

Professional Doctorate Portfolio

David McHugh

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of Liverpool John Moores University  
for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy

August 2020

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## **Abstracts:**

### **Case Studies:**

#### **Consultancy Case Study 1: Using cognitive behaviour therapy with a powerlifting student athlete**

The purpose of this case study is to describe the application of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) with a powerlifting student athlete. This case study highlights my transition from the theory of delivering interventions to practicing in an applied setting. Although I could articulate what I believed my professional philosophy to be, my professional practice was quite different. Authenticity or congruence involves acting in accordance with one's true self and expressing oneself through ways that are consistent with thoughts and feelings (Rogers, 1961). A sports psychology practitioner can be considered congruent when, the selection of a therapeutic framework is underpinned by personal values and practice beliefs (Lindsey, Breckon, Thomas & Maynard, 2007). However, unconscious adoption of frameworks not aligned with personal values can result in ineffective practice (Lindsey et al, 2007). Through reflection on practice and why I worked in a specific way, I aim to make sense of how my professional judgement and decisions impacts the outcomes for the client (Martindale & Collins, 2007).

#### **Consultancy Case Study 2: Acceptance and commitment therapy for an athletics student athlete**

The present case is underpinned by an Acceptance and Commitment approach (ACT; Hayes & Strosahl & Wilson, 1999). The client was a student athlete studying Science and had one year left on the course in order to get her degree. As an athlete she competed in athletics as a sprinter

in the 100m and 200m events. The client presented with having recently experienced a panic attack, not enjoying her sporting experience and worrying about the transition into the workforce. The case study outlines the decision-making process I went through when deciding to not refer the client to another practitioner and how I adopted a whole person approach in supporting the client. Reflections on the perceived efficacy of the intervention are provided and how the ACT approach aligns with me as a person.

### **Consultancy Case Study 3: Supporting group functioning in youth football**

The purpose of this case study is to describe the process of applying social identity theory to facilitate the development of a team's culture. The client was an U17 national league academy team where the coach had recently taken over the team. The majority of the players were joining the club for the first time. Following initial analysis of the team environment and case conceptualisation, the presenting needs identified an absence of commitment to fellow teammates, support among teammates and an understanding of group expectations. The intervention took place over three workshops throughout pre-season before being within the team's on pitch training sessions in the lead up to the start of the season.

### **Teaching case study:**

The intervention was delivered to students in receipt of Sports Scholarships in a third level education institution. Throughout the academic year Sports Scholarship recipients are provided with psycho-educational workshops on areas related to their development as a student athlete. The participants take part in a range of sports including, soccer, Gaelic games (Gaelic football,

Hurling, camogie, handball), rugby, athletics and powerlifting. The student athletes are provided with a range of support while on sports scholarship including sports psychology support, strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, academic support and sports specific coaching. The sports psychology support provides recipients with three psycho-educational workshops and individual sports psychology support. In September 2017 I started out in the role of managing the Sports Scholarship scheme and providing the sports psychology support to the sports scholarship students. This case study refers to the academic years 2017/18 (year 1) and 2018/19 (year 2) highlighting how key moments of delivery during year 1 shaped workshop delivery in year 2 and ultimately how I design, implement and prepare the delivery of Sports Psychology workshops.

### **Research:**

#### **Systematic Review: The Psychology of elite footballers: A meta-synthesis**

Research over the past 20 years has attempted to understand the psychological characteristics of elite footballers. The purpose of the current study was to review the qualitative research that has examined the psychological characteristics of elite footballers. The main objectives of the study was to (1) critically review the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of the research on the psychology of elite footballers (2) systematically review the factors that influence the psychology of elite footballers and (3) synthesize the findings of the factors that influence the psychology of elite footballers. In total 22 studies were included in the meta-study. The studies were analysed and data extracted to carry out a meta-method, meta-theory, meta-data analysis and meta-synthesis. Semi-structured interviews were utilised most often to research the psychology of elite footballers and the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

was the most utilised theory underpinning the collection of data. A total of 86 codes were identified which were categorized into 14 concepts, and 3 overarching categories: coping, support and task focused attention. A grounded theory model is presented to explain the psychology of elite footballers. The current study identifies gaps in the current research, practical implications and areas for future research.

### **Empirical Study 1: The transition through underage international football squads: Environmental and age specific challenge**

Research on the junior to senior transition in sport has found the skills learned in preceding transitions influence the junior to senior transition. However, there is limited understanding of what the preceding transitions are and how the athlete can manage the transition. Interviews were conducted with five head coaches working with underage international squads from under fifteens to under nineteens to explore their perceptions of the challenges and resources available to athletes during transition. The themes identified highlight challenges within the national team environment and between age groups that can be eased by key stakeholders and the athlete developing key coping characteristics.

### **Empirical Study 2: Heads of youth development perceptions of the within career transition to underage international football.**

For athletes to successfully transition through a talent development system there needs to be a long-term strategy, communication, flexibility and support, which is coordinated and integrated within a system (Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007). Despite this, there is limited

understanding of how one talent development environment within a system integrates with another talent development environment. Interviews were conducted with five heads of youth development within football clubs in Ireland to explore their perceptions of the within career transition of their players to underage international football. The findings highlight how there are challenges associated with the transition to international football which requires the players to develop coping skills to successfully overcome the challenges. However, the transition is influenced by the club environment and the governance structures within the game, which subsequently influence the migration patterns of underage international players. The findings extend previous research by highlighting how the interaction between two micro-environments influences the individual athlete's ability to cope with within career transitions.

## Acknowledgements

This portfolio would not have been possible without the help and support of several people.

I would like to thank Gordon Brett in AIT sports department for providing me with the opportunity to work in AIT and to support student athletes in their personal, academic, and athletic development. I hope they have benefitted from some of the support provided as much as I have developed as a practitioner over the last few years.

I would like to thank Dr. Rob Morris and Dr. Martin Eubank for their support and guidance over the last three years. The support provided by you both as supervisors and the environment facilitated within the course at LJMU has been invaluable in my development as a practitioner.

To those who took part in the research on talent development in Irish football and in the case studies, thank you. I hope the findings and work carried out with clients has been of some benefit to you and those you work with.

Thank you to Emer for the unwavering support not only in undertaking this project but in pursuing a career in Sports Psychology. When I look at the hours that I have committed to completing this portfolio, you too have committed those same hours in time, space, and support.

To my brother Connell, thank you for being there to bounce ideas off and checking over the final document. To my sisters Michelle and Louise thank you for your patience throughout.

Finally thank you to Mam and Dad for always encouraging the importance of helping others and education while at the same time supporting all of us in pursuing what we were interested in.



## **Declaration**

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own original work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at Liverpool John Moores University or elsewhere. All external references and sources are acknowledged and identified within the contents.

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David McHugh

August 2020

## **Consultancy Case Study 1:**

### **Title: Using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with a Powerlifting student athlete**

#### **Background to the case:**

The purpose of this case study is to describe the application of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) with a powerlifting student athlete. This case study highlights my transition from the theoretical exploration of delivering interventions to delivering interventions with clients in an applied setting. Although I could articulate what I believed my professional philosophy to be, my professional practice was quite different. Authenticity or congruence involves acting in accordance with one's true self and expressing oneself through ways that are consistent with one's true thoughts and feelings (Rogers, 1961). A sports psychology practitioner can be considered congruent when, the selection of a therapeutic framework is underpinned by personal values and practice beliefs (Lindsey, Breckon, Thomas & Maynard, 2007). However, unconscious adoption of frameworks not aligned with personal values can result in ineffective practice (Lindsey et al, 2007). Through reflection on practice and why I worked in a specific way, I aim to make sense of how my professional judgement and decisions impacts the outcomes for the client (Martindale & Collins, 2007).

#### **Professional Philosophy:**

Keegan (2016) states that assumptions are a necessary part of sports psychology service delivery, and despite potentially never being asked about your professional philosophy, it underpins ethical and effective practice. My consulting philosophy can be classified utilising Keegan (2010) framework. The aim of the service provided within the context was student athlete

welfare and my belief about the priority of the support provided to clients was to consider a whole person approach. I view the client as the expert on their own experience. My aim as a practitioner is to support the client in driving their own change process through developing a safe consulting relationship where the client has the space to explore their experience. This approach has been characterised as a client led approach, although it must be noted this a simple heuristic used to characterise consulting styles (Keegan, 2010).

### **Trainee Background:**

In June 2017 I had started on the Professional Doctorate programme as a trainee sport and exercise psychologist. In September 2017 I began my primary placement in a full-time role as manager of the sport scholarship scheme for student athletes within a third level education institution. This role involved coordinating the support services provided to student athletes including strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, nutrition, tutorial support and providing individual and group sports psychology support. Since stage 1 training three years previously, I had provided sports psychology support to clients through group workshops. While providing this support, I gravitated towards intervention techniques I could apply in a step by step manner. This “rigid” approach to service delivery is a characteristic of early career practitioners and I aimed to follow the intervention as prescribed by what I had read (Tod, Andersen, & Marchant, 2009). I had recognised a need to move beyond this approach through adopting a professional philosophy incorporating a whole person approach (see above) to support client change, however I did not have a clear conceptualisation on how to implement my professional philosophy within professional practice.

According to Skovholt and Rønnestad's (1992) practitioner development is characterised by six categories. (1) The central task refers to the goals the practitioner is attempting to attain. At this

stage, my aim was to develop my ability to help clients with their presenting issues, to make an impact as a practitioner. (2) Predominant affect refers to the emotions the practitioner feels, and at this point I was anxious about knowing what to do and what to say to the client. (3) The third category is the predominant sources of influence on the practitioner such as people and events. In comparison to when I was delivering the workshops, I now had a supervisor and peer support through the professional doctorate course. (4) Role and working style refer to how practitioners proceed to help clients and at this point I proceeded to identify the client's problems and help them overcome them. (5) The conceptual idea underpinning practice delivery was a CBT approach. (6) The final category is the practitioners measure of effectiveness which for me was whether the client overcame their presenting issues. At this stage of my career, I was moving from the lay helper phase in pre-training to the novice professional phase (Rønnestad and Skovholt's, 2003).

### **Needs Analysis:**

The client was a 20-year-old student athlete in his final year of studying a Bachelor of Business degree and was in receipt of a Sports Scholarship. He had been competing at international youth competitions in Europe and worldwide for the last three years having won a world junior championship medal in 2017. The upcoming year would be the client's first time competing at an open age group competition in June 2018 at the national senior competition, making the transition from junior to senior sport for the first time. In preparation for the national senior competition he would compete at the national U23 competition in February 2018.

As part of my role managing the sports scholarship scheme, I meet all of the sports scholarship students once a semester to check if they require additional support and to monitor their progress.

I met the client in early November 2017, and as part of the check in, the client identified

accessing Sports Psychology support as a priority for him. He identified mental skills as an area that he would like support in, in preparation for the competition in February and with a view to preparing for the national seniors in June. As a practitioner I felt that I could provide this type of support. After this initial meeting we arranged to meet again to carry out an intake interview.

The client trained every day during the week, except for Sundays which was a rest day. This totalled 15 hours training per week in his local weightlifting gym. The client was reliant on lifts to and from college from his father which meant getting into college several hours before class began and staying until his father finished work. He would attend training after spending the day at college and to wind down at the end of the day he would play the video game FIFA, often until 12pm. He reported often going to bed around 12pm and sometimes later, and getting up at 7am, which he identified as contributing to feeling tired throughout the week. The client wanted to eat better as it was important for recovery and maintaining weight but found he reported not having enough time. This resulted in having to buy food in the canteen which at times did not meet his training goals.

In addition to the above, in the performance context, the client reported that he often lost grip of the bar which affected his ability to perform on certain lifts. He reported that when he felt his grip go, he would focus on “not letting go” which he found made it difficult to maintain his grip. This did not happen all the time but if it happened on one lift it would happen again. The client explained that powerlifting can be a competitive environment to be in, with all competitors observing one another’s lifts. This can result in mind games from other competitors in the form of them trying to distract him. The client identified that he enjoyed competing and was not concerned with what others thought of him or tried to do to him. He was not competing against

them but against himself. He identified that the competitiveness of the environment will probably be more intense when he steps up to open age grade competition.

The client identified that he would like to become more efficient with his time and prioritised recovery and nutrition as being areas he would like to improve in. Within his sporting performance he would like to learn to maintain a better focus when he does feel his grip going. In preparation for the step up to senior sport he wanted to maintain his ability to enjoy the sport and to continue to block out the distractions from opponents.

### **Theoretical Approach:**

The CBT perspective proposes that psychological problems stem from interactions of various aspects of a person's life, such as thoughts, emotions, physiology, and behaviour, with environmental factors influencing all four systems (Beck, 1995). In addition to these interactions, CBT contends that change in cognitions is critical for positive therapeutic outcomes (Clark & Steer, 1996). There are three levels of cognitive processing, with core beliefs being central to a person's cognitions which are not easily accessible to consciousness. Core beliefs influence the subsequent levels of automatic thoughts at the pre-conscious level which often run through people's minds stemming from core beliefs. The third level of belief is conscious thought, which reflect the rules that the individual has in an attempt to live with core beliefs (Beck, 1995).

The client's conscious thought that he enjoyed the sport enabled him to cope with the distractions from fellow competitors. According to Lazarus & Folkman's transactional model of coping and stress (1984), the environment provides a stimulus, in the client's case this being the pressure to perform when on the podium. The individual perceives information and in the client's case the primary interpretation of this information while on the podium was of the pressure being a

facilitator of performance. The client's secondary appraisal is of his resources to meet the demands and he interprets his resources as being sufficient to meet the demands of the environment. However, when the weight goes up and with the fatigue induced by earlier rounds of competition, the client has less resources to meet the demands inducing a stress response and the loss of grip. This results in the client engaging in problem focused coping and negative self-talk by focusing on “not losing grip”. According to the matching hypothesis, the greatest performance benefits of self-talk will be when the self-talk utilised is matched with the demands of the performance task (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, N., Goltsios & Theodorakis, 2011). The clients instructional self-talk “not letting go” was not matching with the task demand of having to move the weight with the correct form. Instructional self-talk during squatting has been shown to improve squat form (Macias, 2017).

The client's lifestyle influenced his energy levels throughout the week. With his attendance at college being dependent on getting a lift to and from college, his time management was externally controlled. When the client did have time to wind down, this was at the end of the day or after training in the evening. The trigger for the behaviour of staying up late, was the lack of time available throughout the week to disengage from college and sport. Through adopting a CBT approach, I could conceptualise the client's behaviour and cognitions in relation to his grip and ability not to get distracted by the competitive environment. However, by adopting CBT as a problem-based approach I found it difficult to conceptualise the client's presentation of lifestyle issues with a direct mental skill in terms of its solution. There was no clear process to take the client through to solve the travel and lifestyle issues the client was presenting with. My interpretation of my central task at this time was to help the client overcome their problems (Skovholt and Rønnestad, 1992). Bond (2002) and Collins, Evans-Jones & O'Connor (2013)

note that mental skills and problem-based approaches to psychological support can be insufficient when clients present with issues beyond those directly related to performance. The aim for the intervention regarding the client's lifestyle was to help the client identify the best use of the time they do have available (Etzel & Monda, 2013).

### **Intervention:**

After the initial intake interview, it was agreed that the client would fill in a diary of how he spent his week and then bring the diary to the next session the following week. The aim behind this was to help the client develop an awareness about their priorities, responsibilities, and the reality of how he was spending his time. This would help the client identify the best use of the time that he does have available (Etzel & Monda, 2013). At the next session, the client had not completed the worksheet. He said he had forgotten to complete it as he did not have the time and agreed to complete it for the following week. According to CBT information processing biases play a role in the development and maintenance of psychological problems, which can subsequently become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the client (Claspell, 2013).

This posed a problem for me as a practitioner. I had planned the session around reviewing the client's diary for the week and discussing his priorities, responsibilities and how he was spending his time. As I still viewed my central task as making an impact and helping the clients with their problems, my main affect at this point was anxiety about not being able to achieve this goal (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992). I was worried about knowing what to do and say to the client without having a clear task to work on. The second session (after this one) with the client was going to explore his values and alignment of values with his behaviour. Consequently, I decided to explore the client's values within this session. Beck (1991) identified the importance of core beliefs in facilitating change in the client's life. This approach was underpinned by Vyskocilova,



Prasko, Ociskova, Sedlackova & Mozny (2015) who identified the importance of the client identifying their value system when implementing time management strategies.

In this session the concept of a value was discussed, where the difference between a value and goal was articulated to the client. It was explained to the client that values cannot be achieved but they can help in the achievement of goals (Vyskocilova et al, 2015). The client was asked to consider the following question in exploring their values: “If you were to finish last in every competition you entered from now on, what would you like others to be able to say about you? And what would you like to be able to say about yourself?”. The objective behind this question was to aid the client in clarifying their personal values and behaviour in line with their values (Vyskocilova et al, 2015). In preparation for the difficult junior-senior transition, a task orientated approach by the client towards their sport would facilitate a problem focused coping response to the challenges encountered (Ntoumanis, Biddle & Haddock, 1999). The client identified three values he would like to be known for: (1) putting the work/effort in; (2) to be enjoyable to watch; (3) to set his own standard by being his best version of himself. The client then identified associated behaviours that enable him to live these values. The client chose to place a focus on the value of “putting the effort in” over the next two weeks as he felt this would allow him to work on the goal of improving his time management skills. The client chose to focus on developing a routine and testing the behaviour of being in bed for 10:30pm, with the aim of getting more rest throughout the week. The purpose of this was for the client to engage in a behaviour test of the belief that they must stay up later in order to wind down at the end of a day (McArdle & Moore, 2012).

Between the first and second session, the client had emailed back the completed timetable. This gave me an opportunity to calculate the number of hours the client spent on each of the activities

he outlined in his worksheet. The objective behind this was to examine the evidence that the client had more time available to them than they had originally considered (Claspell, 2013). In the second meeting before showing the client the results of their timetable, I asked the client how many hours they spent on each area during the week. The client identified that he only spent six hours each week playing FIFA and did not think that he had as much free time as he did.

Through the behavioural experiment discussed in the first session and the evidence presented, the client learned that they had time available at the weekends to play FIFA and that he also had the free time available to engage in meal preparation to aid recovery post training. The client had an important competition coming up and it was agreed the client would continue to focus on his value of “putting the work in”, but would focus on the value of “setting his own standard” for the upcoming competition.

In the third session, we reviewed the client's competition. In this competition the client had set three junior records and a senior bench press record. The client reported that he felt his time management in the lead up to the competition had improved which enabled him to improve the quality of his training and recover post training. The client also reported utilising his free time at the weekends to engage in meal preparation for the upcoming week. In this session, we also explored the self-talk utilised in the last competition. The aim behind this was to guide the client towards an understanding of how the environment interacts with their physiological response to result in cognitions and subsequent self-talk (McArdle & Moore, 2012) and to explore the type of self-talk that matched the demands of the task (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011). The client explained that in the competition he used the verbal statements of “I am the best here” and the image of “lion of the jungle” when he was going to the platform. I explained that this type of self-talk relates to the need to get oneself ready to perform is called motivational self-talk

(Hardy, Hall & Hardy, 2004). When he was competing, he would use the phrase “stick with it”, which targeted keeping his form and staying with the process. This was explained as being instructional self-talk (Hardy et al, 2004). We then explored this experience against when he loses his grip. The client identified that he says “don’t lose the grip, hold on to it” causing him to focus on his wrist which he identified as instructional self-talk. I explained that research on attentional focus has found that athletes who focus on their body movements can constrain their movements compared to those who have an external focus (Wulf, Zachry, Granados & Dufek, 2007). The client identified that it would be more effective for him to focus on looking at the ceiling in these moments and to say to himself “hit the ceiling” as a form of instructional self-talk.

In the final session, the aim was to review the work carried out to see what the client benefitted from and what they would continue to put into action. However, at the beginning of the session the client let me know he had been selected for the Irish World Championship squad, but he was unsure of whether to compete or not. This now became the focus of the session to explore the client's thoughts and feelings around attending the competition. The aim was to explore a payoff matrix, where the advantages and disadvantages of attending and not attending were explored (Gringerich & Mueser, 2017). The client had been placed in a situation where he was unsure of whether to attend the competition or not and felt anxious about the decision not to attend. This was based on the cognition that although he would not win the event, he would gain valuable experience from attending the event. However, as this was a self-funded sport it would cost him money to go to the competition and he would miss out on two weeks work over the summer period as a result. This work was required to fund his college year and the client had utilised his funding from the sports scholarship scheme to attend another competition in line with his season

plan. The client identified he could afford to go to the competition, but he did not think it would be worth the investment. Previously, I had not considered or explored how the client's whole person interacts with his athletic self and I felt a sense of guilt as a practitioner for not getting to know the client's wider context beyond their athletic participation (Lindsey et al, 2007). This was incongruent with my professional philosophy and challenged me to consider this within the final session, but also to develop as a practitioner.

I began by asking the client to list all the reasons why he should attend the competition and then the reasons why he should not in the context of how it would influence all areas of his life. The list for not attending the event was longer than the reasons why he should attend. The client used this as evidence to not attend but still felt anxious that he would be missing out by not attending. I then asked the client to give each reason on both lists a weighting out of ten in terms of its importance. The objective behind this was to ensure the evidence the client was relying on was reliable (Claspell, 2013). This resulted in the reasons for attending having a higher weighting compared with not attending. The client identified that by looking at the weighting of the reasons that this was reflective of how he was feeling. The aim of this was to facilitate the client in coming to the decision himself, and while he did think he was going to attend when leaving the session, he later came back to me to explain that he had decided not to attend. He explained that having reflected on the scores he changed the weighting he would give to some scores and that saving the money he had, was more important to him. This was due to the competition not being in his season plan initially and based on the idea that the competition would come around again when he was better prepared to take advantage of the experience of competing at that level.

**Evaluation:**

The support provided to the client was evaluated in three ways (1) pre and post self-evaluation questions (2) the opportunity to provide a qualitative response to the support and (3) gaining feedback throughout the support from the client.

***Self-evaluation:***

The client was asked to fill a self-evaluation before and after the conclusion of the intervention. The client was asked to fill in his perceived ability to manage his time, identify his values, execute his values and understanding of self-talk on a scale of 1 (low) - 10 (high). The client identified improvement in all areas, with time management seeing the largest increase.

Figure 2

***Qualitative response:***

The client was asked to note any comments about his experience of the support provided. The client noted that his “time management improved due to having a better routine and being more organised” and he improved his knowledge with regard to his values through “having more knowledge of how something would have a knock-on effect”. As noted during the support provided regarding self-talk the client “felt I was already good at this but definitely improved from the talks.”

***Feedback:***

Verbal feedback was obtained throughout the support on whether the client found the support to be meeting their needs. The client reported having more energy during the week when he started going to bed earlier and planning his week. The client also reported through planning his week

he was better able to plan and prepare his meals. As a measure of effectiveness of my central task, to make an impact with the client, this feedback provided me with reassurance that I was able to support the client. However, it also challenged me in that the client was already engaging in self-talk, he already had a clear idea of his values and his time management required him modifying some of his behaviours. Rather than the intervention being the key driver of change, my role as a facilitator allowed the client to modify their own behaviour. This reflects Rogers suggestion that if clients are placed within a nurturing environment, they will develop their own awareness and into their own fully functioning self (Rogers, 1951).

Overall, the client reported that the support helped him in adapting to less than ideal situations. This was linked to the decision he had to make around attendance at an international competition. He reported the work in the final session helping him better understand the way he was feeling and enabled him to make a better-informed choice on whether to attend the competition or not. The client decided not to attend the competition but was able to accept the decision having explored the decision thoroughly. Through providing the client with a space to explore the decision, the client was provided with a space to develop their own awareness of what was important for them (Rogers, 1961). Prior to this, I had only considered the client as an athlete and had not fully appreciated how all areas of his life influence each other to subsequently his decision-making process in attending the competition. This scenario challenged me to consider the whole person rather than just the athlete (Lindsey et al, 2007), and made me reflect on how my central task of making an impact with clients was not aligned with my professional philosophy (Lindsey et al, 2007; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992)

**Reflection:**

Reflecting on the support provided to the client, it challenged my development as a practitioner in the novice professional stage (Rønnestad and Skovholt's, 2003). Feelings of discomfort in professional practice situations can lead to personal growth with reflection on habitual processes leading to practitioner development (Anderson et al, 2004). Three aspects of me as a practitioner changed during the case study: my interpretation of my central task, my role and working style, and my understanding of my measure of effectiveness (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992).

Reflecting on my central task throughout the intervention, I had supported the athlete, but did not explore or support the whole person. The client's values and behaviours were explored in relation to the client's athletic performance. However the values and behaviours were not explored in relation to all areas of the client's life. Vykocilova et al. (2015) view the therapist's role as aiding the client to identify their values in various areas of their life. If I had considered a whole person perspective from the beginning the exploration of values in all areas of the client's life and how they interact could have informed the decision-making process on whether to attend the competition or not. In the final session it became clear that the client had to weigh up all aspects of his life in making the decision. Through facilitating the client in exploring the impact of the decision on all aspects of his life, I began to act in congruence with my professional philosophy of considering the whole person.

At the beginning of the intervention my role and working style was to help clients with their presenting issues and to help them overcome them. As the objective of the intervention was around improving time management and self-talk, I as a practitioner had developed a plan to solve the problem. As outlined in the post support evaluation the client already had a good understanding of what he should do and how to do it, all he required was an environment to

explore why he was not engaging with his own knowledge. Subsequently in the last session, the client was provided with the space to explore his decision making and came to his own decision in the end. This reflection challenged me to consider how I was working with clients, and how my role was not to provide definitive answers but to facilitate the client in exploring their own subjective experience for their own solutions (Lindsey et al, 2007; Bond, 2002).

Prior to delivering the intervention, I chose the evaluation methods to try and understand whether the intervention “worked” for the client in overcoming their presenting issues (Ravizza, 2002).

This outcome measure was my primary means of evaluating my measure of effectiveness.

However, it is often not the competence in sports psychology that is the driver of effective practice but the personal qualities of the practitioner (Orlick & Partington, 1987). If, as Tod & Andersen (2005) noted, “the sport psychologist is the primary consulting tool and the practitioner-athlete relationship is the main intervention” (2005, p. 309) then evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention must move beyond improvement or lack of improvement, to what led to this outcome. Although I had a professional philosophy, this was not the primary mechanism of change in this case, as my professional practice did not align to my philosophy.

The client themselves made their own change through their own personal expertise and although I tried to enhance this process, I should have tried to facilitate this process. By placing more emphasis on facilitating the client in initiating their own change I can remain true to my own professional values of the client being the expert, providing a space to explore their experience and supporting the whole person. Going forward between session reflection on the client-practitioner relationship will be my process evaluation to remain congruent with my professional philosophy.



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Appendices:

Figure 1:

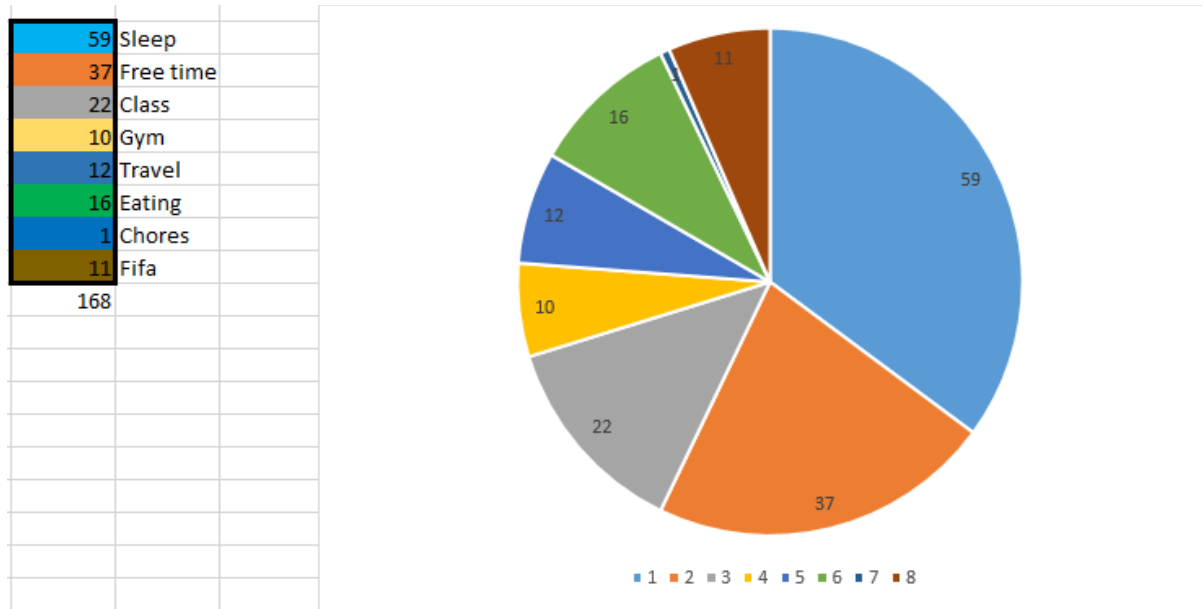
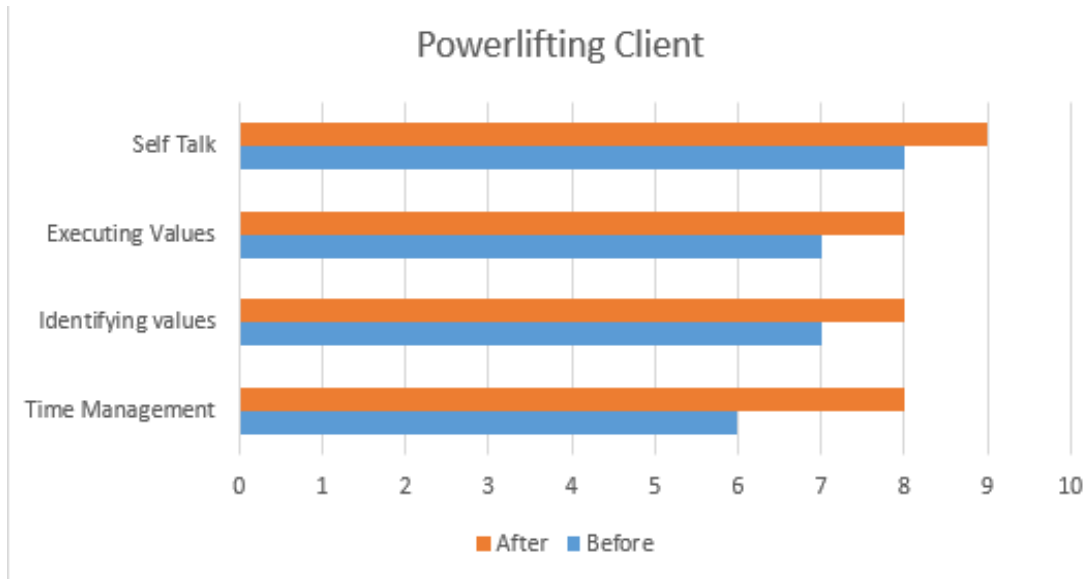


Figure 2:



## **Consultancy Case Study 2:**

**Title: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy with a student athlete competing in athletics**

### **Introduction and Philosophical Approach:**

The present case is underpinned by an Acceptance and Commitment approach (ACT; Hayes & Strosahl & Wilson, 1999). The specific aim of the case was to develop psychological flexibility and mindful awareness which is the “ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being and to change or persist in behaviour when doing so serves value ends” (Hayes et al, 2006, p7). ACT is based on the idea that thinking is an important root in mental ill-being and trying to control thoughts and emotions is part of the problem (Henriksen et al, 2019). Utilising non-judgemental awareness of the present moment, value identification and committed action, ACT aims to help people engage in actions that allow them to live a valued life, rather than just avoiding negative internal states.

To this point as a trainee, I had utilised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) as my therapeutic approach to consulting (Beck, 1991). This approach was underpinned by the view that cognitions are the major determinants of how we think, feel and act. CBT views psychological problems as arising from dysfunctional patterns of thinking. The role of the therapist is to help the client change dysfunctional patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour. One of the criticisms aimed at CBT is the limited emphasis placed on the therapeutic relationship, with the role of the relationship being to facilitate the use of techniques or the intervention (Sanders & Wills, 1999). As a practitioner I experienced that techniques alone were not enough to facilitates change. As a person and as a practitioner, I believe in the importance of authentic relationships and in choosing to act in accordance with my own values. As a practitioner I believe that the client is the expert in their own life, and my role is to facilitate their exploration of their own values and

behaviour. While utilising a CBT approach I was trying to be the expert in changing the client which often resulted in a lack of ownership and engagement from the client. It often felt like I may have been helping them with the problem they were presenting with, but that I was not facilitating them in making lasting change beyond the therapeutic relationship. These reflections resulted in me exploring alternative theoretical approaches. I chose to further develop my understanding of ACT due to its focus on the present moment, choice, value identification, committed action and the focus on empathetic relationships.

ACT is based on the philosophical view of functional contextualism (Hayes et al, 1999).

Functional contextualism examines how a person's past and current context influences external behaviour and internal experiences (Bricker & Tollison, 2011; Hayes, 2004). Reductionism is resisted within this approach, as the removal of context is thought to remove the nature of the problem and its potential solutions (Hayes, 2004). Functional contextualism is philosophically underpinned by Relational Frame Theory (RFT) which is the theoretical basis of ACT.

According to RFT, human language and cognition operates through a process called relational framing. Relational framing is the process through which stimuli within the environment, cognition, emotion, and physiology become related to one another (Bricker & Tollison, 2011).

RFT is not trying to find what is objectively true, as we only know the world through our interactions with it. Interventions are only true to the extent that they make a change in the lives of the client (Hayes, 2004). The abandonment of literal truth is at the exploration of values and how to live according to one's values (Hayes, 2004). The general clinical goal of ACT is to undermine the verbal content of cognition that can facilitate avoidance behaviour and to construct an alternative context where behaviour is aligned to one's values (Hayes, 2004). The underpinning theory of ACT supports my professional and personal philosophy of viewing the



client as the expert and supporting the client in making lasting change to their own life beyond the intervention.

ACT attempts to help people engage in a valued life rather than reduce unpleasant internal states. ACT tries to establish this by developing psychological flexibility through six core processes: (1) Acceptance is the active embracing of all human experiences without trying to change or control them, (2) Cognitive defusion is the ability to observe ones thoughts, detach from them and let them come and go; (3) contact with the present moment is a non-judgemental awareness of what is going on and being able to engage with what is happening in that moment; (4) viewing the self as context refers to viewing the self with ongoing awareness; (5) identifying values that are personally important; (6) commitment to action that brings us closer to our values (Hayes et al, 2006). ACT is not a programme with a specified series of steps but requires decisions to be made by the practitioner on what processes to target and in what order (Henriksen et al, 2019).

Mindfulness has been defined as a “quality of awareness that objectifies the contents of experience, internally and externally, promoting greater tolerance, interest and clarity towards that content” (Baltzell & Summers, 2016, p527). From a psychological perspective mindfulness has been defined as a trait (being mindful in everyday life), state (being mindful of the present moment) and a training tool (Henriksen et al, 2019). Regarding the core processes of ACT, mindfulness can facilitate acceptance of the present moment without judgement, cognitive defusion, contact with the present moment and an awareness of the self in context (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

For a therapy to be effective for a client, the relationship has been identified as integral where Kahn states (1997, p1) that “the relationship is the therapy.” Motivational Interviewing (MI) and ACT share a number of similarities in terms of enhancing commitment to behaviour change,

using a client's values as a means to enhancing commitment and utilising the client's language processes to achieve this goal (Hayes et al, 1999; Miller & Rollnick, 1991, 2002). MI provides a way of interacting with a client to develop the therapeutic alliance to facilitate the client in utilising their self-expertise to facilitate change (Bricker & Tollison, 2011). As a practitioner I had identified developing the therapeutic alliance as an area within my practice that I wanted to develop. MI as a therapeutic style allows it to be utilised in conjunction with other therapies to increase motivation to change (Hettema, Steele and Miller, 2005; Arkowitz et al., 2007). Bricker & Tollison (2011) highlight how it would be clinically consistent with the theoretical and philosophical foundations of ACT to utilise MI focused OARS communication techniques. OARS communication involves the therapist asking 'O'pen ended questions to allow the client to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings, using 'A'ffirmations to allow the client to see their strengths and weaknesses and current progress, 'R'eflective listening to allow the client to hear their own thoughts, and 'S'ummarizing to highlight the important points made (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Within ACT there are a number of core features of the therapeutic relationship characterised by an equal position of the client and therapist: common values and goals, shared suffering, perspective taking and a present moment awareness (Vilardaga & Hayes, 2009; Wilson & Sandoz, 2008). The role of the psychologist is to question the client in a way that facilitates their own self-exploration. The intervention is tailored to the client's needs and is guided by an analysis of the client's behaviours in line with the functional contextualism roots of the therapy. The therapist avoids struggling with resistance and tries not to express their own opinion on the struggle the client is experiencing. This is with the aim of developing an awareness of the discrepancy between current behaviour and important goals or values (Vilardaga & Hayes,

2009). I believe the theoretical perspective underpinning ACT and the technical skills associated with MI provide me as a practitioner with a consultancy approach that is congruent with my own personal beliefs regarding the importance of the therapeutic relationship, the emphasis on the client being their own expert, and how committed action to values can facilitate well-being despite experiencing discomfort.

### **Background to the client and presenting issues:**

In my role as dual career support coordinator I provide individual and group sports psychology support to student athletes. I received a message from a student athlete asking if I could provide sport psychology support to her. The student was studying Science and had one year to left on the course to get her degree. The student was an athletics athlete competing as a sprinter in the 100m and 200m events. As a young athlete she was an all-Ireland winner in the 100m event at U14, U16 and U18, before she attended third level education. In addition to competing she was also the co-captain of the athletics club in the college.

The client got in contact with me as her mum recommended, she speak with a sport psychologist. The client's parents were going away for the weekend and she was asked to come home to look after the house and dogs while they were away. At the same time the client was having problems in her relationship with her boyfriend and he did not want her to go home that weekend. The client decided to go home anyway as she had agreed to go home with her parents. On the bus on the journey home, the client and her boyfriend broke up as a couple. The client got off the bus at the next bus stop and had a panic attack. This was described as being unable to breath, shaking, chest pain and a very fast heartbeat. The client described how she tried to stop the panic attack but the more she tried the worse it got. This resulted in the bus continuing the journey without her and the client being stranded, with over an hour left on the journey and all of her belongings

still on the bus. The client's friend was still on the bus and got her belongings for her and was able to arrange a lift home from a friend. She spoke with her mum and both felt it was important to speak to someone about what had happened on the bus to ensure that similar would not happen again. The client also felt it was important to speak to someone about her sporting career as she was not happy with her development as an athlete.

There were also concerns about her future career once she would finish her degree in science. The client chose to study science as she was interested in science in school, had an interest in animals, and did not want to study a sport related subject as she wanted sport to be her hobby, not her job. She was part of the first cohort of students to undertake the bioscience course and there were several problems with the modules and the course. There was some uncertainty with about whether the course was the correct course for her and whether this was the correct career path for her.

In terms of the client's athletic experience, she had lost the love of the sport of athletics. As a young athlete she had been successful as a national junior athlete winning All-Ireland titles from U14-U18. She had always taken part in athletics to win and found it hard to take part in the sport when she was not winning. Although she enjoyed the sport, but was frustrated as she always saw herself getting to a higher level than she is currently at, which was being made worse by seeing people she had beaten when she was younger go on to be successful at senior level. In addition, her brother was an elite athlete trying to qualify for the next Olympic games and her mum was his coach. This resulted in a lot of talk about athletics when she went home, and a lot of focus was put on her brother's athletics career. The client felt that her concerns about her athletic development were of little significance compared to what her brother was trying to achieve.

She identified a lack of structure and social support as a contributing factor to not progressing as an athlete once she got to college. When she was younger her mum did her training programme and would deliver the training programme. However, when she went to college there was less structure and more of an emphasis on her having to stick to the training plan. The athletics club in the college had low numbers at training which resulted in a lack of focus and support to engage in the pre-season training required to compete during the indoor and outdoor athletics seasons. This season the lack of preparation resulted in the client pretending she had an injury so that she did not have to run in the indoor intervarsity competition. The client does want to get back to competing in athletics, and at as high a level as possible, but did want to compete when she was not able to perform to her potential. She felt like she did not know how to get back to that level. There was also a lack of social support outside of athletics as she did not socialise the way other students do over nights out as she was trying to compete at a high level.

### **Conceptualisation of the case:**

The client had got in contact initially due to experiencing what she described as a panic attack on the bus journey home after splitting up with her boyfriend. According to the DSM-5 criteria, a panic attack consists of four or more of the following symptoms:

- Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- A feeling of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort

- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
- Feelings of being detached from oneself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Chills or hot flushes

Panic attacks are further defined in terms of being expected (in response to a specific fear) or unexpected panic attacks (no apparent cause). A panic disorder is where a panic attack is recurrent and often unexpected (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The client did meet the criteria for having suffered a panic attack, but not for panic disorder as a panic attack had not recurred. This would be monitored throughout the intervention to determine whether the client would need to be referred to a practitioner competent to deal with a panic disorder. Acceptance is a core therapeutic process of ACT, which is accepting in an open and non-judgemental way thoughts and emotions that occur even if they are unpleasant (Birrner et al, 2019, p63). The aim of the intervention would be to promote acceptance of the client's internal state through thought normalisation of the panic attack that had occurred in relation to the significance of the event that had occurred. The client identified how she attempted to stop the stop the panic attack, however this made it worse and that there was a fear that the panic attack would occur again. The process through which the client might develop a response to thoughts that were associated with the panic attack, with the actual panic, attack is known as cognitive fusion (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes & Roche, 2001). Mindfulness would be utilised to help the client develop the ability to

cognitively defuse by adopting an orientation towards the client's experiences within the present moment (Bishop et al, 2004).

Prior to leaving third level education student athletes report apprehension about leaving education regardless of whether the student athlete has plans in place for their career post education (Vickers, 2018). The client reported apprehension about what she would do post third level education. The apprehension was based on not having engaged in part-time work due to her sporting commitments, which the client felt would be a disadvantage when she went into the working world. According to the human adaption to transition model the individual's perception of the transition, the pre and post transition environment and the characteristics of the individual will influence the adaption to the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Stambulova (2010) advocates assessing the personal characteristics of the individual and support structures around the individual to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and values. ACT aims to help athletes formulate values about how they would like to live their life to engage in committed action towards these values (Hvid Larsen, et al, 2019). In addition to value identification, the student athlete should develop a support network for the post academic transition and engage in career planning (Lally & Kerr, 2005). A second aim of the intervention would be to support the client in preparing for the transition into the workforce.

Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson (1999) suggest that when an individual has an emotional response to a stimulus and when a person thinks about the situation at a later time, he or she is likely to experience the same emotional response to the thoughts. The client was avoiding competing in athletics events due to the anxiety associated with not having done the training required to win the event. The client was engaging in experiential avoidance, where the client had created a rule that they can only compete if they have done the training to win (Hayes et al, 1996). Although

the client wanted to compete and get back to a position where they were competing for medals, avoiding the competitive event resulted in the athlete not engaging in their valued activities. The client had identified a lack of social support within the training environment as a source of the lack of adherence to a training programme. Social support has been identified as an important factor in an athlete's response to stress in sport (Fletcher & Sakar, 2012; Morgan et al, 2013). The aim of the intervention would be to enhance commitment to values and value driven behaviour through decision making in the client's day to day life (Gardner & Moore, 2007) and developing a wider social support network.

### **Development of the intervention:**

The intervention took place over three sessions during a one-month period. This was due to the client finishing the academic year for the summer period and returning home for the summer. ACT can be delivered over a long period or short period of time and has been found to be effective in as little as one or two sessions (Strosahl et al, 2012).

### ***Session 1:***

During the first meeting with the client I outlined that I was a trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist and that I was being supervised by a more experienced practitioner. I emphasised that all conversations between myself and the client are confidential unless the client is going to hurt themselves or others or they ask for the information to be passed on. I also acknowledged that I may not be qualified to deal with the issues presented and that I may need to refer the client to someone who has the competences to deal with the presenting issue. Establishing the limits around confidentiality has been identified as an important factor in effective consulting relationships (Sharp & Hodge, 2011).



As this was the first time the client had engaged with a sports psychologist, I explained that the first session was an intake, where I would gather information from the client. During and after this we would work together collaboratively to develop and implement any intervention proposed. I emphasised that I aim for the client to be an active participant within the support provided (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). The client identified that the objective of engaging in the support was to ensure another panic attack did not happen, to get back competing in athletics and prepare for her career post college. During the first session I asked the client to describe when the panic attack occurred and how they tried to stop it. We also discussed her current sporting and academic experience. I utilised open questioning, reflective listening, and summarising in order to get an insight into the client's language around the panic attack and her current life experiences (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

During the first session I became conscious of the client's language around the panic attack. The client was worried that because the panic attack happened once, it might happen again. I attempted to help the client normalise their reaction through asking her to think about how a person she knows reacted when they lost someone important in their lives. The client described similar symptoms to what she had described during her panic attack. I used the similarity between both descriptions to ask the question whether the client thought her reaction was normal considering how a person reacts when they lose someone important to them or an important relationship. I followed this up by asking the client about anyone she knows that never had a negative thought or experience. The client acknowledged that everyone has negative thoughts or emotions, and it is impossible to live without them. I explained to the client that it is not thoughts or emotions that are bad, but our attempt to control them that leads to mental ill-being, which in this case may have contributed to the panic attack (Harris, 2009). The client recognised that her

reaction would be normal if it had happened to one of her friends. I explained the aim of the support would be to help the client accept the full range of emotions that occur in life and defuse from their thoughts (Gardner & Moore, 2007; Henriksen et al, 2019).

At the end of the first session the client identified that they felt much better having spoken about all that had occurred and that she knows that she spoke a lot in the session. I explained that this was normal as my aim was to help her come up with her own solutions to her own problems. The utilisation of reflective listening and summarising facilitated the client in exploring and clarifying their own thoughts enabling a better understanding of me as a practitioner, but also enabling the client explore their own thoughts, experiences and solutions (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

### ***Session 2:***

In between the first and second session with the client, I met my supervisor to discuss the client's presenting issues. We both agreed that the client may have suffered a panic attack and that this was understandable given the news she had received. My supervisor agreed with my assessment of the client's reaction and we both agreed that the monitoring of the client's symptoms would be necessary to understand if referral was necessary.

In the second session I began by letting the client know that my supervisor agreed with my assessment of the clients presenting issue. This seemed to put the client at ease and may have been due to the impression created that I had researched and discussed the client's case. I believe this helped create a trust in the client-practitioner relationship through creating a professional image of me the practitioner as someone who thinks about and cares for their clients (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). The next stage of the session looked at introducing the client to mindfulness

practice and I took the client through an explanation of clean and dirty emotions in relation to what the client had described in the first session. The client gave an example of how she experienced failure at an event and felt frustrated afterwards. I explained that this is an example of a clean emotion where the event triggers a natural response (Gardner & Moore, 2007). In contrast a dirty emotion is one where your thoughts about an event trigger an emotion. An example in this case was where the client felt frustrated afterwards and subsequently did not compete in subsequent events resulting in sadness at not competing. The avoidant behaviour triggered a secondary emotion due to the client's self-schema of seeing herself as winning events. A brief centring exercise (Gardner & Moore, 2007) was introduced within this session to help the client develop the ability to become aware of her own emotions and to connect with the present moment. After the client asked about my own use of mindfulness. I disclosed that I did utilise mindfulness but found it difficult at the beginning. I also demonstrated the exercise to the client. If done correctly self-disclosure within ACT can allow the practitioner model an acceptance towards the clients struggles (Bricker & Tollison, 2011).

