under-twenty-three British Rowing team. The trials were due to be held in Winter 2020. She had requested as part of her work with me that we maximise her potential for achieving a place in the under-twenty-three squad selection.

## **Needs analysis**

As mentioned above, Michaela's ultimate goal was to compete and gain a seat with the national squad. When asked what the reasoning behind this goal was, Michaela explained that as a consequence of the setbacks and injuries and subsequent disappointment of her career thus far, her now injury-free state had provided the motivation to set herself this goal. On a number of occasions, the lack of 'tangible' outcomes from her rowing career had appeared in our previous sessions together, with the concept of rowing for pleasure and enjoyment (rather than competition) being inconceivable to her. To draw on an example from a previous session, a topic emerged surrounding 'meaning' behind our lives. Michaela's perceived lack of 'quantifiable' achievements had left her helpless (and even afraid to die), because in her opinion, she had yet in to achieve anything to be proud of. In light of this, it was not surprising that Michaela was characterised by high outcome-orientated traits typical of elite performers. Michaela was also a self-proclaimed perfectionist and struggled to 'get over' certain thoughts and feelings when she was angry or upset. Subsequently, coupled with her high outcome orientated traits, it was clear that there were some debilitating effects on her day-to-day life and athletic performance. Examples included avoidance of failure and rumination, and high expectations of performance and significant others (such as team-mates and friends).

## **Context (COVID-19 and Lockdown)**

The present intervention occurred from the start of March 2020 to June 2020 over a 14-week period. During this time, a number of 'face-to-face' sessions had occurred along with observations during the initial needs analysis phase. However, the majority of the formal intervention occurred during the period of lockdown in the UK between March 2020 and June 2020.

## Case Formulation and Intervention Choice

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2004) was the current intervention choice. ACT is considered as being part of the '3<sup>rd</sup> wave' of psychological therapies, and is a scientifically informed behaviour therapy rooted in Relational Frame Theory (RFT; Hayes et al., 2004). It strives to develop 'psychological flexibility', described as "the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behaviour when doing so serves valued ends" (Hayes et al., 2006, p.7). ACT posits that the desire to 'feel good' and language both contribute towards 'psychological suffering'. These reasons have been argued as to why mental health has become such an epidemic even in today's Western society (Henrikson et al., 2019). Therefore, ACT aims to modify the relationship to cognitive and emotional processes rather than trying to reduce unwanted cognitions or emotions. ACT also draws on mindfulness. Mindfulness is defined as the non-judgemental focus of one's attention and experience in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), and Buddhist religion, which has also shown to improve health and wellbeing, as well as the potential to increase 'flow' states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A substantial amount of studies that have utilized mindfulness in interventions have demonstrated higher perceived performance, athletic mindfulness and emotion regulation compared to traditional Psychological Skills Training interventions (Josefsson et al., 2019).

In formulating the case, I had chosen this intervention for several reasons. First, Michaela and I had already covered some sessions surrounding ACT in our previous time together. However, as stated previously, difficulties had emerged with the available space and time to achieve what would be described as a 'formal intervention'. Secondly, ACT aligns with my philosophy of practice, with a holistic approach to individual development in both mental health and performance. Variations of ACT (and mindfulness) have been tailored towards performance such as the MAC approach (Gardner & Moore, 2007) and Mindful

Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE; Kaufman et al., 2018). Along with performance enhancement, research also suggests that ACT can assist in perfectionistic, outcome-orientated tendencies, making the intervention appropriate for Michaela. Perfectionism, in particular, maladaptive perfectionism, is linked closely with the desire to not fail, having high expectations of oneself, and levels of distress when goals are not met (Flett & Hewitt, 2005; Stoeber, 2014) This can subsequently lead to procrastination and attempts to avoid negative feelings (Santanello & Gardner, 2007). ACT and has been found effective in clinical populations (Ong et al., 2019). Further, compared to traditional psychological skills training (PST) programmes, mindfulness acceptance-based interventions have been found to increase athletic performance psychological flexibility over time in female athletes (Gross et al., 2016).

Thus, Michaela and I believed ACT to be the best intervention for performance and psychological flexibility. In knowing that she had fully recovered from her injury and given we had built an excellent working relationship, ACT could provide her with not only the tools to perform optimally, but to also possess psychological flexibility in everyday life.

## **Measures**

I recognise that it may seem counter intuitive to use psychological measures given my philosophy of practice. Although construalism posits that no theory or measure can apply to everyone and places emphasis on the individual's experience, using an integrated approach can allow practitioners to adopt psychometrics to better understand and can be used as a monitoring tool through the consultancy process (Keegan, 2015). Practitioners have to consider the situation and context of the consultancy process and identify methods accordingly. In this instance, I added psychometric measures to assist in monitoring Michaela's progress, due to the fact the consultancy took place remotely. Consequently, this

removed the possibility of tracking and monitoring her progress in person, that might otherwise be achieved through the use of observation and informal conversations in and around the training environment.

### ***Five-facet Mindfulness Questionnaire***

The five-facet mindfulness questionnaire (FFMQ; Baer et al., 2006) is a 39-item self-report questionnaire that investigates 5 facets of mindfulness, specifically *dispositional mindfulness*; the ability to be mindful in everyday life. These facets are labelled: *Observing, Describing, Acting-with-awareness, Non-judging of* and *Non-reacting to inner experience*. The FFMQ Shows good construct validity (Baer et al., 2008) and reliability across multiple populations (e.g. Lilja et al., 2006). As ACT adopts mindfulness practice in the development of psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2004), I deemed this measure appropriate in the monitoring and evaluation of mindfulness.

### ***White Bear Suppression Inventory***

Developed by Wegner and Zanakos (1994), the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI) assesses an individual's inclination to suppress one's thoughts. This has been argued to lead to a paradoxical effect, leading to an increase in intrusive thoughts, which has been associated with a variety of psychological disorders (for review, see Najmi & Wegner, 2008). The WBSI shows good reliability across multiple populations (e.g. Fernandez et al., 2004). This measure was used alongside the FFMQ as the attempt to suppress negative thoughts and feelings features heavily in the acceptance commitment literature with links to psychological suffering and performance issues in other sport populations (Dymond, 2010)

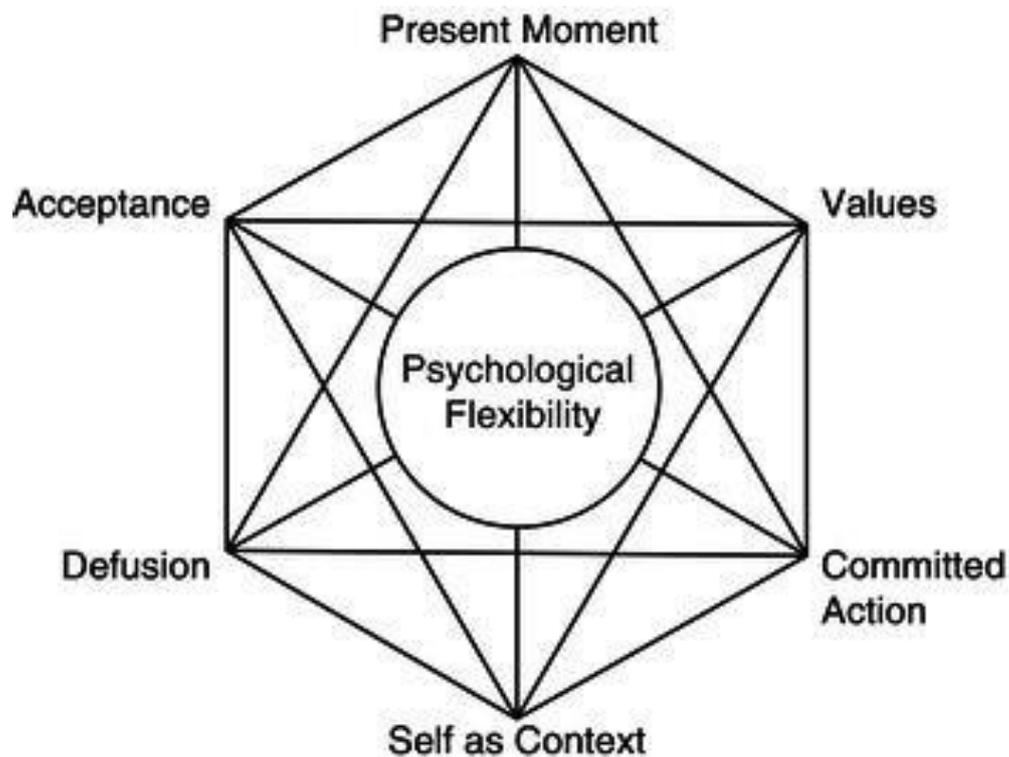
### **Intervention Delivery**

Due to the unprecedented nature of the lockdown, the complete intervention occurred over 14 sessions. This was due to a variety of reasons. The first, and perhaps most novel, was

the virtual nature of the interventions. This occurred over Skype. The sessions outlined below were psychoeducational in nature, but also contained a lot of conversation led by Michaela. Therefore, sessions that may have been intended initially as a single session would sometimes have to be continued over multiple weeks. From a practitioner perspective, I did not see this as an issue, as I believed this catered for a deeper level of understanding surrounding the facets of ACT. In my experience, some of the concepts covered within sessions (e.g. self-as-context) can be abstract and sometimes difficult for clients to grasp. This is arguably why the use of metaphor is so widely used within the ACT setting. Therefore, my aims were to ensure that the facets of the ACT programme (presented as 'hexaflex', see figure 1) were (a) understood to an optimal level, so (b) they could be readily utilized in Michaela's everyday life and in rowing.

Coinciding with the ACT intervention, I had tasked Michaela with completion of a practice diary and reflective logbook. An example and development of the logbook is shown in Table 2. The purpose of this was to engage Michaela in purposeful reflection of her training and to build self-awareness of her thoughts and feelings surrounding her training and daily life, and how these might influence behaviours. I felt that at times Michaela struggled to express in our conversations exactly what she was feeling, and that reflections would promote self-awareness integral to mindfulness programmes (Gardner & Moore, 2004). This also acted as an effective monitoring tool, essential to track Michaela's progress and any alterations that may be required to the intervention (which did occur in this case). We would also discuss her reflections together, which stimulated conversation surrounding her thoughts and behaviours in and around training and provided opportunities for me to challenge and develop Michaela's perceptions and judgements about herself and her performance.

The diary followed a simple rating of her performance out of 10. In the next diary column, she was to explain why her performance reflected this rating, and finally any potential next steps she wished to put in place to improve moving forward.



**Figure 1.** Psychological flexibility presented as the ‘hexaflex’.

### **Intervention Plan and Topics Covered**

The following section includes the main eight sessions covered within the formal intervention phase, and how they were informed by the ACT hexaflex. Note, that not all exercises (e.g. homework tasks) and additional ‘ad-hoc’ sessions are included due to space restrictions. However, the following outlines the planned intervention that was to be conducted on a weekly basis.

***Session one: Introduction to ACT.***

This session covered: expectations of both Michaela as a client and myself as a practitioner, laying out and establishing the session plans, the benefits of ACT and the role of psychological flexibility in wellbeing and sporting performance (e.g. flow).

***Session Two: (De)Fusion.***

This session covered: getting ‘hooked’ on thoughts, types of fusion, the role of words as functions from an evolutionary perspective (i.e. relational frame theory), and techniques to promote defusion.

***Session Three: Values and Committed action.***

This session covered: values and goals (how they differ), how we use values to inform behaviour, using the choice point and how values can inform ‘away’ or ‘towards’ moves.

***Session Four: Contacting the present moment.***

This session covered: mindfulness, attention in sport (i.e. task focused attention), the role of awareness, how to ‘drop and anchor’ in times of distress, attentional flexibility.

***Session Five: Mid-Intervention Monitoring.***

This session covered: A review of progress since the first session occurred by looking back over the practice logbook, identifying areas of improvement, and establishing perceived understanding of the areas covered so far in the intervention. The FFMS and WBSI were administered.

***Session Six: Self as Context.***

This session covered: Using self as context as a tool for defusion, finding an ‘observing self’.

***Session Seven: Putting it all together.***

This session covered: A revisit of the hexaflex as a whole and how one can ‘jump around’ the hexaflex, revisiting low competency areas of hexaflex and assessing understanding, and collection of final scores for FFMS and WBSI.

### ***Session Eight: Final Session***

This session covered: A review of formal intervention and training reflections, dissemination of scale scores across the intervention. Formal termination to consultancy.

### **Monitoring and Intervention Amendments**

Whilst assessing Michaela’s progress through psychometrics and in our sessions together, we had encountered a potential speed bump in her ability to perform whilst engaging in mindfulness. Several weeks in, Michaela had reported that her use of mindfulness whilst performing was affecting her ability to cope with the pain that coincided with her performance (‘pain’ being the normal response of lactic acid built up as a result of strenuous aerobic exercise). Michaela would ‘notice’ the pain in her legs, attend to it, and this would subsequently trigger thoughts of giving up, panic about the ability to complete the rest of the race, and general negative appraisals of her current performance. It was concluded that, in fact, Michaela had attempted to engage in mindfulness to ‘escape’ from the pain, which had a paradoxical outcome, in that she was actually attempting to use mindfulness as a form of experiential avoidance.

A similar adjustment was made in order to find the right ‘zone’ of attention for Michaela during her performance. She commonly found herself ‘watching the clock’, which negatively impacted her ability to cope with the remaining distance, coupled with the level of exertion required for elite level performance. We had initially determined that the use of mindfulness could be effective here, whereby Michaela would ‘notice’ she was watching the clock, and engage in present moment awareness to ease the clocks hold on Micheala’s

thoughts around how long she had to go and how difficult it might be. Once a plan was set in place, it quickly became apparent that the ‘amount’ of mindfulness that was used caused Michaela to lose focus on task relevant cues, and she often found herself missing vital stroke rate cues from her monitor. Once again, through adjustment and a collaborative process, we used a ‘focus target’ (Hansen & Harbel, 2019) to identify what ‘zone’ Michaela would aim to be in, to not only perform at an optimal level, but engage in task relevant cues when required.

### **Assessing the Intervention**

Michaela expressed that she was better able to notice her thoughts and engage purposefully in her actions. By the end of the intervention, she was able to be more mindful in her training and her everyday life through psychoeducation, engaging in mindfulness exercises, and via the use of homework tasks (e.g. walking mindfully, washing the dishes exercise). Being more mindful allowed Michaela to notice her thought patterns surrounding her training, and how these thought patterns affected her mood and behaviours. Through psychological flexibility, Michaela was better able to engage in actions despite her thoughts, managing her perfectionistic tendencies that had previously resulted in rumination, and unhelpful thought patterns that subsequently affected her motivation. During her training, Michaela was better able to engage in present moment awareness, away from outcome orientated concerns. For example, noticing that she was concentrating on the distance yet to go on the ergo machine and coming back to her splits, which subsequently allowed her to engage in better technique and form whilst rowing.

### ***The 2K Test***

The 2K test is the hallmark of a rower’s ability. The times recorded for this test are pivotal in the selection process for national squads. For both Michaela and the coach, ensuring that the desired 2K times were achieved before the next trial date (November) was

one of the main desired goals of Michaela's training. Thus, one of the main aims of the intervention was to enhance Michaela's performance through ACT in improving her 2K test times. Michaela's end goal was to achieve national squad selection, with these times used in the selection process. Achieving enhanced performance is not, from a humanistic philosophy standpoint, the main aim in my interventions. However, this a reality of the way sport, including rowing, uses benchmarks and KPI's to measures success; there was no question that a large part of the perceived 'progress' of the intervention held by Michaela was reflected by the 2KM test. These tests were administered by her coach on weeks six, eight, ten, and twelve of the intervention. By the end of the intervention, Michaela was able to achieve several personal bests (PBs).

Much dispute surrounding measuring sport psychology 'effectiveness' in performance outcomes ensues to this day in current literature and applied practice (e.g. Brady & Maynard, 2010). Thus, it is extremely difficult to discern causality between psychological interventions and subsequent performance. However, a recent systematic review by Bühlmayer et al. (2017) investigating the effects of mindfulness practice concluded that mindfulness practice has both physiological and psychological benefits which can consequently aid sport performance. However, one should be weary of attributing such performance outcomes as a result of psychological intervention.

### *Psychometric evaluation*

**Table 1.** Means and Standard deviation scores (in parenthesis) across the 12-week intervention period for the Five Facet Mindfulness Scale and White Bear Suppression Inventory.

Measure	Subscale	Week 1	M(SD)	Week 7	M(SD)	Week 12	M(SD)
FFMS							
	Observation	21	2.63 (1.30)	22	2.75 (1.39)	29	3.63 (0.52)
	Description	19	2.38 (0.52)	20	2.50 (0.93)	27	3.38 (0.74)
	Aware	22	2.75 (0.71)	24	3.00 (0.76)	29	3.63 (0.52)
	Non-Judge	17	2.13 (0.64)	21	2.63 (0.74)	32	4.00 (0.53)
	Non-React	16	2.29 (0.95)	19	2.71 (0.95)	14	2.00 (0.00)
WBSI		52	3.79 (1.19)	55	3.93 (1.27)	36	2.57 (0.85)

Michaela's scoring on both the FFM and WBSI improved considerably by week 12 of the intervention. For the five facet mindfulness questionnaire, an increase was seen in all subscales apart from non-reactivity, the latter of which may be due to the timing of psychometric administration, external circumstances, or that a strive for performance and continual self-development for may have made her more aware of difficulties and thus more prone to reacting to them to better improve their circumstances. During our final session, Michaela did mention that the ability to 'leave thoughts be' was still difficult for her. Similarly to 'acceptance', another area of the Hexaflex that was difficult for Michaela, she still possessed high levels of expectations of herself and some outcome orientated tendencies. However, the purpose of the intervention was not to 'remove' any of these traits, rather, to

allow Michaela to become more psychologically flexible to make space for them. In our conversations throughout the intervention, I had expressed to Michaela that the use of ACT and the tools in which she could engage mindfully towards her values was a continual process of development. Although we had concluded our intervention, Michaela was to continue to utilize the tools she had learnt and use them independently.

**Table 2.** Examples of Michaela’s practice logbook throughout the intervention.

<b>Week</b>	<b>PR</b>	<b>Why did you rate this?</b>	<b>How can you improve/next steps</b>
2 (Thursday)	7	Didn’t try as hard because I was bored of doing the same thing	Find new circuits
5 (Monday)	7	Went well, I felt like I was concentrating on my technique as well as getting a good distance. I was struggling with how long I had to do though – distracted by length of piece. I think this was because I knew I had a lot more training to do the rest of the day	Try to focus on what it is I’m doing now rather than what else I have to do that day/session
8 (Wednesday)	8	I feel like I have learnt a lot on this session. I didn’t perform as well as I’d have hoped in the watts tests but I tried to separate this from the interval stuff I had to do after so that it wasn’t influenced by it. The interval stuff went well. I beat 2 of my 3 pb’s and I know where I am going wrong with the third one so I know how to improve. I feel like this erg has put me in a good mindset for my 2k on Sunday because I tried to implement the pushing of the pain barrier in these pieces as if it were the real thing.	Try to think about this when I am in pain again - the pain is only temporary
12 (‘Race Day’)	9	This went really well. I was very calm before and knew what plan to stick to. I felt good as I felt there was no pressure on me to achieve a certain time, this was just to	Remember that the stroke counting and planning of splits etc

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see if I could beat what I did yesterday. I did struggle a little in the third split but this helps me feel more calm and  
was somewhat expected after what I had done previously that week as I was fatigued. attentive to what I am doing so do  
I quickly switched my thoughts from the pain onto what task I had to do and regained this in the future.  
my focus on the split I needed. I started counting the strokes again to bring my  
attention back to what I was doing and then this allowed me to think about the split.

Target was a new pb and I got 7:06.8 (new pb)

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*Note:* PR = Performance Rating 1-10 (1= Worst possible performance, 10= Best possible performance).

## Reflections

Recent research has discussed the impact COVID has had on applied practice, and the popularisation of tele-psychological consultancy (Gardner et al., 2005; Perrin et al., 2020; Spek et al., 2007). With regards to the present intervention and its use of tele-psychological service delivery, there were some factors that hindered and some that aided the consultancy process. One of the major barriers from a practitioner standpoint was the removal of physical presence between Michaela and I, which immediately restricted the capacity to attend to non-verbal cues that may occur to assist in the therapeutic process. I reflected on the impact eye contact and bodily cues, or lack thereof, could have had during this intervention process. A review by Bohannon et al. (2012) notes that the discrepancy between looking at someone's eyes on screen and the location of the camera is a form of parallax, where one would have to look directly into the camera to make 'eye contact' with the receiver. However, this in turn results in the sender missing out on potentially vital non-verbal cues that make up between sixty to sixty-five percent of interpersonal communication (Burgoon et al., 2016).

That said, Michaela felt that the tele-psychological nature of the intervention was helpful. The nature of the lockdown provided us with the opportunity for consistent weekly sessions. Michaela also felt that she was able to be more open and felt comfortable as she was in her own home. Our sessions would usually take place in the clubhouse, a single room with a large glass windowpane that was very open and visible to others. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent intervention had opened my eyes to just how much this set up may have affected the sessions conducted beforehand. Despite this, it is important to consider the already established client-practitioner relationship that had been developed over the course of the year. It is difficult to determine if the process would have been as effective despite this. Nevertheless, this point has implications for consultancy both in and out of lockdown.

First, practitioners should be aware of the potential impact the environment can have on client's ability to hold discussions openly and freely. Practitioners interacting with athletes during one-to-one session in club houses, corridors, pitch sides, team buses, are all examples where a client may not feel they can be particularly open, despite being out of 'ear shot'. Secondly, practitioners should consider implementing tele-psychological interventions in some form for part, or even the whole intervention for clients with whom they have developed a good level of rapport and trust. This could become particularly useful for athletes who practitioners struggle to get time with due to busy schedules, or clients who are travelling abroad.

### **Conclusion**

The present case study provides an insight into a formal twelve-week tele-psychological ACT intervention for a single skull rower during the COVID-19 pandemic. Very few in depth case studies exist examining the impact of a third wave therapy such as ACT to develop psychological flexibility in the pursuit of performance enhancement within rowing. Based on quantitative and qualitative measures of intervention effectiveness, an increase of levels of mindfulness and lower levels of thought suppression compared to the initial baseline measures were shown. Michaela continued to improve her 2km times throughout the intervention. The present case study provides evidence of effective work with an athlete with perfectionistic, outcome orientated tendencies, and the impact mindfulness and ACT can have on developing psychological flexibility. Implications of delivering tele-psychological interventions are discussed, noting the potential for an impaired non-verbal communication between practitioner and client. However, as a result of an effective client-practitioner foundation prior to the formal intervention, the virtual format of the intervention proved helpful for the Michaela.

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## Appendix

### Sport Psychology Consultant Rating

Please score your sport psychology consultant on each of the following characteristics by using a number from 0 – 10, as seen on the scale below.

Not at all

Yes, definitely

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Score

Had useful knowledge about mental training that seemed to apply directly to my sport.	10
Seemed willing to provide an individual mental training program based on my input and needs.	9
Seemed open, flexible, and ready to collaborate/cooperate with me.	8
Had a positive, constructive attitude.	10
Was easy for me to relate to (e.g., I felt comfortable and that he/she understood me).	10
Tried to help me draw upon my strengths (e.g., the things that already worked for me) in order to make my best performance more consistent.	8
Tried to help me overcome possible problems, or weaknesses, in order to make my best performance even better and more consistent.	7
Provided clear, practical, concrete strategies for me to try out in an attempt to solve problems or improve the level and consistency of my performance.	10

How effective was this consultant for you and/or your team?

Hindered or interfered

Helped a lot

Effect on you: 

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
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Do you have any recommendations to improve the quality or effectiveness of the sport psychology consultation service being offered? If so, what are these?

“I think the Skype sessions worked really well during the lockdown period. I think it almost worked better than Sessions in person because felt more comfortable taking about my feelings when I was in my own home. We Managed to cover more as well because we had more consistent sessions than when we were meeting face to face as we didn’t have to work as much around the distance.”

## **Consultancy Case Study Three**

### **Referral of a Female Competitive Bodybuilder During an Existential Psychology Injury**

#### **Intervention**

##### **Abstract**

The present case study gives account of an applied consultancy with a 27-year-old female competitive bodybuilder. The aims of the intervention were to provide support for the client to explore her current lived experiences of a sustained injury and to present the client with sessions that facilitated facing up to the existential themes that arose, such as freedom and responsibility. Six formal sessions were conducted over the period of nine months. I present examples of sessions conducted with the client, as well as the events that led up to referring the client to a clinical psychologist. The referral process is detailed and my reflections regarding the existential intervention and the decision making process regarding referral are presented. Finally, applied implications and future recommendations are provided based upon these experiences.

Keywords: existentialism, injury, referral, ethics, competency

## **Context**

### The Practitioner

During the consultancy process, I was half way through the British Psychological Society (BPS) accredited Professional Doctorate of Sport and Exercise Psychology programme at Liverpool John Moores University. At this point in my supervised practice, I had acquired experience of supporting athletes individually through one-to-one work, and also worked for a variety of teams and organisations in different sports and levels of sport, from amateur to elite athletes.

My philosophy of practice maintained a focus on the holistic development of individuals, as I believe that athletic performance and wellbeing are intertwined (Brady & Maynard, 2010). When the client and context allows (in case study 1 and 2 I adopted, by necessity, a more pragmatic philosophy and integrated approach), I purposefully work using a ‘person centred’ approach. This uses the ‘encounter’ (the process in which both client and practitioner are fully engaged, to acknowledge both the client and my own uniqueness; Nesti, 2004) to enhance areas of lifestyle, wellbeing, and self-awareness, which can ultimately lead to an improvement in performance. During the professional doctorate programme, I had been introduced to the existential approach to psychology. My continued endeavour to better understand and develop my ‘toolbox’ of psychological approaches, along with the significant impact of colleagues within the academic world who adopted this approach (Nesti, 2004), led me to add an existential approach to my consultancy.

With this in mind, I had started to evolve a phenomenological approach to my consultancy, still rooted in humanism but also embracing existential approaches (Nesti, 2004; Spinelli, 2007), with the values of understanding that an individual is situated in unique experiences and circumstances. As a result of working in a unique environment of sport

which at times, requires one to be able to ‘flex’ with an individual or situation within the confines of one’s values and beliefs (Stovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). I have the pragmatic capacity to utilize an integrated approach to my consultancy when and where required.

### *Existential psychology and Sport*

Existential psychotherapy aims to develop an individual to face up to the conflict and subsequent anxieties of life’s ultimate concerns; *death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness* (Yalom, 1980). Other themes include *love, spirituality, authenticity, courage, and responsibility* (Cohn, 1997; Frankl, 1984; Nesti, 2004). An existential approach to sport psychology has begun to gain traction, drawing on the transferability of concepts and appropriateness of its use within the context of working alongside athletes and organisations (Nesti, 2004). The concepts and approach to existential psychology can, at times, become blurry within the context of ‘how it’s done’ (Spinelli, 2014). However, through the use of *encounter*, and adopting a phenomenological approach to practice, clients are able to face up to existential concerns and anxieties associated with *critical moments* and *boundary situations* (Jaspers, 1970). The purpose of the practitioner is not to reduce these anxieties, or provide techniques to snub the presence of anxiety, but to adopt the position that anxiety can serve the individual by confronting their anxieties, achieving growth, and developing self-awareness (Kierkegaard, 1954). A client-led consultancy style that serves to explore and clarify client’s situation through use of challenge and purposeful questioning and offering key insights and observations is adopted (Nesti & Ronankien, 2020; Yalom, 1980).

### **The Client**

At the time of the consultancy process, Megan (pseudonym) was a 27-year-old bodybuilder. Competitive bodybuilding is an activity characterised by the attainment of a desired physical figure. In competitions, bodybuilders’ are judged based on muscularity,

symmetry, conditioning, and their posing by a panel of judges. The attainment of such a desired figure for these short, ‘fleeting’ moments during competition require extensive amounts of dedication to weight-based resistance, cardio-vascular training, and nutrition (Helms et al., 2014; Suffolk, 2014).

I was approached by Megan in October 2019 following a guest lecture at her University. I had presented a recent applied case study to the class and had described my work with the client. Following the session, Megan introduced herself and said, “What you said really hit home.” She explained that she had previously been a rower, and described her difficulties with persistent injuries on her athletic performance and the impact it had on her as a person. She then went on to explain she was now a bodybuilder and continued to give detail of her achievements in rowing. She wished to work with me concerning her potential injuries and how this impacted her. We agreed to set up an initial intake session at a local coffee shop.

### **The Consultancy Process**

I adopt Keegan’s (2016) consultancy model framework to underpin my consultancy process. It should be acknowledged however, that the linearity of the process and concepts within the framework can at times become blurry and require some reflexivity. The period of consultation lasted nine months. Megan and I kept contact via text message and email to arrange consultancy sessions. During month six (March 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown occurred. Megan and I formally met for sessions on six occasions (four face-to-face and twice via Zoom) during the UK wide lockdown.

### **Bodybuilding**

Although some may find the prospect of categorising bodybuilding as a ‘sport’ a contentious issue (Suffolk, 2014), there is no question of that the competitive nature of bodybuilding and the dedication of its performers is comparable to the professionalism shown

by athletes in other competitive sports. Bodybuilding requires extremely regimented and detailed training regimes and meal planning, which can consequently take a considerable toll on the individual's physical and mental state (Helms et al., 2014). Traditional athletes will compete once every week (even twice a week), take part in numerous tournaments, and if selected, compete in international fixtures. On the other hand, some bodybuilders will engage in this 24/7 lifestyle, day-in day-out, for only one or two competitions a year.

### **Intake & Needs Analysis**

I used my first initial intake meeting to understand Megan's situation and potential experiences in and out of sport. This session also provides the opportunity for me to give context for my own work, allowing the client to understand the roles and expectations of the client within our work together, including boundaries, confidentiality, and fees. This also provides an opportunity to provide information regarding my professional pathway and the role of my supervisor within the BPS accredited training. When asked how she would like to see herself moving forward and the reasoning behind engaging in sport psychology consultancy, she stated that she wished to, "stop thinking of myself as injured". She stated that she, "missed how I used to be" and saw herself as "broken". Megan wished to "clear her head" and "trust herself". Further exploration into her athletic career revealed that during her rowing career, she threw herself into her training and commitment to attain her goals to the point of what she termed "self-harm", engaging in overtraining regularly in the pursuit of peak performance. Megan described this as a 'fear of her own capability' which was creating some feelings of unease, and thus led her to seek psychological support. We agreed that the aims of the sessions were to explore Megan's understanding of her lived experiences, how they impacted her and to engage in sessions to develop Megan's self-awareness of these in relation to the main existential concerns. At the beginning, these were centred around her

injury and participation in competitive bodybuilding, to promote a safe and trusting environment for Megan to explore these concerns. No formal session limit was given.

### **Case Formulation**

From our initial encounter, Megan had expressed that she wished to be supported by a sport psychologist to better understand and explore her current experience with injury. Her initial injury consisted of a hip-flexor tear resulting in recurrent spasms that hindered her rowing performance. Following multiple physiotherapist consultations, Megan's injury persisted. She described the impact that her injury had on her current bodybuilding performance years after the injury had struck. Megan brought up multiple factors that influenced both her participation and her eventual retirement from rowing. Despite being 'a natural' and an athlete that had broken several British Rowing 2K records (informally) despite no formal training, conflict occurred with Megan and the club when she was asked to sweep rather than skull as part of a high performance team. She had taken up bodybuilding during this time and discovered that she was unable to balance the two sports simultaneously. This eventually led to Megan's departure from rowing to concentrate fully on bodybuilding.

It was clear from our initial meetings that Megan's injuries were not the only areas she wished to explore. Megan's parents had died in an accident when she was 19. She also had an older sister and was engaged. Megan was extremely open and honest concerning the multi-million pound fortune that she had inherited following the death of her parents. This had allowed her to pursue her hopes and aspirations with apparent freedom, enrolling in University programmes and hiring the top bodybuilding coaches in the country to achieve her goals. However, Megan sought a deeper more meaningful interaction with a practitioner that had the ability to understand and provide guidance regarding her current lived experience. When exploring her support network, i.e. her sister and fiancé, she expressed that she was not

able to have some of these discussions with her fiancé and that she did not get along with her sister much.

Megan was a Sport Psychology undergraduate degree student at University. We discussed how this enrolment could add to the consultancy process, as Megan already had a level of understanding surrounding the benefits of sport psychology for her athletic career. She had mentioned that part of the reason was to better understand her own performance and how it could be improved via the use of sport psychology. ‘Buy-in’ from a client can be key for intervention effectiveness (Evans and Slater, 2014; Cotterill, 2017, Sharp et al., 2015), and is something I had difficulty achieving in my previous consultancy work as a trainee sport psychologist. I recognised that this buy-in may have already been established as a result of Megan’s understanding of Sport Psychology, but I believe that further buy-in was created by the client-led nature of the phenomenological approach I had adopted to the sessions. It was clear from our first session that Megan had demonstrated the ability to be actively engaged, and possessed the ability to be open and honest in our discussions that facilitated the client-led consultancy process. These factors helped towards building trust and rapport that were an essential part of the therapeutic process (Ravizza, 1990; Rogers, 1952).

Finally, Megan expressed that she had previously been diagnosed with depression and anxiety following the death of her parents. I took time to understand her current state of wellbeing and discussed my own competency levels and boundaries of confidentiality (BPS, 2019; Keegan, 2015). This meant not ‘jumping in’ as a practitioner, to allow Megan to fully explore her experiences at her own pace over multiple sessions. This was also achieved through the use of ‘bracketing’ and not assigning priority on this subject area as a practitioner. When asked about how she viewed her diagnoses of depression and anxiety in the past, Megan expressed that she did not believe labels were useful, and that if she told herself she was ‘depressed’ or had ‘anxiety’, then she would *be* that thing. She went on to

discuss the fact that she had been assigned some traditional CBT therapy following her parents' death that she did not enjoy. Megan expressed that "Goal setting stuff" and other various Cognitive Behavioural Therapy 'skills' was something that she was not interested in. My 'in action' reflection (Anderson et al., 2004) during this time reaffirmed the belief that an existential approach to the consultancy process would be appropriate, as the existential-phenomenological approach to practice steers away from labelling or imposing diagnoses and concentrates on the client's *meaning* of events (Giorgi, 1985; Nesti, 2004). However, given my values that focus on wellbeing and clients' psychological safety and my perceived competency levels (Eubank, 2016), I endeavoured to monitor these potential clinical 'flags' by seeking advice and engaging in discussion with my supervisor about the presenting issues of the client and their previous experiences. I had also engaged in continual reflection to monitor my own competency levels and Megan's wellbeing on a session-by-session basis to monitor and evaluate conditions where a clinical referral would be required.

### **Intervention**

The following section provides examples of several sessions that aimed to facilitate Megan's understanding of her present experiences by employing a phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1985). This included the use of *bracketing* my own *a priori* assumptions (Nesti, 2004) and entering Megan's *lebenswelt* (or, *world-as-lived*). This is achieved by demonstrating *presence* and asking open, reflective questions that seek to develop self-awareness and understanding of Megan's own experience, rather than imposing my own thoughts or interpretations as a practitioner (for example, Hector et al., 2018; Nesti, 2004, Nesti and Ronankien, 2020). In by doing so, I was better able to make room for an *I-Thou* (Buber, 1958) relationship, whereby the individuals concerns are immersed in conversation that extends beyond the client being viewed by the practitioner as an object or a 'thing' in which one gains from another (also known as *I-It*), or vice versa.

## *Injury and beyond*

Injury has the potential to bring forward anxiety within an athlete's life (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017) and is described as a *boundary situation* (Ronakanien et al., 2013). These events in life may equate to *boundary situations* described by Jaspers (1970) as moments when an individual is faced with one's own finiteness, themes of suffering, and feelings of guilt, which when faced, can lead to greater self-awareness and movement towards *authenticity*. Megan described her experience of a current back injury in the first two sessions of the consultancy, describing the onset of the injury, how it affected particular movements when lifting, and the fact that she wished she was able to "trust herself". Megan hired a new coach who was highly celebrated within the bodybuilding community. When training, Megan was asked to execute a lift, however she was unsure that she was able to achieve such a lift due to another long-term injury. In order to earn "respect" from the coach, Megan was unable to be honest about her ability and her concerns prior to the lift and it subsequently resulted in further injury. I provided Megan with some open questions to explore the concept of 'trusting herself' more in training and how the attempted lift, despite understanding her current limitations, may or may not have been in her best interests.

The purpose of this was to explore the existential concern of *freedom* and *responsibility*. Freedom posits that while an individual has the ability to influence their own "self, destiny, life predicament, feelings, and in such be the case, one's own suffering" (Yalom, 1980; p 218), we are bound by the ability to act freely within the given situation. Whilst we possess *freedom*, it is important to recognise that we have *situated freedom* (Nesti, 2004), whereby an individual has the ability to act within the confines of their own abilities and circumstances. At this period in the session, open, reflective questioning was utilized to explore the extent to which Megan had the ability *not* to perform the prescribed lift, the anxiety that was associated with this, and the impact her actions would have on the apparent

impressions she made on her coach. This subsequently led to exploring the concept of *responsibility*, whereby an individual is responsible for the self and others (Nesti, 2004), which for Megan was about taking ownership on her own actions and behaviours and to live *authentically* (Spinelli, 2007).

As the sessions progressed, it was clear that Megan wanted to explore other aspects of her life that were impacting her as an athlete but also as an individual outside sport. This included themes such as relationships and her relationship with her fiancée and sister, her outlook on life and spirituality, and her *meaning* in life (or the impact she wished to make on the world). For the purposes of the intervention process, I ensured to employ *spontaneity*, allowing Megan to direct the sessions whilst keeping in mind not to get ‘stuck’ or engrossed in matters that focused on feelings or subjects that strayed from the main concerns (Nesti, 2004). However, as a trainee practitioner, this particular ‘skill’ was difficult to navigate and there were times when it was difficult to fully immerse myself in the *encounter* whilst keeping track of, and staying on, the ‘correct’ path.

An example of a *spontaneous* moment within our consultancy sessions involved Megan discussing a ‘bell-curve’ as an analogy for her wellbeing-performance relationship. She explained that the top of the bell-curve was her ideal performance state and that her wellbeing was synonymous to this. This was something I could relate to from my own personal values but also from research (DeVaney et al., 2018). However, Megan explained that she wished to main her ‘top of the peak’ level to ensure the highest possible performance-wellbeing outcomes. I began to draw the bell curve and circled the peak (see Figure 1). I explained that, yes, being in this area could seem attractive and living a ‘peak’ existence, both wellbeing and performance wise, might be a goal every athlete strives for. I posed a question that was directed to the circled area of the bell curve. My questions to Megan was concerned with (a) If we exist in this area permanently, then do we actually have

a peak existence? (b) Without the “lows”, how are we able to identify the highs and grow from our experiences?

