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Wadsworth, N

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Abstract

This article presents a reflective case study, from the perspective of a trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist, of an applied consultancy experience with a 14-year old gymnast. The case study highlights a number of applied challenges, such as: working with a client in an unfamiliar sport, questioning who the client is throughout the consultancy process, adopting a philosophy of practice different from the expectations of the parents and further difficulties when including parents within the consultancy process. The case study also highlights how challenges to a practitioner's philosophy of practice can be deeply uncomfortable and involve the practitioner to question their approach to service delivery. Although the intervention only lasted three sessions, there are a number of observations and lessons to be learnt from an applied perspective, such as: being aware of countertransference when building relationships with a client and understanding how the dynamics of the consultancy process might change when involving parents.

Keywords: ethical practice, holistic support, anxiety, countertransference

41 Pressure to Provide a Solution: One-to-One Support with an Elite Junior Gymnast

42 To be effective as an applied sport psychology practitioner, individuals must be able to
43 regulate themselves as both a person and a practitioner (Poczwardowski, 2017), whilst
44 delivering effective interventions with an applied setting (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011).
45 Reflective practice can enhance an individual's effectiveness within an applied context by
46 increasing a practitioner's self-awareness and providing them with a platform to make sense
47 of their applied experiences (Knowles, Gilborune, Tomlinson, & Anderson, 2007). Reflective
48 practice can also allow applied practitioners to understand themselves within their context
49 (Fletcher & Maher, 2013), generate practice-based knowledge (Cropley, Miles, Hanton, &
50 Niven, 2007) and develop a coherent philosophy of practice within the unique environment of
51 professional sport (Larsen, 2017). The following case study, delivered by a trainee Sport and
52 Exercise Psychologist, provides a detailed overview of an applied consultancy experience
53 with a 14-year old gymnast. The client experiences a multitude of challenges simultaneously
54 and the first author relies heavily on reflective practice throughout the consultancy process to
55 make sense of and learn from the variety of challenges presented.

56 **Context**

57 **The Practitioner**

58 At the time of the consultancy experience, I was 24 years of age and was four months
59 into my British Psychological Society (BPS) Stage Two training. BPS Stage Two training
60 requires applied practitioners to demonstrate a multitude of competencies across four distinct
61 areas: ethical practice, research, dissemination and applied practice. Prior to my enrolment on
62 the BPS training pathway, I had engaged in applied practice within two Premier League
63 football academies and so had had multiple opportunities to reflect upon my own philosophy
64 of practice (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). This philosophy of practice was
65 based around the holistic long-term development of both the person and the athlete (Friesen

66 & Orlick, 2010), with the belief that performance and well-being were inescapably linked
67 (Brady & Maynard, 2010). The development of this approach to applied consultancy was
68 undoubtedly influenced by my supervisor at the time (Tod, 2007), but had also been
69 strengthened through the clients I had worked with within professional football. These
70 individuals would often experience multiple critical moments throughout their careers (Nesti,
71 Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012). which required a long-term holistic
72 focus, as opposed to the use of mental skills training to reduce the symptoms of the
73 experience (Corlett, 1996). Furthermore, by adopting a philosophy of practice that was
74 underpinned by my core values and beliefs (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004), I
75 had been able to work congruently within an applied setting (Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, &
76 Maynard, 2007). However, during these applied experiences, I had not had the opportunity to
77 transfer this philosophy of practice into other contexts and sports and I was mindful that I
78 needed to demonstrate more diversity in my training, which could be achieved by working
79 with a variety of sports and athletes. Moreover, as a male practitioner, it was important for
80 me to gain experience of working with female clients in an unfamiliar sport, to enhance my
81 development as an applied practitioner.

82 **The Client**

83 The client (CS), involved in the following case study, is a 14-year-old female, elite
84 junior gymnast, currently competing nationally and internationally within her sport.
85 Gymnastics is a sport that requires early specialisation (Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas,
86 2009) and involves intensive training programmes that can lead to athletes growing up too
87 soon and losing their childhoods (Pinheiro, Pimenta, Resende, & Malcolm, 2014). The
88 demands of the sport can often prevent individuals from engaging in activities that would be
89 viewed as 'normal' by others (David, 2004). CS had recently injured her ankle performing a
90 dismount from the uneven bars and had been attending physiotherapy sessions. The owner of

91 the clinic recommended to both CS and her father that they contact myself for some
92 psychological support. CS's father contacted me directly and explained that upon her return
93 to training, his daughter was experiencing a 'mental block' on the move that had caused the
94 initial injury. CS had a competition in six weeks that she and her coaches were now preparing
95 for and the 'mental block' was preventing her performing a move that was integral to the
96 routine for the competition. As a result of this, both her coach and her father were growing
97 increasingly frustrated at her lack of progress and her father was keen to highlight that he
98 wanted her to overcome this challenge as soon as possible. It is often the case that parents
99 place their trust and faith in the coach, as they lack the experience and knowledge to support
100 their child themselves (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). The role of the gymnastics coach should be to
101 create an appropriate motivational climate and reduce any anxiety gymnasts might be
102 experiencing (White & Bennie, 2015). However, based on the phone call with CS's father, it
103 seemed both he and the coach were putting pressure on CS to overcome the 'mental block'
104 before the competition in 6 weeks' time. In addition to the 'mental block', CS's father also
105 explained how the family had recently moved countries so that CS could train at a more elite
106 gymnastics club. CS's father did acknowledge that this could be having an impact on her
107 current lack of development as an athlete and recognised some of the broader challenges
108 involved with this transition.