### ***Session 3:***

The third session began with a review of the mindfulness exercise and to check the clients experience of engaging in mindfulness and what they learned from the previous session (Gardner & Moore, 2007). The client reported finding the task difficult at the beginning as they kept thinking about things that had happened or were going to happen. However, she noted that she was getting better at it. We then spoke about how the client can apply this outside of the brief centring exercise to other areas of her life. The aim of this was to help the client be clear that the goal was to be mindful in all areas of her life and to not just get better at the exercise (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

This session was focused on helping the client to clarify her values and identify ways in which she could engage in committed action in line with her values. With one of the presenting issues of the client being the transition out of academia, the first exercise was identifying what she would like to be able to say about herself when looking back on her life, and the application of these values to the world of work. After identifying the client's values and their relevance to the world of work, we then explored how the client could engage in committed action to demonstrate her values. The client identified that they had a contact within a company she would like to work for and would contact them about doing work experience over the summer period. The objective for the client was twofold. Firstly, it allowed the client to explore the industry, gain experience, and develop a network of contacts in supporting the student athlete in transition from college or university (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Secondly, it allowed the client to engage in committed action to her own values within the work environment (Hvid Larsen, et al, 2019) and identify her own strengths and weaknesses (Andersen et al, 2012).

Metaphors are utilised within ACT for the client to directly experience the ACT process instead of having language processes interfere with it (Hayes et al, 1999). Following on from the values clarification exercise we looked at the client's values in relation to her athletics career to address her experiential avoidance in order to avoid failure. I used the metaphor of being on a journey after getting a new job four hours away. The client could be very excited and drive there as fast as possible and remember nothing from the trip. Alternatively, they could take their time and plan, see places she had not seen before and learn something new. The first trip highlights how the behaviour was in response to the emotion of excitement and the second trip highlights how the journey was in service of the persons values (Gardner & Moore, 2007). Following this the client reflected on how her experience in athletics was like the first journey, she was trying to get

back to the top as quick as possible. The client identified that by avoiding the frustration associated with failure, she was possibly losing out on experiences that would help her in the journey of getting back to where she would like to be in her athletics career.

An important value for the client was around being a good teammate, developing a wider social network and having more social support. Although the client could not change the lack of social support available from others that were not attending athletics training, there was the opportunity to play a team sport with friends she had lost contact with from home. The client identified that this would provide the opportunity to develop an endurance base for athletics if she could plan her athletics training with her coach. It would also provide the opportunity to develop resilience to stress through developing a social support network (Fletcher & Sakar, 2012; Morgan et al, 2013).

**Evaluation:**

ACT functional contextualism approach suggests the therapeutic relationship is evaluated in terms of whether it serves shared goals and values (Vilardaga & Hayes, 2009). Through discussion with the athlete the intervention was evaluated in several ways. The first aim of the intervention was to help the client accept her internal state and normalise her reaction to the breakup with her boyfriend. Through discussion, the client reflected that the use of mindfulness was difficult but found it useful after the third session, when rather than try and do mindfulness exercises the client tried to be more aware in all moments of her life. The client found that mindfulness was useful in helping her become more aware and detached from unhelpful thoughts and emotions in all aspects of her life.

The client reported that this was the first time that she had thought about her own personal values. The client identified that through examining her personal values and behaviour she could see a discrepancy between what she wanted and what she was doing. Through reflecting on her current behaviour, she recognised that she was avoiding competitive events, which made it difficult to train, which in turn made the problem worse in the long run (Hvid Larsen et al, 2019). Through values clarification the client realised the importance of social support for her own well-being and how the individual nature of athletics had resulted in a small social network. The client got in contact over the summer to say she had gone back playing a team sport and that this had helped with her get back enjoying sport again while also training for athletics around the team sport commitments.

After the third session the client got in contact to say that she had an interview for work experience with a company for a three-week period and the company agreed to take her on. She noted that the work on values clarification facilitated her in acting in terms of her future career. The client also noted how values clarification facilitated her in promoting her strengths as a student athlete rather than focusing on her lack of work experience (Stambuolva, 2010).

**Reflection:**

This case reinforced the importance of developing a congruent personal and professional approach to consulting, and the impact this can have with clients. As a person and practitioner, I believe in the importance of supporting the client's performance and well-being, facilitating the client's autonomy, the importance of values and value driven behaviour, and the importance of remaining present. I believe utilising an ACT approach facilitated an alignment with my personal values that supported the client in their own change process. Having previously utilised a CBT approach, I found it difficult to conceptualise and get across the underpinning mechanisms of

change to the client. Utilising an ACT approach highlighted the importance of utilising a therapeutic approach that aligns with how I approach my life. Through utilising mindfulness and ACT processes I was able to discuss with the client how I utilised ACT, and the challenges I encountered utilising this approach. My understanding and experience with this method allowed a more authentic support for the client in their attempt to utilise the approach (Sharp & Hodge, 2011). While utilising this approach provided a framework for which to guide the intervention, it also allowed for flexibility to utilise the approach that best met the client's needs. I feel that my own use of ACT facilitated a better understanding of the intervention, which in turn facilitated a more tailored approach to the client's needs, allowing the intervention to take place over three sessions. This was notably shorter compared to other interventions that I had undertaken with clients with the client reporting change after just one session. This is an important part of my development as a practitioner as most people that attend psychological treatment only attend for one session, and 70-80% of these people report that one session is all that is required (Young, 2018).

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### **Consultancy Case Study 3:**

#### **Title: Supporting group functioning in youth football**

#### **Introduction:**

The purpose of this case study is to describe the process of applying social identity theory to facilitate the development of a team's culture. The client was an U17 national league academy team where the coach had recently taken over the team and most players were joining the club for the first time. Following initial analysis of the team environment and case conceptualisation, the presenting needs identified an absence of commitment to fellow teammates, support among teammates and an understanding of group expectations. The intervention took place over three workshops throughout pre-season before integrating the support into team training sessions.

#### **Background to the client:**

During the 2019 season I had worked with a head coach with an U19 national league team. He had moved clubs and invited me to join him as part of his backroom team to work with the U17 team for the 2020 season. The team was playing in the U17 national league and the players were aged from 15-17 years of age. The objective for the coach was to support players in progressing to the U19 team with the aim of playing with the first team. After an initial intake meeting, it was agreed my role as part of the backroom team would be to deliver technical and tactical coaching sessions as an assistant coach and to support the coach in facilitating group functioning. It was agreed this support would be provided through delivering group workshops to the team, individual discussions with the coach, observations, and feedback to the coach, and through the team training sessions.

**Ethical considerations:**

Problems that may arise within the provision of psychological services can be solved prior to their occurrence by managing expectations prior to and during the provision of support (Keegan, 2016). When making the decision to intervene with the team rather than the individual players several ethical considerations were considered (Ellickson & Brown, 1990; Burke & Johnson, 1990; Smith, 1992; Buceta, 1993). The decision to provide support to the coach to in turn influence the team, rather than the individual players, was made due to limited contact time the players had with the academy each week. The players had three hours of training time each week and a match at the weekend, leaving limited time for individual support to be provided. Given the limited contact time with players and to maximize the return on the support provided, I made the decision in agreement with the coach, to support him in facilitating group functioning. This decision was based on an acknowledgement that athletes are situated within a complex social environment which influences their preparation, performance, and well-being (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996). Research on ecological approaches to talent development advocate for Sports Psychology support for young athletes to optimize the environment around the athlete or team (Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010; Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2011; Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007). Flexibility of approach and being able to adapt to the culture and circumstances of the team have been identified as important aspects of sports psychology consulting relationships (Sharp & Hodge, 2013). This approach aligned with my professional philosophy of supporting the whole person and their well-being as the talent development environment can promote the development of psycho-social skills for those who progress to the elite level and those who do not (Williams & McNamara, 2020).

The nature of the relationship was explained to the team from the outset with the aim of the support provided being to support the development of the team environment through the coach. Although I was available to support players as a coach, I would not provide one on one psychological support to the players. Referral mechanisms were in place within the club to refer players to the child welfare officer should the need arise. When considering my dual role as a coach and providing psychological support on group functioning, I was aware of my competence in undertaking this type of support. Through undertaking my UEFA A coaching qualification, I developed my knowledge of the sport and coaching competencies to support team technical and tactical development. This facilitated the development of the relationship and my credibility with the coach (Eubank, Nesti & Cruickshank, 2014) to support him in performing as a coach.

### **Needs Analysis:**

The coach and team need for service delivery were operationalized through observation of the team and coach, and discussion with the coach.

### ***Team observation:***

I observed the team and coach for the first two week of pre-season. During this period, I noticed how the team did not speak up when the coach asked questions on the training pitch, pre-match team talks or in de-briefs after training. There was limited interaction among the overall group with players choosing to interact with players they had known before they joined the team.

During the first half of games, the team would not perform well, the coach would outline how the team could improve and the players would then perform better in the second half. The team were reliant on explicit instruction from the coach to perform and did not understand how to deal

with adversity. There were no clearly stated behaviours or values to try and align with with during adversity.

***Coach observation:***

The coach was trying to empower the team to take ownership of their own development through asking questions but was receiving limited interaction. The coach would vary between coaching and instruction behaviours based on the individual and situation. Some players were reacting well to his form of coaching but others were not. The coach still seemed to be trying to work out how to best work with different players.

***Coach discussion:***

The coach identified that with the previous coach some members of the team would have worked with, he would not have provided them with opportunities to answer questions and take ownership of the group. The coach highlighted that by not knowing what motivated the players he did not know how best to tailor his coaching style and interventions to each individual player. The coach identified that the team needed a vision for the future as players were still identifying with their previous clubs or teams and not with their fellow teammates as a new group.

**Theoretical underpinning:**

The objective of the intervention was to support the head coaching in facilitating group functioning. Previous research has identified supportive training groups as an important feature of successful talent development environments (Henriksen et al, 2010). With the head coach being the leader of the team, the tripartite model of leadership (TML) underpinned the conceptualisation of the leader's behaviour in facilitating group functioning (Arthur, Wagstaff & Hardy, 2016). The TML defines a leader as an individual who is hierarchically more senior than



another individual within an organisation. According to the model there are three fundamental roles carried out by a leader that promote the likelihood of success, inspirational behaviour, coaching behaviour and instruction (Arthur, Wagstaff & Hardy, 2016). Each leadership behaviour facilitates psychological mechanisms of performance which in turn influence the followers psychological state and their subsequent behaviour. Inspirational leadership behaviours refer to the future vision of the organisation and the purpose, values and beliefs of the organisation. The inspirational leadership behaviour should provide the followers with a vision, support and challenge in achieving the groups goals. Coaching behaviours are the extent to which the leader facilitates followers in engage in their own self development and promote self-reflective practice. The leader when engaging in coaching behaviour will engage in effective questioning and facilitate goal setting. According to the model, coaching and leadership behaviours interact to facilitate psychological enablers of performance. This is with the aim of facilitating responsibility, ownership and empowering the followers. The third behaviour in the model, instruction, refers to transferring knowledge from the leader to the followers through adopting a telling approach. Instructing behaviour facilitates knowledge, awareness and an understanding of an individual's role.

Social identity theory provides a means of conceptualizing the development of group norms, values and behaviours in alignment with inspirational leadership behaviours within the TML. The social identity approach encapsulates both social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The social identity approach refers to an individual's acknowledgment that they belong to a specific social group and attach an emotional significance to being a member of that group (Tajfel, 1972). The extent to which an individual identifies with the group is based on the extent to which the individual internalises the group membership as an

aspect of themselves, there is a comparison outgroup to compare against and the relevance of the comparison outgroup (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). However, social identity is not only the basis for joining a group but is also the foundation for commitment to the group. High levels of social identity have been associated with higher levels of team cohesion (Gaertner et al, 1993) and collective efficacy (Fransen et al., 2014). Cameron (2004) proposed social identity to be multidimensional comprised of three elements: (1) cognitive centrality refers to the importance of the group for the individual, (2) in-group affect refers to the emotions an individual experiences in relation to the group, and (3) in-group ties refer to strength of connection felt by the individual towards others in the group. Self-categorisation theory emphasises that group behaviour is based on the extent to which the individual self becomes interchangeable with other group members. Self-categorisation leads those who identify themselves under a particular social identity, to strive to discover the group meaning and to enact the group membership meaning through a process called depersonalisation (Rees et al, 2015).

### **Case formulation:**

Through observation and discussions with the coach through the lens of the TML, it was identified that the coach engaged in leadership behaviours, through creating a vision for the future for individual players getting to the first team, coaching behaviours, through encouraging the team to take ownership of their own development and instructional behaviours, to facilitate understanding of roles and responsibilities. According to the TML, coaching and leadership behaviours overlap in influencing mechanisms that facilitate psychological performance enablers (Arthur, Wagstaff & Hardy, 2016). When the coach was engaging in coaching behaviours there was an absence of alignment of coaching behaviours to an overall vision for the group. Likewise, when engaging in leadership behaviours there was an absence of an overall vision for the group

to take ownership of moving towards. Aligning the vision with agreed values and behaviours would facilitate the coach in better integrating his leadership and coaching behaviours towards the vision for the team according to the TML (Arthur, Wagstaff & Hardy, 2016).

Most of the team were playing with one another for the first time and consequently had a limited emotional attachment to their fellow teammates. The limited emotional attachment to one another, coupled with the reliance on explicit instruction from the coach, highlighted the absence of internalised group norms. Social identity theory posits that the extent to which an individual internalises group membership underpins commitment to the group (Tajfel, 1972). The absence of agreed upon values, aligned to a vision for the team, did not facilitate the discovery of the group's meaning (Rees et al, 2015).

It was agreed with the coach that the intervention would target improving group functioning through addressing the following areas:

- Facilitating the development of agreed values and behaviours for the team.
- Facilitating the coach in better understanding each player in the team.
- Support the coach in aligning his coaching behaviour with the vision for the team and motivation of individual players.
- Supporting the coach in integrating team values within coaching sessions.

### **Development of the intervention:**

The intervention took place over three stages. The first part was a group workshop that utilised Personal Disclosure Mutual Sharing (PDMS). The second part of the intervention was a group workshop identifying values and aligning behaviours to the team's values. The final part of the intervention was incorporating team values and behaviours within team training sessions.

### ***Personal Disclosure Mutual Sharing Workshop:***

The intervention began six weeks out from the start of the season and two weeks after pre-season began with a PDMS workshop. According to Social Identity theory cognitive centrality, in-group affect, and in-group ties influence an individual's identification with a group (Cameron, 2004).

The aim of the PDMS workshops was to support in group ties through developing an understanding of fellow teammates. In developing a social identity for a group or organisation, PDMS has been identified as useful in the early stages of developing the process (Slater, Barker & Mellalieu, 2016). Disclosure in a group environment among all teammates can encourage understanding among group members and enable an understanding of another person's experience (Evans et al, 2013). PDMS provides the basis for communicating beliefs, motivations and personal values which in turn inform the development of group meanings and values (Windsor, Barker & McCarthy, 2011). Changes can then occur in important group functioning variables such as trust, understanding, social cohesion (Dunn & Holt, 2004; Holt & Dunn; 2006) communication, and collective efficacy (Pain & Harwood, 2009; Windsor et al, 2011).

After training on the Tuesday evening before the Saturday PDMS workshop, the team was presented with the task for the workshop. The players were asked to tell three stories about themselves: (1) why do you play football? (2) what are your goals for the year and what do you need to do achieve them? (3) tell a story that would make your teammates want to play with and for you. Once the task was explained the ground rules for the session were discussed as a team. The players were asked “what do you think would be important on Saturday if everyone is getting up to speak in front of each other?” The players identified that silence and respect when someone is speaking, clapping to show support when someone was finished speaking and to be prepared would be important. As the players did not identify it themselves, I asked the question

“what about if someone tells a personal story?” The players agreed that the stories told were not to be discussed with anyone outside of the team. Before the workshop began, I reminded the team about the ground rules agreed at training on Tuesday night. The players decided their running order and decided to start with the player that had been at the club the longest.

Throughout all the speeches I took notes on the key themes from players speeches and after the last speech I gave a reflection and debrief on the common themes discussed throughout the speeches.

Holt & Dunn (2006) have highlighted the importance of maximising task content in relation to the team functioning issues. The first instruction helped form the social identity for the team through identifying what players have in common and supporting the coach in understanding each individual's motivation for playing football. The second instruction supported the coach and each player in understanding what other players wanted to achieve and the support they required to achieve it. The third instruction encouraged players to speak about their sacrifices and personal experience which aimed to create understanding among the team.

### ***Values and Behaviours Workshop:***

The second phase of the intervention was to utilise the motivations, values and goals players identified within the PDMS workshop to inform the development of group meanings, values and behaviours (Windsor et al, 2011). Within social identity theory in group affect refers to the emotions experienced by an individual in relation to the group membership. The aim of the workshop was for the group to create a meaning behind the values and behaviours they associate with the team. During this workshop players were split into two groups and they were both presented with a word cloud of the key themes which arose from the PDMS workshop. The head coach went with one group and the assistant coach went with another group. It was explained to

the players that the different colors represent different aspects of their speeches. The dark blue represents the reason they play football, the sky-blue color represents their goals for the year and the white colored words represent their values as a team. I explained to the group that their motivation for playing football, coupled with their values will facilitate the group in achieving its goals. The aim of the workshop was to identify four values and behaviours that best represent the team.

Both groups were provided with a sheet of paper and were asked first to identify the four values they think best represent the team and provide a reason why they picked those particular values. Both groups picked commitment, bravery and hardworking. However, there was disagreement between both groups with regards picking the value of “winning” or “supportive”. It has been proposed that individuals are more likely to internalise organisational identity and goals when subgroup differences are incorporated within the overall identity (Peters, Haslam, Ryan, & Fonseca, 2012). Both groups gave their opinions on why their value should be incorporated within the overall team’s values. After both groups made their points, the mismatch between both groups was conceptualized through discussion with the head coach. It was identified that you cannot win without support from your team, however you can support, and you might not win. However, support increases your chances of winning. Both groups agreed that winning was important and was the overall goal for the team, and in order to achieve the goal of winning, it was necessary for the team to be “brave,” “committed,” “hardworking” and “supportive.” The team within the workshop identified that they believe their value and strength to be “hardworking”, and that this is what they believe makes them unique.

Following agreement on team values, four behaviours per value were identified by both groups incorporating on and off pitch behaviours (figure 2). Both groups identified behaviours

associated with each value and explained how these behaviours enable the team to live the identified values. The open discussion and identification of behaviours provided each player with a clear direction in terms of progressing towards the team identity. In addition, it also provided the coach with a direction in terms of how he can align his coaching behaviour to the values the team identified.

### ***Training sessions:***

To provide the team with opportunities to fulfill the team's values progressively throughout the season, the values were incorporated within the training sessions for a two-week period leading up to the first game of the season. This would form the basis for further development of each value individually over the course of the season within four-week blocks. Small sided games (SSG) were chosen as the mechanism through which to incorporate values within training exercises. SSG have been used by coaches to help players understand performance requirements in different phases of the game (Davids, Araújo, Correia & Vilar, 2013). Within the training sessions designed by the head coach SSG were used prior to the players engaging in the main part of the session. The use of SSG provided the coach with the opportunity to manipulate task constraints and prime the tactical behaviours before the main exercise within the training session (Davids, Araújo, Correia & Vilar, 2013). The integration of team values within SSG took place through integration with the coaching process engaged in by the coach. The coach engaged in a four-step process of orientation, implementation, learning and debrief advocated by the Football Association of Ireland coach education programme. Orientation refers to setting up the rules and objective of the practice, implementation refers to the process of delivering coaching points, and learning is where the coach observes whether changes have occurred. The coaching process adopted by the coach was reviewed and the 5 C's coaching checklist for integrating

psychological development within technical and tactical coaching sessions was integrated within the coaching framework adopted by the coach (figure 3) (Harwood, 2008; Harwood, Barker & Anderson, 2015). I decided to integrate the existing 5'cs approach into the language of the coach in order to ensure ease of understanding by the coach and so that players would not be exposed to a coaching method they were not used to. Flexibility, and having an understanding of the sport and team have been identified as characteristics of effective sports psychology consulting relationships (Sharp & Hodge, 2014).

***Mission statement workshop:***

After reviewing the intervention with the coach ahead of the start of the season, the coach made the point that although the players identified behaviours and values, and this facilitated group norms to be established, he was unsure if the players really understand what each value meant. He made the point that it is easy for the team to pick hardworking as a value they feel makes them different, as every coach the players would have worked with would have asked them to work hard. He identified that for this team to be unique the team would have to develop their own understanding of how each value interlinks. The aim of the workshop was to develop a team mission statement to identify what reflects the team values and beliefs and to provide direction for the group (Martin, Cowburn & Mac Intosh, 2017). The team was split into three groups and presented with the values and behaviours image (figure 2) from the previous workshop. It was explained to the group that so far the team have identified values and behaviour, with the final part being to develop a vision for how the team will achieve its goals. The groups were instructed to think about how living the values through the behaviours identified will enable the team to achieve its vision. The workshop followed the mission statement workshop guide developed by Martin et al (2017) by splitting the groups into three for the initial activity followed by a group



discussion to develop the first iteration of the mission statement. From this the groups were split into two to develop the second iteration of the mission statement followed by a group discussion. Following this both groups came together to develop the final mission statement. My role throughout this process was to probe for clarification on unclear aspects of the mission statement and facilitate discussion of the points raised. The final mission statement developed and agreed upon went as follows:

“We, (team name), support one another through hard work and commitment in order to be brave. Being brave enables us to express ourselves on the ball, be confident of our ability, work for one another and live our values. By being brave we will be a team known for improving the most this season”.

### **Evaluation:**

The consultancy was evaluated through discussion with the coach and through Slater’s (2019) togetherness survey.

### ***Coach discussion:***

Prior to the intervention the coach did not have a clear insight into the motivation and different characteristics of the group he was working with. This was highlighted through a discussion about the team the coach worked with the previous year compared to this year. The previous year the coach was working with an U19 team and the coach noted how the team as individuals all had experienced setbacks within their footballing careers and for that reason were used to being challenged and seeking out challenges. The coach noted how this group of players had more potential in terms of playing ability but had not experienced the same setbacks as the previous team he used to coach. The coach acknowledged how the team identifying the value of support

as an being a significant for how he should work with the group as this highlighted how he would need to adapt how he challenged the team compared to the previous team he used to work with. The coach also identified how the intervention enabled him to reflect on and think about how he can role model the values and behaviours the players identified as being important. The coach identified that integrating the values into training sessions enabled the team to better understand and bring the values to life.

The coach pointed out towards the end of the intervention that the players choice of the value “hardworking” may have been based on what other coaches and teams had asked from them and was not a true reflection on the needs of current team. The coach was of the view that it is easy to say that we should work hard but it is our job to educate the players on values that will facilitate their development beyond their time with this team and coaching staff. This was taken on board and although not initially planned for, the mission statement workshop was integrated into the intervention plan based on this discussion. The coach believed this workshop enabled a better understanding of how the values interlink with one another to impact behaviours and ultimately achieving the team’s goals.

***Online questionnaire:***

The players were asked to fill in an online survey where they were asked to answer three questions relating to their perception of togetherness with the team before and after the intervention (Slater, 2019). The survey questions can be seen in figure 4. The results of the survey (figure 5) include all the players that were present from the start to the end of the intervention. Two players joined the squad after completion of values and behaviours workshop and therefore did not fill in the pre intervention survey. The results of the survey showed a team average increase of 0.9 from 5.5 to 6.4 on a scale of 1-7. 12 out of 14 players had a positive

increase in perception of togetherness, with one player having no increase and one player have a decrease in his perception of togetherness. The player with the decrease in togetherness suffered a long-term injury during pre-season and would not return until mid-season. The player with no increase previously had his father as the coach of the team until the current coach took over and the head coach did not get on well with the players father. This may have been a reason why there was no increase in togetherness for this player. A one-way ANOVA was carried out on the results to understand whether there was a statistically significant different between the pre and post intervention survey results. The results returned a P-value of 0.0036, lower than the significance level of  $p=0.05$ , rejecting the hypothesis that there was no different pre and post-intervention.

**Reflection:**

Reflecting on the consultancy there are several important lessons for my development as a practitioner.

Firstly being immersed in the environment on an ongoing basis enabled me to adapt the intervention to the requirements of the environment and the key stakeholder (the head coach) through facilitating an additional workshop than had not been initially planned for.

Secondly, the point made by the coach regarding it being easy for players to choose hardworking as their value made me reflect on previous work with teams. Hardworking was the value that other teams I had worked with and had been a part of chose as a value to adopt. It may be that in an Irish context hard work is seen as an important value or that coaches are encouraging the value of being “hardworking.” Although I accepted the groups choice of “hardworking” as their value within the initial workshop, this changed when the group was provided with the

opportunity to discuss the values in depth within the vision workshop. Although adopting a “bottom-up” approach to creating a social identity, a shared understanding of what different values mean and look like can result in a change in values chosen. Early in the intervention I had not asked myself the question how might my own or the teams biases be influencing the intervention? (Schinke, McGannon, Parham & Lane, 2012). If I was to undertake the intervention again, I would spend more time on educating players on what different values and behaviours means prior to undertaking the intervention and spend more time probing during the workshop in order to clarify understanding of values and behaviours. I may not have done this due to my work with previous teams influencing the current intervention.

Thirdly, there is a cost-benefit to the dual role adopted providing sports psychology support and being an assistant coach with the team. The team and the intervention benefit from the perspective of the intervention being incorporated within the processes existing within the team. However, individual support to players is compromised, such as supporting the injured player or the player who did not improve his togetherness and relationship with the team. I understood this prior to the intervention and consciously made this choice with regard to the support provided. I believed I could influence the psycho-social environment for a positive experience for all players. Although the intervention at a psycho-social level can support most of the group it cannot cater for individual needs, and my position as coach/sport psychologist inhibits my ability to intervene in such cases. This decision-making process is something that I need to reevaluate based on each consultancy undertaken based on needs of the client, resources available and best return on investment for the client.

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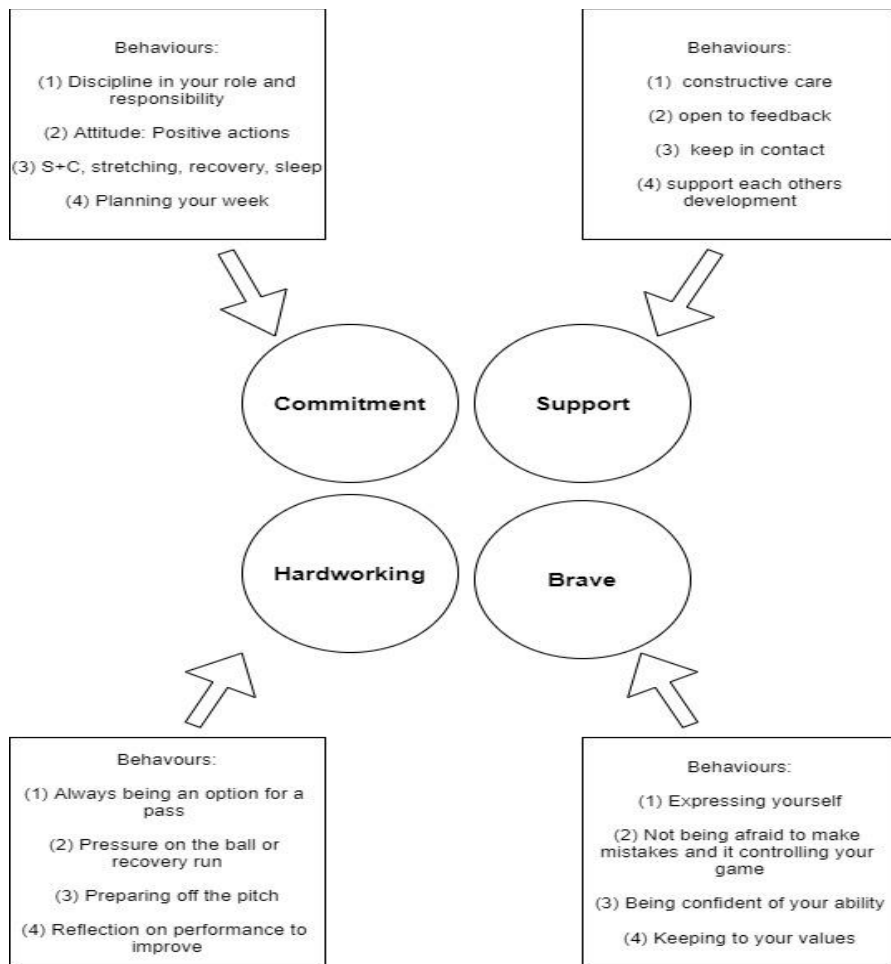
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## Appendices:

Figure 1:



**Figure 2:****Values and Behaviours**

**Figure 3:**

## Coaching process questions

<b>Orientation (Connect)</b>	<b>Implementation (Activate)</b>	<b>Learning (Demonstrate)</b>	<b>Debrief (Consolidate)</b>
What does "insert value" look like on the pitch?	Rate your "value" out of 10?	Rate "value" out of 10 again. What was the difference?	What are our goals for improving "value" for the next training session/match?
How would you describe "value" on the pitch?	How can you improve "value" in the next round?	Did we improve our "value"? if so how?	How can we incorporate this into our next match/exercise?
What does good vs bad "value" look like?	Who demonstrated good "value" in that round? what did it look like?		

**Figure 4:**

## Togetherness survey

	Question	Do not agree			Neither			Agree		
1	I feel a strong identity with the team	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
2	I feel a strong connection with the team	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
3	I feel no connection with the team	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		

Each player marks 1-7 for all three questions. The score for question 3 is reversed so that 1=7, 2=6, 3=5, etc. Once scores for question three are reversed then all three scores are totaled and divided by three.

*Figure 5: Togetherness survey results*

Name	Pre-intervention	Post-intervention	Difference
Player 1	6	7	1
Player 2	5.3	7	1.7
Player 3	5.7	6	0.3
Player 4	5	6	1
Player 5	6	7	1
Player 6	6	6.7	0.7
Player 7	4.7	6.3	1.6
Player 8	6	6.7	0.7
Player 9	5.7	5.7	0
Player 10	6	7	1
Player 11	6	6.3	0.3
Player 12	4.7	7	2.3
Player 13	6	7	1
Player 14	4.3	4	-0.3
Team	5.5	6.4	0.9

## **Teaching Case Study**

### **Background to the client:**

The intervention was delivered to students in receipt of Sports Scholarships in a third level education institution. Throughout the academic year Sports Scholarship recipients are provided with psycho-educational workshops on areas related to their development as a student athlete. The participants take part in a range of sports including, soccer, gaelic games (gaelic football, hurling, camogie, handball), rugby, athletics, and powerlifting. The student athletes are provided with a range of support while on Sports Scholarships including sports psychology, strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, academic support, and sport's specific coaching. The sports psychology support provides recipients with three psycho-educational workshops and individual sports psychology support. In September 2017 I started out in the role of managing the Sports Scholarship programme and providing the sports psychology support to the sports scholarship students. This case study refers to the academic years 2017/18 (year 1) and 2018/19 (year 2) highlighting how key moments of the delivery during year 1 shaped delivery in year 2 and ultimately how I design, implement and prepare the delivery of sports psychology workshops.

### **Consulting Approach year 1:**

When designing the workshops during the first year several considerations had to be considered. These considerations included, the number of students on the programme (40-50 in any given year), their different sport's skill demands, differing schedules and the need for students to balance their athletic and academic demands. The objective of the three workshops delivered was to improve student athletes' knowledge of the psychological factors involved in sports performance and balancing their athletic and academic demands. The workshop topics identified

were based on conversations with the sport development officers, the student athletes, the Sport and Recreation Manager and research on the demand's student athletes encounter (e.g., Brown et al, 2015). Based on these conversations and review of the research, it was identified that the student athletes had limited if any knowledge of sport psychology, had demands on their time, and some had limited work experience because of their involvement in sport. The three workshops delivered in year 1 were, consequently, on (1) controlling your emotions (2) preparing for exams and (3) competing at the highest level. A learning as acquisition approach situated within the cognitive perspective of learning was adopted for the workshops (Sfard, 1998). This approach views learning as something external, to be acquired, and as something we have or possess after we have passively received or reconstructed the knowledge.

From an intervention perspective the educational workshops were underpinned by a cognitive behavioural approach (CBT). CBT proposes that psychological disorders stem from complex and reciprocal interactions between cognition, emotion, behaviour and physical reactions, with environmental factors influencing these processes (McArdle & Moore, 2012). The CBT approach is based on the idea that affective disorders are not due to undesirable or negative events themselves, but the meanings clients give to these events (Beck, 1995). To target the meanings clients, give to events, CBT aims to alter dysfunctional thought patterns through cognitive techniques or behavioural modification.

### **Content of the workshops:**

The first workshop was delivered in October 2017 and was focused on the topic of “controlling your performance environment” with the aim of exploring how mental skills such as goal-setting, self-talk and non-verbal communication influence performance. The workshop began by watching a video from the New Zealand rugby team where they scored a winning try against



Ireland to remain unbeaten throughout 2013. After watching the video, a discussion was held as a group about what they can control, what they cannot control and what they can potentially influence in their performance environment within the 5-minute video. The list of items identified served as a basis to discuss how thoughts, emotions, behaviour and physical reactions interact within the environment to influence performance (Beck, 1995).

Within the video, it was highlighted how New Zealand had a clear goal (2 minutes to score 7 points) whereas Ireland were trying to hold on to their lead and not lose. This resulted in the individual players focusing on the task behaviours and increasing intensity of effort (Physical reactions) to achieve the goal. The difference between performance, process and outcome goals was explained in relation to the example and how they influence one another (Locke & Latham, 1990). Self-talk was identified as a controllable for the athletes and this was explained through the video footage as being influenced by what the person is feeling, subsequently influencing the instructions an athlete gives themselves (Vealey, 2012). The Irish players within the video were visibly fatigued and self-talk was conceptualized as fatigue (emotion), leading to possible self-talk of “do not lose,” and subsequent performance behaviour consisting of a lack of intensity. Follow this conceptualization, the types of self-talk (motivational, relaxation, psyching up, attentional) and their potential applications were explored. Finally, non-verbal communication (behaviour) and its influence on performance was explored. A comparison was made between the body language of the Irish team compared to the New Zealand team where it was identified that both teams behaviour influenced the goal achievement process, subsequent thoughts and self-talk, and perception of fatigue (emotions). It was also identified how this also influenced the opposing team’s cognitions, emotions, behaviours and physical reactions.

The second workshop was delivered in November 2017 during the final day of the semester. The focus of the workshop was on how sports psychology can be used to prepare for the exam period. Examples were provided as to how an athlete can be proactive or reactive in their preparation in sport and how this applies to studying for exams. The interaction between the specific thought “I will do well in the exam” and an exam behaviour checklist was explored. The objective of the checklist was for the student athletes to understand the level of cognitive dissonance or consistency (Festinger, 1957) between their actual and desired behaviour. The checklist provided the student athletes with reinforcement of their exam preparation if there were low levels of dissonance and a behavioural guide if dissonance levels were high.

After the second workshop I had a conversation with one of the students who had attended both workshops. The student commented that while he found the workshops beneficial as a student athlete, he found it difficult in translating the knowledge gained from the workshops to his sport. It has been identified that psycho-educational workshops alone are likely to be insufficient when aiming for transfer between the classroom context to the sporting environment (Hamilton, Smith & Brandon, 2020). This conversation made me think about how I was delivering the workshops, and how I can enhance transfer from the workshop to the daily lives of the student athletes.

The third workshop, was delivered by an ex-professional rugby player where I asked the presenter to speak about their experiences and what they learned from balancing sport and education, controlling their emotions in high-pressure situations, making the transition from junior to senior, and the importance of sports psychology. The objective behind asking the player to speak about these topics was to encourage the student athletes to reflect on the mistakes made by someone else and how they can learn from these errors. Ohlsson (1996) suggests that learning from errors can be effective if the learner understands what aspect of the problem is incorrect,

which can subsequently correct decision making. After a short presentation by the player, there was an open discussion between the presenter and the attendees which centred on the belief that you can perform well when not at 100%. Only being able to perform when 100% ready was a belief that several of the student athletes held and the presenter outlined strategies, they utilised when they were not physically at their best.

### **Reflection:**

To evaluate the workshops, I sent a survey to the students to understand their experience of the support provided. Thirty students responded to the survey and 29 reported that they benefitted from the talks on sports psychology and that they had been able to apply the information discussed in their sport. The students were also provided with the opportunity to give qualitative feedback on the programme delivered. Students commented on the information being useful with the example of how the ex-professional rugby player managed being a student athlete and their performance being of particular benefit.

Despite this feedback I was not satisfied with my own delivery of the workshops. Firstly, on reflection of the workshops delivered there was an absence of a coherent theoretical model that evolved throughout the intervention. The psychological support provided begins with the beliefs of the practitioner and their conceptualisation of the programme objectives and the role of the athlete (Poczwardowski, Sherman, and Ravizza, 2004; Keegan, 2016). Within the workshops where I delivered information to the participants, I was more concerned with delivering theory than educating the participants. This was reflected in the lack of coherence between the workshops, progressing from mental skills to exam preparation and then back to mental skills. Secondly, the absence of planning was reflected in the delivery of the second workshop, on exam preparation, on the last day of the semester. This was not providing the students athletes with

time to be proactive in terms of implementing changes ahead of the exam period. Thirdly, I was delivering material to the student athletes, however I did not consider the knowledge the student athletes may have already possessed. By adopting a practitioner led approach where I decided and delivered the material for the students to learn, I was not taking into consideration the knowledge the student athletes may have already possessed. Fourthly, the delivery context within the classroom setting may not have been conducive to facilitating transfer to the sporting context (Hamilton et al, 2020). In summary, the expert problem solver has been identified as an approach adopted by trainees in sport and exercise psychology, and this reflected my approach to delivering the workshops (Tod, Andersen & Marchant, 2009).

### **Consulting approach year 2:**

Psychological Skills training (PST) programmes have been utilised by sports psychology consultants for many years, where the focus has been on teaching psychological skills to athletes (Anderson, 2005). Although a psycho-educational approach to psychological skill development can provide a foundational knowledge for athletes in their skill development, the challenge for sports psychology practitioners is facilitating transfer of this knowledge from the classroom to the performance environment (Hamilton et al, 2020). As acknowledged by Hamilton et al (2020) psycho-educational workshops on their own are likely to be insufficient when aiming for transfer from the classroom to the sporting context. Research on psychological skills training has advocated for PST to be integrated within training exercises (Harwood, 2008; Henriksen, Diment & Hansen, 2011). The consulting approach adopted was underpinned by a constructivist approach to learning which views learning as a complex interaction between the individual, their learning history, the context and as a process with no direct end point (Sfard, 1997).

To design appropriate environments for the performance of and learning of skills, there is a need for a sound theoretical model of learning and the learning process (Renshaw, Chow & Davids & Hammond, 2010). A theoretical approach adopted by Hamilton et al (2020) in integrating PST within training exercises was Newell's Model of Interacting Constraints (1986). According to this model the acquisition of skill arises from the complex interaction of constraints such as the emotions, thoughts, developmental stage, and social factors, which influence the environment and learning tasks (Renshaw et al, 2010). The interaction of these constraints forces the learner to seek a stable and effective movement pattern when engaging in goal directed activities (Newell, 1986).

Newell (1986) classified constraints into three categories in order understand how movement patterns emerge during performance. The three constraints are: performer, task, and the environment. The performer constraints refer to the physical, physiological, cognitive, and emotional makeup of the individual. The characteristics of the individual provide what is termed affordances, in other words opportunities for action which influence the performance preferences adopted by an individual. Environmental constraints refer to the physical factors in the environment such as access to facilities, peer groups, parental support, and access to appropriate instruction, which can all influence the individual's acquisition of skill. For the sports psychology practitioner, task constraints are the most important due to the practitioner's ability to utilise task constraints to influence learning. Task constraints refer to the goal of the task, the rules and equipment available which can all influence the learning outcome. The manipulation of task constraints in practice helps performers become more aware of the opportunities for action within their environment (Renshaw, Davids, Newcombe, & Roberts, 2019).

Effective manipulation of task constraints involves the educator possessing a knowledge base to lead the learner towards discovering functional movement patterns and behaviours to task constraints (Renshaw et al, 2010). Sports Psychologists are well placed to inform the manipulation of task constraints within learning environments leading to changes in psychological and behavioural patterns in performers. A theoretical approach that Sports Psychologists can utilise in leading learners towards discovering functional psychological and behavioural patterns is the Mindfulness Acceptance Commitment Approach (MAC) (Gardner & Moore, 2007). The MAC approach promotes acceptance of internal experiences, while at the same time having an external focus of attention on the sporting task, with behaviours and decisions being made in line with personal values and goals in order to achieve immediate and long-term goals (Gardner & Moore, 2007). As the MAC approach promotes value clarification and commitment to engage in behaviours required for goal attainment, it targets the decision-making processes, problem solving and behaviour athletes engage in, to perform (Gardner & Moore, 2004). The manipulation of task constraints, targeting these processes within the practice environment can provide Sports Psychologists with opportunities to influence athletes' psychological processes.

The challenge for sports psychologist is identifying ways in which task constraints can be manipulated to target psychological processes. Therefore, the aim of the workshops was to deliver practical activities where the constraints-led approach (Newell, 1986) was adopted to manipulate psychological processes informed by the MAC approach (Gardner & Moore, 2004, Gardner & Moore, 2007).

**Background to the programme:**

Three sports were chosen to guide the delivery of the workshops: basketball, sprinting and volleyball. These sports were chosen as the time was not available to cover every sport in a group setting. Consequently, key aspects of each sport were chosen such as the free-throw in basketball (to replicate aiming for a target under pressure), sprinting in athletics (as most of the sports had some element of sprinting involved), and the experience of being knocked out in volleyball (to replicate working as a team in an invasion sport). These activities were chosen as they replicate similar situations across the participant's sports. With no participant having specific expertise in any of the sports chosen for the workshops, it invited all participants to reflect on how they can transfer learning to their sport. By choosing to deliver the workshops through different sports that the participants are used to participating in, the practitioner would not be providing advice that may influence with skill execution within the athletes' primary sport (Hamilton et al, 2020).

The MAC approach targets the development of: (1) mindful, non-judging, task and present moment attention; (2) acceptance of internal processes such as thoughts and emotions; (3) a willingness to remain in contact with these internal experiences; and (4) a focus on choices in the service of personal values. The aim of the three workshops delivered was to target these processes.

Insert figure 1 here

**Overview of the intervention:*****Workshop 1:***

The aim for the first workshop was to meet the participants and introduce them to the concepts within the MAC programme. The workshop took place in the indoor basketball court using the sport of basketball to facilitate an understanding of the concepts. I started the workshop by asking the participants to fill in a self-evaluation form on their sporting experience in the previous two weeks, in relation to their (1) psychological preparation, (2) application of sports psychology concepts, and (3) understanding of sports psychology concepts.

I began by introducing myself to the group and gave them a brief background on my educational experience and applied experience to gain the legitimate respect of the group (Potrac, Jones & Armour, 2002). I then introduced the first exercise where the group was split into two and each participant was asked to take two free-throw shots each. After the first exercise the two groups were brought together and both groups were asked “can you raise your hand if you had a negative thought when taking the shot?” The participants were then asked to say what their thoughts were. This was followed by a second question “can you raise your hand if you had a negative thought and still scored?”. The participants were asked if they could think of an example of an athlete in their sport who has never had a negative thought. This resulted in a discussion around the idea that you can have, and elite athletes do have, negative thoughts, and still perform well. The concept of cognitive diffusion was introduced where it is was explained that this is the ability to separate from your thoughts and let them come and go instead of getting caught up in them.



The second exercise involved the groups taking two basketball free throw shots each, again. However, this time both groups received different instructions. One group was given a demonstration and an explanation of the correct basketball free-throw technique. The second group was asked to focus on a yellow target mark on the back of the basketball ring. Once everyone had taken two shots each, both groups swapped basketball hoops and received the other set of instructions. Both groups were asked to note how many times they scored with each set of instructions. The objective of this exercise was to explore the difference between self-focused (free-throw technique) and task focused (yellow target) attention through manipulating the task instruction constraints (Newell, 1986). In the review following the exercise, both groups reported that they scored more when they focused on the target compared to technique. When asked why, one student said that he had more negative thoughts when focusing on his technique. It was explained to the participants that research (focus of attention) has found that task focused attention leads to better performance as it facilitates “getting your head out of your body’s way” (Gardner & Moore, 2007). Excessive cognitive activity, such as focusing on the correct technique, replaces the focus on task-relevant attention therefore influencing performance of goal directed behaviour (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

This resulted in a discussion about the aim of this series of workshops being on facilitating present moment focus and task-focused attention. I asked the question “what did most of you do before you took the free-throw shot?” and they said they took a deep breath. I then asked the group “what does Ronaldo do before he takes a free-kick?” I then explained that when focusing on our breathing we can create a present moment focus by embracing how we are feeling and thinking in that moment. Developing the ability to be mindfully present supports individuals focus on their attentional process and task relevant stimuli which has been shown to influence

performance (Edwards, Kingston, Hardy & Gould, 2002). The final exercise was then introduced where the participants engaged in a basketball knockout game, where if they score their shot they stay in the game, however if they miss their shot the next person can knock them out. The idea behind this was to manipulate the task constraints to encourage the individual taking the shot to develop their present moment awareness prior to task execution, as if they executed their shot correctly, they could not be knocked out. The final part of the workshop was where participants were split into their sporting groups and reviewed what they had learned from the workshop and its relevance to their sporting context.

### ***Workshop 2:***

The second workshop began with a review of the previous workshop and the notes that students wrote up summarizing what they had learned. This allowed for further clarification of any concept that was not understood. In the second workshop the sport of athletics was used to explore the concept of values driven behaviour. The aim was to aid the students in understanding the role of values and emotions.

A 100m sprinter was asked to carry out a typical warm up routine which preceded the first activity which was a series of sprinting exercises. The group was split into two with the task instruction being manipulated so that the aim for everyone was on being the best person at the activity (Newell, 1986). The second activity was a sprinting activity with the instruction of winning the race as a team and for each individual to focus on winning while being the best sprinter there. After the two exercises a review with the two groups was carried out with one student taking notes on what participants mentioned. The participants were asked to speak about what it felt like to focus only on winning. The participants noted how they felt frustrated when someone was better than them and that it made it more difficult to stay focused when

experiencing setbacks. This was conceptualised for the group through explaining that by creating a rule that they have to be the best and by focusing on winning alone at the expense of values such as teamwork and communication, the individual can become fused to thoughts and choices that do not match with the demands of the task (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

The participants were then asked to fill in a form where they were asked “if you were to play your sport for the last time, how would you want to be able to describe your performance?” Once this form was completed the two groups were put back into their teams and were asked to identify a value they want to focus on during the activities, based upon their responses. The participants undertook the activities for the second time and were instructed to focus on their values as a group in executing the tasks.

Once the second set of activities were completed the groups reviewed the difference between focusing on winning and focusing on their values. During the second set of activities the group who lost the first set of activities (winning focus), won the second set of activities (values focus). The contrast in experiences was used as a discussion point on the difference between values driven behaviour and emotion driven behaviour. Both groups noted that a focus on values resulted in acceptance of an emotional experience in winning or losing and more of an improvement focus. This can be referred to the concept of ‘clean’ versus ‘dirty’ emotions (Hayes, Strohasl & Wilson, 1999). By focusing on winning in the first exercise when one group lost, they became frustrated (clean emotion) and it was identified this could lead to anger at their teammates (dirty emotion). When the other group won the first exercise, they were happy (clean emotion) but then for the second exercise they felt confident it was going to be easy (dirty emotion). Both groups identified that the secondary emotions of anger and confidence in this incidence could result in the avoidance of executing values driven behaviour.