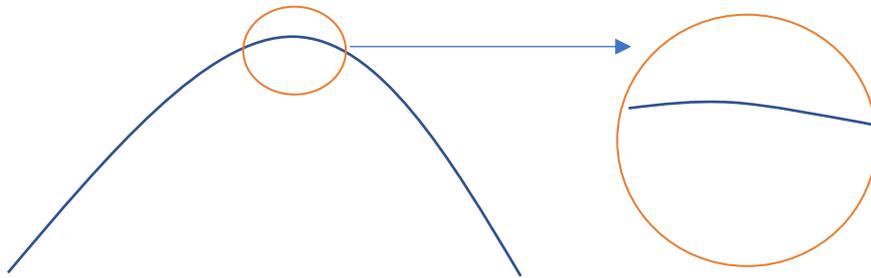


Figure 1: An example of the ‘peak’ wellbeing-performance experience graph used within the session

The purpose of this exercise was to demonstrate that negative feelings, moods and anxiety have been predominantly at the forefront of traditional Western-positivist disciplines of psychology. In particular, there is a lack of evidence that interventions tailored to the removal or replacement of these negative experiences have any long term change to athletes’ performance and lives (Gardner & Moore, 2007; Nesti, 2004). From an existential perspective, both the good *and* the bad are essential for one to face up to life’s ultimate concerns, by using *courage*, finding meaning (Frankl, 1984), understanding one’s values and living authentically (Cohn, 1997). The troughs in life (or ‘anxieties’) associated with these experiences can be faced by the individual to uncover ‘*who they are*’ and ‘*what they stand for*’, which promote greater self-awareness and growth (Nesti, 2004). This is achieved through use of *courage*; that is, rather than to remove or change the unpleasantness of one’s experiences, facing up to these experiences as a way to better understand one’s self.

*“To be seen” - the road to referral*

Nearing the end of one of our sessions, Megan discussed how her relentless strive for success in the athletic field and how she viewed her own identity were ‘clouded’ by her

sister. Her sister had an overactive thyroid and was constantly ill during her childhood. Megan went on to describe how her parents attended to her sister more often than her. Later in life, Megan's sister began to excel at every endeavour she undertook. Megan believed that her now deceased parents influenced Megan's decisions in life, and that many of her life choices were still dictated by them. I asked Megan what making these choices on behalf of her parents achieved, to which she replied, "to be seen". Megan's general day-to-day functioning had also begun to deteriorate. She had mentioned a few times that she didn't wish to continue to be 'mopey' and that she was "in constant tears". She had recently separated from her fiancé and disclosed he had physically abused her. After monitoring Megan's presenting issues session-to-session, along with her current low mood, present life circumstances, and significantly impacted day-to-day life, and having discussed the situation and my own unease with my supervisor as part of an ethical decision making process, it was decided that a clinical referral was required.

## **Referral**

This section provides information concerning the 'grey' areas of sport psychology referral, my own determination of competence at the time of consultancy and how this impacted my decision to refer, and the steps taken for referring Megan to clinical support.

Taylor (1994) discusses the potentially 'grey' areas in which sport psychologists might find themselves with regard to the referral process and the competency levels of the practitioner versus presenting psychological issues. Taylor goes on to describe that if an athletes' day-to-day life is significantly impeded for an extended period of time, then clinical referral may be required. Roberts and colleagues (2016) have also recently described the 'blurred lines' of working with athletes experiencing mental health issues within elite sport. In this instance, through discussions with my supervisor and reflection of my own values and

understanding the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2019), my decision to put Megan forward for referral was informed by the following:

- An honest and open discussion with Megan concerning her current (and recurring) themes of her engagement with sport, her experience of her parents' death, and how these experiences had impacted her emotionally and behaviourally.
- Engagement with supervision to provide support during the referral process (sourcing a licenced practitioner) and evaluation of my own competencies as a trainee practitioner.
- Reflections that investigated my own thoughts and perceptions of my competency as a trainee, my level of experience as an existential practitioners, and the best interests of Megan.
- Reading of the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2019), with particular attention to the values of (a) Competence, (b) Responsibility, and (c) Integrity.

Referring to my first point, Megan was, to an extent, included in the 'decision' making process surrounding the clinical referral. I understood that as a practitioner, I had my own views of the events as they were unfolding, but also that Megan had her own perceptions of her current mental state. However, we agreed that referral was the best course of action. The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2019) states that "Psychologists may need to make decisions in difficult, challenging, and unclear situations". Case studies from practitioners (who have been enrolled in the same training pathway as myself) have published accounts of their experience (e.g., Wadsworth, 2020; Drew and Morris, 2020), detailing the decision making process of whether to maintain contact or refer the client. Megan was understanding, and when asked how she felt about it, she said "annoyed". She explained further that she was not necessarily annoyed at my referral suggestion, but she claimed being annoyed at herself at her inability to 'disconnect' from these persistent underlying issues that had loomed over

her life since her parents' death. She explained she felt great anxiety at the prospect of "opening a can of worms" surrounding the issue. Megan had disclosed that she had not gained much from bereavement counsellors or other psychologists that had been prescribed to her in the past. In asking Megan about her experiences, it was evident that her dissatisfaction may have been a result of psychological approaches that did not focus on the individual experience. Rather, she received a 'prescriptive' set of tasks and exercises that perhaps attempted to alleviate Megan from her distress. Megan had disclosed that our sessions (and the existential approach that was taken) had been extremely useful and her worry was that it would be a difficult task to find a 'good fit' for her, not to mention beginning such an emotionally challenging endeavour once more.

After exploration of Megan's concerns surrounding clinical referral, I explained to her the current options regarding the clinical referral process. These were, (a) a clinical psychologist that was arranged via the National Health Service (NHS), or (b) a private practice clinical psychologist. Megan expressed that private practice would likely be the best option. To facilitate the process I had offered to provide the details of some nearby accredited clinical practices within her area from which she might choose. Clinical referral can be a daunting prospect for clients. The rationale behind sourcing a 'good fit' for Megan was to understand the psychological approach and philosophical underpinning of the potential practitioners, which could then generate a level of congruence between practitioner approach and client need to facilitate Megan's transition to clinical practice. Once sourced and presented to Megan, I took her through each of the practices, their areas of expertise, and associated costs. Providing these choices for Megan was a purposeful task that promoted *autonomy* and *responsibility* in the decision making process.

With Megan's consent, I contacted the clinical psychologist to introduce myself and prime them with the relevant information. I believe that confidentiality is paramount to

promote a safe and trusting relationship between client and practitioner. However, after discussing the benefits of sharing the reasons for clinical referral and my accounts of the sessions thus far, Megan was happy for this to happen. After discussion with the clinical psychologist, they asked if my consultancy was to continue during the clinical intervention period. Previous applied case studies have described the possibility of a collaborative approach (e.g. Shearer et al., 2011) along with the recommendations to do so by practitioners (Drew & Morris, 2020; Rotheram et al., 2016), as clinical psychologists may not have a full understanding of athletes' sport related demands (Roberts et al., 2016). However, after discussing the case with the clinical psychologist, there was an agreement that the provision of both clinical and sport psychology at this given time was not the best course of action. This was due both the holistic nature of the existential approach and the 'boomerang' effect that occurred during my sessions with Megan that ultimately led back to the broader existential concerns that had triggered the referral process to begin with. As a consequence, I was aware that the possibility of 'over saturation' may occur in the provision of psychology for Megan during such a difficult time. Furthermore, the clinical psychologist did have previous experience working in high performance and sport environments. All parties (clinical psychologist, Megan, professional doctorate supervisor) agreed this course of action, and thus Megan was happy to proceed and the relevant numbers and emails were relayed to initiate the primary clinical session.

## **Reflections**

My first reflection concerns the difficulties getting to grips with the existential encounter as a trainee. I recommend other neophyte practitioners who wish to engage with the 'dark arts' of existentialism recruit an supervisor experienced in the approach and its use (few are), to provide insight and support to a developing existential practitioner. The nature of existentialism means to have no prescriptive framework or 'play by play' model of

intervention (Spinelli, 2004), however, I believe having an additional supervisor that adopted the same underlying approach to practice may have provided some light to potential ‘blind sports’ during sessions that could develop my existential counselling approach to practice. Spinelli (2004) gives account of the benefits (*formative, normative, and restorative functions*) of existential supervisory provision, whilst acknowledging the critiques and even ramifications of such an approach. Based on Spinelli’s exploration of the concept, it would seem the concept of existential supervision warrants further investigation.

My second reflection concerns the highly emotional nature of existential encounters that are draining for both practitioner and client (Nesti, 2004). Megan was regularly in tears in her sessions and due to the deep and meaningful nature of the themes covered in the sessions, there were times where Megan found herself in moments of high distress. Experiencing this can be frightening as a neophyte practitioner, however I was aware of these potential moments in consultancy from academic reading, and my supervisory team could help with support in this regard. Nevertheless, this requires *courage* from both practitioner and client to bring forth the main existential concerns and to face up to them despite any discomfort or anxiety that is presented.

Finally, the decision to initiate the referral process and subsequently transfer Megan to clinical support brought up a ‘see-saw’ of emotions from a personal and professional point of view. First, my acquisition of clients and full-time position was stark at best during this period of my professional journey. The professional relationship Megan and I had developed over a short period of time, and the opportunity to work alongside a client using a resonant approach and to gain satisfaction at the end of each session was a great feeling as a trainee. This ultimately helped me acknowledge the congruence and usefulness of an existential approach to my practice. When the time came for referral, I could not help but feel disheartened at ‘losing’ a client that responded well to, and engaged fully with, the sessions.

On the other hand, understanding the needs of the client and whom the sessions serve is paramount, and I gained satisfaction in the knowledge that Megan's needs would be better served in a clinical setting. In my eyes to continue would only serve myself, and Megan's underlying issues would likely remain unattended.

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## Consultancy Contract/Case Report



**Date:** 17/10/2019

The parties involved in this contract are Stewart Bicker (trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist) hereafter known as TSP, and [name removed for confidentiality], hereafter known as ‘the client’.

The TSP is supervised by Dr. Martin Eubank, chartered Sport Psychologist registered under the HCPC and BPS. If the client wishes to raise any concerns or questions then they are free to do so by emailing: [m.r.eubank@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:m.r.eubank@ljmu.ac.uk).

1.1 The TSP agrees to provide support to the client in accordance with the British Psychological Society’s (BPS) code of conduct and its ethical principles. All matters discussed by the client within the sessions are to remain confidential, unless informed consent is provided by the client to disclose, or that the TSP feels that the client is under threat or harm to themselves or others. If this is the case, then in accordance with the ethical code of conduct, this may be communicated to an external party, following an ethical decision-making process provided in the code, and constitutes an acceptable breach of confidentiality.

1.2 Both parties agree that they are bound by the Code of Ethics and Conducts as well as the Professional Practice Guidelines produced by the BPS. The TSP will store all consultancy

reports and other material on a password protected laptop. The TSP agrees that the laptop will only be assessable to the TSP.

1.3 The present contract has no time limit and the TSP and client will continue to work together for as long as both parties feel this is necessary to meet the needs of the intervention. The client is responsible for the arrangement of meetings, with contact to arrange or cancel meetings no less than 24 hours in advance. A financial penalty of £20 may be given at the TSP's discretion if the client cancels less than 24 hours in advance or does not show for an arranged session.

1.4 The cost of each session will be £30 and will last up to one hour (with a grace period of ten minutes following the hour). Thereafter, the client will be charged £15 for each increment of 30 minutes following this grace period.

**Agreed aims of work to be undertaken**

- The needs of the client centre around their current experience of injury and how this affects them as an athlete, bodybuilder, and person as a whole.
- TSP and client to work together to explore client's understanding of this and to adopt a 'client-led' approach to the consultancy practice.
- The objectives of the present consultancy agreement are, but not limited to, developing the clients understanding and self-awareness of their current lived experience of injury and their sport and to support the client's wellbeing during this period.

Name of TSP:

Name of Client:

Stewart J. Bicker

(removed for confidentiality)

Signature of TSP:

Signature of Client:



(removed for confidentiality)

## Case report

**Client:** *Removed for confidentiality*

**Practitioner:** Stewart J.Bicker

BA (Hons) MSc.

Trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist

**Date:** 13/08/2020

This is a consultancy feedback report that intends to provide information surrounding our work together and progress made towards achieving the aims set out in the consultancy contract. I have attempted to lay out the main events of the sessions together, please bear in mind it is not exhaustive and is my own representation of the sessions we have conducted together.

The first session was used as an opportunity to get to know one another and covered the following areas and your reasons for engaging in sport psychology. This relates to the first aim outlined in the contract to better understand your lived experience of injury and how this was affecting you as a bodybuilder and individual outside of sport.

You said you wished to, “stop thinking of yourself as injured”. You “missed how you used to be” and you saw yourself as “broken”. You also mentioned you wished to “clear your head” and “trust yourself”. We discussed your athletic career and the fact you threw yourself into your training and were committed to attain your goals, which you described as a level of “self-harm”; where you would overtrain regularly to achieve your goals and strive to peak performance. We also discussed your concerns with ‘fear’ of capability and how this was bringing up anxiety for you.

You discussed your parent’s death, the relationship with your sister and fiancée and the diagnosis of depression and anxiety. This was discussed to ensure that this was effectively

managed. I outlined the procedures if clinical referral was necessary as I was bound to the BPS code of conduct and the contractual agreement we had signed together. However, you had expressed that currently this was not required as you felt you had no need for clinical intervention. We explored your previous experience of working with practitioners that mainly took the form of bereavement counsellors and CBT therapists. You stated you didn't seem to enjoy this approach to consultancy.

I explained my approach to psychology and the use of existentialism within a sport psychology context can be helpful in that it is concerned with the individual's experience, and allowed you to explore your current life to better understand it and have a better self-awareness, to live up to some of the challenges you were facing. We explored how confidentiality was important in this and these were laid out; 1) confidentiality would not be breached by me unless you were a danger to yourself or others, or 2) a law was broken that required me to report to the police, and 3) you had the ability to discuss any of our work outside our sessions. Following on from this, I also detailed my level of qualification, the role of my supervisor during the course of the session, and his contact details should you have any questions or complaints during the course of the consultancy practice.

Going forward, we agreed to meet and discuss further how you were experiencing your injury and for you to have a safe and comfortable environment to explore things that were going on in your life, for example, your sport and your relationships in and out of sport.

We had begun to explore your injury and what bodybuilding meant to you as an individual and how this related to your identity. In particular, we discussed the relationship with your fiancée and the difficulties you were experiencing with connecting with him surrounding particular issues. This was explored throughout the next few sessions, how you saw yourself in the relationship and some of the conflicts you were experiencing. We also

went into detail about how your independence was affected by people doing things for you, how you saw yourself in this construct and unwillingness for people to do things for you in case it was shown as weakness. This brought about a level of self-awareness and reflection of your own actions and ability to face up to freedom and responsibility in your training.

Your coach and the relationship with him was discussed, how you had idolized him and this had affected your willingness to disclose potential injuries and how this ultimately led to further injury. This meant *freedom* and *responsibility* were some of the main themes we explored during our sessions. With the announcement of COVID-19 and nationwide lockdown( we moved our sessions to Zoom), your competition had been cancelled and you had discussed the fact that this cancellation was difficult for you as you had set a concrete target to compete and then retire. We took time to discuss this together and the work and effort you had put in training towards this goal, which was subsequently squashed.

To develop self-awareness and to better understand your lived experience, I had assigned a task that asked you to describe all the spheres of life that were close to you, with size representative of how much of this sphere meant to you and/or your identity. This was completed and we discussed the task together. The purpose was to understand and to uncover ‘you’, the centre of you and your core. Although this task was prescribed, we discussed that the responsibility to complete the task was yours and evaluation of this task was left to you to explore. Subsequently you discussed your sister and how this had impacted your identity and that you were somewhat in her shadow, and how your previous life experiences had shaped this opinion. You then disclosed that you had been experiencing consistent days of “mopeyness”, and you had become very upset. You wanted ‘to be seen’.

I expressed my concerns around your presenting issues and how they might require clinical intervention. I further disclosed my opinions surrounding my competency and

boundaries as a sport psychologist and the Code of Conduct set out by the BPS. This was particularly important as our third aim of the consultancy contract orientated around your mental wellbeing. You expressed your anxiety at ‘opening a can of worms’ but that you understood the requirement of clinical referral and that these experiences had persisted throughout your life and had an immediate impact that was affecting your mental wellbeing. We agreed that I could source a clinical contact with an approach that was similar to mine, as you had found this was beneficial to exploring your current life experiences. We agreed the matter be brought to my supervisor as a source of information and guidance for myself as part of my ethical decision-making process.

### **Referral**

I sourced two private clinical practices for you to choose from but some weeks after you had not made contact. You asked for a further session, and I agreed on the premise that this be a session for ongoing support within our agreed contracted aims and not to exceed my boundaries in relation to any formal intervention or session required for support with clinical issues.

In this session, you disclosed that your partner had been physically violent with you and that you had been ‘allowing’ this behaviour up until now. We had established that you were safe, staying with family and that you were in no immediate harm from others or yourself. You discussed your safety and how your family friends had provided this safety to you, but also how your safety in sport was also important (relating back to trusting yourself and the concern you felt about ‘throwing’ yourself into your training in an unhealthy manner. Throughout the session I had alluded to the fact that these matters were better discussed with a clinical psychologist. We agreed that I take the reins in arranging the clinical psychologist

to contact you as you were tentative about asking for help. Following this I contacted the clinical psychologist, passed on your details and arranged for him to call you.

**Practitioner and Client name and signature:**

Name: Stewart J. Bicker

Signature: 

Client Name: (removed for confidentiality)

Client Signature: (removed for confidentiality)

## Post-Consultancy Feedback and Evaluation

In order to evaluate the intervention I opted to send Megan four open ended questions via email. I chose email as this could allow Megan to take time to reflect and evaluate the consultancy process as her leisure. Further, I was aware that Megan was in the process of consulting with the clinical psychologist she was referred and it was important to me that she felt safe and comfortable in providing honest feedback of her experience. The questions were developed to reflect if the aims agreed in the consultancy contract were achieved, or worked towards (point 1), if the mode of practice (existential approach) allowed Megan to explore her lived experience (point 2), and if Megan felt the referral process was reasonable based on the third aim of the consultancy contract (to provide mental wellbeing support, points 3 & 4).

“Below are some open ended questions for the purposes of practitioner development and your feedback as a client. Please give as much (or as little) detail as you deem appropriate. Please remember this will remain confidential and **honest** feedback will aid me much more than a glowing review!

- 1) After our first initial session, to what extent was I able to accommodate a safe and confidential environment for you to explore your primary presenting concerns regarding your injury and how this impacted you as a person and bodybuilder?
- 2) What do you believe were your main presenting issues prior to the referral and how did the sessions allow you to explore these (based on the sessions prior to your referral)?
- 3) How was the referral decided? Were the reasons explained and understood by you?
- 4) Did you feel the referral process was well supported?”

Below are Megan's responses:

- 1) After our first initial session, to what extent was I able to accommodate a safe and confidential environment for you to explore your primary presenting concerns regarding your injury and how this impacted you as a person and bodybuilder?
- 2) What do you believe were your main presenting issues prior to the referral and how did the sessions allow you to explore these (based on the sessions prior to your referral)?
- 3) How was the referral decided? Were the reasons explained and understood by you?
- 4) Did you feel the referral process was well supported?

#### Client Feedback

Hi Stewart, I actually [re]wrote the feedback this morning because even though I wrote a response after I couldn't find the last one I had written a few months back. I had been procrastinating sending, but I think it's because I felt a bit uncomfortable sending because it felt so personal and sending it written made me feel nervous because I wouldn't know a response. But I thought if I could write a bit quickly this morning and face that fear that'd be a good thing. I think the thing that made me nervous was thinking about when I was so upset and I couldn't talk to you about it because you were pushing for the referral. The way that happened was exactly as it needed to, because I was desperate to talk to you about it because I hadn't really been honest with my friends or anybody about what was going on in my relationship and I felt I had built trust with you and felt comfortable, and I completely understand that it is not your job, why I was referred, but it was really, really difficult to feel that shift from having a therapeutic relationship that I found really beneficial to not having it. I think that may be a testament to you. [clinical psychologist] is absolutely fantastic. It was

the transition I found really hard. The transition was well supported definitely. It was as easy as it possibly could be. So, I think that question 3 & 4 answered in this paragraph. The safe and confidential environment was great. As I mentioned there, I felt a lot of trust. & the structure really helped, there was a fluidity to discussing stuff that I really appreciated. & the bell curve you drew me & pointed to the upper & lower parts and said 'there's growth here and there's also growth here' regarding my different training and adherence was amazing I still use that as a mental reference. I also got really comfortable training really quickly so the sessions were effective too.

Loss of self-trust. With training, obviously that had spilled over into other areas of my life. The sessions definitely allowed me to explore my issues with training and were very effective because I was unbelievably happy with how my competition prep panned out and how my training progressed and is still.

Apologies if the weird answer structure throws you off. Only negative feedback for you is that those were closed questions for 'open-ended'

Thank you so much for all your help. I am still in an excellent place with mind/body/training post injury. & I really do think you are excellent! I may have passed your number for an elite gymnast that was looking for a sports psych I don't know if they got in touch. Hope you're well!

*Client's name removed for confidentiality*

## **Teaching and Training Case Study**

### **Delivery of a Mental Skills Programme to Adolescent Rowers**

#### **Context**

##### **The Club**

The present teaching and training case study was delivered at a local rowing club situated in the South-West of England. Despite being a small club run by volunteer coaches, over the years it had become highly revered as a club that developed athletes to a high standard of rowing. Despite its humble clubhouse and limited resources, the club boasts several professional rowers who have subsequently gone on to win national, international, and Olympic events. This being said, the club accommodates rowers of all skill levels and ages, from 'learn to row' to athletes competing at the British National Championships, from the age of 14 to senior level rowers. Through discussion with the coach, it seemed that the main focus of the club was the development of adolescent rowers, with a priority on high performance. Therefore, squad members were aged 14-17. To row at a high standard requires dedication and significant periods of time training, which may not be accessible to older adults. Squad members would attend training after school, at weekends, and were also required to train on 'ergs' (rowing machines) during personal time outside of formal training, usually at gyms or in their homes.

##### **The Practitioner**

At the time of the programme, I was enrolled on a professional doctorate and in the middle of my British Psychological Society (BPS) accredited and HCPC approved stage two training. I had been the resident sport psychologist (in training) for 24 months at the rowing club. My responsibilities at the club were to support the development of coaches and athletes mainly through one-to-one support, but my duties also included club development projects.

These organizational projects aimed to understand and develop the clubs' coaching system via assessment of the coaching behaviours using the British Rowing Framework. I had worked exclusively under the head coach at the time, who oversaw the coaching of the J14 to J16 skull rowers and under 21 skull rowers. Squad numbers included single, double, and quad rowers and the majority of the squads were expected to compete at least at regional levels and even at national events. Therefore, my duties were predominately to support and develop these rowers by observing training sessions, providing pastoral support, accompanying the squads to events, and delivery of interventions that adopted a holistic approach to performance and wellbeing in alignment with my professional practice philosophy.

### **The Clients**

I was asked by the head coach to deliver a series of workshops to his J14-16 squads. These consisted of 12 female athlete rowers who competed at regional to national events. For the duration of the teaching programme, I considered the head coach as 'the client'. Although determining 'who the client is' is not always clear (Harbel & Peterson, 2006), I determined the head coach was the client as he had approached me to establish a programme for his squad.

### **Needs Analysis**

During a meeting with the head coach, he disclosed that he had recently taken the J14-16s and that a lot of 'work' was required to ensure they were at a suitable level for competing at the national championships. He had hoped that I could aid him in developing their mental skills for performance, both for training and competition purposes. The head coach had experience in coaching for several decades, and had experienced many instances where young athletes were unable to perform adequately to their full potential during race day. While supporting the J18s at the national championships the previous year, I had the chance

to observe the J14-16 squads as many of the squads mixed together during periods of downtime, preparing for races, and loading boats etc. I saw that many of these younger squad members suffered from a variety of performance inhibiting psychological phenomena associated with race day, such as high somatic and cognitive anxiety, low persistent mood following poor performances, avoidance behaviours, and lack of focus and concentration during and between races. Following a discussion with the head coach it was agreed that I would provide a six-session mental skills training (MST) programme for the purposes of giving educational and applicable information to the squad, which would help them in both a training and competition environment.

### **Development of Programme**

The provision of sport psychology service to young athletes has been shown to develop awareness and the ability to cope with challenges associated with sport and competition (Vealey, 1988; Henriksen et al., 2014). For athletes to achieve their full potential regarding their athletic performance, research has identified psychological characteristics associated with elite performers, including; enjoyment, responsibility, adaptability, squad spirit, self-aware learner, determination, confidence, optimal performance state, game sense, attentional focus, and mental toughness (Holland et al., 2010; Orlick & Partington, 1988). To assist with the development of these characteristics, Mental skills training (MST) represent the learning and implementation of traditional cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT), “with the objective of assisting sports participants in the development of mental skills to achieve performance success and personal well-being” (Vealey, 2007 p. 287). Laurer et al. (2017) outline four reasons that skills training programmes are important for youth athletes. (1) Pressure is an inherent part of organised sport, (2) Young athletes are capable of using psychological skills and strategies, (3) Skills training builds a foundation for immediate and long-term development, and (4) Skills training can have parallel benefits for life skills and

character development. The development of psychological *skills* (techniques used to influence trait-like characteristics) has been shown to influence athletes' *characteristics* (regulated through skills; Dohme et al., 2020). Together, these skills and characteristics have been shown to enhance athlete's ability to meet and exceed performance demands through workshop and intervention delivery methods (e.g. Davidson & Edwards, 2014; Dohme et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2010).

While my own philosophy of practice is rooted in an existential-humanistic approach to service delivery, understanding the educational remit and needs of the head coach and the developmental bracket of the rowers meant I was happy to 'flex' my approach. As Nesti (2004) reports, while MST this may not be a practitioners' usual mode of practice, such concepts and skills may be more digestible for athletes at certain developmental periods, particularly in adolescence. Despite being a targeted performance MST programme, I believe that these skills had the capacity to be transferable to life outside sport (Henriksen et al., 2014) and to facilitate long-term consequences for mental health and self-regulatory capabilities (Henriksen et al., 2014).

I utilized Bull's Mental Skills Questionnaire (Bull et al., 1996) to gain a baseline understanding of the rowers use and conceptual understanding of: imagery, mental preparation (goal setting), self-confidence, anxiety and worry management, concentration, relaxation and motivation. The questionnaire has 28 items and assesses participants along a six-point Likert scale, requiring item responses ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. This was useful to hand out prior to the programme as I could assess whether MST concepts were currently used within rower's practice and competition, and subsequently identify any MST strengths or weaknesses in the squad.

Based on the numerous mental skill components that Bull's questionnaire assesses, the mean scores for each were between around 3 to 4.5. I was pleasantly surprised at some of the rowers MST rating scores, and upon reflection it was not surprising that the athletes possessed these skills due to the high performing expectations set by the coach. However, upon further investigation, it was clear that some of the athletes struggled in some areas. Therefore, I believed there was benefit in delivering an MST-based series of workshops to enhance the athletes' knowledge, understanding, and application of MST relevant to rowing, particularly for those in the lower bracket scores of Bull's questionnaire. For those who already reported a respectable use and understanding score, the workshops would serve to consolidate and strengthen a better understanding of mental skills.

To underpin the programme, I decided to adopt each of the common mental skills components utilized within MST programmes and the concepts identified in the Bull's questionnaire: *Goal Setting, Stress/Anxiety, Imagery, Relaxation and Self Talk, and Motivation and Concentration*. Drawing on traditional MST workshop-based literature, I set the weekly layout of the sessions as follows, with mid and end point sessions. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy underpinned the session aims and learning outcomes. These were:

- **Session 1: An Introduction to Sport Psychology and Goal Setting**
  - Session aims:
    - Understand what sport psychology is, what sport psychologists do.  
How SP might look in rowing.
    - What does a 'high performing' rower look like?
    - Understanding SMART goal setting, application of the principles in and out of sport, and how this can impact on performance.
    - Identification of potential barriers.
- **Session 2: Stress, Anxiety, and Performance**

- Session aims:
  - Recognizing the difference of performance stress and persistent anxiety (clinical)
  - Describing the three different types of stress and what they look like.
  - Analyse the positive and negative consequences of stress on performance.
  - Applying the ‘Recognize, Evidence, Logic, Helpful?, Replace’ principles for unhelpful thoughts.
  - Create personal support network.
- **Session 3: Imagery**
  - Session aims:
    - To understand how imagery is used within sport to enhance performance
    - Understand the role of the brain to body signals
    - Remembering the two types of perspective
    - Applying PETTLEP to create imagery plan.
    - Applying PETTLEP to case studies.
- *Session 3.5: Recap on concepts covered thus far.*
- **Session 4: Relaxation and Self talk**
  - **Session Aims**
    - Recall the role stress plays on performance
    - Understanding that performance nerves are natural and that techniques can be used to help alleviate them if they become too difficult
    - Apply progressive muscular relaxation in session
    - Apply breathing techniques in session

- Understand that imagery and relaxation techniques can be used together
  - Analyse the role that the concepts covered help towards becoming a more resilient, confident performer
  - Apply reframing techniques to help with negative self-talk
- **Session 5: Motivation and Concentration**
  - **Session Aims:**
    - Understand what motivation is and recall at least two types of motivation
    - Evaluate how different approaches to performance might hinder motivation in two types of performer
    - Discuss what concentration looks like, and how this relates to performance.
    - Recall the broad and narrow types of concentration and how these apply to rowing
    - Understand and discuss what might affect concentration when performing.
- *Session 6: Final Session and recap*

Prior to the delivery of the programme, the session outlines were presented to the head coach to assess their relevance and need for the current squad. This ensured the coach was involved in the development of the programme and in doing so, provided the opportunity for collaboration on the coach's perceived needs of the group, as he had worked alongside them much more than I had. The head coach was happy with the content and for me to deliver the sessions as they were presented above. We agreed a weekly session for one hour would be appropriate.

Visek et al. (2009) describe the importance of understanding the athletes developmental stage from a physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development stand point (see table 1). Below is an outline of the developmental characteristics for the group. Pigaet (1952) describes middle adolescence as ages 15-17. However, given the variability of developmental ages, I adopted Visek et al's youth developmental characteristics so I was able to approach the MST programme with a broad understanding of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development stages throughout adolescence.

### **Youth Developmental Characteristics for Consideration**

<b>Development</b>	<b>Early Adolescence (~10-14 years)</b>	<b>Mid-Adolescence (~15-17 years)</b>
<b><i>Physical</i></b>	Physical changes occur more rapidly; puberty; production of sex hormones	Growth spurts begin to slow; more fully physically matured; sexual urges
<b><i>Cognitive</i></b>	Start to think more abstractly; hypothesize; consider alternatives; not as able to link events, feelings, and situations together	Can think more abstractly; more multidimensional; ponder moral, social, political issues
<b><i>Emotional</i></b>	Emotional; moody; emotional outbursts	Fewer mood fluctuations; more capable of expressing feelings
<b><i>Social</i></b>	Peers play an increasingly significant role; strong need to belong; popularity becomes important	More time with peers; develop more mature and intimate relationships; need to achieve independence

*Table 1; Youth Development Characteristics adapted from Vernon (2002a)*

Understanding these physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development characteristics was something I considered prior to delivery and upon creating the programme. According to research by McCarthy et al., (2010), the abstract thought processes required to effectively understand the concepts and application of mental skills for this age group is appropriate. However, I was cognizant that some concepts would have to be simplified. Other considerations when developing this programme include Kipp's (2018) suggestion that athletes at a late adolescent stage are figuring out 'who they are' and can be subject to levels of stress and anxiety during this cognitive development stage. Other cognitive developmental considerations include the emergence of formal operational reasoning, characterised by the presence of abstract reasoning and monitoring thought processes. These concepts are important within sport, as abstract and hypothetical reasoning are important for creating long-term goals, using visualisation, hypothesizing 'what if' scenarios and self-regulation of thoughts and emotions (Kipp, 2018). I was cognizant of the developmental characteristics of late adolescence and the impact this could potentially have had on learning and retention of knowledge (e.g. individual's stage of cognitive development, how emotions may impact group discussions, the role of others impacting one's willingness to share). Peer acceptance and belonging are significant factors in adolescent's self-perceptions, enjoyment, and persistence (Kipp & Weiss, 2013).

Given the critical influence on others' during these stages, I sought to not only develop the squad's knowledge and understanding of MST, but deliver a programme that would foster togetherness, cohesion, and develop individual self-efficacy (Bandura, 2010). Another important factor to consider was my own physical characteristics and the potential impacts this may have on the sessions. Specifically, my gender and age. Nesti (2004) discusses the potential issue of female practitioners within male dominated sports, along with some of the challenges associated with engaging in sporting institutions and clubs. I was

cognizant of being a male, 28-year-old practitioner who had not had much interaction with the group. Therefore, I ensured to place emphasis on my delivery with an upbeat and energetic tone, so to alleviate some of the potential reservations or shyness from the squad. However, I found that the majority of group showed good engagement and the use of initial ‘ice-breakers’ and group tasks helped bring energy into the room.

### **Underpinning Pedagogy**

I categorised and developed the programme under ‘small group teaching’ for the athletes. As small group teaching is categorised by numbers of around 12, I examined the literature to understand how I could run my sessions to best make use of the materials presented and to engage the athletes to make the MST programme as informative and as fun as possible (Evans & Slater, 2014). Throughout the sessions, I included group tasks that sought to develop the athletes’ understanding of psychological principles, whilst promoting a shared learning experience between the athletes and myself as the programme ‘leader’. Prior to and during the session, I was aware that the group may view me as ‘the expert’, and based on the presenting style of the sessions and historical preconceptions of teaching (Boyd & Harris, 2010) this was understandable. I sought to take an ‘integrated’ approach to the teaching process, much like my own approach in consultancy. While understanding that I was the assumed ‘expert’ and ‘leader’ of the sessions, I took into consideration ways to develop a ‘learner centred’ environment (Prawat, 1992).

My rooted values included an understanding that an individual is a unique person with their own constructed beliefs. I was aware that a didactic style of teaching may bring up some feelings of anxiety that conflicted with my philosophy of practice (Lindsay et al. 2007). From a constructivist perspective, students construct their own meanings and as such, involving students in the learning process allows them to develop unique and individual ways of

understanding (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). This includes allowing learners to raise their own questions, generate their own hypotheses and models as possibilities, and test them for validity. Ramsden (1988, p.271) notes that “learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person’s way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world— rather than as a quantitative change in the amount of knowledge someone possesses” (Cited in Weimer, 2002, p.11).

With an awareness of my potential anxiety in assuming the ‘expert’ role, I incorporated a level of social constructivism that is central to my philosophy in the sessions. I regularly acknowledged each individuals’ contribution and ideas during the sessions and promoted ‘student-centred learning’ (Prawat, 1992) as often as I could. This was achieved by asking open-ended questions, allowing the athletes to discuss particular topics or themes relevant to the subject areas amongst themselves (that sometimes evolved into debates), and taking a flexible approach to the sessions (athletes may have wanted to cover topics or in more detail than was initially planned). I also included group task work that could promote peer learning by sharing ideas of how the concepts related to the individual’s rowing experience and incorporated tasks that aimed to develop cohesion through interactive exercises.

### **Delivery of Programme**

Each session was delivered over the following six weeks in the club’s meeting room. This meeting room also acted as a canteen as the club had limited space and resources. This meant the room had its own set of challenges to the programme’s environment and group engagement. The engagement process was largely dependent on attendance at training, as the squad would attend the sessions after their training period. Therefore, if they did not show to training as a result of other commitments or absence, they would miss the session. The

numbers of attendees to the sessions ranged from 10-16. Some rowers attended all six sessions and some only attended one. This being said, the majority of the squad attended all of the sessions. I believe this reflected the professionalism of the club and the expectations placed on athletes to attend by the coach.

PowerPoint presentations were used throughout the programme to present the material and to present graphics and illustrations to assist in my presentation. Tables in the venue were set out with any materials that were required prior to the session starting (Post-Its, handouts, questionnaires, pens/pencils etc.). Tables were given an equal number of chairs for the purposes of group tasks (4 to 5 on each) and faced the projector screen at the front. I purposely decided to start each session with the aims and objectives of the MST subject to be covered. This helped set expectations and introduce the concept that was to be covered. Following this, I made a conscious effort to present different starting tasks, from open questions, group tasks, and a standard introduction to the mental skill. This helped to maintain and keep the group's engagement over the course of the weeks to combat the risk of staleness, but also allowed me to insert some learning-centred activities. This included asking open questions at the start of the sessions to gauge the squad's current knowledge, to generate discussion to foster peer-learning, and to assist me as the teacher to how the squad utilized the particular mental skill within training.

Lastly, the underpinning pedagogy informing my delivery was integrated between the traditional 'teacher' and 'facilitator'. As many of the squad may not have encountered the mental skills concepts formally, I adopted the 'teacher/expert' role when required to disseminate the information. However, as demonstrated, tasks and opportunities for learner-centred activities rooted in constructivism were facilitated by me for squad members to become actively involved in the learning process, collaborate with each other, and apply the mental skills concepts to their sport and lives.

## Monitoring and Evaluation of Programme

Following each of the sessions, large *Post-Its* were handed out to the squad. I asked all the athletes to write down three things they had learnt from that session and one idea they wanted to find out more about, or anything in particular they had difficulties understanding during the session that they perhaps didn't want to discuss in front of the group (see Figure 2, 3, & 4 in appendix). For example, main themes that emerged from the introduction to sport psychology and goal setting (figure 2) included; *what makes a good rower*, showing that rowers were able to recognise the qualities of a high performing athlete and *setting small realistic goals*, where rowers recognised the importance of processed focused goal-setting. In the imagery session (figure 3), rowers noted PETTLEP as a major learning point, with each facet of Holmes and Collins's (2001) imagery model detailed (i.e. physical, environment, task, timing, emotion, perspective), rowers also noted several aspects of this model in their feedback as ways to enhance their imagery. This being said, further detail was perhaps needed to establish the rowers application of imagery to their personal training and competition, and this was addressed in the session mid-point (session 3.5) for rowers to create their own mental imagery pre-race performance routine. As a final example, figure 4 in the appendix outlines the main learning points as detailed by the rowers surrounding stress and anxiety. It was clear the rowers gained insight into the referral processes of clinical anxiety, social support networks, and who to contact if they felt they were unable to cope with stress and anxiety both in and out of sport.