109 **The Consultancy Process**

110 **Reflections Prior to Intake**

111 After the phone call with CS's father I was both excited and apprehensive. The
112 prospect of working with a new client was exciting, especially in a sport in which I had little
113 experience of working. However, I felt anxious as CS's father had given me the impression
114 that he wanted me to provide a 'quick-fix' to the 'problem' he had presented; something
115 which is not congruent with my philosophy of practice (Lindsay et al., 2007). On the other

116 hand, the father had acknowledged some broader challenges his daughter was experiencing
117 (moving home/countries/schools and the relationship with her coach), which I felt could be
118 underpinning the ‘mental block’ and so felt comfortable progressing to understand CS’s
119 experiences further. Despite this and perhaps because of the anxiety I was experiencing, I
120 read a number of journal articles related to gymnasts experiencing ‘mental blocks’ and the
121 psychological skills that they utilised to overcome them. Some of the techniques that these
122 athletes were utilising included imagery, self-talk and pre-performance routines (Chase,
123 Magyar, & Drake, 2005; Howell, 2017; Magyar & Chase, 1996; Martin, Polster, Jackson,
124 Greenleaf, & Jones, 2008). However, I was also mindful not to approach the intake and needs
125 analysis with preconceived ideas that would prevent me from understanding CS’s
126 experiences. Moreover, I was aware that the challenges that the father had presented might
127 not have provided a complete insight into the situation or may not have represented CS’s
128 experiences at all. In line with my philosophy of practice, I was consistently aware of the
129 broader issues CS could be facing and I was particularly aware of the challenge that moving
130 away from home could have on an athlete, especially an athlete so young (Barker-Ruchti &
131 Schubring, 2016). Moreover, these critical moments throughout an athlete’s career, are often
132 accompanied by a significant amount of anxiety, as the individual’s identity is challenged
133 (Nesti et al., 2012; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) and so a more holistic approach to service
134 delivery needed to be considered here.

135 With CS’s upcoming competition in mind and her father’s expression of a desire for a
136 ‘quick-fix’, I felt I could not justify separating the intake and needs analysis and so I
137 combined these two elements together in my first session with CS. Separating these two
138 elements of consultancy can be beneficial, although it is not uncommon for them to become
139 blurred throughout the consultancy experience (Keegan, 2016). The primary purpose of the
140 intake session is to build a relationship with the client, whilst allowing the practitioner to

141 provide an honest and transparent overview of their philosophy of practice and any ethical
142 considerations (scope of practice etc.) so the client can make an informed decision about
143 whether to continue their engagement with the consultancy process. The needs analysis
144 session is primarily designed to gain a complete understanding of the experiences of the
145 client and agree on a primary aim for the consultancy process, to help inform the practitioner
146 when developing an appropriate intervention.

147 **Intake and Needs Analysis**

148 Given the ethical considerations of working with a junior athlete, ethical approval was
149 obtained from both CS and her parents before beginning the consultancy process. Moreover,
150 based on the age of the client, I had decided that it would be appropriate for the session to
151 take place in CS's home. I wanted to ensure that CS felt comfortable to improve the
152 relationship I could develop with her and the efficacy of the work we could achieve together.
153 However, I had little or no control over the environment I was entering into and so had to
154 strongly consider whether or not the environment would be appropriate with regards
155 confidentiality. Confidentiality is essential when working with all athletes and in this
156 particular case was vital, as I wanted to understand CS's experiences, free from the influence
157 of her parents. After meeting CS's parents, they showed me to the room where I'd be
158 working with CS and thankfully respected the boundaries of confidentiality by leaving CS
159 and I to begin the session alone. I began the session by explaining confidentiality to CS and
160 reassured her that the content of our discussions would remain between the two of us if that is
161 what she preferred. I also briefly highlighted my philosophy of practice; in a simple way she
162 could comprehend and appreciate. Understandably, she seemed nervous and I was aware that
163 my role initially was to make her feel more comfortable and to build a rapport with her based
164 on trust (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). I achieved this by starting with a broad question,
165 which she could answer comfortably and at her own pace: "...tell me about your journey, in