The workshop finished up with the students identifying what they had learned from the workshop in and its relevance to their sport, with one student making notes on what was said by the participants. This was with the objective of aiding participants in reflecting on what was learned during the workshop and how it transfers to their sporting context. The groups identified that acting in response to emotions, positive or negative can influence decisions to act in accordance with their values if they are not aware of their choices.

### ***Workshop 3:***

The third workshop took place one week after the previous one. The workshop began with a review of the previous two workshops with the participants being asked to note what was learned. The objective of the workshop was to use the sport of volleyball to explore barriers to executing performance values.

The participants were split into two teams and both teams were asked to identify values they would like to execute as a team in the first game of knockout volleyball. The aim of the exercise was to manipulate the task constraint of team numbers in response to mistakes by participants (Newell, 1986). The teams then played each other in a game where if a player on your team made a mistake (e.g. the ball hitting the ground) they were knocked out and the opposing team could bring a player of their own that was previously knocked out. This resulted in a game where the groups had to work as a team and deal with changes in momentum. After the first game both teams reviewed their performance in relation to their values and identified barriers to being able to execute their values. The participants noted barriers such as “not knowing teammates” “not having a plan” and “feeling like a fool”.

We discussed the idea of “feeling like a fool” and how this links to experiential avoidance (Hayes et al, 1996). By avoiding executing their performance values, they are protecting their ego, by being able to say afterwards that they lost due to not trying their best and if I tried my best I would have won. The question posed to the group was “how they can you overcome this thought?” The groups identified learning each other's names, giving instructions to each other, and not being afraid of failure as ways they can overcome avoidance.

### **Evaluation:**

The aim of the workshops was to aid the student athletes in developing psychological flexibility in response to situations they experience in sport. Through manipulating performer, task and instructional constraints in sporting activities, the aim was to improve student athlete’s ability to understand, apply and ultimately prepare for their sport utilising the MAC programme.

The participants were asked to complete a self-evaluation form before the first workshop and then an online evaluation after the three workshops. The evaluation asked participants to rate their understanding of sports psychology, their application of sports psychology knowledge and their psychological preparation in the last two weeks out of a scale of 1-10 (1=not at all, 10=completely agree). Ongoing monitoring of the workshops was carried out through asking the participants to explain at the end of each workshop what they had learned and how it applies to their sport. The participants were also provided with the opportunity to comment on what they had learned in the online evaluation after the final workshop.

The findings of the questions asked of participants can be seen in figure 2. There was improvement from the first workshop to the third workshop across understanding (3.4 point

increase), ability to apply the knowledge (3.5 point increase) and psychological preparation within the last two weeks (1.4 point increase).

Three comments made by participants linked with the objective of the workshops in that they believed they developed the ability to:

- be aware of their surroundings (the objective of workshop one was to aid participants develop an understanding of mindful attention)
- maintain focus (the objective of workshop one was to develop an understanding of the impact of internal and external focus of attention. Workshop two also explored emotion and values driven behaviour)
- identify who I want to be (workshops two and three explored value driven behaviour and barriers to value driven behaviour)

### **Reflection:**

Despite the results of evaluation, there are several limitations with the implementation of this MAC approach. Firstly, although the learning and teaching process in the psycho-educational workshops was informed by a constraint led approach, the tasks are not sport specific for the participant, and therefore are not representative of the task that the participants normally participate in. Although participants were encouraged to reflect on how what they learned could be incorporated within their sport, there was limited information-action coupling specific to their sport. Secondly, with the sports chosen not being the participants primary sport and with the intervention relying on reflection to facilitate transfer to their sporting context, it would have been beneficial to integrate the process of reflecting on performance into the programme. Reflection to improve sporting performance involves comparing self-observed performance

against obtained performance, prior performance or performance of others, relating the causes of success or failure to self-observed performance, feeling satisfied or dissatisfied with performance and subsequently adapting behaviour to implement new processes or strategies that facilitate performance (Jonker, Elferink-Gemser, de Roos, Visscher, 2012). Integrating this process during the first workshop and implementing it throughout would better inform transfer and the overall development of each participant beyond the goals of the MAC programme.

### **Meta-Reflection:**

Through integrating the constraints led approach with the MAC approach a framework was provided for me as a sports psychologist in integrating a constructivist educational position, with psychological theory. This facilitated the delivery of psychoeducational workshops within practical activities (Renshaw et al, 2010). When comparing the delivery to the first year of the workshops, the choices around the CBT approach and expert approach adopted were not made consciously. The unconscious adoption of this approach initially resulted in an approach that met my need to demonstrate competence as a practitioner rather than the needs of the client group. Although I believed in a client-led approach I adopted the role of problem solver (Owton, Bond & Tod, 2014). As I reflected on the first year of workshops and moved into my second year of delivery, I became more congruent with how I believed workshops should be delivered. I adopted an approach where I considered the knowledge the participant may bring to the environment by guiding them through learning experiences. This resulted in the development of knowledge throughout the workshops compared to the first year. Having a clear philosophical approach aligned with a psychological theory and methods of delivery, enabled evaluation of the processes of change pre and post intervention.

In summary, although psycho-educational workshops on their own are likely to be insufficient when aiming for transfer from the classroom to the sporting context (Hamilton et al, 2020), adopting an approach where practical activities are implemented through a theoretically informed approach to the learning process, psychological processes can be targeted to support athlete development.



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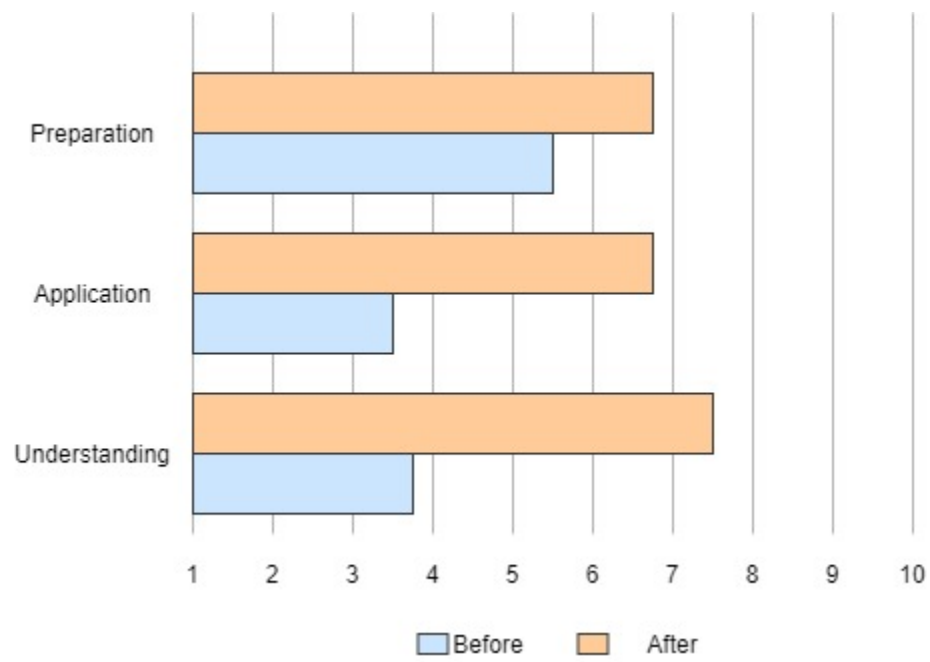
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## Appendices:

*Figure 1:* Workshop activity, task constraint and target process

Workshop number	Sport	Activity	Task Constraint	Target Process
1	Basketball	Free throw	The performers focus of attention	Present moment attention
2	Athletics (Sprinting)	15m relay	The performers goal directed activity	Acceptance
3	Volleyball	Game	The task: a mistake leading to an underload for your team	Choice and values driven behaviour

**Figure 2:** Evaluation results



## **Teaching diary:**

### **Background:**

The teaching and learning diary will refer to two different populations in which I delivered to, throughout my training period. The first three diary entries (1-3) will refer to the delivery of workshops to AIT Sports Scholarship. The second three diary entries (3-6) will refer to a twelve-week lecturing block where I delivered an Introduction to Sport and Exercise Psychology module to Sports Science and Athletic Rehabilitation students.

### **Reflection 1: My underpinning approach to workshop delivery**

#### ***What?***

Over my two-year training period I delivered six workshops to the AIT Sports Scholarship students. During the first year the workshops covered topics such as controlling your performance, study skills and balancing life as a student athlete. During this first year of workshops, I delivered in the classroom where I very much led the discussion, with little interaction. In my second year of delivery I moved from the classroom environment to deliver content through practical workshops focused on helping the student athletes apply psychology in the sporting context. When reflecting on the two years of delivery although there was the same positive feedback about the workshops, I believe I delivered more effective workshops in the second year compared to the first year. I am trying to understand why this was the case.

#### ***So What?***

I believe that cognition is embodied and that interaction between the individual's cognitions, their body, the environment, the task, and social environment all have an influence on subsequent behaviour. Likewise, the behaviour in turn influences the individual's cognitions

(Cappuccio, 2015). This belief is in line with the ecological dynamics approach to human cognition and information processing (Gibson, 1979). This belief in the way an individual acquires knowledge lends me towards a constructivist theory of delivery in teaching and learning, where it is acknowledged that we construct or build knowledge in our own unique ways (Anderson & Johnston, 2016). The role of the teacher utilising a constructivist approach is to arrange learning experiences to help the learner with the acquisition process.

I believe the reason I felt the that workshops did not go well during the first year was that I was not delivering the workshops in line with a constructivist theoretical lens but a cognitivist one. During the first workshop I delivered on controlling performance states I utilised video and explanation of topics to cover the material in the workshop. In the second workshop on study skills I utilised mnemonic devices to aid the students in acquiring knowledge on improving their memory for exam situations. The aim of the workshops was to ensure that the students were left with memorable content to enable storage of sensory information for later retrieval (Petri & Mishkin, 1994).

When I received the student evaluations of the workshops where one of the students identified that the workshops needs to be more practical, I recognised that I was not helping the students learn through experience, and subsequently allow integration with their current knowledge. For this reason, I placed a conscious focus during the second year to implement a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. I implemented this through backwards design of what I wanted the student athletes to learn throughout the series of workshops and identifying clear learning objectives for each workshop. In addition to backwards design students were placed into situations to challenge their previous learning and provided time to construct their own meaning of what they learned (Naylor & Kingston, 2012).



The first workshop focused on the present moment awareness, the second on values identification and the third on engaging in value driven behaviour. Although these were the objectives, students might learn something completely different from the workshop depending on their current level of understanding of the topic. The second strategy I utilised was placing students in situations to challenge previous conceptualisations. During the first workshop I asked groups to focus their attention on a target and a technique and asked the students about their experience of both. A lot of students highlighted how they found focus on a target resulting in less cognitive dialogue compared to technique and found they performed better when focusing less on a specific technique but more on the process. Finally, during all three workshops providing time for the students to discuss their experience and to construct their own meaning of what they learned was provided.

### *Now What?*

From this experience I have developed a better understanding of the underpinning theory which I utilised when delivering workshops to athletes and coaches. Despite utilising an underpinning theoretical approach that suited my beliefs about human development, I believe the real difference in the workshops came about through consciously matching the underpinning theoretical approach with complementary instructional strategies.

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**Reflection 2: Supervisor comments that “the workshop looked more CBT than ACT”*****What?***

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2019, my supervisor came to carry out a placement provider meeting with my primary supervisor. As part of this visit, I also delivered a workshop to the sports scholarship students in AIT. The workshop I delivered was the final session in a series of three that were underpinned by an Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach. The aim of the final workshop was to facilitate students in identifying their own values, identify barriers to their performance values and identify strategies to overcome their performance barriers. At the end of the workshops myself and my supervisor met to carry out a review of the session. One of the comments he made was that the session “looked more like CBT than ACT.”

***So What?***

I found this comment difficult to answer at the time as I felt there was a clear link between all three of the workshops and a clear theoretical follow on from all three of the workshops. At the time I felt that as CBT and ACT are linked as second and third wave therapies, they have several similarities. According to Forman & Herbert (2009) both ACT and CBT view cognitions as observable and distinguishable from the self, aim to foster increased awareness of subjective experience and incorporate behavioural strategies. At the time I thought without observing the previous sessions and their delivery that only the similarities between the two approaches would have been observed.

In the first workshop I covered focus of attention and developing present moment awareness through cognitive diffusion. The participants were asked how many of them had negative thoughts in response to the task, with the majority reporting negative thoughts and some still

performing despite negative thoughts. I then explained to the group that negative thoughts are normal and that instead of trying to control negative thoughts we can accept them and work through them with breathing exercises (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

The second workshop explored value identification and the third workshop expanded on this to explore barriers to performance values. During this workshop I explored the thoughts that individuals had which prevented them executing their performance values. After the first game one student identified that they did not want “to feel like a fool” and this resulted in them not engaging in their performance values. I responded to this by explaining this was what is called experiential avoidance, where we try and suppress potential negative internal experiences. In response to this I asked the question how can we overcome this negative thought?

This question was more linked to a CBT approach compared to an ACT approach in terms of changing the client's thoughts rather than accepting the thought as normal and still acting in accordance with one's values. This was where I should have emphasised the link to previous workshops and particularly the first workshop where we explored cognitive diffusion in response to negative thoughts. Gardner & Moore (2007) have identified this as a common problem for consultants adopting an ACT approach.

### ***Now What?***

In the future when delivering a series of workshops, it is important to link the previous workshops to the current workshop. In this case I could have identified where I can reinforce the points from the first and second workshop within the third one. In this way I would be planning and linking the learning from each of the previous workshops with the learning outcomes for the current workshop.

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### **Reflection 3: Participant feedback on year 1**

#### ***What?***

After completing the workshops delivered to the sports scholarship students during the first year of the professional doctorate, I sent out an online form for students to fill in their feedback on the sports scholarship scheme and workshops delivered. A final year student commented in the feedback that there was a need to cater for different students' needs within the workshops as some students have had similar workshops delivered previously. The question this posed to me as a practitioner is how can I cater for the needs of different individuals when I am delivering to a group?

#### ***So What?***

During the delivery of the workshops I found it difficult to group students by their stage of learning or their stage in academic or sporting development. This was due to the limited time and resources available to deliver multiple workshops over a series of weeks or on the same day. At the end of the year I researched how I can better cater for individual needs when delivering workshops. I came across a strategy utilised in education called differentiation. Differentiation is a method of teaching based on the premise that teachers should adapt instruction to the student's difference (Willis & Mann, 2000).

There are some considerations when implementing this strategy:

- Reducing complexity can hold back the more advanced students.
- It can increase the gap if more advanced students are given more complex tasks.
- Differentiation can hold back more advanced students if they are assigned an easy task.

To ensure this strategy caters for the needs of those I deliver workshops to, I needed to ensure that the needs of individuals are met without holding back those who are at a more advanced stage. I also needed to ensure the workshops were not too complex for those at an earlier stage of learning.

### ***Now What?***

Collaborative learning through groupwork can help facilitate differentiation through empowering shy students to participate more. This can provide more advanced learners with the opportunity to vocalise their ideas and lower ability students the opportunity to learn from their peers. In addition, progressive workshops and tasks within workshops can help challenge the different levels of students' ability between and within the workshops (Resource Ed, 2017). When delivering the workshops next year these are strategies that I will aim to utilise to help support individual learner needs.

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## **Reflection 4: Academic Assessment Methods**

### ***What?***

During the 2018-19 academic year I lectured to Sports Science and Athletic Rehabilitation students on the Introduction to Sport and Exercise Psychology module. I was tasked with developing the material for the module, delivering the material for the module and the assessment methods. There were three assessment methods, a reflection assignment based on a presentation from a coach on leadership and communication, a report for a coach on stress and anxiety and a short answer questions assignment. I utilised a reflection assignment as I wanted to introduce the students to reflection and help them integrate the theoretical knowledge from the classroom with scenarios presented by the guest speaker.

### ***So What?***

The aim for introducing reflection as an assignment was to help the students identify how they can link theory to practice and identify ways they would work with a coach when they enter practice. This was based on a discussion with the head of department at the beginning of the semester when she mentioned she wanted a focus on applied work within the module. However, when reflecting on the overarching learning outcomes for the module, I was not aware of the importance of alignment between the learning outcomes, the assessment method and the content delivered. Constructive alignment is where the teaching, learning and assessment are closely aligned to the learning outcomes (Whitaker, 2017). According to Blooms Taxonomy of learning (Bloom et al, 1956) there are six levels of learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Within each level there are action verbs associated with the learning outcomes. Within the module I was teaching the learning outcomes centred around

identifying, discussing, and defining. These verbs are associated with knowledge and comprehension elements of the taxonomy of learning (Bloom et al, 1956). When reflecting on my choice of assessment methods for the module introducing reflection was a level beyond what the learning outcomes identified for the module. Instead of asking students to reflect on what was presented, their knowledge and what they would do, I should have asked them to discuss what was presented in relation to psychological theory.

### ***Now What?***

I approached the delivery of the series of lectures more from an applied workshop perspective rather than an educational perspective. Although this enabled me to deliver the lectures with a focus on links to the application of sports psychology it did not align to the learning outcomes of the module. When delivering lectures in the future I will aim to work from back to front, from the learning outcome to the assessment method to the teaching methods utilised.

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**Reflection 5: How am I teaching and are they learning?*****What?***

During the first few weeks of delivering lectures to the students on the introduction to sport and exercise psychology module I was focused on developing and delivering the material relevant for the module. This was my first time in an academic teaching environment, and I was focused on gathering, understanding, and delivering the material, compared to understanding how I was going to teach the material. This resulted in me teaching but not following up on what was being thought. I had no way of checking in on the students understanding of the previous lecture before moving on to new material. I often found that students did not connect the previous lecture to learning in the subsequent lecture. After the first three weeks of delivery I recognised that I had to come up with a way of assessing students understanding of the material before progressing.

***So What?***

After the first three weeks I introduced three questions at the beginning of each lecture from the previous lecture. This enabled me to assess students learning at the beginning of each class and go back over previous material before progressing to the new material. In addition, I asked the questions in a way that would link to the learning outcomes of the module.

I also experienced situations where students learned more following the tutorial compared to the lecture room. I had arranged for the lectures to cover the theoretical material and for the tutorials to translate the theory into application. The tutorials also allowed the students to go over the material again. When looking back on this, the way I structured the lecture environment may have been to account for this. Up to this point I had previously delivered workshops to small groups 10-20 people. This resulted in me trying to deliver material in an interactive manner in

small groups settings during the tutorials where I utilised applied paper discussions and practical activities. When delivering to the lecture room I did not engage in open discussion with the group as much as I would have when delivering to smaller group. I found that the lecture room resulted in less open discussion from the students. This was in part due to my lack of engagement in teaching strategies to cater for the large lecture room environment.

### ***Now What?***

To improve delivery to large classroom environments I need to improve my ability to integrate teaching strategies when engaging with larger groups of people. A strategy I have come across is Think-Pair-Share where the students are provided time to think about a question or subject, then are asked to speak about it in groups and then are asked to share their discussions with the rest of the room. It has been acknowledged when utilising this approach that the thinking part is often rushed although this is the most important part.

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**Reflection 6: How did the lectures help a student in their sport?*****What?***

In December 2019 a sports scholarship student approached me about engaging in Sports Psychology support in the new year. I had delivered the introduction to sport and exercise psychology module to her class during my time lecturing the Sports Science and Athletic Rehabilitation first year students. The student mentioned that the sports psychology lectures had helped her as an athlete when she went to compete in the European U23 championships the previous year. The student mentioned how the lectures, in particular the study of anxiety helped her better perform in the championships. This made me think about how what I thought lead to the student feeling that what had been thought helped her in her performance as an athlete.

***So What?***

The student identified how when she was competing in the U23 European Championships that she applied what she had learned in the Introduction to Sport and Exercise Psychology module with regards to anxiety. In this class presented multiple theories of anxiety, the response to anxiety and how anxiety can influence performance. Within the lectures we covered the inverted U hypothesis (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), drive theory (Hull, 1943), reversal theory (Apter, 1983), multidimensional model of anxiety (Smith & Smoll, 1990), catastrophe theory (Hardy & Parfitt, 1991) and individual zone of optimal functioning (Hanin, 1997). My intention as a lecturer had been to bring theory covered within lectures to life in the tutorials. I supplemented the theory delivered within the lectures with practical activities in the tutorials that looked at how different individuals responded to different levels of anxiety utilising the wire loop game. We examined three different states a normal arousal level, a high heart rate, and a negative marking game.

What the student described was the process of transfer of learning. Transfer of learning is defined as the ability to transfer what is learned in one context to another (Bransford et al, 1999). A strategy that can be employed to encourage transfer is activating prior knowledge about a topic. I introduced this within the first lecture to get an understanding of the classes response to anxiety when they played sport. A second strategy I employed that encourages transfer is simulations, which can be like situations students might be in in the future. I utilised a simulation of the feeling of anxiety to aid the students in understanding the experience and different people's reactions to it. This enabled the group to discuss their own individual reactions to anxiety and the strategies that enabled some to successfully perform in different anxiety states versus those who did not.

### ***Now What?***

Although transfer to athletic competition was not the main goal of the lectures, it was a by-product of what was thought. As a practitioner I have come to view the importance of making workshops on sports psychology practical to facilitate transfer. This principle also applies when teaching concepts to students so that they can transfer it to their context and work. This experience has further reinforced the importance I place on linking theory to practical activities to facilitate students transfer of learning to their own knowledge and context.



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## Systematic Review:

### Title: The Psychology of elite footballers: A meta-synthesis

Declarations of interest: none

Authors: \*<sup>A</sup> David McHugh, <sup>B</sup> Dr. Robert Morris & <sup>C</sup>Dr. Martin Eubank

<sup>A</sup> Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Ireland.

<sup>B</sup> University of Stirling, Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA.

<sup>C</sup> Liverpool John Moores University, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Tom Reilly Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool, L3 3AF.

\*Corresponding author. Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Ireland. Email address: davidmchugh@ait.ie

#### Highlights:

- The primary data collection method has been the use of semi-structured interviews
- Stress and coping theories have underpinned the research carried out on the psychology of elite footballers.
- The individuals coping skills, the environment they are within and the interaction between the individual and environment influences an elite footballer's performance.
- A model of the psychology of elite footballers is proposed which incorporates the findings of existing research.

**Abstract:**

Research over the past 20 years has attempted to understand the psychological characteristics of elite footballers. The purpose of the current study was to review the qualitative research that has examined the psychological characteristics of elite footballers. The main objectives of the study was to (1) critically review the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of the research on the psychology of elite footballers, (2) systematically review the factors that influence the psychology of elite footballers, and (3) synthesize the findings of the factors that influence the psychology of elite footballers. In total 22 studies were included in the meta-study. The studies were analysed and data extracted to carry out a meta-method, meta-theory, meta-data analysis and meta-synthesis. Semi-structured interviews were utilised most often to research the psychology of elite footballers and the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) was the most utilised theory underpinning the collection of data. A total of 86 codes were identified which were categorized into 14 concepts, and 3 overarching categories: coping, support and task focused attention. A grounded theory model is presented to explain the psychology of elite footballers. The current study identifies gaps in the current research, practical implications and areas for future research.

Key words: psychology, footballer, elite, meta-study

**Introduction:**

Research on expertise in sport has highlighted the importance of various factors that influence its development and maintenance. The quality of training and coaching afforded to the athlete (Ericsson et al, 1993; Cote et al, 1995) and psychological skills (Gould et al, 1992) have all been identified as factors that influence the development of expertise in elite athletes. Despite developing an understanding of the development of expertise in sport, further research is required to understand the maintenance of expertise among elite athletes (Housner & French, 1994).

Given the importance of research on elite athletes there has been a notable increase on research on elite football players. Previous research on elite football players has examined coping skills (Kristiansen et al, 2012; Kristiansen et al, 2019; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Hofseth et al, 2017), mental skills (Jordet, 2005) and decision making (Feigean, et al, 2018; Tedesdqui & Orlick, 2012).

Previous systematic reviews on the psychology of football have examined the psychosocial factors that influence talent development in football (Gledhill et al, 2017). Despite the individual research on elite football players no systematic review has been undertaken that has synthesised the research examining the psychological factors that influence elite football players. Research on elite athletes can inform a better understanding of the psychological processes required for success at elite level of competition (Swann et al, 2012) and can be transferred to sub-elite populations aspiring to progress to the elite level (Swann et al, 2015). However, it can be problematic to transfer findings from sub-elite populations to elite populations as these populations differ on cognitive, strategic, and perceptual aspects of behaviour (Calmeiro et al, 2014; Rice et al, 2016). Summarizing and synthesizing the qualitative research from individual studies that have examined the psychological factors that influence elite footballers can provide a

more comprehensive description of the psychology of elite footballers. The synthesis of knowledge can identify areas of challenge for elite footballers, potential areas for intervention and areas for future research.

The current study aims to address the gap in the research by carrying out a meta-synthesis of research on the psychology of elite footballers. Specifically, the purpose of the current study is to: (a) provide an overview and critique of the methodological and theoretical underpinning of the psychological research of elite football players, (b) systematically review and evaluate the key findings that impact the psychology of elite footballers, and (c) and synthesize the findings that are perceived to influence the psychology of elite football players.

**Method:**

A qualitative meta-synthesis approach was utilised in this study (Paterson et al, 2001). This design was utilised to aggregate the findings from studies that have examined the psychological characteristics of elite football players in order to develop new insights into the literature on elite football players. The aim of the research is to understand the psychological characteristics of professional football players playing in open age grade or senior international football.

***Inclusion Criteria:***

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria: (1) A clearly defined sample must be playing or have played professional football at an open age grade level and/or have played senior international football. The participants can be current or former professional footballers as long as the focus of the study is on their time as a professional football player; (2) Examines a psychological outcome measure related to playing professional football; (3) Studies that qualitatively examine the athletes experience of playing professional football and the

psychological characteristics required were included. Mixed method studies were included but only the qualitative data was utilised in the synthesis; (4) the studies had to be written in the English Language.

***Search Strategy:***

**Electronic Search:**

A forward and backwards search of the qualitative literature was carried out using the following search terms: "football" or "soccer" or "football\*" and "elite" or "professional" or "world-class" or "national" or "international" or "Olympic" or "high performance" and "mental skills" or "sport\* psychology" or "psychol\*" or "performance enhancement" or "psychol\* characteristics" or "psychol\* attributes" or "personality traits" not "rugby" or "American football". The search was conducted in August 2019 on the following databases: Sportsdiscus, Academic Search Complete, Medline, Psychinfo, Web of Science, Scopus, and ProQuest thesis (under psychology).

A second electronic literature search was carried out using the SPIDER search strategy for qualitative and mixed methods research (Cooke et al, 2012). A forward and backwards search was carried out using the following terms: "football" or "soccer" or "football\*" and "elite" or "professional" or "world-class" or "national" or "international" or "Olympic" or "high performance" and "mental skills" or "sport\* psychology" or "psychol\*" or "performance enhancement" or "psychol\* characteristics" or "psychol\* attributes" or "personality traits" and "questionnaire\*" OR "survey\*" OR "interview\*" OR "focus group\*" OR "case stud\*" OR "observ\*" and "view\*" OR "experienc\*" OR "opinion\*" OR "attitude\*" OR "perce\*" OR "belie\*" OR "feel\*" OR "know\*" OR "understand\*" and "qualitative" OR "mixed method\*".

The following databases were searched: sportsdiscus, academic search complete, medline, psychinfo, web of science, Scopus, and ProQuest thesis (under psychology). The electronic searches began on the 10/08/19 and the final search was on the 30/08/2019.

Insert figure 1 here

### **Manual Search:**

A manual search of the titles of publications in the following academic journals was carried out: The Sport Psychologist, International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, Journal of Sports Sciences, Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, Journal of Sport Psychology, and Psychology of Sport and Exercise. The reference lists of the identified studies were also searched for further relevant studies.

### ***Screening and Selection of studies:***

An electronic search was carried out across seven electronic databases yielding 9118 prospective articles. A manual search was carried out on nine academic journals yielding three prospective articles. All prospective articles were titled screened at source by the lead reviewer and only included if they met the initial criteria.

584 records were screened for title and abstract review, with 50 being carried forward for full text review after duplicates and irrelevant studies were removed. Of the 50 articles reviewed, 21 met the inclusion criteria. The reference lists of the articles that were included in the study were searched manually, yielding no addition studies. The articles included in the study were transferred to Excel for analysis.

***Data Extraction:***

Data extraction was carried out by the lead researcher. The lead researcher read all studies in full to develop familiarity with the studies aims, methods and main findings. Information extracted from the studies included: research method utilised, the research question, the researcher, and the setting in which the research took place, theoretical approach utilised, participants included, trustworthiness and the data collection technique. In addition to the above data extraction, direct quotes from the players were extracted from the findings of the studies. The data extracted was put into excel and tables were developed (Figure 2 and Figure 3)

***Meta Method analysis:***

Following data extraction, a review of the research designs and methodologies utilised was carried out. The meta-method procedure was utilised with the aim of understanding how the methods utilised to study the psychological characteristics of elite football players have influenced current knowledge. The meta-method procedure involved the appraisal of the primary research studies in terms of the research question, data collection method, the researcher and setting, the sampling procedure, data analysis method and the research sample. Following the primary appraisal an overall appraisal of the studies was carried out. A table was designed to facilitate the comparison of the primary studies.

***Meta-Theory analysis:***

A meta theory analysis took place after the meta method analysis. The purpose of this analysis was to identify the theory underpinning the primary research studies and to understand its potential impact on the subsequent findings. This provided the opportunity to critically interpret the findings of the research papers and informed the subsequent meta-synthesis. The meta-theory



analysis involved initial reading of the primary research noting the theory underpinning the research. Once this was complete the underpinning theories were added to the table including the findings from the meta-method analysis. Identifying the theories underpinning the research helped inform an understanding of how different theoretical approaches inform the understanding of the psychological characteristics of elite footballers.

***Meta-Data analysis:***

Meta-data analysis involved the examination of the findings from the primary research studies (Paterson et al, 2001). The data captured related to the psychological factors that influence elite footballers and quotes were extracted from the studies and was carried out by the lead researcher. The extracted quotes from the players identified in the research studies were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Extracts were coded and grouped into concepts and then categories. All research meeting the inclusion criteria was coded for key concepts. The key concepts in each study were compared to the other studies for similarities and differences in findings.

***Meta-Synthesis analysis:***

The meta-synthesis brought together the results of the meta-method analysis, meta-theory analysis and meta-data analysis in order to compare and contrast themes across studies and to integrate them into a coherent account of the psychological characteristics of elite football players. An increased understanding of the research can help athletes, coaches, and sports psychologists better support players in developing the characteristics to play at the elite level. It can also support researchers in identifying areas for further study in relation to the topic.

**Results and discussion:*****Meta-Method:***

Semi-structured interviews were the most used data generation method. Thirteen studies utilised semi-structured interviews only, with two further studies utilising semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012; Horrocks et al, 2016a) and one study utilising retrospective recall interviews (Horrocks et al, 2016b). Three studies utilised mixed qualitative methods, with an audio diary and semi-structured interview (Holt & Dunn, 2004), behavioural observation and video recall interview (Feigean, et al, 2018), and observation and a narrative interview (Holt & Hogg, 2002). One study utilised a written diary (Pensgaard & Duda, 2002) and another was based on a case study (Larsen & Engell, 2013).

The most common setting for the research to be undertaken was where the researcher interviewed the participants to collect data. Fourteen studies highlighted how the role of the researcher was to collect data only. Five studies reported that a member of the research team was also working in the setting in some capacity (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002; Flack, 2011; Larsen & Engell, 2013; Holt & Hogg, 2002). Two studies reported engagement as a researcher prior to data collection, one for three months (Feigean et al, 2018) and another for three years (Kristiansen et al, 2019).

The most common research question was around stress and coping with eight studies exploring this process (Kristiansen, et al, 2012; Kristiansen, et al; 2019; Kristiansen et al, 2012; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Hofseth et al, 2017; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002; Holt & Dunn, 2004; Woods & Thatcher, 2009). Three studies examined mental skills (Jordet, 2005; Freitas, Dias & Fonseca, 2013; Larsen & Engell, 2013) while two each explored team coordination (Feigean et al, 2018;

Gershgoren et al, 2016), anxiety (Jordet et al, 2006; Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012) and the practice and preparation process (Horrocks et al, 2016a; Horrocks et al, 2016b). One study each examined the transition from youth to senior (Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2017), attentional focus (Tedesqui & Orlick, 2015), activation states (Flack, 2011) and home field advantage (Fothergill et al, 2014).

Regarding data analysis, thematic analysis was the method most utilised in seven studies, followed by content analysis being utilised in five studies. Phenomenological analysis was utilised in three studies. Additional methods reported were the use of a confessional tale (Larsen & Engell, 2013) and a narrative analysis (Pensgaard & Duda, 2002). Two studies did not report an analysis method (Flack, 2011; Jordet, 2005) with one study reporting the use of a generic qualitative approach but providing no detail on what this approach involved (Kristiansen et al, 2019). All but one study reported details on strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings (Larsen & Engell, 2013). Member checking and expert/critical friend were the most often used strategies to ensure methodological rigour. In total eight studies utilised one method to ensure methodological rigour, a further five used two methods and seven studies used three or more methods.

The methodological theoretical orientation was not widely outlined within the studies. Of the four studies that stated a specific theoretical orientation each one stated a different approach: idiographic approach (Holt & Dunne, 2004), subjectivism (Pensgaard & Duda, 2002), post-positivism (Gershgoren et al, 2016) and ontological relativism (Feigean et al, 2018). Method theoretical orientations were not stated in sixteen of the twenty studies.

The sample involved in the studies consisted of 135 players, 7 coaches and 1 parent. The players sample was made up of 116 male and 19 female players. Twelve studies reported purposeful

sampling methods to recruit participants and six reported convenience sampling methods. Two studies did not report a sampling procedure (Freitas et al, 2013; Jordet, 2005).

Insert figure 2 here

### ***Meta Theory:***

The meta-theory analysis aimed to identify the underpinning theoretical approach of the articles included in the meta-study. In total seven studies examined stress and coping. The Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) was utilised in six studies to examine the coping process. In addition, one study utilised the Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (CATS) (Ursin, 1988). One other study examined shame and coping utilizing Lazarus conceptualization of shame and coping (Lazarus, 1991, 2000). Two studies examined the preparation process of elite footballers utilising the theory of Deliberate Practice (Ericsson et al, 1993). Team coordination was examined in two studies, with one study utilising an enactivist approach to teamwork (DeJaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) and another utilizing Shared Mental Models (Eccles and Tenenbaum, 2004). Three studies examined mental skills. One study utilised Gibson (1979) ecological approach to visual perception to examine imagery. An alternative study utilised Pavio (1985) cognitive and motivational functions of imagery. Goal setting was also examined utilising Locke & Latham's (1985, 1990) theory of goal setting. Other theoretical approaches utilised to underpin research included: transition and youth to senior transition (Stambulova, 2003; Pummell et al, 2008); Game Location Framework (Carron, Loughead, & Bray ,2005); Contingency-Competence-control Model (Weisz, 1986; Weisz & Stipek, 1982); Eriksonian Hypnosis (Geary & Zeig, 2001). Two studies did not state an underpinning theoretical approach.

Stress and coping have been a primary focus of the research carried out on the psychological characteristics of elite football players. This work has primarily been underpinned by the Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) with six studies utilising this theoretical approach. The transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provides an understanding of how stress and coping with stress evolves over time depending on the interaction between the individual and the environment. Lazarus (1993) states that transactional model of stress assumes that coping under stress should be measured separately from outcomes. This assumption enables an understanding of the evolving stress and coping process in context, however elite sport is a goal directed activity with performance being the desired objective. In contrast the CATS (Ursin, 1984) conceptualises stress and coping in relation to achieving an objective in terms of outcome expectancy. The study included in this meta-study examined stress and coping during the World Cup where the goal for the team was to win the World Cup (Pensgaard & Duda, 2002). This theoretical perspective provides an insight into the cognitive mechanisms which underpin the stress and coping process in specific situations and in relation to goal directed behaviour. With six out of seven studies examining stress and coping utilising the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as the underpinning theoretical approach there is the risk that the research provides an insight into the coping process over time but not the relationship it has on goal directed behaviour. One additional study examined shame and coping utilising Lazarus conceptualization of shame and coping (Lazarus, 1991, 2000). The study of emotions with elite football players is limited to stress and shame. There is an absence of study regarding emotions relating to the experience of success and how players cope with success. The focus on a limited range of emotions experienced by elite football players results in an understanding of the negative aspects of being an elite footballer. Future research which

broadens the underpinning theory utilised when studying emotions and elite footballers would help broaden the knowledge of coping and emotions.

Other theoretical areas explored in the research studies include the Deliberate practice approach (Ericsson et al, 1993) and approaches to team coordination. The theory of deliberate practice put forward by Ericsson et al (1993) provides an understanding of the cognitive processes elite football players engaged with, in preparation for and while playing at an elite level. However, there was no insight into the social aspects that may influence the development of different cognitive approaches being utilised by different players. In contrast the two studies which have explored team coordination have examined it from a different perspective. The enactivist approach (DeJaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) utilised by Feigean et al (2018) provides an understanding of how decision making unfolds with action in real time. From a social cognitive perspective, the Shared Mental Models approach (Eccles and Tenenbaum's, 2004) utilised by Gershgoren et al, (2016) provides an understanding of how teammates coordinate and adapt to dynamic competitive environments. Although from different theoretical approaches the enactivist approach and social-cognitive approach provide alternative perspectives on the factors influencing teamwork. The comparison between the deliberate practice approach and team coordination emphasises the importance of researchers adopting alternative theoretical perspectives in order to broaden the knowledge of the psychological characteristics of elite footballers.

### ***Meta-Data Analysis:***

The meta-data analysis identified 86 codes in the literature reviewed that were perceived to influence the psychological characteristics of elite football players. The 86 codes were categorised into 10 concepts: (1) flexible coping, (2) challenges, (3) stressors, (4) preparation, (5)

practice, (6) process focus, (7) support, (8) confidence, (9) performance and (10) task focus. The 10 concepts are discussed further below in relation to 3 categories: coping, support, and performance.

### **Coping:**

Elite footballers face challenges associated with their occupation which can create stressors. In response to stressors elite footballers utilise a range of flexible coping strategies.

### **Challenges:**

Being evaluated constantly was highlighted as a challenge associated with being an elite footballer (Kristiansen et al, 2019). The constant evaluation is a result of the daily competition for places to be in the starting line up (Kristiansen et al, 2019; Holt & Hogg, 2002). This requires players to perform consistently (Freitas et al, 2013) despite the opposition trying to put them off (Holt & Hogg, 2002), travelling long distances for games (Kristiansen et al, 2012; Fothergill et al, 2014) and uncertainty over their future contract (Kristiansen et al, 2012). In order to cope with these challenges' players have to sacrifice time in order to prepare to deal with these challenges (Kristiansen et al, 2012).

### **Stressors:**

With the players being challenged to perform consistently, making mistakes (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Hofseth et al, 2017) can result in criticism where “here it is much more ‘you made a mistake, don’t do it again’ and if you do it again, you get continually criticized for that which puts you under pressure” (Morris et al, 2017 p531; Fothergill et al, 2014; Hofseth et al, 2017). This can be compounded by negative coach communication which can bring the player down further (Freitas et al, 2013; Holt & Hogg, 2002). There is a pressure for players to perform (Holt

& Hogg, 2002) and preparation is important to cope with the pressure. If preparation is “wrong, any element of it is wrong, I’m in trouble” (Horrocks et al, 2016, p677). This can result in pre-game and in-game anxiety (Holt & Hogg, 2002). Poor performance can result in a feeling of embarrassment (Hofseth et al, 2017) with fatigue also affecting players ability to train consistently (Holt & Hogg, 2002). A lack of perception of control over situations can result in stress (Freitas et al, 2013) and can result in a fear of getting injured (Holt & Dunn, 2004).

***Coping strategies:***

Developing a strong sense of self (Kristiansen et al, 2012) was identified as important to cope with the challenges that players encounter. Having multiple identities beyond football (Larsen & Engell, 2013) can help players cope flexibly to “confront it... with my support group... let some stuff go... defend yourself... a very strong sense of self, and a very strong sense of you are the only one that is going to, that cares about you” (Kristiansen et al, 2012b, p218). Developing a strong sense of self facilitates players developing a range of coping strategies such as problem focused coping (Kristiansen et al, 2019; Kristiansen et al, 2012; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Hofseth et al, 2017; Horrocks et al, 2016; Freitas et al, 2013; Kristiansen et al, 2012a; Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012), rational thinking (Kristiansen et al, 2012a; Holt & Dunn, 2004), emotion focused coping (Kristiansen et al, 2011) and avoidance coping (Hofseth et al, 2017) in response to the challenges they encounter.

**Support:**

To cope with the challenge’s players encounter and to perform at an elite level, players require open communication in their environment, teamwork and task-orientated communication



### ***Communication:***

The informational support a coach provides in preparation for a game can help players prepare for performance (Horrocks et al, 2016; Kristiansen et al, 2012a). If a player has a “manager and coaches who can explain to you how you can win that match before you've won... I think you are in a far better state of mind as a player” (Horrocks et al, 2016b, p678). The players within the team can provide social support when a player experiences setback (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Gershgoren et al, 2016) and informational support in terms of the tactics and culture of the team (Tod et al, 2017). However, in order to cope with the emotional demands of elite football they receive support from their partner (Kristiansen et al, 2012a), family members (Holt & Hogg, 2002), sports science staff (Morris et al, 2012) and ex-coaches (Pensgaard & Duda, 2002).

Although the communication environment provides support to the athlete, the athlete also influences the communication environment. The athlete can “respect the other team... pay attention to the other team, you don't talk about them” (Horrocks et al, 2016b, p678) which facilitates the team focusing on what they can control. The athlete can activate themselves and their teammates through yelling (Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012) instructions to their teammates (Holt & Hogg, 2002), however it is important this is constructive (Horrocks et al, 2016b). The athlete also communicates with themselves “when things aren't going well... I talk to myself to keep calm and reduce my anxiety levels” (p851, Freitas et al, 2013).

### ***Teamwork:***

For the individual player to perform they require the team to work together in order to perform. Teamwork requires appropriate team goals “because if the goals are inappropriate, lack proportional to the human sources that you have, it kills the chemistry. It kills it” (Gershgoren et

al, 2016, p134). In addition, teamwork requires the clear roles for the players to facilitate coordination and belief in the team (Gershgoren et al, 2016).

### ***Preparation:***

“Preparation for a match has been key to my career. If that's wrong, any element of it is wrong, I'm in trouble” (Horrocks et al, 2016, p677). In order for a player to be prepared for a match they must plan their preparation (Horrocks et al, 2016b; Flack, 2011) which consists of opposition analysis (Woods & Thatcher, 2009) imagery (Freitas et al, 2013), tactical preparation, having a routine (Horrocks et al, 2016a) and having a good warm up (Fothergill et al, 2014). In order to prepare effectively it is important the athlete develops awareness of “all the small aspects that occur during the day, become aware of why it happened and what influence it has” (Larsen & Engell, 2013, p67; Jordet, 2013).

### ***Practice:***

In order to develop as an athlete an elite footballer must develop a focus on constant improvement (Horrocks et al, 2016b; Holt & Dunn, 2004) where they are “daring to fail” in order improve (Hofseth et al, 2017). This requires motivation (Morris et al, 2017) to consistently (Flack, 2011) maintain the focus required (Kristiansen et al, 2019) to do the work required to become and sustain playing at an elite level (Holt & Dunn, 2004).

### ***Performance:***

Performance consists of a present-moment focus (Tedesqui & Orlick, 2015; Kristiansen et al, 2011) and a feeling of excitement (Holt & Hogg, 2002). To develop the present moment focus and the feeling of excitement necessary to perform, the athlete must maintain a process focus, task focused attention and have the confidence to perform.

***Process Focus:***

In order to develop a process focus the athlete must develop the ability to reflect and improve so that if an opposing players “made me look a bit stupid there, next time I'm not gonna do that” (Horrocks et al, 2016b, p473). This require the player to develop problem focused coping strategies so that when “you fail and it is very visible... I choose to believe there is something to learn from this” (Hofseth et al, 2017, p120; Flack, 2011). Self-talk can provide the athlete with direction during the game (Freitas at al, 2013) in order to utilise avoidance coping (Kristiansen et al, 2002; Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012) to block distractions (Tedesqui & Orlick, 2015) and maintain emotional control (Freitas et al, 2013).

Emotional control is where the athlete has “control over how I would play regardless of how I was feeling" by developing an ability to leave "everything else (implicitly personal issues) where it was at the time... rather than dragging it all into training" (Flack, 2011, p11). This can be achieved through imagery, breathing exercises and/or listening to calm music or psyching each other up (Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012). When things are not going well on the pitch, self-talk can be utilised in order to reduce anxiety levels (Freitas et al, 2013).

The crowd, mistakes, teammates, and coaches can all distract elite football players during a game. Having the ability to ignore distractions (Holt & Hogg, 2002) and focus on the next task at hand helps facilitate task focused attention and remain process focused (Tedesqui & Orlick, 2015; Flack, 2011).

***Task focus:***

To execute the correct decision elite footballers utilise “self-talk to execute defensive moments. It is a strategy I use to perform my defensive tasks as accurately as possible” (Freitas et al, 2013,

p851). Self-talk helps players identify “where am I supposed to be? all the time so I can get that edge” (Holt & Hogg, 2002, p261) in relation to the positioning of the ball, the opponent, their own teammates, individual players and their own role in the team (Feighan et al, 2018).

### ***Confidence:***

In order for players to be confident in performing their tasks, they require preparation and specifically “repetition in training gives you the sort of comfort in the game that when it comes into that situation you know you've done it before” (Horrocks et al, 2016a, p678; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Gershgoren et al, 2016). Preparation and practice provide positive past experiences which facilitates confidence (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Larsen & Engell, 2013) which in turn develop competence (Jordet et al, 2006) and routines which give the confident feeling (Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012). Elite players utilise self-talk in order to “tell myself that I am the best, and when I am not playing a good game... reframe it, consider it a bad day” (Kristiansen et al, 2016a, p178; Jordet et al, 2006).

### ***Meta Synthesis:***

The findings from the meta-method, meta-theory and meta-data analysis are synthesized to present a model of the psychology of elite football players. By bringing together the findings from twenty-one studies that have examined the psychology of elite footballers, a model is presented which represents the main findings from the research. The current synthesis brings together qualitative research based on 135 players who have played professionally or represented their national senior team. The synthesis provides a framework for practitioners to understand the athlete experience, the challenges they encounter and identify areas to intervene.

Based on the model, it is proposed that there are three underpinning aspects that influence the psychology of elite football players, the environment, the individuals coping skills and process focus, which both influence the subsequent performance. The model proposed is dynamic in nature and changes over time through the athlete's experiences, and through interactions between the individual athlete, their performance, and their environment.

Insert figure 4 here

The extent to which the environment provides the appropriate level of preparation and practice required to perform, the number of challenges the athlete encounters within the environment, and the level of support provided from the environment, interacts with the individual to influence subsequent performance.