Sessions 3.5 and 6 were check-point sessions. These were designed to cover any difficulties the squad had experienced around the mental skills concepts covered thus far in the programme. This also provided an open platform for members to voice concerns or thoughts on the sessions. For session 3.5, I also used a short quiz to assess athletes' learning. This was in the format of a 'fill in the blank' exercise for athletes to complete individually

(see Figure 7 in appendix), with the opportunity to discuss their answers. Only one or two words were removed, as I was aware that each athlete had differing levels of understanding and a wide range of cognitive abilities and development. With this in mind, I ensured that this task was relatively easy so as not to impact on their sense of competency (Bandura, 2010). The squad at this time also had their GCSE mock exams. Because of this, I was weary of analysing the rowers' understanding of the concepts by a traditional pen and paper style test. Instead, I asked the rowers to note down what they thought the missing word was. Subsequently, I revealed the answer but engaged the group and asked for volunteers to share with the group what they had put down and why. This also aimed to stimulate conversation and group learning that is typical of a constructivist teaching style (Baviskar, 2009).

I collated the athletes' 'three things I learnt' and 'one thing I'd like to know more about' and arranged these into thematic mind maps. This was used as monitoring tool for athletes' understanding of the concepts covered within sessions. It also served to provide potential extra sessions that I delivered during the midpoint and end-point sessions. Some of the sessions were also attended by the head coach and some by parents, however, no formal feedback was collected. A practitioner (known as M), working as a performance coach with the boy's squad, asked if they could sit in for one of my sessions. Following the session, I asked for feedback on how they felt the session went, and to outline any recommendations for the purposes of the next session and for my own practitioner development:

Following on from your concentration workshop I thought what really worked well was how you related each aspect back to rowing, I think that really helped them to understand the concept. I also think the way in which you presented it had a clear and logical format. My only note maybe that it seemed at times that a few weren't fully engaged (the giggling and whispering), and although you maintained control of the

workshop I think maybe a note for the future would be to make it a bit more interactive to sustain that engagement level throughout. (M)

Reflecting on M's feedback, I was pleased to hear that the sessions were making the concepts relatable to rowing. I believe classroom teaching can too often remove athletes from their sporting context, making it difficult for them to transfer new skills to training and competition. MST has similarly been criticized for its 'classroom' style approach (Henrikson et al., 2014), so integrating the MST that was applicable to rowing seemed to land well. Furthermore, from some of the squad member's feedback, I believe I was able to deliver material that was transferrable to life outside sport. For example, from the feedback after the session on stress and anxiety, some of the 'things I learnt' related to the individual's wellbeing outside sport (see appendix figure 4).

### **Termination and Reflection**

The final planned session was unfortunately cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown during the month of March. Because of the circumstances, I was unable to conduct a session that (a) revisited some of the concepts covered from sessions 4 and 5, and (b) re-evaluate the squad using Bull's questionnaire to quantify any positive change in scores regarding rower's MST use and understanding.

Although there were several challenges during this period, I believe that the programme developed for the squad met the initial needs of the coach. I developed and delivered a MST programme that aimed to develop the squad's understanding and application of mental skills tailored towards rowing. Furthermore, I believe these concepts could be readily adaptable to life outside sport. Despite not being able to use Bull's questionnaire in the evaluation phase, I monitored the squads understanding of the concepts through a '3 things I learned' and 'one thing I'd like to know more of' exercise at the end of each session.

I took feedback from the athletes and peers to enhance future sessions and endeavoured to cover any concepts that needed further examination in future sessions.

The programme was attended on occasions by the head coach, parents, and fellow practitioners that added awareness of the benefits of MST to key stakeholders. Utilizing an integrated pedagogy of expert and facilitator, I ensured to incorporate a learner-centred approach that aimed to understand the individual as a unique person, capable of constructing their own interpretations of the information presented (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Despite adopting the 'expert' teacher role, I believe the integration of constructivist theory helped demonstrate to the squad that I was cognizant of their own ability to develop and understand knowledge based on their prior constructed knowledge. This was demonstrated by a willingness to listen and to share knowledge between myself and the squad, such as their opinions and experiences of the mental skills concepts. Furthermore, as the programme teacher/facilitator, I often found myself gaining new, insightful knowledge that helped me develop as a practitioner. For example, as shown in figure 4 in the appendix, many of the athletes wanted to learn more about the application of imagery to their performance. This assisted me as a practitioner by addressing a more practical stance to imagery as it may be that I concentrated too much in the theoretical aspects, or did not make the application of the content clear enough for the audience. Opportunities to gain insight into the learners' experiences presented themselves by asking open-ended questions during the sessions and assigning group tasks that promoted peer-collaboration and dissemination of findings. Thus, my reflection and recommendation as a teacher/practitioner highlight the benefits of adopting a learner-centred, constructivist style to teaching. This presents the opportunity to develop not only students' learning, but practitioners' understanding of psychological concepts within the applied field. In contrast, the opportunity to collaborate and develop as a practitioner may be missed in more traditional classroom 'expert' teacher-learner approaches.

The present teaching and training case study was an MST programme tailored to a squad of rowers between the ages of 14-17 in a weekly classroom setting that aimed to develop athletes' mental skills namely: *Goal Setting, Stress/Anxiety, Imagery, Relaxation and Self Talk* and *Motivation and Concentration*. Pedagogical theory and research informed concepts that underpinned the programme are discussed. Insights into the programme's effectiveness and considerations for applied practitioners are given with recommendations for future MST teaching for adolescent athletes. Finally, issues considering termination due to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic are discussed along with my reflections on the programme's impact against the needs identified.

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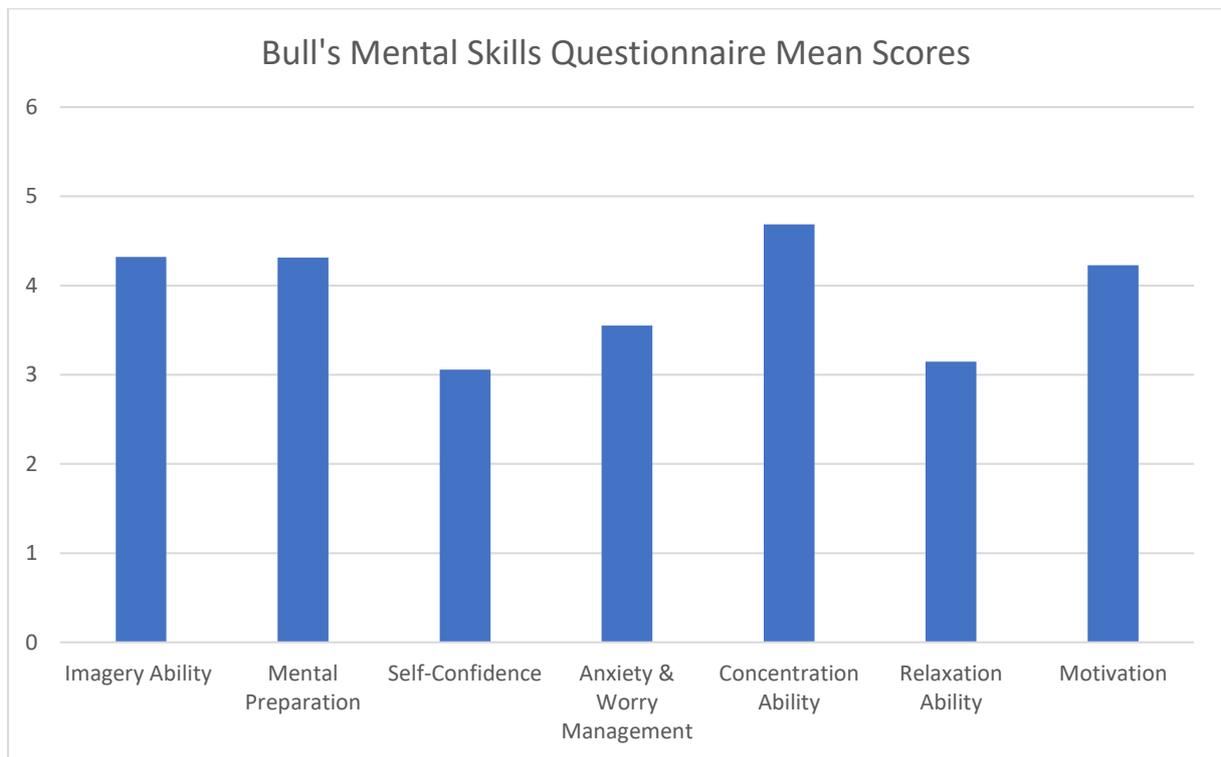
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**Appendix:**



*Figure 1: Preliminary analysis of rowers mental skills using Bull's (1996) Mental Skills Questionnaire*

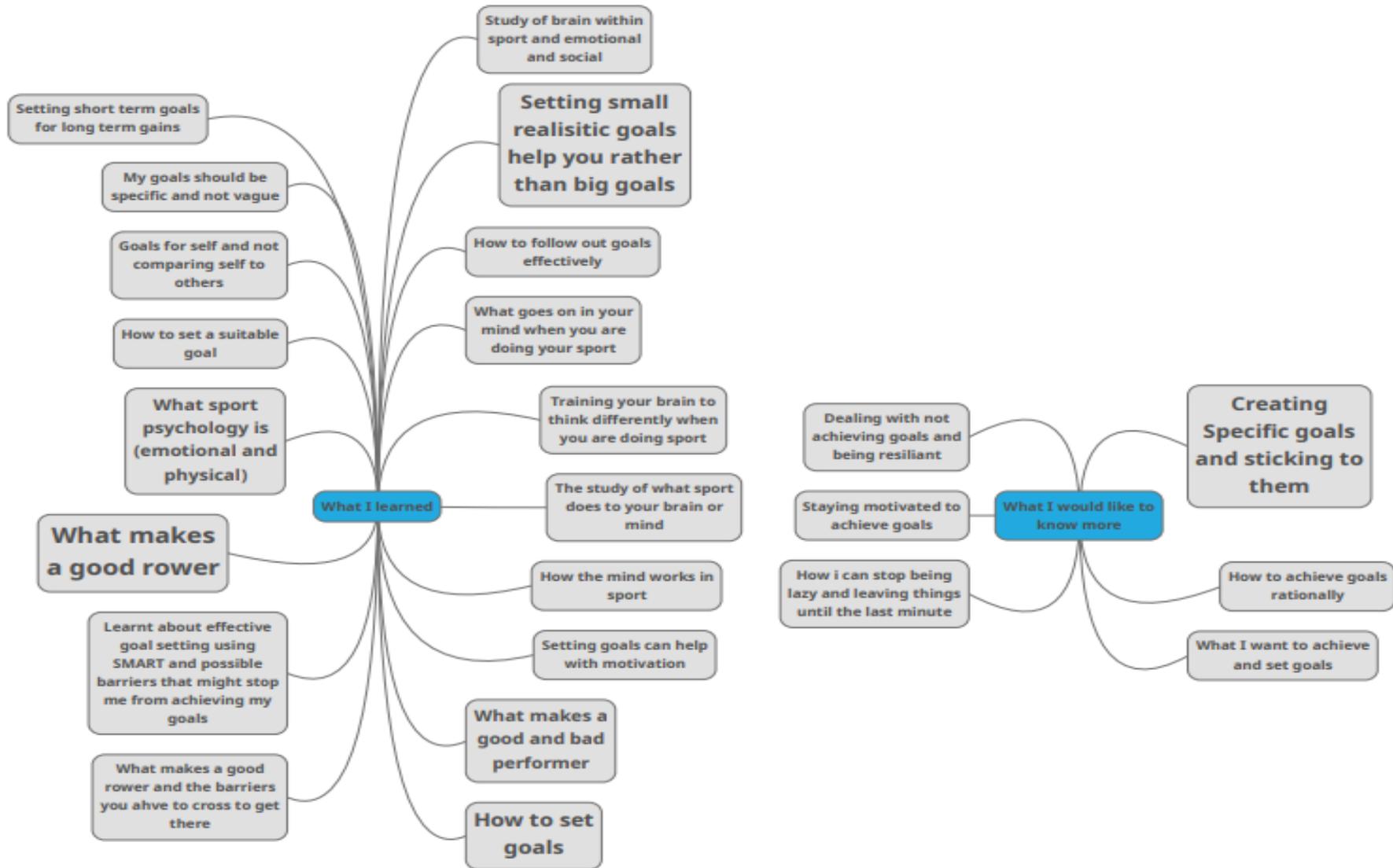


Figure 2: Feedback exercise following introduction to sport psychology and goal setting using (three things I learned and one I would like to know more about)

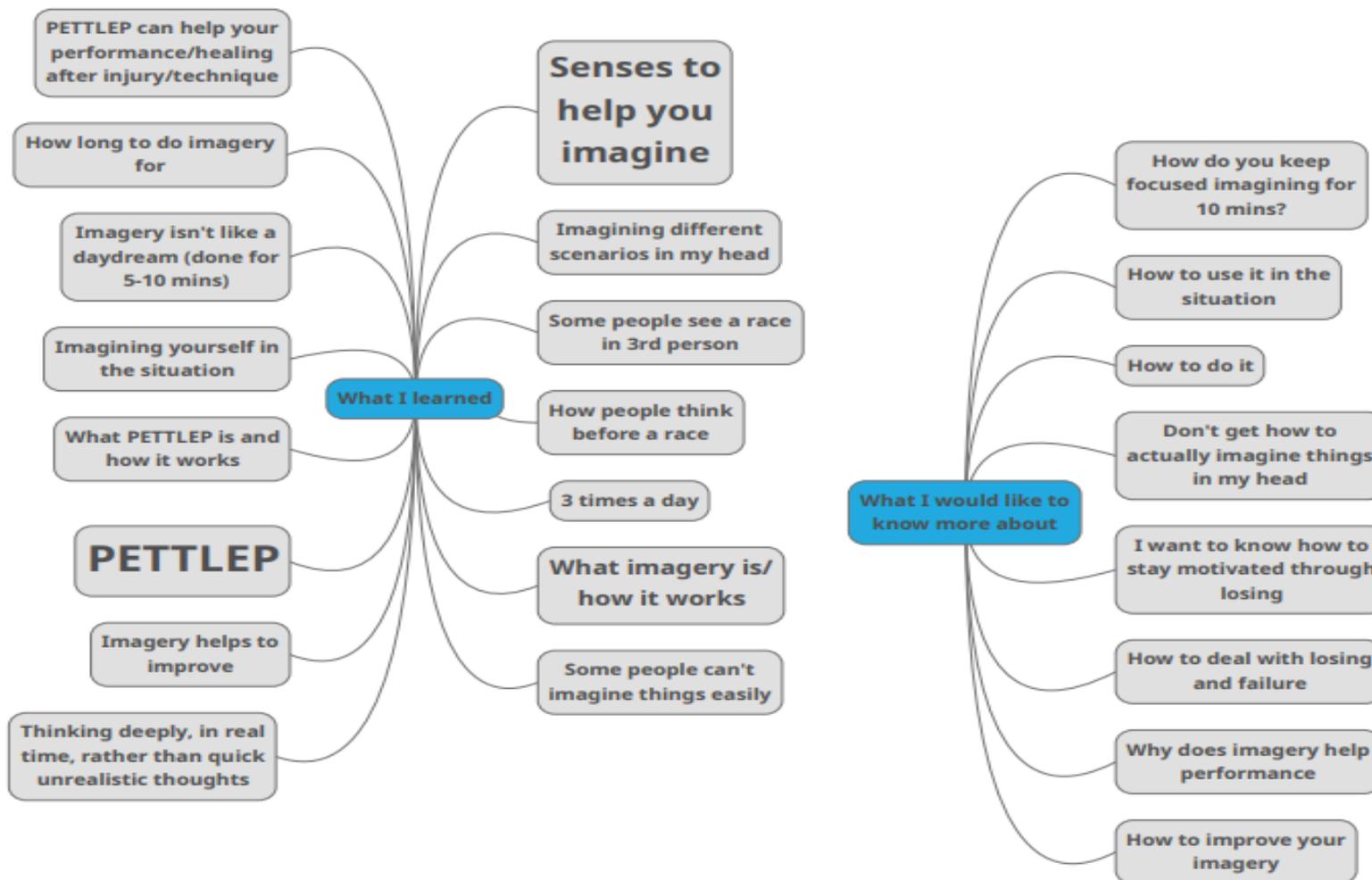


Figure 3: Feedback exercise following imagery session ('three things I learned and one I would like to know more about')

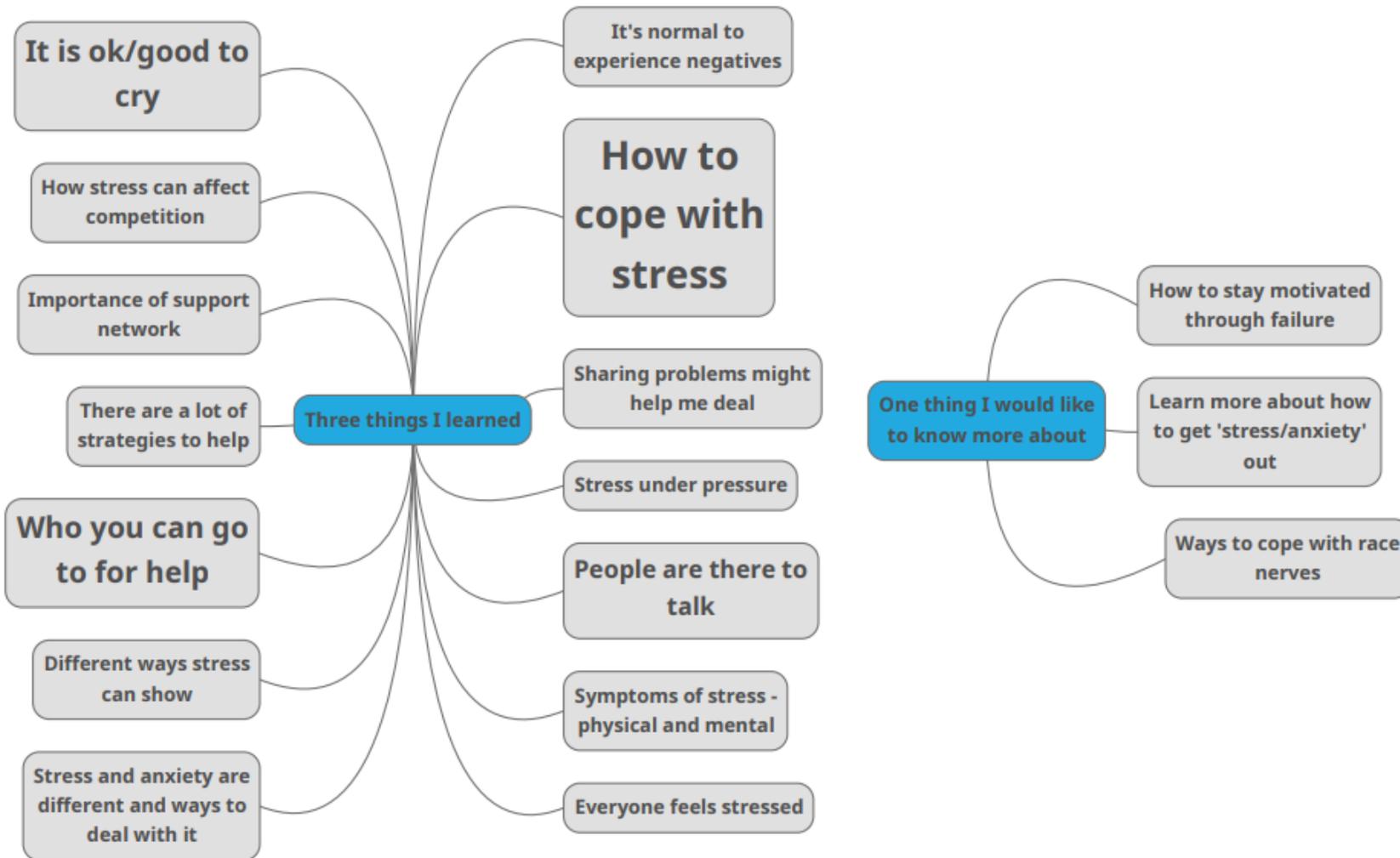


Figure 4: Feedback exercise following stress and anxiety session ('three things I learned and one I would like to know more about')

# How do YOU do?

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“How do I perform under pressure?”

“How does my body feel when under pressure?”

“What are my thoughts when under pressure?”

“What are my coping strategies when I am under pressure?”

*Figure 5: Example of ‘Stress, anxiety, and performance’ open questions posed to athletes, aimed to promote self-awareness of individual’s unique experience of stress and anxiety.*

## Task – Case studies

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Case study 1- Rower is set to compete at a national competition in a few months. She has been training well but as the competition draws closer, she is not training well because she keeps getting nervous. Use PETTLEP to create an imagery plan for her.

Case study 2 – Rower has recently got injured, they are set to come back to training after a few weeks but they are unsure of their skill ability and how they will cope when they come back. Use PETTLEP to create an imagery plan.

Case study 3 – Rower has had some trouble with their catches in training, his coach has given him information about how to improve the catch and has used video analysis to show him how to correct. Use PETTLEP for him to improve him catches

*Figure 6: Example of case study group exercise that asked athletes to adopt PETTLEP to create imagery scripts*

## Work out the missing words!

**Mind stress generally has a negative impact on performance and can include;**

- Fear of performance failure
- Worry about negative evaluation from others
- concerns of injury or danger
- general fear of the unknown.

**Body stress is the body's reaction to our stress and can include physical sensations:**

- increase in heart rate
- rapid breathing
- butterflies in the stomach.

Behavioural stress includes

Tense facial expressions, changes in communication patterns, agitation and restlessness.

## Work out the missing words!

**Mind stress generally has a negative impact on performance and can include;**

- [ ] of performance failure
- Worry about negative evaluation from o [ ]
- concerns of i [ ] y or danger
- general [ ] of the unknown.

**Body stress is the body's reaction to our stress and can include physical sensations:**

- in [ ] in heart rate
- rapid br [ ]
- [ ] ies in the stomach.

Behavioural stress includes

Tense f [ ] expressions, changes in com [ ] patterns, agitation and [ ] lessness.

Figure 7: Example of recap exercises found in session 3.5

## Teaching Diary

Prior to the professional doctorate, I had little experience teaching in a formal setting. Nearing the end of my Masters at Cardiff Metropolitan University, myself, along with a colleague at the time, volunteered for the regional Welsh under-16s golf squad that was supervised by a senior lecturer at the university. During this time, I had the opportunity to develop some experience in delivering some psycho-educational workshops, along with some one-to-one support mostly concerning mental skills (e.g. pre-shot routines, course planning and preparation). From the beginning of my academic career, I would describe my knowledge and understanding of pedagogical theory and educational literature as non-existent. On reflection, what little I did know centred around the understanding that in education, standing in front of learners and presenting off of slides was perhaps not best practice, particularly for adolescents. This being said, my own experiences of education from high school onwards (and even at masters level) seemed to be centred around a positivist-certainty paradigm; where we (as the learners) were expected (and expected ourselves) to be bestowed with knowledge. This was somewhat mirrored in psychological approaches at the time, whereby the traditional cognitive behavioural approaches such as CBT were the main focus of practitioners, in which the sport psychologist can (although not always) assume the role as ‘teacher’ and client as ‘student’ (Keegan, 2016).

This being said, in my history of studying the discipline of psychology, it was clear that many theories and frameworks exist surrounding a particular phenomenon, and that the importance of evidence in the form of rigorous scientific trials (randomised control trials, for example) were pivotal in ‘backing’ or solidifying one’s argument. Thus, it was understandable that my approach to teaching from the start of the professional doctorate did take a form of the ‘teacher-led’ classroom style. Typical of many neophyte practitioners, I wanted to be able to ‘show off’ and prove the knowledge I had (Woodcock et al., 2008). This

has certainly been a struggle for me to navigate from the perspective of aligning my own core values to the roles of ‘practitioner’ and ‘teacher’, which has perhaps created some internal conflict and lack of philosophical alignment between these different roles as my development has evolved. From reading of others practitioners’ journeys, both as a trainee/neophyte practitioner and in education (e.g. McGregor & Winter, 2007; Kane et al., 2004; Tod et al., 2009), as one develops one may encounter some discrepancies between their values and/or philosophy of practice (Haberl & Patterson, 2006; Lindsay et al., 2007). This may occur due to their prescribed or expected role as a practitioner. Although the head coach of the rowing squads with my Teaching and Training case study never ‘prescribed’ a programme that was to take a strictly positivist/post-positivist underpinning, I felt as though this was the case and was subsequently ‘bad’ for some reason. I believe that further reading of academic literature concerning philosophy of practice has helped me understand *why* I was feeling uneasy. Further, my reading perhaps reassured me that what I was doing was OK and that I wouldn’t be chastised for utilizing MST as an approach to develop the rowers (e.g. Nesti, 2004). Reading Keegan’s (2015) conceptualisation of the main philosophies helped me understand that my integrated-construalist approach to sport psychology as a practitioner was actually drawing parallel with my approach to teaching. As a practitioner, I utilize theory and scientific knowledge to inform practice, and know that there are certain circumstances where a practitioner-led approach is appropriate. I also understand, based on my philosophy, that psychology is not a perfect science; individuals have their own uniqueness that require consideration with the context in which one operates. Finally, I understood that being able to ‘flex’ within one’s approach is advantageous in the world of sport (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992).

My first Teaching and Training session with the rowing case study began with the head coach introducing me to the squad. This was helpful as once the squad convened,

everyone was excitable and the room got slightly rowdy. He was able to calm them and describe what I did as a practitioner and my current work within the club. This was particularly helpful to me at the time, because I thought ‘I don’t want my first task to try and settle a group of 12 adolescents down!’. This is perhaps because of the atmosphere I wanted to create in sessions; to show it as something fun and interactive, rather than forcing them to sit down and learn about MST. Throughout the session the head coach was able to pick up on those not being attentive, which in hindsight helped the session run smoothly. This demonstration of buy-in from the head coach I believe significantly impacted the willingness of the squad to engage with the session (Cisneros Sánchez, 2020). From previous experience, the rowers engaged well with the sessions held by other level 6 and level 7 placement students working at the club, and this was similarly the case throughout my programme.

One major consideration that emerged was to tailor the teaching experience athletes with a variety of knowledge of some of the basic constructs of sport psychology and mental skills. For example, several of the rowers were doing P.E. GCSEs, and were thus able to describe some of the psychosocial aspects of sport psychology. This has implications for practitioners working with adolescent athletes who may have exposure to sport psychology prior to their programmes or interventions. Others mentioned ‘mind in sport’, ‘how the mind is in sport’, and ‘sport and the mind’, but seemed to be able to express how sport psychology was used within sport. This being said, I noticed this was likely a result of the *question* asked by me, rather than the *answers* given by the group. This was a key point in my development that demonstrated how asking good questions is imperative in teaching.

An ‘ice breaker’ exercise was given to the rowers at our first session, and required the group to split into pairs and introduce the other to myself and the group. I was shocked at the fact that it seemed many of the individuals did not know their partner very well and gave generic ‘likes’ or ‘dislikes’ of the person. This was surprising, as I had assumed, given the

rowers had trained and competed together for a number of years, that they had developed deeper relationships. Nonetheless, this task enabled me to pick up on some individuals who perhaps weren't well integrated with the group, and to observe the interactions of the rowers to get a sense of the dynamics of the group. For example, rowers sat at the back did not seem to integrate well or aimed to avoid contributing to the session's discussion. In this first session, I gave out the mental skills questionnaire I used, which took a bit of time. This was because I decided to read out all the questions, as I had no idea of knowing if any of the rowers had particular issues reading or difficulties comprehending the questions. Therefore, I added a bit of explanation to each question and some individuals asked for further clarification about some of the questions. I felt like because of this, I believe I had created an atmosphere where some of the individuals weren't scared to ask if they were unsure. An 'in action' reflection occurred during the session as I had attempted to go around and integrate myself with the groups to generate discussion, build rapport, and ask meaningful questions. However, I questioned myself as it may have come across that I had just selected a couple of individuals during the tasks to see how they were getting on, thus coming across to the rowers that there was a purposeful reason for this choice, i.e. 'he doesn't think I'm doing well', or 'why is he asking her and not me? Is my opinion not worth asking?'. Another main takeaway from the session was that the large glass panel that looks into the room is a source of distraction for the rowers, they would often look out to see who was entering or leaving the club house. Noticing some of the group even led me to look out the room as an initial reaction! If this continues I will acknowledge in the group and explain that distractions will occur and to recognise them and aim to maintain their focus.

Prior to a session, the head coach and I discussed the material to be covered in session. He reminded me that because of their ages, the rowers would perhaps not understand some of the concepts. However, I reassured him I had already amended any jargon (i.e.

cognitive/somatic anxiety) and the slides included I believed were suitable for the age range. In the session, the first presenting issues the next session were that there was around 8 more rowers in this session than last. Therefore, space was an issue as well as limited tables for rowers for group work that I had intended to use for learning tasks due to maintenance. The first part of the session I presented the learning objectives and asked the group to break into groups to discuss what stress 'looks' like in relation to the mind/body/behaviours (cognitive, somatic behavioural). After five minutes for discussion in their groups, they presented back their discussion points. The rowers had somewhat good awareness of potential actions and behaviours but not necessarily the particular somatic aspects of stress response. Following the feedback, I explained that although anxiety in relation to performance can be used, within the session, anxiety would be used as a chronic debilitating condition (i.e. clinically diagnosable). Therefore, stress would be used as the feelings during or prior to a particular event. This was aimed to reduce any confusion or mix up of terms and allow for more effective learning. I felt this was important to highlight because even within the academic literature, there is still confusion around the stress-anxiety concepts and the use of the terms within literature. Furthermore, I wanted to include material within my sessions that covered some wellbeing themes. Despite being a MST, I integrated some holistic well-being material, including information like websites and phone numbers and an invitation to approach me at any time concerning any of the mental health themes we covered. It gave me satisfaction that I was able to integrate some holistic psychological information that may be useful for the squad and this was clear to me a reflection on my values as a practitioner.

The session went well in relation to the feedback gained from talking points. There were several key points that resulted in reflections. Some rowers became distracted by each other, for example, drawing on PostIts whilst I was talking. This point triggered several thoughts and feelings. First I was not concerned that they had drifted off and began

interacting with other rowers. After all, it was a voluntary classroom setting and I hadn't expected everyone to engage to an optimal level. And although I made it as interactive as possible, it was likely some would not respond well to this environment. My main concerns were that other rowers would notice this and then model their own behaviours in a similar manner. However, on the whole, I felt the engagement with the session was excellent. This reflection prompted me to try and challenge myself on how I would attempt to address individuals who were distracting to the group.

For one session, time management prompted me to reflect. The material to be covered in my session plan concerned coping mechanisms for unhelpful thoughts. However, it seemed that some rowers wanted tangible ways to 'do' what it was they were being taught. Therefore I included several processes to deal with an unhelpful thought, "*Identify, challenge, evidence, replace*". However, because of the limited time, I felt I went through this too quickly and I that perhaps this did not land as well as it could have. This may have been a result of planning issues to include this particular part of my session because of the feedback I was given by the rowers. I aimed to include this once again with the mid-section review session.

I felt the session had some good aspects to both the content involved and my delivery of the subjects. However on reflection, there were several ways I could have improved it. The squad in attendance was not as many as previous sessions. This enabled three distinct groups of 5 rowers that provided an acceptable amount for group discussions. I felt that this would result in fewer distractions and that it was less likely the squad would have their attention diverted to the session. I believe the content I delivered was appropriate for the ages and the minimum use of jargon helped understanding. However, given the feedback, I could have spent longer on certain 'theory driven' parts of the content. I believe this could have been improved by including examples of how functional equivalence works. There has never been internet access to the club, meaning I was limited to accessing certain multimedia (e.g.

YouTube). However, I will endeavour to find a way to include videos or extracts to illuminate some of the more difficult to understand parts of the mental skills programme.

I felt that my interactive tasks that included case studies for rowers to develop imagery programmes using PETTLEP were challenging for the rowers. This may have been a result of how I asked the questions. I intended to make the case study's broad so the rowers could take some creative licence and use their imagination to develop a plan for the rower in the case study. However, perhaps more direct prescription of what is expected in the case study tasks may be required next time. This could have also been due to a basic lack of understanding of the underlying concepts that then led to the squad being ill equipped to apply them appropriately with their current understanding (Bloom et al., 1956).

I was able to pick up on a few things that worked well and some that did not during the relaxation. I was able to spot individuals who were tired, resting on their water bottles and closing their eyes. Despite this clearly indicating boredom or exhaustion from training, I was able to spot it by attending to the class, asking everyone to stand up and move 2 chairs to their left. As the athletes attended after training and had also spent a whole day at school, I was not surprised that some of them would be tired in a small warm room. I did however check in regularly on the individual throughout the rest of the session and following this, she seemed more awake and engaged with the session. I felt more confident to address some of the rowers' moments of inattentiveness that I seemed to lack in the previous sessions. This might be a result of getting to know the rowers over the course of the programme. Secondly, I felt that the interactive nature of the session around the breathing techniques worked well. The athletes were able to try out numerous types of breathing techniques as a form of relaxation and gave further applied examples of MST techniques to use in training and competition. The athletes asked plenty of questions without prompting which I was happy with as this pointed towards a more collaborative classroom atmosphere. Again, this type of

teaching style seemed to resonate well me more and is perhaps in line with my values, making me a more authentic practitioner (Harberl & Peterson, 2006).

During one session, I reflected on that I could have been more clear on the benefits and to lean into the enthusiasm of some of the subject area. Given the restrictions of the classroom setting, I spotted my tone and the ways in which I was delivering to be unenthusiastic. However, I was able to spot that ‘in the moment’ and attempted immediately inject some tonality and movement whilst presenting and working with the group. I felt the self-talk part of the session could have been improved. The athletes were tasked with writing five negative statements, to hand them to the other group, who were then to reframe the statements. I explained that the statements were not merely to be positive, they must be believable, realistic, and frame the negative in a way that was more constructive to their specific situation. Overall, the athletes were manage to complete the task effectively, although I noticed that perhaps athletes tended to ‘flip the statements’. For example, ‘I am bad at rowing’ to ‘I am good at rowing’ and did not necessarily provide full thought out reframing statements. Following this, examples included, ‘I can’t do it’ to ‘Nike says, ‘just do it’’ by one individual. This did add some humour to the session, however, this example given by one of the rowers made me second guess I had the athletes full engagement surrounding this subject area.

My sessions had been cut short prior to the final session due to COVID-19. I was frustrated and angry that this had happened so close to finishing. I was also filled with concern that I would not be able to fulfil my portfolio submission and being in my final year, that I would be left up river without a paddle. However, I believed that the work I had conducted with these rowers had been worthwhile and had impact on both myself as a teacher and on the rowers in developing their mental skills. Despite being a classroom focused programme, I believe that the rowers experienced sport psychology in a fun and interactive

way and enabled them to use the experiences they had to ‘open the door’ to sport psychology services in the future, or to increase the opportunity for ‘buy in’ for the next practitioner to enter the club.

In comparison to my experience of Teaching and Training within the rowing case study, my series of ‘guest lectures’ throughout the professional doctorate have given me a variety of experiences that have both been positive and negative and caused me to reflect and develop as a practitioner. My first experience was to level-6 students at Liverpool John Moores University, where I was invited by the module leader to discuss my experiences of being on placement to students at Warrington Rowing Club and other applied work I had done. I was filled with anxiety throughout the lead up to this lecture for a number of reasons. First, delivering workshops to students was frightening. I believe this is because having been a student, many if not all have had bad experiences of lectures that were of subpar quality. I wanted to make the session the best I could to prevent me from being viewed as a poor practitioner. This was also the case of delivering the lecture in tandem with other practitioners and in front of a senior staff member. I was afraid that I would be viewed as boring, uninspiring, a fraud, and that I would be ‘caught out’ or made a fool of by my peers, superiors, and students (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013). This caused me to over-prepare and ruminate over the session plan, spending longer on my presentation planning than perhaps was necessary. This is something that was a common occurrence for me throughout my professional doctorate and still struggle with to this day. However, despite my anxiety, the senior lecturer had given me a detailed list of points she would like covered, including a real ‘case study’ example for the students to discuss in their groups. This helped a lot with my preparation for the session, and is something I would consider using if the time comes when I invite a neophyte practitioner to a session of my own. On reflection, I could see that the lecturer was aiding the students’ learning in their applied module by offering ‘real life’

accounts of practitioners work by inviting guest lecturers and working through case studies. The application of theory into practice is something I have noticed and experienced much more in Liverpool John Moores University compared to other universities. This seems beneficial for students who aim to develop applied experience in preparation for life after education.

Following this session, one of the level 6 students approached me after the session and said, “what you said really resonated with me”. We talked for a good ten minutes following the session about the subject area of injury, and following this agreed to set up an intake session, which would eventually become *consultancy case study 3*. Looking back, I remember that to have such an impact on a student that they would consider working with me as a practitioner was a huge boost of confidence surrounding my development. I also considered the notion that being within an academic setting as a practitioner might give more credibility as a sport psychologist and an opportunity to develop relationships with stakeholders. Given that practitioners are seen as ‘experts’ in their craft, it would not be surprising that employers may recognise those working in an academic setting as well as the applied field as more knowledgeable due to their professional status. Therefore, it could be that academia could act as a platform for practitioners to be noticed and to ‘get their name out there’.