166 *and outside of sport, which has led you to this point*". CS began by discussing her
167 experiences of gymnastics at the age of seven, when it had been fun and something she
168 'loved' doing. However, she quickly progressed the session onto the main challenges she was
169 currently experiencing. Throughout the first session with CS, it became apparent, almost
170 instantly, that the challenges she was experiencing were broader than simply a 'mental block'
171 as her father had explained (see *Appendix: 'Case Report One'*). The family had recently
172 move to England to ensure CS was training at an elite gymnastics club, which meant she felt
173 under a lot of pressure to continuously train and compete at the highest level. It is often the
174 case that athletes feel compelled to carry on training because of the sacrifices their parents
175 have made throughout their career (Pineiro et al., 2014). CS explained that in her previous
176 country, she had lived, trained and studied at a gymnastics school, which she found very
177 challenging as she missed her family and friends. At this point, at the age of 12, she had
178 stopped enjoying the sport and had not enjoyed it since. She experienced anxiety before every
179 training session and could not switch off from gymnastics as she trained 27 hours a week,
180 leading to it dominating her life (Pineiro et al., 2014). She struggled to manage the demands
181 of both school and sport and so had little time or opportunity to develop friendships outside
182 of these environments (Tekavc, Wylleman, & Erpič, 2015). As a result of moving to a
183 different country, which required her to move both school and club, she felt she had very
184 little support from friends and coaches and at this point in the session she expressed her
185 feelings of isolation (Aquilina, 2013). She became very upset at several moments throughout
186 the session. She did not discuss the 'mental block' until I prompted her to do so 50 minutes
187 into the session and unsurprisingly, in comparison to the other challenges she was
188 experiencing, she did not seem overly concerned by it. As well as explaining her current
189 experiences, she had explained to me that she had worked with a Sport and Exercise
190 Psychologist in the past and had been taught breathing techniques and imagery. However, she

191 clearly expressed to me at this point that she had not felt that these techniques had been
192 useful in improving her performance (Corlett, 1996). To conclude the session, CS and I
193 discussed her aspirations as an athlete and how she felt I could help her achieve these goals in
194 the future. Despite the challenges she was currently experiencing, she expressed that her
195 long-term goal was to be an Olympic athlete. One step she wanted to take towards achieving
196 this ultimate goal was to compete in the British Championships that were taking place next
197 year. We agreed that during our next session(s) we would focus on three specific areas to
198 help her achieve both of these goals: a) switching off from gymnastics when away from a
199 training or competitive setting, b) reducing the anxiety she experienced before training and to
200 begin enjoying the sport again and c) overcoming the ‘mental block’ she was experiencing.

201 **Reflections Prior to the Development of an Intervention**

202 It was clear after the first session that the psychological skills highlighted in the
203 research, I had read prior to the session would be insufficient to support CS through her
204 current experiences. It was also clear that there was a discrepancy between the challenges the
205 father had presented, and the challenges CS had discussed (Smits, Jacobs, & Knoppers,
206 2017). At this point what was not clear was whether this discrepancy was due to a lack of
207 understanding or appreciation from the father of his daughter’s experiences, or whether CS
208 had not communicated these challenges to her parents. Nevertheless, at this point, with
209 regards the development of an intervention, the expectations of CS were different from the
210 expectations of her father, which raised the question; who was the client? Ultimately, the
211 client was CS, but her father was paying me for my services and perhaps had a different set
212 of expectations regarding the aim of my support. Despite understanding the needs of CS and
213 my own personal philosophy, I felt anxiety and pressure, based on the father’s expectation of
214 a ‘solution’ and as a result considered the use of mental skills training alongside a more
215 counselling based approach. However, after reflecting further and engaging in critical

216 discussion with my supervisor, I came to the conclusion that any attempt to implement
217 mental skills training would be insufficient in overcoming the more holistic challenges CS
218 was experiencing and I was also very aware of how working in this way, given my
219 philosophy of practice, would create a sense of incongruence (Lindsay et al., 2007). I was
220 also mindful to gain a better understanding of whether CS had communicated any of these
221 challenges with her parents, as based on my discussion with her father, he did not seem to be
222 aware of any of the experiences she had discussed.

223 **Developing the Intervention**

224 Having reached the conclusion that mental skills training would be insufficient in
225 dealing with CS's broader challenges (Corlett, 1996), I adopted a counselling-based approach
226 to our second session together, underpinned by the core principles of Humanistic psychology.
227 I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of some of the more holistic challenges she was
228 experiencing and provide CS with a safe environment in which to discuss these challenges.
229 Due to time constraints and the amount of challenges CS had discussed in our first session
230 together, I felt as though we had not had the opportunity to go into much detail about the
231 specific challenges she was experiencing, which more than likely occurred as a direct result
232 of me attempting to combine the intake and needs analysis sessions. This highlights the
233 potential benefits of separating these two sessions during the consultancy process. Taking
234 time to conduct a thorough intake ensures the practitioner develops an effective relationship
235 with the client, which has a direct influence on the detail the client is willing to divulge in the
236 subsequent needs analysis. The more detail the client is willing to provide, the more likely the
237 intervention developed will meet the needs of the client. In addition to wanting to gain a
238 better understanding of CS's experiences, I was also mindful that CS's parents did not know
239 what their daughter was experiencing. Hence, the following session acted as a second, more
240 detailed needs analysis, whilst also allowing CS to shape the intervention herself (regarding

241 the decision to include her parents). The suggestion to include the parents in the consultancy
242 process was initially discussed between my supervisor and I. My supervisor had recently
243 experienced a similar applied experience and found that including the parents in the process
244 had been successful in supporting the client through their challenges. However, I wanted to
245 ensure that CS was comfortable with this.