Within the environment the athlete is located there are challenges they will encounter such as competing for a position on the team, travel, being evaluated and having to sacrifice in other areas of their life in order to perform (Kristiansen et al, 2019; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Kristiansen et al, 2012b; Fothergill et al, 2014). To facilitate the athlete in overcoming some of these challenges the environment must provide some resources to support the athlete. The athlete requires social support outside of the team environment (Holt & Hogg, 2002), informational support from the coach on their development (Horrocks et al, 2016a), emotional support from teammates and coaches (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002), and informational support from fellow teammates (Gershgoren et al, 2016; Morris et al, 2012). In addition to providing support the environment also provides the practice opportunities to improve (Horrocks et al, 2016b), remain focused and consistent (Kristiansen et al, 2019; Flack, 2011), and to maintain motivation (Morris et al, 2012). The environment also influences the preparation of the athlete in terms of being able to implement a pre-performance routine and prepare tactically for games (Horrocks et al, 2016a),

developing awareness of the opposition strengths and weaknesses (Larsen & Engell, 2013; Jordet, 2003), engaging in opposition team and player analysis (Woods & Thatcher, 2009), and being able to visualize the performance prior to the game (Freitas et al, 2013).

The individuals coping skills are key aspects of being able to perform at an elite level in football. In order to deal with the challenges associated with being an elite footballer and the stressors associated with this, the athlete must have developed their coping strategies to be able to flexibly choose the strategy most appropriate to the challenge (Kristiansen et al, 2012b). Athletes can utilise problem-focused coping to be proactive in dealing with the challenges and stressors they encounter which can facilitate the athlete in overcoming some challenges (Horrocks et al, 2016a). However, there are some situations the athlete has little control over and this requires a different coping response. An example would be one where the athlete makes a mistake resulting in a loss for the team, although they can be problem-focused in terms of improving their skill set for future games, they cannot change the previous mistake. This requires the athlete to have developed and engaged in alternative coping strategies such as rational thinking, emotion focused coping and/or avoidance coping. The basis of being able to cope with the challenges that are encountered as an elite footballer is the individual's development of multiple identities to develop and utilise flexible coping strategies (Larsen & Engell, 2013). The development of an individual's coping strategies provides the context to engage in the process focused attention required to facilitate subsequent performance and development as a footballer.

The extent to which the athlete can remain focused on the process of improvement as an athlete over time and maintain this through positive self-talk will influence the individual's short term and long-term performance (Horrocks et al, 2016b; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Freitas et al, 2013). This is facilitated through the individual developing and utilising a range of coping mechanisms such

as emotion-focused, problem-focused and avoidance coping (Kristiansen et al, 2019; Kristiansen et al, 2012; Holt & Hogg, 2002; Hofseth et al, 2017; Horrocks et al, 2016; Freitas et al, 2013; Kristiansen et al, 2012a; Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012; Kristiansen et al, 2011; Hofseth et al, 2017).

The practice, preparation, support, and challenges within the environment interacts with the extent to which the individual is process-focused and has developed their coping skills, to facilitate an individual's response. The response is comprised of the individual's confidence, task focus and the perception of stressors. The extent to which an athlete is confident about their performance is based on the self-talk they engage in (Kristiansen et al, 2019; Jordet et al, 2006), their past experience as an athlete (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Larsen & Engell, 2013), and the individuals perception of their own competence at that moment in time (Jordet et al, 2006). The athlete's confidence is influenced by the practice, preparation and support provided within the environment, and the individuals process-focused self-talk. To maintain an elite level of performance they must consistently engage in correct decision making on the pitch. The athlete must be aware of the opponent, their own role, the position of the ball, the teams positioning and opposition positioning, their direct opponent and engage in constant scanning of the pitch in order to make the correct decision (Feigean et al, 2018; Holt & Hogg, 2002). Externally the environment provides challenges for the athletes, which in turn create potential stressors for the athlete (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Hofseth et al, 2017). The extent to which the challenge is perceived as a stressor is dependent on the coping skill developed by the individual. The individual's perception of the challenge can create stress depending on the individuals coping resources which influences the confidence, decision making and consistency of performance for the athlete.

Performance in the model presented is characterised by the athlete developing a present moment focus and a feeling of excitement about the performance. This performance state is developed through the interaction between the individual and the environment. The model highlights the importance of defining performance beyond the lens of the individual to understand the two-way interaction between the individual and environment in subsequent performance. When players are performing at their best, they are disconnected from everything and only focused on the task at hand (Tedesqui & Orlick, 2015). This is coupled with a feeling of excitement about the game that facilitates task focused attention (Holt & Hogg, 2002). Excitement and task focused attention arise from a feeling of confidence and correct decision making which is facilitated by the support provided by the environment in which the player is located. Although the environment provides support, the individual must also develop the coping mechanisms to respond to the stressors they encounter within the environment. An example is where avoidance coping is utilised to avoid distractions in the build-up to a game and during a game to maintain confidence and subsequent task focus (Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012; Kristiansen et al, 2012a).

Previous research on coping has examined coping as a process influenced by the individual and environment interaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An alternative perspective has been to examine coping in relation to goal-directed behaviour from a cognitive perspective (Ursin, 1984). The model presented proposes that coping is a process that is based on the coping mechanisms available to the individual which evolves over time and in relation to the individual and environment interaction. The model also recognizes that coping is also goal-directed for the elite athlete with the aim of performing to their potential. The model presented recognises that coping is both a process and goal directed.



**Conclusion:**

The aim of the meta-synthesis was to provide a systematic review of the qualitative research on the psychology of elite footballers. The study (a) provides an overview and critique of the methodological and theoretical foundations which underpin the research on the psychology of elite footballers; (b) analyses the literature on key factors identified that influence the psychology of elite footballers; (c) synthesizes the findings on the psychology of elite footballers.

As identified in the meta-method review there are several methodological considerations for the development of the literature examining elite footballers from a psychological perspective.

Firstly, the most predominant data collection method in the research was individual interviews.

The over-reliance on interview as the method of choice could potentially result in opportunities being missed to understand the experience of elite football players. Kristiansen et al (2012) carried out individual interviews with players on how they coped with stress and the results identified self-belief as being important. In comparison, Pensgaard & Duda (2002) examined stress and coping utilising audio diaries and found that the player experienced self-doubt and coped with this through speaking with their club coach. The findings from individual interviews may provide an insight into what people say they do, or in this case what is important, rather than what the participants engage in. Secondly, the most common trustworthiness methods utilised were member checking and the use of a critical friend. Despite all but one study reporting some trustworthiness check, only one study reported the researcher engaging in a bracketing interview prior to undertaking the research (Tedesqui & Orlick, 2015) while a second study explicitly stated the criteria on which the research should be judged (Morris et al, 2017). The absence of the utilisation of bracketing interview by researchers may influence the individual researcher carrying out the research due to a lack of awareness of the biases they may have to the research

question. In addition, the absence of an explicit statement on the criteria on which to judge the research, does not facilitate an understanding of the coherence between the research method and the method utilised to ensure trustworthiness. Future research on elite footballers should ensure methodological rigour through an explicit statement of the epistemological position of the study, the aims of the study and reporting of the criteria on which the study should be judged. Thirdly, the research questions investigated most within the studies were around stress and the coping process. Of the eight studies which examined stress and coping, five utilised one-off interviews, which may not capture the process of coping (Kristiansen et al, 2011; Kristiansen et al, 2019; Kristiansen et al, 2012; Jordet & Elferink-Gemser, 2012; Hofseth et al, 2017). The additional three studies which examined stress and coping using semi-structured interviews, diary entry, audio diary and observation (Pensgaard & Duda 2002; Holt & Hogg ,2002; Holt & Dunn ,2004) all had a researcher who was also engaged as a practitioner. The engagement of the researcher within the context can facilitate the use of methods that provide further insight, triangulate and/or enhance the understanding of elite football players.

The meta-theory analysis identified that the most prominent underpinning theory to be the Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) with one other study utilising the Cognitive Arousal Theory of Stress (Ursin, 1988). Despite both theories providing an insight into the stress and coping process, only one other study examined the process of coping with shame (Lazarus, 199, 2000). The limited insight into the range of emotions experienced by elite footballers limits the understanding of coping to stress and shame. This results in underpinning models that have limited account for the broad range of emotions experienced by elite footballers. More research utilising a broad range of theories on emotion and coping can provide a greater insight into the coping process.

The meta-data analysis in this study, identified 86 codes that influence the psychology of elite footballers. These 86 codes were categorized into 10 concepts: flexible coping, challenges, stressors, preparation, practice, process focus, support, confidence, performance and task focus. The 10 concepts were grouped into 3 categories: coping, support and performance. The meta-data analysis provides researchers with an in depth understanding of the variables which have been identified to influence the psychology of elite footballers. It provides researchers with the opportunity to identify areas that require further study in order to extend literature on elite footballers. The meta-data analysis also provides practitioners with an understanding of the factors that influence elite footballers and the opportunity to help them identify factors that are influencing their performance.

Through a synthesis of the findings from the meta-method, meta-theory, meta data analysis, a model of the psychology of elite footballers was produced. Based on the synthesis of the findings it is proposed that coping is both goal orientated towards performance and process orientated in terms of managing stressors in the environment, that the interaction between the individual and the environment creates the individual's performance state, and subsequent performance is influenced by the performance state of the individual, and the coping process evolves over time. The model represents the main findings of the psychology of elite footballers and provides a testable model of future research to explore and develop further.

The new model extends the current research on the psychology of elite footballers in two ways. First, the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) views coping as a process, while in contrast Ursin's CATS (1988) model views coping as goal orientated. The model presented incorporates both the process and goal orientated perspectives of coping which both dynamically influence performance. Second, the model identifies the importance of the

interaction between the individual and the environment in developing the individual's performance state. The environment provides the individual with challenges and support which interact with the individuals coping to create a performance state. Based on the findings of the meta-synthesis future research may utilise a broader range of qualitative research methods in order to understand the psychology of elite footballers. In addition, future research may examine how the individual and environment interact and its influence on subsequent performance for different individuals. This research could be useful in designing individual and organisational specific interventions to support clubs, teams and players in developing the psychological characteristics required to perform at an elite level.

**Declaration of interest:**

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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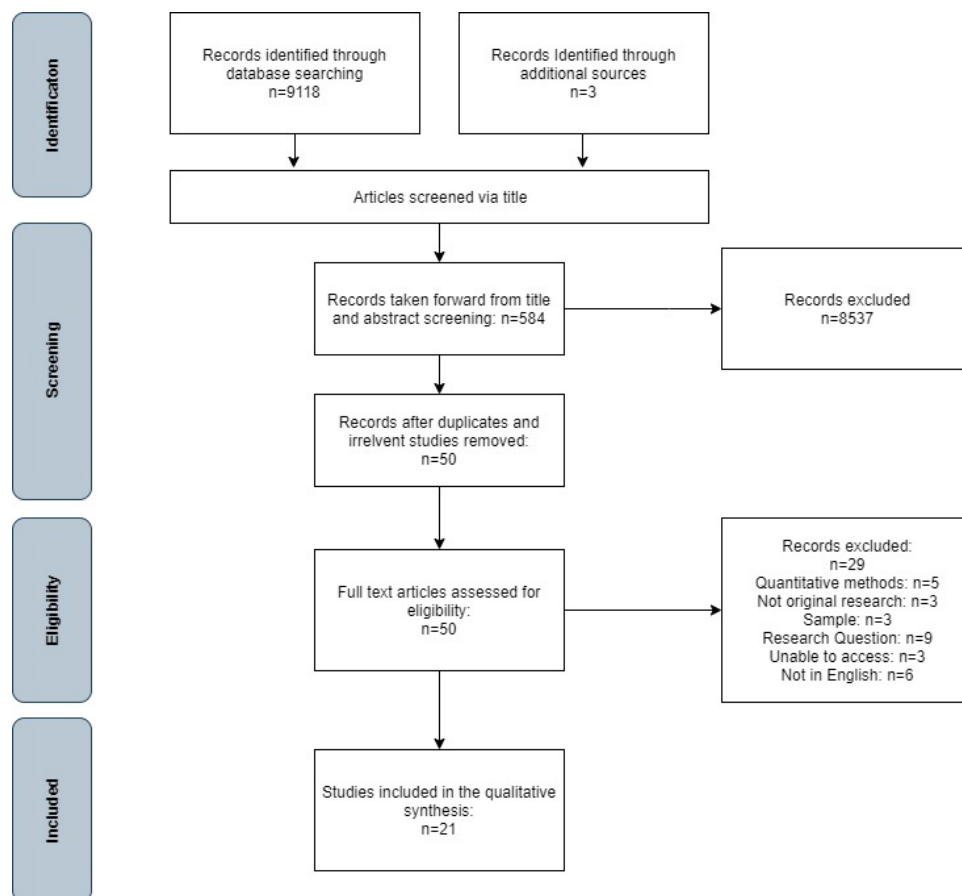
**Appendices:****Figure 1: Search Strategy**

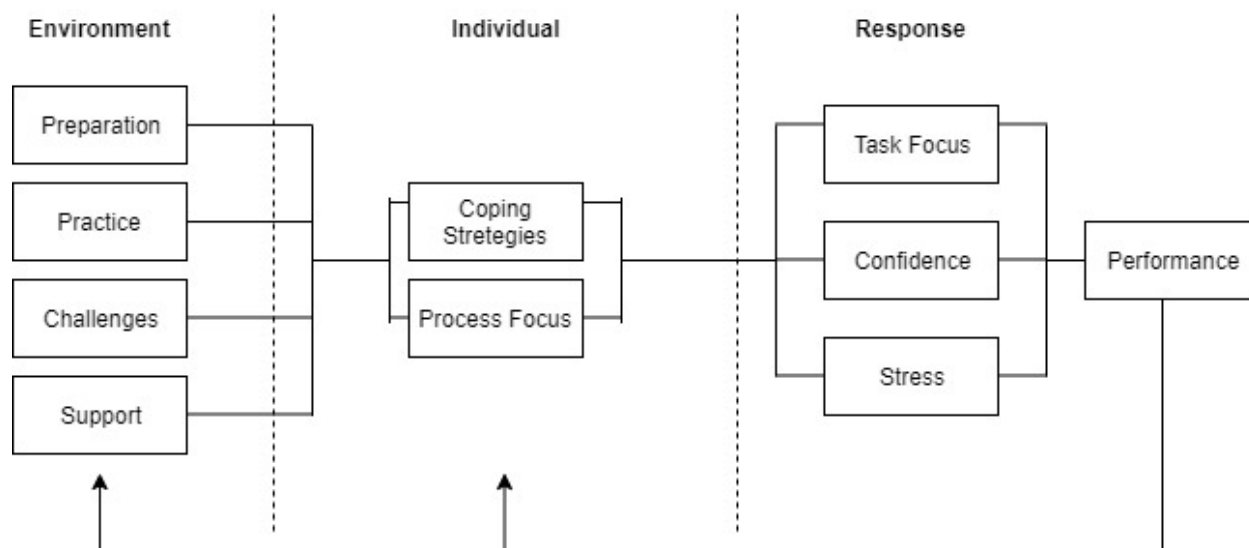
Figure 2: Meta Method Table

Authors	Epistemological position	Data Collection Method	Researcher and Setting	Theoretical Approach	Trustworthiness/Rigour	Data Analysis Method	Number of Participants	Male/Female
Feigean, Kikouak, Seiler & Sourbousson (2018)	Ontological Relativism	Behavioural observation and video recall interview based on observation of the game	Ethnographic participation for the month prior to data collection.	Enactivist Approach (DeJaegher & Di Paolo, 2007)	Inter-rater reliability	Thematic Analysis	10	10 male
Tedesqui & Orlick (2015)	not stated	Semi-Structured interviews	Interviewer	not stated	Bracketing interview, member checking, expert checking	Thematic Analysis	8	8 male
Kristiansen, Roberts & Sjøjord (2011)	not stated	Semi-Structured interviews	Interviewer	Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Research team discussion	Content Analysis	3	3 male
Kristiansen, Ivarsson, Solstad & Roberts (2019)	not stated	Semi-Structured interviews	Prolonged engagement as a researcher for 3 years	Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	member reflection	Generic Qualitative Approach (Bradbury-Jones et al, 2017)	11	11 male
Kristiansen, Murphy & Robert, (2012)	not stated	Semi-Structured interviews	Interviewer	Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Member checking,	Content Analysis	8	4male/4 female
Holt & Hogg (2002)	not stated	Observation and Semi-Structured interviews	Researcher and practitioner	Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Member checking and Expert Check	Thematic Analysis	7	7 Female
Horrocks, McKenna, Whitehead, Taylor, Morley & Lawrence (2016) a	not stated	Semi-structured phenomenological interview	Interviewer	Deliberate Practice Ericsson et al (1993)	Member checking, researcher background	Interpretative Phenomenological analysis	1	1 male
Horrocks, McKenna, Whitehead, Taylor & Morley (2016) b	not stated	Retrospective Semi-Structured interviews	Interviewer	Deliberate Practice Ericsson et al (1993)	Triangulation, Critical friends, member checking	Content Analysis	1 parent, 1 coach, 3 players	3 male
Jordet & Efferink-Gemser (2012)	not stated	Semi-structured phenomenological interview	Interviewer	Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Pilot interviews, Researcher background, critical friend, triangulation,	Interpretative Phenomenological analysis	8	8 male
Larsen & Engell (2013)	not stated	Case Study	Researcher and practitioner	A theory of goal setting (Locke & Latham, 1985, 1990)	Not stated	Confessional Tale	4	4 male
Flack (2011)	not stated	Post intervention interview	Practitioner	Eriksonian hypnosis	Session outline	Not Stated	1	1 male
Morris, Tod & Eubank (2017)	not stated	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	Transition and youth to senior transition (Stambulova, 2003; Pummell et al, 2008)	Transparency, Critical Friends, Pilot testing	Abductive thematic analysis	5	5 male
Hofseth, Jordet & Toering (2017)	not stated	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	Lazarus conceptualization of shame and coping (Lazarus, 1991, 2000)	Pilot interview, expert check, member check,	Content Analysis	6	6 male
Gershgoren, Basevitch, Filbo, Gershgoren, Brill, Schinke & Tenenbaum (2016)	Post Positivism	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	Shared Mental Models (Eccles and Tenenbaum's, 2004)	Data triangulation, data saturation, member checking, inter-rater reliability	Inductive Thematic analysis	3 players, 6 coaches	3 male
Pensgaard & Subjectivism Duda (2002)	not stated	Diary	Researcher and practitioner	Cognitive Activation theory of stress (Ursin, 1988)	Member checking, critical friend	Narrative Analysis	1	1 Female
Woods & Thatcher (2009)	not stated	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	not stated	Pilot interviews, Bracketing interview, triangulation, member check, critical friend	Content Analysis	20	17 male/3 female
Holt & Dunn (2004)	Idiographic approach	Audio diaries and semi structured interviews	Practitioner and researcher	Transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Member checking	Phenomenological Analysis	4	4 female
Freitas, Dias & Fonseca (2013)	not stated	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	Cognitive and motivational functions of Imagery (Pavio, 1985)	Researcher background, critical friend,	Content Analysis	16	16 male
Fothergill, Wolfson & Little (2014)	not stated	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	Game Location Framework (Carron, Loughead, & Bray, 2006)	Member checking	Thematic Analysis	3 players, 6 coaches	3 male
Jordet, Efferink-Gemser, Lemmink & Visscher (2006)	not stated	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	Contingency-Control Model (Veisz, 1986; Veisz & Stipek, 1982)	Member checking, researcher background	Thematic Analysis	10	10 male
Jordet (2005)	not stated	Semi Structured Interviews	Interviewer	Gibson (1979) ecological approach to visual perception	Critical friend	Not Stated	3	3 male

**Figure 3:** Research questions and main findings of the primary studies

Author	Research Question	Main Findings
Feigean, R'Kiouak, Seiler & Bourbousson (2018)	How team members are dynamically attuned to the coordination needs of their joint effort in real-time.	There are three main information sources: local information, global pictures of the game, and previously built knowledge. Players adapt based on a single player, the collective behavior of team/unit, checking team and individual behavior, focus on an area far away from the ball, understanding what is around them and relying on memory.
Tedesqui & Orlick (2015)	To explore the attentional focus naturally experienced by elite soccer players.	Players' best performances have present moment focus, positive thoughts and playing on auto-pilot. During less than best performance participants were distracted by internal and external stimuli.
Kristiansen, Roberts & Sisjord (2011)	How elite goalkeepers cope with the constant media attention and the strategies they use to cope with perceived negative media coverage?	Negative media coverage can affect confidence. Players cope through social support to maintain confidence, avoidance to cope with negative media and problem-focused coping strategies such as post-game debrief and rational analysis.
Kristiansen, Ivarsson, Solstad & Roberts (2019)	Examine the player's experiences of organizational and media stressors and if perceptions of the athletic environment affected how they coped within organizational and media stressors during the season.	Organizational stress for players consists of being part of the selected line-up, injury, losing games and not being in the starting team. The coach-athlete relationship can be a stressor and a source of support. Task orientation meant that media stress did not become a strain.
Kristiansen, Murphy & Robert, (2012)	To understand the relationships between stress and coping and the coping mechanisms used by professional players to manage stressors.	Organizational stressors consist of team selection, communication, confidence-building, team culture, travel, and drafting/contracts stress. Coping strategies consist of problem-focused and social support to manage the stressors. There is some use of avoidance and informational coping.
Holt & Hogg (2002)	The psychological and social sources of stress perceived and the coping responses as they trained for the 1999 world cup.	Reflecting on previous performances, using positive self-talk and problem solving to cope with competitive anxiety demands. On-field communication used to help maintain task focus and deal with the demands of the game. Coach communication was a source of stress but social support (Family, teammates, significant others) were used to overcome this stressor.
Horrocks, McKenna, Whitehead, Taylor, Morley & Lawrence (2016) a	Deliberate practice activities used by an elite footballer and how they influence cognition and decision making under pressure.	Good decision-making includes (i) prior knowledge developed through careful observation, (ii) accurate identification of an appropriate action sequence, (iii) experience of deploying solutions in practice simulations, (iv) feeling reassured that the 'needs analysis' was correct and that the required responses had been integrated into the playing repertoire.
Horrocks, McKenna, Whitehead, Taylor & Morley (2016) b	The experience of people directly and indirectly involved with sustained high performance at all stages of Manchester United.	Players who progress demand more from themselves than the academy environment demands from them. Players experience similar challenges throughout their development.
Jordet & Elferink-Gemser (2012)	The experiences professional soccer players have during the different phases of a penalty shootout.	Penalty shootout stress consists of the (1) environmental stressors such as the score and prospect of failing, (2) After the final whistle the waiting, the type of communication from the coach, (3) The walk to take the penalty and thoughts and the possibility of failing, (4) The mark: the encounter with the goalkeeper.
Larsen & Engell (2013)	To provide an insight into a long term program aimed at showing the process and how to apply goal setting.	Goal setting is a dynamic, ever-changing, complex process and the method itself has to be flexible
Flack (2011)	Case study on the activation states of a professional footballer.	Increases in the ability to control and maintain activation states, as well as related increases in confidence and focus.
Morris, Tod & Eubank (2017)	To assess the short term process of approaching the transition event and reactions post-transition	(a) The motivation for the transition, (b) confidence and anxiety, (c) stressors and (d) social support were factors associated with transition, and that athletes' perception of these factors changed throughout the move from youth-to-senior soccer.
Hofseth, Jordet & Toering (2017)	To gain an insight into how professional soccer players experienced and coped with shame during match and training activity.	Players may experience shame in response to performance failures and working on weaknesses due to threats to ego ideal or lead to negative consequences.
Gershgoren, Basevitch, Filho, Gershgoren, Brill, Schinke & Tenenbaum (2016)	To understand team chemistry and shared mental models.	Team chemistry centers on the interface among team personnel (i.e., the interaction among the players and between the players and the coach, the team's environment, and members' characteristics).
Pensgaard & Duda (2002)	To examine the experience of stress and coping during the Olympic competition.	Stressors: Doubting ability, dissatisfaction with own performance, discontent with team play. Coping strategies: emotion coping using venting to a club coach and sports psychologist. Problem-focused coping: seeking advice from club coach and sports psychologist. Approach orientated coping: motivated the team when conceding in the final.
Woods & Thatcher (2009)	To understand soccer players' experiences of the substitute role.	Substitute experience was overall a negative experience due to: poor communication from the coach, poor match preparation (limited warm-up time). Some positive reactions by focusing on remaining task-focused and enthusiastic whereas others responded by avoidance coping.
Holt & Dunn (2004)	To identify perceived stressors and coping responses.	Stressors were identified when situational demands influenced appeared to threaten season goals. Stress and appraisal are goal-related.
Freitas, Dias & Fonseca (2013)	Understand where, when and why soccer players used self-talk, imagery, and goal-setting.	Globally, the majority of the participants mentioned employing self-talk, imagery, and goal-setting in their soccer routines. Participants highlighted a lack of use of relaxation techniques.
Fothergill, Wolfson & Little (2014)	To understand the perceptions and causes of home advantage.	Stress is different when home vs away due to venue familiarity, travel, referee and anxiety away from home. Playing experience and tactics can influence the perception of stress when playing away from home.
Jordet, Elferink-Gemser, Lemmink & Visscher (2006)	Perceived contingency, competence, control and anxiety experienced during a penalty shootout	Contingency and competence are associated with anxiety
Jordet (2005)	To determine whether an ecological imagery intervention program would affect the prospective control of future actions of elite soccer players.	Elite players can improve visual exploratory behaviors through ecological imagery training

**Figure 4:** The interactive model of the psychology of football performance



## Empirical Study 1

**Title: The transition through underage international football squads: Environmental and age specific challenge**

David McHugh, Dr. Robert Morris and Dr. Martin Eubank

Declarations of interest: none

Authors: \*<sup>A</sup> David McHugh, <sup>B</sup> Dr. Robert Morris & <sup>C</sup> Dr. Martin Eubank

<sup>A</sup> Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Ireland.

<sup>B</sup> University of Stirling, Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA.

<sup>C</sup> Liverpool John Moores University, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Tom Reilly Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool, L3 3AF.

\*Corresponding author. Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Ireland. Email address: davidmchugh@ait.ie

**Title: The transition through underage international football squads: Environmental and age specific challenge**

**Abstract:**

The ability to cope with the junior to senior transition in sport has been found to be based on the developing the capacity to cope with challenges that occur during preceding transitions.

However, there is limited understanding of what the preceding transitions are and how the athlete can manage the transition. Interviews were conducted with head coaches (5) working with underage international squads from under fifteens to under nineteens to explore their perceptions of the challenges and resources available to athletes during transition. The themes identified highlight challenges within the national team environment and between age groups that can be eased by key stakeholders and the athlete developing key coping characteristics.

Key Words: transition, coaches, talent development

**Lay Summary:** Players experience challenges with being part of the national team and age specific challenges. Along the pathway from there are critical moments which can determine whether progress to the next age grade, however there are ways in which the transition through the age grades can be eased.



**Implications for practice:**

- Injury, moving abroad and returning to Ireland are critical moments where players require support in order to transition to the next phase in their career.
- The players require support in understanding the high-performance culture in international football and dealing with the age specific challenges they will encounter.
- Support from the club in terms of the players physical development, the club's style of play, having a support network and consistency between international age groups can help players transitions through the age grades.

## **The transition through underage international football squads: Environmental and age specific challenge**

### **Introduction:**

Although the objective of talent development environments is to aid progression to achieving sustained success at senior level sport, there are numerous stages of development an athlete must go through to attain sustained success. Bloom (1985) identified three stages talented individuals go through (1) early years where the individual is introduced to the activity, (2) the middle years where the individual invests more time into the activity, (3) the later years where the individual is seeking to achieve expert status in the activity. Cote et al (2007) continued the work by Bloom (1985) and examined the stages athletes go through to achieve sporting success and found three stages of development: (1) the sampling stage, where the athlete will try a number of different sports and is characterised by deliberate play; (2) the specializing years, where the athletes play is more structured and more time is invested into their chosen sport; and (3) specialisation stage, where the athlete is motivated to achieve success in their sport and invests time in developing their skills. Within and between the stages of development leading to athletic success, there are numerous transitions an athlete must overcome to achieve sporting success (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

A transition has been defined by Schlossberg (1981) as “an event or non-event [which] results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (p3). The Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) developmental model of sport participation adopts a holistic approach to describing from a career long perspective, from initiation to discontinuation, how transitions outside of sport can influence athletic development. Normative athletic transitions are predictable events, for example an

athlete moving from the youth to senior squad or retirement from sport, whereas non-normative transitions are unpredictable events such as injury (Schlossberg, 1984).

Other athletic transition models have focused on the process of transition, where internal and external demands are negotiated with internal and external resources. Resources are defined as all internal and external factors that facilitate the coping process, whereas barriers are all internal and external factors interfering with effective coping (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, 2003). Alfermann and Stambulova's (2007) and Stambulova's (2003) models suggest that when an athlete's resources match or exceed the demands, then they are likely to be successful in their transition. Stambulova (2003) defined a transition in an athletic context as the athlete's ability to cope with demands which pose a conflict between where the athlete is at a moment in time and where they would like to be in their athletic career.

The normative athletic transition from junior to senior has been associated with increased expectations with associated increases in stress which may have a negative performance impact (Pummell, Harwood, & Lavalley, 2008). The demands athletes face during this transition may lead athletes to ceasing participation or being released from the senior environment, with approximately only 17% of youth athletes progressing to senior elite sport (Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, & Wylleman, 2004).

However, before an athlete reaches the junior to senior transition, there are numerous preceding transitions they must overcome within and between each age group. In a soccer context, Güllich (2014), examined talent identification and selection in German youth academy teams and national youth selections and found there was a mean annual turnover of 41.0% in national youth teams, with only 5.9% playing continuously throughout the age categories U15-U19. In Ireland,

of the 176 international youth players who played U17 between 2008-2013 only 9 (5.11%) have progressed to represent the senior national team (Finn, 2018).

The Stambulova (2003) model suggests that a transition is a process rather than an event.

Transition as a cycle rather than an event was further supported by Morris, Tod & Oliver (2016), where it was found that previous transitions from 13 or 14 years of age, through age group sport, can influence the transition to senior sport. The skills acquired during preceding transitions such as coping mechanisms (e.g. reflection upon performance), can aid the athlete in acquiring the knowledge of what works for them before the difficult transition to senior sport (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016).

The presence of support from others has been identified as important during transitions (Pummell et al., 2008; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavalley, 2014; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016; Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2017). Different individuals can provide different types of support to an athlete depending on their context, with coaches providing informational support and parents providing emotional support (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016). Finn and McKenna (2010) and Jones et al. (2014) found that athletes experience challenges such as increased physical demands and earning respect from other athletes during the junior to senior transition. Coaches identified that athletes could utilise positive work ethics, intrinsic motivation, and support from others to overcome the challenges faced. Despite this research providing a valuable insight into the junior to senior transition from a coach's perspective, it has focused exclusively on the junior to senior transition and not the preceding transitions that Morris, Tod & Oliver (2016) found influence the subsequent normative transition from junior to senior.

This study aimed to extend the work by Morris, Tod & Eubank (2017), Finn and McKenna (2010) and Jones et al. (2014) by examining the transitions that precede the junior to senior

transition. Coaches regularly interact with numerous athletes who experience challenges and are undergoing transitions. Understanding the challenges that occur from the coach's perspective will be beneficial in terms of the coaches having experiences of working with numerous athletes who cope successfully and unsuccessfully with the challenges that occur. Also, the coach's perspective will provide an insight into how the challenges change throughout the talent development pathway. This research broadens the knowledge of the transition process by examining the transitions which occur prior to the junior to senior transition. This knowledge can then be used to inform the development of support programmes for youth international athletes, coaches and those who interact with the athlete to develop an environment that is conducive to successful transition through youth international age grades.

The aim of the current study was to identify and examine the factors that youth international soccer coaches associate with youth international athletes successfully transitioning through the age grades. Sport transition models have identified the demands resources and barriers that can affect the transition process in athletes (Stambulova, 2003). The current study provides context specific information on the demands, resources and challenges that athletes experience in a football context as an Irish athlete before they reach the junior to senior transition. To achieve the aims outlined, the findings of the study are discussed with reference to previous transition literature to highlight similarities and areas in which the current study extends knowledge in transition literature.

**Method:*****Participants:***

Five youth international coaches (Five male, M age=45.2, SD=2.7, range=43-50) currently working with Ireland underage international teams from the U15-U19 age groups were interviewed. To be eligible to take part in the study participants had to be the head coach of an international underage football team and have experience of coaching players involved in international underage football for at least 1 year. These criteria ensured that participants had the necessary experiences to be able to answer questions related to the transition into and through underage international squads. The participants playing experience ranged from amateur (N=1), to Irish National league (n=3) and in the UK and in the Northern Ireland National League (n=1). The coaches had an average of 20.4 years coaching experience (SD=6.1, range=14-28), with an average of 8.8 years' experience coaching youth international players (SD=3.7, range=3-12). All coaches held the UEFA Pro License coaching qualification with one coach holding both the UEFA Pro License and the UEFA A Elite License. The sample consists of all the men's head coaches from the U15-U19 age groups and provides an in-depth understanding of the research question.

***Interviews:***

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participants thoughts and opinions as it allows for in-depth exploration of the research question. Semi-structured interviews allow the participant to highlight potential alternatives and are not constrained by the questions preventing further exploration (Patton, 2002). The semi-structure interview schedule was based on transition models (Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and the youth to youth-senior

transition literature (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Morris et al, 2016). Relevant themes from this literature were used to inform the topic areas to be covered in the dialogue with participants. Prior to the interviews taking place the interview schedule was reviewed by the second author to ensure that the guide was covering areas that are related to the literature. The interview schedule is attached in the appendix with questions being focused on the individual's characteristics, challenges faced, how to facilitate the transition and how individuals can continue to progress when playing international underage football.

***Procedure:***

Ethical approval was gained from a university ethics board, after which potential participants were contacted regarding their interest in taking part in the study. A willingness to participate was received from two participants who were known to the author, and the other three participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Once participants understood the background to the study a time was arranged to meet to discuss the purpose of the study. An information sheet was provided to the participant and the purpose, risks, safeguards, and benefits of the study were explained to the participant. Once the participant had received this information, they were then asked to fill in an informed consent form. Semi-structured Interviews (See appendix 1) were conducted face to face with all five participants, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 28-54 minutes (M=45min).

***Data Analysis:***

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the first author to create a record of the interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2006) abductive thematic analysis was used to highlight commonalities and differences between the interviews. Abductive content analysis is a combination of inductive and deductive analysis and ensures that themes are not pre-selectively

grouped to pre-existing themes, allowing potential new themes to emerge that have not been identified in previous literature. The process of analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis: (1) getting familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and noting initial ideas; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes by bringing the relevant codes together; (4) reviewing themes to ensure they were identifiable within the whole data set; (5) defining and naming the themes identified and; (6) writing the report. The interviews were analysed after all the interviews had been completed. This was to ensure that analysis did not influence subsequent interviews and to ensure a common interview guide was utilised. The interview guide was semi-structured and this provided the interviewer the opportunity to ask further questions to gather in-depth responses from participants should it have been required. Critical discussions were conducted throughout the data analysis process and any discrepancies were settled through discussion to increase credibility of the analysis.

### **Results:**

All the coaches identified challenges associated with being part of the national team environment as a theme. Within in each age group however themes were identified where there are specific challenges associated with being within an age group. The theme of critical moments was identified to highlight how some challenges can have a key influence on the athlete's development. The final theme highlights how challenges faced within each age group can be eased by the athlete and key stakeholders. A summary of the results can be seen in appendix 2. Quotes are provided from the interviews which provide illustrative support for each theme.



***National Team Environment:***

Once an athlete is invited to join the international team, participants felt that the athlete is faced with several challenges.

Coach C identified that “one of the first challenges for them to understand is our team culture.” Some of the expectations would be around their “behaviours, we don’t call them rules, we call them behaviours. No mobile phones while you’re eating dinner. Someone would come in for dinner on his phone and another fella would say to him to put his phone away. They police it themselves” (Coach B)

When part of the international team all players “need to understand the importance of team building and togetherness and how it works especially in international football”. Coach E gave an example of what togetherness looks like in international football:

“There has got to be togetherness. Even small things. You are together at mealtimes. We are together at our meetings. We are together going out on to the pitch. Coming back in from the pitch we are together. We come running in past the opposition at half time together. We always show togetherness, we always show unity.”

The coaches identified that there is a challenge in bringing athletes together to play in an international team when they play in different systems of play at their clubs, "you might have one team playing a 3-5-2, another one playing 4-4-2 direct and another team encouraging to play football” (Coach D). There is also the challenge in terms of the style of play, where “There is a little bit of that ethos or philosophy change from a big club in the UK to playing with us when we are playing against the bigger nations that you have got to defend first and then the higher up the pitch we go you can do what you want” (Coach D).

There is also the challenge of getting into the starting team once in the national team “the first challenge they have got to face is getting into the team, that comes from competition between the players and that can build the peer pressure and there can be jealousy” (Coach E). Once the player is in the team there is “the challenge of performing, the ability to go and train well, it’s having a good attitude around the place, its being positive around the place, it’s about dealing with the peer pressure too and obviously dealing with the opponents” (Coach E). )

The demands of international football often require athlete to play “3 games in 7 days and that will be the same for each team but there is a new physical demand. So the whole area then of hydration, nutrition really counts now for them, their rest” (Coach C). Despite the importance of nutrition when the players travel to different countries “because their diets are so limited, anything that's different to what they’re used to eating at home they won’t eat. It’s hard to get food into them when their pallets aren’t broad enough” (Coach B). In addition to nutrition “there is a lot of information given to them over a very short period of time” (Coach A).

With the limited time between games the participants identified developing the ability to respond to setbacks as a challenge:

“But what you have got to realize is when you play your first game and the result does not go your way, you still have got another shot. So it is the positive mindset of we will go out here and to do our best, we will prepare properly, we will make sure we learn from our mistakes, our self-belief, that is the key. They have got to understand that it is not over until it is actually over” (Coach A).

Avoiding complacency through preparing for each opponent is required for all teams the athletes compete against as “there are a few mid-tier teams they might have a little bit of complacency about. That’s a new challenge for them as well, not to underestimate any country” (Coach C).

***Age Specific Challenges:***

Although challenges exist with an athlete being part of the international youth team, there are specific challenges that exist at each age group in the athlete's development.

***U15/16 age group:*** Physical development was identified by participants as requiring continuous improvement and within the 15/16 age group “you get 15s who are going through a growth spurt, or you might not have started it or you might be finished it”. At U15/16 the players are playing “against boys who’ve probably been in academies for four or five years” with this leading to the “condition of the players that play under sixteen international football are stronger physically; better core, better balance, better agility, better explosiveness than our players” (Coach B).

The standard of training in the national team is demanding on the athlete and if the players diet is not good it can affect the risk of injury:

“When they come into the training environment in international football its really high and the training load is quite intense because you have all the best players together. Then some of them break down, some of them get injured, their nutrition is not helping, because they wouldn’t be sure about their nutrition coming from certain environments” (Coach A)

***U17 age group:*** When progressing to the U17 national team the first challenge players face is that they are now playing competitive football and they “have to win. It is competitive at

under seventeen, they have to win. They won't get the game time that they get at under sixteen unless they're top players in the team".

At the U17 age group "the level of training going right up, the volume of training going right up" (Coach C) for home based and UK based players. This increase in training load can lead to injury with some players having moved clubs and "signed in July, did their pre-season and then when we were doing our preparation events say in August and September there was 60% unavailable through injury" (Coach C).

Within the U17 age group there is a challenge if players are home based, as their off season is the international mid-season:

"November to February they need their off season, they need their off-season programme, from their club and then they start pre-season in February. That off season, pre-season and then back in season, so there is a challenge there for them. It is a challenge for us, it is something we would link with the clubs...so there is an immediate challenge now for them. Their games programme over that period November." (Coach C)

***U18 age group:*** At U18 athletes may have moved through the age groups together and this can be a challenge for new athletes coming into the group:

"you have a core group from 16s, 17s, 18s, sometimes that core group can be a bad, where they are looking at new players coming in and they are going who is he? Who is he?... They are saying, every time he gives it away, they are saying, they are the first one to jump" (Coach D).

At the U18 age group there is a need for the athlete to be playing competitive football, but they can be "on the fringes of the first team, they are training but not getting matches. Then you are asked to go in and perform in a high-level international game" (Coach D).

The majority of the squad at U18 are full time but home-based but some athletes are called into the squad who are part time where “they are only training a couple of days a week, 2/3 days a week training, so they struggle with the intensity of training sessions. It’s a big, big step for them” (Coach D).

***U19 age group:*** The U19 age group is a competitive age group “So then you are coming into the competitive side of it where if you don’t get out of the qualifying phase you are out. So that is more pressure on the U19 players, and you have got to be able to deal with it” (Coach E). This leads to “the first challenge they have got to face is getting into the team, that comes from competition between the players and that can build the peer pressure and there can be jealousy” (Coach E).

***U21 age group:*** When progressing to the U21s there is a period of time where an athlete might be U20 but they are not in the U21 squad, “so there is that period where you might not put on a green jersey, you could be a piece of driftwood for long periods of time” (Coach D).

### ***Critical Moments:***

Within the pathway from U15-U19 there are critical moments that affect whether an athlete will progress to the next age group in international football.

The athletes tend to move to the UK while eligible for U17. Moving to the UK sees the athlete move to “a new club, new living situations, that’s a big one for them and you have to be mindful of that as a coach. A players form might dip, and you think I have seen him play better before but is it homesickness.” (Coach C).

At U17 there is the increase in number of injuries due to an increase in training load when progressing from U16 to U17. When the athlete moves to the UK at U17 “the hard one for the

player is if they get a 3-4 month injury, because they miss pre-season, they miss the start of the season, and it seems a trend with some of those players that that first year then is a very difficult time for them” (Coach C).

Despite moving to the UK at U17 some athletes move back to Ireland at U18. It was acknowledged that players “do feel like a little bit of a failure you know” (Coach E) and “it is a real mental wrestle with players who are released” (Coach D).

When the athlete may be playing U23 in the UK there is a need for them to be playing regularly rather than just training with the team “is he *playing* with the 23s or is he *training* with the 23s, and I don’t mean to be disrespectful about that but the player needs to be playing, playing regularly” (Coach C). The athlete needs to be exposed to first team football while still playing games. Home based athletes can have an advantage as “they are training with the senior team; they might be getting an odd game here and there with the senior team, so they are in quite a good place. You bring them in and there might not be an awful lot of difference” (Coach E).

Progressing from the U19s may not necessarily lead to players progressing straight into the U21s because “getting into the U21s is a huge step because you have gone from U19s, the following year you are sort of U20s but the manager might already have a squad in place full of U21s”.

### **Easing Transition:**

Despite the challenges athletes face as they progress through each age group, there are ways in which the challenges the athletes face can be eased by the environment in which they are located and the athlete themselves.

### **Individual Characteristics:**

The coaches outlined a number of characteristics that the athlete should possess and develop in order to cope with the challenges they will experience as they progress through the age groups.

The coaches identified that the difference between players who progress their career can often be their belief in their own ability: “It boils down to belief and I often see players when they come in and are playing regularly for their club and they are doing well and maybe lads that are in and around the first team and they are coming in and they can take the world on” (Coach E). This is based on playing against good players and is developed over a long period of time.

The athletes also need to develop their capacity to deal with disappointments as “there will be disappointments along the way and you have to put the disappointment into your hip pocket” with Coach E giving the example of “how players deal with not getting selected for the team. How players can stay 12 days away and not get a kick of the ball”.

Although the athlete may experience setbacks, they “have got to have that hunger and pure determination, that they are going to do whatever it takes because they can be rest assured that the competition in front of them are going to do it” (Coach E). This requires the athlete “to take responsibility for their own development no matter what their age” (Coach D) and may involve the athlete having “a chat with the manager. Go and have a chat. Has the manager spoke to you? No he hasn’t. Maybe it’s time you went to him. You might need to go out on loan” (Coach E). Taking responsibility for their own career requires the athlete to acknowledge “there is still a lot of onus on them to individually develop” (Coach D) and to keep on learning by “being honest with yourself. Where am I, how bad am I? What do I need to improve on? Can I hit 100%? Can I be the best I can possibly be? Is there a 10% improvement in my physical ability? Is there percentages of improvement technically?” (Coach E).

With the limited time to prepare for games and between games in international football the athlete requires the ability “to be able to take on information and they need a good understanding of the game” (Coach B).

Coach E identified that the “players have got to have humility because it is an important ingredient in the makeup of player because it builds a strong foundation” and an emphasis is placed on “personality and for them to have confidence, but we try and find that balance with that one of being over confident and cocky” (Coach C).

### **External Support:**

Progressing through each age group requires consistency in the environment the coaches create. Within each age group “we try and instil a high-performance culture in the players when they come in, under fifteen management sings off the same hymn sheet as me and the same with under seventeens and the whole way up and probably even earlier than that with emerging talent” (Coach C).

There is also a need for players to have consistency in playing style between club and country “in the national league if we can get all our teams to play a particular formation, a particular style, that will definitely help the 15s, the 16s, the 17s” (Coach D).

Communication between the international coaches where there is a "good line of communication regarding how players are performing, which players are stepping on, attitude of players coming into camp and various things like that” (Coach E) can enable the next age grade manager to understand the qualities of the athlete.

The importance of communication extends to the support network around the player to include the club and parents “the support network should start with their parents. It should go to their



clubs, it should go to their leagues and then filters into us. That is the only way it is going to work. Everyone should have an open line of communication, in that they should talk and discuss and it should be about an approach that is about developing the person and obviously improving the skillset in terms of football” (Coach A).

The club can support the athletes in transitioning through the age groups by working on the feedback from the international coach “I give all the players some feedback, in terms of what they need to work on before they come in again. It’s up to the clubs to help them implement that” (Coach A). As the athlete gets older there is “is a challenge for the players to develop physically and that’s going to be helped by the club putting you on a proper weights programme, proper nutrition” (Coach E).

***U15/16 age group:*** The club coach can support athlete development by going to “watch international matches and they need to watch international training sessions” (Coach B) and with the club seeking to “educate coaches. It’s invest in coaches...they should be able to contribute to the education of coaches” (Coach A).

The international coaches need to “educate them (players) on their diet. They eat because things are there, there’s no thought in what they’re doing, they are eating bread after dinner” (Coach A). There is also education on physical preparation “education through the physios and the strength and conditioning coaches to get them prepared for it” (Coach A). This facilitates the players in staying injury free during this period because in order to progress “they need to stay injury-free” (Coach B).

Within the U15/16 age group, more contact hours with international coaches could enable athletes to continue to progress to the U17 international team: “you see at that age group 14s, 15s

and 16s, we have far more access at that age group before they go... we could have more access, contact, to have more contact hours with them” (Coach C).

***U17 age group:*** At the U17 age group some athletes may move abroad to the UK and when adapting to life in the UK developing a support network and “the whole thing of trying to find who to trust” because “every player is going to hit a difficult time and having that support network to lean on is important for them” (Coach C).

Education at younger age groups, can support athletes in overcoming challenges they encounter “like a former player coming in and letting them have it in a really good way. The pitfalls basically, and an hour of that education at 14, some will pick it up and you are hoping that will stick with some of them” (Coach C).

To continue to improve regardless of where the athlete is located, they must be playing football at a good standard “are they playing first team or are they playing 23s? Are they gone out on loan where it is a good standard? So where are they in their games programme then? That can be a challenge for some of our boys” (Coach C).

***U18 age group:*** To continue to progress within the international team environment the athlete needs to be playing competitive football “That’s a challenge once they come out especially 18s, 19s... they are training but not getting matches. Then you are asked to go in and perform in a high-level international game” (Coach E).