My second applied case study lecture was when I was invited by a Professional Doctorate colleague to present to the level 6 ‘Sport and Exercise Psychology in Professional Practice’ module at Bolton University. Again, my reflections on this session paralleled the first lecture delivered to the placement students at Liverpool John Moores, being characterised by over-preparation and ruminations concerning ‘how I was seen’ as a practitioner. The session was delivered, and I asked my colleague to conduct some formal

peer observation as part of my Associate Fellow for Advance HE accreditation, which I was undertaking alongside my Professional Doctorate. The feedback was as follows:

<b>Teaching Observation Criteria</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Met</b>	<b>Not* fully met</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>Preparation:</b> Was the tutor prepared for the session?	<i>Presentation well prepared. Turned up early to session</i>	✓		
<b>Structure and Organisation:</b> How did the tutor interact with the students? Was he/she supportive? Did he/she enable learning?	<i>Great flow to the presentation</i>	✓		
<b>Interaction:</b> How did the tutor interact with the students? Was he/she supportive? Did he/she enable learning?	<i>Answered all questions asked. Encouraged engagement. Praised correct answers.</i>	✓		<i>Choice to sit down at times???</i> <i>Turned back on students???</i>
Was the time management of the session appropriate to the needs of the group?	<i>Appropriate</i>	✓		
<b>Level:</b> Was the support provided at the appropriate level?	<i>Very supportive of student learning</i>	✓		
<b>Learning Resources:</b> Did the tutor make appropriate use of handouts or other study materials?	<i>N/A for type of session delivered</i>	✓		
<b>Audibility:</b> Could the tutor be clearly heard?	<i>Loud and good pace of delivery style</i>	✓		

<b>Enthusiasm &amp; Interest:</b> Did the tutor attempt to present the materials in an appropriate and interesting way?	<i>Clear passion and interest for the topic was apparent throughout.</i>	✓		
<b>Overall comments and recommendations</b>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Slow and thoughtful delivery style which engaged the audience from the very beginning of the session.</li> <li>-Delivered potentially complex material/theory/content in a way that was understandable and relevant to the target audience.</li> <li>-Great use of videos/pictures/metaphors to ensure students understand the point being made</li> <li>-Consider using more questions at the start to set the scene/expectations for them engaging from the start and throughout the presentation</li> <li>-Use of group tasks and challenging questions to engage the audience and check understanding</li> <li>-Probed understanding by asking further questions based on students' responses</li> <li>-Consider changing the pace of the delivery style throughout the lecture so students don't become complacent (think about the energy in the room!)</li> <li>-Built effective relationships in a very short time!!</li> </ul>				

Overall, I was extremely happy with how my case study lecture went. I believe a large part of why I felt it was so successful was that my colleague ensured I entered an environment of learning that encouraged students to develop their own understanding and knowledge of experiences and psychological phenomena. From his feedback comment *“Consider using more questions at the start to set the scene/expectations for them engaging from the start and throughout the presentation”*, I could see that his approach to teaching was highly ‘student-centred’ (Wright, 2011), encouraging learners as active participants in the session. Since this first case study, my colleague and I have discussed at great length his approach to teaching, how his philosophy of practice informs his teaching philosophy and vice versa. Furthermore, we have become research colleagues, great friends, and he has become a mentor for me during the later stages of my professional doctorate. This has been extremely useful with gaining ‘field knowledge’, sharing ideas and being ad hoc *critical*

*friends* both in the applied and academic field (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2001). For example, he discussed his adaptation of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2010) to inform his teaching environment. This is something that I aim to develop going forward in my academic career and any lecturing roles I fulfil. This overwhelmingly positive experience has certainly made me consider applying for opportunities as a lecturer if and when they become available.

The world of academia and teaching was not something I had originally wanted to do at the end of my MSc, hence enrolling in the professional doctorate scheme rather than applying for a PhD role. However, in experiencing difficulty throughout the doctorate programme to secure a full time position (or salary), it seems that taking up an academic teaching role is something that I should not shy away from. In my experiences delivering within an academic setting, it has been mostly enjoyable, causing me to reconsider a role that I had previously cast aside. However, I still believe there is much to learn within an academic setting, the skills required, research expectations, amongst other responsibilities such as supervising students undergoing major projects and dissertations. My initial reaction is that I would not possess all the skills that would constitute an effective academic. However, I have taken steps towards upskilling and becoming more comfortable in such a role. For example, I have agreed to take up the co-delivery of an exercise psychology module at a university in 2021. Despite my anxiety, I aim to develop these skills and put myself in uncomfortable situations to progress my career (Tod, 2007). I believe this will give me invaluable experience to develop my academic CV and will be useful if I do decide to transition into a lecturing or teaching role within academia.

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**Appendix 1:** *Example slides from Bolton University case study lecture and LJMU placement lecture*





# Journey of Psychological Approach and Philosophy

- Psychology is a 'soft science'. E.g. "You can't measure something as unique as a person's psychology".
- A person has their own **unique** sets of backgrounds, experiences, personality, and social context.
- Client's **unique experiences** and building a theory around them.
- It is the '**working alliance**' that provides the catalyst for the client and practitioner to discover solutions or reinterpret their reality in a way that solves the client's difficulty.
- Dependant on;
  - Warm and caring relationship
  - Genuine interest and care
  - Asking insightful (but not leading) questions
  - Sufficient time to capture client's story

## Issues with the journey metaphor?

- Sometimes clients want you to have the map, the compass *and* the helicopter.
- The destination sometimes is uninteresting and it was more about the journey.
- Maps don't account for bandits, animals, landslides – sometimes you have to deviate (sometimes the client wants to and they end up at another destination).

## Perfectionism within ACT framework

- Perfectionism is linked with **rumination and avoidance** and is tied firmly with **self-acceptance**.
- Perfectionism is characterised by the rigid setting of unrealistic **high personal standards** and by **doubts** about one's performance, concerns over making mistakes, and harsh self-scrutiny.
- Thoughts as truth (fusion),
  - noticing perfectionism. Disrupting the degree of conviction that those thoughts are helpful, useful.

Applied experience

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

e-Racing Team



## Level 6 Placement Case Study Exercise

Michaela is a 19-year-old rower, currently training at regional level. She has rowed for 7 years and has competed at national events throughout her career. A good rapport and working relationship with Michaela had been established. Michaela is highly competitive and typical signs of perfectionism are apparent.

She has been affected by injuries at integral moments in her career that have hindered her ability to achieve medals and work towards national selection. She regularly contracts tonsillitis, which sets her back in her training for weeks, causing frustration. Several months into the consultancy the coach shared that Michaela is under investigation for Exercise-induced laryngeal obstruction (EILO), also known as vocal-chord dysfunction (VCD), and persistently faints during exercise and competitions.

Michaela had been referred to specialists including neurology specialists that have recommended she undergo CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) and that the fainting was due to Michaela's ability to cope with stress and is now on the waiting list.

- As a practitioner, what are some of the considerations we should have when working with perfectionistic athletes?
- Identify some of the barriers you may face as a practitioner working with a regularly injured athlete. How might this be different to a non-injured athlete?
- Would the role change for the practitioner?

### **Case study 1 Level 6 Exercise**

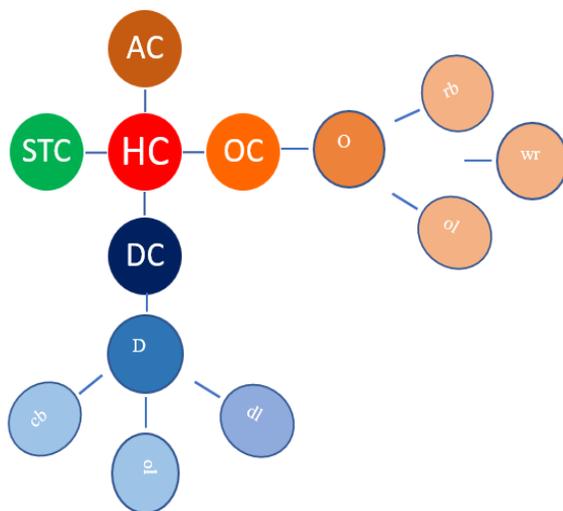
During lockdown, a team manager approaches you to deliver support for their amateur squad. The manager is highly receptive to Sport Psychology, as they have previous experience learning the benefits of Sport Psychology through their coaching degree and from literature. They explain that they are unsure of the COVID return to sport guidelines due to the level of competition, but it is looking likely that this years competitive season will be scrubbed, with the intention to return to limited practice soon within the next few months, and competitive season to start next Summer. The athletes all have day jobs, and the club is relatively successful; placing middle of the premier division table. Most of the coaches are volunteers and have limited coaching badges, but are highly experienced, with many years of previously playing the sport and as part of the coaching staff.

#### **Task:**

- In your group, first decide on a sport of your choice, ideally a team sport.
- How would you approach this case study as a Sport Psychologist? Who would you work with, and why?
- Give examples of work that you could do with the client(s). Provide a rationale for your answer.

## Case study 1 – American Football example

From the needs of the client and the given circumstances (COVID-19), it was deemed appropriate that the majority of work be done from a coach/organisational level. After discussion with the coach, gaining an understanding of his knowledge of Sport Psychology areas he and the coaches wished to develop, a ‘coach development’ plan was put in place. All done remotely through Zoom.



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*This figure aims to demonstrate the large variety of coaches and levels of coaches to positional groups within an American Football team. It is arguably one of the most varied sports in relation to breadth of skills, knowledge, and therefore; required coaching expertise.*

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*Figure showing the basic American Football team structure.*

This included sessions surrounding topics such as;

- **Reflection.** How to utilize reflection appropriately as a development tool. Getting more from ‘field knowledge’.
- **Communication.** Getting the appropriate messages across to players and enhancing communication skills to streamline practice and competition.
- **Stress and Emotions.** How stress and emotions impact coaches, with an educational session on how this affects performance in players also.
- **Burnout and injury.** The psychological impact of injury in contact sports and concussion/return to play. Identifying signs of burnout and dealing with burnout as dual career coaches.
- **Shameema Yousef** – Guest speaker facilitating sociocultural conversations surrounding BLM, Race, and Racism within sport.

## **Systematic Review**

### **Work-Life Balance in Sport Professionals: A Meta Study**

The concept of work-life balance (WLB) has become a popular concept of investigation within organisational psychology, human resources, and quality of life literature. A review of WLB literature by Sirgy and Lee (2018) suggest two dimensions that are key in the understanding the conceptualisation of WLB. First, the engagement with multiple roles in work and non-work life. Specifically, engaging with multiple roles pertains to attentive engagement, equal time and involvement, balanced satisfaction, and a balance in time, involvement, and satisfaction across all domains. Secondly, minimal conflict between these multiple roles. Minimal conflicts are characterized by the reduction or management of conflicts across multiple domain and enrichment, a process of growth, without conflict. Work-life conflict (WLC) is argued to arise when the demands of one role (i.e. work) and the demands of another (i.e. non-work) are incompatible (Khan, 1964). Incompatibility to attend to each domain as demands increase may result in ‘spill-over’, where one’s work demands may impede on another (Khan, 1964). This concept has been argued to be bidirectional, with the ability for both domains to carry over into the other (Greenhaus & Buttell, 1985).

Within a work setting, research has demonstrated that WLB can have a significant impact on an individual’s performance (Greenhaus et al., 2003), wellbeing (Allen et al., 2000; Bell et al., 2012), leaving intentions (Boamah & Laschinger, 2015), absenteeism (Kumari, 2012), and can lower commitment levels to their roles (Kossek & Ozeki, 1999). In their investigation of WLB across multiple cultures, Haar et al. (2014) found that individuals who perceived themselves as having an effective WLB had greater job and life satisfaction and were less likely to be at risk of anxiety. With this in mind, the ability to manage one’s

multiple roles has implications at individual and organisational levels for performance and wellbeing.

In sport, Arnold et al. (2017) describe the ‘team behind the team’ as the professionals tasked to support athletes. These include personnel such as bio mechanists, doctors, physiologists, physiotherapists, strength and conditioning coaches, and sport psychologists. Elite sport can be a challenging domain, both for athletes and for the team that supports them. Sport professionals working within an organisation can be subject to significant organisational demands, notably a win-at-all-costs, results-driven culture (Feddersen et al., 2020) that demands total dedication to the goals of the team or organisation. This may include time demands, where professionals work long and non-traditional hours and have extensive travel schedules, which present difficulties for sport professionals to delegate what little time they have to other aspects of their lives. For example, a physiotherapist or strength and conditioning coach may be required to provide their services to an athlete or team for multiple months of the year as part of international fixtures, leaving their families behind at home.

Some studies have suggested that poor WLB can affect satisfaction with life (e.g. Haar et al., 2014; Keyes 2002). The high-pressure environment of working in elite sport subjects the sport professional to emotional and physical demands that can lead to sub-clinical and clinical disorders, such as burnout (Raedeke et al., 2000). The inability to manage one’s multiple life domains, while working in an sport environment that is results driven and has associated high work demands, might lead to languishing or poor mental health in sport professionals. Further, the emotionally draining nature of working within a professional environment may lead to interpersonal conflict or leave the sport professional with little to no emotional or cognitive resources to attend to their friends, family, and loved ones.

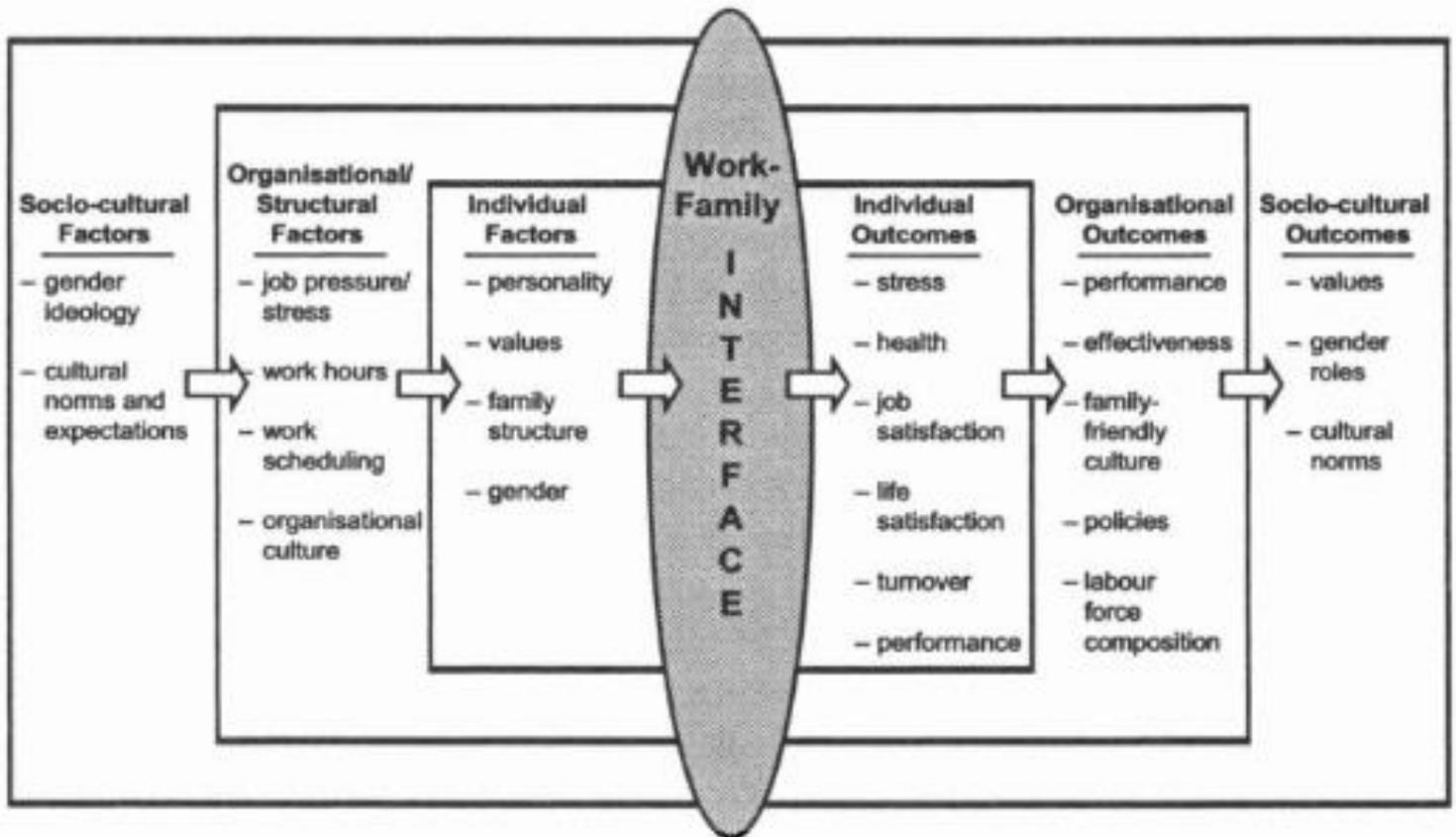
In noticing the long working hours and demands of sport, Dixon and Bruening (2005) introduced a multilevel model of work–family conflict that integrates theories of rational policy theory (Allison, 1971) and scarcity theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). Recognising that sport professionals had difficulties managing their WLB, and given that the sport arena is a unique and multifaceted environment, the authors aimed to present a sport-specific framework to further inform WLB literature. The authors argue that WLB is a subjective, dynamic phenomenon, where WLB is directly and indirectly impacted at three distinct levels. These are: (1) sociocultural, (2) organizational/structural, and (3) individual (See figure 1). The model presents individual attitudes and behaviours that may inform or shape the organisational climate or policy via a ‘bottom-up’ process. Conversely, the model also recognises that higher-level organizational factors shape and constrain lower level individual behaviours, understanding one does not live in a vacuum, and that socio-cultural and organisational factors have the ability to influence an individual’s perception and understanding of work–family conflict.

Following the conception of the model, a significant body of research has emerged that has adopted the framework to explore sport professionals’ experiences of WLB. This has included individuals’ navigating their profession as a parent (e.g. Eason et al., 2014; Graham & Dixon, 2017), turnover and retention of employees (e.g. Goodman et al., 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2013), and strategies to manage an effective WLB (Bruening & Dixon, 2007b; Mazerolle et al., 2011). Further, in light of the demands typical of professional sport, recommendations from applied literature highlight the necessity for ‘self-care’ practices among sport practitioners, such as managing an effective work-life balance (Kerai et al., 2019; Neil & Cropley, 2018, Mokha et al., 2012; Quartiroli, 2018). Self-care in professional practice can ensure optimal service delivery through self-awareness and good decision making that can promote safe and ethical practice (Neil et al., 2016). It is therefore imperative

for practitioners working in a professional environment to reflect and examine on their own WLB to promote wellbeing that contributes towards optimal service delivery and professional practice.

**Figure 1**

Dixon and Bruening's (2005) multilevel integrated theory of Work Family Conflict in sport.



As WLB has become a popular concept within sport research within the last twenty years, synthesizing the current literature of WLB could aid in benchmarking the current conceptualisation of WLB and methodological trends within the literature. In addition, synthesizing the literature in a way that appraises and critiques the model can further inform organisations, stakeholders, and practitioners to maintain and enhance their own WLB practices. Adopting a meta-study approach that examines qualitative literature may shed light

on how sport professionals manage their work and life domains and how WLC may impact at both an individual and organisational level. Such findings might better inform organisational policy and provide practical implications for ensuring best professional practice within a sport setting.

### **Method**

A meta-study was adopted as the methodological approach to the current study. A meta-study involves the analysis of the theory, methods, and findings of qualitative research and their synthesis to reveal new knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon (Patterson et al., 2001). A meta-study goes beyond the aggregation of study findings by utilizing a systematic approach to collecting and evaluating research design, methodologies, and qualitative data. Therefore, a meta-study was appropriate as the aims were to bring together the current WLB research to achieve a level of understanding and interpretation of the research as it exists, rather than a reduction of the data. We adopted Patterson et al's (2001) approach to meta-study, utilizing a six-step approach. This was achieved by (1) identifying research objectives and theoretical lens, (2) identification and assessment of existing studies, (3) categorizing data based on methodology, sample, publication year, and other established criteria, (4) analysis of methodology and findings, (5) examination of theory in primary studies and their implications for the underpinning theoretical model, and (6) a critical synthesis of methodological directions, current ideas, and implications for future studies and practitioner implications. The main questions that guided the meta-study were: (a) What is the extent of the literature that investigates sport professionals' WLB? (b) What were the experiences of sport professionals' WLB? (c) To what extent did the conceptualisation and accounts of WLB in the studies support or contradict Dixon and Bruening's (2005) WLC model?

Patterson et al. (2001) outlines two stages to conducting the meta-method procedure: (a) the initial appraisal of primary research studies and their design and methodology, and (b) an overall appraisal of the themes within the primary research studies included in the meta-study. We critically appraised the methodological aspects of primary research in the following areas; data collection, sample size, professional role, years of experience, gender and age of participants, competitive level, sport, and country of the primary research. This allowed the identification of themes and patterns within the literature that could be used to appraise literature gaps and avenues for potential future research within the literature.

## **Electronic Search**

### ***Electronic Databases***

We searched for relevant articles using PsychInfo, SportDiscus, Web of Science, OpenGrey, and Science Direct databases and used EndNote (v20; Philadelphia) to file the identified papers. We utilized the SPIDER tool (see appendix; Cooke et al., 2012) for the purposes of searching for relevant articles. The SPIDER tool was designed to develop effective search strategies of qualitative and mix-methods research. It consists of the following: (S) Sample, (PI) Phenomenon of Interest, (D) Design, (E) Evaluation, and (R) Research type. There was no limit of search parameters in relation to publication date. Initial searches were conducted in September 2019. A secondary search was conducted in February 2020 during the write-up stages by the primary author to identify any new, relevant research had been published since the initial search.

### ***Inclusion and exclusion criteria***

The inclusion criteria was set to gain a broad spectrum of literature concerning the phenomena in question. With this in mind, the studies were to be: (a) in English, (b) participants that was deemed as a sporting professional, (c) qualitative data that speaks to the

research question, (d) a competitive level of sport that demonstrates ‘professionalism’ and is competitive in nature (e.g. high school, upwards). Mixed-method studies that included qualitative data (such as questionnaires with open-ended questions) were included if findings based on qualitative data could be separated and examined independently (Tamminen & Holt, 2010). The exclusion criteria was set to anything that did not meet the inclusion criteria, and included examples such as; athletes, recreational sport, quantitative research studies.

### **Study Selection**

A total of 7,173 papers were identified from the initial keyword searches (see appendix A1). A flow diagram of the search and retrieval strategies are presented in a flow diagram (see appendix A2; PRISMA, Moher et al., 2009). 14 papers were identified via ‘pearl growing’, where the primary author identified potential research papers through a primary paper. This technique is argued to be useful in identifying relevant research that is scattered across multiple databases. After all papers were gathered, they were subject to title screening. After title screening, 6,981 papers were rejected. Following title screening, remaining papers were subject to abstract screening where 133 papers were rejected. A total of 72 papers were assessed at a full text level for inclusion, of which 34 were rejected with reasons stated in the PRISMA diagram. A total of 38 papers were included in this meta-study for synthesis concerning sporting professionals’ WLB.

### **Data Extraction and Management**

Data extraction commenced after the full-text review of the identified articles and hard copies were obtained. Each article was read numerous times by the primary author to ensure familiarity with the findings. Data were then extracted onto a custom-made data extraction form, which was then copied directly into an excel spreadsheet. This allowed the research team to record significant and relevant aspects of each individual study (e.g.,

samples characteristics, data analysis), and to ensure accuracy and consistency throughout the review process. Data from the data extraction were entered into the corresponding columns as the analysis progressed through each of the studies (e.g., participant gender, type of sport).

## **Critical Appraisal**

The meta-study was carried out by the primary author, who was a professional doctorate sport and exercise psychology student at Liverpool John Moores University. For the purposes of transparency, the primary author was a single, white male, with no children. A ‘critical friend’ was adopted in the form of a senior lecturer employed at the University who had extensive experience in conducting systematic reviews and qualitative research.

The present meta-study is aligned with epistemological constructivism. Epistemological constructivism posits that, “the knower and the known are interdependent and fused together in such a way that the “findings” are the creation of the process of interaction between the two” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 376). Concerning the quality of the studies, there continues to be debate surrounding the ability to measure or assess qualitative research (Sparkes, 1998; Dixon-Woods et al., 2004; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Therefore, the present meta-study does not adopt a ‘check-list’ to assess the research quality, as such methods have been argued to be problematic (Holt & Tamminen, 2010; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Based on this, studies were not excluded based on quality. Rather, criterion of trustworthiness are acknowledged and critiqued within the meta-method and meta-theory section, akin to previous meta-studies within sport literature (e.g. Ronkainen et al., 2016).

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Meta-Method***

The first stage of data analysis was the identification of key study characteristics that were identified via the data extraction process. Characteristics that were relevant to the

research question and commonly occurring methodological and analysis procedures were collated in a spreadsheet and these are presented in Table 1.

### ***Meta-Theory***

Next, the meta-theory analysis was conducted alongside the meta-method analysis in parallel. Meta-theory analysis synthesized and presented the theoretical frameworks, paradigms, and models that have arisen in the research. By doing so, practitioners and researchers are able to understand more fully how dominant theories have been adopted, created and developed in a body of research, in this case in literature concerning sport professional's WLB. Using Patterson et al. (2001) as a guide, we initially conducted a thorough read of the primary research to identify the ways in which the theory has shaped and influenced the research, taking note of the theoretical propositions and emergent theory. Next, the theoretical underpinnings were noted in a table, if possible, as some studies did not state their theoretical underpinnings.

Following recommendations from Patterson et al. (2001) and Tod (2019), a theoretical model was used to underpin the meta-studies synthesis. As conducting systematic reviews can be an arduous process, particularly if the phenomena in question is a broad concept, adopting a theoretical model can aid in the synthesis of the identified research (Tod, 2019). Dixon and Bruening's (2005) work-family conflict (WFC) model is an integrated theoretical model and presents a multi-level conceptualisation of the antecedents and impacts of WFC within a sport specific environment. The model acted as a foundation to critically evaluate the use of theories, paradigms, and models that drive WLB research in sport professionals. By evaluating this model against the current research, this in turn may impact, inform (or contradict) Dixon and Bruening's (2005) WFC model. Lastly, we adopted the

model to present the meta-data analysis and offering suggestions for consideration in the development and future use of the model.

### ***Meta-Results***

Following the Meta-Theory analysis, a meta-results analysis was conducted via the use of an abductive thematic analysis against Dixon and Bruening's (2005) model. The analytical procedure involved concurrent deductive and inductive thematic analysis to move between the theoretical model and research findings. Sparkes and Smith (2014) refer to this combination of deduction and induction as abductive reasoning. The researchers followed such a procedure because the aims of this meta-study were to understand sport professionals' experiences of WLB (inductive) and to understand Dixon and Bruening's (2005) framework as a sport specific model (deductive).

The abductive process was achieved by comparing and contrasting the primary research, both identifying commonalities in the presented data and critiquing findings against other primary research findings and against the model (Patterson et al., 2001). Tamminen and Holt (2010) define 'data' as the analysis and subsequent interpretation made by the author(s) in the primary research and is subject to the meta-study's researcher's interpretation (Patterson et al., 2001). Therefore, the primary author deemed the data suitable on the basis that the primary research provided meaningful, impactful insights surrounding sport professionals' WLB.

### ***Meta-Synthesis***

Finally, a meta-synthesis was conducted to provide a final product in the form of a model that represented the meta-method, meta-theory, and meta-results using Dixon and Bruening's (2005) model as a reference. The meta-synthesis was refined continuously over

the course of the research in an iterative process between conducting the analyses, discussions with the primary author's critical friend and the final synthesis.

**Table 1*****Meta-Method Table***

Author	Theory	Population	Data Collection	Level	Participant # (f, m)	Mean age (SD)	Mean Experience (SD)	Data Analysis	Country
Bolorizadeh et al. (2013)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model and Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964)	Coaches	Face-to-face and telephone interviews	Professional	35 (35, 0)	31.6 (range 26-45)	6.46 (range 2-10)	Thematic Analysis	Iran
Bruening & Dixon (2007b)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model and Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964)	Coaches	Online Focus Group	Div I	41(41,0)	35.4 (mode = 34)	Head coach 6.46 (range 2-10)	Thematic Analysis	USA
Dixon & Bruening (2007)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model and Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964)	Coaches	Online Focus Group	Div I	41 (41, 0)	35.4 (mode = 34)	Head coach 6.46 (range 2-10)	Thematic Analysis	USA
Eason et al. (2014)	Mentoring Research (Levinson, 1978)	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (QuestionPro)	Div I	27 (27,0)	35 (9)	range 3-35	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Eason et al. (2017)	Role Congruency Theory (Eagly & Diekman, 2005)	Athletic Trainers	Semi-structured telephone interviews	Div I, II, III	16 (6, 10)	32 (6)	32 (6)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Filion et al. (2019)	Bennett-Levvy's (2006) Three Systems Model of Development	Sport Psychology consultants	Semi -structured telephone interviews	Various	8 (5, 3)	37.38 (6.86)	10.5 (6.74)	Thematic Analysis	Canada
Goodman et al. (2010)	Voluntary turnover (Price, 2001)	Athletic Trainers	Semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews	Div I	23 (23, 0)	36.30 (7.61)	13.96 (7.58)	Grounded theory	USA
Goodman et al. (2017)	Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960)	Athletic Trainers	Semi-structured telephone interviews	Div I, II, III	16(6, 10)	32 (6)	10(6)	General Inductive Analysis	USA

Goodman et al. (2015)	WLB literature	Head Athletic Trainers	Online interview (SurveyMonkey)	Div I	18 (5, 13)	44 (8)	22 (7)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Graham and Dixon (2017)	Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960) & Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964)	Coaches	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews	High school	24(0, 24)	46 (Range 35-64)	22 (range 5-42)	Inductive thematic analysis	USA
Greenhill et al., (2009)	Organisational theory of homologous reproduction (Kanter, 1977)	Coaches and administrators	Semi-Structured interviews	Professional	6 (2, 4)	Not provided	19.3 (coaches)	Thematic content analysis	Australia
Joncheray et al. (2019)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model and Goffman's (1959) Social Interaction Theory	Coaches	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews	Professional	41 (8, 33)	Not provided	Not provided	Thematic Analysis	France
Kerai et al. (2018)	Meta-Model of Stress (Fletcher et al., 2006)	Physiotherapists	Semi-structured face-to-face, telephone interviews, & focus groups	Elite	10 (5, 5)	Not provided	range 3-25	Thematic Analysis	UK
Mazerolle & Eason (2015)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model and Hakim's (2000) preference theory	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (QuestionPro)	Div I	27 (27,0)	34	11	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle & Eason (2016a)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Semi-structured interviews (phone)	Div I Collegiate	6 (3, 3)	31 (2)	9 (3)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle & Eason (2016b)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (Phenomenological) (Closed Questions?)	Div II, III, NAIA	22 (22, 0)	40 (8)	15.5 (7.5)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle & Eason (2018)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model	Athletic Trainers	Semi-structured telephone interviews	Div I, II, III, NAIA	30 (16, 14)	median 30.5 (IQR= 7.75)	median 7 (IQR=5)	Phenomenological analysis	USA

Mazerolle & Goodman (2013)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (SurveyMonkey)	Div I	8 (3, 5)	38 (7)	16(6)	Grounded theory	USA
Mazerolle & Hunter (2017)	Meyer's (1993) Professional Commitment Model	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (Qualtrics)	Professional	27 (0, 27)	34 (8)	21 (8)	Inductive analysis	USA
Mazerolle & Hunter (2018)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Online interview	Professional	27 (0, 27)	34 (8)	21 (8)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2011)	Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960)	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (HuskyCT) and follow up interviews	Div I Collegiate	28 (15, 13)	35 (9)	12 (8)	Inductive content analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2008a)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Sem-structured face-to-face interviews	Div I	12(6,6)	Not provided	range 0-25	Thematic Analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2008b)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Semi-Structured interviews	Div I	12 (6,6)	Not provided	range 0-25	Thematic Analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2015a)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Semi-structured telephone interviews	Div I	8 (8,0)	45 (12)	5 (1.5)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2017a)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Face-to-face structured interviews	Div I, II, III	21 (10, 11)	33 (9)	Not provided	Phenomenological design	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2017b)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Online Semi-Structured interviews	Div I, II, III	24 (9, 15)	Range (25-64)	Range (3-41)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2015b)	Meyer's (1993) Professional Commitment Model	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (QuestionPro)	Div I, II, III	30 (11,19)	Not provided	10 (8)	Inductive content analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2015c)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Online interview (QuestionPro)	Div I Collegiate	27 (27,0)	35 (9)	Not provided	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2016)	WLB literature	Athletic Trainers	Structured telephone interviews	Div I	14 (3, 11)	54 (6)	Minimum 15	General Inductive Analysis	USA

Mazerolle et al. (2015c)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model	Head Athletic Trainers	Online interviews (SurveyMonkey)	Div I	18 (5, 13)	44 (8)	22 (7)	General Inductive Analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2015d)	Hopkins' (2005) Social Identity Theory	Athletic Trainers	Open ended telephone interview	Div II, III, NAIA	13 (8,5)	38 (13)	13.1 (11.4)	Inductive content analysis	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2013)	Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960)	Athletic Trainers	Semi-Structured face-to-face, telephone, and word document interview	Div I	8 (0, 8)	45 (11)	15 (11)	Grounded theory	USA
Mazerolle et al. (2017)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model	Athletic Trainers	Structured face-to-face interview	Collegiate (NCAA)	12 (12, 0)	Not provided	Not provided	Inductive and deductive content analysis	USA
Olusoga & Kentta (2017)	Burnout (Smith, 1986)	Coaches	Face-to-face interview (open-ended questioning)	Professional	2 (0, 2)	Not provided	Not provided	Thematic narrative analysis	Sweden
Pitney et al. (2011)	Dixon & Bruening's (2005) model	Athletic Trainers	Phone interviews	High school	14 (8,6)	Range = 28-52	Range = 3-30	Inductive content analysis	USA
Sage (1987)	Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1973)	Coaches	Observation, conversation, and formal interviews	High school	50	Not provided	Not provided	Field Study	Not provided
Szedlak et al. (2020)	Constructivist coaching development (Ciampolini et al., 2019)	Strength and Conditioning	Written letters, composite letters, and focus groups	Professional (Olympic)	13 (3, 10)	30 (3.9)	9.6 (3.2)	Thematic Analysis	USA, Finland, France, UK

*Note: IQR = Interquartile Range; NCAA = National Collegiate Athletic Association; NAIA = National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics*

## Results

### Meta-Method

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the key study characteristics of qualitative research that has focused on WLB in sporting professionals. Across the 37 studies, the majority were conducted in the USA alone (n=29). Other studies were carried out in the UK, France, and Sweden. Other countries outside of Europe and the USA were Australia (n=1) and Canada (n=1). Only one study (Szedlak et al., 2020) conducted their study across multiple countries (USA, Finland, France, & UK). The literature represented within the collected studies paints a picture of a predominantly 'Western' account of sporting professionals' experiences of WLB. Other studies outside of sport that have attempted to investigate the cultural differences of Eastern versus Western WLB, argue that WLB research has been predominantly at the forefront of Western-based research (Chandra, 2012). Given the individualism-collectivism differences between Western and Eastern culture, how WLB is conceptualised and addressed at an individual and organisational level may differ. Such differences are argued to be a consequence of an individual's appraisal mechanisms (Haar et al., 2014) that can subsequently alter one's perception and experience of WLB. With this in mind, the findings within this meta-study may not be representative of cultures outside of Western society. Dixon and Bruening's (2005) model posits that socio-cultural factors (e.g. cultural norms and expectations, gender ideology) influence the work-family interface via bottom-up and top-down processes. Future research should be cognizant of, and aim to develop, the WLB literature from a variety of collectivist-individualistic cultures.

The main professionals investigated were Athletic Trainers (n=26). This included research of the experiences of athletic trainers (AT) themselves, and others examining the role of head athletic trainers' (e.g. Goodman et al., 2015; Mazerolle et al., 2015c). The

remainder of the population sample included coaches (present and ex-coaches) (n=8), sport psychology consultants (n=1), physiotherapists (n=1), and strength and conditioning coaches (n=1).

Research into the WLB experiences of AT's has become significantly popular since 2008, and is likely a result of Pitney's (2008) investigation of AT's quality of life working within the professional field. It was argued that AT's were subject to organizational stressors and in some cases, low administrative support. This sparked the first initial studies investigating WLB antecedents (Mazerolle et al., 2008a) and it's relation to job satisfaction and life satisfaction (Mazerolle et al., 2008b). With over a decade of WLB research dedicated to understanding WLB within an AT setting, the research as it stands provides several notable discussion points. As shown in Table 1, the research has been dominated by a select group of researchers along with a limited scope of methodological approaches to understanding WLB within an AT context. The predominant method chosen for data collection was semi-structured interviews. 15 of the studies included online 'asynchronous' interviews and 29 of the studies included either face-to-face interviews, or phone call interviews, or both. All mixed method approaches utilized similar data collection procedures.

Future research should aim to diversify the methodologies adopted within the current body of literature. Our findings and recommendations echo that of several researchers, who call for an expansion on traditional positivistic or realist inquiries that are dominant within qualitative research (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). As it stands, the research has been somewhat saturated with data collection procedures typified by semi-structured 'one off' interviewing techniques. Such methods can lead to data that is subject to recall bias and deterioration or limited to an individual's experience at a singular period of time. Given that studies have identified that time of year impacts on sport professionals' WLB (e.g. Bruening & Dixon, 2007b; Goodman et al., 2015; Mazerolle & Eason, 2016) many of the studies might fail in

capturing the broad and temporal experience of sport professionals' WLB; whereby circumstances, organisational demands, and attitudes may develop or change over time.

Concerning data analysis, the majority of studies opted to use some form of inductive thematic analysis (n=30). Two studies adopted a phenomenological approach to their data analysis. However, similar to other criticisms of interpretative-phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), it was difficult to discern how these phenomenological investigations could be separated from that of a general inductive thematic analysis.

Finally, when synthesizing the trustworthiness and credibility of the studies, the majority of the papers utilized multiple-analyst triangulation, peer review, and member checking. Four of the studies (Bolorizadeh et al., 2013; Graham & Dixon, 2017; Mazerolle et al., 2013; Sage, 1987) did not provide any information on how they assessed credibility and rigour. Studies that adopted a non-foundational or relativist approach to their study utilized credibility criteria, including Tracy's (2010) 'Big Ten' and credibility criteria provided by Sparkes and Smith (2014) (Kerai et al., 2018; Olusoga & Kentta, 2017; Szedlak et al., 2020). While methods that aim to provide credibility through triangulation, peer review, and member checking have their place within qualitative research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) such methods have been criticized by previous researchers (e.g. Bloor, 1983; McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). The popularisation methods to ensure validity are argued to be a result of post-positivist qualitative methodologies derived from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory. Only five of the papers within this meta-study acknowledged the study's philosophical assumptions. This made it difficult to identify whether the majority of the research was rooted in a positivist, post-positivist, constructivist, or any other philosophical underpinning. As a result, we are unable to identify any philosophical trends within the study of sport professionals' WLB.

We recommend that future researchers should endeavour to outline their study's philosophical underpinning (e.g. post-positivist, constructivist), thus enhancing the transparency and rigour of the research, for example, providing more detail of the member checking procedures and further details of alterations or amendments that have impacted on the study's data (Brit et al., 2016).

