Personal Qualities of Effective Sport Psychologists: Coping with Organisational Demands in High Performance Sport

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to explore colleagues’ perspectives of the personal qualities of effective sport psychologists and how these qualities enable practitioners to address the organisational demands they face within their work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with sport physicians (N = 6) and coaches (N = 7). Data analysis identified three main themes: understanding high performance sport environments and cultures, the wider organisational role in high performance sport, and working with support staff in high performance sport. This study provides insight into the wider organisational role of sport psychology in high performance sport and the personal qualities that are fundamental to effective service delivery in this environment. Suggestions are offered regarding how education and training could better prepare practitioners for addressing organisational demands within their role, by developing trainees’ awareness of their personal qualities and providing them with the opportunity to critically explore these qualities in the context of applied sport psychology practice.

Keywords: personal qualities; professional practice; sport psychology
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Personal Qualities of Effective Sport Psychologists: Coping with Organisational Demands in High Performance Sport

Literature posits that elite athletes do not live in a vacuum, but moreover function within a highly complex social and organisational environment which exerts major influence on their performance(s) (Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996). This is therefore also true for the practising sport psychologist, who must negotiate these complex environments and their associated challenges, which according to McDougall, Nesti, and Richardson (2015) include building relationships and establishing credibility, handling sensitive information, understanding elite sport cultures, dealing with interpersonal disagreements and conflict, and maintaining effectiveness when working within volatile and unpredictable environments.

Therefore, a sport psychologist needs to appreciate, and operate effectively in accordance with, the organisational demands of the sport environment they are working within (Katz & Hemnings, 2009). Maintaining effectiveness in light of these organisational demands can be particularly challenging given the nature of high performance sport; success is difficult to sustain and creates a number of challenges for an organisation and its members. However, there is a lack of literature regarding the organisational demands that are placed on sport psychology practitioners in high performance sport environments and therefore the personal qualities required to address such demands. In applied practice, a personal quality represents a tangible embodiment of a practitioner’s core self, which relates to a person’s morals, values, virtues and beliefs (Chandler, Eubank, Nesti & Cable, 2014).

Early research by Partington and Orlick (1987a) and Orlick and Partington (1987) identified characteristics of effective sport psychologists working in sport to include being flexible, open, creative, likeable, and accessible enough to establish rapport with athletes.

Ineffective sport psychologists were found to be those who were overbearing or arrogant and imposed their ideas on others, had poor interpersonal skills, and were unable to appropriately
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apply their skills in context. Gould, Tammen, Murphy and May (1989) identified the services provided by sport psychologists to include helping colleagues cope with the politics of the sport organisation and addressing problems with staff communication. Furthermore, Gould, Murphy, Tammen and May (1991) used the Consultant Evaluation Form (Partington & Orlick, 1987b) to explore the characteristics of effective sport psychologists from the point of view of coaches, athletes, administrators and practitioners themselves. Data indicated that the ability of the sport psychologist to fit in with the team was especially important, yet this was one aspect in which practitioners scored lowest (Gould et al., 1991). More recent work by Sharp and Hodge (2011; 2014) has outlined effective consultants to be those who are open, trustworthy and able to develop strong relationships with athletes, whilst research by Lubker, Visic, Geer and Watson (2008) has highlighted the importance of a sport psychologist ‘fitting in’ with the sport culture. Such research has identified the characteristics of effective practitioners working as consultants on a one-to-one basis, often centring on their skills rather than on the qualities they bring as a person, to their work as a practitioner. The aforementioned studies have also acknowledged that sport psychologists may experience and be required to address organisational demands as part of their role, yet the part the practitioner’s personal qualities play in how they are able to address these demands remains unclear.

Nesti (2010) has described high performance sport environments as socially and organisationally complex cultures, and sport psychologists in the 21st century need to better understand the resulting organisational impact of rapid and ongoing advancement in these contexts (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Researchers have highlighted organisational demands within sport that result from ineffective interpersonal communication and sport relationships, a lack of common goals and therefore overall direction, a lack of role definition and structure, and issues with the organisational structure and climate of the sport (Fletcher, Hanton,
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Mellalieu & Neil, 2012; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Furthermore, Eubank, Nesti & Cruickshank (2014) highlighted interdepartmental communication problems, coach athlete conflict, interference from owners, negative reporting in the media and financial pressures to be challenges for high performance sport organisations and specifically for sport psychologists working within them. The growth of sport science as a discipline has also brought about the development of multidisciplinary sport science support teams, and it follows that increased numbers of practitioners may bring about a similar increase in personnel-related organisational demands (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Nesti, 2010).