246 I decided to utilise the report I had written from our first session as the basis for the
247 discussion in the second session. I did this for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to ensure I had
248 fully understood CS's experiences as she had described them and demonstrate that I had a
249 genuine interest and understanding of these experiences. Secondly, I wanted to give her an
250 opportunity to change or add anything to these experiences, which would stimulate further
251 discussion between us. Finally, I wanted to give CS an opportunity to reflect on what we had
252 discussed and allow her to consider the inclusion of her parents as the foundation for our next
253 session together. Using the report from the previous session worked well. CS seemed to be
254 more comfortable with me in the second session and so expanded on each of the challenges
255 she had mentioned. However, providing CS with the opportunity to reflect made her
256 noticeably upset and concluded in us having the following exchange:

257 **CS:** *Begins to cry* 'I don't know why I'm so sad'

258 **NW:** 'What is it you think is making you sad?'

259 **CS:** 'Speaking to you has made me realise for the first time that I don't do anything other
260 than gymnastics'

261 At this point, CS also re-emphasised the enormous pressure she was under from her
262 parents, given that they had moved country to ensure she was training at an elite level and we
263 both agreed that her parents needed to hear what she was experiencing (see *Appendix: 'Case
264 Report Two'*). CS expressed how she found it difficult to communicate with her parents at

265 times, because of their consistent focus on gymnastics. She mostly chose not to discuss her
266 experiences of gymnastics, because she wanted to switch off when not training or competing.
267 However, she agreed that telling her parents what she was experiencing would help her
268 overcome some of her challenges in the future. In fact, she was noticeably relieved at the
269 suggestion of involving her parents. We then discussed what options CS had in relation to
270 how to communicate most effectively with her parents. I presented CS with three options
271 (which my supervisor had suggested in our previous conversation): a) for her to speak to her
272 parents without me present, b) for us to talk to her parents together or c) for me to talk to her
273 parents on her behalf. We agreed that it would be best if we both spoke to her parents in the
274 next session, which would allow CS the opportunity to discuss her experiences of the sport,
275 particularly how she felt pressure and anxiety due to the fact that the whole family had moved
276 to England for the purposes of her training.

277 **The Intervention**

278 The third session included both CS and her parents and was designed to form the initial
279 part of the intervention; facilitating communication between all members of the family. To
280 achieve this, I was aware that I needed to create an environment where everyone's voice
281 could be heard. This was vital given that CS had already highlighted how she struggled to
282 communicate with her parents. It is often the case that young athletes, who are part of a
283 sporting culture, do not communicate effectively, through fear it will be viewed negatively
284 (Coakley & Pike, 2009). Furthermore, it can often be the case that the high level of
285 commitment involved with elite sport and the facilitating role parents adopt, might inhibit
286 young athletes from disclosing their experiences (Stirling, 2011) and it is particularly
287 common within gymnastics for the athletes to develop a 'code of silence' (Pinheiro et al.,
288 2014). Hence it was essential for me to build a strong rapport with the family, based on trust
289 and respect, to ensure the intervention would be effective (Greenless, 2009). Moreover, I was

290 also unsure of how CS's parents might react and so needed to consider their emotional
291 response and psychological well-being as well. Therefore, I began the session by reinforcing
292 the boundaries of confidentiality and outlining my role within the session, which would be to
293 create a safe environment, facilitate communication and allow the family to discuss potential
294 solutions for the future. Everyone seemed satisfied with the supportive role I would adopt and
295 so I encouraged CS to begin the session by telling her parents what she had been
296 experiencing. CS immediately got upset, but courageously described her experiences to her
297 parents. Her father's immediate reaction was to hug CS, but his body language gave me an
298 insight into his thoughts, and he seemed to be extremely disappointed with what he was
299 hearing. It was also clear that he was taken aback by what he had heard and instantly began
300 expressing his thoughts on what his daughter had said. His opinion centred around how
301 disappointing it would be if she did not continue with the sport and how she would make the
302 whole family proud if she carried on; "...*think about how good it'll be when we can come*
303 *and watch you perform*". Research has found that whilst parents do want their child to enjoy
304 the sport, in a lot of cases, they also want them to become Olympic Champions and so
305 dedicate a lot of their own lives in achieving this goal (Smits, Jacobs, & Knoppers, 2017) to
306 the extent that it 'becomes a significant part of their identity' (Donnelly, 1997: p.399).
307 Moreover, parents are often unaware of the negative impact elite sport can have on their
308 child's well-being and psychological development (Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003). This was
309 definitely evident through the father's response as he also began discussing the sacrifices, he
310 had made within his own childhood to achieve his successes within his life. Whilst doing this,
311 he began to belittle CS's experiences, by making statements such as; "*It would be a shame to*
312 *quit gymnastics just because you want to see your friends*". He also did not seem to fully
313 understand the magnitude of what was being discussed, as he continued to return to the
314 'mental block', which left CS visibly confused and frustrated.