In total, 716 participants were recruited to further understand sport professionals experiences of WLB. Three studies employed studies over multiple papers (e.g. two-part, three-part studies) with the same participants. The participant numbers represent these multiple studies as one larger study. 359 of the participants were female and 307 were male, with 50 being unidentified within one paper (Sage, 1987). Eight studies in total sought to investigate female perspectives of WLB, six of which concerned ATs and two studies investigating coaches. More than half the studies (n=25) investigated sport professionals working within a collegiate setting (NCAA levels I, II, III & NAIA). This is likely due to the fact that AT's in the USA are predominantly hired within collegiate settings. Three studies were at high school level. Eight studies investigated sporting professionals within an elite, or Olympic setting. One study gathered experiences of sport psychology consultants who were working at a variety of levels and settings.

To conclude the meta-method synthesis, the present body of literature investigating sport professionals' WLB have consistently adopted very similar methods and analysis procedures within the research. Research investigating sporting professionals' WLB has likely become idiosyncratic in nature and subject to traditional positivist or post-positivist methodologies. Future research should aim to expand the literature as it stands in adopting different methodologies to not only diversify the body of research, but to also test Dixon and Bruening's (2005) model against the methods used.

## Meta-Theory

Meta-theory analysis was adopted to establish the theoretical underpinnings of the research identified within this meta-study. We identified 11 studies that explicitly stated or discussed their theoretical underpinning or theoretical model as a basis for their research. One study utilized grounded theory as a theoretical underpinning. A large portion of the studies were either a-theoretical in nature, utilising past WLB literature as a basis or rationale for their study, referenced previous WLB literature in their discussion, or had difficulty discerning if the theory referenced underpinned the research in question. Moreover, many of these studies adopted the same research protocol as previous studies (e.g. Mazerolle et al., 2015a).

The main theoretical models cited in the literature were Dixon and Bruening's (2005) integrated theory of WFC in Sport (n=11), Role theory (Khan, 1964) (n=4) and Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960) (n=5). Other theories included: Role Congruency Theory (Eagly & Diekmann, 2005) (n=1), Goffman's (1959) Social Interaction Theory (n=1), Hakim's (2000) Preference Theory (n=1), Meyer's (1993) Professional Commitment Model (n=2), Social Identity Theory (Hopkins, 2005) (n=1), Organisational Theory of Homologous Reproduction (Kanter, 1977) (n=1), Bennett-Levy's (2006) three-systems model of therapist skills (n=1), and the Meta-Model of Stress (Fletcher et al., 2006) (n=1). Twelve studies either did not provide a theoretical rationale, the theory was not explicit within the text, or used previous WLB research as their research justification or within the introduction or discussion sections.

Dixon and Bruening's (2005) model is underpinned by individual, social, and socio-cultural theory (Allison, 1971; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003) and represents an integrated, multilevel framework to examine bottom-up and top-down processes that may moderate or directly the impact individual behaviours. Given the multi-faceted nature of WLB, concepts

such as role strain, spill over, role conflict, stress, enrichment, and burnout are often examined alongside WLB, for example, Olusoga & Kentta's (2017) narrative examination of burnout in coaches. While Olusoga and Kentta (2017) did not directly investigate WLB specifically, data revealed coaches' inability to deal effectively with their roles and their roles outside of the sport, resulting in WLB issues. Similarly, Kerrai (2018) explored stressors experiences by physiotherapists within an elite setting. They utilized Fletcher et al's (2006) Meta-Model of Stress, and through their analysis, identified that participants' high workload and working hours resulted in a lack of time for friends, family, and oneself.

In summary, a variety of theories underpinned the current research, likely due to the research in question or phenomena being investigated. Future research should therefore be cognizant of how these theories may interconnect or have impacts on WLB. Dixon and Bruening (2005) integrate several theories and present a multi-level framework that can help to explain WLB at a socio-cultural, organisational, and individual level. Future research should seek to understand how the integration of the specific theories of rational policy (Allison, 1971) and scarcity theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003) remain relevant, or less relevant, over different demographics (e.g. professions, trainees vs experienced practitioners, single parents) and cultures (Eastern versus Western).

### **Meta-Findings**

The meta-findings are presented using Dixon and Bruening's (2006) model. These are: (a) Socio-cultural Factors, (b) Organisational/Structural Factors, (c) Individual Factors, (d) Individual Outcomes, (e) Organisational Outcomes, and (f) Socio-cultural Outcomes.

### ***Sociocultural factors***

**Gender Ideology/Cultural Norms and Expectations.** At a sociocultural level, several studies identified addressed gender ideology. In particular, professionals' who were

female carried the expectation to be the primary caregiver, or mother, or that motherhood expectations had a direct impact on their WLB. Coaches from Iraq discussed the impact cultural ideology had on their WLB. Results showed that female coaches were expected to be the primary caregivers as a sole role. They also raised the issue of reduced salaries as impacting on their WLB (Bolorizadeh et al., 2013). The ‘breadwinner’ ideology, where males were expected to be the main source of income (Graham & Dixon, 2017) impacted on sporting professionals’ WLB, both in a positive and negative fashion (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2017). One study highlighted that fathers as primary caregivers shifted the gender ideology and thus, facilitated a healthy WLB (Mazerolle et al., 2015a).

Sociocultural norms may have resulted in internal pressures to assume the primary caregiver position, assuming the ‘traditional’ role of mother as primary caregiver (Mazerolle & Eason, 2015). This role was also identified as a barrier to progressing one’s position, where sport professionals associated higher positions with greater workload, or more of the sport professionals’ time was required that would ultimately lead to a poor WLB (Greenhill et al., 2009; Mazerolle et al., 2015a).

### ***Organisational/Structural Factors***

**Workload.** A number of studies highlighted that the sporting professionals were spread thin as a result of their workload and multiple roles (Goodman et al., 2015; Mazerolle et al., 2015d; Olusoga & Kentta, 2017). This contributed to the inability to effectively manage sport professionals’ WLB as they were required to attend to multiple tasks and responsibilities, and multiple teams. Furthermore, some studies highlighted that sporting professionals felt the need to be ‘on call’, or experienced the need be available for ‘face time’ with athletes. The expectation to be ready to attend to the athletes’ requirements 24/7 resulted in the inability to make room for other priorities (Eason et al., 2017).

**Time Commitments.** Work hours, the number of days a week sport professionals worked, and travel requirements were regularly noted as factors that impacted WLB. Many sport professionals cited working over 40-75 hours per week (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016; Mazerolle & Hunter, 2017; Mazerolle et al. 2015d), some 85-90 hours including travel (Mazerolle et al., 2011), and some mentioned continuing to work when they arrived home (e.g. Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Working hours in a sport environment were typically cited as being ‘non-traditional’, where sport professionals would regularly work 10-14 hour daily shifts (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016).

Similar to work hours, the amount of days worked usually included weekends as well as weekdays, equating to six or seven days work-a-week (Mazerolle et al., 2015d). This also included holidays (Joncheray et al., 2019), where one would typically be with family. Accounts of ATs who had left the profession discussed their experiences of working with little to no time off (Mazerolle et al., 2017), which contributed to their retirement from the profession. Finally, the days required to travel to away games and competitions for sporting professionals was identified as a factor that contributed to WLB, with many months of the year away from their homes and families (Graham & Dixon, 2017). The descriptions of work hours, days, and travel commitments contributed to the typical mindset that such commitments are just part of working within an elite sport environment.

**Time of Year.** The time of year was noted as a factor that could influence one’s WLB. Despite the world of sport being a 24/7, some studies identified that being in-season, or particular times of the year that were busier than others, or require more travel (Bruening & Dixon, 2007b; Mazerolle & Eason, 2016a; 2016b). Therefore, more of the sport professional’s resources were dedicated to their work domain at certain times of the year, resulting in less flexibility in their schedules that then affected their non-work domains negatively (Goodman et al., 2015).

**Year-Round Work.** Some sport professionals identified that the time of year may predict more or less workload. The requirement of some sport professionals to work consistently over the period of the year contribute towards their WLB. Some sporting professionals acknowledged that while they were in-season, other aspects of their lives (e.g. family time) were put on hold until the off-season. The off-season was a time that allowed sport professionals to attend to their lives outside sport, make plans with family, and where their shifts at work were more representative of a typical 9-5 job (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016). However, from the literature it seems that sporting professionals have become increasingly subjected to work that extends all year round (Mazerolle et al., 2015d). In some cases, the sport professionals required an ‘off season’ of their own that could potentially counteract the imbalance within the competitive season (Mazerolle et al., 2017). The off-season therefore might not necessarily provide much needed downtime for sport professionals. Rather, they may be required to shift their focus and efforts towards the next season.

**Work Scheduling/Autonomy.** Work scheduling, and in particular autonomy, was identified across several studies, indicating that a lack of autonomy in one’s work schedule contributed to high workloads and subsequently, sport professionals’ inability to manage their WLB. It seems from the literature that individuals working within a high performance sport setting are subject to last minute changes in their schedules, are required to be reactive in nature, and are at the mercy of their superiors (Goodman et al., 2015; Mazerolle et al., 2011, Mazerolle et al., 2008a). Participants expressed that they would find formal organizational policies that mandated specific notice periods of when they would be required (e.g. from coaches), which contributed toward the ability to manage their work and life domains effectively (Mazerolle et al., 2017a).

Autonomy can be promoted by supervisors (Mazerolle & Eason, 2018), and further roles of supervisors impacting on sport professionals’ WLB are discussed further in this

meta-study under organisational factors. One study (Bruening & Dixon, 2007) was able to identify that autonomy in one's work schedule provided both benefits and negatives, noting that their profession as a coach allowed them flexibility in their work schedule. However, autonomy was a double-edged sword, where at times there was no flexibility in their schedule, such as working on Christmas Day (Mazerolle et al., 2008a).

**Policies.** A number of studies noted that some participants were not aware of, or underutilized the organizational policies (e.g. childcare services) that were available to them (Mazerolle et al., 2017a). Regardless, such options were not plausible to a number of sport professionals within certain studies. For example, the use of maternity and paternity leave that allowed for a number of weeks off was not something participants were willing to do, particularly for coaches (Mazerolle et al., 2017a). The non- utilisation was described as a 'conscious' decision to be discrete about any difficulties they were facing due to the cut-throat nature of the sporting world. Doing so ran the risk of losing their job if they are seen to be underperforming or not coping with the pressures of the role (Graham & Dixon, 2017). Given that communication with administrators and stakeholders was noted as integral in managing one's WLB, it seems that some professionals are not willing to communicate certain difficulties if they feel that their jobs might be in jeopardy.

**Family Friendly Culture.** Family Friendly Culture was originally proposed as an Organisational Outcome factor within Dixon and Bruening's (2005) model. However, from the literature gathered within this meta-study, we place it as a 'bottom-up' factor under 'organisational/structural factors'. Having a family friendly culture was perceived as beneficial for sport professionals, particularly those with families. This also incorporates 'workplace integration', whereby individuals are able to bring in their families and children into the workplace. It concerns sport professionals as being supported in bringing their children or families into the work environment and having colleagues look after their children

when necessary (Mazerolle et al., 2011; Mazerolle & Eason, 2016b; Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). Other studies mention spouses helping out on the side-lines, or taking families with them abroad (Mazerolle et al., 2016). This blending of multiple domains may provide the sport professionals with the ability to attend to each more effectively. Further, this blending of both personal and professional domains challenges the assumption that an individuals' spheres of life are separate, and that 'spill over' is a consequence of one domain impeding on another.

**Organizational Support.** Several studies discuss the impact that staff within the organisation have on sport professionals' WLB. Some studies acknowledge the benefits of having administrative staff that are knowledgeable, and possess an understanding attitude of the work-life commitments of their staff (Mazerolle et al., 2011; Graham & Dixon, 2017). Some manager/supervisor roles encouraged staff to take time off, particularly during the off-season (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016), promoted cooperation and collegiality of staff members in achieving tasks (both work and non-work related), acted as role models, and provided general advice and support for their staff in managing their own WLB (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016). Some studies expressed that time off during off-season periods to attend to their lives outside work was identified as a priority by their superiors (Eason et al., 2017). However, given that some sport professionals expressed that their work is 'year-round', it may be possible that this depends on the position one holds or the supervisor/line manager one reports to. Sport professionals noted that they were provided with social support from supervisors or used them as 'sounding boards' (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). This served to alleviate work pressures that may subsequently spill over into the home domain. Support and role modelling behaviours from supervisory figures, such as supervisors and line managers was regularly cited as a facilitator of sport professionals' WLB (Eason et al., 2014; Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). On the other hand, Mazerolle et al's (2015) study includes participants citing

a lack of support, or poor interpersonal relationships with supervisors and administration that was shown to subsequently impact their WLB. It is unclear if other sport professionals, such as coaches, also utilize support in a similar way given that they are usually oversee all other sport professionals.

**Collegiality.** Within the context of the present meta-study's findings, Collegiality refers to the support of other staff members, specifically intra-disciplinary colleagues, , with general work related matters that can ultimately promote and assist a more effective WLB. This includes covering other members of staff in their work to allow them to have time away from the environment to decompress (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016a; 2018), and stepping in when necessarily to aid in other staff members' workload (Mazerolle & Hunter, 2018). Assistant coaches may help out head coaches if required (Bruening & Dixon, 2007b) and having a team dynamic of "having each other's backs" highlighted the impact other members of staff can have on promoting and assisting one's WLB. Finally, one participant mentioned that an interdisciplinary staff member (team sport psychologist) provided a source of stress relief that assisted in managing their WLB.

### ***Individual Factors***

**High Performance Mindset.** A number of studies illuminated the subjective attitudes of sports professionals' that ultimately impacted on their WLB. This included giving 100% at all times to their work, and for some their personal lives (Dixon & Bruening, 2007) and devoting oneself fully towards the love of the profession (Graham & Dixon, 2017). Sometimes this passion and commitment to succeed came at the cost of their family commitment (Joncheray et al., 2019). This was framed by Joncheray et al. (2019) as an 'uncompromising loyalty' to one's profession.

**Boundaries.** Sports professionals created professional boundaries to manage their WLB, including knowing when to say ‘no’. Some of the professionals’ experiences argued that ‘no’ was not an option (Mazerolle et al., 2017), or that one must *learn* to say ‘no’ (Pitney et al., 2011). Many professionals expressed that one should know *when* they were able to say no, for example, the times available for phone calls (Goodman et al., 2015). Furthermore, some studies highlighted the importance of communicating these boundaries to other professionals or staff they were working with (Mazerolle et al., 2011).

Physical boundaries were established by some sport professionals to separate the work domain from the personal domain (Graham & Dixon, 2017; Mazerolle & Hunter, 2018). While integration with the work place was identified as a benefit to professionals’ WLB, the importance of separating work from family was a benefit to some, emphasising that they had a ‘life’ outside work (Mazerolle & Goodman, 2013). However, physical separation may be difficult to navigate; given the work hours, work load, and travel requirements. Lastly, the effort to compartmentalise the work from home life seemed to occur exclusively for the benefit of the life domain, rather than the work domain. This could further cement the argument that work is likely to impede on one’s non-work domain, rather than *visa versa*.

**Stress Relief Activities.** Sport professionals noted that they tried to engage in a range of activities that had stress reducing qualities. This seemed to benefit the professional’s WLB, as they were able to engage in activities and hobbies that they enjoyed, thus making time for themselves to engage in their lives outside the work domain. This included exercising (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Mazerolle et al., 2011; Mazerolle & Eason, 2016; Mazerolle & Goodman, 2013), domestic cleaning, alcohol, golf, shopping, spending time with children, getting a good sleep, and making friends outside the workplace (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Mazerolle & Goodman, 2013). This being said, sports professionals work

schedules, hours, and demands are high. A lack of energy or resources that have been spent during work hours may deny the possibility of attending to these activities (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016).

**Organisation and Time Management.** Sports professionals must be diligent in their organisational skills, such as prioritisation of workload and time management (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016) that can allow them to navigate their multiple domains. Other studies highlight coaches attempting to impose strict work time limits (Joncheray et al., 2019), so they can attend to their families more effectively. Fillion et al. (2018) found that some sport psychology consultants used time management techniques, such as calendars and journaling, and made use of spare time on airplanes to plan their schedules. Sport professionals also appreciate the use of being creative in their scheduling and understanding busy periods during the year so they make the most of the time in each domain, (Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Mazerolle & Eason, 2016; Mazerolle & Goodman, 2013). Being strategic with one's time schedule could also facilitate the previous factor of stress relief activities, allowing sports professionals the opportunity to engage with significant others and taking time to exercise, for example (Mazerolle et al., 2017b).

**Values.** The impact of one's values in the balance of work and life outside of work seems to play a significant role alongside understanding one's priorities. Discussions from participants within the current literature demonstrates a 'family first' attitude (Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). This meant that attending to family matters were at times, non-negotiable, requiring the individual to miss sport events or competitions. Some sport professionals mentioned that bereavement, child sickness, or weddings were instances where they could leave work (Graham & Dixon, 2017), however some mentioned these events were often missed (Mazerolle et al. 2008a). From the literature it is clear that work continues to impede on one's life domain, resulting in conflict and dilemmas for sport professionals (Dixon &

Bruening, 2007; Goodman et al., 2015; Graham & Dixon, 2017) where at times, a decision is made to attend to family or work through a process of weighing up the 'costs'. Szedlak et al. (2020) developed a composite letter that strength and conditioning coaches wrote to their younger selves. Creating and maintaining a work-life balance was a value they had identified as being integral in their professional development, as well as understanding and attending to their personal and professional values.

Sport professionals' engaged in prioritizing their own wellbeing by assigning time in the day for themselves and for others (Mazerolle et al., 2011). Some utilized prioritisation of their daily tasks (in order of importance) to reduce the risk of tasks impeding on their lives outside of work (Mazerolle et al., 2011). Others discussed the importance of being surrounded by a team with similar values (e.g. family orientated, team orientated) (Mazerolle et al., 2011; Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). Thus, values may exist at the organisational and at an individual level and can be facilitated by supervisory figures, such as promoting autonomy within the team (Mazerolle & Eason, 2018). The benefits of role modelling by supervisors and impact of the organisational culture has been noted previously in this meta-study. However, prioritizing one's professional services and 'sacrificing' oneself was also argued as a prerequisite of success, meaning sport professionals were not able to effectively engage in their lives outside sport because of their commitment (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). We recommend that further research should aim to investigate how organisational values are demonstrated and lived through staff, supervisory and administrative teams, and how this might impact on WLB.

**Family Structure.** A large portion of the literature examined the experiences of sport professionals with children (e.g. Eason et al., 2014; Mazerolle & Eason, 2015; Graham & Dixon, 2017). Some studies suggested that being single without children allowed sport professionals to engage more in their role (Mazerolle et al., 2015a), which may lead to future

WLB issues down the line. Being single also meant that professionals had sole responsibility for household or domestic responsibilities (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016). On the other hand, a single AT included in Mazerolle et al's (2008a) mixed-method study, suggested that WLB would not be an issue until they found a partner or had children. Little of the literature examined participants that were both single and had children. Future research might aim to investigate if single parents find it difficult to balance their work and personal domains compared to those who are married and have access to support from their spouses.

**Social Support.** Having social support and understanding from one's family and friends allowed sport professionals' to better manage their WLB. This acted as an emotional, but also practical resource for sport professionals. This included spouses providing child care support (e.g. Bruening & Dixon 2017; Pitney et al., 2011), such as taking their children to day care or having family members attend to emergencies when sport professionals were unable to. It was rare that the husband was the stay-at-home parent (Mazerolle et al., 2015). Sports professionals who were not married mentioned the importance of having support from roommates as sounding boards (Mazerolle et al., 2015d) and having friends who understood the commitments of their profession (Pitney et al., 2011).

**Gender.** Similar to family status, it is not clear whether gender plays a significant role in influencing one's WLB alone. Rather, it may interact with other variables to influence the balance between one's work and personal domain. From the literature, it seems that conflicts between the sport professionals' domains occur, regardless of demographic variables. However, the findings from the literature suggest that intentions to start a family as a female might increase the intention to leave their current position (Mazerolle et al., 2015a; Mazerolle & Eason, 2015), given their current workloads and experiences of managing their WLB so far in their lives.

## ***Individual Outcomes***

**Stress.** Stress experienced as a consequence of the WLB interface was difficult to synthesize throughout the literature due to more direct individual consequences being presented within the data. Our findings may aid understanding of particular psychological or behavioural consequences of WLB at an individual level.

The high-pressure environment and emotions encountered in practice or competition were found to spill over into the home domain (e.g. Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham & Dixon, 2017). From the synthesis, we were able to identify two notable outcomes impacting on sports professionals' at an individual level. First, the inability to switch off from ones' work impacted on one's personal domains because of high workload and work stress (Graham & Dixon, 2017; Sage 1987). To combat this, some sport professionals made an effort to ensure they had switched off when they returned home (Mazerolle & Eason, 2016). Secondly, a large majority shared that they felt guilty because of their work impeding on their personal lives. For instance, not being able to attend to their spouses' or being around their children as they grew up (Bolorizadeh et al., 2013; Mazerolle & Eason, 2016, 2016b; Sage, 1987). Others were wishing they could "...leave the office when I come home" (Dixon & Bruening, 2007).

**Turnover.** Many studies examined sport professionals' experiences where they intended to leave their positions or had already left their previous roles, giving account of the inability to manage their work and life domains. Sport professionals expressed that because of their work, they had 'missed out' on seeing their children grow up, impacting on their lives in a significant way (Bruening & Dixon, 2007b; Joncheray et al., 2019; Mazerolle et al., 2013). Some 'chose' to have a life (Goodman et al., 2010), intending to leave the profession (Mazerolle et al., 2015c; Mazerolle et al., 2015d), or had already left to be around their

families as a consequence of poor WLB (Eason et al., 2014; Jonchery et al., 2019; Mazerolle et al., 2017). For some sport professionals, becoming a parent was conveyed as a critical moment, where they realised that they were unable to attend to both domains. This effectively led to a transition of career (Jonchery et al., 2019), or to re-evaluate their attitudes toward their workload habits (Bruening & Dixon, 2007).

Factors such as workload, busy schedules, and travelling contributed towards sports professionals' intentions to leave, and with long work hours and little to no days off, some sport professionals saw the benefits of a traditional 9-5 job in managing their WLB (Mazerolle et al., 2015c; Mazerolle et al., 2015b; Mazerolle et al., 2017). Finally, for those without children, some sport professionals felt a career change might be more appropriate if they were to start families (Mazerolle et al., 2015c).

**Performance.** Although performance was generally considered to be affected when sport professionals experienced high workload, few studies identified how WLB affected their performance in a direct manner. Eason, Mazerolle, and Goodman (2014) included a participant who expressed that ATs who were mothers and were unable to manage their WLB risked sacrificing effective care to their athletes, and reinforced the narrative that being an AT and a mother is a zero-sum game.

**Interpersonal Outcomes.** Many sport professionals discussed their experiences of family problems due to poor WLB. Further, as a result of the inability to manage their WLB, several studies included sport professionals' accounts of divorce (Bolorizadeh et al., 2013; Jonchery et al., 2019; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Sage 1987). Some professionals were unable to meet a partner or significant other until they left the profession (Mazerolle et al., 2017), highlighting that their commitment to their work role had left them with limited resources to establish relationships outside their work.

Two studies were able to identify how life-to-work conflict impacted relationships with athletes. This included time away from the team following the birth of a child (Bruening & Dixon, 2007) and the impact elite sport workload had on physiotherapists' interactions and care of athletes (Kerai et al., 2018).

### ***Organisational Outcomes***

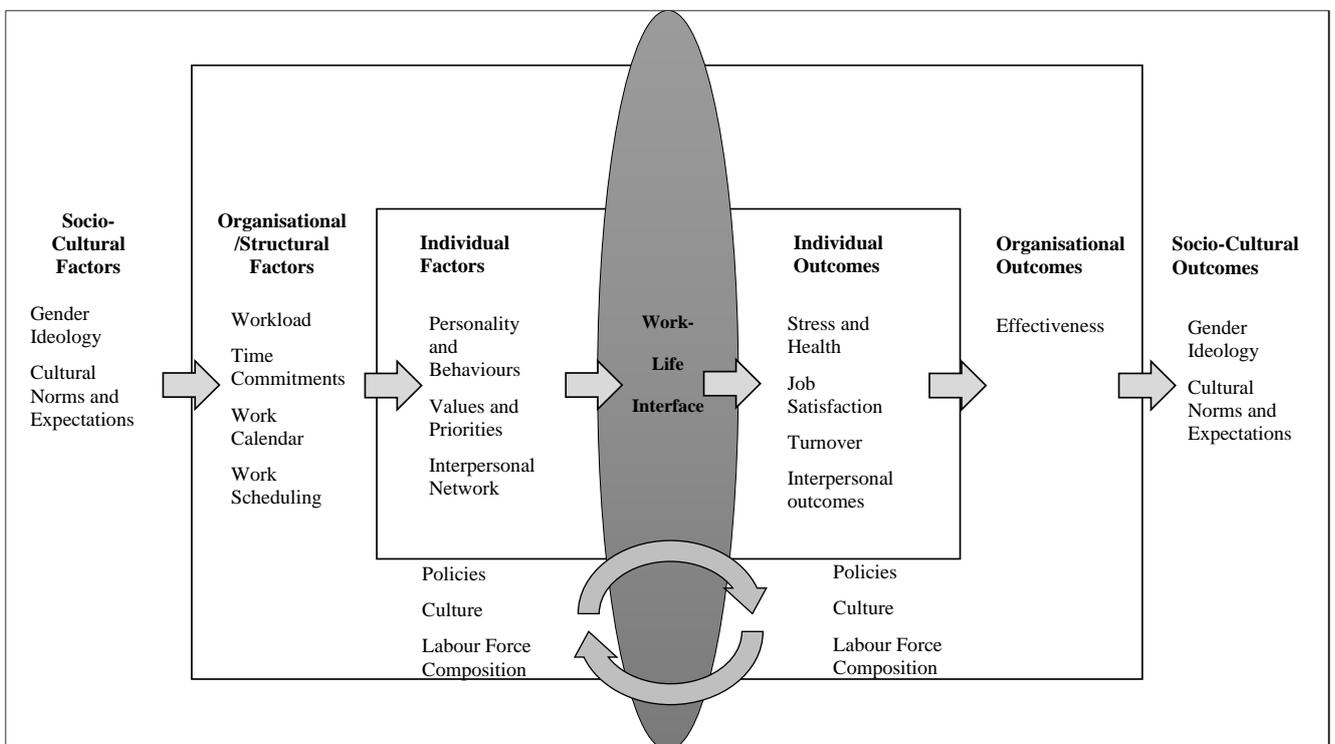
Little data within the literature synthesized investigated organisational outcomes. Bruening and Dixon (2005) outline five factors associated with organisational outcomes: performance, effectiveness, family-friendly culture, policies, and labour force composition. Factors such as 'performance' and 'effectiveness' at an organisational level might be better assessed through stakeholders and policy-makers, rather than sport professionals. An organisation's performance may be impacted by non-work domain spill over. Some coaches did express that they felt that they should be attending to the recruitment process more, but were unable to due to their family commitments (Bruening & Dixon, 2007).

### ***Family Friendly Culture & Labour Force Composition.***

A family friendly culture might work in a cyclical manner. Formal and informal policies from managerial or stakeholder positions can influence the organisational culture and work-force composition. This can either facilitate (or hinder) the sport professionals' WLB, and thus impact the ability to manage and attend to their domains in and out of a work setting. Similar to turnover, if sport professionals are unable to manage their WLB effectively and subsequently leave the profession, then the composition of the workforce might not be indicative of a family-friendly culture, as those with families may struggle to thrive in such a setting. Conversely, if culture and policies facilitate WLB, then opportunities to progress within the organisation might be achievable.

### **Meta-Synthesis**

The meta-synthesis aimed to pull together the meta-data-analysis, meta-method analysis, and meta-theory analysis processes. By engaging in a meta-synthesis of the data, methods, and theory from primary research reports, we aimed to develop on Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) model that was representative of the qualitative literature thus far. Figure 2 shown below aims to provide a novel and updated view on Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) model following the synthesis of data, methods and theory within this meta-study. The model is presented as an integrated multi-level theory that examines work-family conflict at both individual and external levels.



**Figure 2:** Revised Work-Life Interface proposed as part of the current meta-synthesis

The first proposed amendment is that a sport professional’s family is part of their larger life realm, and that based on the findings of this study the central interface is changed to “work-life interface”. On one hand, it was clear that having a family and managing both life and work domains ultimately led to WLC. However, findings also suggest that family status (being married or having children) did not necessarily impact the *amount* of conflict experienced, rather the *source* of the conflict.

While the integrated theory that underpins the model examines WLB at an individual and external perspective, the model as it stands fails to examine the factors and outcomes at a socio-cultural level. One study (Greenhill et al., 2009) did utilize feminist theory within their investigation of female coaches' career pathways. Despite finding contradictory findings to the underpinning theory, further research might utilize similar approaches to examine how feminist or socio-cultural theories might impact on WLB from an organisational and individual perspective, for example, Gendered Organisation Theory (Acker, 1990). Despite these limitations, the socio-cultural factors and outcomes are still included within the revised model, as socio-cultural examinations of WLB continue to acknowledge the roles these factors play (e.g. Herman et al., 2012; Lewis & Beauregard, 2018).

The organisational structure and outcomes are presented as cyclical in nature in the present meta-synthesis model. From the meta-synthesis, we propose that organisational factors reinforce or perpetuate particular factors within organisational outcomes, and vice versa. This subsequently impacts factors such as 'labour force composition' or 'culture'. From the meta-synthesis, those in stakeholder positions were integral in being helpful or a hindrance for sport professionals to manage WLB, particularly those with families. These may be individuals who understand the importance of WLB or parents themselves who recognise the benefits of WLB policies within the organisation. A stakeholder who is a parent, for example, might understand the requirement of WLB policies, develop and implement such policies that continue to impact on the organisational culture (e.g. family friendly culture, labour force composition). On the other hand, those who possess stakeholder roles within the organisation that do *not* implement effective WLB strategies or policies for their workforce may contribute to a continued cycle of sport professionals leaving the field or not progressing to stakeholder positions where changes can be made.

A number of novel and amended factors are presented in the model. ‘Work Calendar’ encapsulates the themes of ‘year round work’ and ‘time of year’ that emerged from the synthesis. This concept should be examined further within longitudinal studies. Dixon and Bruening (2005) propose ‘personality’ to be an individual factor that contributes towards the WLB interface. However, no personality characteristics were examined within the literature. We identified and proposed a factor, ‘Attitudes and Behaviours’, which pertains to themes within the results. This included a high performance mind-set, creating boundaries and saying “no”, engaging in stress relief activities, and maintaining a high level of organisational time management skills. Next, the use of prioritisation through one’s values emerged, and these were combined to create the ‘Values and Prioritisation’ factor that appears under individual factors that contribute to the WLB interface. ‘Family Structure’ was changed to ‘Interpersonal Networks’ and concerns both family support and social support from a variety of groups, including family, friends, and work peers. We felt this was best able to capture the beneficial impact social support had on sport professionals’ WLB from a variety of groups. ‘Stress’ as a psychological phenomenon was not widely examined within the literature; we combined ‘stress and health’ as individual outcomes given that some studies had examined burnout directly. This factor also includes ‘life satisfaction’ contained within Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) model.

Job satisfaction and life satisfaction were covered in a broad sense throughout the body of literature, with challenges associated with workload, hours, gender, job pressures. These all had an impact on sports professionals’ ability to manage their WLB and had the potential to impede on their satisfaction with their jobs and their wellbeing. However, there was difficulty discerning between sport professionals’ job satisfaction and life satisfaction within the literature. Given that work and life satisfaction are closely related (Judge, 2020), the literature did not present a clear or definitive understanding of how sport professionals’

WLB directly impacted their job and life satisfaction. One mixed-method study did aim to investigate ‘quality-of-life’ issues in ATs, comparing two service delivery models (Mazerolle et al., 2017). The study adopted qualitative methods for measuring satisfaction levels of participants. From the qualitative data, the study proposed that communication with others (coaches, other staff) was an integral component of establishing WLB and job satisfaction. However, further investigation at a qualitative level is warranted. The difficulty in measuring or identifying these concepts, as Judge (2020) notes, is that job satisfaction is a subjective and state-like phenomena. Research might rather assess an individual’s attitudes and behaviours that are more readily accessible and may be more appropriate for researchers as an indication of satisfaction levels e.g., ‘turnover’ (Judge, 2020).

## **Discussion**

The primary purpose of this study was to provide a systematic review of literature investigating Sport Professionals’ work-life balance. Specifically, this study (a) investigated the extent of literature that investigates sport professionals’ WLB within a qualitative lens, (b) provided an overview and critique of the methodology and theoretical underpinnings of the WLB literature, (c) utilized Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) multi-level model to understand and evaluate sport professionals’ experiences of WLB, and (d) critically evaluated Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) model based on the literature identified.

The present meta-study is novel in that it utilized Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) model to present the meta-findings via an abductive approach in synthesizing the literature. This also sought to further inform and develop the model. Overall, the model was found to be an effective theoretical and practical model in understanding WLB at an individual and organisational level that was applicable in investigating sport professionals. To further inform and develop the model, a meta-synthesis was performed and a novel framework adapted from

Dixon and Bruening's (2005) is presented. As much of the studies examined WLB experiences at an individual and organisational level, it is not surprising that much of the meta-findings and subsequent meta-synthesis provide insights at these levels. The lack of data pertaining to the socio-cultural levels may be a result of appropriate methodology, underpinning theory, or presentation of data, and require further investigation. The meta-synthesis presents a novel, cyclical relationship between organisational factors and outcomes. Finally, we present factors that emerged through an abductive synthesis of the findings that provided additional and complimentary factors within the framework. Overall, Dixon and Bruening's (2005) model and integrated theory provided a sound platform to examine and understand sport professionals' WLB. Other frameworks presented in previous reviews, such as Guest's (2002) review, have also tended to examine the WLB interface from an organisational and individual perspective. With this in mind, further evidence to inform and enhance the model at a socio-cultural level is required.

The findings of the present meta-study suggest that majority of WLB literature in sport is conducted within a Western setting, meaning the results may not be transferable in Eastern cultures. The current body of research has also predominantly investigated Athletic Trainers that provide primary care in the USA. Given that much of the research has been on AT's, future research should aim to evaluate the model's applicability across multiple sport professions (e.g. nutritionists, sport psychologists, assistant coaches, analysts, sport scientists, and team doctors). Despite these limitations, the large body of research investigating AT's WLB has provided a solid foundation for future researchers in broadening the participant sample.

Semi-structured interviewing was the predominant mode of data collection and data analysis primarily consisted of thematic analysis. Although thematic analysis aims to provide broad and generalizable findings, much of the literature lacked in-depth and rich description

within their results. We propose that future research should endeavour to include qualitative methods that may investigate how WLB might fluctuate over time via the use of longitudinal studies, or examine the subjective lived experience of participants' WLB through narrative analysis, for example.

Further understanding on how an individual's experience of WLB impact on organisational and socio-cultural outcomes warrants further investigation, particularly where gender or gender-roles are concerned. While this study accepts that gender ideology, cultural norms and expectations may have a significant direct and indirect impact on sport professionals' WLB, socio-cultural factors and outcomes are not readily examined within the research findings.

As this meta-study only synthesized qualitative and data within mixed-method studies, future research should also endeavour to synthesize the quantitative measures within the current body of literature, which may extend the findings presented within this meta-study. Given the lack of inconsistency with which the WLB construct is conceptualised and measured within the literature, a synthesis may help to streamline and assist future research, but should also be approached with caution (Allen et al., 2000). This being said, factors that were posited in the original model by Dixon and Bruening (2005), particularly at the individual level (i.e. personality, stress, life satisfaction), are traditionally examined using self-report measures within quantitative studies and thus outside the scope of the current meta-study.

This meta-study provides applied implications in managing sport professionals' own WLB and may inform stakeholders and organisations surrounding their own organisational policies. The findings of this study demonstrate the impact WLB has at an individual level, particularly when workload and work times are concerned. In particular, the inability to

attend to one's life outside their sport meant sport professionals had interpersonal conflicts or were unable to engage in relationships outside their sport domain. According to the socio-ecological model of mental health, an inability to satisfy interpersonal needs (such as engaging in friendships, seeing family and significant others) might lead to languishing and negative mental health (McElroy, 1988).

Literature advocating 'self-care' for sport professionals has begun to emerge due to the high stress, high workload lifestyle of sport practitioners, which stresses the importance of maintaining WLB and its pivotal role in effective practice and practitioner wellbeing (Quartioli et al., 2019). With this in mind, we propose that organisations and stakeholders should examine their current WLB policies and communicate with their employees to develop and enhance these policies. Doing so might develop wellbeing, retention, and performance. Stakeholders might seek to work alongside sport psychologists or human resource staff to develop and inform the workplace via CPD events. This might involve working with supervisors to develop their knowledge and understanding of the potential impacts work hours and workload might have on staff's personal life. A culture of 'having each other's backs' or being 'family friendly' via promoting cohesion within the disciplinary group, building trust and accountability through team building events might also assist in developing the informal WLB policies within the organisation.

The concept of WLB has become a popular topic within the world of sport. The present meta-study aimed to synthesize the current body of literature within the sport domain that investigated sport professionals' experiences of WLB. Dixon and Bruening's (2005) WFC model provided a sport-specific underpinning that utilizes a multi-level integrated theory of WLB. Through meta-results, we examined the emerging themes through an abductive thematic analysis against the model that informed a meta-synthesis. Finally, the meta-synthesis presented a critique of the model using the meta-methods, meta-theory, and

meta-findings. A model that evolved from the meta-synthesis is provided to aid in future research within the sport domain at an individual and organisational level.