As a member of the multidisciplinary group, the sport psychologist can play a key part in the creation and facilitation of an effective and functional organisational team and structure (Reid, Stewart & Thorne, 2004) and will often be identified as the most appropriate person to perform this role (Nesti, 2010). Sport psychologists possess a comprehensive understanding of group dynamics based on both their theoretical and experiential knowledge, and should therefore be appropriately placed to identify markers against which optimal performance can be developed (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). To meet these organisational demands, the sport psychologist may therefore spend a considerable amount of time providing services that are acknowledged by Nesti (2010) to be akin to that offered by an organisational psychologist. Nesti’s work as a highly experienced sport psychologist has involved delivering an organisational psychology role within elite professional soccer in the English Premier League. He is therefore well-placed to describe the need for and realities of such a role; alongside their ‘traditional’ role, sport psychologists must be able to provide a range of services including staff development (Dorfman, 1990), and peer support and management (Males, 2006) within the volatile, unpredictable and insecure milieu of high performance sport (Eubank et al., 2014).
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The nature of the high performance sport environment can make it a volatile and arduous one to work within and therefore a very personally demanding and uncomfortable place for a sport psychologist. It has been argued that to survive and indeed thrive, sport psychologists need to possess personal qualities such as resilience, commitment, presence, authenticity, and empathy to survive (Nesti, 2004; 2010). For example, Kyndt and Rowell (2012) stated that the difference between practitioners who are able to deliver excellent support services under the ‘intense pressure’ of high performance sport, and those who are not, is less-so related to their ‘technical prowess’. The implication, therefore, is that it is a practitioner’s personal qualities, in addition to their technical expertise, that allows them to operate effectively within highly pressurised sport environments. Although organisational and cultural aspects of elite and professional sports have been afforded increased attention in recent years, the demands and challenges faced by sport psychologists continue to be overlooked within the literature (Nesti, 2010). Therefore, there remains the need for a detailed exploration of the organisational demands that a sport psychologist may experience within their work, and the personal qualities that can influence a practitioner’s ability to address these demands effectively. Understanding the latter is particularly important for sport psychologists who themselves can be considered the ‘tool’ (Tod & Andersen, 2005); they are the means by which their work is carried out and against which their effectiveness is therefore ‘measured’. Chandler et al. (2014) observed that drawing on the perspective of colleagues who possess a close working alliance with sport psychologists facilitates an authentic insight into the personal qualities impacting practitioner effectiveness in their workplace. Thus the purpose of this research was to explore colleagues’ perspectives of the personal qualities of effective sport psychologists and how these qualities enable practitioners to address the organisational demands they face within their work.

Method
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Participants

A sample of 13 participants (six sport physicians [5 males and 1 female] including a Head of Medical Services, and seven coaches [all male]), were identified and contacted through colleagues of the first author. All participants had worked or were currently working with sport psychologists and had been employed within a range of high performance sports (e.g., Premier League football, rugby, tennis, gymnastics, boxing, and several other Olympic sports). All physicians had worked as General Practitioners prior to their involvement in sport. At the time of interview, three out of the five physicians were working full-time in sports medicine, with one approximated to be working 60% of their time within sports medicine and the remaining 40% in General Practice and lecturing. The remaining participant had recently left their job as a sport physician to return to General Practice full-time, and the Head of Medical Services was employed full-time within a team. Three of the coaches were employed within universities; one no longer coached in any capacity having left coaching 3 years ago at the time of interview, but was still involved in high performance sport as a consultant in football. One acted as a coach mentor and one worked in a coaching capacity within the university, having left coaching 6 and 7 years ago respectively at the time of interview. The four remaining coaches were all employed in senior coaching-related roles. Four of the seven coaches came from an ex-participation background within the same sport as they were currently employed. Participants’ experience of working with sport psychologists ranged between eighteen months on a near-daily basis and twenty years more sporadically. Participants worked with or alongside sport psychologists in a variety of ways, including coach education and support as part of a team when away at training camps and on tour. The coaches and physicians were specialists in their own right and were chosen as they often had a high level of daily contact with sport psychologists because of shared philosophies of
personnel qualities of effective sport psychologists

practice as scientist-practitioners, or because of their high levels of engagement with athletes
(Nesti, 2004).

**Instrument**

Data for the study was collected via a semi-structured one-to-one interview with each participant. A pilot interview was conducted with a personal acquaintance of the first author, who had a background in coaching and who was therefore deemed to possess sufficient understanding of sport environments and the discipline of sport psychology to be interviewed. The appropriateness of the questions was therefore confirmed (Berg, 2009). The authors reviewed relevant literature that had utilised similar methodologies to explore the characteristics of effective sport psychologists (e.g., Orlick & Partington, 1987; Anderson, Miles, Robinson & Mahoney, 2004), and subsequently developed the interview guide to address the research question for the specific participant group. The interview began with a section of non-threatening, demographic questions (Berg, 2009), which were designed to establish the professional and applied background of each participant. Questions were asked to determine their current employment and role, the extent of their experience within their field, and the sports in which they currently or had previously worked. The remaining interview guide was created to explore the participants’ experience of working with sport psychologists, and their perceptions of the practitioners’ roles and personal qualities. Participants were questioned about the relationship they had with the psychologist as well as that between the psychologist and athlete, and the extent to which the psychologist was perceived to understand the environment within which they were operating. When necessary, the participants’ responses were further explored through the use of probing questions (Berg, 2009), which encouraged them to elaborate on information key to the research question. The interview schedule is available from the first author upon request.