When playing U18 some athletes will be out of contract with their club in the UK and return to a club in Ireland. In this scenario the athlete is “going from top class facilities, training 5/6 times a week to back to what I said earlier on to training 2/3 times a week, maybe in a facility where you are using half an astro which a couple of league of Ireland clubs do.” The athletes adaption to

this change is eased “when you have got a coach who understands you, that believes in you, the facilities are there to match, your teammates are there, a good team. That’s a big help” (Coach D). The relationship with the coach is important “because coming back to a manager who doesn’t understand football and is all about results and get the ball in the corners, an aggressive type of manager they can intimidate people. That’s not great either because times have changed. Times have changed with players” (Coach D)

***U19 age group:*** When playing at the U19 age group “(to progress) they have got to be playing first team football. If you can’t get first team football, move on to get first team football or where you are going to be in the picture of playing first team football” (Coach E). If the athlete is not getting first team football, they need to take ownership of their career by going to “have a chat with the manager, go and have a chat. Has the manager spoke to you? No he hasn’t. Maybe it’s time you went to him. You might need to go out on loan” (Coach E).

Coach E felt that “there should be something where he could be dipped in or the best players from the 19s are brought into a training camp (with U21s)”. The U19s athlete progress into the U21s age group where they might not make the U21 squad initially and during that year it is “important as well that they stay connected with international football” (Coach E).

### **Discussion:**

The aim of the study was to advance knowledge of the transitions which occur prior to the junior to senior transition in sport through qualitative interviews with underage international coaches, and the factors associated with successful transition. The results highlight that athletes will experience (1) challenges with being part of the national team environment, and (2) challenges which are specific to the age grade they are within. Along the development pathway from U15-

U19 there are (3) critical moments which can determine whether the athlete will progress to the next age grade, and also, (4) ways in which the transition through the age grades can be eased by the athlete themselves and by the stakeholders around them. These findings have theoretical and practical implications for supporting athletes prior to and during the junior to senior transition in sport.

The coaches identified that athletes must adapt to the demands of the international team environment when they first join the international squad. This theme supports previous research identifying that athletes go through a period of adaption when they move to senior sport (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016; Morris et al. 2015; Pummell et al., 2008) and extends previous findings by identifying that this period of adaption also occurs when the athlete progresses to a higher level of competition within and between age grades. As discussed by the coaches, the athletes are moving from a club environment where they know their teammates and compete against other teams, to an international team environment where they are now teammates with players from teams in which they compete against. The challenges for the coach and athletes are to create an in-group identity which facilitates the individual and team values being congruent (Turner et al., 1987). Although there are challenges such as avoiding complacency, dealing with setbacks and getting into the starting team associated with playing international football, if coaches can develop an in-group identity, they can guard against the potentially negative effects of stressors on the individual (Morgan, Fletcher, and Sarkar, 2013). The coaches identified that the athlete must develop the capacity to persevere when they experience setbacks (MacNamara et al, 2010). The physical demands that occur when an athlete progresses from junior to senior also occur when the athlete progresses to international football (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Morris et al, 2017). This physical demand is coupled with the demand of having to adapt to a different system

and style of play compared to the athlete's club team. This requires the team and individual to develop on field Team Situation Awareness (TSA) consisting of following up on pre-agreed tactics, but also adapting to the situation as team performance requires a high degree of coordination (Eccles & Tenenbaum, 2004). Coaches can improve intuitive decision making in teams by engaging in representative practice design, receiving quick and accurate feedback, gaining extensive experiences, and reviewing prior experience (Klein, 2001)

Transitions have been identified as a process rather than an event (Stamboulva, 2003) and Morris et al (2016) identified that transitions along the developmental pathway can influence the junior to senior transition. The current research extends these findings by identifying the challenges that occur at specific age grades in a national team talent development pathway. In the junior to senior transition athletes face challenges such as coping with the physical demands of playing with senior athletes, the move from development to competitive sport, the challenge of getting into the starting team and the possibility of other players rejecting a player who is competing for their position (Morris et al, 2017). The coaches in the current study identified that these challenges also occur at specific stages along the talent development pathway. Support staff, coaches and mentor working with players experiencing these challenges can help players identify how this challenge might reoccur in the future and how they might develop the capacity to deal with the challenge now and in the future. Likewise, when the athlete experiences similar challenges in the junior to senior transition the athlete can be supported in identifying the resources used to overcome similar challenges in the past.

Despite there being challenges associated with the national team environment and associated with each age grade, the coaches identified challenges such as moving to the UK, injury, a contract not being renewed and being exposed to first team football as important moments in a

player's career. These moments have been referred to by Nesti et al (2012) as critical moments, which involve an important change in an individual's identity in a positive or negative way. Nesti and Littlewood (2009) emphasize the importance of athletes developing a strong and flexible sense of self to overcome the challenges that inevitably occur in elite level football. This involves the athlete constantly confronting the challenge of creating a new identity for themselves in response to their change in circumstance. To help the athlete respond to such critical moments sporting organizations can employ the services of a sport psychologist to facilitate the athlete in examining and reaffirming their identity (Nesti et al, 2012). The sport psychologist can also educate the wider support staff in working with athletes during critical moments as they can find it difficult to know how to work with an athlete during critical moments.

All participants identified the importance of psychological characteristics that aid athlete progression as well as support that can be provided from the environment in which the athlete is located. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting how psychological characteristics such as dealing with setbacks, self-belief, and an improvement focus play an important role in an individual athletes' development (MacNamara et al, 2006; 2008; 2010). The athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003) identified internal and external barriers and resources can influence an individual's adaption to transition and emphasizes transition as a process rather than an event. Morris et al (2016) identified that the internal resources developed during preceding transitions can impact the junior to senior transition. The current findings support this model in identifying the internal resources that athletes can utilise along the talent development pathway and the potential external barriers and resources within the talent development environment. These findings can be used to develop education programmes for

athletes from the time they enter the talent development environment at U13 to develop their internal resources. Coaches identified the importance of mentors in the athlete's development, and each underage international team has an ex-professional athlete as a mentor. The programme can utilise this importance to educate the athlete on the challenges of the junior to senior transition and utilise the mentors experience to aid athletes in identifying how they can overcome the challenges they face in their environment. An additional education programme for key stakeholders would also facilitate athletes in the transition to international underage squads. This programme for key stakeholders around the athlete such as parents, club coaches and club administrators would identify the external barriers and resources that can impede an athlete's development and their role in developing the athlete's internal resources to cope with transition.

Although the current study offers an insight into coaches' perceptions of athletes' transition through underage international age groups, there are some limitations that can be considered for future research. The current study identified the individual characteristics that coaches perceive the athlete must possess and/or develop. MacNamara et al (2010) found that Psychological characteristics of developing excellence (PCDEs) are utilised dependent on the characteristics of the individual and the context of the individual. Future studies should examine the PCDE's and when and how they should be utilised by the individual athlete in response to challenges they face in the talent development pathway in an international football context. The current study also only provides an insight into the coach's perception of the transition to playing international football and does not provide an insight into the athlete's and other stakeholder's perceptions. The coaches' perception coupled with the retrospective nature of the study requires consideration for future research due to the potential for confirmation bias and recall bias. Future research should examine athletes' perspectives of the transition through international squads. This

transition could be explored before, during and after the athlete is undergoing the transition to limit recall and confirmation bias.

The current study emerged from findings in previous transition research emphasizing the influence of preceding within career transitions on the junior to senior transition. Findings of the current study supported the findings from previous literature identifying the individual characteristics that athletes need to develop in response to the barriers they encounter. The study extends previous research by identifying the potential barriers along the talent development pathway that precede the junior to senior transition and how the transitions can potentially be eased. Based on the current findings and previous transition research governing bodies can implement best practice recommendations to facilitate athletes in transition.



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**Appendix 1:**

## Interview Schedule

**Introduction:**

1. How long have you worked with players that are making the transition to international underage football?

What are the characteristics of players that successfully play underage international football?

2. How do players develop these characteristics to successfully play international football?

**Challenges**

3. What do you feel are some of the challenges that players face when they step up to international level football?
4. What makes this transition difficult? Is it the technical, tactical, physical, psychological or environmental demands?
5. Are there any demands specific to the age and stage of development of the players that you work with?

**Facilitating the Transition**

6. What type of support do they get? Where can players get support as they are trying to make the transition to playing youth international football?
7. What do you believe your role is, in supporting players as they make the transition to playing international underage football?
8. Have you or any of our support staff employed any strategies to help players overcome some of these challenges? How successful has this support been?

9. Is there anything that you feel would help in supporting players more in making the transition to international football?

### **Moving forward**

10. What is important for players if they are to continue to progress after they have made the transition to international football?
11. Do the clubs and international team support the players with the factors you consider important?
12. How can the club/international team support the players progression after making the step up to international football?

### **Summary**

13. Do you feel that there is a programme in place to help players to successfully make the transition to international football? If yes, why? If no, why not?
14. is there anything I should have asked that you think I should have asked that you think is important?

## Consultancy Contract

### FAI Research Contract:

- (1) This agreement is between the David McHugh and the FAI for the provision of carrying out a research project on the transition through the underage international football squads.
- (2) This agreement covers the period from granting of ethical approval for the project, to data collection and analysis and through to dissemination of the projects results.
- (3) Services to be provided include: interviewing 5-10 head coaches working with the international teams, transcription of the interviews, analysis of the transcripts, write up of a report, the development of a final paper, the submission of the final paper and report upon completion, and communication of the results to the FAI.
- (4) All the coaches' information and identification of any individuals within the research will be anonymised.
- (5) There will be no fee charged for the provision of the research project and I will travel to meet the coaches to carry out the interviews.
- (6) The results of the research project will be submitted for publication to a journal, disseminated at academic conferences, disseminated to clubs and coaches, and on FAI programmes on the request of the FAI.
- (7) Any modifications to this contract must be agreed by both parties.

**Consultancy Contract Report:**

**The Transition through underage**

**international football teams: Environmental and age specific challenges.**

**Research Summary Report**

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**March 2020**

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**Liverpool John Moores University Authored by  
David McHugh**

**Supervised by: Dr. Rob Morris, Dr. Martin Eubank**





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## Introduction

This research was undertaken to investigate the challenges that players encounter before they attempt to make the step-up to senior sport. The move to senior sport is associated with increased expectation and stress, resulting in approximately only 17% of elite youth athletes progressing to senior elite sport (Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, & Wylleman, 2004). Although the transition to senior sport is difficult, the transitions through international underage football teams has been identified as particularly difficult. Güllich (2014) examined talent identification and selection in German youth academy teams and national youth selections, and found there was a mean annual turnover of 41.0% in national youth teams, with only 5.9% playing continuously throughout the age categories U15-U19.

A transition in sport is defined as an athlete's ability to cope with the demands placed on them, which pose a conflict between where the athlete is at a moment in time and where they would like to get to (Stambulova, 2003). The transition through underage teams and age groups has been shown to influence the subsequent transition to senior sport (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016). The aim of the research was to understand the challenges players encounter on the talent development pathway in Irish underage international teams, identify the characteristics the players need to develop, and the support required to progress through the talent development pathway.

## Phases of the research:

### The research consisted of three phases:

**Phase 1:** Interviews were carried out with the men's underage international coaches from the U15-U19 during the summer of 2018.

**Phase 2:** The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for similarities and differences using thematic analysis

**Phase 3:** The results of the analysis were compared to previous research on talent development in sport.

## Summary of the Results

1. There are challenges associated with being part of an international squad
2. The players will experience different challenges specific to the age group they are within
3. Along the development pathway from U15-U19 there are critical moments that can determine whether the player will progress to the next age grade
4. There are ways in which the challenges can be eased by the player developing specific characteristics and by key stakeholders around them.

Each of the findings outlined above will be explored in more detail in the findings section.

## Results

### **National Team Environment:**

When a player joins up with a national team squad the first thing, they must understand is the culture of the environment and the behaviours that are expected from them. This requires the players to develop a sense of togetherness as a team over a short period of time.

The challenge of creating a togetherness within a team is made more difficult by the players playing numerous different systems and styles of play with their club. There can be a philosophy change compared with the players club, where at their club they work more on the attacking side of the game. In contrast it is a challenge for players to have to work on the defensive side of the game due to the limited contact time available as an international squad. This highlights the importance of creating a sense of togetherness in the squad.

Once a player has made a squad there is competition for places between teammates. This requires the players to train well, have a good attitude around the team, take on tactical information in meetings and deal with the pressure of performing well. The pressure to perform is higher for the players in international football due to the limited time between games, requiring a player's diet, rest, and recovery to be correct.

In preparation for games it is important that players avoid complacency and not underestimate any opponent. In response to setbacks in games the players must learn to keep going until the end and if a setback occurs in the first game, the players learn from it and play the next game with a positive mindset.

## **Age Specific Challenges**

Although challenges exist with an athlete being part of the international youth team, there are specific challenges that exist at each age group in the player's development.

### **U15/16**

The player's physical development is important at this age group. At this age group the players need to develop their strength, balance, and explosiveness as they are often playing against players from other countries that have been in academies for five or six years. When the players come into camp there is an increase in training load compared to their clubs and if a player's nutrition, rest, and recovery is not right it can lead to a risk of injury.

### **U17**

The first challenge at this age group is the change from development-focused games to playing competitive games. This results in players not getting the same game time they have at U15/16 unless they are the top players in the team.

At this age group it was noted there is an increase in training load for Irish based players and UK based players. However, the increase in training load is particularly sharp for players that move to the UK at the beginning of the international team season. A lack of preparation for the increase in training load before moving to the UK can lead to an increased risk of injury when joining a full-time academy.

The home-based player's off-season is the middle of the international U17 teams' season. This requires players to maintain a games and training programme during the off season to be match ready for the international team.

### **U18**

At U18 there can be some players that progress straight to the U19s squad. This means that some Ireland based players are called into the squad. There is a challenge for these players in terms of the intensity of the training sessions as they are often only training

2/3 times a week.

Players can also be on the fringes of the first team, meaning they are training but not playing matches. This makes it difficult for them to then go and perform in high level international matches.

## **U19**

When playing U19 international football as a competitive age group, there is again pressure to win, and like the U17 age group, there is increased competition for places in the starting team.

**Critical moments:**

Within the pathway from U15-U19 there are critical moments that affect whether an athlete will progress to the next age group in international football, and as a professional footballer in the long run.

The first critical moment is if a player moves abroad where they must adapt to new living arrangements, a new club, a new group and a new coach. This can result in homesickness and a potential loss of form for the player.

In addition to homesickness it can take time for the player to adapt to the increase in training load associated with moving to new club. Moving from a semi-professional set up to a professional set up can result in a sharp increase in training load and increase the risk of injury in the first few months. If an injury occurs during the first few months at a new club it can make the adaption process more difficult.

Although a lot of players move to the UK at the age of 17/18 a lot of players return within one or two years. If a player returns to Ireland they can feel a sense of failure and this requires the player to return to a club in Ireland that has a coach that understands what the player is going through, will help develop the player and a club with adequate facilities.

For those players that stay in the UK beyond the first year or two it is not enough to just be training with the U23s, there is a need to be playing regularly and be around the first team. This can be an advantage for players based in Ireland as they are around the first team squad and potentially getting games with the first team squad.

## Supporting Progression through underage squads

### Personal Characteristics:

The coaches identified several characteristics that the athlete should possess and develop to cope with the challenges they will experience as they progress through the age groups.

It was identified that often the difference between players who progress their career can often be their belief in their own ability. This belief in their own ability is often based on playing with and against good players over a long period of time. The player must strike a balance in terms of their belief in their own ability and remaining grounded.

Having belief in their own ability helps players deal with the setbacks that will occur. Players can deal with the setbacks by taking responsibility for their own development. This requires the players to constantly seek improvement in their game. If the player is putting in the effort to improve and is not getting picked it is the responsibility of the player to speak with their club coach and potentially look for a loan move to further their career.

Within international football and elite level football there is limited time between games, and this time is often spent focused on rest and recovery for the next game. The players must be able to take on information in team meetings and have a good understanding of the game in order to be prepared to perform consistently.

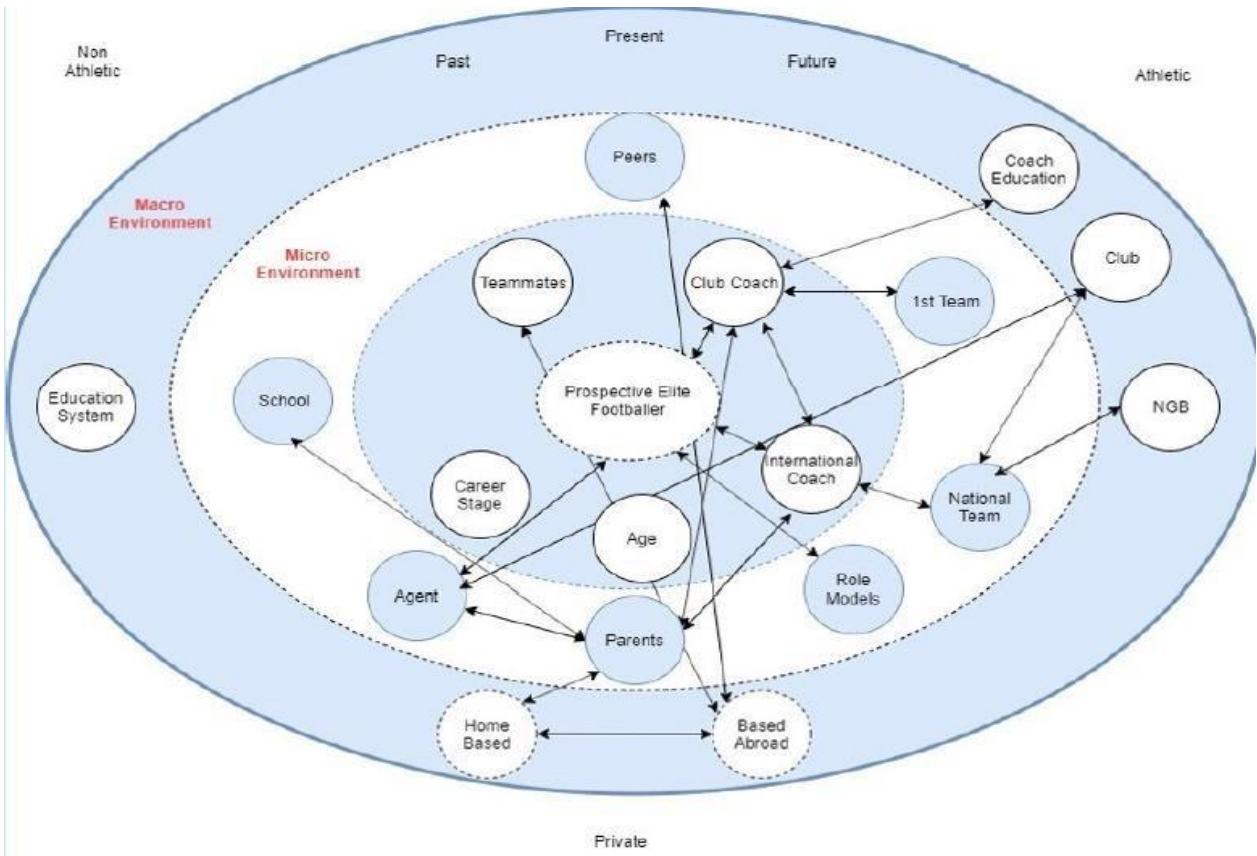


**External Support:****All age groups:**

Throughout all age groups a consistent team culture and style of play is required to ensure quick adaption when players come in from their clubs. This allows players to know what to expect when they enter the national team environment. The club can support this by playing a similar style to the national team.

Consistent communication between the national team and club team can help the players develop when they are at their club but can also help the International coach know how the player is progressing for when they come into camp. Communication between the international coaches helps identify players that are ready to progress between the age groups.

Throughout the transition through U15-U19 age groups the club needs to support the player's physical development so that they can meet the demands of international and professional football.



**U15/16**

At the younger age groups (U13-16) contact time with the international team can help players prepare for the demands of international football at U17 and later. This allows time to prepare players on the culture, style of play, nutrition, and recovery methods.

Club coaches can help players at these age groups by attending underage international games and training to know the standard of players and the key points the international team is trying to get across. The clubs themselves can support players by ensuring their coaches are qualified and engaging with the coach education pathway.

**U17**

If a player moves to the UK at 16 it is important that they develop a new support network and engage with appropriate role models on and off the pitch. The work done at younger age groups becomes important here as education from current and ex-professionals can help prepare players for the challenges they encounter.

**U18/19**

At this age players need to be looking to break into the first team. If a player is not around the first team environment it may require moving clubs. It is important if a player is going to move club, whether they move to the UK or move home, that they get the right advice from agents and pick the right club. Picking a club that has the facilities, playing style and a coach that suits the player's development is important.

## Recommendations

**The recommendations are split into two parts, those not requiring financial investment, and those requiring financial investment.**

### **Non-financial investments:**

- A standardised written communication regarding feedback from the clubs to the national team and from the national team to the clubs. This feedback can provide club coaches with clear action points after international events and provide international coaches with information on player progression coming into camp.
- Communication between international coaches on player progression was a key theme throughout the interviews. The continued communication between international coaches on player development and progress is important for player progression.
- The development of a games programme for underage international players based in Ireland due to the international season being during the League of Ireland Clubs off-season.
- A consistent high-performance culture throughout the age groups was highlighted as an important aspect when players move through age groups.
- The maintenance of a similar style and system of play throughout the age groups helps players adapt to moving through the different age groups.
- A similar style and system of play to the national team when players are with their clubs can help players adapt and perform better with the national team.
- The education of club coaches was an important aspect of supporting player development in international football. The award of CPD hours for attending international training and/or matches to develop an understanding of the standards within specific international age grades could incentivize coaches to educate themselves on the trends at international level football.

**Potential areas for investment:**

- The research highlighted the importance players developing their life skills. The development of a Team and People development department that would be responsible for developing a Psychological Characteristics for Developing Excellence (PCDE) programme (McNamara et al, 2010). The aim of this programme would be to help players develop the skills necessary to prepare them for the professional game within the U13-U19 age groups.
- The research highlighted the importance of a similar high-performance culture between the age groups. The Team and People development department would also be responsible for ensuring the creation of a standardised team culture in conjunction with the head coaches and coaching staff of each age grade.
- Monitoring and coordination of where players are on their development pathway. The critical moments in a player's pathway can determine whether a player progresses along the talent development pathway. The development of individualised support plans for players encountering critical moments can help players cope with these moments.
- The home-based players are in their off season in the middle of the international team season. The development of a games programme across age groups for international players that are in the off season

**Contact details:**

**Name:** David McHugh

**Place of Work:** Athlone Institute of Technology

**Email:** davidmchugh@ait.ie

This research was conducted as part of the fulfillment of the course requirement for the Professional Doctorate in Sports Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University.

**References:**

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Örebro: Örebro University

## **Consultancy report dissemination**

### **Details:**

Call with Dan Horan (FAI Head of Fitness, Science and Research)

Date: 31/03/2020

Time: 16:15

This consultancy report dissemination took place over the phone due to Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time.

### **Discussion points:**

#### **Introduction:**

- We discussed my educational background, my position in AIT, the course of study I am undertaking and my coaching experience.
- As I was speaking with the head of research, and not with the High-Performance director who the research went through, I started by explaining the background to the research question.
- I explained I was working with the National Academy U14 team with the lead of the national academy Niall Harrison, and that my research supervisor had carried our research on the junior to senior transition in academy football. His research found that the junior to senior transition was influenced by an athlete's knowledge and skills acquired during preceding transitions. I explained that as I was working with the



national academy where players were starting out on their journey through the underage international teams, I wanted to understand this process in supporting their transitions.

- I explained the process I went through in gathering the research, through interviewing the head coaches of the international teams and I then outlined the findings of the research.

### **Discussion of the results:**

- I highlighted how there are challenges associated with being part of the national team environment such as understanding the culture, developing a team in a short space of time, players not getting their place within the team and adapting to the teams style of play.
- Following on from this we discussed the challenges players have in adapting their club style and system of play to the international team style and system of play. Dan highlighted how there is very little that can be done regarding this.
- I made the point that the U16 coach highlighted, where there is a process in place within Switzerland FA where clubs are ranked based on their facilities, coaching standards, academy processes and the team's style and system of play. The U16 coach highlighted how this allows for easier adaption to international football as their club teams are playing in a system like the underage international teams.
- We then discussed the second finding from the research where I highlighted the age specific challenges associated with being part of the national team.
- I highlighted that at 16 years of age a lot of players move to the UK, with the U17 coach highlighting that when he went to pick a squad at one point for the U17 60% of the players were unavailable from the previous U16 squad due to injuries. This was

due to players moving from Ireland to the UK, from amateur to professional environments and there being an increase in training load.

- I highlighted how injury can subsequently influence the adaption process to the new club, as if a player gets an injury within the first few months, they may get homesick. Moving to a club in the UK requires the player to develop a support network and this may be compromised through injury.
- We also discussed how the Irish club season being a summer season results in the Irish based players being in their off-season in the middle of the international season. This result in players not training or being up to match fitness when playing international football during the off season.
- I highlighted how within the progression through the international teams that there are critical moments that can influence subsequent transition to the next age group. I explained that these are key moments where players require individual support in order to overcome the challenges. I explained that I am carrying out a study with Heads of Youth academy in Ireland and that ongoing support during these times, despite the player not being with the club can help players overcome these critical moments.
- I then explained that the coaches identified individual characteristics required of players to progress through the international teams. I highlighted that despite this, that probably the most significant finding was that the external support required for players to progress.
- I explained that consistency in terms of the style and system of play between the club and international team enables players to adapt quicker when part of the international team. In addition, similarity between the international teams enables players to get used to the system and style of play within the international team programme.

- I also highlighted that communication between the club and international team, is important in order to ensure that the coaches and support staff know what the player has done training and game wise in the weeks leading up to being part of the international team. This enables the international team to tailor the training load for the players. Likewise, communication between the national team and club is important, and I highlighted how this was a key finding from the research with heads of youth development. The heads of youth development identified that they do not get formal feedback after international events and have no actions for how they can support the players when they return.

### **Recommendations Discussion:**

- We first discussed the non-financial investment recommendations. I highlighted that feedback to clubs after international events would be important to support players after international camps. Dan agreed with this and explained that this is an area they are constantly looking to improve.
- Dan Highlighted how communication between the international teams has improved since Ruud Dockter took over as high-performance director and that he has specifically targeted developing a high-performance culture across all teams.
- Dan also highlighted how they recognise a games programme is required for home-based players in the League of Ireland off-season and this is something that they are looking to address.
- Dan wanted to particularly know about my recommendation about the team and people development department. I explained that this would be a department that would support coaches, teams, and players in the transition process through the

international teams. The aim would be to support individual players navigate the transition process but also develop the Personal Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDE) required to navigate the transition through the international teams and ultimately as a professional footballer. The aim would be to plan individuals' players development and provide high levels of support in the face of challenges they will encounter along the talent development pathway.

- Following this Dan asked me the question, if I am supporting the coach, what do I think I would be able to tell a coach who has been coaching for 10 or 15 years that he does not already know? I explained that I do not think I would be able to tell him anything and that it would not be my role to do this. My role as a sports psychologist would be to provide the coach with an evidence base for deciding.
- The conversation finished with Dan saying that he will be back in contact about the research in the future.

## Empirical Study 2:

**Title: Heads of Youth Development Perceptions of the Within Career Transition to Underage International Football.**

David McHugh, Dr. Robert Morris and Dr. Martin Eubank

Declarations of interest: none

Authors: \* <sup>A</sup> David McHugh, <sup>B</sup> Dr. Robert Morris & <sup>C</sup> Dr. Martin Eubank

<sup>A</sup> Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Ireland.

<sup>B</sup> University of Stirling, Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA.

<sup>C</sup> Liverpool John Moores University, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Tom Reilly Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool, L3 3AF.

\*Corresponding author. Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Ireland. Email address: [davidmchugh@ait.ie](mailto:davidmchugh@ait.ie)

## **Heads of Youth Development Perceptions of the Within Career Transition to Underage International Football.**

### **Abstract:**

For athletes to successfully transition through a talent development system there needs to be a long-term strategy, communication, flexibility, and support, which are all coordinated and integrated within a system (Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007). Despite this, there is limited understanding of how one talent development environment within a system integrates with another talent development environment. Interviews were conducted with five heads of youth development within football clubs in Ireland to explore their perceptions of the within-career transition of their players to underage international football. The findings highlight how there are challenges associated with the transition to international football which requires the players to develop coping skills to successfully overcome the challenges. However, the transition is influenced by the club environment and the governance structures within the game, which subsequently influence the migration patterns of underage international players. The findings extend previous research by highlighting how the interaction between two micro-environments influences the individual athlete's ability to cope with within-career transitions.

**Key Words:** transition, talent development, within-career transitions

**Highlights:**

- The players experience challenges when making the transition from club to international football.
- Playing international football requires the development of coping resources to successfully make the transition.
- The players development is influenced by the club environment and the resources available within the club.
- The resources available to clubs to support talent development is inhibited through lack of finance and resources.
- The lack of finance and resources influence player migration patterns.

## **Title: Heads of Youth Development Perceptions of the Within Career Transition to Underage International Football.**

### **Introduction:**

The development of talent in sport has been conceptualised as a series of stages an athlete must go through to achieve sustained senior success (Bloom, 1985; Côté, Ericsson & Law, 2005). The stages an athlete goes through have been characterised as: (1) initially being introduced to the activity and sampling a number of different sports, (2) the middle years where the athlete spends more time on their sport and, (3) a specialization phase where the athlete is motivated by achieving success in their sport and developing their skills (Bloom, 1985; Côté et al, 2005). Within and between these stages athletes go through a series of transitions defined as an event which causes “a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Transitions may be normative or non-normative. A normative transition may be an athlete stepping up to a higher level of competition depending on the characteristics and organisation of the sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). A non-normative transition is unexpected and may include injury or deselection.

The holistic athlete development model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman, 2019) outlines phases and stages, along with transitions, across an athlete’s career. The model is organised across six levels incorporating transitions within an athlete’s sport: psychological development, psycho-social development, academic/vocational development, financial development, and legal status. Athletic sporting development begins with initiation in the sport, a development stage where the athlete invests more time in their development, a mastery stage where they aim to reach peak performance and discontinuation where the athlete ceases participation in sport. The psychological stages include middle childhood, early



adolescence, later adolescence, early adulthood, and later adulthood. The psycho-social development an athlete goes through incorporates the changes in the significant people in their life. The significant people start out with parents early in an athlete's sporting career, and progresses to peers within early adolescence, to partner and support staff within later adolescence and early adulthood, with the partner and/or family being the primary focus in later adulthood. The academic/vocational development includes transitions from primary to secondary school and then on to higher-education and/or a professional vocation, to finally focus on a post sporting career. At the financial level the athlete relies on their family early in their career, with a combination of the family and the sports organisation taking on the role in early adolescence, the sporting organisation providing funding in late adolescence and early adulthood, and the athlete's employer taking on the role upon athletic discontinuation. The final level is the legal status which moves from being a minor to adult at 16 or 18 years of age. Each level of the model interacts with and influences the athletic level transitions from initiation through to development, mastery and discontinuation. The whole person perspective within the model highlights the importance of the context in which the athletic and social development takes place (Stambulova, 2009b; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman, 2019). In athletic career development research, national culture and the national sports system have been identified as important factors in influencing athletic career transitions (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004).

The athletic career development literature can be viewed as a means of understanding the broad context in which different aspects of an athletic career take place (Stambulova, 2009b; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). One aspect of athletic career development models is the talent development stage. The aim of this stage is to build the capacities of the athlete to cope with the challenges they will encounter in

the junior-to-senior transition, and their career in sport (Henricksen, 2010). The talent development environment has been defined as encompassing all aspects of the coaching situation (Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007). Researchers have highlighted the importance of individuals within the environment such as the coach, parent, and peers, who influence athletic career development (Côté, 1999; Wylleman, De Knop, Verdet & Cecic-Erpic, 2007). The national culture and the sports system have also been identified as important factors in influencing talent development (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004).

The role of key individuals, the sports system and national culture influence transition through a talent development programme, as successful talent development is dependent on a long-term strategy, coherent communication, flexibility for individual development, support through key transitions, which are all coordinated and integrated into a coherent system (Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007). This requires the governing body to facilitate a system for the talent development process and policy development within the sport (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013). With athletes being situated in multiple environments within a talent development system, the integration of different environments into an overall system can influence the development of the individual athlete.

Previous transition research has examined the junior to senior transition in sport. The junior to senior transition in sport has been characterised by a number of challenges for the athlete, that require the athlete to develop the coping resources during preceding within career transitions and have the social support to overcome these challenges (Pummell, Harwood & Lavalley, 2008.; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavalley, 2014; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016; Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2017). This research has examined the challenges and coping resources required from the individual, and the support required within the environment to successfully

cope with the transition process. The interaction between different environments within which the athlete is located within the talent development process has received less attention. This is despite talent development environments that athletes are within prior to the junior to senior transition being characterised by a high turnover. Güllich (2014) examined talent identification and selection in German youth soccer academy teams and national youth selections and found there was a mean annual turnover of 41.0% in national youth teams, with only 5.9% playing continuously throughout the age categories U15-U19. Despite the importance of the individual developing the coping resources and social support required for a successful transition, the high level of turnover within a system can result in release from a talent development environment prior to the junior to senior transition. The increasing number of players migrating transnationally from donor clubs and countries further increases the level of turnover within the talent development system (Richardson, Littlewood, Nesti & Benstead, 2012).

The movement of players within football has increased over the last 25 years as the limits on foreign player numbers have been lifted (Milanovic, 2005). According to Gelade and Dobson (2007), between 2000-2005 40.9% of international football players played abroad with 86.2% of them playing in a country with a higher FIFA ranking. As of May 2017, 12,051 expatriate footballers were recorded in the 2,120 clubs competing in 137 leagues of 93 national associations worldwide (Poli, Ravenel & Besson, 2017). To maintain a level playing field, UEFA introduced requirements for clubs to have a specific number of players who have been classified as homegrown (spent at least three years with the club between the ages of 16-21). This has had an unintended consequence of clubs recruiting players at a younger age to ensure eligibility for home grown status at the age of 19 (Littlewood, Mullen & Richardson, 2011). Research has found that players decision to migrate is based on factors such as enhanced facilities and resources, increased visibility, selection for national teams,

geographical proximity, and the player's ambition to pursue a professional career (Elliott, 2014). The transnational migration of young players comes about through increased recognition and attention to their development within the game (Richardson et al, 2012).

Despite the recruitment and movement of young players abroad, almost half of the players who make it through the system to the age of 16 in England will have left professional football within 2 years, with 75% leaving by the age of 21 (Green, 2009). The dropout rate from professional football can have (possible) negative consequence when coupled with the experiences of adaptation to a new environment, lifestyle problems, and the psychological consequences that players may experience when migrating abroad (Richardson et al, 2012). The migration of players domestically from one club to another or transnationally, can result in donor clubs experiencing a "feet drain" where they have a poorer product, lose out on finance and the deskilled club having fewer role models to facilitate development (Elliot & Weedon, 2010; Balish & Côté, 2013).

Although, previous junior to senior transition research has identified the importance of understanding the factors that facilitate adjustment to transition, the relationships between different environments within a system have received less attention. This is despite previous research identifying an absence of research on the within career transitions of athletes as they move up, down, and across a sporting system. In addition, domestic migration and transnational migration have been identified as within career transitions that come about through increased recognition within a talent development system and have received limited attention (Richardson et al, 2012). This provides sports psychologists with a limited understanding of the within career transition process (Lavalley, Wylleman, & Sinclair, 2000). Given the high turnover in youth players within talent development environments in football (Güllich, 2014) the aim of the study was to advance the understanding of how two

environments within a talent development system (club and international team) interact to influence the individual athlete's transition. Specifically, the study examined the transition into and through underage international football squads from the perspective of Heads of Youth Development (HOYD) at clubs. The HOYD and club environment were chosen for the analysis as this is the environment where the athletes spend most of their athletic development.

### **Method:**

#### ***Participants:***

Interviews were conducted with five heads of youth development (HOYD) from five different League of Ireland football clubs. To be included in the study the participants had to currently be a head of youth development at a League of Ireland club, overseeing the national league U13-U19 age groups. The participants also had to have players within their club involved with the international team development programme in the last 12 months. This was to ensure participants could draw on their experience of supporting player progression within the international team environment. The participants experience in supporting players in transition to international underage football ranged from 5-40 (M= 14.8, SD=12.8). The participants were in their current role ranging from 2-12 years (M=6.8, SD=4.2). The coaches all held the UEFA A Elite Youth coaching qualification, a coaching qualification for heads of youth development in football, and one coach also held the UEFA Pro Licence qualification. In the last twelve months the number of players involved in underage international teams ranged from 2-12 (M=4, SD=4.04). The participants also identified the number of players that have represented the senior international team from their club, which ranged from 0-3 (M=0.8, SD=1.1).

Insert Figure 1 here

***Procedure:***

Ethical approval was obtained from a university ethics board and following this, participants were approached regarding participation in the study. Initially potential participants were identified through the author's personal contacts and internet websites. Participants were informed of the potential purpose, risks, benefits, and safeguards of taking part in the research when initial contact was made. The participants were then provided with the participant information sheet to review. Eight participants were contacted with five agreeing to participate. Once the participant agreed to participate a time and place was arranged to carry out the interview. Prior to the interview taking place, the participant was provided with the participant information sheet and the purpose, risks and benefits were explained once again. The participant was provided with the time to read the documentation and ask any questions before signing the consent form and taking part in the research. The interviews were conducted face to face with all five participants, utilising a semi-structured interview guide, audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The interviews ranged from 35-54 minutes in duration (M=48.6, SD=7.03).

***Interview Guide:***

A semi-structured interview guide was utilised to explore participants thoughts and opinions of the research question in depth (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interview guide allowed participants to respond with their own perspective which facilitated further in-depth exploration of topics that came up during the interviews. The semi-structured interview guide also facilitated the data analysis process in comparing the transcripts (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interview guide was based on transition models (Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and youth to senior transition literature (Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008.; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016; Morris,

Tod & Eubank, 2017). The interview guide attached in the appendices was broadly focused on understanding the barriers (e.g. What do you feel are some of the challenges that players face when they step up to international level football?), demands (What is important to athletes if they are to continue to progress after they have made the transition to international football?) and resources players (e.g. What are the characteristics of players that successfully play international football?) and clubs (e.g. How does the club/international team support the players progression after making the step up to international football?) encounter when supporting player's transition into and through the international team environment.

### ***Research Context:***

Within Irish football, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) implemented national underage leagues at under 13, 17, 15 and 19s to balance player development opportunities throughout the country (Finnegan, 2019). The implementation of the national underage leagues provides players with access to a high level of competition within their geographical location, with the aim of enhancing player development in progression to senior football. Understanding the interaction between the individual, the context and processes within Irish football can provide an insight into how these interact to influence the transition into and through underage international football.

### **Data Analysis:**

The interviews were analysed after all data collection took place. The interview guide remained the same for all interviews and as it was semi-structured it allowed an exploration of topics in depth as they arose within the interview. Once transcription of the interviews was complete, abductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was completed to highlight the similarities, differences, key findings that emerged from the data and to answer the research question. Abductive thematic analysis involved both inductive (analysing the

data to generate themes and matching the data to themes in existing literature) and deductive (matching the data to themes in the data analysis stage). The thematic analysis involved six steps: (1) familiarisation with the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts and noting the initial ideas, (2) generating the initial codes through extracting quotes from the data set and assigning descriptions of the quote, (3) searching for themes by bringing the initial codes together and reviewing the codes for accuracy of the themes represented, (4) reviewing the themes to ensure that they are representative of the whole dataset, (5) defining the identified themes and, (6) and writing the report.

***Sampling Strategy:***

The sample consisted of five heads of youth development working in the underage league of Ireland. The participants were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy which supports the use of a smaller sample as it ensures richness of the data in terms of the characteristics of the sample and the diverging views they represent (Patton, 1990, Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). In total there are 20 league of Ireland clubs with teams from U13-U19. If the selected participants possess a level of expertise within their cultural context, then a small sample can provide reliable insights from the data (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986).

***Research Credibility:***

The research is informed by a social constructionism epistemology. Social constructivism is grounded in a relativist ontology where reality is viewed as socially constructed and where knowledge and experiences are inseparable from the socio-cultural context (Crotty, 1998). The lead researcher had worked as a coach at two of the five clubs where the head of youth development was interviewed at the time of data collection. The lead researcher had also worked with the FAI Emerging Talent programme, which is a programme that aims to



support players in progressing into the underage international teams. This background provides an understanding of the context in which the clubs and heads of youth development are operating within. However, this may also influence the interactions of the interviewee towards me and me towards the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As a coach operating within this environment, I reflected on my experience and understanding of the talent development process to recognise my potential influence on the research. As a coach observing the impact of movement of players between clubs that I had worked with to different clubs, I contacted clubs that I did not have a direct contact with in order to balance my potential bias with their experiences. In addition, my role within the National Governing body talent development programme may have been used to criticise their talent development system. Finally, other clubs may have been reluctant to take part in the research as I was working with another club at the time and they did not want to provide information on their internal processes. I tried to overcome this through advising the participants that all information would remain confidential.

To incorporate any gaps in the research findings and/or similarities the participants share, the participants were provided with the opportunity to share their reflections on the results which could be incorporated within the findings. The process of member reflections provides an opportunity to work with participants to provide an enriched understanding of the research question (Schinke, McGannon, Smith, 2013). The results were exposed to a critical friend who was independent of the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) who had experience as a coach working across the U13-U19 age groups with three of the five clubs that took part in the research. Sparkes and Smith (2014) highlight that critical friends can provide a theoretical sounding board and question the conclusions reached to ensure they are representative of the data collected.

**Results:*****Summary:***

The results highlight the challenges the athlete encounters when making the transitions from the club to international team, the personal characteristics required to cope with this transition and the support required within the club. At the system level, the inability of clubs to provide the support required to play international football results in players migrating domestically in search of environments which can provide the support they require. Domestic migration is facilitated by lack of alignment of the talent development pathway, investment in clubs and player commuting regulations. Selection for the international team and the inability of clubs to fund full-time football subsequently results in transnational migration to clubs which can facilitate full-time football. Despite the recognition that players will migrate transnationally, only one club employed specific strategies to prepare players for the migration transnationally.

***Main findings:*****The transition:**

The starting point for a player's entry to the international team is based on their ability, because "if you don't have ability, you wouldn't be near international standard" (1). When a player has the ability to play at international level and enter the international team environment, they are exposed to a higher playing standard compared to playing with the club team. This creates a challenge for the player when they come back from the international team environment as there can be increased expectations on the player: "I think mentally is also another aspect of things. They get stressed out, they're anxious about things and I think

that indirectly affects their form and their performance, because they're expected to do more in their club" (3).

The increase in expectations on the player, requires the player to increase the standards they expect from themselves, "I think that when you make an international team, now you have to up your standards again. Whatever you've known as standards will change, because you're with better players, better resources, better structures and better advice going on" (3). To cope with the increase in standards, the players need to develop the corresponding resources to cope with the challenge. A HOYD gave examples of players who played international football who "are very focused and determined to succeed and be the best they can be and are very disciplined" (5).

The player's ability to develop the coping resources required is influenced by the environment created within the club. The level of responsibility the club takes for developing the player influences the player's progression within the international team. Taking responsibility requires the Head of youth development to understand what is expected of players at the international level: "They have invited me to attend some of their camps, that I could see what the standard is, what's expected of the players... to bring maybe our levels up a bit closer to the international level" (3). With the ethos of the club environment influencing the players development once the player makes the international team, communication between the club and international team can influence whether a player stays within the international team. The clubs require specific feedback on the players progress following an international camp to support their continued progression within the international teams. Likewise the clubs should seek out this information from the international team to support the player: "If you had that sort of information where the international ones had it, and they came

back and said, ‘This is just something that we have seen while he was away for two weeks or whatever’ at least you have something to talk to them about, a programme” (4).

The HOYD understanding of the demands of international football and the extent the club takes responsibility to develop their own club, influences the culture and subsequent support for the player within the club. It was highlighted that sometimes the person is forgotten about at the expense of the player: “It goes hand in hand (well-being). I think sometimes that’s neglected as regards to that some people will see the actual player as the player rather than the whole person” (1). A long-term development perspective and whole-person approach is dependent on the “outlook of the club as well. You also have to get support from people within the club structure as well” (5). The high-performance culture within the club supports the player when they progress to international level in terms of their professionalism “There’s a reason why I suppose our boys stand out there because one, they’re professional, they should turn up and shake your hands and say hello, and do the jobs that they have to do. Two, they have got a game understanding. Three, they can play and get on with it” (4).

In summary, with the transition to international football the players ability to play at the level allows them to enter the international team environment which leads to an increase in playing standard. This increase in standards requires a corresponding change in the players standards and discipline to reach these standards to cope with the challenges. The players ability to develop the coping skills is dependent on the outlook of the club and whole person approach adopted within the club environment.

### **The system:**

The increase in standards and expectations on the player is coupled with the need for the player to perform with their club to stay within the international team. For the player to stay within the international teams, getting the contact hours at their club is one of the key

challenges in maintaining their form. The ability of clubs to provide the contact time required to progress as an international footballer was identified as lacking “Coaching hours is one of the key things for any of the player's progress and we're probably not doing enough” (2)

The acknowledgement of importance of contact time with the club and the club environment, interacts with the location and reputation of the current club, to influence decisions on domestic migration to other clubs. Some HOYDs identified “You're not maybe in the spotlight when you're in the X (location) of Ireland” (2) and that players migrate domestically in order to get recognition for the international team due to a perception of the club that is within their own locality “It appears the messages that, you don't have to go to a club like X. In fact, if you want to make the international scene, you'd better go to a X club perhaps” (3). The domestic migration from one club to another, influences the club the player is leaving as it “takes away from all the work we've done” (3). The club the player is moving to “don't necessarily need your two internationals...but because they are good players, people feel well I'm going to try and get them two players” (5).

The domestic migration of players in search of clubs with better reputations, locations, facilities, and more contact hours are facilitated by the absence of rules around players commuting outside of a specified distance. One HOYD highlighted “I think we're the only country in Europe or that has no 80-kilometre rule with regards to players that are taken out and have their socioeconomic and educational background” (1). In addition to rules around travel, HOYDs identified domestic migration of players being facilitated by the absence of underage leagues at U14 and U16 in addition to the U13, U15, U17 and U19 leagues. This results in player turnover where “each season, we seem to be forming different panels of players. We just seem to get them for a season” (3). This results in a development programme that is “not a pathway, it's like jumping from cliff to cliff and hoping for the best and seeing,

can you hang on the other side of it, that's the way it is" (4). The high player turnover in clubs each year facilitates players transferring between clubs. In addition, being selected for the international team can result in players being identified, approached, and transferring to other clubs. An example provided by a HOYD was where "there's an under-14 development team and they nominated some of my players for it, it frightens the life out of me because 99% are lost after it. He heads to Dublin for a couple of trial games, it's not behind closed doors, and the place is full of all the clubs trying to sign them and get them" (1).

The introduction of the national underage leagues as part of the National Development Plan is a relatively recent addition to the player development pathway in Ireland. This has resulted in the U13 national league being introduced for the first time in 2020, the U15 league being introduced in 2018 and the U17 league being introduced in 2015. The HOYDs identified that the implementation of the national development plan has led to an improvement in standards for talent development in Ireland. However, there has been a lack of guidance for clubs in terms of best practice for talent development environments, where the clubs have "got there without any educational side too, with regards to the clubs" (1). It was identified that there is a need to improve standards once again and that a strategic plan for clubs over a period was required "you have got to grow, this is for 10 years down the line, this ain't for the first three years that you're in it, and it forces them then to put a plan in that, but at the moment it's like a nod and a wink" (4). The term "a nod and a wink" refers to how despite the leagues being introduced, some clubs have not introduced the standards to meet what is expected of competing in a national league.