315 **Reflections throughout the intervention.** It was becoming apparent to me at this
316 point in the session that the father was not fully understanding or acknowledging the
317 experiences of CS. His lack of empathy towards his daughter and continuous reference to his
318 own needs and experiences was evoking a negative emotional response in myself. I had
319 developed a strong relationship with CS over the last two sessions and so felt protective of
320 her. She was noticeably upset and frustrated at her father's response and I got the sense that
321 she regretted telling her parents how she felt. Because of this, I had a strong sense that I was
322 failing her. I also could not understand how her own father did not seem to be taking a similar
323 protective approach in relation to his daughter's experiences. These emotions and thoughts, in
324 the moment, led to an almost tangible distance between me and CS's parents. Upon
325 reflection, I needed to revisit the question of 'who is the client', when preparing for the
326 family session. Earlier, it had been clear that CS was the client. However, by including CS's
327 parents as a key part of the consultancy process, I should have spent more time considering
328 the impact this could have had on the relationships and dynamics of the support I was
329 providing. Within applied sport psychology delivery, it is not always clear who the client is
330 (Haberl & Peterson, 2006) and without enough consideration I approached the third session
331 in a similar way to the first two sessions (CS was the client). Because of this, when CS's
332 father did not respond in a supportive manner, my line of questioning moved from being
333 supportive and exploratory, to emotive and potentially directive at times. However, I was
334 aware of this in the moment and attempted to return to my facilitative role, by encouraging
335 CS's mother to provide her thoughts on the situation, in the hope that she would provide
336 more of a balanced view and show some empathy towards her daughter's situation.

337 Disappointingly, CS's mother reinforced everything CS's father had been saying.
338 However, I got the sense that this was not how she truly felt. It was clear to see by observing
339 the dynamic of the parent's relationship, that the father was viewed as the authority figure. At

340 this point within the intervention, I reinforced how important it was for everyone to speak
341 openly and honestly. CS's mother then began to discuss her own experiences, which were
342 very similar to her daughter's experiences. She discussed how challenging the move to
343 England had been for her and expressed how she would often experience severely low
344 moods, due to having no friends or support. However, frustratingly, she did not seem to
345 demonstrate any empathy to her daughter, who was experiencing the same challenges, with
346 the added challenge of training and competing 27 hours a week in the highly pressured
347 environment of elite sport. With my frustrations growing, alongside the feeling I had failed
348 CS, I changed my approach to the intervention. I actively encouraged the family to begin
349 thinking about possible changes that could be made that would help CS through this difficult
350 period. Initially CS's father actively encouraged CS to reduce her focus and efforts towards
351 her schoolwork. This reinforced the idea that his identity and focus was solely directed
352 towards his daughter becoming an elite athlete and led to me becoming more frustrated and
353 despondent. Eventually, with further guidance from myself, as a family they agreed to
354 improve lines of communication (something CS was going to take a leading role in) and
355 create 'protected family time', which they would utilise to watch a film each week and switch
356 off completely from gymnastics (See *Appendix 'Case Report Three'*). To me, these were very
357 small steps that I felt would not make much difference in the long-term. However, at least it
358 was an acknowledgement that something needed to change!

359 At the end of the session, I asked the family what they wanted from me in the
360 following session, in the hope that this would provide me with an opportunity to continue my
361 support of CS and perhaps educate the family further on how to overcome these challenges.
362 CS's father immediately returned to the 'mental block', which further highlighted his lack of
363 empathy or understanding towards the situation and potentially provided more of an insight
364 into the pressure he was under from CS's coach (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). I attempted to

365 explain the potential link that existed between performance and well-being and how by
366 focusing on these broader challenges, CS might be in a better position to overcome the
367 ‘mental block’ (Brady & Maynard, 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2010). However, CS’s father did
368 not seem to appreciate this response and ended the session by stating “...*we’ll contact you if*
369 *we want you to come back*”. This response reinforces the different approaches CS’s father
370 and I had adopted towards the situation. Despite hearing all the challenges his daughter was
371 experiencing, CS’s father was still focused on overcoming the ‘mental block’. Based on my
372 philosophy of practice (long-term holistic support of the person), overcoming the ‘mental
373 block’ was not the priority, which made it almost impossible to continue the consultancy
374 process due to these different perspectives of the situation.