**Procedure**
Following university ethical approval, purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) allowed a strategic and purposeful selection of information-rich cases that contributed an in-depth understanding to the aims of the study. The participants were selected because of their close working relationships with sport psychologists and their extensive experience of working alongside them in high performance sport environments, which enabled participants to offer detailed information in relation to the aims of the study. Participants gave their informed consent to take part in the research, and were interviewed in person at a location suitable to and chosen by them, with interviews typically lasting 60-90 minutes. Sport psychologists were not contacted to identify physicians and coaches with whom they had worked, so as to avoid any bias in participant selection. The interview guide and an information sheet were provided for each participant in advance. This detailed the interview questions and informed the participant of the procedure, that the data would be kept confidential, and of their right to withdraw. The participants were experts in their field and according to Morse (2015) were therefore *appropriate* for the research. Thus theoretical saturation, described by Sparkes and Smith (2013) as “the selection of cases that are most likely to produce the relevant data that will discriminate or test emerging theories” (p. 42) was achieved from the 13 interviews. Furthermore, interviewing 13 participants was deemed *adequate*, given that this allowed replication of data to occur (Morse, 2015) and themes to emerge that enabled the research question to be answered.

**Data analysis**

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim, reviewed for grammatical accuracy, and re-read for familiarity by the first author. Transcripts yielded 328 pages of 1.5 spaced interview data. Each relevant quotation was tagged to identify the interviewee from whom it originated, allowing the researchers to identify the contributors for ease of reference between and within interviews. The researcher was guided in their analysis by Côté, Salmela,
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Baria and Russell’s (1993) description of interpretational qualitative analysis, whereby “elements, categories, patterns, and relations between properties emerge from the analysis of the data and are not predetermined” (p. 129), and the researcher creates a structure for the data to make the studied phenomenon easier for the reader to understand. Firstly the data was ‘tagged’, with the aim being to “produce a set of concepts which adequately represent the information included in the interview transcripts” (p. 130), and which enabled the researcher to identify the key roles of a sport psychologist operating within high performance sport environments. Following this process of tagging, the researcher created categories, whereby tags with similar meanings were gathered together and labelled to capture a given topic. These were then further re-categorized to represent participants’ perceptions of the sport psychologist’s understanding of high performance sport environments, the wider role of sport psychology within these environments, and the sport psychologist’s role within multidisciplinary teams.

Researcher trustworthiness

Research credibility principles were used to ensure accurate representation of the data and allow the reader to judge the quality of the research (Shenton, 2004; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The lead author had previously completed and contributed to qualitative research projects that had used interviews as the method of data collection, and they were therefore experienced in preparing interview schedules and carrying out research interviews. The focus of this prior research was similar to that of the current study, which provided the primary researcher with a good knowledge of the relevant literature base. The above information was shared with participants, given that the lead author was the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). In addition, reflecting on this prior experience and any potential biases allowed the researcher to consider how such biases may impact upon their research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Although participants were recruited to the study
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through purposive sampling, the authors ensured that data was collected from varied and multiple sources. In doing so, and by providing background information about the participants, the reader is able to judge the generalisability of the findings to other situations and experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Analyst triangulation was achieved through regular meetings between the authors to discuss the findings that emerged from the data analysis process, thereby offering a wider perspective from which to develop interpretations of the data (Shenton, 2004). All authors reviewed the interview transcripts to identify the main messages to be taken from the data. The first author led the analysis and development of common themes, and the subsequent discussions between the first three authors allowed their interpretations to be debated and common themes to be agreed.

Results

The purpose of this research was to explore the personal qualities of sport psychologists and how these enabled them to deal effectively with the organisational demands of operating within high performance sport. The results support and extend existing knowledge of high performance sport environments (Reid et al., 2004; Kyndt & Rowell, 2012), and highlight the importance of a sport psychologist’s understanding of the organisational demands these environments create, as well as how their personal qualities (such as humility, integrity and authenticity) are integral to their effectiveness. To protect anonymity, participants are referred to by the category they fall within with regards to their profession (coach or physician) and a number.