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## Appendix

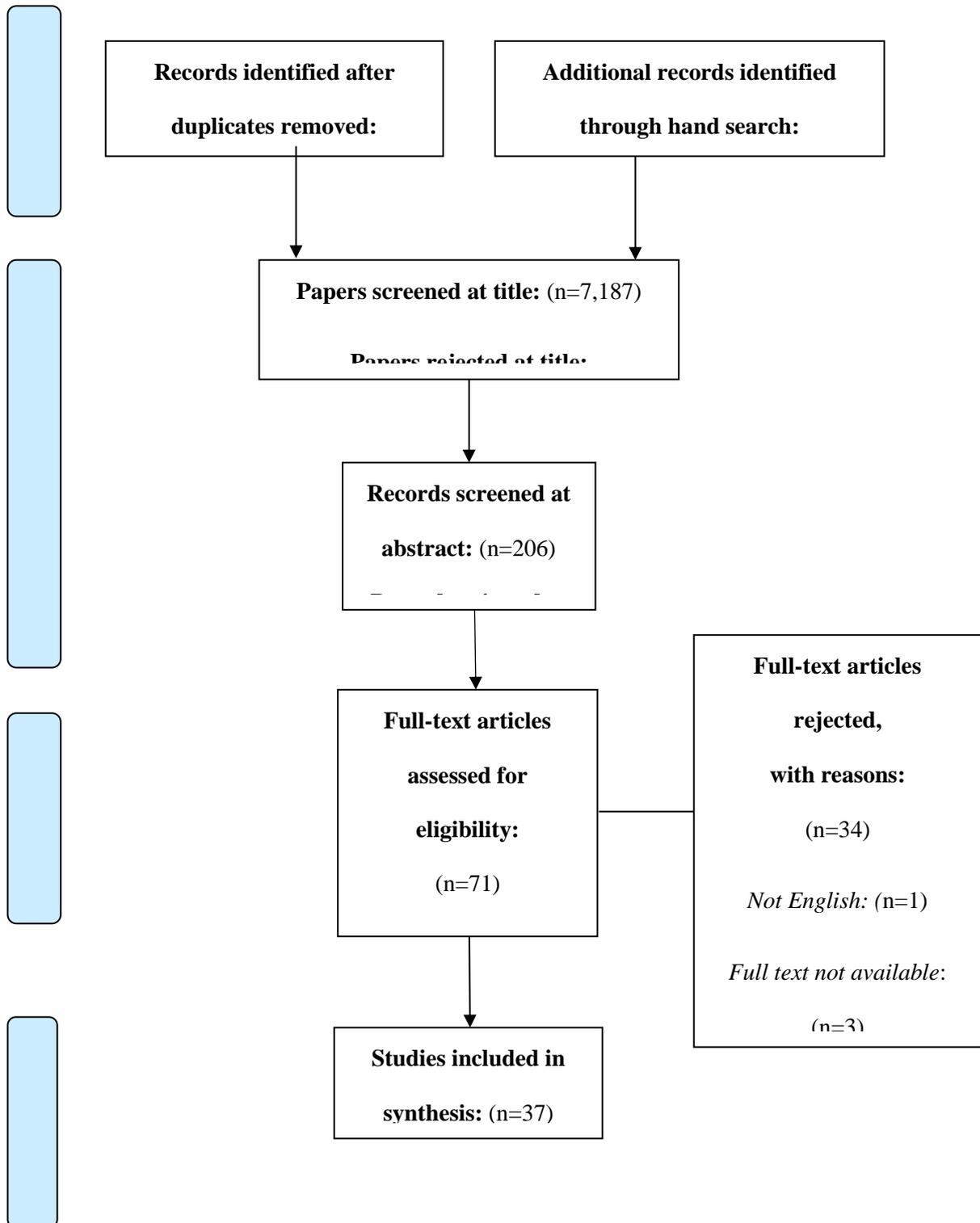
A1

**Table 1**

*SPIDER search tool and keyword search terms used*

S	<p>“Sport*” OR “sport staff” OR “organi?ation*” OR “practitioner*” OR “staff” OR “physiotherap*” OR "athletic train*" OR psycholog* OR doctor* OR coach* OR "strength and condition*" OR masseu* OR "sport scien*" OR “nutrition*” OR "performance analysis*" OR “assistant*” OR “biomechani*”.</p>
PI	<p>"role conflict" OR "role overload" OR "work life conflict" OR “life work conflict” OR "spill over" OR “work life balance” OR “role strain”</p>
D	<p>“Focus group” OR “case study” OR “field study” OR “interview*” OR “grounded theory” OR “ethnograph*” OR “action research” OR “observ*” OR “narrative*”.</p>
E	<p>“experience” OR “attitude” OR “opinion” OR “belie*” OR “perception*” OR “aware*” OR “personal view*” OR “movitat*” OR “incentive*” OR “reason*”</p>
R	<p>“qualitative” OR “mixed method”</p>

**PRISMA Diagram**



A3

Meta-results table guided by Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) framework

Socio-Cultural Factors	Organisational/Structural Factors	Individual Factors	Individual Outcomes	Organisational Outcomes	Socio-Cultural Outcomes
<p><b>Gender Ideology/Cultural Norms and Expectations</b></p> <p>Bloorizadeh et al. (2013), Dixon &amp; Bruening (2007), Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Mazerolle et al. (2015a), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2015)</p>	<p><b>Workload</b></p> <p>Eason et al. (2017), Goodman, Mazerolle &amp; Pitney (2015), Mazerolle, Pitney, Eason (2015), Olusoga &amp; Kentta (2017)</p> <p><b>Time Commitments</b></p> <p>Boloorizadeh, et al. (2013), Dixon &amp; Bruening (2007), Goodman, et al. (2017), Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Joncheray et al (2019), Kerai et al., (2018), Mazerolle et al., (2011), Mazerolle et al. (2008a), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016a), Mazerolle and Eason (2016b), Mazerolle et al. (2015b), Mazerolle &amp; Hunter (2017), Mazerolle &amp; Hunter (2018),</p>	<p><b>High Performance Mindset</b></p> <p>Dixon &amp; Bruening (2007), Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Joncheray et al. (2019), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016b)</p> <p><b>Boundaries and Saying “no”</b></p> <p>Goodman, Mazerolle, &amp; Pitney (2015b), Mazerolle et al. (2011), Mazerolle &amp; Goodman (2013), Mazerolle, &amp; Pagnotta (2011), Mazerolle et al. (2017), Pitney, Mazerolle &amp; Hunter (2018)</p> <p><b>Stress relief activities</b></p> <p>Bruening &amp; Dixon (2007b), Mazerolle et al., (2011), Mazerolle &amp; Goodman (2013)</p>	<p><b>Stress</b></p> <p>Boloorizadeh et al. (2013), Dixon &amp; Bruening, (2007),Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016; 2016b), Olusoga &amp; Kentta (2017), Sage (1987)</p> <p><b>Burnout</b></p> <p>Boloorizadeh et al, (2013), Olusoga &amp; Kentta (2017)</p> <p><b>Job Satisfaction</b></p> <p>Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Mazerole, Eason, &amp; Goodman (2017), Mazerolle et al. (2015b), Mazerolle et al. (2015c)</p> <p><b>Turnover</b></p>	<p><b>Effectiveness</b></p> <p>Joncheray et al.,(2019), Mazerolle et al. (2011), Olusoga &amp; Kentta (2017)</p>	<p><i>(insufficient data to report)</i></p>

	<p>Mazerolle et al. (2015d), Mazerolle et al. (2013), Mazerolle et al. (2017), Olusoga &amp; Kentta (2017)</p> <p><b>Year Round Work</b></p> <p>Goodman, Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2017), Goodman et al. (2015), Mazerolle et al. (2017b), Mazerolle, Pitney, Eason (2015)</p> <p><b>Time of Year</b></p> <p>Bloorizadeh et al., (2013), Bruening &amp; Dixon (2007b), Goodman et al. (2015), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016; 2016b)</p> <p><b>Work Scheduling/Autonomy</b></p> <p>Bruening and Dixon (2007b), Eason et al. (2017), Goodman, Mazerolle (2008a), Goodman et al. (2015), Mazerolle et al., (2011), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2018), Mazerolle (2017a),</p>	<p><b>Organization and Time Management</b></p> <p>Breuning &amp; Dixon (2007b), Filion et al., (2019), Joncheray et al., (2019), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016b), Mazerolle et al. (2017b), Mazerolle &amp; Goodman (2013)</p> <p><b>Values</b></p> <p>Boloorizadeh et al., (2013), Dixon &amp; Bruening (2007), Mazerolle et al. (2017)</p> <p><b>Prioritising</b></p> <p>Goodman, Mazerolle and Pitney (2015b), Mazerolle et al. (2011), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2018), Pitney et al. (2011)</p> <p><b>Family Structure</b></p> <p>Mazerolle et al. (2015a), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016), Mazerolle et al. (2017)</p>	<p>Bruening &amp; Dixon (2007b), Eason et al. (2014), Goodman et al., (2010), Joncheray et al. (2019), Mazerolle, Burton, &amp; Cutrufo (2015), Mazerolle, Eason, &amp; Casa (2008b), Mazerolle et al. (2015b), Mazerolle et al. (2015c), Mazerolle et al. (2013), Mazerolle et al. (2017)</p> <p><b>Interpersonal outcomes</b></p> <p>Boloorizadeh et al., (2013), Bruening &amp; Dixon (2007b), Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Joncheray et al., (2019), Kerai et al., (2018) Mazerolle et al. (2015b), Mazerolle, Sterling, &amp; Mench (2017 ), Sage (1987)</p>		
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	<p>Mazerolle et al. (2015b), Mazerolle &amp; Goodman (2013)</p> <p><b>Policies</b></p> <p>Bruening &amp; Dixon (2007b), Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Mazerolle et al. (2011), Mazerolle et al. (2017a)</p> <p><b>Family Friendly Culture</b></p> <p>Bruening &amp; Dixon (2007b), Eason et al. (2014), Eason et al. (2017), Joncheray et al., (2019), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016a; 2018), Mazerolle et al. (2017a), Mazerolle et al. (2015b), Mazerolle &amp; Goodman (2013), Mazerolle et al. (2015c), Mazerolle, Pitney, Eason (2015),</p> <p><b>Workplace Integration</b></p> <p>Breuning &amp; Dixon, (2007b), Goodman, Mazerolle, &amp; Pitney (2015b), Mazerolle et al. (2011),</p>	<p><b>Social Support</b></p> <p>Dixon &amp; Bruening (2007b), Graham &amp; Dixon (2017), Mazerolle et al., (2011), Mazerolle et al. (2015a), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016b), Mazerolle &amp; Hunter (2018), Mazerolle et al. (2015d), Pitney et al. (2011)</p>			
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	<p>Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016b; 2018), Mazerolle et al. (2016), Mazerolle &amp; Goodman (2013)</p> <p><b>Collegiality</b></p> <p>Bruening &amp; Dixon, (2007b), Joncheray et al., (2019), Mazerolle &amp; Eason (2016; 2018), Mazerolle et al., (2011) Mazerolle &amp; Goodman, Mazerolle &amp; Hunter (2018)</p>				
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## **Empirical Paper One**

### **Exercise Dependence and Associated Psychological Factors in CrossFit Exercisers**

#### **Abstract**

The purpose of the present cross-sectional study was to examine the prevalence of exercise dependence and potential associated psychological variables, namely; reasons for exercise, body image satisfaction, esteem, satisfaction with life, and exercise dependence within a sample of affiliated UK CrossFit exercisers. Female and male CrossFit members (n=283) completed self-report measures of reasons for exercise, body image satisfaction, esteem, satisfaction with life, and exercise dependence. Results showed that 11.3% of the sample were at risk of exercise dependence. Bivariate correlational analysis for the total population and for the female and male populations were performed. Hierarchical multiple regressions with forced block entry revealed that stress and mood management and satisfaction with life were unique predictors of exercise dependence for both males and females. Appearance and weight management was the strongest predictor for exercise dependence in females. This research provides some evidence surrounding potential motivational and psychological factors that may contribute to exercise dependence, particularly reasons for exercise and satisfaction with life. Furthermore, results showed that gender may play a role in the development of exercise dependence. Applied recommendations and future research directions are given.

**Keywords:** exercise dependence, CrossFit, reasons for exercise, body image, esteem, satisfaction with life

## Introduction

Created by Greg Glassmann in 2000, CrossFit has become an immensely popular workout program and competitive fitness sport. Throughout the UK and worldwide (<https://map.CrossFit.com/>), CrossFit affiliated gyms (otherwise known as ‘boxes’) have emerged, where exercisers engage in a prescribed “work out of the day” (or WOD). CrossFit takes great pride in the provision of functional, inclusive and everyday fitness, with workouts including elements of high-intensity interval training, weightlifting, plyometrics, powerlifting, gymnastics, indoor rowing, running and other exercises. The combination of both aerobic and anaerobic exercise aims to provide broad physical fitness, increasing cardiovascular and respiratory endurance, strength, power, speed, flexibility, balance, and coordination. A sense of community and belonging is fostered, cultivating a sense of ‘togetherness’ from one’s own box to the wider CrossFit community, making it arguably one of the most popular fitness regimes worldwide (Murphy, 2012). However, recent concerns have arisen about the safety of CrossFit, with research recording prevalence rates of musculoskeletal injuries of 20-73.5% (Hak, et al., 2013; Weisenthal et al., 2014), which may be a result of lifting large amounts of weight within a short period of time 5-6 times a week.

Despite these concerns, exercise can have a positive effect on the mind and body (Biddle & Mutrie, 2007; McAuley & Rudolph, 1995) with its benefits widely accepted to enhance physical and mental wellbeing. A review by Martinsen and Morgan (1997) reports that exercise can help reduce levels of anxiety, depression, enhance self-esteem and self-concept, and provide one with a sense of mastery and control. However, early research by Baekeland (1970) introduced the idea that exercise and the cessation of such exercise can have potentially detrimental consequences. Originally defined as exercise “addiction”, the absence of exercise was found to cause negative psychological symptoms (i.e. withdrawal) such as depression, low mood, irritability, fatigue, anxiety, impaired concentration, and sleep

disturbance (Baekeland, 1970; Glasser, 1976). Subsequently, a variety of terms have emerged to define the phenomenon, such as exercise dependency, compulsory exercise, and obligatory exercise (Hausenblas & Downs, 2002a). For the purposes of this study, exercise dependence will be used, characterised by the need to compulsively exercise despite risk or prevalence of injuries, illness, and prioritisation of exercise over other activities within one's life (Anthony, 1991; De Coverley Veale, 1987).

The prevalence of exercise dependence varies, with a range of 5-15% being recorded in previous literature (Downs et al., 2004; Hale et al., 2010; Lichtenstein et al., 2014; Lindwall & Palmeira, 2009; Szabo & Griffiths, 2007; Vilella et al., 2011). Lichtenstein and Jensen (2016), using the Exercise Addiction Inventory (Griffiths et al., 2005), found that 5% of their Danish CrossFit population sample were at risk of exercise dependence. However, in reviewing exercise dependence literature, Adams and Kirkby (1998) note that there is a lack of consistent methodological rigidity, not to mention a varying degree of definitions within exercise dependence literature. Later, Hausenblas and Downs, (2002b) developed the Exercise Dependence Scale (EDS), based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV (APA, 1996), providing a multidimensional, theoretical-based measure of exercise dependence symptoms. Much of the exercise dependence literature has focused on the running population (Carmack & Martens, 1979; Glasser, 1976; Yates et al., 1983).

Hausenblas and Downs (2002a, 2002b) developed a multidimensional approach to investigating exercise dependence, identifying seven key factors in the maladaptive pattern of exercise. (a) Tolerance, defined as either a need for increased amounts of exercise to achieve the desired effect or diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of exercise, (b) Withdrawal, as manifested by either the characteristic withdrawal symptoms for exercise or the same (or closely related) amount of exercise is engaged in to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms, (c) Intention Effects, where exercise is often taken in larger amounts or over a

longer period than was intended, (d) Lack of Control, where there is a persistent desire or unsuccessful effort to cut down or control exercise, (e) Time, where a great deal of time is spent in activities necessary to obtain exercise, (f) Reduction in Other Activities, such as social, occupational, or recreational activities that are given up or reduced because of exercise, and (g) Continuance, where exercise is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by the exercise (e.g., continued running despite having an injury).

Reasons for exercise, whilst being widely examined within aerobic settings, has yet to be investigated alongside exercise dependence literature. Previous literature has investigated reasons for exercise, with psychological factors such as esteem and self-objectification being identified (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005; Strelan et al., 2003). However, there is little to no literature examining reasons for exercise, and exercise dependence specifically. Despite the overarching opinion that exercise increases esteem (Scully et al., 1998), previous research has reported a negative association between exercise dependence symptoms and self-esteem (Bruno et al., 2014; Greenberg et al., 1999), along with personality traits and other psychological phenomena (e.g. perfectionism, narcissism). Previous research has identified those exercising for health and fitness motives show higher levels of esteem compared to those who exercise for body image and appearance based reasons who have a reduced self-esteem (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005; Strelan et al., 2003).

To date, little research has investigated certain motivations behind exercise dependence and other potential psychological contributors. Furthermore, the majority of exercise dependence literature centres on running and aerobic exercise. To address this, we aimed to explore the prevalence of exercise dependence within a UK CrossFit population and to identify potential motivational and psychological correlates that may impact the risk of exercise dependence; specifically, reasons for exercise, body satisfaction, esteem, and

satisfaction of life. Furthermore, due to previous research employing several different methods of measuring exercise dependence, for instance, measures that do not have cut off criteria or are bidirectional in nature, this research adopts a more reliable measure of exercise dependence using Hausenblas and Down's Exercise Dependence Scale (EDS-R21; 2002).

Our first hypothesis is that appearance and weight management motivations will be positively correlated to exercise dependence as well as exercising for stress and mood management. Secondly, we expect low self-esteem to be positively correlated to exercise dependence. Thirdly, we expect low body image satisfaction to be positively correlated with exercise dependence. We expected some impact of exercise dependence and related factors to have an impact on satisfaction with life. However, given conflicting previous research, we intended to use this measure as an exploratory addition to our study. Further we intend to explore the age and gender interactions with the current population. Despite previous gender differences within the exercise dependence literature, these particular psychological factors have yet to be explored within CrossFit exercise dependence literature.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

A cross-sectional survey design using an online questionnaire (Survey Monkey; [suverymonkey.co.uk](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk)) was used. Limited demographics (age and gender) were gathered in order for the study to remain anonymous and the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Only participants over the age of 18 were recruited via two routes. The first route involved identifying affiliated CrossFit boxes using the CrossFit map (<https://map.CrossFit.com/>), which were then contacted via Facebook. A total of 401 CrossFit boxes were contacted, with 57 agreeing to pass on the studies details. The message contained the purposes of the study and contained a gatekeeper information sheet. If the admin of the

Facebook group agreed to provide the study's details to their members, they were then provided with the participant information sheet and website link to the online questionnaire to either share on their member's Facebook group, or to share with their member's mailing list (via email). The second route involved contacting the boxes via an email address provided on their website. The email contained the information sheet for the admin and participant information sheet, as well as the web link to the online questionnaire. We were unable to offer any pen and paper versions of the questionnaire. Therefore, this study was only available to those who had access to the internet, were members of the Facebook members' group, or were on the boxes mailing list. Within the participant information sheet, participants were informed that their results would be anonymous and that they may withdraw at any time. This study was approved by the University Ethics Committee.

## **Participants**

Participants were comprised of 198 female and 132 male adult members of affiliated boxes throughout the UK, recruited from May 2019 to June 2019. 57 participants did not complete the full questionnaire. 30 participants withdrew during the reasons for exercise section, 17 withdrew during the exercise dependence section, 4 withdrew during the body satisfaction section, 3 withdrew during the self-esteem section, and 3 withdrew before completing the last section (satisfaction with life). After removal of incomplete questionnaires, 283 participants remained, 176 of which were female and 106 were male. One respondent opted not to disclose their gender, however they completed the full battery of questions, therefore their data was included in the study (age range 18-71,  $M = 35.09$ ,  $SD = 8.8$ ). We estimated an average of 150 members per box by taking an average of the number of members on the Facebook groups in the recruitment phase of the study. As 57 boxes responded and agreed to pass on the study's details, we concluded an estimated population sample of 8,550 with participants from across Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern

Ireland. Therefore, our study represents 3.31% of the sample population. As we limited the demographics for confidentiality purposes, we cannot determine certain demographics such as income or ethnicity within the sample population.

## **Measures**

### ***Reasons for Exercise***

Based on the seven-subscale version of the Reasons for Exercise Inventory (REI) developed by (Silberstein et al., 1988), Cash et al., (1994) reduced the original seven-subscale to four factors that include; Fitness/Health Management (FHM), Appearance/Weight Management (AWM), Stress/Mood Management (SMM), & Socializing. Participants were asked to rate the questions using a Likert scale from one (do not at all agree) to seven (strongly agree). Factor analysis was performed, confirming Cash's four-factor model. However, Cash's addition of "to do what is socially expected" was removed from analysis, as this did not load on to any specific factor. Additionally, the item "to maintain my current weight" did not load on to any specific factor and was also removed. We did find the item "to improve my muscle tone" loaded onto the Appearance/Weight management factor, contrary to Cash's findings. Given the sample, this factor was included in this study. Reliability analysis is shown in table 1.

### ***Exercise Dependence Scale Revised (EDS-R21)***

The Exercise Dependence Scale-Revised (EDS-R) is a multidimensional measure of exercise dependence symptoms based on the DSM-IV (APA, 1996) criteria for substance dependence (Downs et al., 2004). The EDS-R consists of the following seven subscales. Tolerance (e.g., "I continually increase my exercise duration to achieve the desired effects/benefits"), Withdrawal Effects (e.g., "I exercise to avoid feeling irritable"), Continuance (e.g., "I exercise when injured"), Lack of Control (e.g., "I am unable to reduce

how often I exercise”), Reductions in Other Activities (e.g., “I would rather exercise than spend time with family/friends”), Time (e.g., “I spend most of my free time exercising”), and Intention (e.g., “I exercise longer than I intend”). Participants respond to each item on a 6-point Likert scale, anchored at the extremes with 1 (never) to 6 (always). The EDS-R has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure (Downs et al., 2004).

### ***Body Part Satisfaction Scale-Revised (BPSS-R)***

The Body Parts Satisfaction Scale-Revised (BPSS-R; Petrie et al. (2002) measures degree of concern about body shape. This study included only those features that can be altered by changes in bodyweight and exercise (e.g. shoulders, arms, legs) similar to previous research (Varnado, 2000). The BPSS-R has high internal and construct validity (Chronbach’s alpha values of .87). Participants are asked to rate their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with each of these body-parts on a six-point likert scale, ranging from (1) completely dissatisfied to (6) completely satisfied. We elected to combine the total scores to give an overall score for body image satisfaction.

### ***Self-Esteem (RSES)***

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) assesses a person’s overall evaluation of his or her worthiness as a human being. Responses are coded on a four-point likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The RSES contains an equal number of positively (e.g., people feeling satisfied with life) and negatively (e.g., people feeling they are failures) worded items. RSES has shown excellent validity and internal consistency in previous studies ( $\alpha=.89$ ; Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000).

### ***Satisfaction With Life (SWL)***

Using Deiner et al’s (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale, subjects’ overall wellbeing was measured. The questionnaire contains five items using a seven-point likert scale, ranging

from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The satisfaction with life scale shows validity and good internal consistency ranging from  $\alpha=.61$  to  $.81$  (Pavot & Diener, 2009).

**Table 1:** Means (*M*), standard deviations (*sd* in parentheses), and Chronbach's  $\alpha$  values for age and each subscale.

Variable	$\alpha$	Total sample	Females	Males	_ <sup>a</sup>
		(n=283)	(n=176)	(n=106)	(n=1)
		M(sd)	M(sd)	M(sd)	M
Age	-	35.09(8.8)	35.34(8.99)	34.66(8.55)	37.00
EDS-R	.88	61.69(16.12)	60.95(16.38)	62.80(15.71)	75.00
Withdrawal Effects	.82	11.24 (4.13)	11.80 (3.93)	10.25(4.27)	17.00
Continuance	.87	9.51 (4.36)	9.19 (4.30)	10.07 (4.42)	6.00
Tolerance	.81	11.29 (3.58)	11.00 (3.63)	11.78 (3.46)	10.00
Lack of Control	.77	7.54 (3.76)	7.58 (3.97)	7.48 (3.41)	8.00
Reductions	.51	7.21 (2.89)	7.09 (2.90)	7.39 (2.86)	10.00
Time	.87	10.69 (4.03)	10.45 (4.19)	11.04 (3.69)	17.00
Intention Effects	.91	7.24(3.69)	6.82 (3.48)	7.94 (3.93)	7.00
Reasons for Exercise	.80				
FHM	.84	5.87 (.91)	5.87 (.96)	5.88 (.82)	6.50
AWM	.81	4.24 (1.14)	4.25 (1.18)	4.21 (1.07)	5.33
SMM	.84	5.09 (1.65)	5.35 (1.54)	4.65 (1.68)	7.00
Socialising	.89	4.52 (1.64)	4.63 (1.58)	4.30 (1.73)	6.33
BSS-R	.84	26.87 (6.3)	26.49 (6.60)	27.49 (5.75)	28.50
Shoulders	-	4.14 (1.22)	4.18 (1.26)	4.06 (1.15)	5.00
Arms	-	3.74 (1.28)	3.63 (1.35)	3.91 (1.14)	5.00
Stomach	-	2.73 (1.33)	2.68 (1.35)	2.83 (1.28)	1.00
Chest	-	3.77 (1.27)	3.86 (1.28)	3.64 (1.26)	3.00
Buttocks	-	4.01 (1.30)	3.88 (1.37)	4.23 (1.17)	4.00
Legs	-	3.90 (1.32)	3.70 (1.38)	4.22 (1.16)	5.00
Lower Legs (Calves)	-	4.13 (1.31)	4.12 (1.36)	4.14 (1.22)	5.00
Overall Tone/Shape	-	3.69 (1.25)	3.63 (1.30)	3.80 (1.17)	4.00
Self Esteem Scale	.71	26.81 (7.36)	26.34 (7.00)	27.65 (7.90)	20.00
SWL	.89	23.84 (6.61)	24.17 (6.64)	23.26 (6.59)	27.00

<sup>a</sup>“-“ is the non-disclosed gender participant.

	1)	2)	3)	4)	5)	6)	7)	8)	9)	10)	11)	12)	13)	14)	15)	16)
1) EDS-R Total	–															
2) Withdrawal	.50**	–														
3) Continuance	.55**	0.04	–													
4) Tolerance	.66**	.22**	.26**	–												
5) Control	.71**	.26**	.29**	.35**	–											
6) Reductions	.70**	.34**	.28**	.33**	.53**	–										
7) Time	.78**	.28**	.22**	.52**	.47**	.58**	–									
8) Intention	.65**	0.08	.27**	.36**	.38**	.40**	.50**	–								
9) FHM	.14*	.15**	0.03	.24**	0.03	0.10	0.09	0.00	–							
10) AWM	.15**	0.07	0.06	.17**	.16**	0.09	0.07	0.10	0.00	–						
11) SMM	.25**	.67**	-0.03	0.09	0.09	.18**	0.08	0.02	.22**	.12*	–					
12) Social	.17**	.21**	-0.03	0.12	0.09	0.00	.19**	0.10	.24**	0.08	.24**	–				
13) BSS	-0.05	-0.08	-0.08	-0.03	-0.05	-0.01	0.09	-0.11	0.10	-.35**	-0.02	0.03	–			
14) Esteem	-0.09	-.21**	0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.07	-0.08	-0.04	0.08	-0.11	-.14*	-0.07	.22**	–		
15) SWL	-.16**	-0.07	-.14*	-0.11	0.01	-.17**	-0.09	-.14*	0.01	-0.01	-0.10	-0.01	.21**	.33**	–	
16) Age	-.23**	-.21**	0.03	-.20**	-.13*	-.18**	-.25**	-.19**	.13*	-0.11	-.13*	-.15*	0.11	.18**	0.08	–

**Table 2:** Total sample population bivariate correlations (\*Correlation significant at  $p < .05$  level, \*\* Correlation significant at the  $p < .01$  level.)

**Table 3:** *Female and Male bivariate correlations.*

	1)	2)	3)	4)	5)	6)	7)	8)	9)	10)	11)	12)	13)	14)	15)	16)
1) EDS-R	—	.53**	.57**	.70**	.71**	.67**	.77**	.64**	0.11	.25**	.26**	.18*	-.16*	-0.11	-.19*	-.31**
2) Withdrawal	.50**	—	0.10	.37**	.25**	.28**	.31**	0.13	.15*	.17*	.62**	.25**	-0.13	-.25**	-0.10	-.30**
3) Continuance	.52**	0.00	—	.27**	.33**	.30**	.26**	.22**	0.08	.16*	0.01	-0.04	-0.12	-0.05	-.21**	0.01
4) Tolerance	.60**	0.07	.22*	—	.38**	.33**	.50**	.38**	.24**	.25**	.16*	0.15	-0.13	0.00	-0.09	-.18*
5) Control	.72**	.29**	.22*	.29**	—	.50**	.44**	.41**	-0.07	.23**	0.14	0.08	-.18*	-0.03	-0.01	-.23**
6)Reductions	.74**	.48**	.25*	.33**	.60**	—	.60**	.41**	0.03	0.11	0.15	0.04	-0.08	-0.05	-.19*	-.28**
7) Time	.78**	.28**	0.14	.55**	.60**	.55**	—	.49**	0.01	0.09	0.08	.15*	0.02	-0.05	-0.11	-.28**
8) Intention	.67**	0.09	.33**	.31**	.37**	.39**	.52**	—	0.03	0.15	0.04	0.13	-.17*	-0.06	-.15*	-.25**
9) FHM	.21*	0.16	-0.07	.24*	.26**	.24*	.25**	-0.04	—	0.05	.27**	.27**	0.06	0.09	-0.06	.25**
10) AWM	-0.04	-0.13	-0.10	0.02	-0.01	0.07	0.02	0.03	-0.12	—	.20**	0.09	-.31**	-0.09	-0.06	-0.09
11) SMM	.28**	.71**	-0.02	0.04	0.01	.26**	0.11	0.08	0.14	-0.02	—	.26**	0.07	-0.14	-0.09	-0.14
12) Social	0.16	0.10	0.01	0.10	0.11	-0.05	.28**	0.10	.21*	0.05	0.16	—	0.12	0.01	0.04	-0.10
13) BSS	0.15	0.05	-0.01	0.15	.25*	0.11	.22*	-0.05	0.19	-.43**	-0.12	-0.10	—	.23**	.20**	.16*
14) Esteem	-0.07	-0.11	0.07	0.03	-0.02	-0.11	-0.14	-0.04	0.06	-0.14	-0.10	-0.16	0.19	—	.38**	.21**
15) SWL	-0.10	-0.05	-0.02	-0.14	0.04	-0.14	-0.04	-0.10	0.13	0.07	-0.17	-0.11	.25**	.28**	—	0.11
16) Age	-0.09	-0.09	0.08	-.22*	0.05	0.01	-0.18	-0.09	-0.11	-0.16	-0.15	-.24*	0.04	0.16	0.02	—

**Note:** Top row is female, side row is male. \*Correlation significant at  $p < .05$  level, \*\* Correlation significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

**Table 4:** Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Gender, Age, Reasons for Exercise, and Satisfaction with Life Predicting Exercise Dependence.

Criterion Variable	B	t	S.E.	p	$\beta$
Exercise Dependence					
Step 1:					
F(2, 280) = 8.41, $p < .01$ , $R^2 = .06$	73.89	15.64	4.73	.00	
Gender	1.84	.97	1.90	.33	.06
Age	-.42	-3.95	.11	.00	-.23
Step 2:					
F(5, 275) = 7.19, $p < 0.01$ , $R^2 = .16$ , $\Delta R^2 = .10$ , $p < 0.01$	46.44	5.17	8.98	.00	
Gender	2.93	1.57	1.86	.12	.09
Age	-.35	-3.27	.11	.00	-.20
FHM	2.02	1.91	1.06	.06	.11
AWM	1.51	1.89	.80	.06	.11
SMM	1.75	2.93	.60	.00	.18
Socializing	.65	1.12	.58	.26	.07
SWL	-.28	-2.06	.14	.04	-.12
Exercise Dependence (female)					
Step 1:					
F(6, 169) = 7.4, $p < .01$ , $R^2 = .21$	64.47	6.72	9.60	.00	

Age	-0.42	-3.29	0.13	.00	-.23
AWM	2.50	2.18	1.03	.03	.16
SMM	1.69	2.16	0.78	.03	.16
Socializing	1.16	1.55	0.75	.12	.11
BSS-R	-0.19	-1.02	0.19	.31	-.08
SWL	-0.31	-1.78	0.17	.07	-.13
<hr/>					
Exercise Dependence (male)					
Step 1:					
F(2, 103) = 6.15, p<.01, R2=.11	31.70	2.93	10.77	.00	
FHM	3.38	1.88	0.25	.06	.18
SMM	2.35	2.67	0.36	.00	.25
<hr/>					

## Results

Descriptive results and statistical analysis were performed using SPSS26 (IBM) statistical software. Reliability analysis was performed on each subscale and scale as a whole and is presented in table 1 using Chronbach's alpha. Means and standard deviations for each scale and where relevant, subscale were calculated and are presented in table 1. Participants who did not disclose gender were not used in gender analysis.

The age range for females was 18-63 ( $M=35.34$ ,  $sd=8.99$ ) and for males 18-71 ( $M=34.66$ ,  $sd=8.55$ , see descriptives in table 1). T tests were performed to compare scores between females and males. Females exhibited a significantly higher scores for Withdrawal, with a mean difference of 1.55,  $t(280)= 3.09$ ,  $p<0.01$ , and effect size of 0.38. Females exercised more for SMM than males with a mean difference of 0.70,  $t(280)=3.57$ ,  $p<0.01$ , effect size of 0.44. Males scored higher in Intention with a mean difference of 1.13,  $t(280)= 2.50$ ,  $p<0.01$ , effect size of 0.31. Males were more satisfied than females in two body parts: buttocks, with a mean difference of 0.35,  $t(280) = 2.21$ ,  $p<0.01$ , effect size of 0.27 and legs satisfaction, with a mean difference of 0.52,  $t(280)= 3.20$ ,  $p<0.01$ , effect size of 0.40.

Bivariate correlations revealed that FHM, AWM, SMM and Socialisation had significant positive correlations with exercise dependence, whilst SWL and Age had significant negative correlations with exercise dependence. Correlations by gender (see table 2) revealed that for females, AWM and SMM and Socialisation had significant positive correlations, and BSS and SWL had significant negative correlations, with exercise dependence. For males, FHM and SMM had significant positive correlations.

Hierarchical multiple regressions were undertaken to examine the predictive relationship of reasons for exercise, body image satisfaction, esteem and satisfaction with life for exercise dependence (see table 3). In block 1, age and gender were entered to examine the

amount of variance explained in exercise dependence. In block two, reasons for exercise subscales were entered along with SWL into the regression. For the total sample, age and gender explained 6% of the variance in exercise dependence. After reasons for exercise subscales and SWL were entered, the model as a whole explained an additional 16% of the variance  $F(2,280)= 7.19, p<0.01$ , with higher age resulting in lower exercise dependence scores. In block two, reasons for exercise subscales and SWL were entered and explained an additional 10% of the variance. All reasons for exercise variables were associated with higher total ED scores. Higher ED scores were also associated with a lower satisfaction with life. Age ( $\beta=-0.20, p<0.01$ ), SMM ( $\beta=0.18, p<0.01$ ) and SWL ( $\beta=-0.12, p<0.05$ ) maintained a unique contribution. Two-way interaction terms revealed that Gender moderated the relationship between AWM and ED ( $p<0.05$ ) as well as the relationship between BSS and ED ( $p=0.01$ ). SMM was also found to moderate the interaction of SWL and ED ( $p<0.05$ ).

We conducted hierarchical multiple regression analysis separately for both the female and male population. For females; Age, AWM, SMM, Socialisation, BSS and SWL were entered as one block. The model as a whole explained 21% of the variance of exercise dependence  $F(6, 169)= 7.40, p<0.01$ , with age ( $\beta=-0.23, p<0.01$ ), AWM ( $\beta=0.16, p=0.05$ ), SMM ( $\beta=0.16, p<0.05$ ) maintaining unique contributions. For males, only FHM and SMM had significant  $r$  values and were entered as one block. The model as a whole explained 11% of the variance in exercise dependence  $F(2, 103)= 6.15, p<0.01$ , with SMM maintaining a unique contributions ( $\beta=0.25, p<0.05$ ).

Further analysis revealed that gender moderated the relationship of exercising for appearance and weight management and exercise dependence ( $F=4.07, p<0.05$ ) and the relationship of body satisfaction and exercise dependence ( $F=6.37, p=0.01$ ). The relationship of satisfaction of life was moderated by stress and mood management for exercise dependence ( $F=4.07, p<0.05$ ).

## Discussion

The present study's first purpose was to identify the extent exercise dependence is present within the CrossFit population. Results from the EDS-R reported 11.3% of the sample were at risk of exercise dependence. Although this percentage falls within the range previously stated within previous literature, it is more than double that of Lichtenstein and Jensen's (2016) CrossFit population in Denmark. We recommend the EDS-R as a valid and reliable multidimensional tool for the investigation and classification of exercise dependence, with a large amount of previous research using a variety of different measures that often do not include cut-off criterion to differentiate between at-risk and symptomatic populations. The present research provides a novel investigation into the prevalence of exercise dependence within a booming population to provide consistency for previous and future research. A recent systematic review by Dumitru et al. (2018) examined gender differences in exercise addiction in 27 studies. With effect sizes varying between .04 and .98, they reported that men were more addicted to exercise than women, with only two studies within their review finding that women were more addicted than men. Our study did not find any gender differences with those at risk or symptomatic within the EDS-R guidelines.

This study was able to identify particular factors that could contribute to exercise dependence. From the findings, we found that reasons for exercise played a role within exercise dependence. Overall, all reasons for exercise sub factors had a positive relationship to exercise dependence. Further analysis revealed gender differences in exercising for fitness and health management, with males more likely to be exercise dependent for this reason. Appearance and weight management and socialisation were related to exercise dependence for females. Previous studies have suggested that females are more likely to exercise for weight control and appearance motivations. Despite no significant gender differences in T tests and not maintaining a unique contribution in the regression analysis, gender somewhat

moderated the relationship of appearance and weight management and exercise dependence. We tentatively suggest that gender plays a role in the motivations of exercise, and that exercise dependence with appearance and weight management represent a significant contributor to exercise dependence, particularly within the female population. Additionally, females who were more satisfied with their body were less likely to score highly on exercise dependence.

Previous evidence has suggested that exercising for appearance is negatively related to body satisfaction and esteem, whereas exercising for health and fitness reasons is related to higher esteem and body satisfaction within the female population (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Streaan et al., 2003). Much research has investigated body image ideals and have found that females generally desire a thinner and leaner physique (Brownell, 1991), which has shown to influence body satisfaction (Benton & Karazsia, 2015). Further, recent research into “fitspo” or “fitspiration” on social media has made links with body ideals and satisfaction for males, with lower body satisfaction and higher muscularity-ideals (Fatt et al., 2019). Concerning females, previous research has identified lower body dissatisfaction, disordered eating and appearance comparisons (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018). Washington and Economides (2016) proposed that despite CrossFit advocating the development of ‘functional fitness’ over looks (e.g. “Strong is the new skinny”), there was a move towards exercise for performance rather than aesthetics in an attempt to disband the traditional (usually Western) notions of attractiveness. This may be a result of sociocultural influences such as advertising, social media, television, peers, and family (López-Guimerà et al., 2010; Schooler & Trinh, 2011). Despite this shift from appearance-based to performance-based outcomes and the resistance to gender-normative bodies, Washington and Economides (2016) argued that examples from CrossFit media, including YouTube promotional videos and interviews

emphasized “the appeal, particularly the sexual appeal of a fit body, rather than its function” (Washington & Economides, 2016).