The current development plan, with national leagues at U13, U15, U17 and U19 and without leagues at U14 and U16, makes it difficult for clubs to retain players throughout the development pathway within a club. It was identified by one HOYD that the development

plan was based on a club's ability to fund development and not best practice: "I'm going to say this now, that you cannot have a development programme based on clubs (that) can't afford it" (4). The financial constraints on a club's ability to implement best practice in talent development influences subsequent migration patterns transnationally. The players need for contact time with the club and coaches to develop as players, results in players seeking out environments where they can get the quality contact time required to stay within the international team setup. The lack of investment in facilitating full time coaches results in limited contact time for the players. This results in players migrating to the UK as they progress as an international footballer. "So really to be honest with you, unless you're playing highly in a professional league in a professional setup by a certain age. If you look at the under-15 and say 100% or 98% are from Ireland, so when you step up (in age groups), it (squad selection) starts going to the UK" (1).

Despite the acknowledgement that as players progress as an international player they are more than likely going to have to move abroad to continue to progress, there were no specific strategies employed by four of the clubs with regard to preparing players for transnational migration. However, the club with the most successful track record of underage and senior international footballers (4) employed several strategies. Firstly, the players are prepared for the difference between being an amateur footballer and a professional footballer: "the difference between coming to play for X and paying €10 a week to go on to (UK Club) and being paid to play football. It's hard for them to get their head around that. You're being paid to do a job, understand that. Yes. That will be my job." Secondly, individual support is also provided to prepare players for the transition of moving abroad: "I speak to players about the reality of professional football. The reality of the last day at home. When the bags are packed, and you have to drive to the airport. They're cocky lads and they're like, "That is no problem to me" but everybody breaks down because it's a big thing." Thirdly, in addition to

preparing the players the club also provide ongoing support while the player is abroad. “I deal because I keep in contact with them. If they put something stupid on social media, I text them to say, ‘What're you doing? Get that down.’”

**Discussion:**

The aim of the study was to advance the understanding of how two micro-environments within a talent development meso-system interact to influence the individual athlete's transition. The results highlight (1) that athletes experience challenges within the club environment when making the transition to underage international football and require the development of personal characteristics to cope with these challenges. However, (2) the governance structures within football in Ireland result in the absence of a strategy for clubs, alignment of player development and investment which (3) influences the club environments ability to support the players development of the personal characteristics required to successfully transition into and through the international squads. (4) The tension at governance level between the clubs and NGB manifested itself in an absence of communication by some clubs with the NGB, inhibiting the development of the individual player. The inability of the club environment to support player progression (5) results in player migration domestically in search of recognition for international selection and migration abroad to stay within the international team. The findings of this research have implications theoretically for the development of talent that cross over between two environments and practically for supporting athlete transition.

The results highlight that the players are exposed to challenges within the club environment when first making the transition to the international team and as they progress as an international player. Stambulova (2003) describes transitions as a process rather than an event. Within the transition process the players experience challenges within the club



environment which influence their progression within the international team environment. When a player has an ability to play international football and they enter the international squad, they are exposed to a higher standard of play compared to the club environment. This normative within-career transition to a higher level of competition results in a change in assumption the athlete has about themselves as they now identify as playing at a higher level than before (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The within career transition to international football was identified as being associated with sources of stress such as increased expectations from others, increased expectations on self and an absence of support for athletic career development. These findings support previous research on sources of stress associated with the within career transition from junior to senior in sport (Pummell et al, 2008; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016; Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2017). The increase in standard of play subsequently requires a change in the players behaviour to cope with the challenge of playing at a higher standard (Schlossberg, 1981). The HOYDs identified that the players need to increase the standards they expect of themselves to cope with the increase in standards associated with playing at an international level. To successfully cope with the challenges associated with the transition, determination to succeed, coping strategies and delaying immediate gratification are important characteristics for the players to develop (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Holt & Mitchell, 2006). Despite the similarities between the transition to international football and the junior to senior transition, there are differences associated with the transition also. The findings highlight how making the transition to international football in Ireland is associated with players subsequently seeking out environments which can enable them to meet the demands of the transition so they can continue to progress as an international player.

For the players to develop the characteristics required to successfully meet the challenges within the international team, the environment within the club must facilitate players'

understanding of a high-performance culture. The culture within professional football has been characterised as including the daily practices, operational mechanisms, explicit processes, tradition, unwritten rules, values and beliefs (Nesti, 2010), with a similarity between the club and international team culture facilitating adaption to the international team environment. In addition to similarity of culture, the club environment must also provide appropriate training, facilities, and ongoing support for the player to stay within the international team. Access to appropriate training facilities, contact time with coaches and ongoing support was identified as lacking by the HOYDs interviewed. An inability to provide the appropriate training, contact time with coaches, informational support and emotional support during the within career transition in the club environment can affect the individual athlete adaption to a higher standard of competition (Pummell et al, 2008). The inability of the clubs to provide the support required for the player to play international football, was identified as a factor influencing players' decisions to migrate domestically and transnationally.

The HOYDs identified that there is an absence of an overall strategy and finance available for clubs to support player development, which results in a high turnover of players, transnational migration, and an absence of support for holistic athlete development. Previous research on organisational governance has identified tension among stakeholders with the governing body of football in Ireland (Finnegan, McArdle, Littlewood & Richardson, 2018). Specifically, previous research has identified tensions among stakeholders regarding leadership, finance and organisational justice. Stakeholders perceptions that their concerns are being addressed by leadership, has been identified as a key tension in a network system (Provan & Kenis, 2007). The HOYDs in this study identified that although there is a strategic goal from the governing body for player development, there is an absence of a strategic plan on how clubs can facilitate player development, with all clubs highlighting the absence of

leagues at U14 and U16 resulting in player turnover as being a key concern. This was highlighted with the absence of rules on domestic migration and transfer between clubs, resulting in some clubs losing their best players to stronger clubs. The absence of strategic input from the governing body in terms of player development within clubs facilitates tension due to the time and resources invested by the clubs, and for all but one club in this study, a lack of return with regard to player progression. The governing body facilitates the system for the talent development process and policy development within the sport (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013), however this is dependent on appropriate leadership and investment which was perceived to be lacking by the HOYDs interviewed. This tension creates a context within the talent development system that subsequently influences all aspects of the talent development environment and subsequent migration of players domestically and transnationally.

Previous research that has found that successful talent development environments have an integration of efforts, communication and supportive training groups which facilitate athlete development (Henriksen, 2010). Although communication between the international team environment and the clubs was highlighted as an important factor in supporting players to progress with the international team, it was identified as lacking by some of the HOYDs. This finding extends the understanding of talent development environments by identifying how tension that exists at a governance level between the clubs and an NGB can result in an absence of communication between environments. Specifically, the results highlight how the absence of communication can potentially inhibit the club's ability to support players in maintaining their form required to stay within the national team. In addition, the lack of alignment within the player development pathway inhibits clubs in facilitating a supportive training environment and adopting a holistic psychosocial approach to player development (Henriksen, 2010).

All participants identified migration, both domestic and international, as being a feature of the talent development environment within Irish football. The findings are consistent with previous research that identified migration patterns in football being based on accessing enhanced facilities and resources, increased visibility, selection for national teams, geographical proximity and the player's ambition to pursue a professional career (Elliott, 2014). This "feet drain" as referred to by Elliott & Weedon (2010) results in donor clubs having a poor product, losing out on finance, and players with the deskilled club being exposed to fewer role models to facilitate development (Balish & Côté, 2013). Recognition by the international team was identified as the start of the process of players subsequently migrating abroad. The "feet drain" then occurs to the larger donor clubs. Previous research on internal migration patterns in Irish football identified that smaller local leagues lose talented players to larger and more powerful clubs in Dublin (Finnegan, 2019). Research by Finnegan (2019) was carried out prior to the implementation of the national league structures at under 13, 15 and 17 in addition to the under 19 league. It was identified that having access to local League of Ireland clubs at the underage level may outweigh the migrations costs of travel to Dublin clubs (Finnegan, 2019). The current research extends previous findings by identifying that migration to clubs outside of a player's geographical location in Ireland still occurs despite access to resources within their own region. It also identifies that the international team environment requires players to be within a full-time training to access the resources and facilities necessary to progress their careers. This often requires players to migrate abroad due to the limited resources available in Ireland to facilitate full time training. Migration abroad requires support for the athlete pre, during and post transition to cope with the demands they will experience. This highlights the role of key individuals within the athlete's environment that can help them cope with the transition process (Martindale et al, 2007). This type of support was absent in all but one club and highlights how an absence of resources and

experience of providing this support within clubs can influence the transition of moving abroad.

The results of the current study provide insight into the within-career transition process and how the structures within the sport influence the person within the club environment, the talent development process, the transition process and the changes over time. These findings have implications for organisations attempting to support players in progressing to a higher level of competition. Players experience stress associated with the increased expectations with playing at a higher level of competition and transnational migration. The national governing body, clubs and coaches could implement educational programmes from when upon entry into the talent development environment to help them develop the appropriate psycho-social skills that will facilitate them with the transitions they will experience within the development process. The alignment of the talent development process with league structures at U14 and U16 would help clubs in facilitating this support through reducing the level of turnover between age groups. Rules around player migration and transfer would facilitate smaller clubs to retain their talent for longer, enabling smaller clubs to develop the structures and knowledge to support player progression. With migration abroad being a feature of the talent development environment to access the training and resources required to stay within the international team, ongoing support is required pre, during and post transition. Ongoing support pre and post-international migration was a feature of the club with the most successful track record of player development within international football. With the support of key individuals within the athletes' environment influencing their development (Martindale et al, 2007), support for transitions could be expanded and potentially centralised within the governing body to support all players migrating abroad to ensure they are prepared regardless of their club.

Although this research provides an in-depth understanding of the HOYDs perceptions of the within-career transition from the club environment to underage international teams, there are limitations which need to be considered for future research. First, the findings are specific to the Irish football context and caution should be taken when applying the findings to different cultural contexts and sports. For example, within Irish football the introduction of the underage national leagues at U13 occurred for the first time in 2019. With the national leagues from U13-U19 being relatively new, the support for players is a work in progress within several clubs and from the national governing body perspective. In addition, within a football context, international team selection occurs for the first time at U15 which may be young compared to other sports. Second, the study involved the HOYD and not the players directly. This provides an insight into the challenges for the clubs and the systems involved in players transitioning to international football. The findings may be subject to recall bias and information loss as the focus was on players making the transition within the last year, which may have influenced the findings. To overcome these limitations future research could examine the within career transition to a higher standard of competition from a longitudinal perspective. A case study methodology would highlight how different organisations are interacting and how they manage the transition between two micro-environments. Exploring players perceptions of the transition process could enable an understanding of how the talent development process and systems impacts the individual. This would allow the identification of best practice approaches in supporting within career transitions and could be used to inform other organisations in supporting athletes through the process.

The current study emerged from previous research highlighting an absence of research as athletes move up down and across a sporting system and between different micro-environments (Lavalley et al, 2000). The study confirms the findings from previous transition research on the challenges and personal resources required to cope with the demands of

progressing to a higher standard of competition. The findings extend previous research by identifying the role that governance structures, communication, club resources and migration have on within-career transitions. Based on these findings governing bodies, clubs and coaches should consider how the recommendations can be implemented in order to support athlete adaption to transition.

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**Appendix 1:**

Figure 1:

Club	Experience supporting transition (Years)	Time in current role (Years)	Highest Coaching Qualification	Underage Internationals in the last 12 months (N)	Senior Internationals (N)
1	7	7	UEFA A Elite	2	0
2	10	2	UEFA Pro and UEFA A Elite	3	1
3	5	11	UEFA A Elite	2	0
4	12	12	UEFA A Elite	12	3
5	40	2	UEFA A Elite	1	0
M (SD)	14.8 (12.8)	6.8 (4.2)	NA	4 (4.04)	0.8 (1.1)

**Appendix 2:**

Interview Questions for Head of Youth Academy:

**Background**

- (1) What is your current role? And how long have you been in this role?
- (2) What is your highest coaching qualification?
- (3) How many players have played underage international football in the previous 12 months?
- (4) What age groups have they represented?
- (5) How many players have went on to represent the senior international team?

**Introduction:**

- (6) How long have you worked with players that are making the transition to international underage football?

Can you describe your experience of working with players as they make the transition to playing international football?

What are the characteristics of players that successfully play international football?

- (7) What do you believe your role and the club's role is in supporting players as they make the transition to playing international underage football?

**Facilitating the transition**

- (8) How do players develop the characteristics to successfully play international football?

(9) what support do players get before and during the transition to international football within your club?

### **Challenges**

(10) What do you feel are some of the challenges that players face when they step up to international level football?

What makes this transition difficult? Is it the technical, tactical, physical, psychological or environmental demands?

(11) Have you or any of our support staff employed any strategies to help players overcome some of these challenges?

How successful has this support been?

Is there anything that you feel would help in supporting players more in making the transition to international football?

### **Moving forward**

(12) What is important to athletes if they are to continue to progress after they have made the transition to international football?

(13) Do the clubs and international team support the players with the factors you consider important?

How do the club/international team support the players progression after making the step up to international football?

### **Summary**



(14) Do you feel that there is a programme in place to help players to successfully make the transition to international football? If yes, why? If no, why not?

(15) Is there anything I should have asked that you think I should have asked that you think is important?

## Research Commentary

### Introduction:

Harwood (2016) notes how graduates from PhD or professional programmes often progress into research or teaching positions, or engaged in applied consultancy, where there are constraints on the ability to engage in applied research. In order to bridge the gap from science to practice and from practice to science, there is a need for an increase in the number of scientist practitioners or scientists working alongside practitioners, in order to link research and practice (Lowman, 2012). The scientific basis of the profession is an ethical obligation as stated in the BPS guidelines for the training of Sport and Exercise Psychologists; “Key role 2.1: Review psychological literature and other information sources for relevant advice, research findings, research methods and interventions.” Despite the ethical obligation to underpin practice with evidence, there is no competency guideline to underpin research with practice-based problems “3.2 Design Psychological research activities: Identify theoretical models and research findings relevant to the proposed research questions; Generate relevant and testable research questions and/or hypotheses, related to quantitative or qualitative research methods.” As reflected on the BPS competency framework for the training of applied sports psychology practitioners, I understood from the beginning of training the importance of science-based practice. However, what I have come to realise is that practice can also inform the evidence base and research. Lowman (2012) notes we need both evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence to sustain a scientist practitioner model within psychology and in this case specifically sport psychology. This research commentary is split into four reflections (1) my development as a scientist; (2) how science informed my practice; (3) how I came to realize the influence of practice on science and (4) where this leaves me for my future as a scientist-practitioner.

### **Reflection 1: Initiating and developing original research**

The first reflection is based on my experience engaging in my first research study as part of the professional doctorate course. I decided to research the transition process within Irish underage football squads. I believe that the transition process and awareness of this process within organisations in sport has an impact on the quality of the sporting experience for its participants (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016). In a sporting context an athlete is striving to close the gap between where they are in their athletic career, and where they would like to get to. This gap creates challenges for the athlete and requires the athlete to cope with these challenges, known as a transition (Stambulova, 2003).

When speaking with coaches in football, there is often predictions made about young players and the level of the game they can get to. I often hear coaches make the prediction “he or she is going to be an international” and “he has the potential to go all the way.” On the other side of this I hear stories about players who had the ability to get to the highest level of the game but did not reach their potential due to a lack of “motivation,” “discipline” or “commitment.” What is absent from these stories is what support is or was required for individuals at different points in their pathway to overcome the challenges they encounter as they pursue their athletic career? The transition of athletes along a pathway or lack thereof is often based on the support provided around the athlete (Pummell et al., 2008; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavalley, 2014; Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016; Morris, Tod & Eubank, 2017). Different individuals can provide different types of support to an athlete depending on their context, with coaches providing informational support, parents providing emotional support and the athlete themselves can be encouraged to rely on or develop their own coping resources in response to challenges (Finn and McKenna, 2010). Through understanding the transition process we as sports psychology practitioners can help athletes, coaches and organisations

navigate the transition process. Likewise, as practitioners research in this area can inform the development of support processes in preparation for transition events.

From reading this literature, I noticed that a lot of the literature had been based on the junior-to-senior transition. However, Morris, Tod, & Oliver (2016) highlight how skills acquired during preceding transitions can influence subsequent transitions. My question was, what is occurring during the preceding transitions that subsequently influences later transitions?

What I found was there are challenges with being a member of the international team environment and although this remains consistent throughout, there are also age specific challenges. Along with these challenges for the individual, they will also experience critical moments on the pathway that will result in the individual closing the gap or increasing the gap between where they are in their athletic career, and where they want to get to (Stambulova, 2003). However, through developing the individual's psycho-social competencies and external support the individual can cope with these challenges.

The coaches I speak with on a regular basis acknowledge and understand the challenges the players encounter, however, they do not know how they can support them beyond what happens on the pitch. I now encourage players, coaches, and clubs to think about what they need to support players in coping with the challenges they will encounter and what support needs to be provided around the player to facilitate this. The science has informed my practice and how I challenge others to think about the talent development process from a psycho-social perspective rather than just a playing ability perspective. Through engaging in the research process, I have met the competency of being able to design and implement an original research question, which has informed my practice. As a scientist-practitioner, I had produced science and disseminated the ideas back to the profession to advance understanding of transition theory (Lowman, 2012). I now had up to date knowledge on the transition

process, but how could I translate this to inform interventions and evaluate their effectiveness?

### **Reflection 2: Research informed support**

As I was not directly involved with the teams and coaches that were the subject of my first study, I was not able to influence the environments in which they operate. The findings from the study made me reflect on the environment in which I operate working with student athletes, and how I can incorporate the findings to support them in their transition process through higher education.

Within the findings of my research it was highlighted how the individual must develop coping strategies to continue to progress within their environment. The environment the athlete is located within plays a key role in facilitating the development of these characteristics. These findings made me reflect on the work I carry out and the environment in place for the student's athletes I work with in AIT. When I critically examined this environment, it was underpinned by an ego-centric involved climate where athletes compared their achievement with one another to achieve a standard as defined by the sports scholarship scheme (Duda, 1992). This was reflected in the sports scholarship scheme providing payments to student athletes based on having achieved a standard specific to their sport. Based on achieving this standard the student would receive two payments throughout the year. During my first year managing the sports scholarship scheme I observed how students would only engage with the support if it were compulsory as part of the sports scholarship scheme. This was despite the support service providers potentially being of benefit to them in developing the competencies necessary to manage their dual career demands. Due to the reward structure in place the student athletes were mostly concerned with getting paid rather than improving.

The following year I changed the reward structure in place for the sports scholarship scheme with the objective of changing the motivational climate within the scheme. The objective was to facilitate a mastery-orientated environment where self-improvement, learning and mastery of one's own personal competency was the goal (Duda, 1992). This resulted in a change in the reward structure for the student athlete, whereas instead of receiving payment for achieving a specified standard, the student athletes would be receiving funding for expenses associated with being a student athlete rather than being paid directly. The supports would be available to all student athletes if they wished to engage with the support. If students wished to avail of the funding available, they had to provide an explanation on how the funding would support them in improving as a student athlete.

Facilitating this change within the environment resulted in what I believe to be a positive change in the participants on the scheme motivation for engaging with the scheme. What I observed was students engaging more with the supports provided and asking for more support that could facilitate their development. This change also had the by-product of me as a practitioner placing more of an emphasis on the type of environment, we were facilitating rather than checking student athlete compliance to get paid.

As a scientist practitioner, the science I had carried out led to a change in the way I worked not only as a consultant with athletes, teams and coaches but also how I conceptualised the facilitation of an environment to support student athletes. In making these changes although I could conceptualise how the changes led to changes in behaviour of the student athletes, I had no way of evidencing this change. I had become a consumer of science with science informing my intervention (Harwood, 2016; Lowman, 2012), however I could not demonstrate practice-based evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention. This experience

made me reflect and think about how I can become an evaluator of science who can examine the effectiveness and the effect of interventions (Harwood, 2016; Lowman, 2012).

### **Reflection 3: Monitoring and evaluation course**

The need for sport psychology practitioners to document their effectiveness was identified as a pressing issue as far back as 1998, and one that is essential for the growth of the profession (Streat, 1998). Systematic evaluation of interventions has been identified as a professional practice issue facing the profession and despite its importance has been not standard practice within the profession (Grove, Norton, Van Raalte, and Brewer, 1999). I undertook a monitoring and evaluation course for physical activity programmes during my training period, and it provided a basis for developing and integrating an evidence base for the effectiveness of the interventions I was undertaking.

Prior to undertaking the CPD course I viewed evaluation as something that was carried out once the intervention was completed, with the aim of demonstrating the impact of the intervention. However, through the course I realised that it can be more than that. My first realisation was the difference between monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring is the extent to which a programme is being delivered as intended, whereas evaluation occurs less often and relates to the effectiveness and impact of the intervention (Coulter, 2008). However, it is about more than accountability and the impact of a proposed intervention, it is about learning for programme improvement. This change in perception about the objective and process of evaluation enabled a better understanding of how this integrated with me as a scientist practitioner. A key point made by those delivering the course was “process always, outcome often.” This means that we should always monitor the delivery process of a programme as this can tell the story about why a proposed intervention resulted in a specific outcome.

Outcome evaluations tell if an intervention worked, but do not give the full picture about why it worked.

As practitioners we engage in a case conceptualisation of the client's presenting issue. Based on the case conceptualisation we implement an intervention underpinned by an evidence-based theory. Based on this we examine if there was a change in the client's presenting issues. Within a monitoring and evaluation framework a similar process is engaged in referred to as a logic model. A logic model refers to a project's resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes, and how these come together to produce a change in results or people (Coulter, 2006). Through the development of a logic model, a framework is provided to monitor and evaluate the implementation and outcomes of an intervention.

A key aspect of understanding and advancing knowledge from practice on the effects and effectiveness of interventions (Harwood, 2016), is identifying the objective of the evaluation. The identification of the primary objective or question the evaluation seeks to answer will inform the methods utilised to evaluate. Three broad objectives of evaluations have been identified: (1) to judge the programme effectiveness, (2) to improve the programme and, (3) to generate knowledge (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney & Robinson, 2002). Reflecting on my own evaluations I had only engaged in effectiveness evaluations to this point. Although this provides evidence to the stakeholders I am working with, an improvement oriented, or knowledge-focused evaluation can feed back into the development of the professions understanding of interventions.

The course I completed was focused on a pragmatic approach to evaluation. The aim was to be able to integrate monitoring and evaluation within the projects that we are working on based on the constraints of the project. This is based on the acknowledgement that experimental designs do not fit with the nature of applied practice settings (Anderson et al,



2002). Within the pragmatic evaluation course, we were asked the question, what is the one thing you want to be able to answer about your programme at the end of your programme delivery? Through developing a clear focus for the evaluation, the resources, constraints, process, and outcome evaluations can be aligned to answering the question. It has been advocated that a case study approach provides a nonexperimental approach to evaluation that provides a holistic evaluation picture (Anderson et al, 2002). Rigorous planning, multiple assessments repeated throughout and collecting data in a logical manner can inform the explanations for the effectiveness of case studies and the improvement and knowledge of the profession of sports psychology.

For me as a scientist practitioner going forward, acknowledging that I can develop the profession beyond experimental designs and through my practice was an important realisation for me. The pragmatic evaluation course helped me see the link between science and research to understand the effectiveness of interventions and to be able to disseminate information back into the profession (Harwood, 2016).

#### **Reflection 4: The way forward**

Several reasons have been identified for the gap between the researcher and practitioner perspectives (Tunison, 2016). A criticism of academic work has been that it is too focused, and too disconnected from practice or common sense, for it to be relevant to practice. In contrast, academics can perceive practice as outdated and closed to innovation. The way in which research is conducted has been suggested as a reason for this and subsequently models have been developed to address this gap (Collins & Collins, 2019). Tranfield and Starkey (1998) offered a conceptualisation of mode 1 and mode 2 research whereby research informs practice and practice informs research. Mode 1 research refers to research which is disciplined based and is initiated by the investigator to develop the theoretical understanding

of a specific research question. Mode 2 research is problem-based and focused on the context in which it takes place.

If I were to start my professional doctorate journey again with the knowledge I have now, I would change two things. First, with the research I carried out on transitions, I would have followed up with a case study on how I implemented this knowledge of transitions within an applied setting. In other words, the research study would have been mode 1 research where I extended knowledge of the literature. The case study would have been mode 2 research where I utilised mode 1 research to solve a problem in a specific context. The second aspect would be to integrate a formal monitoring and evaluation plan within the applied case studies, with a linked case conceptualisation and logic model. This would provide a comprehensive theoretical underpinning for applied interventions and reporting of the results.

**Conclusion:**

I was asked recently what my goals are for the next few years after the professional doctorate course is complete. To develop the profession of sports psychology we need both evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence to sustain and develop the scientist practitioner model (Lowman, 2012). The professional doctorate course has developed my ability to carry out research to extend theoretical knowledge and understanding of an area of study. It has also developed my ability to support clients underpinned by ethical and evidence-based practice. My future as a scientist practitioner is to carry out applied research closing the loop to engage in practice-based research.

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## **Reflective Practice**

### **Commentary**

#### **Introduction:**

This reflective practice commentary is split into four parts, with one common theme throughout: attempting to understand why I decided to study a professional doctorate in Sport Psychology. The first part chronicles my experiences during year one of the professional doctorate where I felt an incongruence in the work I was undertaking with clients. The second part chronicles my experiences during the second year of the professional doctorate where I utilised a professional philosophy that led to positive outcomes for clients. The third part reflects my development as a scientist practitioner and the impact research had on my applied work. The fourth and final part attempts to answer the question why I studied a professional doctorate and how being able to answer this question led to a more congruent professional philosophy.

#### **Part 1: Making an impact. Was I meeting the client's or my own needs?**

My professional Doctorate journey started in June 2017 with a teambuilding event organised by the course leader in LJMU. We were nearly finished the round of crazy golf when one of the supervisors on the course asked me the question "why did you decide to study a Professional Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology?" I responded that I wanted to study a doctorate level qualification while at the same time getting the supervised experience required to work as an applied sports psychologist. I believed with supervision I could develop the skills to make an impact with the clients I was working with and going to work with in the future.

The answer I gave was based on my experiences since stage 1 training. After completing my MSc in 2014 I began working with clients in 2015 and found despite having developed

theoretical knowledge in stage 1 training, I was unable to help them. The theoretical knowledge I had gained allowed me to see the link between the presenting issues and theory, but I felt unable to translate this into support and an intervention. This lack of confidence and fear of not knowing what interventions to choose was the main reason why I undertook the professional doctorate (Tonn & Harmison, 2004). Through beginning the Professional Doctorate, I felt more comfortable working with clients due to the supervised support provided and I had a newfound eagerness to make an impact in the lives of clients as an applied practitioner. The motivation to help others has been identified as a reason practitioners enter the profession, but further reflection often reveals motivations that the practitioner is not often first aware of (Tod, Andersen & Marchant, 2009). At this point I had not explored my own philosophical motivations, values and congruence between my beliefs and a therapeutic framework. This lack of exploration subsequently became apparent during my first year of the professional doctorate (Lindsey et al, 2007; Poczwardowski et al, 1998).

The start of the professional doctorate course coincided with me starting a new role as Assistant Sports Officer in Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). This role consists of managing the Sports Scholarship Scheme and the Soccer club programme in AIT. As part of the sport scholarship aspect of the role I was tasked with delivering and arranging workshops and providing one on one support to student athletes. Having worked in the institute for the previous 12 months I believed I had a good understanding of the student athletes needs to be able to develop and deliver support to them. Basing my plans on my experience observing the environment I set about meeting each student and providing a problem focused CBT informed approach. The group workshops consisted of mental skills, exam preparation and lifestyle management as an elite athlete. I believed that I could help the students overcome the issues they were encountering daily through this type of support. The reality was quite different.

The one on one support provided initially led to good responses from the athletes. The athletes could see the link between the CBT support provided and issues they were presenting with. I gained confidence in my ability as a Sports Psychologist when I was making the link between what I knew and what the client presented with. I was then able to provide them with suggestions for a path forward. I was always asking myself the question, “what does the athlete require from me now?” and trying to provide the answer for the athlete. I worked with one client who had difficulty in managing his time and we identified several areas where he could improve. However, as time progressed, I found that the clients were not engaging with the solutions that we were discussing in the one on one sessions. I experienced the same issues with the group workshops I delivered. I tried to make the workshops interactive but received limited feedback from the student athletes. In the workshops I provided suggestions for issues the students were encountering and despite getting good feedback in the post sessions evaluations, I always had the feeling that what I was delivering was not resulting in an impact on the student athletes. When I reflected on this period, I realised I was providing a sticky plaster over client's issues with mental skills training. I did not possess a deep understanding of the interventions I was utilising. The feeling of ineffectiveness was down to me not delivering the type of sports psychology support I believed in, which was to meet the needs of the person or group by supporting their autonomy (Tammen, 2000; Collins et al, 2013).

I brought what I was feeling as a practitioner up with a student towards the end of the first year, asking for his feedback on the support provided during the year. He made the point that the workshops need to be more applied, in that the students need to be able to go out and experience what they are learning in order to be able to integrate it into their practice. This conversation had an impact on my work in several ways. Firstly, I realised that I was delivering what I know to the student athletes and not taking into consideration what they



would like to know. I was not facilitating them transferring the knowledge from the workshops into the context they were operating in. Secondly, I reflected on this point to also review the one on one work carried out with sports scholarship students. I came to realise that I was trying to find a solution to the client's problem without first getting to know who they are and their context. I was trying to impose a solution on to them rather than working with the person in front of me to help them find their own solution. I was working on trying to develop solutions to the athlete's performance problems even when being confronted with non-performance related issues. The adoption of the “expert” problem solver role has been identified in trainees when initially interacting with clients (Tod et al, 2009). I was in a beginner phase in my development as a practitioner and believed I had to provide concrete interventions to justify my work as a practitioner (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

At this point at the end of my first year on the Professional Doctorate course I realised that I was not being true to my values as a person to care for the person in front of me. What I had been focused on during my first year was on making an impact. This was in part due to taking on a new role and wanting to show that I was good at my job to develop my confidence as a practitioner. I realised that there was an incongruence between my value of trying to meet the needs of the person in front of me, and what I was providing in terms of trying to offer solutions to individuals problems. I was trying to meet my need for a display of competence rather than the needs of the person in front of me. Andersen et al (2004) highlighted how athletes appreciated consultants who get to know the whole person rather than just the athlete. I realised at this point that I needed to change my approach to providing support to meet the needs of the individual in front of me through a client led approach to service delivery.

## **Part 2: Alignment of the person with the practitioner**

At the DSEP conference in December 2018 the staff and students from LJMU sat at the same table for the meal on the first night of the conference. I sat beside the same supervisor I had spoken to on the first day of my course. During the meal the supervisor asked the same question that he posed to me on the first day of the course: “Why did you decide to study a Professional Doctorate?” I gave the same answer as I had on the first day of the course, I wanted to avail of applied supervision and carry out research at doctorate level. I gave the same answer to the same question as I had at the start of the course and I did not think anything of this answer at the time. However, my aim as an applied practitioner had changed since the first day on the course, and subsequently my approach to applied practice had changed.

My values as a practitioner during my second year, I believe, had become more aligned to me the person. This came about through a conversation with a classmate during the start of the second year of the professional doctorate. I asked him how he worked with players being released from academy football as I was working with a team where players would be released from the programme. I had acknowledged within my own practice, asking the clients to change their thoughts in relation to the experience would not be enough to support their well-being. Within my practitioner development a predominant source of influence was the peer group on the professional doctorate course (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). My fellow classmate advised me that he utilised an Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach to working with clients. I read up on ACT and this approach and I believed it aligned with how I approached my life. As a person I acknowledge I will experience difficult moments and despite potentially not being able to change the situations, I can choose my response to the situation. Instead of trying to control my thoughts, I try and live in the present moment

acknowledging what I am experiencing and choosing to respond in a way that aligns with my values. In my own life I try to remain mindfully present as a person when working with others. I try to align my behaviour to my values of trying to be a trustworthy and honest person who cares for the people that I interact with. This approach also aligned with my practitioner philosophy of facilitating the client in becoming their own expert as they understand their own values, behaviours, and experiences.

The acknowledgement of my values as a person resulted in a change in me as a practitioner when working one on one with clients. I now tried to get to know the person in front of me and help facilitate the person in front of me to develop their own solutions to their own problems. Through aligning my values as a person with a theoretical approach as a practitioner, I moved from a less directive approach to adopting an approach where I facilitated the client in their own journey of change. The adoption of ACT as a consulting approach allowed me to take a more present approach to supporting the client and listening to their story. I was encountering athletes being released from their sport, suffering setbacks and for the first time as a practitioner the anxiety of trying make a link between the presenting issue, theory, and a potential solution, was no longer there. When first engaging with clients I was more focused on myself compared to the client, whereas now I was able to listen attentively to the client to develop the working alliance (Tod et al, 2009).

The alignment of personal values with a therapeutic approach resulted in a change in the way I delivered group workshops also. Instead of delivering within a lecture style setting I moved the workshops to the indoor hall and delivered the workshops through different sports. The aim was to deliver a more interactive, experiential series of workshops that progressed throughout the year. The workshops progressed from basketball examining a present moment focus, to athletics examining values driven behaviour, to the final workshop examining

volleyball and response to failure. Although the workshops were underpinned by an ACT approach the practical aspect allowed for the participants to explore their own interpretation of what was being presented (Hayes, 2004). Utilising ACT as an underpinning framework and as a practitioner trying to remain present while delivering the workshop I could respond more to the needs of individuals as the workshop developed. I had moved from the “expert” to the “guide” of the participants learning. Although I got the same positive feedback when comparing the workshops to the previous year, the style of delivery and underpinning theoretical approach utilised facilitated a congruent approach aligned to my values.

With a change in therapeutic approach from CBT to ACT I experienced my first individual consultancy where the congruency of my approach, I feel, led to a positive outcome for the client. At the time as a Professional Doctorate group we had had a workshop on Motivational Interviewing (MI) can complement a theoretical approach to inform the working alliance (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). The client presented to me with having experienced a panic attack recently and was having difficulty motivating herself for competing in Athletics. Having recently completed the workshop on motivational interviewing I found myself being less focused on the internal dialogue that I had been engaging in, within previous consultations. I placed a focus on consciously listening to the client and probing for a better understanding of her perspective. Although I utilised an ACT approach to guide my support when attempting to conceptualise the client's presenting issues, the development of the relationships and understanding the whole person is what facilitated the intervention. What occurred for the first time was my clarification seeking and probing for a better understanding facilitated the client in coming to their own solution (Bricker & Tollison, 2011). The quality of the relationship that was developed facilitated the intervention and not the use of a specific theoretical approach. This was summed up for me when after the second session with the client, the client remarked that she knew that she did most of the talking but that it helped. It

has been found that athletes appreciated the opportunity to talk, and this can be a form of intervention for the client (Tod et al, 2009).

Two things were highlighted to me as a practitioner because of this experience. Firstly, Orlick & Partington (1987) note that excellent sports psychologists possess personal qualities and good interpersonal skills and then go on to learn about their field through experience and academic literature. I realised that I had previously allowed the theoretical approach I adopted to pre-occupy my approach to consulting when the quality of the relationship determined whether the theory had the opportunity to come alive. Secondly, understanding and working with the whole person can help the client identify their own values and re-alignment of value driven behaviour. I now understood my role as supporting the client in the changes they want to make, not the changes I think they should make. My values as a person and practitioner influence the development of a therapeutic alliance, which in turn influences the intervention (Tod & Andersen, 2005).

### **Part 3: Development as a Scientist-Practitioner**

Throughout the course I was conscious that I was being trained to be a scientist-practitioner and that research and practice inform each other (Jones & Mehr, 2007). I undertook my first research study on the transition through underage international football squads. As a scientist I saw a gap in the research, in that previous research had identified transitions that precede the junior to senior transition, influence the subsequent junior to senior transition (Morris et al, 2016). As a practitioner I also saw an issue in the talent development pathway in Irish football. The talent development programme was based more around talent identification rather than development and support of the players. As a scientist practitioner I wanted to understand the process of transition through the underage international squads to be able to answer the question of how we can support young players development in Ireland.

Over the space of three months I carried out data collection and interviewed coaches from the U15-19 international teams. This was my first time carrying out qualitative research and, in the beginning, I did not appreciate the philosophical underpinning to qualitative research. As I carried out the interviews with the coaches, I came to view the qualitative research process as a function of the relationships you develop with the interviewee. The information gained from a semi-structured interview approach stems from the interviewee's interpretation of the environment, their background, and their experiences. I was able to develop an initial relationship with the interviewees as I was able to approach the key gatekeeper which facilitated access to the coaches. From this perspective the coaches were willing to take part in the research. Additionally, all of the coaches expressed an interest in the subject I was studying as they all mentioned that psychology was something, they all believed played a key role in player development. Part of me felt at the time that they saw taking part in the research as serving them as coaches in terms of possibly getting access to more resources for their programmes.

In contrast when completing my second study, I was carrying this out with the heads of youth development in the clubs around Ireland. I contacted several clubs highlighting the results of my first study and how the research might benefit their club. I got no response to take part by a few clubs. With those that I did undertake interviews with, I found that there was a reluctance to answer some of the questions that I posed to them. I often found that the questions that I asked and the answers that I was provided with were not linked in the way I interpreted them. I felt some heads of youth development viewed this as an opportunity to air their frustrations with the Football Association of Ireland rather than answer the question that was asked.

When reflecting on both research studies and the data collection process I came to view the research as a process of social construction between two people and the quality of the data collected was related to the quality of the relationship that was established, and the individuals cultural understanding of their environment. As a researcher I was working as a contractor with the FAI and this may have facilitated the development of the relationship with the FAI coaches and a barrier to a relationship with the club coaches in the research. I had a better understanding of the FAI's processes and perspectives compared to understanding the context of each club. This would have influenced my research questions and interpretation of the answers. Although not intentional, an awareness of the impact I (the researcher) have on the data collection process prior to data collection can potentially mitigate the barriers to data collection. In addition, the clubs were in competition with one another and may been reluctant to share information that could be passed on to other clubs. In contrast it was in the interest of the coaches with the international teams that they share their knowledge to support clubs developing players for them.

Despite this I had developed the ability as a scientist practitioner to observe a gap in the research and applied practice, generate a hypothesis, and test the hypothesis to gather the desired information (Shapiro, 2002). I was now able to answer the question as a researcher and applied practitioner on how we can support young footballers' development in Ireland and the transitions they experience. What I found was that as players progress there are challenges associated with playing international football and with the age group the player is within. There are some critical moments along the talent development pathway which can influence whether a player progresses or regresses as an athlete. Despite this there are ways in which the transition can be eased by those who surround the athlete. I analysed the results of the study thematically and organised the results around an ecological dynamics framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Through an ecological dynamic framework, I tried to

understand how different individuals and environments interact to influence the talent development process.

As part of completing my UEFA A coaching licence I was asked by the tutors to give a presentation to the group of coaches on the role of the sports psychologist in football and my research on talent development. I presented my research findings to the group and afterwards I gave the group the opportunity to ask questions. One of my final slides presented was an ecological framework of the talent development environment for underage international footballers. The tutor pointed out that with so many factors involved in talent development that it is extremely hard to “make it” as a professional footballer and that players who do make it can be lucky that these conditions come together for them. As I reflected on the point made by the tutor where the “conditions come together for them” and on my research where the importance of the environment was at the forefront, I came to realise I can, as a practitioner, influence the environment to support the individual rather than just intervene with the individual.

The comment by the coach made me question the support and environment being provided to student athletes within AIT. Within my primary placement I was working with student-athletes who were experiencing issues such as scheduling, fatigue, coaching and finance issues and attempting to help them individually (Cosh & Tully, 2014). The research I carried out helped me develop an awareness of the importance of the organisation and culture.

According to achievement goal theory athletes are motivated through their goal involvement, described as being task or ego involved (Miller et al, 2005). Task-orientated athletes base their assessment of their own ability on their perception of mastery, while ego orientated athletes base their assessment on being more able than others. Ego-orientation has been associated with maladaptive behaviour, stress, and anxiety (Nicholls et al, 1990). Despite the



athlete being predisposed to a goal orientation the environment in which the athlete is located can also influence the athlete's goal orientation. A mastery orientated environment is characterised by learning and coping. In contrast a performance climate is characterised by comparison and competition (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002).

When reflecting on the motivational climate created for student athletes during my first year, I believe it was an ego orientated environment to an extent. The students' sports scholarship was contingent on them engaging with the scheme. The students would receive cash payments in two instalments based on their engagement with support. A lot of the time it felt like students were only engaging in support to meet the criteria for receiving payment and not for mastering their own development. I believe this created an environment which resulted in introjected motivation for the individual athletes and they engaged in support out of sense of obligation to receive payment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I wanted to change this and in my second year I changed the reward structure for the student athletes. Instead of receiving payments directly the money was set aside for anything that the students felt would help them improve as an athlete. The aim was to facilitate students focusing less on criteria for receiving payment and more on utilising the supports available to improve. In addition, more opportunities for athlete interaction was facilitated through group training sessions and workshops. This was based on Fletcher & Sakar (2012) where they identified the perceived level of social support among elite athletes helped protect elite athletes from the stressors they encountered.

As a practitioner the research I carried out influenced the way I provided support as a practitioner. I focused less on the individual and more on the environment. I realised at the beginning I was providing support but not helping the person as their motivation for change was being controlled externally. I was now looking at the person as an individual within a

specific context. While still viewing my role as being able to support the individual to influence their context, I could also support the individual through influencing their context.

#### **Part 4: Why did I study a Professional Doctorate in Sport Psychology?**

Between my first and second year of training to be a Sport and Exercise Psychologist there had been a change in the way I worked as a practitioner. This change was from being a CBT practitioner led approach to a client led ACT approach. I also learned to place an emphasis on working on the relationship between the client and practitioner as I now viewed this as being instrumental to the process of change for the client. I had experienced what I believed to be a congruent therapeutic approach, which has been identified as being key the therapeutic outcomes (Tod & Andersen, 2005). I feel I developed a congruent therapeutic approach, as the more I reflected on why I found ACT and focusing on the quality of the relationship useful, the more I learned about myself as a person. I believe that after the two years on the professional doctorate course, I could now answer the question “why did you decide to study a Professional Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology?” Strupp (1978) believes that “the therapist's theoretical orientation... is deeply rooted in one's biography. To understand the mainsprings of a therapist's theoretical orientation, one has to understand the therapist as a person” (p314). After completing my first research study I observed the impact of those around the athlete on the athlete's development. After completing the study, I began to reflect on the impact others have had on my development as a person and why I decided to study a professional doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology.

The journey to study Sport and Exercise Psychology would have started with my first football training session when I was eight years of age. Although I asked my parents when I was six years of age could I play with the local team, they both said I was too young, and I had to wait until I was eight years of age. This resulted in me practicing for two years to be ready to

play when I was eight years old. Although my parents had no interest in sport, they both facilitated me in pursuing my interest. This interest resulted in challenges throughout my journey as a young football player where I was not making the team, suffering injuries, or transferring teams. Although there was often not much my parents could do, they did provide an opportunity to talk about what was happening which would clarify my thought process and most often I would be able to identify how to move forward. Although at the time I viewed this support as just my parents supporting their child, it was also a lot more than that. They facilitated my interest in sport, without imposing their values or lack of interest in sport on me. They created a safe environment in which I could speak about what was on my mind. Most of the time the support they provided from resulted in me figuring out my own way to move forward. Developing my interest in sport and the support provided by my parents while in sport, provided me with awareness of the importance of caring relationships in a person's psycho-social development.

As a practitioner I now place the importance of developing the relationship over the theoretical orientation being utilised (Rogers, 1959). Before relying on the theoretical orientation, I try to understand the person's story, be non-judgemental and support the person's autonomy. The change for me as a practitioner in being able to deliver a person-centred relationship has been in developing the technical skills associated with motivational interviewing such as utilising open questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries (Mack et al, 2017). Looking back on the support I received from my parents and the support I now provide to clients, it is often the case that with a caring relationship established between two people and the opportunity to discuss an individual's circumstance, the person can identify how they can move forward. I now view my role as creating a space for the individual to identify how they can move forward.

When on my UEFA A licence coaching course as part of my job in AIT I met a coach, who was working with a player that I used to play with when I was young. I was in the same group as the coach and I was invited to his club to observe training for a day. I met the player I used to play with, and we spoke for a while before he went to training. Between this block and the second block of the course the coach and player were talking and the coach asked what I was like as a player. The player responded, “he was a top pro even at ten years of age!” We had a laugh about this during the course, but it was brought up again for me at the end of the course when the tutor noted my professionalism on the course. This was after numerous people on the course did not hand their assignments up on time. I did struggle myself to hand up the assignments on time, but I organised my time and even helped some others on the course with their assignments. When I reflected on this at the end of the course as a practitioner and person, I always strive to be professional and trustworthy. This means that when I say I will do something, I do it to the best of my ability and I try to develop relationships with those I am working which shows I care for them.

When thinking about where I believe these values came from, I thought back to what my father used to say about what he wanted for his children in terms of a career. He used to say “it does not matter what you do as long as you enjoy it and do it to the best of your ability, even if it is sweeping the streets.” I always understood this to mean, that no matter what I decided to dedicate my life to, that I should always choose to do my best even if it is a difficult job or moment. By understanding my values as a person, I was able to understand how my values, and choices influence my own behaviour in life. I acknowledged that there are difficult and pleasant moments in a person's life and to engage in value-driven behaviour I accept the emotions and experiences associated with them. This has been described as a willingness to experience thoughts, emotions, and sensations regardless of whether they are pleasant or not (Gardner & Moore, 2007). This willingness to experience these moments I

believe facilitates me as a practitioner choosing behaviours that enable me to pursue my personal values. In order for me to deliver effective sports psychology support I try to remain congruent with my values as a person, while adopting an ACT approach which aligns with my view of the world and people within it (Lindsay et al., 2007; Poczwardowski et al., 2004).

Reviewing the research I carried out on transitions in underage Irish football, I found that it was not enough for the individual to develop coping resources: the environment had to provide support to facilitate the individual's development. When reflecting on this and why I came to study a professional doctorate in Sports Psychology I began looking at how I had been supported to this point. Firstly, my family placed an emphasis on education from a young age. My mother always told us that she had not finished school and that it was important for all of us to do our best in education. My father had completed a degree in microbiology and was offered the opportunity to study a PhD after his degree or to work for a multinational company. He chose to work for the multinational company. This is something he regretted later in life as he pursued a job over what interested him. Secondly, the idea of pursuing something that I was passionate about while contributing to helping others was something, I learned from those closest to me. Thirdly, the support I had from my family facilitated me in pursuing this interest in studying psychology and later sports psychology. Although there was apprehension on their part in studying sports psychology with the limited job prospects on offer, once my family understood I wanted to pursue my interest in sport, psychology and helping people, they supported me in pursuing the profession.

When I take all three together, the support I had to develop an interest in sport, the values that I learned from those closest to me, and the importance of education within my family, I believe I now understand why I studied a Professional Doctorate in Sports Psychology. Developing this awareness links in with the theoretical orientation I have adopted in a

relationship focused Acceptance Commitment Therapy approach. I acknowledge that this awareness of why I studied a professional doctorate is not the end of my journey as a practitioner. Congruence is a dynamic construct as opposed to something that is arrived at over a period (McDougall, et al, 2015). My values will change over time as I change and develop more awareness of myself and those I work with. Likewise, the people I work with and the organisations will change which in turn influences my congruence.