Understanding high performance sport environments and cultures

Coaches and physicians offered insight into how a sport psychologist can operate effectively in elite professional sport environments, and believed that this is dictated by their ability to understand the organisational processes and cultures of such environments. Coach 2
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stated that “each sport has its own language, and if you don't know that language, you ain’t
going to last in that sport”, with Physician 5 stating that the sport psychologist must be “the
right person for that environment” which they gauged based on their ‘sense’ of whether the
person would ‘fit in’. Coach 5 also commented that “you've got to know where you're
allowed and where you're not allowed, you've got to know what's acceptable and what
isn't...the political landscape”. The coaches and physicians commented on sport
psychologists’ understanding of organisational hierarchy and their ability to appropriately
position and represent themselves within it to be able to do their job effectively. Coach 7
stated that “different situations require different qualities at different times, with different
contexts, with different people, depending where you sit in the hierarchy of staff, how long
you've been in the organisation, how well you know the philosophy, your status”. Participants
elaborated by describing how a sport psychologist’s personal qualities can contribute to their
understanding of the elite sport environment in greater detail. For example, Coach 4
highlighted that sport psychologists require “[qualities] such as respect of the way that they
fit into a wider picture”. Coach 5 stated that a sport psychologist needs “to understand the
sporting world and what it takes or what's going on in a sports person’s mind... [and have]
some idea of how you might approach things and give you some empathy with the
environment”. Coach 5’s comment represents an evolution in the conceptualisation of
empathy, describing it in the context of the sport psychologist’s relationship with their
working environment. Coach 5 appeared to suggest that the empathic capacity to comprehend
and appreciate an environment is an important quality for sports psychologists in seeking to
understand an individual’s experiences within that context.

The current study therefore highlights the importance of a sport psychologist being
able to understand the environment they work within and appreciate its politics and culture.
Politics in this context, especially in elite and professional sport, should be understood as
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referring to the often more informal and less transparent mechanisms of power and influence in the organisation. Coaches and physicians believe sport psychologists can gain this appreciation and understanding by patiently developing an overall picture of the sport organisation they are working within, before implementing any interventions. According to the coaches, this can be achieved by the sport psychologists subtly “mooching, observing around the environment and lots of informal conversations that…develop into more formal stuff” (Coach 5) and “just collecting [information] and talking to people” (Coach 4). This approach was considered especially important for the sport psychologist to be able to accurately identify the requirements of their role, which was further emphasised by one physician:

Psychology’s a waiting game, you’ve got to just bide your time and understand the team dynamics and the way the different individuals work, and then start to decide on what strategies to take on board, so it's a bit of a slow-burn sometimes really, but absolutely vital, especially at the elite end (Physician 2).

In relation to this subtle (yet deliberate) approach, coaches and physicians discussed the sport psychologist as a humble individual who benefits from and indeed embraces being on the periphery, yet who is still able to understand central ‘goings on’:

You've got to be prepared to take a back seat on stuff...be kind of the grey man if you like, the psych, ‘cause they need to be behind everything but picking up the vibe on what's going on, and it might just be some little bit that they’re picking up but it could be really valuable just that little bit of advice that they’re giving (Coach 6).

In relation to personal qualities, what the participants appear to be describing here is the humility of the sport psychologist in patiently developing an understanding of the unique
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culture of a sport organisation, whilst being happy to remain in the background and maintain a degree of both physical and metaphorical distance. Coach 6 described this quality as being “modest, because they wouldn't be singing and dancing type people...I think they’d be quite in the background but because of the work they do they'll understand the effect that they've had”. Coach 3 also alluded to the importance of humility, noting that “when people feel the need to bowl you over with what they're allegedly coming from, it generally falls apart anyway”, suggesting that a lack of humility may be a ‘smokescreen’ for, and predictive of, ineffective practice.

An effective sport psychologist, who truly understands the culture in which they operate, will not feel the need to ‘advertise’ their work, or ‘shout about its benefits from the rooftops’. Coach 6 emphasised the importance of this:

Be prepared not to get the recognition...they'd have to be a person that's really quite happy for other people to take all the plaudits, just so they can fit in the background of the team, but then they need to be a person who’s got enough character too. If they really have got a belief that something needs driving through, they’re going to have to stick to their guns.

This coach recognised the need for the sport psychologist to possess the aforementioned qualities of humility and modesty in relation to their work, but suggested that these must be coupled with the integrity to intervene if it is considered the ‘right thing to do’ and to be direct in initiating change when required. This suggests that the sport psychologist who is internally secure about the impact they have, without requiring external recognition and reassurance for their work, is better able to maintain the withdrawn, low key and ‘one step removed’ role described whilst staying true to their beliefs and being prepared to ‘stick to their guns’. Also implicated, therefore, is the quality of authenticity in a sport psychologist
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acting in congruence with their own beliefs about ‘doing the right thing’. This was alluded to
by Physician 6, who stated:

[A sport psychologist] needs to be authentic and be who they are, and that's
unique…to be able to tell the truth is very important as well, and that kind of
goes in line with authenticity, sometimes it’s not easy to tell somebody the truth
and you need to be strong to do that.