375 **Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Intervention**

376 Unsurprisingly, in the weeks that followed, CS’s father did not ask me to return, despite
377 CS’s mother clearly expressing her desire for me to come back again. Therefore, I did not
378 have an opportunity to gain any objective or subjective feedback on the effectiveness of the
379 intervention (although not being asked to return is a pretty conclusive insight into how CS’s
380 father had evaluated the intervention!). To better understand the potential effectiveness of the
381 intervention, I needed to rely on my own reflections of the consultancy experience.

382 My lack of experience in sports other than football made this consultancy process
383 difficult to begin with. My awareness of this lack of experience prior to the first session with
384 CS had made me unusually anxious, which led to an unnatural and unauthentic meeting
385 between CS and me. Furthermore, my past experiences of working for a professional
386 organisation meant I had had limited experiences of engaging with parents in the way I had
387 with CS’ father, which perhaps impeded my effectiveness with this particular case. With
388 regards the different perspectives CS’s father and I had adopted, I feel I should have spent
389 more time discussing the relationship that exists between well-being and performance and

390 how focusing on the broader challenges could have supported CS in overcoming the ‘mental
391 block’. Perhaps taking the time to educate the family on my approach to service-delivery,
392 before the third session, would have allowed them to better understand how I was attempting
393 to support their daughter. However, it was clear throughout this consultancy experience,
394 based on my understanding of the literature, my theoretical orientation, and the needs of CS,
395 that the ‘mental block’ was not the priority. Despite this, in the weeks following the third
396 session, I could not help but feel I had failed CS. She was noticeably upset and frustrated at
397 the end of our third session together and without the invitation to return, I could no longer
398 support her. After texting CS’s father and reinforcing that I was available if needed in the
399 future (with no response) I considered offering my support for free. I felt a strong duty of care
400 towards CS and was frustrated that this support relied on her father, as the gatekeeper,
401 inviting me back. However, I decided not to do this, as ultimately it was not the money that
402 was the issue, it was the difference in expectations regarding the outcome of the consultancy
403 process that was the problem and this would have prevented me from developing the right
404 relationships with CS’s parents, leaving any future intervention pointless.

405 After a few weeks had passed, I was able to reflect on the consultancy process without
406 being influenced by the emotions I had experienced. Whilst I was still disappointed that the
407 intervention had ended so abruptly, I was able to reflect positively on the experience. As a
408 trainee practitioner, I was able to successfully build a strong relationship with a young female
409 athlete competing in a sport I had no experience of working within. All my experience, prior
410 to this client, had been working with adult male professional footballers and coaches and so
411 successfully building a strong relationship with a client of a different demographic allowed
412 me to demonstrate diversity in my training to become a chartered Sport and Exercise
413 Psychologist. Moreover, I was able to work congruently, in line with my core values and
414 beliefs (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004), despite a number of external pressures

415 and doubts I had had at the time. This sense of congruence led to me experiencing my most
416 positive consultancy experience to date (during and after the second session with CS). I was
417 able to create a safe environment for CS to explore her experiences, which resulted in her
418 developing more self-awareness and realising things about her life that she had not realised
419 before. Following the second session, CS thanked me for my support and this genuine heart-
420 felt appreciation reinforced why I had dedicated so much of my life to this profession! I am
421 confident, that if given the opportunity, I would have been able to successfully support CS
422 through this critical moment in her life and consequently had a positive impact on both
423 performance and well-being.

424 Whilst there are a number of positives to take away from this experience, there are
425 aspects of the consultancy process I would change if given the opportunity again. To begin
426 with, I needed to spend more time considering my relationship with CS's parents. The
427 moment I introduced them as part of the intervention, the dynamic of the service delivery
428 changed. At this point, did they become the client as well as CS? I would argue that CS was
429 still the client primarily and her parents were there to support her. However, by adopting this
430 approach and not getting the supportive response I had expected, it created a gap between CS,
431 her parents, and me, which ultimately led to me not being asked to return. Perhaps if I had
432 taken more time to build a relationship with CS's parents, I would have been given another
433 opportunity to return and support their daughter. Moreover, I needed to consider my
434 relationship with CS more closely. Why did I feel so protective of her? I have always felt an
435 emotional 'attachment' to my clients, which I believe comes through empathetic
436 understanding. However, my emotional response to CS was a lot stronger than previous
437 clients. Upon reflection, I believe that, because CS was a young female athlete, I may have
438 viewed her as more vulnerable than some of my previous clients and this may have fostered
439 the idea that I needed to adopt more of a protective role with her. Feeling strong emotions

440 towards a client can be a sign of countertransference (Winstone & Gervis, 2006), which can
441 occur when the client evokes thoughts and feelings in the practitioner that originate from a
442 previous relationship. It is not uncommon for practitioners to ‘want to save’ their clients
443 (Anderson & Williams-Rice, 1996), which is exactly how I would describe my emotional
444 response to this consultancy experience with CS. With time I have come to understand that
445 my identity as an uncle to a young niece may have been the underpinning cause to this
446 countertransference with CS. It is vital that applied practitioners become aware of the
447 practitioner-athlete relationship to improve service-delivery (Petitpas, Danish, & Giges,
448 1999), but more importantly to ensure safe ethical practice (Rowan & Jacobs, 2002).