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## **Reflective Practice Diary**

### **Reflections Key Role 1:**

#### **What have I done since stage 1 training?**

30th June 2017

#### **What?**

Since stage 1 training I have been providing performance analysis support, coaching and sports psychology support teams. After completing the MSc in Sports Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University I worked as a performance analyst with the Tipperary Senior Hurling team. I also began coaching with an academy team, with the goal of achieving my UEFA B licence. This then led on to coaching with the FAI Emerging Talent Programme working with players from 11-14 years of age to support their development in preparation for international underage football. Through this an opportunity came up to work as a football development officer part time in Athlone Institute of Technology, which 12 months later coincided with being appointed to a full-time role as Sports Scholarship Coordinator and Football development officer. This was the time when I began the professional Doctorate in Sport Psychology at LJMU in June 2017.

#### **So What?**

After graduation from stage 1 training, when working with teams delivering sports psychology support or being asked to work with clients to help them with presenting issues, I always felt that I did not know what I was doing. I could identify some links between the presenting issue that I was confronted with and psychological theory or literature, however I could not translate this into an intervention or form of support. I was delivering workshops to teams based on what I knew rather than what the client needed. I always noticed that I was

more preoccupied about what I was thinking “am I helping them?”, “is this useful for them?”, or “do I look like I know what I am talking about?.” I had also experienced an appreciation of sports psychology support by those I was working with, however there was a reluctance to invest in the support due to previous bad experiences of service providers. I did not have enough confidence or knowledge to take what I had learned and apply it in real world settings.

### **Now What?**

These experiences, the self-doubt associated with supporting clients and the bad experience of others when engaging with sports psychology as a profession, are reasons why I wanted to engage in stage 2 training. I realised for me as a practitioner to support clients ethically I needed supervision to make the link between theory and helping individuals with their presenting issues. I also did not want to be someone who harmed the profession and growth of sports psychology through practicing in a way that did not meet the client's needs and harmed those I am working with through not providing a competent service. My goal for undertaking training is to develop the skills and competencies to be able to support the performance and well-being of those I work with.

## **Why did I decide to study a Professional Doctorate?**

June 2017

### **What?**

On the first day of the Professional Doctorate course I was asked the question “why did you decide to study a professional doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology?.” I responded to this question with an answer that I wanted to study a Doctorate Level qualification and to get the supervision required to practice as an applied practitioner. This answer was based on my experience undertaking applied work between the end of stage 1 training and undertaking the professional doctorate. I felt unprepared for the work of an applied practitioner. As a practitioner I wanted to help the clients I was working with, with their presenting issues. To this point I had not been able to translate what I knew from theory into a coherent service for the client.

### **So What?**

When I think back on this answer it is only part of the reason why I am now studying a professional doctorate. I originally started studying psychology because I was interested in the subject. I did not look specifically into sport and exercise psychology as a career as initially I did not think it was a viable career option. As time progressed a coach in the sport of GAA in Ireland was working with a team and led them to a successful season. He was working as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist and it is only then that I considered sport and exercise psychology as a viable career option.

I followed this up by speaking with a student studying a PhD at LJMU in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Prior to this conversation I had viewed sports psychology as being primarily about helping people with their mental skills and only about helping people perform. This

was quickly challenged over the course of the conversation as she explained, “what is the point of working on mental skills such as visualization, when the athlete might have a poor relationship with the coach or be going through a difficult time in their personal life. No amount of mental skills in an example like this will be of use to the athlete.” This challenged my view of what sports psychology was about, and I realised that it was about more than helping athletes, but also helping people in all aspects of their life. This reinforced my view that sports psychology was what I wanted to pursue as a career.

### **Now What?**

After stage 1 training I knew I wanted to work as an applied practitioner and subsequently undertook work with teams and individuals. I soon realised that although I wanted to help people, I only felt comfortable in helping athletes. I was working along a mental skills continuum even though I was being presented with non-performance related issues. I did not feel comfortable moving outside the mental skills area as I could not translate the knowledge from stage 1 training into a support package. I knew as a practitioner, in order to support the individual, I was working with, I wanted to be able to take a whole person approach to support. There was a discrepancy between the practitioner I was being and the practitioner I wanted to be. This was a primary influence on why I decided to study a professional doctorate.

## **Why did I decide to study a professional doctorate? Part 2**

December 2018

### **What?**

During the BPS conference 2018 dinner, I sat beside the same supervisor who asked me the question “why did you decide to study a professional doctorate?” on the first day of the course. At this dinner he again asked me the same question. I did not think much of this question at the time and I gave the same answer. I wanted to study a doctorate level qualification and get supervision to undertake applied practice. However, as time went on over the next week, I began to reflect on this question and all that had happened on the course between June 2017 and now.

### **So What?**

When looking back on the previous year and a half, my motivation for starting the course had not changed. However, the way I viewed my role as an applied sports psychologist had changed. Initially starting out on the course, my motivation was to help people. I consequently adopted a position in my practice where I tried to give the client what I felt they needed. I was overly focused on myself and over thinking my work due to the feeling of anxiety of being found out by those I was working with. At the end of my first year of training in June 2018, I recognised that I was trying to be the expert. Although I had adopted a more holistic approach to conceptualisation and subsequent support, compared to my practice before enrolling on the course, I was being practitioner led and not client led.

### **Now what?**

My motivation at this point was less focused on my role as a “helper” and more focused on the process of change for the client. Having experienced an incongruence in my approach in

year one of training, I was focusing on how I can develop as a practitioner. This resulted in a change of perspective in how I worked with clients and resulted in placing more of a focus on developing a relationship with the client. I also adopted a theoretical approach that was less focused on educating the client on what they should change, but more focused on a present moment awareness and living a values-based life.



### **Why did I decide to study a Professional Doctorate? Part 3**

January 2020

#### **What?**

When I think back to the start of the professional doctorate course in June 2017 and the answer I gave to the question “why did you decide to study a professional doctorate?”, the answer I gave only covers a small part of why I decided to study the course. I did study the course because I wanted to learn the skills of an applied practitioner and carry out research at doctorate level. That answer is simplistic and only highlights a small aspect of my motivation to help others. However, as time progressed my motivation changed from wanting to help or make an impact, to wanting to develop competence as a practitioner. Now when I look back on my motivation for undertaking the course, I was not acknowledging the influence of other people on my development as a person, the reason I have an interest in sport and why I am pursuing this career.

#### **So What?**

When answering this question at the beginning of the course, I was too focused on myself. This was reflected in the work I carried out with clients, subsequently leading to a change in the way I practice focusing more on developing the relationship with the client and facilitating rather than driving the change process. The change in practice I believe suited me as a practitioner as I adopted an ACT approach to consultancy which aligned with me as a person.

When looking at this change in approach and why it seemed to work for me, I have had to try and develop an understanding of what has influenced me in my life. Firstly, my interest in sport was facilitated through my parents, despite them not having an interest in sport. They

did not force me to change and allowed me to explore my own interests. This resulted in me developing my interest in sport and my own motivation for taking part in sport. My parents did not impose their own values on me, and this is something I try and facilitate in the clients I work with. Secondly, my family always put a value on education and my father put a value on pursuing our interests through education. This was based on his experience of deciding to work for a company due to the money on offer over pursuing a PhD. As children we were always encouraged to learn about what interested us. Thirdly, as a participant in sport I suffered injuries, got released from teams, joined new teams and had positive and negative experiences in sport. One thing that was said about me is that I was always a “professional.” I was not the best player on any of the teams I played with, however I would always try and be the most prepared to perform. As I did not have the same ability as others I played with, I would get frustrated when other players were not putting in the same effort as me. Others would go on to play at a higher level, but some of them never reached their potential. This question always puzzled me, why do some reach their potential and others not?

### **Now What?**

Looking back on my own development I did not undertake a doctorate in sports psychology just because I wanted to get supervised experience and undertake doctorate level research. Although that was part of the motivation, my motivation was shaped by those around me and my experiences such as my interest in sport, my interest in attempting to answer questions around talent development, reflection on my values as a person, all shape why I decided to study a professional doctorate. When answering this question now, it is less about what I wanted to get out of the course and more about my journey as a person which ultimately influences the practitioner I am and will be.

## **The HPX Conference**

October 2017

### **What?**

On the 6/7<sup>th</sup> of October 2017 I attended the HPX High Performance in Sport Conference. The objective of the conference was for those involved in high performance sport in Ireland to exchange knowledge, ideas and lessons learned in preparation for the Rio Olympics and how they can impact athletes, coaches, NGBs and high-performance directors in preparation for Tokyo 2020.

On 7<sup>th</sup> December I attended the Student Sport Ireland general meeting where the Head of Delegation for the World University Games reviewed the 2017 World University Games. This was the fifth time the Head of Delegation had travelled in this role to the event. The results of the teams and athletes who competed were presented and the Head of Delegation outlined how it was felt that the results could have been better and that some athletes and teams were unlucky. The first person on the presentation was Shane Ryan who achieved Gold in swimming in the World University Games. The Head of Delegation went on to outline how the whole Irish team was there to support him in his success. It was pointed out that athletics Ireland have asked to meet with the Student Sport Ireland high performance committee to learn how they can prepare their athletes for the Olympics through the World University Games.

### **So What?**

Ken Lynch (high performance athlete development lead in New Zealand) outlined how the focus in his role is on the “gap to gold” for each sport/athlete. Kayan Bool (Talent development lead in the Netherlands) and Finbarr Kirwan reinforced this where they outlined

that each sport and athlete has individual “plan to podium” programmes to deliver sustainable performance for the athlete and organisation. In reviewing performance after the 2016 Rio Olympics Finbar Kirwan (High Performance Director US Olympic Committee) emphasised that pockets of underperformance were identified and key people and processes are being put in place to adapt heading into the next Olympic cycle.

In contrast to accountability and vision presented by the HPX presenters, the Head of Delegation for Student Sport Ireland operated more on the logistical level rather than the processes that are involved in the individuals and teams achieving their potential. The presentation outlined some of the successes, such as Shane Ryan who achieved gold in swimming. The focus was on the logistical challenges of getting people to Chinese Taipei in addition to the climatic conditions. There was no identification of what processes or areas for improvement within the organisation, or individual sports being identified and there was no mention of whether any targets were identified. As was mentioned to me after the presentation, it seemed the presentation was on the logistical preparation involved in getting the team there rather on the overall performance and how the organisation can improve.

### **Now What?**

Comparing both presentations, high performance was presented in two different perspectives: logistical aspects of high performance and processes underpinning high performance. It must be noted the logistical focus of Student Sport Ireland is probably more a factor of resources compared to National Governing Bodies preparing for the Olympics. For me as a practitioner it highlighted how the organisational structure influences the processes that can be implemented, subsequently influencing high performance of individuals within the organisation. This highlighted for me the role of the Sport Psychologist can be about more

than supporting the individual to include the development of individual and organisational processes to facilitate high performance.

## **Responding to unpredictable contexts and events professionally and ethically**

April 2018

### **What?**

I attended the Irish Athletics intervarsity with the Athlone IT athletics team in April. We travelled to Belfast for the competition and we were away for two nights in the hotel. On the first day of competition each member of the team ate at the track around their own schedule. There was food arranged for everyone at the hotel that evening. When we got to the hotel after the day's events, we went straight for food. I went to leave my gear bag back in the room and when I came back everyone was in the que for their food. I had just missed it, but one of the students came up to me to inform me that one of the students got upset when she asked for a salad and one of the other girls on the team made a comment about wanting a salad after competing all day. I then went to check on the student who was being comforted by two other students. I spoke to these students and they advised me that they thought she suffered from bulimia. As her friends knew her better, I went and bought her a salad and asked her friends to keep an eye on her, with me checking in on them later that night and the next day. When we got back to AIT I decided to speak to the counsellor in AIT to raise my concerns and to see if there was an appointment available for the student, to see if the student was engaging in counselling in AIT. I also went to the counsellor about how best to approach the student.

### **So What?**

I arranged to meet the student the following week after one of her exams. This was chosen as I did not want to bring up a sensitive subject before the student undertook an important exam. It also gave me time to speak with the counsellor in AIT to arrange a follow-up appointment

and referral should the student require it. As it was near the end of the semester it might be necessary to refer the student to a practitioner in their hometown. In the meeting I let the student know that I understood she got upset at the intervarsity's regarding the food provided and that I wanted to make sure the student was ok with regard to her eating. The student acknowledged that she does have a problem with her weight and that she is seeing a counsellor about bulimia. This was linked to a breakup she had with a boyfriend earlier in the year. The trigger at the athletics intervarsity's was that she had not eaten well that day and wanted a salad to compensate for the unhealthy eating.

Throughout this conversation I was trying to be bring up a sensitive topic for the individual in a caring way. I wanted the student to know that I was concerned for their well-being, while at the same time listening to her experience before providing suggestions on how we can help. The reason I chose to confront the student was based on a workshop I had attended on suicide prevention, where they emphasized that quite often when someone is contemplating suicide, they want someone to ask them directly "are you thinking about suicide?." I applied the same principle from the workshop to the eating disorder by confronting the student from a caring perspective.

### **Now What?**

This was my first experience in dealing with an eating disorder. It highlighted that the sport psychologist can be the first responder to mental health issues that arise with athletes and that we have to have appropriate referral mechanisms in place. It also highlighted the necessity to confront the issue to ensure the person is getting the appropriate support or to facilitate appropriate support.

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## **BPS Conference 2018**

December 2018

### **What?**

I attended the BPS conference in Belfast on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 and I attended the keynote speech delivered by Paul Wylleman. During the presentation he spoke about his work with the Dutch Olympic committee where he has been appointed as lead of the performance behaviour team after the last Olympic games. He outlined how he has developed a model of support where the role of the sports psychologist is to primarily work with the coaches to deliver the support to the athlete. Paul also highlighted that they had changed the wording of the support team he is head of, from “sports psychology” to “performance behaviour” as this has led to more engagement with the service.

### **So What?**

The week prior to the BPS conference I had been on the first block of my Uefa A license coaching course. On the last day I sat down with one of tutors on the course I had interviewed for my first research study and showed him my initial results to get his opinion. I then showed him an example of what I hoped would come out of the research, and I also showed the coach the model of sport psychology support for Team Denmark. He felt that the model would be useful for him as a coach in terms of engaging sport psychology support and how it links in with him as a coach. However, he pointed out that the term “mental skills” in the model would put players and coaches off. He too, backed up the point made by Paul Wylleman on the impact of the words used on engagement.

**Now What?**

I have been thinking back on the presentation at the BPS and the conversation with the coach and feel that the delivery of sport psychology support within performance environments should primarily be with and through the coach. This does three things: (1) it develops trust between the coach and sport psychologist that the sport psychologist is supporting the team and not just individuals, (2) it facilitates the coach to become self-sufficient in delivering sport psychology knowledge, and (3) it allows the coach to deliver in context/culture specific language that the athlete understands. For my approach to service delivery using performance behaviours as a means of explaining what I do allows me to explain the impact of lifestyle on performance behaviour, which traditional sports psychology research has not been associated with.

## **Talented athlete lifestyle support course**

December 2018

### **What?**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2018, I began the Talented athlete Lifestyle support course with TASS in the Sport Ireland Institute in Dublin. The course is designed to provide education to individuals working with dual-career athletes and was offered to Student Sport Ireland members and members of the Sport Ireland Institute Performance Life Skills team.

On the first day we had to role play in groups with a partner about an athlete we were currently dealing with or had dealt with previously and see how the advisor would work with that individual. I was partnered with the lead of the performance Life Skills team in the Sport Ireland Institute who presented a case where he felt his coach was placing more focus on younger athletes in the year following him competing at the Olympics.

### **So What?**

The issues he presented to me as an advisor was one I had experienced with an athlete I was working with. Before sitting down I was nervous in working with this partner, as this is someone I was trying to make an impression with in terms of demonstrating my competence as a practitioner given his role in the Sport Ireland Institute. My aim was to understand the context he was in, in terms of (1) his previous relationship with the coach (2) how the Olympics went, and (3) what had changed between now and prior to the Olympics. I made the point that it sounded like the coach's perception of him changed rather than anything he was doing different. He made the point that he had never thought of it like that. I then suggested that we arrange a meeting with the coach to discuss some of the issues and he agreed with that.

From this, we had to reflect on the advisor meeting, and he mentioned that I was very calm in the way I handled the issue. He identified that he was aggressive and that I remained calm which led to him being calm and comfortable in my presence. This is something I try and create when working with a client by understanding their perspective, letting them speak openly, asking questions and trying to understand the perspective of everyone in the environment.

I mentioned that the skills that were being covered in the course were topics we have covered in the Professional Doctorate course. I gave my view that when I first undertook the masters in Sports Psychology people used to ask me where I would get a job following the course. I did not know how to answer that question at the time. I highlighted that the skill sets we were developing through courses like this was fundamental to any job in which an employer is looking to support staff in terms of their personal development. I made the point; what employer would not want someone on their staff that could help their staff and organisation to better manage their lifestyle and well-being with a view to improving productivity and performance. The lead of performance lifestyle made the point he had never thought of the work we do in that way.

### **Now What?**

The phrase “I never thought of it like that” really hit home with me. This is something that I often hear when I feel a client makes progress. This often involves seeing another person’s perspective or changing their own perspective on something. This often enables the person to engage in actions in order to resolve the presenting issue. In role play exercise, it enabled the athlete to see the coach’s perspective and engage in a conversation with the coach. The behaviour of the me the support provider, by being calm in front of the client, diffuses what could have been a confrontational conversation.

**Deciding whether to refer a client or not?**

May 2019

**What?**

A sports scholarship student got in contact to meet me about providing sports psychology support. We met and the client presented with having had a panic attack the previous week. The client was on her way home for the weekend to look after the family house as her parents were away for the weekend. However, her boyfriend did not want her to go home for the weekend as he was staying around the college for the weekend. On the way home on the bus they were arguing, and they decided to split up. This resulted in the client getting off the bus and having a panic attack. As a result, the client missed the bus and had to get her friend to pick her up where she was. This posed a question for me on whether I was competent to deal with this presenting issue?

**So What?**

As the client was presenting this to me, I made it clear that I may have to refer the client on if I feel that I am not competent to deal with this. I said my initial opinion was that I could help the client, as I believed it was a normal reaction to receiving the news she did and not a clinical presentation, but I wanted to double check this. Following on from this I looked up the DSM criteria for panic disorder and the client did not meet the definition as the client's presentation was a once off event. I followed this up with a second opinion from my supervisor and he agreed with me about my conceptualisation.

**Now What?**

When the client initially presented with a panic disorder, I had to make a number of judgements within the moment of the consultation. Firstly, I had, outlined to the client my to

the client what I was competent to work with and what I was not. It was important that I did this from the outset in case I had to refer the client. Secondly, I had to judge whether I believed this to be a clinical definition without having the information to hand. Based on this I gave my professional opinion, however I let the client know that I would have to do some research. I believe this facilitated developing the relationship with the client as I showed that I would research the client's presenting issues. Thirdly, by presenting to the client the criteria for panic disorder in the second session and the shared opinion of my supervisor, the client could understand their presenting issue. This enabled a sense of relief for the client. This consultation with the client identified for me the importance of having a referral network but also having the opportunity as a practitioner to discuss presenting issues with fellow professionals.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation Course Review**

June 2019

### **What?**

From the 31st of May to the 2nd of June 2019 I attended a pragmatic evaluation course in Olomouc, Czech Republic. I attended this course on behalf of the Student Sport Ireland research committee where my role is to implement a monitoring and evaluation framework within the programme's that are delivered across third level institutions in Ireland. The aim of the course was to aid the participants in developing the skills to monitor and evaluate the programs that we were all working on. The course was delivered by researchers from a health policy and health promotion academic backgrounds and this provided me with an insight into an area of research I had not previously explored.

### **So What?**

I had read about and heard about the importance of monitoring and evaluation, however I did not have a clear understanding about how to go about delivering monitoring and evaluation. The course gave a sequential insight into the steps and processes involved in designing and delivering programmes. As a trainee sport and exercise psychologist I was filtering the course content through the lens of a sports psychologist. Previously I had viewed the scientist practitioner model of sports psychology training as being opposite sides of a spectrum. This course brought both perspectives together through developing the concept of a logic model for the programme that is being delivered. This is a concept I had not come across previously which tries to capture the complexity of a programme in attempting to achieve a specified outcome. The model then highlighted how multiple activities can interlink and influence subsequent outcomes. Within the model different activities are underpinned by theory which

informs delivery of programme. This approach to developing and delivering programmes captures and acknowledges complexity and highlights the key aspects of programme delivery or possible prioritisation of resources.

### **Now What?**

From an applied sports psychology perspective developing logic models with stakeholders at the beginning of a programme can highlight the complexity of what is being attempted within the programme of support. Like participatory research, it can facilitate stakeholders understanding their role within an intervention and the factors that are critical for the success of a programme. Sports Psychology has been criticized as often being unable to evidence its impact and this is perceived as a barrier in terms of the development and acceptance of sports psychologists as result. Developing logic models pre-intervention can identify evaluation points and areas to evaluate in attempting to evidence the impact of sports psychology.



## **Adapting service delivery to different contexts**

February 2020

### **What?**

My professional philosophy places an emphasis on the motivational climate and group functioning within the environment. Through comparing my work within my primary placement with my consultancy work within football the dynamics of each environment have a significant influence on the intervention process used. This requires adapting service delivery to the organisational context. Working within my primary placement there are a lot of different people that influence the context of the individual student athlete who need to be on board in order to influence the environment. In contrast, within the football clubs I have worked with there is often the coach and the team, with limited ability to influence the parents or those directly outside of the environment.

### **So What?**

This requires tailored approaches to supporting the group of student athletes and the team functioning of the team. With the student athletes this has resulted in me withdrawing the money paid directly to the student athlete, to a system where the student athletes can get funding for sport related expenses. This was done with the aim of facilitating a mastery orientated rather than ego orientated motivational climate. The difficulty in this context is that often in order to make a change within the overall system, it takes a longer period of time as it often involves changing the plans in place across the whole year, communicating with a range of stakeholders and making changes at the beginning of the following academic year.

In contrast with the football teams I have worked with, I can respond to presenting issues through influencing the coach, working with the player or intervening directly with the team.

This requires me to at time to respond more in the moment to presenting issues and requires quick decision making in line with an ethical framework. Often there is little preparation time when being presented with an issue which relies on underlying professional practice philosophy and applying the key ideas from self-determination theory, and achievement goal theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Nicholls, 1989).

### **Now What?**

Both environments require different ways of working to influence the environment due to the organisational structure, processes and relationships with key people within each environment. This relies on me being able to think strategically about the facilitation of environments in both contexts, while also being able to influence change within the football context quicker compared to student athletes. The students athlete role requires me to be a facilitator of an environment, where as the football context requires me to be able to respond in context. As practitioner this has enabled me to develop my ability to work in and across multiple scenarios, such as the individual, the team and organisational levels, and with key stakeholders across each of these levels.

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## **Bringing Psychology to the Role**

December 2019

### **What?**

I attended the BPS conference 2019 in Solihull. Two incidents occurred that made me reflect on my journey so far as a trainee sport and exercise psychologist and how multiple roles within the training process have shaped me as a practitioner. The first was a conversation with two MSc students from LJMU at the end of the first day. They were asking me about my research and my role as a sports scholarship manager. A concern for them was what career options exist beyond the MSc in sport and exercise psychology. I explained that from my perspective, when you go on to a job site that there will be limited if any jobs advertised. The way I view it, is that when you speak with people working in sport about sports psychology, they are all interested and acknowledge its importance in sport. Although there are not many jobs in sport and exercise psychology advertised, sport and exercise psychology can be your unique selling point when applying for jobs in other areas. This conversation was followed up with another conversation with a fellow trainee who is nearly finished the independent training route on day two of the conference. We were speaking about our own development and I made the point that as a profession, we could be limiting ourselves by just fulfilling the role of a psychologist. Just like we ask athletes to develop a broad identity to cope with challenges within sport and outside of sport, we as practitioners should look to develop a broad professional identity to cope with challenges we will encounter within the profession.

### **So What?**

What does this broad professional identity as a sport psychologist look like? Firstly, having the competencies to practice in several different ways such as one on one support, group

workshops, delivering to different populations, working with and through the coach, and influencing the environment just to name a few. This broad approach to consultancy can facilitate developing support for clients that best meets their needs. Secondly, related to practice competencies is understanding the theoretical underpinning and assumptions associated with practice in these various ways.

Through developing the competencies and theory to practice in different ways, we as a profession can apply our knowledge beyond the traditional role of an applied sports psychologist. An example from the BPS conference was where Mark Nesti presented on his applied work with Aston Villa FC and how his role is to help facilitate the backroom team functioning. This is related to being able to practice through influencing the organisation's function.

### **Now What?**

Although my role within AIT as soccer development officer and sports scholarship manager is not a Sports Psychology job title or job description, it has enabled me to develop a number of skills and competencies related to being a sports psychologist. Through this role I have worked one on one with athletes, I have designed a psychologically informed support programme for student athletes, I have worked with coaches and through coaches utilising sports psychology, I have delivered applied workshops for athletes and educational lectures for students, I have utilised sports psychology as a coach, and I have carried out research on problems I and others have encountered in practice. When applying for jobs, work or consultancy whether it be as a sports psychology practitioner, lecturer, coach, performance director or other jobs in sport, developing a broad identity as a practitioner enables the profession of sport and exercise psychology to be applied in a variety of ways. These include practice through the individual, group/team and or organisation, and can facilitate psychology

influencing performance and well-being through a broad range of mechanisms. Although the role may not be that of a psychologist, as a practitioner in a job you can bring psychology to the role.

## **Reflections Key role 2:**

### **Developing the Relationship with the Client**

January 2018

#### **What?**

I was reading "How to Support a Champion" by Steve Ingham and there is a part of the book where he asks two athletes he is working with why they finished 4<sup>th</sup> instead of 2<sup>nd</sup> in a race that they should have won. Steve had been working with the athletes for a period of time and had built up a trusting relationship with both athletes. Steve Ingham asked to one of the athletes, was it easier for the them to slow down and save themselves the image of finishing runner up. The reaction from one athlete was to stop the conversation immediately and the other seemed to agree with Steve. When both athletes were competing in the Olympic final some time after this initial conversation and after winning the Olympic final, the reaction of the athlete who dismissed the suggestion was to say that the question Steve posed to them was what he was thinking of and gave him the courage he needed in the final few moments of the Olympic final.

#### **So What?**

Steve as the physiologist, developed a trusting relationship with these athletes in order to be in a position pose such questions to them. He developed the relationship with the athletes where he was congruent with the client and was able to be real, open and honest. Instead of delivering what he knew at the end of the race from a physiologists perspective he supported them from a person first perspective by identifying what the needs of the individual were at a specific point in their development. Fundamentally, "people don't care what you know until they know how much you care" (p234, Ingham, 2016). The question for me is, what is the

process of developing a relationship with a client? how can I facilitate a relationship that is the fundamental component of sport psychology support?

**Now What:**

Having worked with clients during the first few months of the professional doctorate course, I see that I have been placing too much of a focus on what I know, compared to developing a working alliance with the client. Although I have been supporting clients, I am not sure I have been meeting their needs. This book and examples from the book made me think about how I can develop relationships with clients in order to meet their needs at a specific moment in time rather than simply what I know.



**LJMU lecture**

March 2018

**What?**

Martin Littlewood delivered a session on culture and identity as an applied practitioner. Martin began by outlining his identity as a person and as a practitioner and then looked at how he conceptualizes how a relationship forms, grows, matures and then declines or extends. Martin linked his experience as a person, an ex-player and as a practitioner into how he developed his identity and how this relates delivery with individuals, teams and organisations. Martin then challenged us as a cohort to deliver a message or intervention with a football only. Two students gave examples, one with a flat ball and saying what would be the challenges of playing with a flat ball and then asking the team/group how they can pump up the football. Another student gave the example of how they asked the group to do “keepie uppies,” and then you had to try and beat the person next to you. The group was then asked to explore the perceptions around being observed and the anxiety experienced with that. Martin also outlined a session he did with a team where he examined the core identity of the team and asked players to give examples of what they see as the team’s core identity.

**So What?**

The day challenged me to think about how I can be creative with the sessions I deliver to teams and individuals. Martin made the point that it can often feel like a risk to do something creative and there is anxiety associated with that. On the flip side of this it creates a platform for having meaningful conversations if you are posing questions and facilitating/guiding answers in a direction.

It also challenged me to think about my identity as a practitioner and what I view my role as being. The dominant theme from the words that we as a cohort used to describe our role was 'performance'. I think if I was doing this again, I would not have used the word performance. In the list I sent to Martin I put down performance and well-being as being the dominant role of the sport psychologist. At the time I was trying to think of a word that would merge the two aspects together. Reflecting on this, I would use the word flourishing as being the primary function of the sport psychologist. I would explain this as about being concerned about supporting the individual client in all aspects of their life. I think performance can be misinterpreted as being confined to just sport, and well-being can sometimes be misinterpreted by coaches as a practitioner not being concerned with performance. I think by explaining the word flourishing or a word like it, as being concerned with supporting the client to function in all areas of their life, that this captures for me how I view my identity as a practitioner.

After the session finished some of the group stayed behind to speak about what was discussed in the session by Martin. The point was made that although an intervention on culture might be beneficial at the beginning, when a team is in decline this would not be bought into or challenged as not being appropriate. The point was also made that if you have to articulate the culture is it really a culture as a culture is often the unwritten rules and assumptions a group have. Speaking to one of the group on the way home we both came to the conclusion that if you are to deliver an intervention with a team around the idea of cultural identity, then the important aspect of this, is the consequences for the individuals that do not conform to the identity. We both related to experiences where the individual who does not buy in may be the best player on the team. It is whether the coach is willing to outline consequences and follow through that will often determine the success of the intervention. Rob made the point that there are often three types of outcomes on a continuum: good culture with average players,

average players with average culture and excellent players with poor culture. We both felt from reflection that often the performance is reflective of the culture.

### **Now What?**

The session with Martin Littlewood challenged me to think about how I deliver workshops to teams and groups. I often rely too much on PowerPoint and what I know, rather than facilitating what the client knows about a topic. Martin challenged me as a practitioner to think about how we can deliver workshops with limited resources or content. By focusing less on teaching and more on the preparation and process of the delivery, the group can be facilitated in drawing out their own knowledge. What this has taught me for my own practice is that effective workshops can be delivered with minimal materials but good planning.

## **The influence of transference and counter transference on the working alliance**

February 2018

### **What?**

Pepitas et al. (1999) identified transference relationships, facilitative conditions and the working alliance as being facilitative of counselling relationships. Transference has been described as the process by which clients ascribe feelings and attitudes from significant other relationships to the current client-practitioner relationship. This can be in the form of a positive or negative relationship with a significant other or in the form of an idealised relationship the client never had and is projecting this on the practitioner. Likewise, counter-transference is where the practitioner's previous experiences and assumptions also influence the development of the relationship with the client.

### **So What?**

Two clients I have worked with recently have displayed how the concept of transference may affect the current relationship with me as a practitioner. One client has limited contact with her parents and is open to expressing her experiences as she have previously not had a stable relationship at home to express herself. The other client felt over controlled by their parents and responds by getting confrontational to any perception of someone going against what they want to do. This is important to identify from a practitioner point of view, to identify how previous relationships influence the current client-practitioner relationship and potentially other relationships within the environment.

I am also working with an athlete who I get frustrated with as he makes demands of the support staff on the sport scholarship scheme who are willing to support him. Despite this if the support service does not fit in with his schedule then he is unwilling to engage with the

service. The frustrating aspect of this is that he then complains to other athletes, coaches and staff members undermining the support structure in place. This has resulted in a reluctance from some support staff to engage with the student, which further reinforces the cycle of frustration on both sides. This could be a factor that is influencing the relationship I develop with the client and my responses towards the client. As a practitioner I need to recognise the impact other support staff members/the environment may be having on my perception of the student before I engage with the client.

### **Now What?**

Understanding a clients background can provide some context to the presenting issues within a consultation. I would have understood transference and counter-transference as important topics in practitioner-client relationships. However, this is the first time I have seen (or possibly acknowledged) the influence it can have on the consulting relationship. This has allowed me to realise the importance of understanding the client history, their background within and outside of sport in order to provide context about potential reasons for different types of behaviour.

**References:**

Petitpas, A. J., Giges, B., & Danish, S. J. (1999). The Sport Psychologist-Athlete relationship: Implications for Training. *The Sport Psychologist*, 13(3), 334-357.

## **Working with a client on time management and mental skills**

March 2018

### **What?**

During the 2017/18 academic year I worked with a powerlifting student athlete who wanted to work on his mental skills and time management. I adopted a CBT approach during consultations, and I initially believed that I was supporting the client effectively. However, looking back on the support this was not necessarily the case. One moment within the case stands out, where we had moved from working on time management within earlier sessions to work on self-talk in the later sessions. In the post session evaluation, the client outlined that although we were working on self-talk, he thought he was already good at this, and he was right. He was already doing “good” self-talk. This made me reflect on my approach to consultancy at the time.

### **So What?**

At the beginning of the intervention the client stated that he wanted to work on his mental skills. We spoke about all areas of his life and the client also identified that he wanted to work on his time management. Looking back on this initial conceptualisation, when the client identified mental skills as an area to focus on, I did not question this. Looking back now, why did he want to work on something when he felt he was already good at it? It may have been due to the perception of a sports psychologist’s role as being primarily focused on mental skills. At the beginning of the consultation I did not take time to try and understand the client’s perspective of sports psychology and what he viewed the role of the sports psychologist role as being. If I had took time to understand his perspective, it may have led to a better use of the time available to support the client in other ways. I also was in part glad

the client wanted to work on mental skills as I felt this was something that I could help him with.

### **Now What?**

After the work with the client was completed, I realised that I was adopting a mental skills approach to supporting the client even when this type of support may not have been required. I was not taking the time to address the perception of sports psychology and what a sports psychologist does. Although I wanted to work on and with more, than just performance related issues, this may not have been how the client viewed me and my role. This is something I need to clarify when working with clients and explain clearly my role and the type of service I can provide.



## **My perception of competence vs the client's needs**

June 2018

### **What?**

I have been looking back on the support I provided to a powerlifting student athlete during the academic year. I adopted a CBT approach to the support, and we explored the clients time management skills, his mental skills and a decision around attending a competition he was selected for. Throughout the support I took on a leading role in the process. By focusing on the CBT approach and taking on a leading role in the support process, this reduced some anxiety for me as a trainee practitioner. I felt by taking on a leading role, I was helping the client. Reflecting on the support I provided the client; I wonder whether the support I provided was meeting the clients needs or my sense of wanting to demonstrate competence.

### **So What?**

When providing the support, I was conscious that I was demonstrating to the client that I was able to provide the support of a sports psychologist. This resulted in me taking on a leading role within the sessions. I was overly focused on adhering to the CBT approach throughout the support that I did not take the time to get to know the client. This served a function for me; in that it reduced my anxiety when working with the client. We always had something to do within the session and a clear outcome from each session. While not necessarily a bad thing, it was adopted unconsciously at the time.

The need to get to know the client at the beginning was highlighted at the end of the support when the client stated that he already thought he was good at self-talk. I had not taken the time to build the relationship and get to know the client and their lived experience. I had placed the theoretical approach above the quality of the relationship, which went against what

I believed in as an applied practitioner. I was more focused on what we were going to do in each session compared to what the client needed. This was highlighted within the final session when I met the client with what they were presenting with at that moment in time, rather than focusing strictly on the theory.

### **Now What?**

This case highlighted to me how I was not practicing in line with what I believed in as an applied practitioner. This resulted in a highly structured practitioner-led form of support for the client. What I have noticed from the population that I am working with, is that quite often they are highly functioning people. This does not require me as a practitioner changing what they are doing, but providing a space for them to discuss what is happening in their life. This has resulted in me focusing more on facilitating the relationship within the support I provide and exploring alternative theoretical approaches to support that focus less on the practitioner leading the change process.

## **Balancing the needs of the individual and the organisation**

**Date:** April 2018

### **What?**

A challenge I encounter in developing a consulting relationship is putting the needs of the organisation to one side in order to create the conditions for real, open and honest dialogue that meets the needs and concerns of the client. The challenge for me is responding in a way that is congruent with me and the client's needs, while empathising with their feelings. A scenario that occurred recently was where a client did not show up for an appointment despite having arranged the appointment less than twenty-four hours previously.

### **So What?**

My reaction was frustration as another client could have been seen at that time, however I know that time management is something that the client wishes to improve on. I reacted by initially waiting for the client to get in contact, but then tried to consider his point of view that he may feel guilty about not attending the appointment. I got in contact mentioning that he had missed the agreed meeting and that there was no availability to meet for 2 weeks as a result. He apologised and we agreed to meet on Thursday after another client cancelled. I could have potentially ignored the client and he may have withdrawn from the relationship. Instead I tried to show care for his needs by understanding how he might withdraw from the relationship and support provided if this is ignored. I acted on my frustration not by taking it out on the client, but by letting them know what happened had an effect on others. The skill of reacting congruently is not in reacting in a complementary fashion to a negative interpersonal pull from the client, but in a way that facilitates a therapeutically facilitative response that takes into account the client's needs (Greenberg & Geller, 2001).

**Now What?**

As a practitioner in this scenario I tried to facilitate unconditional positive regard for the client despite what had occurred previously. In my dual role as sport scholarship coordinator and providing sport psychology support, there are times when as coordinator there are difficult decisions and conversations with students. This involves being explicit about what role I am speaking to them in, providing support or managing the scheme. What I have done to overcome this is to not only have the conversation, but to provide support on how they can act on the feedback. As I said to one student, it would not be fair to provide feedback as the sport scholarship scheme coordinator and then not provide the support or resources necessary to act on the feedback. I also ask the students what their goals are for the support that is available. The message I am trying to convey is regardless of what was done previously, that I am still available to support them and their needs. For me, unconditional positive regard is based on understanding and listening to the client's story, understanding the client's perception and the relationship that is being presented as it is in that moment.

**References:**

Greenberg, L., & Geller, S. (2001). Congruence and therapeutic presence. In G. Wyatt (Ed.), *Rogers' therapeutic conditions: Evolution, theory, and practice, Vol. 1: Congruence* (pp. 131–149). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

## **Developing the working alliance to enable the client to be the expert**

**Date:** May 2018

### **What?**

The working alliance is a collaborative process between the client and sport psychologist that is based on both parties working together to address the barriers the client is facing. The basis of the working alliance for me is the development of an emotional bond between the client and sport psychologist. For Bordin (1979; in Peptitas et al, 1999) the basis of the working alliance is agreement on goals, agreement on tasks and the development of an emotional bond. According to Bordin once an emotional bond is developed between the client and sport psychologist agreement on tasks and goals becomes much easier.

### **So What?**

I experienced this in a one-on-one with a student athlete who had been dropped from his club team and as a result went playing another sport because his friends and ex-coach wanted him to. This was even though his primary goal was to progress his rugby career. The client mentioned how in the first few months in college he had extra freedom and that he was adjusting to this extra freedom. Over two initial sessions I began by getting to know the client, their experiences and to understand what was happening in their life. I felt it was not my position to tell the client whether to stop playing another sport or not. In the third session we explored his values and whether his behaviour aligned to his values. He was of the view that he was trying to please everyone but that he was going against what he wanted to do and felt under pressure as a result. He felt that he did not know how to tell his friends that he did not want to play as he did not want to let them down. The client highlighted how he had not thought about these things before and that he had not spoken to anyone like this. He thanked

me for giving him a new perspective on what he was thinking and feeling. However, I felt that I had done very little with the client clarifying their own perspective.

### **Now What?**

The conclusion the client arrived at was based on the previous two sessions where I got to know and understand the experience of the client. I established trust by explaining limits of confidentiality, meeting in a room where there were no distractions and communicating respect for what the client was going through by understanding their perspective and feelings. The client was invited to engage in role play, taking on another person's perspective and then his own perspective. If the working alliance is the basis of the intervention, then establishing trust, confidentiality, getting to know the client and inviting the client to engage in the process is the basis of the working alliance.

## References

- Andersen, M. B., & Speed, H. D. (2013). Therapeutic Relationships in applied sport psychology. In Hanrahan, S. J & Andersen, M. B. *Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology* (pp. 3-12). Oxon: Routledge.



## **ACT as an underpinning approach to service delivery**

August 2018

### **What?**

In March 2018 I attended a lecture at LJMU. At the time I had been working with an academy football team providing sports psychology support. The team I was working with were attending a 10-day training camp in Malta over the Easter break. After the training camp players would be released from the academy team as a team would be selected for a competition due to take place in June. Although my role with the team was to support the coach and team function within an autonomy supportive psycho-social environment, I also wanted to help prepare the players for when they are released from the academy. I asked a classmate during the day I attended LJMU how he supports players in the preparation for being released from the academy. He explained that he works from an ACT framework and that he helps them explore their values and value-driven behaviours so that there is a focus on what they can control in response to negative experiences.

### **So What?**

The ACT approach is something I have been exploring in my own practice recently. The approach aligns with how I try and live my life. I try and remain within the present moment and I aim to behave in line with my values. This aligns with attention to the present moment, values and committed action with the ACT framework. I acknowledge that I cannot always change my circumstance, and that this requires me to change my relationship with the circumstance. This aligns with the ACT processes through acceptance of the emotions or the experience and understanding the context in which a person is located.

The final process within ACT, diffusion, is something that I had not overly considered previously. Diffusion refers to the process of disconnecting from language. Through working with clients within a CBT framework, I always felt that even though we were looking to change cognitions sometimes, within a sporting context changing your thoughts is not enough. If you are experiencing a negative event, changing your behaviour or thoughts in order to change how we feel sometimes results in avoidance or experiences that can help a sportsperson grow. The exploration of the concept of diffusion, enabled me to identify what I was experiencing working with clients.

### **Now What?**

Reflecting on my belief about how I live my life I have come to understand that ACT, rather than CBT, better aligns with me as a person. ACT has also allowed me to conceptualize with clients how negative experiences and emotions can still be opportunities for growth as a person and athlete. The ACT approach better aligns with supporting high performing individuals who are for the most part functioning well, and the sports psychologist role quite often is to help them maintain or return to a previous level of functioning.

## **The importance of values and beliefs in behaviour change**

December 2018

### **What?**

At the beginning of the professional doctorate programme of study, I would have classified myself as a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) practitioner. Over the course of the programme of study I have moved from a CBT approach to an Acceptance Commitment Therapy approach (ACT). This came about due to experiences with clients where a CBT approach was not meeting the client's needs and I was utilising it in a more technique focused way. The ACT approach aligns with me as a practitioner as it reflects how I go about my life in trying to stay within the present moment and behave in line with my values.

### **So What?**

Although I have changed my theoretical approach to practice, one constant between the move from CBT to ACT practice is the emphasis I place on alignment between values and behaviours for myself but also the client. I recognize that this is how I try and live my life, and the emphasis within ACT on value clarification and committed action aligns with my beliefs as a person. From what I have seen working with clients is an examination of values and belief systems, and a comparison with actual behaviour, which often leads to the client identifying areas for action. My role is less about making change and more about facilitating the client's own expertise as a result.

### **Now What?**

When working in sport we are often working with people who are flourishing to some extent within their area of expertise. Often there is not anything clinically wrong with them, but a barrier has occurred that is preventing them from growing further. Focusing on values has the

effect of enabling my practitioner values of the client being their own expert and me listening to understand the client's worldview. Through recognizing this as a key aspect of my approach to consultancy it has enabled me to consciously adopt it as part of the ACT approach, where as previously I would have incorporated values with the CBT approach without a clear conceptualization of how it fits.

## **Motivational interviewing and developing the relationship**

April 2019

### **What?**

At the end of the academic year a student arranged a meeting with me to begin sports psychology support. This was during the last week of semester and did not give much time to be able to provide support with the exam period coming up and the summer break afterwards. We arranged to meet, and the client presented with wanting to improve her performance in athletics, as it was felt that this was the primary reason that things were not where she would like in the rest of her life. As we explored her situation, she had experienced break up with her boyfriend recently and was also unsure about whether she had chosen the correct academic course despite being three years into the course.

### **So What?**

Over the last two years of training I have experienced moments where if the scenario presented by the client did not link directly with an issue explicitly covered by theory, I would struggle to help the client. I can think back to a previous case where I referred the client on in a scenario like this. This time I feel that I was more comfortable in appreciating the complexity of the scenario presented by having less internal dialogue with myself while the client was speaking. Through focusing on developing the relationship with the client what I experienced for the first time was the client developing their own solutions to the issues they were presenting with. In the first session I focused more on listening and understanding compared to trying to make links with the evidence and the literature immediately. Instead this time I made notes afterwards and then made the links with the literature. This facilitated

a more present-focused approach in the first session which provided a foundation for the consultancy despite the short time frame that was available to work with the client.

I found in the first meeting as I was unsure of what the client would present with, that I focused more on what was covered in a session about motivational interviewing by Jeff Breckon in the previous professional doctorate session. I focused on reflective listening by repeating what my understanding of what the client said was. What I found was this facilitated further discussion from the client and subsequently further insight. I then explored the client's discrepancy between where they are and where they would like to be and used this as a frame to explore what the client was experiencing. This resulted in further insight into what the client was experiencing outside of sport with her boyfriend and with college rather than just focusing on sport.

### **Now What?**

This was the first time I believe I have consciously listened to a client without the worry of internal dialogue and doubt about my ability to help the client. This was linked in part to the previous professional doctorate session. What I have gained from this initial consultation and the session on motivational interviewing is less of a focus on the theoretical orientation used by the practitioner and utilising core counselling skills regardless of the theoretical orientation.

## **Motivational interviewing and developing the relationship: Reflection part 2**

June 2019

### **What?**

The support for the student athlete experiencing anxiety came to an end in mid-June 2019. In total we met four times which progresses from an intake interview, to exploring mindfulness and present moment awareness, values and values driven behaviour, and post-academic transition options. The support started with me as a practitioner focusing on developing the relationship with the client and then focusing on ACT as a theoretical orientation for the change process. What I found was I played less of a prominent role in the change process through utilising core processes within Motivational interviewing (MI) in conjunction with ACT.

### **So What?**

Three strategies I utilised from MI during the intervention were questioning, listening, and summarising. I used open questions to try and develop an understand of the client's experience. I then listened to what the client had to say. Usually I would have listened to respond or to ask another question, as I felt the pressure was on me as the practitioner to provide a solution. In this case, I listened to reflect to the client what they had just said through summarising. This resulted in me as a practitioner having a better understanding of the client and their experience, and for the client feeling that their perspective was being understood. Through this process I developed the ability to actively listen to the client rather than the dialogue within my head. The support consisted of listening for change talk, where the client identified that she wanted to get back to competing in athletics, and my role was to facilitate the client exploring the options she had in making this change. This then facilitated

ACT being integrated within the support as present moment awareness would facilitate change in response to anxiety, values and value driven action would facilitate change in response to avoidance behaviour and exploring graduate job opportunities.

### **Now What?**

Through utilising MI in conjunction with ACT, a mental roadmap has been created for how I can facilitate the development of the relationship with the client and how this links with the theoretical orientation I am adopting. I have moved from previously implementing the theoretical approach over developing the relationship, although I believed the relationship is important in the change process. This case was the first time I felt I could really listen to the client. This came about through focusing on developing key skills such as, reflective listening, open questioning and listening for change talk. These are skills that I want to continue to develop and implement in future work.



## **Superstitions and performance**

June 2019

### **What?**

I attended Dundalk FC on the 7/06/2019 to do a club visit as part of my UEFA A license course. I attended as one of my micro-group participants is a member of the staff at the club. I attended the day before a league match against a club at the bottom of the table. Dundalk have won the last 4 league titles. I was introduced to the manager, the coaching staff and players and observed training on the day. Having observed training I could see that there was some tension between the coaching staff, in that some had different opinions in terms of the type of training required for the team. The coach that had invited me in and then gave me an insight into how the current coach is trying to replicate what was done under the previous manager. The manager continued to do the same passing exercise the day before a game and the coaches felt another one would be more beneficial. Another point that stuck with me from the day was that they did their video analysis after the training session and not before. When I asked about this I was told that they won an important game by doing video analysis after the training session and it has just stuck since.