Operating authentically in this context is about more than being consistent; it requires the
sport psychologist to be aware of and therefore able to remain true to their deepest core
values and beliefs, and to live this out in their work.

The wider organisational role in high performance sport

Coaches and physicians discussed the importance of sport psychologists being willing
and able to undertake organisational psychology-type work within their role, and why this
work is required. Coach 1 generalised by commenting that “current sport psychologists [have
moved] away from teaching discrete elements of things like focus, concentration... [they are]
focussed now on the environment in terms of trying to get the environment right”. Physician
4 discussed their experience of a sport psychologist who “took on a much bigger role than
just being a psychologist” and they observed that this “is what quite a lot of sport
psychologists end up doing isn’t it, go into management”. Physician 3 commented that “the
sport psychologist was given a wider remit than just being sport psychologist...almost a
human resources type of role there as well”. The same physician discussed what this role
might entail:

[The sport psychologist] did make themselves readily available to all…they
were doing other things in terms of away days…to try and help with the
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development of [the] whole sport science department...so the human resource
side of things, making sure the whole department was ticking along.

A sport psychologist may therefore be of significant value to an organisation when in a
position to encourage the development of a functional and successful working environment.

Conversely, coaches and physicians identified less effective sport psychologists as those who
neglected to consider the organisational context when working with an athlete, or failed to
address wider issues within a sport organisation. Coach 4 commented: “I've got no doubt [the
sport psychologist] was helping the athlete, but they weren't as effective because they were
focussing on just the athlete as opposed to focussing on the athlete but in the environment”.
The importance of this wider focus was further emphasised:

It's the relationship between the coach, the athlete and the training, or the coach,
the athlete and any event which needs working out...the idea that coaches and
athletes work in isolation is just so naive...you’re not just dealing with the
athlete, you’re dealing with the squad, the wider picture (Coach 4).

In addition, Coach 4 highlighted that sport psychologists “don't deal with wider structural
issues, well the good ones do, but...quite often we come across the people who don't get that
kind of wider multi-support picture”. These perspectives suggest that a sport psychologist’s
capacity to help an athlete or member of the staff team will be limited by an inability or
unwillingness to adopt an ‘organisational perspective’, specifically the environmental and
organisational constraints that will impact upon an athlete’s performance, development and
well-being.

With regards to the personal qualities that can assist sport psychologists operating
within an organisational psychology-type role, Physician 3 described a practitioner they had
worked with as 'rigorous' when highlighting the difficulties the practitioner faced because of
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the working environment; “I think you’ve got to be fairly rigorous…the [sport psychologist] I
worked with was very rigorous in terms of knowing what they wanted to do and finding out
where they could help and try and mould things”. However:-

The rug was pulled out from under their feet when the management decided to
change their mind on whether they liked their presence there or not and that was
things that are beyond football, that was personality clashes, but again it wasn't
the sport psychologist’s fault (Physician 3).

These quotes highlight that the sport psychologist operating in an organisational psychology
type role felt this was essential because of ‘difficult circumstances’ within the organisation,
yet in trying to ‘mould’ the environment to help develop the whole support team, the
organisation became un-nerved by their presence at this level. Despite the rigorous work that
this sport psychologist did to try and create a functional environment, the often volatile and
‘political’ nature of high performance sport meant their impact was ultimately determined by
the lack of support from the organisation. The same physician highlighted that “both myself
and the sport psychologist were of the opinion when we joined [the organisation], that as long
as they were said in private, conflicting and contrary views would be respected, and I’m not
sure that was the case eventually”. Physician 3’s insights also suggest that the sport
psychologist must possess a degree of resilience to be able to remain comfortable and
confident in a role that has the potential to be terminated at any point, and in which freedom
to express one’s views is limited. This is particularly difficult for a sport psychologist
working across an organisation in the wider role described and therefore exposing themselves
to the ‘politics’ of that organisation, more so than if they maintained a sport psychology role
alone.

Working with support staff in high performance sport
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A key determinant of a sport psychologist’s effective practice within an organisational role is their ability to manage people. This was considered particularly important for a sport psychologist working to support their colleagues as well as athletes, including the head coach or manager. Physician 3 summarised this need, stating that “to be honest the person who needed the sport psychologist more than the players was the manager”. Physician 6 also discussed how the sport psychologist “ended up working more with the manager”, and further elaborated on why such work was required:

The manager’s job is very lonely, and he gets isolated, so the biggest function I think [the sport psychologist] had, which is very valuable, is just to give him somebody to speak to and trust… it's quite a unique thing isn't it?