Similar to previous literature that investigated the CrossFit population (Köteles et al., 2016), we did find that both males and females generally exercised for Fitness and Health Management over all other reasons for exercise. Based on our findings, it is plausible that the motivations behind why we exercise impacts differently to the contribution of exercise dependence, depending on gender. Exercising for appearance and weight management and stress and mood management was linked uniquely with being female. Males who exercised for fitness and health management reasons were more likely to be exercise dependent, and may be the result of the constant pursuit of peak physical fitness. Gill et al., (1996) found that within adult sport and exercise programs (e.g. running club, exercise classes), males scored higher than females in win orientations and competitiveness. One of the primary aims of CrossFit is to complete the WOD in the fastest time possible. Therefore, improving one’s ability to execute repetitions efficiently contributes to shorter times, demonstrating high competence against previous times and the times of others.

It is not surprising that exercising for stress and mood management is a key factor in exercise dependence, ranked second among the reasons for exercise. Exercise is viewed as a healthy, stress relieving activity, with beneficial mood enhancing qualities and psychological protective properties. Furthermore, Ryan et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study and recognised the mood enhancement benefits of CrossFit benefitting commitment and motivation. Like any activity however, moderation is key, and from our findings a higher emphasis placed on exercise to alleviate negative mood and stressors is connected to not only exercise dependence but one’s satisfaction with life. The ‘cognitive appraisal hypothesis’ asserts that individuals engage in ‘healthy’ methods in order to deal with stress (Szabo, 1995). With the common message that exercise alleviates stress, improve our esteem and

provide us with a form of control over our lives, with the possibility of being within a fun and social environment, the appeal is unsurprising. Consequently, the recognition of exercise as a form of relieving stress as opposed to other behaviours is used as a means of stress reduction, thus leading to a need to exercise during times of stress. With the repeated exaggerated amounts of exercise, impacts on other areas of life are impacted and cessations of exercise leads to negative psychological feelings to emerge. It may be that those individuals who experience high stress and low mood as well as a low satisfaction with life use exercise as a release from these factors in a regular fashion. Köteles et al. (2016) found that frequency of CrossFit training is not linked to improved psychological functioning (i.e. higher levels of well-being and positive affect, or lower levels of negative affect). Although we did not account for frequency of exercise, we suggest that the presence of debilitating factors associated with exercise dependence (e.g. withdrawal, time, intention) may have an impact on one's satisfaction with life.

There is some disagreement within the literature differences between body image and esteem, particularly concerning gender (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Furnham et al., 2002; Lerner et al., 1973). Our results suggest that body image satisfaction and motivations to exercise contribute to being more exercise dependent, but we found no evidence to suggest that esteem has any effect on exercise dependence. Previous research has proposed that the older one gets, the greater importance of exercise for positive body image (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006; Loland, 2000). Our results suggest that body satisfaction does decrease as age increases. However, our findings suggested that the likelihood of being at risk of exercise dependence decreased with age. One explanation may be that although an individual may be older and have more concern about their body image, they may have developed social roles, personality traits, established careers and family lives, with more solidified esteem levels compared to younger generations (Orth et al., 2018). Given these results, further investigation

into age and exercise dependence is warranted. Previous research within CrossFit and exercise dependence has suggested that it is young males who are likely to develop exercise dependence (Lichtenstein & Jensen, 2016; Weik & Hale, 2009). Surprisingly, our results revealed that young females are more at risk.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation of this study is that the data was reliant on self-report measures. A number of participants did not complete the full questionnaire, which may be due to the questionnaires length or a result of the nature of the questions asked. Participants free to withdraw from an online survey and faced with questions concerning exercise dependence may do so to avoid admission of potential ‘undesirable’ traits, despite the data being confidential and anonymous. The second limitation of this study was that it was cross-sectional in design and therefore unable to identify causality of the relationships found. However, it could be argued that ethically, given the nature of some of the factors investigated within this study (i.e. exercise dependence, esteem, satisfaction with life), it would be unwise to conduct experimental research investigations that aim to lower or heighten such psychological and motivational states. Finally, researchers are yet to agree over the nature of exercise dependence as a primary syndrome. Much of the previous research has investigated exercise dependence as a secondary syndrome to eating disorders, with recent research identifying the prevalence of both exercise addiction and eating disorders within fitness sports to be 2.3% (Rudolph, 2018). The current study did not use any screening tool to identify any possible prevalence of eating disorders. Therefore, we are unable to state if exercise dependence sits as a primary condition independently of eating disorders.

### **Applied Recommendations**

As exercise dependence is associated with negative psychological and physiological symptoms, we recommend that box owners, trainers, exercisers and practitioners (e.g. sport psychologists, physiotherapists) are aware of the condition and the potential for psychological behaviour change interventions that elicit the beneficial rewards of appropriately moderated exercise. This research is able to provide meaningful information concerning potential antecedents of exercise dependence, and factors that may interact with exercise dependence. Understanding motivations behind why we exercise and gender effects may help practitioners deliver more effective interventions. CrossFit endeavours to level the playing field, with both male and females completing the same WODs. In light of the findings of this study, we suggest that although the workout is the same, CrossFit trainers, coaches, and exercisers should be cognizant of their underlying motivations about *why* they exercise. Assistance may be provided by working alongside practitioners who understand the psychological and physical components of exercise dependence (e.g. exercise psychologists, physiologists). For boxes and trainers, recognition of particular behaviours or habits of their members might assist in the prevention or treatment of exercise dependence. Alternatively, educational sessions with guest speakers might be useful to raise awareness and understanding of a subject that is not commonly discussed in the fitness industry.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

The present study aimed to investigate exercise dependence and possible factors and antecedents associated with exercise dependence within a CrossFit population. CrossFit as a fitness regime and competitive fitness sport has had little empirical psychological research - despite being a popular and growing exercise regime. Future research should aim to expand on the present cross-sectional, survey-based research, and aim to aid in the present understanding of exercise dependence through qualitative longitudinal studies that seek to understand potential fluctuations of exercise dependence, the related psychological and

motivational factors, or the in-depth subjective lived experience of at risk CrossFit populations.

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## Empirical Paper Two

### COVID-19: Athletes' Experiences of Returning to Sport Following Lockdown.

#### Abstract

The present study investigated athletes' experiences of returning to sport following the first lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Seven participants (three female and four male) were interviewed to investigate their return to sport experiences following COVID-19 lockdown. Interviews were conducted prior to and on return to training and competitions and narrative analysis was used to explore the stories told. The athletes' narratives are best represented in three distinct sections: *Beginning: Returning to Training and Competition*, *Middle: Experiencing Challenges of COVID-19*, and *End: Reflecting on the Return Experience*. Four narrative themes were also co-constructed from athletes' stories: *Initial Positive Experiences*, *Challenges Faced by Athletes*, *Athletes' Attempts to Cope*, and *Lessons Learnt*. Theoretical implications and applied recommendations are provided surrounding athletes' return to sport.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, lockdown, pandemic, virus, return to sport, narrative analysis

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed life for people all over the world. Governments were forced to issue nationwide lockdowns to reduce the spread of the virus and to protect the vulnerable, as advised by The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). For athletes, the lockdown led to the cancellation of competitive seasons and events, including the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Athletes were required to stay at home, away from training grounds, support staff, and teammates. A global pandemic and government-imposed lockdown had never occurred during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and for the sporting community, it was difficult to anticipate just how disruptive this critical moment would be to athletes' lives and sporting careers. Consequently, commentaries and recommendations emerged from academics and governing bodies (e.g. BPS, 2020) utilising transition and critical moment theory as a guide and terming the pandemic as a “crisis transition” or “critical situation” (Mehrsafar et al., 2020; Schinke et al., 2020a, 2020b, Stambulova et al., 2020).

Following serious injury, research has demonstrated that the return to sport can be difficult for athletes. The return can spark concerns about returning to pre-injury levels and a self-imposed pressure to prove oneself (Podlog & Eklund, 2006; 2009). There are also a variety of psychosocial factors prior to return to competition that may impact an athletes' psychological readiness to return such as: achieving personal goals, reconnecting with teammates, and attempting to preserve their athletic identity (Podlog & Eklund, 2006). Upon return to competition, athletes are tasked with overcoming fears concerning reinjury, performing well and to preinjury levels (Podlog & Eklund, 2006; 2007; 2009), dealing with and overcoming adversity (Podlog & Eklund, 2006; 2009), and a lack of confidence (Podlog & Eklund, 2006).

Following extended periods of confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, research by Ruffault et al. (2020) revealed that elite athletes may be susceptible to levels of anxiety concerning their return to sport. This included worries concerning the perceptions of the

public and external motivational factors, such as external rewards. Other research has suggested that lifting restrictions can be associated with a reappearance, or ‘iceberg’ effect, of anxiety and depressive symptoms that may be attributed to prolonged periods of isolation and confinement (Mehrsafar et al., 2021). Such negative psychological states might also arise due to last minute cancellations or postponements to competitions and events, mandatory isolation periods following COVID-19 outbreaks, as well as on and off again training schedules.

Whitcomb-Khan et al. (2021) investigated athletes’ experiences of lockdown during May 2020. The use of narrative analysis aimed to understand athletes’ stories of the lockdown experience and how this impacted them as people and performers . The narrative structure suggested that COVID-19 presented a threat to athletes’ goals and had significant consequences on athlete’s personal and professional lives. Athletes consequently attempted to overcome these challenges, adapted, and engaged in reflection over their experiences. The findings drew similarities with the psychological and physical consequences of long-term injury (Podlog & Eklund, 2006; 2009), as the athletes’ narrative themes indicated a loss of identity, physical conditioning, and day-to-day routines.

To date, little qualitative research has been conducted into athletes’ experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study aims to investigate athletes’ experiences of returning to training and competition using narrative analysis. As Jowett (2008) states, this approach allows researchers to delve into the “subjective data and reveal individual differences by seeking to interpret the meaning of the narratives and its importance for personal functioning” (pp. 27–28) . As the COVID-19 pandemic is a period of great disruption to athletes’ personal and professional lives, understanding the subjective lived experience of athletes through narrative ‘breathe’ meaning (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Further, narrative can provide useful insights into an unprecedented event such as the global pandemic, where

theoretical and psychological processes are yet to be fully understood. The ‘messiness’, confusion, and uncertainty of the pandemic presents an opportunity to utilize narrative analysis to collect and examine athletes’ experiences (Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Using the same athletes as Whitcomb-Khan et al’s (2021) first study, we aimed to explore the subjective lived experiences of returning to sport and competition following the initial lockdown period.

## **Method**

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

The present study was situated in an interpretivist paradigm (accepting that there are multiple meanings and ways of knowing), informed by ontological relativism (multiple subjective realities exist) and epistemological constructivism (reality is to be interpreted and is used to discover underlying meaning behind events; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). As narratives play a key role in constituting meaning and making sense of our experiences, a narrative approach was deemed appropriate (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This allowed the research team to gain insight into the subjective lived experiences of participants through the stories they told of their return to sport.

### **Participants**

Following ethical approval from the University’s ethics board, all participants were recruited as part of the research team’s first study (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). Participants had been recruited purposefully (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) and via the use of Twitter. Purposeful sampling is useful when conducting intense, focused methods, and aligned with our conceptual framework of narrative analysis (Curtis et al., 2000). Elite athletes are also a difficult population to reach and purposive sampling allowed the research team to identify a diverse range of participants. Informed consent was gained from all participants prior to

interviewing. Participants were over the age of 18 and were professional athletes competing in the UK, at domestic and international levels. The definition of 'elite' by Swann et al., (2015) was used to justify the athlete's level of sport, whereby all athletes participated at a high level of sport over several years, possessed 'professionalism', and continued to compete (or at least intended to compete) at a national level or higher (International, Olympic level). Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity, and their sports are identified as individual or team sport, as revealing the sport could jeopardise anonymity. Seven participants took part in the present study and were from a range of individual (n=3) and team sports (n=4). Participants' mean age was 28.29 years (range = 23-35). Three participants were female and four were male.

### **Information Power**

In the current study, information power was employed to determine sample size (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power is achieved through considering a) the study aim, b) sample specificity, c) theoretical background, d) quality of dialogue, and e) the strategy for analysis. It was determined that information power was high based on the following criteria: a) the study aim was clear and specific, b) the population sample consisted of professional and semi-professional athletes who had experience of the phenomenon in question, c) the research team used literature that provided insight into athletes' experiences following return to sport after injury, d) each member of the research team had previously interviewed and built rapport and trust with the participants, were accredited sport psychologists (n=1) and trainee sport psychologists (n=4) with experience of conducting interviews, and e) data analysis was guided by literature theory to examine athletes' stories (Bell, 2004). It was concluded that these five factors contributed to high information power. When information power is perceived to be high, a smaller sample size is deemed appropriate (Malterud et al., 2016). Seven participants were chosen to take part in this study because it allowed the

research team to recruit a) a variety of athletes who were impacted differently by the return to sport experience (e.g. ability to train or travel abroad and compete internationally), b) athletes competing in individual and team sports, and c) enough athletes to collect data on a variety of stories and experiences to meet the purpose and aim of the study.

## **Procedure**

The participants in this study were previously recruited as part of Whitcomb-Khan et al's (2021) and had previously been interviewed by the research team in the present study. The research team had kept contact with the participants to identify whether they had returned to training and/or competition. This ensured that enough time had transpired so as to collect a full story. The number of times the participants were interviewed ranged between one and three, depending on that athlete's return to sport schedule (as determined by government restrictions and their sport governing bodies). For those athletes who were interviewed only once, we ensured that they already returned to their sport and had been competing at the time of the interview. Some athletes had yet to return to training, or were training and had yet to compete. This meant multiple interviews over a period of time to capture the full stories. Face-to-face interviews were not possible due to travel restrictions and secure 'training bubbles' for teams and athletes. Interviews were conducted using Zoom (V5.0; San Jose, California). 13 interviews in total were conducted across all participants and lasted between 26 and 56 minutes ( $M= 37.14$  minutes). Interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and were transcribed verbatim.

Interviews were conducted by the research team made up of one accredited sport psychologist and four trainee sport psychologists. All of the research team members had extensive experience conducting interviews, had a wide variety of experience within the applied field, and all had experience conducting qualitative research. Participants were asked an opening question that was purposefully broad to allow them to tell a story that had

meaning to them (Smith, 2010); “What has changed since our last interview?”. As the research team were aware that some had returned to training and some had not, this question served to encourage the participant to tell their stories as they wished, with the researcher assuming the role of an ‘active listener’. The research team utilised prompts to gather data surrounding the participants' return to sport experience. This covered areas such as: participants' work and life arrangements prior to return, how they were feeling prior to and on the return to training and competition, what training was like, and how they viewed their lockdown experience now they had returned to sport.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was carried out by two of the research team, Stewart and Nick. This was conducted separately so as to not influence the others’ perceptions, opinions, or analysis of the data. Transcripts were read and re-read and the duo immersed themselves in the data to identify the beginning, middle, and end to the stories that were told by participants to ensure each had a complete story.

The participants’ stories and findings were then presented and discussed between the two, with the addition of a ‘*critical friend*’ Laura, to encourage self-reflexivity in the story presentation sessions and promote dialogue concerning the interpretations and understanding of the stories presented by the data analysis duo (Smith & McGinnon, 2018). This allowed for a collaborative team process that could identify areas of agreement and disagreement. During the process, the main areas of disagreement emerged concerning the beginning to middle, and middle to end aspects of the narrative structure. For example, there were instances where an event was included in the beginning in one researcher’s narrative structure, whereas this event was included in the middle for the other member. Similarly, an event may have been included in the middle of the narrative structure, but in the end for the other member. However, it was determined that the overall story structure remained the same

and that the discrepancies did not interfere with the central theme of conflict, whereby athletes faced particular challenges associated with their return to sport, in which all parties agreed upon. Following this, the research team agreed upon the following broad structure to best represent each of the athletes' stories. The beginning of the narrative structure began with the athletes' return to their sport, including both training and competition. Next, the middle section of the narrative structure contained the central theme of conflict and the challenges associated with COVID-19 and their return to sport. Finally, the narratives (and final part of the story) concluded with the athletes engaging in reflection upon their experience surrounding their return to sport. To provide further insight into the narrative structure and to explore the similarities and differences between the athletes' stories, narrative themes are provided to underpin the narrative structure.

### **Quality**

A non-foundational approach to credibility was adopted by the research team (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The research team engaged and reflected their values based on the aims of the research by using Tracy's (2010) 'Big Tent' criteria as a guide to achieve Credibility. These were: *Impact* (the topic of the research is relevant, timely, significant, and interesting), *Rigour* (the study uses a sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complete sets of theory, data, samples, data collection and analysis), *Reflexive Transparency* (the study is characterised by self-reflexive values, biases and inclinations of the researchers and is transparent about methods and challenges), *Rich description* (data is rich and contains thick description that allows participants to demonstrate their lived experiences), *Novel* (the study provides contribution to theory, practical applications, and methods), *Ethical* (the study considers procedural, situational, and relational ethics), and *Meaningful Coherence* (the study achieves the stated goal with the desired methods and procedures and interconnects findings and research questions with existing research).

## Results

Both the narrative structure and the narrative themes will be discussed below. The narrative structure of the participants' stories were categorised into three distinct stages: (1) *Beginning: Returning to Training and Competition*, (2) *Middle: Experiencing Challenges of COVID-19*, and (3) *End: Reflecting on the Return Experience*. The narrative themes co-constructed between the athletes and the research team reinforced the narrative structure. Four narrative themes were co-constructed, these were: (a) *Initial Positive Experiences*, (b) *Challenges Faced by Athletes*, (c) *Athletes' Attempts to Cope*, and (d) *Lessons Learnt*.

### **Beginning: Returning to Training and Competition**

#### ***Initial Positive Experiences***

As government restrictions were eased and athletes were able to return to training and competition following lockdown, athletes experienced an overwhelming positive experience upon their return where they could see their teammates and get back to business.

“Initial Positive Experiences” includes factors that are concerned with the extent to which the athletes had a positive experience upon their return to training and sport. This theme is broken down into three subthemes, which are: (1) *Seeing Teammates - the experience of reconnecting and seeing teammates upon return to sport*, (2) *Feeling Happy/Positive - the extent to which the athlete has a general positive outlook or attitude about their return to training and sport*, (3) *Normality Has Resumed - the extent to which athletes felt their lives had returned to normal upon their return to training and competition*.

#### **Seeing Teammates.**

Athletes were forced to spend months away from family, friends, coaches, and support staff during the lockdown period. Returning to sport meant that they were able to reconnect with their teammates. Some described their teammates as a “second family” and

the excitement that they felt at being reunited. Athletes also stressed the importance of teammates in relation to their performance and training. Shaun had been released by his former team and had recently been signed to a new club. He describes the importance of a team who values socialising:

Um, and then this team is definitely a bit more social in terms of um we had a team dinner last week that the owners put on for us. Um, most of the guys do go out at least once or twice a week and get food together and I think those things are really important and particularly in this current climate um to build that chemistry and we were speaking actually and we were saying that, you know, during this season when we're not going to have fans in the [stadium], chemistry and communication in particular is going to be really, really important (Shaun).

Going back to [sport] and training and seeing my teammates again like they're like a second family to me, you know, spend all of my time with them and not even being able to see them properly was quite hard, but now that I'm back with them and training it's just really nice to have that again. (Meghan)

Not only was seeing teammates a very positive experience for athletes, Karl also explains the key role his teammates have in keeping him motivated to train, holding him accountable, and being of a like-minded attitude:

Yeah, I think like uh I think um it's been a bit easier in that I'm accountable to other people now rather than just me. Like obviously before it didn't matter if I was there or not really um you know rather than me. I've said I'll be there and I don't want to let someone down. People need me there to hit me and stuff so got to be there...(Karl)

**Feeling Happy/Positive.**

Once training had commenced, athletes shared their experience of positive emotions from an individual and team perspective:

Yeah, um, I just remember, well I was giddy, but everyone was really giddy. Like just kids basically. It was just like to actually play and get on the field was just like, yeah, as if I just went back like twenty years probably [laughs]. (Jen)

But like obviously I've not been doing not a lot, I slept like a baby that week. I was so excited all the time! (Karl)

I think everyone was just really happy to be in the privileged position to be able to train... Which was quite a nice feeling. Uh yeah so everyone was just really happy that we got the opportunity to do it... Like it was still pretty isolated whilst you were in camp, but it was fine because we were playing [sport] and everyone was just loving life that we were actually playing [laughs]. (Katie)

Katie's experience highlights that not only were athletes happy to be back training and competing, but that they were also honoured and thankful for the return of their sport. However, the prospect of returning to sport brought mixed emotions for some athletes. Meghan experienced a mix of happiness and nervousness, with concern about what her coaches might think about her post-lockdown return:

I was excited but then I was nervous, just mixed emotions, I was like, "This is great, things are cooking again." and then I was like, "Oh my goodness are they going to judge me for like what my fitness levels are going to be? What if I can't do this?". So, it was just a massive mix of emotions where, you know, bigger picture was that I was really happy to be going back and because I'd really missed it but there was the other ones when I was a bit nervous. Like when I was going into the building I was there like, "I don't know what to expect here like, are they going to critique us? Are they

going to ease us into it? Or are they going to go straight in and hammer us?” There was a lot of emotions! (Meghan)

### **Normality Has Resumed.**

Return to training meant that a perceived sense of normality had been restored to the athletes’ lives, whilst acknowledging training and competition had not completely returned to “normal” in comparison to pre-COVID:

Um, but yeah it feels like we’re back to normal now, we’ve still got slightly longer days now ‘cos we’ve obviously got competitions so it’s more meetings for strategy meetings, so we have to give time for that. Um, so yeah, so it’s sort of back to normal without it being ‘normal’ like it was years previous. (Gary)

They had loads of different things in place. Obviously sanitiser...um, lots of different things, but at the same time, we as players, we were just playing [sport]. Which felt extremely normal. (Jen)

Katie shared her somewhat ‘surreal’ experience competing in a country with little to no COVID-19 restrictions. Restrictions and COVID-19 safety measures were not necessary, due to the little-to-no infections within the country:

And that meant no masks, no social distancing, like literally there was no, it was literally like COVID wasn’t there. Do you know like around the UK there’s signs everywhere about COVID? There’s literally like there was nothing there. Um, so that was a bit weird, to be fair, walking around to go to the shops and being able to go to restaurants and just literally do whatever we want...It was literally like life had resumed back to normal when we were in [country], which was nice [laughs]. (Katie)

### **Middle: Experiencing Challenges of COVID-19**

Once athletes had returned to sport, many quickly encountered further challenges and obstacles upon their return. These challenges were a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic on the athletes' sport as a whole, or challenges as a consequence of the lockdown period impacting athletes directly.

### ***Challenges Faced by Athletes***

The theme 'Challenges Faced by Athletes' is divided into eight subthemes: 'Limited Training' - *refers to the restricted nature of athletes return to sport*, 'Levels of Fitness/Injury/Fatigue' - *athletes' experiences of their physical state on return to sport*, 'Loss of Technical Ability' - *impact the lockdown experience had on athletes' technical ability on return*, 'Competitions/Season Cancellations/Postponements' - *athletes experiences of their regular competitive seasons being cancelled or postponed*, 'Uncertainty' - *athletes' concerns surrounding how their sport will proceed, how competitions will be arranged, and general uncertainty surrounding the general COVID-19 pandemic*, 'Team Infections' - *describes the athletes' experiences of other members of the team contracting COVID-19*, 'Levels of Anxiety About Contracting COVID-19' - *the extent to which the athlete is concerned about contracting the COVID-19 virus themselves*, and 'Elite Immunity' - *refers to the view that athletes are not restricted to the 'everyday' protocols or restrictions*.

#### **Limited Training.**

COVID-19 restrictions on training set by governing bodies meant that many athletes had to train with reduced numbers or small 'pods'. These presented their own challenges, for example, the training 'atmosphere':

... we're waiting to go to the next phase, which is having the whole group together training because that's where the atmosphere is. I vibe off of that, because that for me is the game changer in my training. You know, when you come into training you want

to enjoy what you do, you want to have a vibe, you know, it's like anyone who goes out who goes to a party, you're not going to go to a party with no music on are you? (Ronald)

Karl uses an analogy of a Ferrari with a speed limiter to describe his experience of limited training:

It's like I could do everything, just not properly. Like you know like, you're allowed to drive a Ferrari, but at forty miles an hour, "aw great, cheers mate". But you're still going to drive it, you're not going to go in your Fiesta, are you? You're still going to drive it. Like uh, you know, it's obviously better than nothing, but you know, I know it's not the same. (Karl)

#### **Levels of Fitness/Injury/Fatigue.**

Coming back to sport meant many athletes were met with the harsh reality of the physical nature of their sport:

Yeah, I mean, my body has been so sore coming back I was like, "Oh why did I love this sport again?!" the first session back. (Meghan)

And uh and I've been really quite um tired and stuff. Like I think on Monday I done three sessions for the first time since before lockdown. I was fucking knackered. Like uh see yesterday like Monday night I slept from like ten 'til eight and I then I had like a three-hour nap in the day and I would still would have been early, but I was wiped out um but I sort of like dragged myself there. (Karl)

Competing after a relatively short period of return meant that some were still concerned about their recurring injuries and how long they may last in a competitive match:

Like you can kind of coast a bit in practice, well I have been able to [laughs]. Um, but yeah in a game situation you can't, so I was a bit nervous about my body uh holding up, just with such a long break and stuff and how fatigued I'd be. (Jen)

In contrast, the lockdown period had given Ronald time to recover from injury and improve his physical fitness, meaning he was able to capitalize on his return:

It's weird to say, but I'm in the best shape I have been for a very long time, before the lockdown, I have little injuries, I had little niggles, qualifying was very hard in itself, I was fighting injured...(Ronald)

### **Loss of Technical Ability.**

Some athletes experienced a deterioration of their skill level on their return as a result of the lockdown period. On their return, athletes struggled to engage their sporting 'brain' and experienced some confusion about their duties within drills:

Like, the first day back I'd forgotten to do even the simplest of moves because it had been so long, I was just there like, my coach told me a move and I was just like, "How do I do that again?" I know the move but my body just wouldn't do it. (Meghan)

...even though you've been doing it for years, so yeah, it was always going to be like that at the beginning and the first two or three weeks, I tell you what Nick, you'd be like, "What the bloody hell is he doing?". I was all over the show, like, I didn't know what time it was, I didn't know how to control my opponent, it was like, unknown territory...(Ronald)

### **Competition/Season Cancellation/Postponements.**

Sporting events were still subject to cancellation and postponements similar to the initial lockdown period. Athletes were faced with the challenge of missing out on

competitions and regular season. Because of the ongoing cancellations, athletes experienced a sense of frustration and disappointment:

So, the show was cancelled. So even if I wanted to and then quarantine after or whatever I didn't have the choice, so. That was pretty gutting to be fair. It was sort of like as well, um I done all the hard work up to it. I had like 2 weeks left I lost all the weight and I was like fit again. And that was cancelled. (Karl)

...but our international which is in [month] which is meant to be in [country] has been cancelled, which is really annoying 'cos that's a great opportunity. That's always a really good opportunity in the international calendar, uh so that's been taken away from us. (Katie)

### **Uncertainty.**

Athletes were faced with the challenges of uncertainty surrounding their careers and expectations of the competitive seasons ahead of them. For Karl, the prospect of continuing to battle through the challenges coupled with the unknowing of when he will come out the other side sparked an interesting metaphor:

But its uh, yeah, it's like it sort of feels like we're muddling through, but we don't know where the end is, um you know just like uh you know like Andy Dufresne in the Shawshank, but you don't know how long that thing is, it could be fucking miles, we could be just like walking through shit every day like we just like no idea when things gonna change...(Karl)

Many athletes felt left in the dark concerning competitions. The potential for last minute changes in fixtures and arrangements resulted in anxiety, particularly for those travelling abroad to compete:

...so it was all, the anxiety of not knowing if it's going to happen and then all of a sudden now we're going to [country] and it's happening. (Jen)

And obviously we still weren't sure if we're actually going to go on the plane until we were on the plane and then we were like, "OK this is really weird, that we're actually on a flight, going to [country]. (Katie)

### **Team Infections.**

As training resumed, the virus continued to permeate the sporting environment. With regular testing in place within these training environments, some participants shared their experiences of team members testing positive:

One player had to isolate cos you've got cameras set up all round the training facility. So, they had to analyse all the footage and just us in the gym, walking around and then anybody who's in contact with that player for longer than fifteen minutes, sort of face to face, they had to isolate until they got a retest. So, one other player I think spent longer than fifteen in close contact. So, they had to isolate along with the player who tested positive and then we all got tested on that Monday and the results got back the next day and no one had it, so. (Gary)

For Katie, a positive COVID test for her teammate meant this individual was not able to travel for their competition:

We obviously got the news that [teammate] tested positive for COVID...so she couldn't come to [country] with us, which is obviously a massive shock (Katie)

### **Levels of Anxiety About Contracting COVID-19.**

Despite the restrictions put in place by governing bodies to limit and prevent infection, some were still experiencing levels of anxiety at returning to compete against other teams outside of their team bubble:

Um, so yeah I think that it's caused me anxiety 'cos it seems like, yeah we're going to be fine, but actually, how do you know that? Because there's that many things in place to make sure that is the case. Um, but yeah, it's just hoping that nobody has 'hidden' symptoms, I guess. Um actually, the team we're due to play against, the first official game, [team], they actually had a positive, or actually a few positives now, um on one of their like academy teams. (Jen)

For Gary, his previous experience of contracting the virus and mixed information about the possibility of reinfection meant he did not let his guard down. Overall he felt he was safe and felt comfortable about his training arrangements:

Yeah, I suppose so, I feel like, the talk in the press is that if you've had it you've had it then it's likely you're not going to get it again but there's no guarantees so I'm not, I'm certainly not slacking or anything that I shouldn't be doing, I'm sort of being sensible and just sort of following what everyone else is doing really...(Gary)

For Katie, her anxiety of testing positive was attributed to a concern for her health, but rather the possibility of deselection for the squad, like her teammate:

Yeah, um, I'm not going to lie when we done the testing, it was the most nervous I've ever been 'cos obviously we've been through the whole selection process of going to [country]. Like some girls were being left at home and stuff like that...and I know everyone was really nervous in that first test because it was like, if you get tested positive, you're staying at home, there's no way you can fly or compete. (Katie)

### **Elite Immunity.**

The ability for athletes to travel and compete under ‘elite’ status outside the ‘regular’ restrictions left some participants to question the rationale behind their return to sport:

Yeah, I think so, I just think it’s quite funny - so obviously elite athletes are sort of, yeah, they have sort of a pass when it comes to COVID for some reason, which I think is just so funny. I know it’s because they’ve got all the stuff in place and testing and everything like that. But I just find it really funny that it’s like “yeah all these restrictions are in place for everyone but if you’re an elite athlete you’re fine, you’ll be OK, COVID can’t touch us”. [laughs] Like I think that’s funny so um, yeah, I think that’s probably why I don’t believe that. I think obviously if I’m coming to contact, I’m going to get it. Um, being an elite athlete, is that going to stop it? (Jen)

So, yeah, there’s definitely an argument to say, well why even play sport? Like why even have elite sport? Um, me and one of my teammates were talking today actually and saying, it’s kind of bit weird how elite sport is separate to these conversations and just exempt from these restrictions, like are we not people too? (Shaun)

For those individuals who had yet returned due to government restrictions, some opted to bend the rules despite the government restrictions put in place. Return to sport guidelines differed between sports and each with their own ‘schedules’. Karl continued to train despite these restrictions:

Um. So, I think I can [train] at the moment. But you know, I’m gonna you know, it’s sort of like we’re sort of taking it as a little like it’s like professional athletes and stuff and those bit’s and sort of like borderline, do you know what I mean? (Karl)

For Karl, local restrictions and the risk of contracting or spreading the virus was not enough to keep him from covertly training. He opted for a ‘middle ground’ between not training at all

or resuming his 'pre-COVID' regular training. His decisions demonstrate that the dangers surrounding COVID-19 were not enough to keep from training in his coach's garden:

Yeah absolutely, like uh but you know, sort of like I sort of think what's the alternative really, do you not do any of them, or do you go like "fuck it", do all of it...I guess I sort of picked a middle ground where I'm uh only breaking half the rules or [laughs] it's sort of, or maybe like where we're doing it, but not blatantly, cos it is like a bit hush hush still and stuff...(Karl)

### ***Athletes' Attempts to Cope***

The COVID-19 pandemic had impacted the athletes' lives, both in and out of sport, and athletes were faced with a variety of challenges as a result. Athletes attempted to navigate and cope with these challenges individually using internal and external resources available to them. The theme 'Athletes' Attempts to Cope' is made up of two subthemes: 'Acceptance' – *the utilization of acceptance to cope with the challenges athletes' faced*, and 'Engaging with Dual-Career' - *careers outside of sport that allowed athletes to better cope with the challenges of COVID-19 and restrictions of training*.

#### **Acceptance.**

The ability to cope with the challenges faced by athletes were met by a sense of acceptance. Many athletes felt that after so long facing the challenges posed by COVID-19 and lockdown, they had reached a point where they just had to accept and 'get on with it'. Karl, who was training in his coach's garden, chose to accept the challenges associated with training outside, in this example, the poor weather conditions:

Like it would be easy, it would be really easy not to just be like "it's raining today we won't train" or you know "we can't train in the gym let's not train". We just do it. So, you know. It is what it is I suppose. (Karl)

For some, the help of a Sport Psychologist allowed them to become more accepting of the situation and solidifying his career aspirations:

...last time I told you that I was in a position, should we say, not knowing what's going on and it's still the same. I'm in limbo, because I really don't know what's going on, erm...So, the moment my mind accepted that was the moment all the stress went away of it not being, is it this year or next year? And I have to give thanks to my psychologist [name], because he made me think in that way and ever since then I've accepted that thought and nothing has distracted me from what I need to do...(Ronald)

### **Engaging with Dual-Career.**

Many of the athletes had vocations outside of their athletic life, providing them with routine in their lives and a sense of normality. For two of the participants, this came in the form of working for a school:

I'm now working in a school, so I've been working for the past few weeks now, so I've been changing my focus as well on to that. So, my days are busier um and I've got a proper routine of training in the morning, going to work and then coming home and maybe training again or just relaxing [laughs] (Katie)

On the other hand, Shaun describes the challenge of balancing his dual-career once his sport has resumed training and the impact of balancing the two:

What it looked like was probably me not being 100 percent focused in either area. Just kind of doing enough to make sure the day job, you know putting out fires almost in the day job and then surviving rather than thriving, type of thing. (Shaun)

### **End: Reflecting on the Return Experience**

The experiences of the athletes led them to consider what they had learnt about themselves as individuals and as athletes. Time away from sport had given them the opportunity to engage in other spheres of life. Returning to sport had led to an ‘*unpause*’, meaning athletes were able to resume their athletic lives once again. Once resumed, many athletes were able to take stock of what their sport meant to them and what they were like as people and performers prior to the lockdown:

The one thing I would say that COVID probably just gave you a lot of thinking time really... Yeah, I think it has helped, I feel like I’m better out the back end of it. Um, and probably in a better place. (Gary)

### ***Lessons Learnt***

The theme ‘Lessons Learnt’ is made up of two subthemes: ‘Appreciation of Sport’ - *an added sense of appreciation of their sport after the lockdown experience and upon returning to training*, and ‘Broadening Identity’ - *athletes acknowledging and understanding that they are more than athletes, and that their identities extend beyond an athletic one.*

#### **Appreciation of Sport.**

Returning to sport prompted a realisation that sport may not be around forever; lockdown had left them with a sense of appreciation of sport and a thankfulness to train again:

I’ve really realised how much I’ve missed it and I’ve talked to my other teammates and they’ve missed it just as much. So, I’ve become a lot more appreciative of what I have, so I guess I could be thankful in a way for the lockdown of opening my eyes to that side, but another thing is I don’t ever want it to happen again [laughs]. (Meghan)

... I think we're all just still like, a bit giddy about everything because um, we don't know how long it's going to last as well [laughs], is the other thing. So, we're just trying to like appreciate it, rather than be stressed out or feel like it's a chore to go to practice. (Jen)

### **Broadening Identity.**

Reflecting on their experience of lockdown and their return, athletes began to understand that they had identities outside of their sport, were able to reconnect with family, and understand they were much more than athletes:

Erm it means I'm more than just an athlete you know I've realised my athletic identity is a massive part of my life, but I've realised I'm very good at stuff other than just my sport you know, I'm great at what I do in work I'm well respected within there I know that I've got a great family...I've got more connections with them I've got to see my friends outside of my sport world. I see myself as more than just an athlete now and I think that's one thing I did always struggle with before was you'd ask me like who I am and I'd just say, "Oh I'm a [athlete]." But now I have more to say for myself which I'm happy for. (Meghan)

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine athletes' stories surrounding their return to sport. In particular, the present study aimed to investigate how athletes navigated their return to sport and how this impacted them as people and performers. After analysing the participants' stories, their experience was best described in the following narrative structure:

*Beginning: Return to Training and Competition, Middle: Experiencing Challenges of COVID-19, and End: Reflecting on the Return Experience.* There were four narrative themes:

(1) *Initial Positive Experiences*, (2) *Challenges Faced by Athletes*, (3) *Athletes' Attempts to Cope*, and (4) *Lessons Learnt*.

Based on the narrative structure and themes co-constructed from athletes' stories, our findings highlight the significant positive impact returning to sport had on athletes' lives. The findings based on an analysis of the narrative structure bears some similarities to the return to sport following injury (Podlog & Eklund, 2006; 2007a; 2009). Evidence from Clement and colleagues' (2015) three-phase rehabilitation study following injury characterised the return to sport phase with elicited feelings of excitement and happiness. In the present study, for athletes to be reunited with their teammates and resume training was described as an overwhelmingly positive experience. This being said, our findings bring to light a milieu of challenges associated with their return as a consequence of COVID-19 and the lockdown experience. The challenges of returning identified within the middle section of the narrative structure with returning have been echoed in previous research concerning athletes' perceptions of returning to sport following periods of confinement (Mehrsafar et al., 2021). Similarly, Ozan-Tingaz (2021), in their examination of athletes' perceptions of returning to sport found that athletes' engaged in thoughts concerning the future and attempted to cope with levels of uncertainty. This highlights that although returning to sport following periods of lockdown, athletes' may experience

By utilizing a narrative approach, this research provides further insight into *performance narratives* that are told by the athlete (Douglas & Carless, 2006). These narratives are typified by a single minded dedication to sport performance above all else and to the exclusion of all other aspects of an athlete's life (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Returning to sport after engaging in an unanticipated event led some athletes to engaging in and reaffirming the performance narrative, and for others, the conflict that arose as a result of the return to sport experience led them to broadening their identities and

drawing on other narratives (Ronkainen et al., 2014). An unexpected event, in this case the global pandemic, might have led to a difficulty in athletes' navigating their identities and putting athletes' at risk of distress due to identity foreclosure and a lack of career-management and planning (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy et al., 1996; Schinke et al., 2020b; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). The present study gives a wide account of the *performance narrative*, from an individual and socio-cultural level. For instance, the challenge of lockdown on Karl's ability to train led him to 'bend' the rules and pursue his athletic career despite what restrictions might be in place. Other athletes' attempted to resist the performance narrative, engaging in vocations and projects outside of sport. Douglas and Caress (2013) similarly gave account of athletes' resisting the performance narrative, recognising other aspects in their lives that contributed to their identity that subsequently assisted their overall wellbeing.