449 **Conclusion**

450 This reflective case study highlights a number of challenges experienced by a trainee
451 Sport and Exercise Psychologist at the start of his BPS Stage Two journey. The applied
452 practitioner had to build a relationship with a client in an unfamiliar sport, withstand
453 challenges to his philosophy of practice, demonstrate sound ethical practice when working
454 with a junior athlete, attempt to include the parents in the intervention to improve support for
455 the client, closely consider the concept of countertransference, and overcome the anxiety
456 associated with this unsuccessful consultancy experience. This case study highlights the
457 complexities of working as an applied sport psychology practitioner in elite sport and
458 addresses how these experiences can contribute towards the overall development of the
459 practitioner.

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572

Appendix

573 Case Report One

574 **Date:** 26/10/17

575 The purpose of our first session together, was for us to get to know each other and begin
576 building a relationship that would allow us to work together effectively moving forwards. We
577 started with a timeline exercise, where I asked you to give me an overview of your journey,
578 both in and outside of sport, up until the current day.

579 You explained to me that you had started gymnastics at the age of seven and up until the age
580 of 12 you really enjoyed the sport. At the age of 12 you enrolled at a gymnastics school,
581 which you explained was similar to a boarding school. You trained and studied there full-
582 time (5 times a week) and it was at this point, for the first time, that you stopped enjoying
583 gymnastics. The first six months in particular were very challenging for you, as you missed
584 your family and friends. You have recently (in the last 2 months) moved to England for your
585 previous home, where you had lived for 9 years previously. You described this move as less
586 disruptive than previous occasions where you have moved house and country.

587 We then began discussing your current experiences of gymnastics. You explained to me that
588 you train 27 hours a week and that gymnastics takes up a lot of your time. You often
589 experience anxiety immediately before training. You have been experiencing this anxiety for
590 the last two years, since you started training at the school at the age of 12. You explained to
591 me that this anxiety is reduced when you have a better idea of what you are doing in training
592 and you have more of a set routine. At the moment, because of the short time you have been
593 back in England, you haven't developed a relationship with your coach, which means her
594 training seems unpredictable to you. You also began to describe the differences between your
595 previous coach and your current coach. One of the differences that you described was that
596 your previous coach was more likely to get 'angry' if individuals didn't perform or train well,
597 whereas your current coach was more likely to be 'disappointed'. When I asked if you felt
598 she was currently disappointed with you, you seemed unsure. You also seemed unsure about
599 whether or not you were able to compete in the British National Championships, which was
600 one of your goals for the future.

601 You also explained to me that you struggle to switch off from gymnastics. You added to this
602 by telling me that you had made the decision to attend training even when experiencing an
603 injury that was preventing you from physically training yourself. The only times you get an
604 opportunity to switch off from gymnastics are when you are at school (although that can be
605 challenging as well), when you watch TV (and YouTube) and when reading. You told me
606 how you liked reading Harry Potter and how you liked "getting lost in that world".

607 **It was really interesting to hear you talk about your hobbies outside of gymnastics at**
608 **this point. You seemed more relaxed and upbeat when talking about your passion for**
609 **reading. When we discussed the idea of working together to help find ways for you to**
610 **switch off from gymnastics, you seemed excited. You also agreed that switching off from**
611 **gymnastics would actually be beneficial to your performances as an athlete. We agreed**
612 **that this weekend (your trip to the Lake District) would be a good time for you to think**
613 **about different that you could switch off from gymnastics.**

614 Finally we discussed your current experiences of a ‘mental block’ on the uneven bars. You
615 have experienced a mental block before on the vault that took you 6 months to overcome.
616 You explained that you couldn’t get passed the block on the previous occasion because of the
617 pressure of the upcoming competition. However, once the competition had passed and the
618 pressure was reduced you were able to perform the move again.

619 **Do you think the current pressure you are experiencing might be contributing towards**
620 **the ‘block’ you are having now? We can discuss this in more detail in our next session**
621 **together.**

622

623 **Additional Notes:**

624 You have worked with a sport psychology practitioner before, in a group setting. He taught
625 you how to use breathing techniques and imagery. You didn’t feel that these techniques were
626 very helpful. However, you did describe how you use imagery before you go to sleep at
627 night.

628 Your aspirations are to compete in the British National Championships in one years’ time and
629 your ultimate goal is to compete in the Olympics. We agreed that I could help you achieve
630 these goals by doing the following:

- 631 1. Helping you switch off from gymnastics
- 632 2. Help reduce the anxiety you experience before training
- 633 3. Help get you passed the ‘mental block’ you are experiencing.