The coaches and physicians suggested that ‘good’ sport psychologists must be able to assess the needs of the whole team and ensure it operates effectively. Coach 2 highlighted the benefits of a sport psychologist working to support their colleagues; “I think that sport psychology is very, very successful and probably the most successful way, is for the sport psych to work with the coaching team”. Coach 2 also stated that “when you're working with a team of coaches, I think it’s very important to have a sport psychologist who can actually work with the team and help the process that the team have to go through”. In addition, Physician 2 highlighted that “psychologists often work with the whole team rather than just the athletes…making sure the team works as well…good psychologists, they don’t just do the athlete stuff they look at the team as a whole, the team dynamics”. Two physicians elaborated on what working with the whole team involved, and discussed a sport psychologist’s work with regards to how they can aid communication within the wider support team:

Looking after the whole team is really quite key, I say looking after, I don’t mean looking after in a sort of health sense, I mean being involved in the whole
team…the good psychologists became sort of tools of communication between
different factions of teams (Physician 2).

Having a psychologist coming in and pointing out to other members of the
management team that there are different ways to communicate and you have to
sympathise with what drives some person may not drive [others]...that's a really
useful role for a psychologist (Physician 4).

It appears that a quality of an effective sport psychologist working within a high performance
sport organisation is their ability to enhance and optimise communication between its
members by encouraging each individual to recognise and be sympathetic towards how their
colleagues operate. The coaches in particular recognised the importance of a sport
psychologist helping them to develop an awareness of how they communicate with athletes:

[The sport psychologist] flagged it up for us...I would never have been able to
reflect on that myself and needed a nudge, just in terms of are you aware of how
you speak to all the players, do you speak to them the same, and for me as an
individual...that's going to stick with me.

Here Coach 6 is discussing their appreciation of a sport psychologist’s ability to draw
attention to aspects of their communication as a coach that they may otherwise have been
unable to identify for themselves. The effective sport psychologist will therefore be one who
courages and supports colleagues’ ability to think critically and to develop their awareness
and understanding of self.

Coaches and physicians described the personal qualities of sport psychologists who
were able to help the support team to function effectively, and explained the value of having
a sport psychologist who was courageous enough to challenge other members of staff about
their work. Humility was again highlighted as an essential quality in this regard, enabling a
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sport psychologist to subtly direct staff within the environment in a positive way and
highlighting aspects of their practice that may otherwise go unnoticed:

[The sport psychologist] will come out with something a little bit ‘have you
thought about this, have you thought about that’…they will challenge you in a
positive way of how you deal with a stressful situation or your comments about
an athlete or whatever so there are sometimes two aspects to a sport psych
(Physician 1).

[The sport psychologist must] build the trust with the individuals where they
respect others’ opinions but again when you're putting your opinion across, it
has to be put across in a certain way that is not confrontational or where it's
downgrading what other people are saying, it's more suggested have you thought
about this because these might be the benefits, so it's more selling your idea
rather than criticising other ideas (Coach 7).

The onus is therefore on the sport psychologist’s ability to challenge other staff in a
constructive way that avoids devaluing their ideas and input. This suggests that in this
support team context, a sport psychologist’s humility can help to ensure that any thoughts and
advice they offer are provided in a helpful and collaborative way, and not one that suggests
their knowledge is of greater importance than a colleague’s. Having the humility to accept a
‘cog in the wheel’ status and acknowledging others’ input as being equally as important as
their own was considered crucial for the sport psychologist’s successful integration and
acceptance into the support team.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to provide insight into the organisational demands
that sport psychologists face within their work and the personal qualities that aid them in
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meeting these demands, from the perspective of colleagues with whom they have worked in
sport. By interviewing coaches and sport physicians, three themes emerged to represent such
organisational demands and the sport psychologist’s role in addressing these; a) understanding high performance sport environments and cultures, b) the wider organisational role in high performance sport, and c) working with support staff in high performance sport.

The personal qualities of the sport psychologists discussed both explicitly and implicitly by coaches and sports physicians were also highlighted to help articulate how a sport psychologist can operate effectively within high performance sport organisations, such as humility, integrity and authenticity.

Coaches and physicians considered effective sport psychologists to be those who were able to understand, appreciate, and operate in accordance with an organisation’s culture. Organisational culture has been defined as “the visible and less visible norms, values and behaviour that are shared by a group of employees which shape the group’s sense of what is acceptable and valid” (Wilson, 2001, p. 356). The culture of an organisation is therefore evolutionary in nature and represents a core template of working practices, ideas, values and philosophies, brought together by key stakeholders to determine the organisation’s aims (Nesti, Littlewood, O’Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012; Wilson, 2001). The coaches and physicians in the current study described the importance of sport psychologists being able to recognise what is ‘acceptable’ practice, being able to speak the ‘language’ of the organisation, and understanding how they fit into the ‘wider picture’ of that organisation. A key aspect of this understanding related to the politics of an organisation and the mechanisms of power and influence that exist within the specific organisational culture. Ken Ravizza, when interviewed about his applied practice (Fifer et al., 2008), recognised the importance of this:

I have to assess…the subculture of the sport, the politics of the organization,
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the team and staff dynamics, and the amount of support that I will have. The subculture of the sport and the politics overlap, I must learn who the decision makers are, who the leaders are, and who the ‘gatekeepers’ are (Fifer et al., 2008, p. 365).

Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) commented that “consultants attempting to implement organizational service delivery should remain cognizant of Ravizza’s (1988) recommendation that they pay careful attention to the constantly unfolding ‘organizational politics’ within elite sport” (p. 432). These mechanisms of power and influence, are often difficult to recognise; very often they sit invisibly alongside formal structures and systems, and are sometimes based on personal loyalty and previous professional relationships (Lussier & Achua, 2009). The current research therefore operationalises the concept of organisational culture and its associated mechanisms, and how a sport psychologist can demonstrate their understanding of this in their work.

Coaches and physicians believed sport psychologists who understand organisational culture are therefore those who can also recognise the benefits of remaining ‘in the background’ and who are accepting of a withdrawn role given that this may result in them receiving little recognition for their work. Nesti (2010) highlights how sport psychologists’ interactions with athletes and colleagues are often carried out in an informal and low key manner, which may often result in ‘good work’ going unnoticed. This can be a challenge when operating in high performance sport environments where staff are normally expected to identify their achievements and for these to be subject to evaluation by others (Nesti, 2010).

Likewise, Dorfman (1990) suggests that “by using a self-effacing approach you enhance your image by not enhancing your image” (p.344). The coaches and physicians in the current study perceived subtlety and humility to be positive qualities of the sport psychologists they worked with, which benefitted their integration into the organisation. Sport psychologists
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must therefore be able to recognise when a subtle approach is required and understand how this withdrawn position can actually enhance their effectiveness as a practitioner.

Based on the views of the coaches and physicians within the current study, the effectiveness of a sport psychologist is determined, at least in part, by their ability to support the work of the large multidisciplinary teams that exist in elite and professional level sport teams. Coaches and physicians in the current study described sport psychologists who adopted an organisational psychology-type role as dictated by the demands of the organisation, yet it was the challenging and disruptive nature of these demands which ultimately prevented the sport psychologist from being effective within this role. The current study suggests that sport psychologists must possess the personal qualities necessary to allow them to effectively carry out the tasks associated with an organisational psychology role. This resonates with Nesti (2004), who stated that “to survive and indeed thrive in such an arduous climate [as elite professional sport], sport psychologists will need to possess resilience, commitment and…presence, authenticity and empathy” (p. 91), and the current study provides some evidence of how and why these qualities can aid a practitioner. Empathy is a term typically associated with a relationship that exists between two individuals and has been defined by the British Association of Counselling Psychology (BACP) as “the ability to communicate understanding of another person’s experience from that person’s perspective” (2010, p. 3). One coach, however, described empathy in the context of the sport psychologist’s relationship with their working environment, and suggests that the empathic capacity to understand and interpret the specifics of the environment is an important quality of sports psychologists when operating effectively inside high level sport organisations. Weinberg and McDermtt (2002) interviewed sport and business leaders regarding the factors essential for organisational success, with a key finding being the ability to flexibly adopt a variety of leadership styles, requiring ‘interpersonal competencies’ of listening, empathy and trust. Such qualities have long been associated with
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effective sport psychologists (Nesti, 2004), so it is unsurprising that these practitioners are often
called upon to adopt a leadership role in terms of ‘directing’ organisational change, at the very
least on an informal, ad-hoc basis.

It was also suggested that resilience is an important personal quality in aiding a sport
psychologist to manage the day-to-day challenges associated with high level sport
organisations. The BACP (2010 describes resilience as “the capacity to work with the client’s
concerns without being personally diminished” (p. 4), a definition which suggests a resilient
individual will be one who focuses on the needs of others without negatively impacting on
themselves. This is particularly significant within the context of high performance sport given
that the sport psychologist will work to support those around them, despite concurrently
addressing organisational demands in a role that may lack clarity and security. A significant
part of the organisational psychology-type role that sport psychologists may adopt includes
working to support other staff within a multidisciplinary support team, and findings from the
current study suggest that sport psychologists must be able to both react to and address staff
issues as well as proactively developing the team overall. Communication skills have long been
documented as essential for effective sport psychologists (Gould et al., 1989; Partington &
Orlick, 1991), however the current study provides an understanding of how practitioners can
use these skills with regards to the personal qualities underpinning their work to enhance team
processes. Results suggests that sport psychologists benefit from being happy and able to take
a step back and objectively view team processes such as communication between support staff,
and be personally humble enough to accept this withdrawn position. However, they must also
have sufficient knowledge of the environment and the people operating within it to be able to
recognise when to step in and provide suggestions where appropriate, and coaches and
physicians appreciated sport psychologists who could offer them support and guidance in a
collaborative and helpful way. Nesti (2010) describes how some staff can often feel
uncomfortable and become suspicious of sport psychologists with academic knowledge and ideas that challenge their own. However, coaches and physicians in the current study welcomed being challenged by a sport psychologist, particularly if it allowed them to reflect upon and thus improve their own practice. The onus is therefore on the sport psychologist’s ability to have the personal courage to challenge other staff in a constructive way that avoids confrontation or devaluing others’ input. This is especially important in an environment described by one of the coaches in the current study as ‘survival of the fittest’, where the temptation of self-promotion for personal gain must be avoided (Nesti, 2010).