Athletes' *performance narrative* can also be influenced at a socio-cultural and global level (Carless & Douglas, 2013, Ingham et al., 2002), where discourse may arise in navigating their lives, identities, and sense of self against the dominant narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013). This research presents novel insight into some athletes' opinions surrounding their return to sport following lockdown and the expectations placed on them to perform during the pandemic. During October 2020, secondary lockdowns had been implemented and enforced by law as a response to the rising infection rates and COVID-19 related deaths (BBC News, 2020a). In the present study, some athletes were left with a sense of bewilderment that elite sport was allowed to continue despite restrictions and infection rates within their respective localities. Although many felt 'privileged' and thankful to return, some athletes questioned the reasoning behind a 'free pass' to travel throughout the UK, and even to other countries. It is not unusual for athletes to be viewed as 'superhuman' and/or be treated in a 'machine-like' manner (Rintala, 1995) who transcend the boundaries of

‘everyday’ humans. However, some of the athletes in our study raise the question of their own well-being, acknowledging their own mortality (“Are we not human too?” Shaun) as a consequence of continuing to train and compete despite the ongoing pandemic.

### **Practical Implications**

We offer practical implications based on these results as surrounding the levels of uncertainty and how acceptance can be adopted within the applied field. This could include the development of acceptance through the use of acceptance based approaches, such as Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, 2009) or Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment (MAC; Gardner & Moore, 2004) to better cope with the challenges and uncertainty surrounding sport during the pandemic. Uncertainty was prevalent for some athletes’ who had yet to begin competing, similar to previous literature (Hakansson et al., 2021; Ozan-Tingaz 2021; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). Further, Mehrosfar et al. (2021) found preliminary evidence to suggest that COVID-19 anxiety and competitive anxiety might pose a negative impact on the athletic performance of professional football players during COVID-19 pandemic competitions. Levels of uncertainty and concerns around positive COVID tests might lead to last minute and sudden halts to practices or even periods of isolation. Such interventions might be suited to promote the overall promotion of psychological flexibility that assist in the development of the athletes’ wellbeing, as well as their performance (Noetel et al., 2019).

Given the perceived benefits of athletes’ dual-careers to reduce the risk of identity foreclosure (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Stambulova, 2010), practitioners should continue work alongside athletes’ to develop and explore their identities and other life spheres (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017; Stambulova et al., 2015). This might be achieved through a ‘person-first’, holistic approach to the consultancy process (Friesen & Orlick, 2011;

Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) that might assist in broadening athletes' identities (Peptitpas et al., 2013). An example of support staff that can facilitate this process includes 'lifestyle advisors' that aim to develop the individuals' identity through exploring other roles and vocations outside sport (Knight et al, 2018).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite a well-developed and effective researcher-participant relationship formed as a consequence of the multiple interviews over a number of months, the present research is still at the mercy of the information that is shared by the participants and the co-constructed nature of the interview process. Information may have been excluded or silenced by participants, meaning that other narrative structures may exist within the data or that has not been collected by the research team. The narratives contained within the context of this study are of elite athletes and may not represent amateur to semi-professional levels. Further studies should endeavour to explore populations where sport may not be an individual's primary career.

Future research should continue to monitor and evaluate the impact of short-term pauses, how athletes navigate and make sense of their lives during these periods and endeavour to investigate the potential differences and/or similarities of the injury-lockdown conceptual relationship. We believe our research has opened the door for the opportunity to investigate athletes' perceptions of how they are viewed as individuals and the moral and ethical implications of continuing to train and compete outside local or national lockdowns, even when members of staff, teammates, or athletes themselves contract the virus. Future research should also aim to explore to what extent, if any, the impact of COVID-19 has had on persistent behaviours and attitudes that are adopted by athletes throughout their lives

hereafter. The present research team aims to conduct a longitudinal analysis that may provide insight into these areas.

## Conclusion

The present study explored the stories told by participants on their return to sport following lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' stories were represented in three distinct sections: *Beginning: Returning to Training and Sport*, *Middle: Experiencing Challenges of COVID-19*, and *End: Reflecting on the Return Experience*. By using narrative analysis, we were able to explore how the return to sport impacted participants as people and performers. We were able to identify four narrative themes that were co-constructed: *Initial Positive Experiences*, *Challenges Faced by Athletes*, *Athletes' Attempts to Cope*, and *Lessons Learnt*. The present study also presented practical implications and applied recommendations surrounding athletes' return to sport. We also recommend future research to investigate the effects of lockdown and the experience of COVID-19 on athletes' lives both in and out of sport once major competitions and seasons have resumed and for athletes dealing with recurring postponements to competition due to the currently ongoing pandemic.

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## Research Commentary

Uprooting my life in Scotland and taking the leap to Liverpool to study my professional doctorate and to run my sport psychology consultancy presented challenges. Following my masters, I decided to start the next leg in my sport psychology career afresh. From the first week of the professional doctorate I had ensured to plan ahead, using the time that was required to procure the necessary placements or work opportunities alongside research activities. As shown in my practice diary, the systematic review was one of the first assessment components I decided to start. This was also due to the fact I had no idea what a systematic review was! I had only really encountered ‘reviews’ throughout my academic career and did not understand if and how systematic reviews were different. I found myself feeling like I was academically ‘behind’ those who had gone through the Liverpool John Moores system. They had conducted systematic reviews in their masters and had an idea of what was involved and how systematic reviews intended to synthesise existing literature to inform and develop the present body of literature, inform future research of methodological trends, and develop new data or theories based on the current knowledge base (Paterson et al., 2011; Tod, 2019). With perceived limited knowledge I decided to pick my systematic review subject area of my and start early, as I knew this would be a mammoth task that would likely be full of setbacks. I completed it 38 months later. .

The systematic review was by far the most difficult submission for my portfolio. First, identifying the particular subject area that I wished to investigate was trickier than I thought. Secondly, I was not aware that there were different types of systematic review depending on the approach. This resulted in me dedicating way more hours than intended as I decided to start over multiple times. That said, despite the stress and the arduous process of synthesising the data, I believe my meta-study provides insightful, relevant impact to work-life balance within sport professionals.

I was not prepared for the vast amount of knowledge and understanding of the research process that was required for a doctorate level degree; in particular, the underpinning methodological considerations and the impact one's own beliefs and values contribute to the researcher's alignment with different paradigms. I was also perhaps naïve to the fact that modern sport psychology research has developed in a way that places emphasis on applied practical implication. I believe this is somewhat reflective of my first empirical paper that utilized a cross-sectional survey approach as its methods. I was perhaps too eager to get going with what I believed was a novel study, and did not take time to consider how my approach and the findings might inform practice, or how my approach to the methodology of the study might be considered further so that the reader might gain more applied insights from the findings. This brings me to the first major reflection surrounding my research commentary, where my initial approach to conducting research was rooted in a post-positivist, realist paradigm.

It is argued that researchers should understand their ontological and epistemological viewpoints before conducting research and in the development of said research to ensure methodological coherency (Mayan, 2009). Although I had not explicitly examined my underpinning theoretical positioning or perspective for my first quantitative study (empirical paper 1) in this way, my current positioning at the time reflected post-positivist, realist assumptions. My first empirical paper aimed to investigate exercise dependence in CrossFit exercisers and to identify possible associated psychological factors; a set of assumptions were held that were rooted in a post-positivist philosophy. That was, there was a held belief that the psychological phenomena in question could be assessed, which would then provide generalisable findings outside of the research and that knowledge is something to be discovered outside of the knower.

My philosophical positioning in my first six months to a year of being on the professional doctorate was a drastic period of transition. After finishing my masters, I had assumed the 'expert' role, adopting a predominantly cognitive-behavioural approach to my consultancy. However, through many hours of reading, through the CPD events held by the University, and through my own applied experience; I began to understand the many different approaches to not only applied practice, but to research. In my mind, there was qualitative and quantitative research. One dealt with numbers and the other dealt with interviews. My experience over the last three years has exposed me to many other approaches within the 'umbrella' of these two modes of research. The reading of Sparkes and Smith's (2013) book in particular was extremely helpful in understanding the different approaches to qualitative research, understanding my values as a researcher, and appreciate how different methodological approaches might satisfy particular research questions.

Overall, I believe my first empirical paper was a success in that I was conducting research that was quantitative, which was the only approach I had used in my academic career to that point. This allowed me to 'settle' in to the professional doctorate and conduct a cross-sectional survey in a novel arena. Choosing CrossFit as well as the psychological phenomena of exercise dependence meant I was able to contribute to academic knowledge in arenas that have yet to be fully explored. I was excited as a researcher to gain entry into this demographic, as CrossFit presents itself almost as a hybrid exercise/sport activity. I believe that this added to my portfolio and my research repertoire by conducting research in the domain of exercise, and the under-researched topic of exercise dependence..

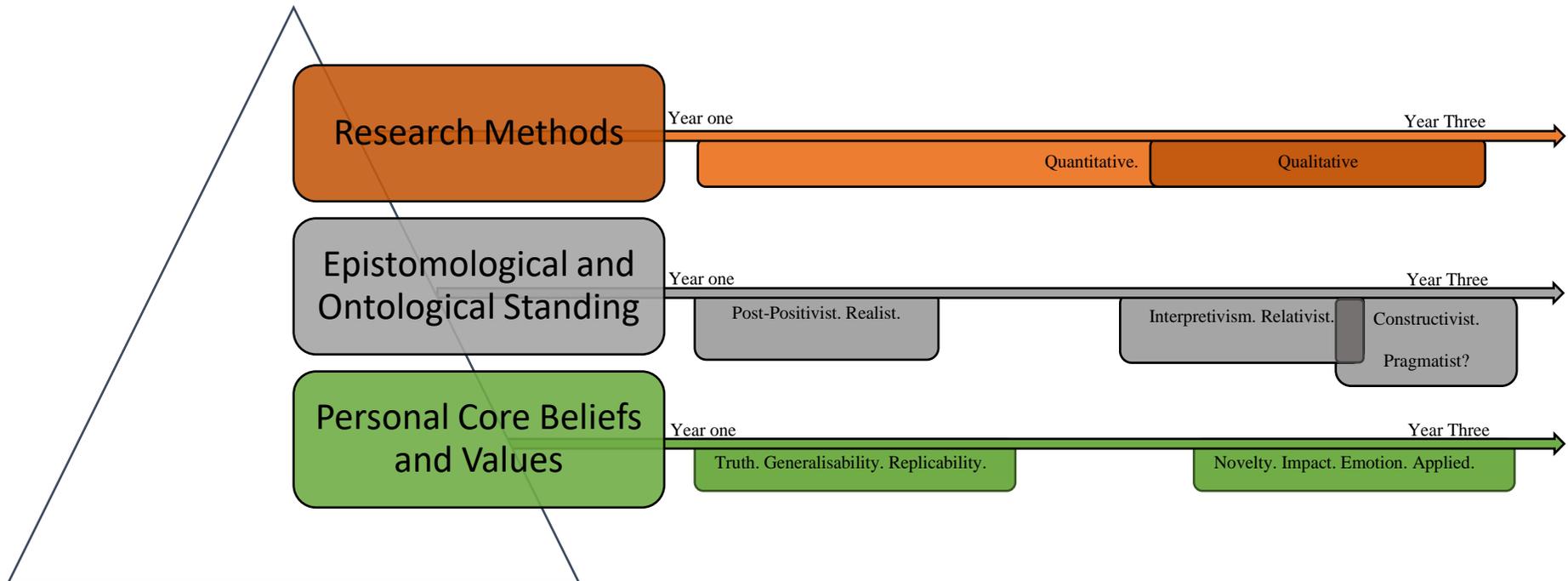
One of the main challenges of my first empirical paper was gaining entry to the population in question. As I wanted to gather participants from affiliated Cross-Fit 'boxes', I had to utilize social media and email to contact potential gatekeepers of the gyms and then rely on said gatekeepers to recruit participants. There may have been significant pros and

cons to this approach. First, recruitment from the box admin or owner in recruitment may have led to a better response rate as the potential participants knew the gatekeeper, as opposed to an unknown researcher attempting to recruit participants. On the other hand, reliance on a second party to first, respond to my request for access, and second, to pass on the study details may have led to a filter effect of participant recruitment. This being said, I was proud of the number of participants gained from the study and securing them from all across the UK meant I had a good representative sample. Future endeavours to conduct quantitative research will be informed by the lessons I have gleaned from this study, which will ultimately provide a better understanding of methodological approaches to data collection. Another major challenge was creating opportunities to disseminate my research to the CrossFit community. I believe this was due to the 'negative' nature of my study. The community is tight knit and possesses a passion for their chosen exercise regime. Bringing in a trainee sport psychologist to 'educate' them on the risks of exercise dependence and the potential links with self-esteem, reasons for exercise, and satisfaction with life might have put admins or owners of boxes off my services. Granted, I could have done a lot more to gain entry to disseminate findings, but I do not place the limitations of the dissemination wholly down to circumstance and outside factors. My plans following my submission include targeting a journal that is the right fit for this research as I now have some experience in the submission and review process.

Following on from my cross sectional study, I decided that I wanted my second empirical paper to be qualitative in nature, so I was able to expand and develop my skills as a researcher. Moreover, by my second year, my values, philosophical underpinning, and approach to practice had developed in parallel to my evolving ontological and epistemological positioning. Figure 1 below depicts my experience of this evolution. I had moved from a traditional certaintist practitioner (albeit with some tendency in leaning

towards a construalist perspective within my practice) that was rooted in a positivist academic history to a philosophy that was, in a way, more open in its approach to knowledge construction. As this commentary pertains to research alone, my comparisons between the evolution of practitioner and researcher philosophy is explored further within my meta-reflection at the end of the portfolio.

**Figure 1.** Notable personal research developments throughout the professional doctorate programme.



My second empirical paper was born out of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was approached by a professional doctorate colleague to investigate the impact the nation-wide lockdown had on athletes' lives. The initial study (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021) was conducted as a research team, something I had not done before. I had not realised that conducting research with other practitioners was an option for the professional doctorate as long as I was able to make a significant contribution to the work. Working in a research team was an invaluable experience and this study was a major period of development for me as a researcher. First, it was the first qualitative study that I had been involved in. This significantly impacted my ontological and epistemological positioning as we adopted a narrative approach to our method. As discussed previously, I had begun to understand and relate to a more relativist ontological position with a subjectivist epistemology. To examine the subjective lived experience of the athletes, my colleagues and I discussed our assumed philosophical underpinning of our research. In particular, that multiple meanings and ways of knowing existed to examine meaning and the human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This was something I resonated with whole-heartedly. On reflection, I felt this philosophical re-positioning as a researcher paralleled with my applied practice development, where my study of existential psychology in sport and the utilization of phenomenology within existential approaches to my practice (Nesti, 2004; Yalom, 1980) had begun to resonate and reflect practitioner congruence.

This new (for me) approach to research was supported in a safe and supported manner where I was able to learn and apply a new paradigm, collect data, and analyse data alongside colleagues whom I had developed a personal and professional relationship with. We opted to use a narrative approach to the study in question, where participants' interviews were examined to co-construct a narrative structure of their experiences along with narrative themes to underpin this narrative structure (Sparkes, 2005). I felt like I was being thrown in at

the deep end slightly, however, the research team as a collective supported and developed together in understanding and utilizing this approach, along with the supervisory assistance of David Tod. Once we had grasped our common philosophical assumptions, our methodology, and method in question, we began our data collection with a solid foundation.

Similar to consultancy, interviews were conducted via Zoom, which (unsurprisingly) presented occasional hiccups. Overall, I believe the interview interaction of participant-researcher were not majorly affected by the limitations of the virtual nature of the interview itself. However, in my opinion, the full extent to which the researcher cannot glean certain cues via body language and verbal communication in a virtual forum are yet to be fully addressed in current literature. Following the data collection, we collaborated to analyse and present the findings via narrative structure and thematic analysis. Again, the collaboration between the team was most enjoyable and assisted in identifying blind spots in knowledge and allowed us all to challenge and reflect on our findings throughout.

Upon completion of the study, we submitted a paper using aspects of the data for review. I had not anticipated how critical reviewers could be! The next step was to address reviewer's comments and revisit our paper based on their recommendations and concerns. Again, perhaps down to my naivety and lack of experience in attempting to publish the research, I continue to be surprised to how much a research paper can change over the course of the entirety of the research process. One lesson included the awareness that an individual's energy expenditure and resource investment can be easily 'misplaced' when conducting research, especially when one is 'shot down' by the review process and you are left questioning whether it was all worth it. I suspect this may become easier as researcher's begin to understand the review process more and what reviewer's look for within the journal. It was an achievement to be part of one of the first qualitative empirical papers to investigate

athletes' experiences of COVID-19, and it is something I was always be proud of going forward in my career.

As our narrative study was part of a larger, longitudinal examination of athlete's experiences, the time came when the research team believed that we had entered the next 'phase' of our research. That was, the return to training and competition for athletes following lockdown. In discussing with the group and Martin (my supervisor), we agreed that I would take the lead on this paper and submit it as my second empirical paper for the portfolio. I remember feeling some amount of anxiety surrounding this. First, I tentatively navigated the issue of the research team's involvement. On one hand, having the support of the team was a strength, on the other, I wanted to ensure the paper was my own (as form part of my portfolio) and that I would not be criticised for gaining a submission off the back of the rest of the team. To address these issues, the team and I ensured role clarity. Each members' roles and responsibilities for the study were set out and examined alongside what was expected of me in my submission. Broadly, only interviews that were conducted as part of the initial study were conducted by the other team members, with two of the eight transcriptions completed by other research team members. 'Nick' and I collaborated in co-creating the narrative structure and themes and 'Laura' sat in as a 'critical friend' during this process. 'Kristin' predominantly assisted with critiquing my writing style and structure (with some input from the rest of the team). Overall, I was happy that the submission was 'my own' and in satisfying the desired competencies for the portfolio.

When the submission was made and comments were returned from the reviewers, I was extremely disheartened. I had made several errors in presenting the interview lengths and subsequently, we were rejected without the opportunity to amend the findings. I felt as though my silly errors has cost us a high impact journal submission and that I had let the team down. I also felt as though my research did not stand up to our first submission, meaning I

was not as good a researcher as the others. Once my initial feelings had subsided and from the support of the team, we resubmitted the paper to another journal. It is currently under review. My lessons from this submission were the following. (a) check and recheck any numbers, (b) provide applied implications, but stay true to my own values and beliefs; don't type up applied recommendations if you don't resonate with them, despite what reviewers say, (c) develop a thick skin; reviewers aren't there to criticise *me* as a person (this being said, some of the comments were noted as being unconstructive by members of the research team).

One other major development point for me was my confidence to address any potential research concerns I had with honesty and courage. For example, one interview that was conducted only lasted around 18 minutes. I remember seeing this number after transcribing the interview, immediately recognising that this might stir up concerns for reviewers. However, I neglected to address my concerns with the group, ultimately leading to the reviewers picking up on this issue. I spoke to one of the research team about my concerns, specifically that I had neglected to voice my concerns in risk of causing upset with the individual who had done the interview. They had agreed that the interview length was short and would likely affect the perceived credibility of the study's findings. This was a critical moment in my development as a researcher. I had learned that sometimes addressing thorny issues such as this would help to serve both the study and the researcher in the long term, despite any discomfort that was created in the short term.

To conclude, I believe the professional doctorate has opened my eyes in so many ways to the ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches to research. Not only did I develop as a researcher in my approach to research (quantitative to qualitative), but I now understand more than I did at the start about the underpinning philosophy and approaches to research. Parallel to my philosophy of practice, I had begun to understand

further the strengths in investigating one's subjective lived experience, adopting a non-foundational approach (Smith & Sparkes, 2013), and underpinning research that aligned with my beliefs and values such as ontological relativism and epistemological constructivism. That said, I do understand and value the benefits of a quantitative approach, so and is not an approach I have buried. In-fact, a pragmatic approach (Sparkes, 2015) is one that has personal appeal and aligns well with my values as a researcher. While facing several early career challenges in conducting and attempting to publish my own research, these challenges served me in a way that I believe has made me a better researcher. I have also conducted research in three distinct fields: exercise (empirical paper one), sport (empirical paper two), and organisational psychology (systematic review). I believe this shows breadth in my skills and knowledge as a researcher that will assist in my future career endeavours.

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## **Reflective Practice Commentary**

The present reflective practice commentary aims to examine my journey as a trainee sport psychologist enrolled in the sport and exercise psychology professional doctorate over the last three and a half years. Prior to engaging in this assignment, I immersed myself in my previous reflections to examine my consultancy and research experiences, becoming familiar with the recurring themes or common ‘threads’ that emerged in my journey and contributed towards my professional development. In citing some of those reflection here, I endeavour to identify key ‘critical moments’ and learning experiences in my professional development journey that have made a contribution to who I am today. To this end, I am confident I have emerged from the professional doctorate as a practitioner with a greater and competent breadth of knowledge, skill and experience in the applied and research field. I hope to demonstrate courage and honesty within this commentary by ‘zooming in’ and examining my reflections critically (Risner, 2002), and reflecting ‘on’ reflections in a ‘zooming out’ process will allow me place my reflections within the wider context of the field (Risner, 2002). This will also serve to demonstrate who and where I now am as a practitioner who is moving forward with my continued professional development in the sport and exercise psychology domain .

### **Philosophical Development**

Through examining the common themes of my research and consultancy reflections, the present research commentary is split into three sections. The first section concerns my own philosophical development in relation to ontological and epistemological positioning that evolved throughout my three and a half years on the programme, and how this evolution is paralleled in my development and approach to practice, teaching and training, and research.

Coming in to the professional doctorate was an eye-opener. I had no idea philosophy had such profound implications in every aspect of my work. I know understand why philosophy of practice, and Poczwadowski et al's (2004) model and others, is explored so early in the professional doctorate. One's values and beliefs are integral in everything we do. Encountering such information that questions your assumptions at a deep level had the potential to cause confusion and anxiety as a new practitioner. What I thought I knew and what I thought was my standard mode of practice was thrown wide open for questioning and scrutiny:

“I felt apprehensive of what I wanted to adopt as my own professional philosophy and consultancy style.”

Either through a lack of appropriate reading and preparation, or as a result of my own personal academic journey leading up my enrolment at Liverpool John Moores (LJMU), I had not been exposed to, or was not aware of, the implications philosophy had on a sport psychologist's approach to consultancy (Keegan, 2015; Poczwadowski et al., 2004). Through interactions with peers, and through appropriate reading that investigated practitioners' own journeys, I was able to gain some solace that I was perhaps not as out of my own depth as I thought. One of the first initial professional doctorate sessions brought forward some concerns. My limited experience to that point was a little practice in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and I was not aware of many of the other approaches to psychology that existed. When examining my own values and beliefs through the professional doctorate journey, I can now see there was some discrepancy and incongruence from the very beginning:

“From the literature, neophyte practitioners seem to approach their consultancy quite rigid and based in traditional mode of practice (Tod et al., 2009; Stovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). I

was clearly experiencing a similar predicament when examining my own default style against the philosophy of practice.” *Early Philosophy of Practice Reflection*

Keegan’s (2015) book certainly helped break down the standard modes of practices, how philosophy fits with sport psychology, among other practical considerations for neophyte and experienced practitioners alike. Looking back, this was like a bible to me! Through reading this and through professional doctorate sessions dedicated to tackling the elusive and challenging beast of practitioner philosophy, I resonated with the ‘integrated’ approach, whereby I was able to adopt an approach to consultancy that incorporated theoretical principles from both cognitive behaviourism and humanism; I believed it to be the best of both worlds. I could aim to provide a safe space for athletes to explore their current issues, while remaining on task to provide a service that could enhance performance.

At this point in my development, it was clear that, as reflected in my early case experiences and case study write-ups, I was still invested in a high performance, results driven style to sport psychology. The key here was a simple pre and post intervention style whereby if the numbers go up, it’s all good! My attempts to deliver an intervention predominately based on performance enhancement was likely related to the traditional, certaintist realm of sport psychology. In a research parallel, such philosophical positioning, and my personal familiarity with it through previous education and training, led me conduct my first empirical paper that utilized a quantitative, correlational survey methodology rooted in a positivist ontological position. I am confident that if I had understood the constructivist, interpretivist philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research, this might have made me less biased against such methodological approaches that was present within the first six months of my professional doctorate:

“I didn’t feel I was ‘buying’ into the research methods used for this presentation. I continued to feel guilty; these were excellent points being put across but given the ‘scientific’ nature of Sport Psychology I have been studying throughout my academic career, my thoughts came back to - what is the purpose, what is the take home message?.” *Performance Narratives*

It was clear that I had my own preconceptions of what research should endeavour to achieve at that particular moment in time. My belief was that ‘data’ should be generalisable and that a definitive ‘truth’ existed that could be measured and disseminated. With this in mind, it was no wonder that my first empirical paper was a quantitative, correlational study. I have mixed feelings looking back on this paper. On the one hand, I was extremely proud that I was able to conduct a largely independent paper with a significant participant sample size, despite some of the concerns and bumps along the way associated with recruitment and my own perceived feelings of inadequacy:

“Although participants are trickling in, many more boxes have yet to be contacted. I’m feeling confident that I will make the target with this information. I will continue to push on, trust the research process, and acknowledge that as a neophyte practitioner, thoughts of inadequacy and proving one’s worth are bound to appear as a practitioner (Skovholt and Rønnestad, 1992; Tonn & Harminson, 2004) and as a researcher.” *Difficulty in Recruitment*

On the other hand, it became apparent conducting research that investigated exercise dependence was going to present difficulties in dissemination:

“Another major challenge was creating opportunities to disseminate my research to the CrossFit community. I believe this was due to the ‘negative’ nature of my study. The community is tight knit and possess a passion for their chosen exercise regime. Bringing in a trainee sport psychologist to ‘educate’ them on the risks of exercise dependence and the

potential links with self-esteem, reasons for exercise, and satisfaction with life might have put  
admins or owners of boxes off my services. “ *Research Commentary*

I believe conducting this research was necessary for me to examine my own values and beliefs as a practitioner and researcher within the professional doctorate, particularly relating to the importance of applied implications in the field. I had lacked the recognition that research, particularly at a doctoral level, should aim to inform and contribute to the field, and as a researcher-practitioner, it would serve me well to research areas that support this remit. While the findings of empirical study 1 have the ability to contribute to knowledge and application around the phenomena of exercise dependence, , by engaging in reading that explores philosophy, particularly in qualitative methodology (e.g. Sparkes & Smith, 2013), existential psychology (e.g. Nesti, 2004; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) and conducting group research (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021), my ontological lens saw a dramatic shift:

“While I understand the usefulness of utilizing such methods [thematic analysis], I feel sometimes the participant’s individual experience is ‘lost’ in the representation of the data. Reading some narrative studies, for example in Sparkes and Smith’s (2002) and Smith and Sparkes’s (2005) studies, I feel like I really get to ‘know’ the individual and their experience of events and meanings they construct. Some of these studies are emotionally stirring and have significant impact upon reading!” *Ontology and Epistemology Reflection*

Around this time, I was engaged in a significant amount of Teaching and Training as part of the professional doctorate programme. In parallel with my evolving philosophy as a practitioner and researcher, I began to consider how this shift was reflected in my approach to teaching, which also saw a shift due to my philosophical transition. A direct, “teacher led” approach was the standard teaching approach I had experienced ‘growing up’ (Boyd & Harris, 2010), and understandably I went straight for what I knew and the relative safety of

the PowerPoint teaching format as soon I got the opportunity! By developing my own approach that aligned with my practitioner philosophy, I was able to provide teaching sessions that were coherent with my values:

“Through reading and learning about constructivist theory, I was able to understand learners as individual’s with unique perspectives (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). This allowed me to find the ‘common thread’ between my pedagogical approach as a teacher and my philosophical approach as a practitioner (Poczwadowski et al., 2004). “ *Teaching Diary*

I was beginning to see the ‘common thread’ of values and beliefs that inform who we are being consistently played out in my role as psychology researcher, consultant and teacher. By navigating through what was likely an incoherent approach to practice in relation to my values (Lindsay et al., 2007), I had begun to solidify my approach that resonated with my values and beliefs (Poczwadowski et al., 2004). A deeper examination of philosophy within texts books (e.g., Frankl, 1985; Nesti, 2004; Spinelli, 2007; van Deurzen, 1988; Yalom, 1980), radio podcasts (e.g. Bragg, 2007; 2015; 2019), and peers and supervisors, contributed to a deeper understanding of myself within the context of sport psychology. Here, I found alignment with the existential approach, which also resonated with my personal situation in life and how I was navigating the main existential concerns I was experiencing (Nesti, 2004).

At the time, studying what seemed to be the deepest set questions relating to human existence brought me a significant amount of anxiety. Looking back on this event will remain with me I imagine for as long as I live:

“All of a sudden I felt I had become the man on the train. I felt in that moment I had been ‘unlocked’ to the strange and obscure phenomenon that was life itself. The world around me no longer had significance to me.” *Existential Experience*

Experiencing this depersonalisation as a result of the significant amount of time and dedication I had spent in attempting to understand the philosophical and existential approach to psychology had significant contributions to my development as practitioner. I made progress, but I also made mistakes that I regret. I did not possess the courage to truly open myself up to my supervisor at the time. I was preoccupied with the potential ramifications of what disclosing such information to him would do to my place on the doctorate, and thus my career as a sport psychologist. By doing so, I believe I failed to take a real opportunity to show courage that I was in need of help at that moment in time. I must constantly challenge and question my assumptions that psychologists must be mentally ‘strong’ every once in a while. I had not been meeting any clients during this short period, it is difficult to say whether I would have – probably not. However, this reflection serves to remind me that I must acknowledge my weaknesses, remind myself I am human and am subject to stressors just like any athlete, and that support is there if and when I need it and I have the courage to use it.

### **Anxiety**

Through reading my reflections and looking back on what I wished to present within this reflective commentary, I believe that exploring my anxiety experienced in all aspects of my consultancy, research, and teaching are worth exploring further. By doing so, I hope to provide both a narrow and broad focus on the experiences, from individual consultancy experiences, to a broader existential account of anxiety in relation to my development as a practitioner.

What immediately stands out from looking through my reflections is the decision to explore my anxieties, why they presented, and what it might mean:

“I felt nervous about meeting these athletes as I had never worked with disabled athletes before. Being aware that para athletes sometimes had unique challenges in life and

sport (Arnold et al., 2017; Martin, 2005), I felt ill-equipped and perceived myself as less competent due to my lack of experience within the client demographic.” *Working with Para*

*Athletes- First Exposure*

“I was nervous as there were quite a number of rowers and parents in the room. I felt like I had something to prove, to show I was a professional and come across as knowledgeable. This was magnified as I assumed that the parents wanted the best for their children in relation to the services available. If I was unable to live up to that expectation I would be seen as a failure.” *Team Meeting With Parents*

These examples from my consultancy reflections demonstrate the impact new situations, or more specifically, working with new ‘demographics’ had on me, provoking anxiety and a sense of incompetence. Looking back, my fear of judgement from others is something I still struggle with today. This may have resulted in unhelpful coping strategies, such as avoidance and rumination, on what one could argue were insignificant factors that could have hindered my ability to move forward and develop my knowledge and experience. This being said, many opportunities, while anxiety provoking, led to opportunities that opened the door to many other exciting projects (e.g. empirical paper 2). My first formal teaching session was an example of how rumination over a lecture had resulted in significant hours of dedication to ensure it was to of a high standard. While the lecture had gone well, the initial anxieties on the lead up had resulted in the lecture taking precedence over other responsibilities I had at the time:

“Going forward I will seek out further opportunities to build my experience which will allow me to enhance my self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). This might strike a balance between preparedness and the ability to conduct sessions with limited slides and rigid structure. While the formal observation can cause some anxiety and a pressure to provide excellent results, I

believe doing this contributed highly to my teaching development.” *Bolton Case Study*

*Lecture Reflection and Formal Observation*

A placement lecture with level 6 students also evoked anxiety as a result of the large number of students I was to present to:

“I was nervous, I usually feel nerves before talking in front of groups. I usually catch myself shaking which impacts my flow of thought, however I regularly accept this as regular and

unavoidable.” *Case Study lecture to Level 6 Placement Students*

From this excerpt, it was clear that I was not able to escape from the feelings from anxiety. By developing my own skills and expertise in approaches such as Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, 2004) and existential psychology (Nesti, 2004), I had developed the ability to use what I was utilizing within my own consultancy. I believe I possess an excellent level of self-awareness, and despite sometimes getting in my own way by over-thinking, I regularly take the opportunity to engage in mindfulness and the ‘Hexaflex’ contained within ACT. Engaging in a case study that proved to provide an effective intervention in developing psychological flexibility and enhance Michaela’s ability to perform at a consistent level also served to justify why I, as the practitioner, should be engaging in my own intervention practice.

“Achieving enhanced performance from my philosophical stand point is not the main aim in my interventions. However, there was no question that a large part of the perceived ‘progress’ of the intervention held by Michaela was reflected by the 2KM test. These tests were administered by her coach on weeks six, eight, ten, and twelve of the intervention. By the end of the intervention, Michaela was able to achieve several personal bests (PBs).” *Case*

*Study Two*

Looking back, it is no wonder I was perhaps feeling a sense of unease and incongruence (Lindsay et al., 2007), as I had got tied into presenting myself as the ‘expert’. Perhaps deep down I knew I wasn’t. Doing so might have been a direct contradiction between my actions and internal beliefs, and ultimately led to the consistent feelings of anxiety I encountered. This sense of unease persisted through each of the realms of my doctorate; the attempts to navigate a positivist quantitative empirical study, my tendency to provide teacher-led classroom lectures, my initial struggles to push away from mental skills approaches upon enrolment. When I was finally able to utilize an approach that did not assume that the practitioner was the expert, rather, a ‘knowledgeable guide’ (Yalom, 1980), I was finally able to feel comfortable and congruent in my practice. I was now even able to fully understand the benefits of utilizing silence within my consultancy in a way that was beneficial to the overall aims of the therapeutic partnership. I also found strength in holding on to the temptation to provide advice to my client:

“Going forward, this experience has helped towards individuation (McEwen et al., 2019; Tod & Bond, 2010). I believe I have shown courage to acknowledge and resist the temptation to provide ‘advice-giving’ within conducting existential interventions with clients (Nesti, 2004).” *“Just tell me what to do!”*

That said, the anxiety continues to permeate throughout my continued professional development. Two reflections that investigated my recent interview experiences for research assistant roles detail the impact performance anxiety had on my interview experience:

“My answers were weak, I was unable to articulate myself properly (no doubt due to the feelings of inadequacy at trying to navigate questions asked by three esteemed researchers), and the ability to *really* examine the panels facial expressions meant that I assumed they were unimpressed with my answers.” *Interview 1 reflection*

“The next section was 20-25 minutes of questioning. I believe I carried myself relatively well, however, in action reflections prompted me to notice that I had stumbled or struggled to answer some of the questions in a succinct manner. My worries about appearing nervous, being nervous, and attempts to acknowledge and move on with the interview despite these feelings were quite overwhelming.” *Interview 2 reflection*

## **Looking Ahead**

It is difficult to say based on my reflections, my journey, and the current opportunities available within the sport industry, whether I see myself as a sport psychologist five years down the line. I hope so. I feel like my journey has been a difficult one, and one that resonates with much of the literature that has investigated neophyte trainee practitioners in the field. From Tod's (2007) longitudinal research on neophyte practitioner's experiences, it was clear that I had somewhat of an underdeveloped understanding of what my values and beliefs were. Additionally, I had yet to develop or explore my philosophical foundation that contributed to the aims and goals of my consultancy and the mode in which I practiced. This in turn had led me to become a practitioner who values the uniqueness of their clients, their experiences and their own interpretations of their place in the world, who possess situated freedom to influence their world. That said, the ability to utilize interventions that are orientated around mental skills training (MST) and CBT I believe also have their place, and would not exclude this at all from my practice when the client and context aligns with these approaches. There may be circumstances where MST is appropriate, and I doubt I would turn away paid work for delivering such an intervention. Entries from my teaching diary demonstrate the 'flexibility' required as practitioners:

“I also understand based on my philosophy that psychology is not a perfect science, where individuals have their own uniqueness that require consideration with the context in which

one operates. Finally, I understood that being able to ‘flex’ within one’s approach is advantageous in the world of sport (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992).” *Teaching Diary*

Going forward, I believe I show the self-awareness to consider how I am approaching my practice and the justification of why a particular intervention or approach is being taken. I believe I now represent a more authentic version of my practitioner self when conducting consultancy, and I am better able to recognise potential conflicts or ‘rubs’ that elicit anxiety in me when practicing. My holistic approach that has leaned towards a counselling approach has also made me wonder if a role outside sport might provide a better sense of who I am as a practitioner. My work has become less and less about performance and more about the individual, how they relate to the world, and some of the more difficult aspects of navigating day to day life; relationships, identity, meaning, mental health. Engaging more in mental health CPD and applying for research assistant roles have clearly demonstrated that I am willing to expand my horizons and perhaps delve into clinical or counselling psychology.

In conclusion, I believe I have demonstrated a wide variety of competencies within this portfolio through my ethical, consultancy, research and teaching practice that demonstrate achievement of the programme learning outcomes and HCPC standards. The portfolio also demonstrates how reflective practice can explain the *what* and *why* of my experiences and how engaging in reflection has made a significant and meaningful contribute towards the development of effective professional practice (Andersen et al., 2004). Going forward, I will continue to pursue the consultancy and clinical experience that will facilitate further development of my expertise when working with clients and dealing with challenging issues that we face in practice, and I shall continue to seek volunteering and other opportunities that might present themselves in the future.

It is a bittersweet feeling coming to the end of the doctorate, back in Scotland, and still without full-time employment. This journey has definitely raised a significant amount of awareness of who I am and how psychology provides meaning to my life (Frankl, 1984). I am richer for it.

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