634

635

636 **Case Report Two**

637 **Date:** 02/11/17

638 In our second session together we spent some time going through the discussion we had had
639 the week before. This was to ensure I had understood your current situation properly and to
640 give you an opportunity to change or add more detail to any areas you felt I had missed or
641 misunderstood. By reflecting on last week’s session and going over the ‘homework’ you had
642 completed, we were able to go into more detail, which I’ve highlighted below:

643 You discussed the idea of ‘belonging’. For you it is important that you feel you belong at the
644 gymnastics club where you currently train. Even though there isn’t anyone at the club that is
645 the same age as you, you get along with all the girls in your group (both younger and older).
646 You feel your relationship with your coach could be better, but you don’t want to become
647 over familiar with her at this point. In order to improve your relationship with your coach,
648 you’d like to learn more about her, but at the same time, you’d like to maintain certain
649 boundaries. You described the club that you currently train at as more fun when comparing it
650 to your previous club. At your previous club you wouldn’t do anything outside of gymnastics,
651 whereas at your current club they do more activities that don’t just focus on gymnastics.

652 **Considering that you have only been training at the club a couple of months, you seem**
653 **to be developing good relationships with the other gymnasts and over time these**
654 **relationships will continue to improve. Remember that what you are currently**
655 **experiencing is completely normal and the other girls at the club could be experiencing**
656 **similar things.**

657 **You've admitted that the relationship you have with your coach could be better, but as**
658 **long as both you and your coach are working towards improving it, it will improve with**
659 **time.**

660 At this point, I asked you the question, "*What does success look like to you*" and your
661 response was "*being in the right place, being around the right people and not being injured*".

662 **This is an extremely mature response to this question and again highlights the**
663 **importance of the relationships that you develop with the people around you. It might**
664 **be helpful to start thinking about who you want/need to develop better relationships**
665 **with and how you can begin to improve these relationships over time.**

666 At this point of the session, we both discussed what we felt were the most important parts of
667 last week's session and agreed that the following three areas were where we should focus our
668 attention:

- 669 • Your lack of enjoyment for gymnastics
- 670 • The anxiety you feel before training
- 671 • Not being able to switch off when you're away from gymnastics.

672 You became a little upset at this point in the session and you described that the reason you
673 were upset was because this was the first time you'd discussed this with anyone before and it
674 had made you realise that you don't do anything outside of gymnastics. You explained that in
675 order for you to enjoy gymnastics again, you'd want to train less (3 times a week).

676

677 You also described how you feel a lot of pressure at the moment because your family had
678 moved over to England specifically so you could train. We agreed, after a little discussion,
679 that your parents needed to hear what you were currently experiencing. You admitted that
680 you don't usually like to talk about the challenges you experience and when asked by your
681 parents about gymnastics, you choose not to go into any detail because you want to switch off
682 from the sport.

683

684 We then spoke about what we wanted to achieve in our next session with your parents and we
685 agreed that we would focus on telling them the following:

- 686 • Your experiences in your previous country. Especially how challenging the first 6
687 months were for you, because you missed your family and friends
- 688 • Your current experiences. Specifically, how you feel pressure and anxiety, because of
689 the fact that the family have all moved to England for the purposes of your training.

690 You want your parents to know your experiences, because you think they want to know and
691 it'll help all of you moving forwards. You want to be able to choose when you do and don't

692 speak about gymnastics. There are some occasions where you would benefit from talking
693 about it, whereas sometimes you would rather switch off from the sport and concentrate on
694 other things.

695

696

697 **Case Report Three**

698 **Date:** 16/11/17

699 Session three was the first session that included both you and your parents. I began the
700 session by explaining the boundaries of confidentiality and expressing my appreciation to
701 your parents for respecting confidentiality up until this point. I also provided some detail
702 about my philosophy of practice and how my role in today's session was to facilitate open,
703 non-judgmental communication between each family member. You then began the session by
704 communicating the messages we had discussed in the previous session:

- 705 • Your experiences at the 'gymnastics school'. Especially how challenging the first six
706 months were for you, because you missed your family and friends
- 707 • Your current experiences. Specifically, how you feel pressure and anxiety, because of
708 the fact that the family have all moved to Liverpool for the purposes of your training.
- 709 • Your current lack of enjoyment for the sport, your inability to switch off and your
710 lack of engagement in activities away from gymnastics.

711 Your parents then discussed some of their concerns, specifically:

- 712 • How it would be a shame for you to quit gymnastics after all the time and effort you
713 had put into the sport
- 714 • How you could achieve great things and make the family proud.
- 715 • How they were willing to support you, by allowing your friends to come over on her
716 days off.
- 717 • How they wanted you to communicate more effectively with them.

718 In the future, the family have agreed to:

- 719 • Consider their communication with each other. You will initiate the communication
720 with your parents when you feel comfortable to do so.

721

722 **Part of the challenge in the past has been that you didn't want to communicate, as**
723 **you wanted to switch off as soon as she got home. However, your parents want you**
724 **to communicate, as they feel excluded given the club's no parent policy.**

725

- 726 • Create some 'protected time' throughout the week where the family can engage in an
727 activity that will allow you to switch off from the sport.