The lack of previous research exploring the sport psychologist in an organisational role means they are unlikely to have received sufficient training in preparation for it (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Nesti, 2010), and have likely gained their organisational role-related knowledge through experiential ‘on the job’ encounters. The current research emphasises the likelihood that sport psychologists will operate within these roles, and therefore individuals responsible for educating and training future practitioners should take this into account, and at least prepare trainees to go in with their ‘eyes open’ and encourage them to consider how they might best react and respond to the inevitable challenges they will encounter. In addition, previous research has highlighted specific aspects of an environment that require resolution, for example role conflict and organisational stressors (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) which have been seen to fall within the sport psychologist’s remit. However, the reality, based upon the findings of the current research, is that the need for organisation psychology type work within high level sport can stem from, for example, political and communication based issues between staff. This suggests there is additional merit in developing education and training programmes that provide sport psychology students with (at the very least) exposure to organisational psychology theory and it’s synthesis to the elite sport environment. Sport psychology education and training programmes should promote greater self-awareness in trainees that allows them
to explore the specific requirements of the practitioner working in an organisational role. Trainee sport psychologists should also have the opportunity to critically develop an understanding of where and when they need to draw on their personal qualities to help them survive and remain effective when addressing the organisational demands of high performance sport. This implicates the supervisory process, and the importance of Socratic dialogue to stimulate rigorous self-examination of one’s philosophy (Corlett, 1996a) and develop a trainee’s understanding of self and self-in-practice. Developing greater self-awareness of one’s personal qualities in practice could also aid future practitioners in their ethical decision making. Jones (2007) emphasises humility and integrity, as well as courage and good judgement, as essential personal qualities in maintaining professionalism and practising ethically and within one’s area of competence. These qualities are reflected in the ethical codes of conduct published by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES; 2014) and the British Psychological Society (BPS; 2009); the BPS highlight the importance of integrity for example. However, the authors believe there remains the need for explicit links to be created between these qualities and how they can impact upon a sport psychologist’s ethical decision making. This does not mean to say that the guidelines are insufficient, but that programmes of sport psychology education and training should clarify these links and contextualise the relevant personal qualities with regards to ethical decision making in applied practice.

Future research should explore the first-hand experiences of sport psychologists who operate in such a role and the personal qualities they draw on, which could subsequently provide valuable information for consideration within sport psychology education and training programmes. The coaches and physicians who work alongside sport psychologists provided a rich perspective of ‘outsider’ perceptions, yet it is also important to develop idiographic accounts of sport psychologists who are working within these evolving and challenging environments and acknowledge the individuality of the person behind the
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practitioner. It would be important to obtain individual first-hand accounts to facilitate an in-depth exploration of a sport psychologist’s personal qualities, their awareness of self with regards to these qualities, and their own perceptions of how these interact with the particular sport environment they operate within.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the organisational demands that a sport psychologist may face within their work and the personal qualities that can aid them in addressing these demands. The results from this study represent detailed discussions around the personal qualities of effective sport psychologists, and support the growing emphasis on the organisational roles they may be required to fill. Several aspects of high performance sport environments were discussed by coaches and physicians in relation to the sport psychologist’s understanding of the environment, what their role as an organisational psychologist may involve, and their ability to translate their academic knowledge into effective practice and support for the multidisciplinary team around them. The coaches and physicians also highlighted several personal qualities of the sport psychologist, which included integrity, empathy and humility, as making key contributions to effective practice in an organisational role. Colleagues of sport psychologists have not been used as a participant group to any great extent, and physicians specifically appear to have been overlooked entirely. This study therefore offers some novel methodological contributions with regards to the theoretical focus and the insight into sport psychology practice that physicians can provide. The perspective gained from working with colleagues of sport psychologists is important in emphasising that practitioners do not work in isolation. The findings support and extend the previously limited literature that focuses on the realities of working in elite sport, and highlight several areas of interest for further consideration and study.
References


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