### **So What?**

This highlighted the importance of rituals in performance. Why would a team look at the video of the opposition after training when they cannot go out on to the pitch and work on aspects of their game in relation to the video? Why was the current coach trying to continue what the previous manager did, when he had the opportunity to improve aspects of the teams approach?

Research by Schippers and Van Lange (2006) found that superstitions can have a positive impact on the perception of control over performance. Superstitions can also aid the reduction of tension prior to an important competitive event, however the reduction in anxiety may be detrimental to performance. Superstitions are often developed in hindsight and can result in a cause and effect interpretation for good and bad performances.

### **Now What?**

As a practitioner, acknowledging that superstitions are important to a group or athlete can aid understanding their function in the environment. In this context it may reduce player or coach anxiety to have the video analysis after training. It may also reduce coach and player anxiety to train a certain way. A presentation earlier in the year by Dr Kate Kirby at the Irish institute of sport highlighted how a lack of time focused on the debrief in GAA, rugby and soccer can often result in the wrong conclusions being drawn from performance. Dr. Kate Kirby highlighted how this is one of her most important roles in helping the team constantly renew and move forward as a group. As a sport psychologist facilitating consistent review of performance processes can be an important way of influencing group functioning within an environment.

**References:**

- Schippers, M. C., & Van Lange, P. A. (2006). The Psychological Benefits of Superstitious Rituals in Top Sport: A Study Among Top Sportspersons. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 36*(10), 2532-2553.

## **Motivational Climate and working with teams**

Date: November 2019

### **What?**

I work with numerous different coaches, and from what I have, beliefs and interactions the head coach has about sport have a direct impact on the motivational climate created. One coach I work with is a general in the army and he takes a very autocratic approach to coaching. In other words, he tells them to do something and he expects them to do it. There is little regard paid to individual player needs and the group dynamic. This has an impact on the players in terms of not enjoying playing under this coach and a lot of players come and go regarding their attendance. In contrast another coach I work with facilitates players giving their opinion, gets to know them as people and concerned about the group functioning. This results in players always attending training and displaying a commitment to improving as well.

### **So What?**

Looking at the environments facilitated by the both coaches, I see the influence of the motivational climate on the behavioural outcomes of the players. The quality of the motivational climate influences the sporting experience, the development of the person and athlete, and the subsequent performance. The coach's beliefs about achievement and success have a direct impact on the quality of the motivational climate. One coach is concerned only about the results of the team, fostering what I believe to be an ego-orientated environment. The players are expected to execute specific tasks as specified by the coach in order to achieve the outcome goal of winning. In contrast the other coach aims for the team to improve each week through fostering an environment where each players effort, learning and

understanding are self-referenced. The coach emphasizes the importance of focusing on the process behind winning, rather than the outcome of winning alone, facilitating what I believe to be a mastery orientated environment. Looking at the environments facilitated by both coaches, the task orientated environment facilitates a healthier sporting experience for the participants compared to the ego orientated environment (Roberts, 2002; Harwood & Swain, 2002).

### **Now What?**

Working as a practitioner, I have come to realise the importance of the motivational climate when working in sport. As a sports psychologist if I was to identify what the basics of my approach to support for individual, teams and coaches would be, it would center around the quality of the motivational climate and its influence on the sporting experience regardless of the level of participation. The motivational climate is something I now see as a key part of my professional practice philosophy and a means of conceptualising and influencing the sporting experience on multiple levels.

**References:**

- Harwood, C., & Swain, A. (2002). The Development and Activation of Achievement Goals Within Tennis: II. A Player, Parent, and Coach Intervention. *Sport Psychologist*, 16(2), 111-137.

## **Aligning my theoretical orientation with the person behind the practitioner**

February 2020

### **What?**

As a practitioner at the beginning of the professional doctorate course I adopted Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) as my underpinning theoretical approach. I adopted this approach as CBT attempts to explain the world with a logical approach. This approach fitted well with me as an early career practitioner as it provided a clear framework for me to work from. The CBT approach is underpinned by the idea that cognitions underpin emotion, cognitive activity can be altered, and modifying cognitions can facilitate a change in behaviour. Reflecting on the underpinning ideas of CBT, I realised that when engaging in performance and well-being support, a rationalistic approach to conceptualising presenting issues can be too simplistic when performance and well-being are influenced by complex factors. A rational explanation of our internal experience did not sit well with me as a person. When I encounter difficult moments as a person, I don't focus on changing my thoughts: I focus on identifying and engaging with my values. Reflecting on this, as a practitioner I was asking athletes to engage in a therapy that was not compatible with me as a person.

### **So What?**

Through working with athletes, it became clear that athletes at all levels experience self-doubt, low confidence and experience difficulties in their life outside of sport. Asking athletes to modify their thoughts in relation to these presenting issues, or change their behaviour, can be limited as often the situation the person finds themselves in cannot be changed. A book that has resonated with me since my stage 1 training is Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. A quote from this book which has influenced me as a person is

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” As a person, when I am in a situation I cannot control, I focus on my values and try and choose a way forward that is congruent with my values. This can result in discomfort or anxiety within the moment, however, it can lead to growth. I found myself as a practitioner relying on value identification and supporting clients engaging with value driven behaviour when the CBT approach was not working for the client.

It took me around a year on the professional doctorate to realise that my working philosophy was compatible with Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) as a theoretical approach (Hayes, 2004). On further exploration of ACT I realised that I was already engaging in four of the six core processes within the ACT working model. I was working with clients to facilitate them in contacting the present moment, understanding their own context and relationships, identifying personal values that are important to them, and engaging in behaviour that aligns with identified values. This was based on my belief as a person in the importance of values in behaviour change, which subsequently influenced my practice.

### **Now What?**

CBT and ACT both stress the importance of the learning process in developing functional and dysfunctional behaviour, the importance of experiential learning and psychoeducation. However, both approaches differ with regard to the development of dysfunctional behaviour. Within CBT dysfunctional behaviour is due to faulty cognitions. In contrast ACT, views dysfunction as being due to fusion with thoughts and experiential avoidance, and attempts to facilitate value driven behaviours based on contact with the present moment. I had always viewed my role as a practitioner to help clients explore meaning in all areas of their life. Working within an ACT theoretical approach enables me to facilitate a client's psychological



flexibility to choose the best actions aligned to their behaviour's in all areas of their lives  
(Birrer & Röthlin, 2017).

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## **My values as a practitioner**

March 2020

### **What?**

At the beginning of training on the professional doctorate, I primarily focused on delivering psychological skills training to clients, which has been identified as a characteristic of early career practitioners (Bond, 2002). Simon & Andersen (1995) highlighted the need to move away from a mental skills approach to support, to a more holistic approach of supporting the person before the athlete. Over the course of the training period on the professional doctorate, I changed as a practitioner from supporting the athlete first through a mental skills approach, to supporting the person. This occurred through reflection on the way I was practicing as a practitioner, and who I am as a person. Pocwardowski, Sherman & Ravizza (2004) provided a model of a practitioner's professional practice philosophy, where a practitioner's inner most beliefs about behaviour change, and growth and human behaviour is the foundation of the professional philosophy and subsequent theoretical paradigm adopted. Over time engaging in practice I began to think about the question, what is my professional philosophy?

### **So What?**

Through self-reflection and discovery, I have realized that an important aspect for me as a practitioner is to emphasise a whole-person approach to working with clients, be it individuals, teams or coaches. This is based on the recognition that sport is only a part of a whole they are and that an imbalance in a person's life can affect all other areas of their functioning. Following on from this I believe the client is the expert in their own lived experience. This is based on the belief that we construct our own meanings and interpretations of life events. Through working with the client to understand their own lived

experience, the client can often identify the areas and changes they would like to make in their own life, while providing me as a practitioner an opportunity to understand the client. Understanding and developing empathy provides the basis of the relationship between the client and practitioner which is the primary agent of change. I also believe that just like we as practitioners adopt values, the client does too, and exploring a person values and belief system and its subsequent alignment to behaviour can facilitate change with the client. This can only come about through developing a working alliance with the client which subsequently facilitates the theoretical orientation adopted to come alive. Through development of the working alliance with the client, an insight can be provided of the motivational orientation of the individual, whether they are ego or task orientated, and the type of environment they are located within. I believe the motivational climate and motivational orientation of the individual underpin functioning in sporting contexts and should be taken into account, and at times the motivational climate should be the focus of the intervention.

### **Now What?**

Through reflection on my practice with client throughout the training period, I have developed an understanding of the type of practice I want to engage in. Although at the beginning of training I could not articulate my personal beliefs about practice beyond wanting to make an impact, through reflection on my practice I was able to identify that something was not right with how I was working. As I developed as a practitioner, I was better able to articulate what was not right within my practice, to the point where I am today regarding my beliefs and values on applied practice. This subsequently provides me with a guide for reflection on my own practice and congruence. In addition, it provides a means for

further development as a practitioner in terms of reflecting on what areas I need to develop and adapt within this approach to practice

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### **Reflections Key Role 3**

#### **Initiating and developing original research**

##### **What?**

My first study on the professional doctorate examined the transition through underage international teams from the perspective of the coaches working with the men's international football teams in Ireland. In order to undertake this research, I had to negotiate the procurement of resources and access to participants. I was able to access the participants for the research through my contacts within the organisation. However, my ability to develop and deliver original research was constrained by the resources I was able to negotiate, and those made available to me. For me as a researcher operating from a constructivist epistemology, this has implications for the data collection methods I can implement.

##### **So What?**

Due to my limited access to the organisation and their context I was constrained in only being able to interview the coaches of the men's teams. This gave me an insight into their understanding of the research question from their point of view. However, it may have been an idealised version of the work they undertake due to self-presentation effects. Because of the lack of access, I had to develop an original research question that sought to advance existing transition models and theory, based on the resources available.

The findings supported previous research in highlighting how transitions prior to the junior-to-senior transition (in this case a transition to a higher standard of competition) influence the subsequent transition to senior sport. The ability to cope with transitions preceding the transition to senior sport and the resources available within the environment can influence

future transitions. This support for previous research extends the understanding of transitions that occur at different points within an athlete's career.

Despite the findings there is limited development of understanding the topic from a different perspective. Before undertaking the research, I would consider qualitative research to be primarily based on semi-structured interviews. I had not considered that I can extend knowledge within the profession through engaging in alternative methods of qualitative research on the same topic.

### **Now What?**

My ability to answer the research questions was influenced by access to the participants which was limited. This subsequently influenced the design of the research utilising qualitative interviews. I have come to realise I could research the same topic, with the same research question but extend research through utilising alternative qualitative methods.

Identifying and developing alternative ways of approaching a research question through the selection of methods is an area I have to develop as a scientist practitioner. This will facilitate me as a researcher utilising the method that fit the question, rather than picking a question that fits the method and resources available.



## **Meta-Synthesis and my development as a researcher**

### **What?**

I completed a meta-synthesis review on the psychological characteristics of elite footballers, where I reviewed the qualitative research that has explored psychological characteristics in players who have represented their country and/or played professional football. I carried out this review as I wanted to understand the characteristics of elite players in their own words. As a result, I carried out a grounded theory analysis of the results from the papers that met the inclusion criteria. Through carrying out the meta-synthesis I developed an appreciation of the importance of the ontology and epistemology when undertaking research, and the influence both the ontology and epistemology have on the decisions made in the research process. Prior to undertaking the professional doctorate and reading qualitative research, I would have understood rigour as trying to implement consistency in the results generated. I have now come to realise that this is not possible according to my epistemological outlook.

### **So What?**

Within the meta-synthesis I critically evaluated the methodological orientation utilised within the studies that met the inclusion criteria. Of the twenty studies that met the inclusion criteria only sixteen studies reported the ontological or epistemological position of the study. Through undertaking the meta-synthesis, I came to understand that in order to truly evaluate the methodological coherence of a study, the epistemology must be stated. This provides transparency on the decisions that were made within the research process in terms of understanding whether the methodological decisions regarding rigour align with the chosen epistemology. My first research study was grounded in a constructivist epistemology. Within this research I did not acknowledge the role I played in the research process. This is despite my view of knowledge being co-constructed within a constructivism epistemology. Not

acknowledging my background working with and for the FAI, while interviewing FAI coaches, fails to acknowledge my influence on the knowledge developed from the research process. Acknowledging my position within the research process would explain why inter-rater reliability was not chosen as a method for rigour due to the inability of the researcher to generate theory free knowledge and the generation of knowledge being socially constructed.

### **Now What?**

Developing an appreciation for the importance of the epistemology and ontology of a research question has highlighted how I can develop further as a researcher. Through understanding my epistemological position, I can make clear and coherent decisions throughout the research process. I have come to understand my role within the research process as influencing the generation of subsequent knowledge. Although I would have previously viewed this as being poor research practice, I have now come to embrace my role within the process as a strength of the research, but only when I acknowledge my role within the epistemological position adopted.

## **Same questions, different perspective, different results**

### **What?**

I have just finished my data collection and analysis of the results of my second research study. For my first and second study I explored the transition through underage international squads. Within the first study I explored the question from the perspective of the international coaches who are employed by the national governing body. In the second study I explored the question from the perspective of the heads of youth development within clubs. What I found when comparing the results of both research papers was how the role an individual has within a system, influences the generation of the results.

### **So What?**

The results found that the heads of youth development perceived a lack of guidance and support from the national governing body as being a barrier to them being able to effectively support youth players in making the transition through underage international squads. In contrast the underage international coaches perceived that they engaged with clubs through coach education and regularly speak with coaches within clubs working with underage international players. Considering both perspectives it is clear there is tension within the system. The context the participant is located influences their perspective and the resulting knowledge generated through the research. Likewise, my role as a researcher and background as a coach with the FAI can influence the interaction some of the participants have with me as a researcher.

### **Now What?**

When weighing up decisions about the methodology to use within a study I have come to realise several things. Firstly, homogeneity within the sample of participants can provide an

understanding of the perspectives and culture within an environment. Both research studies have different results due to the homogeneity of the sample with each respective study. However, homogeneity within the sample can result in self-presentation effects within the research. Secondly, the methodology utilised within the research, for example observation, ethnography, auto-ethnography, can potentially limit the effect of self-presentation within a homogenous sample. Thirdly, diversity within a sample can highlight different perspectives limiting the potential of self-presentation effects on the research. However, it may limit an in-depth understanding of a specific cultural context or the topic under study. Finally, with knowledge being co-created by the researcher and participants, the researcher is an active participant in the knowledge generated and the background of the researcher influences the interaction with the participants.

## **Study 2: Resistance to research questions**

### **What?**

When carrying out interviews for both research studies, I encountered situations where the interviewee, I felt did not want to answer the questions I had about the research question. In the first study, there was one participant who started asking me questions to check for my understanding of the questions. While in the second study, one participant would provide an answer that was not related to the research question. I had viewed the research process as encompassing participants who had volunteered and were willing to participate. This was not always the case and although the participants were willing to participate there was resistance in the form of what the participant wanted to get from the interview process and the points they wanted to make.

### **So What?**

These experiences got me thinking about the role of the researcher and interviewee within the research process. As a researcher interviewing participants, there is an imbalance of power within the relationship. The interview is being undertaken for the purposes of the researcher, not the participant, and therefore is guided by the researcher. The purpose of the dialogue within the interview is to answer the pre-determined questions set out by the researcher.

Within my research, the participants may have viewed the questions as serving my interests as a researcher and not their interests as a participant. The resistance which occurred could be due to my perceived role within the research process. Some of the participants may have viewed my role as taking what they said and changing it to suit my own narrative. Through resistance the participant can control the information they provide. My background as an academic in trying to understand their perspective can influence the interview process as

there is a reluctance to be misrepresented from an academic perspective by someone outside of their social environment.

### **Now What?**

For me as a researcher working within a constructivist framework, resistance is something that is going to be encountered within the research process. During the interview process and afterwards when analysing the results, I viewed this as the participant not wanting to answer my questions. However, it is not as simple as that. I must acknowledge my role and the participants perception of my role, their context and identity. Although rapport is important within the constructivist framework, it may not be enough to overcome resistance in the research process. Instead of viewing resistance as data lost or disregarding the data, I can look to interpret the goal of the resistance in order to understand the rest of the data.

When seeking to understand the resistance from the head of youth development not answering the questions I asked, I now view this as a form of resistance in trying to deflect attention from the processes within their club. I could be a researcher who may criticise the system in place from an academic perspective. The resistance from the participant in the form of criticising staff recruitment practices within the governing body, rather than answering the research question, can be viewed as a means of understanding the lack of transparency within the governing body and their support for the clubs development.

My role as a researcher within a constructivist approach is to provide a space for the participants to express their perspective, either engaging with the research questions or resisting. This interaction generates the knowledge gathered and acknowledging the power dynamic within the research process, while aiming to understand the participants identity, can support understanding the knowledge generated.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

### **What?**

From the 31st of May to the 2nd of June 2019 I attended a pragmatic evaluation course in Olomouc, Czech Republic. I attended this course on behalf of the Student Sport Ireland research committee where my role is to implement a monitoring and evaluation framework within the programmes that are delivered across third level institutions in Ireland. The aim of the course was to aid the participants in developing the skills to monitor and evaluate the programmes that we were all working on whether coming from an applied or research perspective. The course was delivered by researchers from a health policy and health promotion academic backgrounds and this provided me with an insight into an area of research I had not previously explored.

### **So What?**

I had read about and heard about the importance of monitoring and evaluation, however I did not have a clear understanding about how to go about delivering monitoring and evaluation. The course gave a sequential insight into the steps and processes involved in designing and delivering programmes. As a trainee sport and exercise psychologist I was filtering the course content through the lens of a sports psychologist. Previously I had viewed the scientist practitioner model of sports psychology training as being opposite sides of a spectrum. This course brought both perspectives together through developing the concept of a logic model for the programme that is being delivered. This is a concept I had not come across previously which tries to capture the complexity of a programme in attempting to achieve a specified outcome.

The model then highlights how multiple activities can interlink and influence subsequent outcomes. Within the model different activities are underpinned by theory which informs delivery of programme. This approach to developing and delivering programmes captures and acknowledges complexity and highlights the key aspects of programme delivery or possible prioritisation of resources.

### **Now What?**

From an applied sports psychology perspective developing logic models with stakeholders at the beginning of a programme can highlight the complexity of what is being attempted within the programme of support. Like participatory research it can facilitate stakeholders understanding their role within an intervention and the factors that are critical for the success of a programme. Sports Psychology has been criticised as often being unable to evidence its impact and this is perceived as a barrier in terms of the development and acceptance of sports psychologists as result. Developing logic models pre-intervention can identify evaluation points and areas to evaluate in attempting to evidence the impact of sports psychology. Through monitoring and evaluation, the evidence base of the application of sports psychology can be extended.



## **How my research informed a new perspective on governance, management, and psychology**

### **What?**

With my two research studies examining transitions within football, the management and processes in place or not in place to facilitate transition were highlighted by participants.

What became clear to me after completing the second study, was the influence of governance by the NGB on management processes within the clubs and the subsequent ability of clubs to support players transition. The management processes influence the development of the individual at the centre of the talent development process. The outcomes for the individual are based on the processes within the club, the processes within the clubs are influenced by the governance practices within the national governing body (NGB), and the NGB being influenced by the strategic targets and funding priorities.

### **So What?**

Three things were highlighted for me from the research. First, the psycho-social and sporting outcomes for the individual are based on the talent development processes and resources within the club. If the club has a history of successful talent development the club will have better players, better coaches, resources and subsequent investment, therefore attracting better players to the club and progression to international football. In contrast a club without the tradition of supporting players in gaining international recognition, will lose players to clubs where they traditionally provide opportunities for this recognition. This results in some clubs getting better while others regress. Both environments influence the level of support that is provided to players when facing the challenge of trying to progress to international underage football.

Second, the difference in resources within Irish football is influenced by the governance processes and practices within the NGB. The movement of players between clubs and turnover of players within clubs is facilitated by the NGB as the clubs that have traditionally developed players for international football recruit players from other clubs. In addition, the absence of financial or strategic investment in developing the league the clubs operate within results in an absence of finance for sustaining the number of teams within each club. With no restriction or guidance on recruitment from the NGB, the process of clubs getting better at the expense of others is facilitated. With the movement of players between clubs, the support for individual players development is inhibited as they are not retained within a system or process for a long enough period.

Third, the priorities for the NGB are linked to their income streams. The primary income stream for the NGB is senior international matches. The national leagues were set up to support the progression of players into the underage international teams and eventually the senior international team. The primary focus for the High-performance director has been “the best players, with the best player, for the best.” As a result, the focus has been on player development and a system that enables the best players to transfer from one club to another. However, recently there has been a change with the CEO of the NGB with a renewed focus on the league of Ireland clubs. With this there has been renewed focus on the development of the clubs, which may in the longer-term result in more support being in place for all clubs not just the traditionally bigger clubs.

### **Now What?**

As a scientist practitioner the research has resulted in an insight into the influences on a system for talent development from the governance decisions to the impact on the individual participant. To influence a complex system of talent development, an understanding of the

processes in place and their impact on the individual club and athlete can provide an insight into why things are the way they are. From a practitioner perspective, it may also be that an intervention with an individual, while it could be effective, might not be the most effective method of supporting an organisation or system. In the case of supporting talent development, facilitating an environment where the athlete can be supported throughout the talent development process, could be facilitated at the club level, but most effective when facilitated through the national governing body.

## **Developing research recommendations**

### **What?**

As part of research I carried out for the FAI, I had to provide the FAI with a report on the research I carried out. As part of this I outlined the research process, the results of the research and at the end I provided some recommendations for the organisation in terms of supporting the transition through underage international football squads. I decided to split the results into two areas, areas that do not require any financial investment and areas that do require financial investment. Following on from sending on my research findings, this was followed up with a phone call with the head of research within the FAI.

### **So What?**

I developed my research recommendations based on my understanding of the context within which the FAI operates. I split the recommendations into financial and non-financial investments as from conversations with key personnel within the organisation, the FAI was going through a financially difficult time. I felt in order to for the research to be worthwhile from their perspective, there would need to be clear actions that they could take without financial investment. By highlighting the importance of communication between clubs and the national team, the development of a games programme, a similar style and system of play within age groups and coach education, I was highlighting areas that were already being delivered which could be improved.

Following on from this I highlighted investment within sport and exercise psychology as an area of improvement. I did not call this a sports psychology department within the document as I understood the head of high performance did not believe sport and exercise psychology to be important. Instead I called the department “team and people development” as the focus

would be on supporting group functioning within the team and supporting individual player development. I outlined how the aim of the department would be to support the development of characteristics of individual players to support them in progressing through the age groups and develop skills for when they leave the talent development programme.

### **Now What?**

I recently came across a tweet on Twitter criticising researchers for simply advocating how their research can inform coach education without taking into consideration the systems, processes and context of coach education within sporting organisations. I felt this was important when providing feedback and I tried to take this into account when delivering the recommendations to the FAI. Speaking with the FAI head of research, I outlined the results of the research and the reasons why the recommendations were made. The aim was to show understanding of the processes in place within the organisation and identify ways in which the processes and systems can be developed further through the research.

## Reflections Key Role 4

### **Provide psychological advice and guidance to others and facilitate the use of psychological services**

July 2018

#### **What?**

Nash and Collins (2006) outlined an example how at the 2006 FIFA World Cup coach Jurgen Klinsmann decided to make a substitution. Following on from this substitution the team went to immediately afterwards. The question they posed was: was this decision luck or did it come from knowledge? Some coaches operate from knowledge they have developed over time and this can be referred to as tacit knowledge. The question this posed for me as a practitioner is, if coaches develop their knowledge based on their experience, how does the role of the sport psychologist complement this knowledge? How can sport psychology provide guidance and support the coach when they have in depth knowledge of their sport? This is the scenario I am faced with when working with coaches and what I encountered when working with a coach on a training camp.

#### **So What?**

The way I conceptualised my role was by recognising, the coach has expertise in the sport and the challenges that will be faced with in their sport. An example is where the coach believed there would be disagreement with one player during the training camp. For me as a sport psychologist I viewed my role to support the coach to come up with an evidence-based rationale for supporting the coach in working with the player. As a sport psychologist I had to acknowledge that my concern fundamentally had to be the players well-being, and through

supporting the coach in understanding how best to work with the player I could achieve this aim.

Throughout the training camp there were daily reviews of the team's performances and interactions. We reviewed whether the player was aligned with the team's values and where he was not, my role was to help the coach explore how to go about integrating the player and the behaviour with the group. Would the coach drop the player, speak to him by himself, ignore the player, praise him for good behaviour, or use the group to align the player with team values? My role was to develop an understanding of the player's goals for the trip. He was motivated extrinsically and wanted to "get recognized" or "scouted" by a team. His motivation for the trip was utilised as a means of aligning his behaviour with the group. It was conceptualized with the team, that in order to achieve personal goals, the teams behaviours needed to be aligned. When the player felt he was not going to achieve his goal he created tension for the coach through his behaviour. It was identified that the best way of helping the player was not for the coach to be seen to reinforce the behaviour, but for the team to outline what is acceptable and not acceptable. By the end of the training camp the team were carrying out daily performance reviews aligned to their own behaviours to identify areas for improvement, with the player the coach identified taking a leading role in this process.

My role as a sport psychologist is to provide the coach with 'where' (Declarative knowledge) he gets his knowledge from, and advice to facilitate an exploration of "how" to implement (procedural knowledge) and then review 'what' the outcome was in relation to the psychological principles (tacit).

**Now What?**

Guided discovery is often referred to by coaches as setting the objective for a training session but not giving the answer on how to achieve the goal. I see myself as a guided discovery sport psychologist. To facilitate the use of psychological services I believe it is my role to create a goal with the client, provide the principles to achieve the goal, explore how to get there, and review and make the necessary changes to achieve the goal.

**Update:**

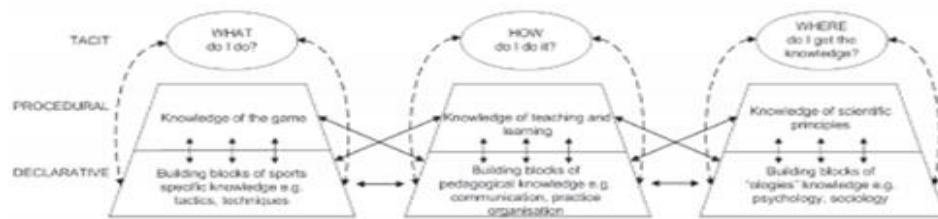
In March 2020 I had a phone call with the FAI Head of Football Research Dan Horan on my research with the underage international football coaches. During the conversation he posed a question to me about what I would be able to tell a coach that has over 15 years of experience. I gave the answer that there is very little I would be able to tell them as this would not be my role to tell them how to be their job. My role would be to provide them with an evidence based behind their decision making.

At the time, I did not think about the answer I gave and how I came to give this answer. In part this answer came from my experience of working with coaches and appreciating the different types of knowledge that exist. Although I did not think much about it at the time, reflecting on the decision making process a coach engages in when they do what they do provides a framework for how I as a practitioner can support coaches through sports psychology support.

Looking back on this conversation I outlined that my role as a practitioner is to provide the scientific knowledge to inform “how” to intervene within a given scenario. The “how” to intervene part is based on knowledge of change and needs of the scenario. The “what” part of the intervention can be done by the coach or practitioner depending on the presenting issue.



This framework provides a basis for complementing the coaching process and explaining this process to fellow practitioners and coaches.



**Figure 2**—Interaction model of coaching knowledge.

**References:**

Nash, C., & Collins, D. (2006). Tacit Knowledge in Expert Coaching: Science or Art?

*QUEST*, 58(4), 465-477.

## **Student Sport Ireland Presentation**

May 2018

### **What?**

On Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> of May I delivered a presentation to the Student Sport Ireland networking event on student athlete transition/adjustment to university higher education. This presentation was based on the findings of studies that I had identified through a systematic review of the literature. The context of the presentation was that I would be presenting to the heads of Sport in Irish Third level colleges and universities. The objective of the conference is for all colleges and universities to share best practice and research around topics related to students and sport in third level education. The institution where I work was hosting the event and I was asked to contribute something to the event. My objective before the presentation was to ensure the delegates understood some of the findings of the research that can have an applied impact and to generate a conversation on how the organisation can develop support for dual career in Ireland.

### **So What?**

McGuire (2001) argued that there are five variables that influence the impact of persuasive communications. These are the source of communication, the message to be communicated, the channels of communication, the characteristics of the audience (receiver), and the setting (destination) in which the communication is received. The source of the communication was the research that I identified through the literature search. I wanted to convey the message of the challenge's student athletes face and a potential programme of support that can be put in place to support student athletes. When designing the presentation, I initially tried to get too much across in the 12-minute time frame available.

The channel of communication was through a presentation but also followed up with conversations before and after the presentation. I placed a focus in my presentation on the setting and the characteristics of the audience. The audience would include both academic staff, heads of sport and development officers from around the country. The organisers of the conference spoke about how it is important that there is something that people can take away and implement in their college/university. I asked for feedback from my manager in AIT and he advised me that the presentation went well and that I got my points across well. He mentioned how it might start a conversation within Student Sport Ireland on how we can support our student athletes.

### **Now What?**

When initially developing the presentation and on receiving feedback from my supervisor I initially tried to get too much information into the presentation (e.g. the role a sport psychologist can play in supporting student athletes) and tried to include information that was not relevant to the setting and receiver. When developing information for dissemination my guiding thought would be, 'what three key points do I want to get across to this audience and why?' In this case I wanted to: (1) outline the challenges student athletes face, (2) explain how students potentially cope with these challenges, and (3) give an example support programme from the research. Following on from the presentation of the research I have been invited on to the research committee to explore sport and physical activity within Ireland's third level colleges and universities.

## **Promoting Sports Psychology**

December 2017

### **What?**

I attended the BPS Sport and Exercise Psychology conference in Glasgow on the 11th and 12th of December 2017. The conference finished with a panel discussion on the future of sport and exercise psychology with Professor Chris Harwood outlining the ongoing debate in the US about protecting the Sport Psychology profession. He outlined that in Britain there is an advantage in that the profession is protected, however to develop the profession further we must endeavor to clarify what we can offer as a profession. He outlined how there is a spectrum of well-being from mental ill health to mental well-being, and that the role of the sport psychologist is to work with people and organisations to facilitate mental well-being. Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of sport psychology, segments of the sporting community are reluctant to engage the services of a sport psychologist (Ferraro & Rush, 2000).

### **So What?**

A lack of understanding of the processes and techniques that comprise sport psychology support leads to a lack confidence in stakeholders belief in the effect sport psychology consultants can have on athletic performance (Ferraro & Rush, 2000; Pain & Harwood, 2004; Gee, 2010). Gee (2010) outlined how a person's absolute performance is based on genetics but can be influenced by proper training methodologies. However, environmental conditions and a person's genetics interact at any given point to create a relative performance in a given moment. External and internal factors can influence the extent to which a person achieves their absolute performance. Sport psychology cannot influence the absolute performance of

an individual; however it can influence the effect internal, external and environmental factors have on performance (Gee, 2010). This acknowledgement that performance does not occur in a vacuum is where the work of a sport psychologist can add value.

I recently asked an athlete what they require to perform well in their sport. The answers provided were clear goals, effective communication from management and between teammates, rest and recovery and balance between being an athlete and their other responsibilities as a person. These conditions facilitate the development of psychological flourishing for this athlete. The role of the sport psychologist is to work with the individual and influence the environment to promote the conditions that promote psychological flourishing (Anderson & Gilbourne, 2011).

### **Now What?**

When someone approaches me and asks how does sport psychology add value, my answer will be based on Simpson's (2016) guide for sport psychologists on delivering an elevator speech. Firstly, I will start with a rhetorical question to create a situation to support the need for services (as an athlete/coach what are the conditions necessary for you to be able to perform at your best?). Secondly, I will present/highlight a problem (are all those conditions present for you at this moment of time? And/or was there ever a point when these conditions were not present?). Thirdly I will present a solution (the role of a sport psychologist is to facilitate individuals and environments that promotes the psychological flourishing for the individual in the environment). Fundamentally the development of the field of sport psychology and me as a practitioner is based on how effectively this message can be communicated.

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## **Communicating sports psychology theory and knowledge**

November 2017

### **What?**

Six weeks into the first semester and with the sport scholarship scheme participants selected, we arranged a sport psychology presentation for the sport scholarship students. The aim of the sport scholarship scheme is to aid student athletes in making the transition from junior to senior in their sport. Consequently, the presentation was focused on “controlling your emotions in sport” which has been identified as being one of the factors associated with a successful junior-to-senior transition. With the focus of the presentation in mind, I designed the presentation by taking into account the feedback from the last time I presented to a student athlete group, that I need to give more practical examples of how the students can apply sport psychology in their sport. I also considered the perception some students would have of me being focused on soccer, given my dual role as soccer development officer. I decided to place the focus on using examples from Rugby during the presentation, to try and create the perception of me being sport neutral by using examples from a sport I do not or have not worked in. At the same time, I tried to gain the respect of those students and coaches involved in Rugby. At the end of the presentation the rugby coach came up and agreed with the point I made about an example I used relating to controlling your emotions. I felt at the end of the presentation that I had not got any buy in from the group in terms of engaging in what was being delivered. Seeking feedback from my manager at the end of the presentation he made the point that the way I felt at the end of the presentation was how lecturers in AIT feel after delivering content to students daily.



### **So What?**

I view my approach as a Sport Psychologist to facilitate the athlete in developing and applying psychological skills and processes in their environment. I view them as the expert in their context and my role is to facilitate them in developing their psychological resources. To an extent I did that with the presentation, in that I gave examples of what the psychological skills were and gave the students examples of how they can apply the skill in their context. However, I believe that the acquisition of skill comes about as a result of the interaction between an individual and their performance environment. With the mismatch between what I delivered, and what I believe, I achieved the outcome set out by the programme (to deliver content on controlling emotions in sport), but I controlled rather than facilitated what they could take away and apply in their context.

Larsen (2017) outlined the need for practitioners to integrate cultural sensitivity into their professional philosophy. In the case of student athletes, lecturers delivering content hold a power dynamic in a relationship, in that they set an exam and then deliver content to students to aid them in passing the exam. The student is required to attend lectures and apply the knowledge in the exam. They do not necessarily need to apply or engage in the content until the exam. I delivered the presentation in the same environment that lecturers deliver their content and consequently may have had similar lack of engagement. This is like most sport psychology mental skills programmes which have been delivered away from the training environment (Diment, 2014). I want to be perceived as a support for student athletes and need to deliver content that does not confuse my role with the perception of expert or lecturer.

### **Now What?**

Given that all decisions that a sport psychologist makes are based on underlying assumptions, I need to ensure that the way I disseminate sport psychology is congruent to the way I believe

psychological skills are developed (Keegan, 2016). Consequently, the content delivered needs to be taught in a manner and setting that leads to transfer to the competitive environment of the student athletes (Larsen, Alfermann & Christensen, 2012). When delivering workshops, I need to facilitate group work, interaction and delivering workshops in an environment as close as possible to the performance as possible. Although I considered the perception that may be held of me from students as being focused on soccer only, I did not account for the presentation being delivered in the same room as their lectures. Taking the context of where I deliver sport psychology and the perception of me as a sport psychologist into account will allow me to be more culturally sensitive and potentially more effective (Shinke & Moore, 2011).

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## **Review of the workshops delivered in year 1 of training**

May 2018

### **What?**

Looking back on the delivery of the workshops during the academic year, it became clear that I did not deliver the workshops in a way that aligned with my beliefs as a practitioner. This became clear when I asked a student for feedback after the second workshop in November 2017. He stated that the workshops were informative but delivered in an environment where the students were every day and normally don't engage with lecturers anyway. He also highlighted that the students wanted workshops that allowed them to practice what was being delivered.

### **So What?**

These thoughts were running around my head for a few months, and I was thinking of ways in which I can change my delivery to enable transfer from the workshop environment and engagement from the participants. In March 2018 Martin Littlewood delivered an applied workshop to the Professional Doctorate course. The workshop was based on a workshop he delivered to a football team on facilitating a team identity and group functioning. Within the workshop he challenged us to think of ways in which we could deliver a workshop with minimal resources and he asked "how could you deliver a workshop with just a football?" Martin was trying to instill creativity in adverse settings.

When reflecting on my delivery of workshop during the previous 12 months I was delivering my knowledge to the participants instead of facilitating the participants in developing their own knowledge. I was delivering in a way that I would have been delivered information while in education. I was not being creative in terms of the experience I was facilitating for

the participants of the workshop. Reflecting on the experience of delivery, and the workshop delivered by Martin Littlewood made me think about how I can deliver more useful workshops for participants in the future.

### **Now What?**

When delivering workshops with clients in the future, I need to consider the needs of the group I am delivering to. I recognised after the delivery of the first workshop that there was something not right with how I was delivering to the group. I now recognise that I was not meeting the participants needs in terms of facilitating transfer, and my own beliefs about facilitating transfer to the persons own environment. Recognising this, the needs of the workshop participants, my own beliefs about the delivery of workshops and the objective of the workshops, will collectively enable me to better facilitate engagement and ultimately client's requirements.

## **Planning the delivery of workshops**

September 2018

### **What?**

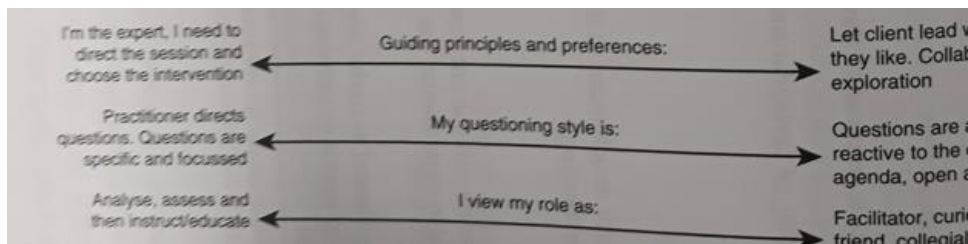
I am currently planning the delivery of support for sport scholarship students for the upcoming academic year and I have been reflecting on my delivery of workshops during the 2017/18 academic year. Last year I delivered sport psychology workshops during the year however I always felt the students were not engaged enough to apply what was being delivered in their sporting context. All students I met at initial intake interviews spoke about how they wanted to learn more about sport psychology, but I found there was little engagement with the support provided. I think this was more due to the nature of how the workshops were being delivered rather than the content.

### **So What?**

Upon reflection on the workshop's I feel that I was delivering the workshops for the purpose of the qualification rather than for the benefit of the clients. As a result, I did not adapt to the needs of the group from the beginning which may have resulted in less engagement in the support from the whole group. I only realized after speaking to lecturers in AIT about their experiences of lack of engagement that I delivered the workshops in lecture rooms that the students were in on a daily basis, and may have got a similar response to lecturers as a result. Fundamentally, I described to the students what they should do rather than develop their understanding of how to do it. Speaking to coaches, this is often the criticism of sport psychology, we can explain what athletes/teams should do, rather than how to go about applying it. I developed their knowledge of action rather than what is required to perform, which is knowledge in action (Nash & Collins, 2006)

## Now What?

Last year I facilitated student athlete understanding of what aspects of sport psychology can influence performance. This year I want to facilitate an understanding of how sport psychology can be applied in their sport. My objective for my development as a practitioner is to move from delivering descriptive knowledge of what athletes should do, to delivering procedural knowledge of how to implement sport psychology. I plan to deliver three workshops based on a team sport (volleyball), individual sport (sprinting) and a closed skill (basketball free throw). I also hope to work with students in each sport to help plan the session. They will take the sporting session and I will look at how sport psychology can be applied. Over the year I hope to progress my ability to deliver in front of a group from the left side of the image below, to the right.



(Figure 1: Keegan, 2016)

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## **Review of the workshops delivered during year 2 of training**

May 2019

### **What?**

During my second year of training I delivered workshops through three different sports: volleyball, sprinting and basketball. The three workshops were aimed at develop student athletes' understanding and ability to apply remaining in the present moment, identifying their individual performance values and identifying and overcoming performance barriers.

The workshops were underpinned by an Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) theoretical approach. The aim of the workshops was to facilitate experience that would allow for discussion of points raised and reflection on how the knowledge gained can be applied in the student's own sporting context.

### **So What?**

The series of workshops went better compared to the workshops delivered during my first year of training. I believe this was due to meeting the needs of the client group and reflecting my views on the importance of enabling transfer to the sporting environment. Underpinning all of this, the adoption of the ACT approach having a theoretical link with each workshop enabled the theory to be explored within a practical setting.

During the first year of delivering the workshops I tried to underpin the content with a clear reference to CBT. However, I tried to deliver too much within each workshop resulting in lots of content delivered but none of it explored in depth. In contrast, by focusing on delivering key underpinning theory from ACT, I was able to facilitate exercises which enabled the participants to experience the underpinning theory.

The workshops delivered through practical activities were congruent with my view on the construction of knowledge. I believe that knowledge is co-constructed, and the practical workshops facilitated the participants constructing their own knowledge through their own experiences. In this context my role was to facilitate psychology in action, whereas the way I was delivering workshops in the first year was the psychology of action.

### **Now What?**

I believe the second year of workshops better reflects how I want to work as a practitioner. First, have clear links to underpinning theory enabled in depth exploration of topics through exercises. Second, the practical activities enabled the participants to experiment what we were discussing within the workshop. Finally, both years reflect two types of knowledge I was delivering, psychology of action and psychology in action. When disseminating psychological knowledge understanding the type of knowledge required for the client group can better support the delivery of the workshop.

## **The importance of transfer when delivering applied sports psychology workshops**

December 2019

### **What?**

Reflecting on my delivery of workshops, something that I have come to value as an important part of my professional philosophy is the importance of facilitating transfer from the workshop environment to the applied setting of the participants. At the beginning of the training period I thought it was enough to understand if the participants had more knowledge at the end compared to the beginning. However, I soon realised that even if this is the case, more knowledge does not necessarily mean the ability to apply the knowledge.

### **So What?**

This has resulted in me trying to deliver workshops with an applied experiential focus, aiming to develop participants' understanding of psychology in action. Over the training period I believe I have developed in my ability to facilitate this. I try and incorporate psychology within the sports activities through understanding task demands of the sport and working with the coach to manipulate the task constraint for a psychological outcome. This is underpinned by an ecological dynamics view of the learner and the learning process and a constraints led approach to skill acquisition.

However, delivering an applied focus workshop is not always possible with teams. Quite often when working within a team environment, the opportunity to deliver sports psychology support is when a team has some down time or when there is reduction in training load.

Although I would prefer to deliver through the sport itself this is not always possible. What I have since realised is that in these scenarios reflection on previous experience, on current practice and reflecting forward, is important to incorporate when delivering content.

**Now What?**

When delivering content, I now try and incorporate reflection within the process. This involves providing a reflection model, an example of the process of reflection, and areas for action. Through incorporating reflection within the support provided, the clients can become self-sufficient in developing their own knowledge, skills and application over time, ultimately with the aim of being less dependent on the sports psychologist for their own development.

## **Disseminating in the right context**

December 2019

### **What?**

I delivered a poster presentation at DSEP in December 2019 on my research on the transition through underage international football squads. Through this poster presentation I had some interactions and conversation with fellow researchers with interest within the area. I found this was good to get direct conversations started with others directly interested in the research area and for developing my network. In contrast I delivered at the All-Ireland postgraduate conference in May 2019 and I was moved from a performance section to the health and physical activity by the conference organisers, due to low numbers in the health and physical activity section of the conference. This resulted in me presenting my research to academics who were primarily interested in physical activity.

### **So What?**

Although I didn't realise it at the time, the dissemination context is important. In both settings I adapted the content from the presentation to a poster and vice versa. The hard part in both cases was identifying the key pieces of information required for both forms of dissemination. However, the context of the delivery at the All-Ireland postgraduate conference resulted in the information having limited relevance to the people in the room. This made me think about where, what and how to disseminate my research. The all-Ireland postgraduate conference provided a context to present to multi-disciplinary researchers, where as the BPS conference provided a context that enabled dissemination practitioners that were more likely to understand the background to the research. I was disseminating my knowledge to fellow academics but not to the ends user: coaches, players and the talent development system. I was only disseminating to a small section of the overall population that the research is relevant to.

**Now What?**

Comparing both experiences made me think about where and how best to disseminate my research. The academic conference provides a context to inform other researchers and applied practitioners of theoretical developments within an area of study. What I have thought about is the importance of disseminating sports psychology research outside of sports psychology conferences at other conferences. This provides a means of disseminating research that could inform theoretical development in areas such as sports management and sports science. In addition, the ways I have disseminated so far have not reached the end user who can make changes to their own practice. One area I have targeted for disseminating to the end user within talent development environments is a report to the Head of High performance and coaches involved in the research. Following this up with dissemination through a blog post to a wider audience.

## **Providing research consultancy feedback**

March 2020

### **What?**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2020 I took a phone call with Dan Horan, Head of Performance and Football Research with the Football Association of Ireland. I had originally sent an email with my consultancy report to the High-Performance Director and to Dan, where I had offered to meet both to discuss the research. However, this was not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, I took a phone call from Dan to discuss the findings of the research. In the consultancy report I split the recommendations into financial investments and non-financial investments. Within the financial investments I recommended the establishment of a team and people development department.

### **So What?**

I felt offering to arrange a meeting to discuss the findings would facilitate an in-depth discussion of the findings. I wanted to be prepared for the meeting and when Dan called it was unexpected, which was perhaps done on purpose to test my knowledge as I had to repond on the spot. I am someone who likes to be prepared and responding without having had the opportunity to look through the document made me anxious during the call.

We started by speaking about each other's backgrounds in the sport. I felt it was important to outline my educational background to provide insight into the course of study I was undertaking. I did this to try and help him understand the qualification route for a sports psychologist and that the reason I went to the UK was so that I could avail of a professional training route. As Dan is a chartered physio, he understood the importance of a professional training route. I believed this was important as it demonstrated to Dan that I was both a practitioner and a researcher.

I followed this up by explaining my background working with the U14 national academy team, national league teams and as a development officer in AIT. I did this so that Dan knew about my background within the game and that I understood what was happening on the ground in Irish football. Being able to highlight this led to us identifying people we know in common.

A key point on the call was around the recommendations around financial investments. I was asked about my recommendation regarding the team and people development department and what they would do. I outlined that this would be the role of a sports psychologist. I originally called this a “team and people development department” as I knew from speaking with people working with the FAI that the High-Performance director did not believe sports psychology was important. Because of this I called it the team and people development department, which I explained would support players in developing the skills, and teams in developing environments, to successfully cope with the transition through the international teams

After explaining the results of the research, Dan asked “what do you think you could tell a coach that has over 15 years of experience?”, after I suggested that often the best way is to work with and through the coach. I made the point that it was not my role that to tell the coach anything, my role was to provide evidence to support their decision-making process. This was something I had reflected on before, and prior to being on the professional doctorate course I would have not been able to answer that question. This question was a real test for me as I did not have time to think about the answer I could give, but I gave the answer in a way that I had previously thought about providing it.



**Now What?**

Although I was not fully prepared for the call, I was able to deal with it. I did feel anxious initially but getting to know Dan and his background while getting the opportunity to explain my background allowed me to get some form of legitimate respect for the research I was going to discuss. Discussing the research was straight forward as I knew it best. I knew that the FAI were going through financial difficulties and in order to get buy in for any recommendations that they would need to be split into actions that would require investment and ones where processes could be improved. All of this cultural understanding of the context on the ground in Irish football and understanding of the research allowed me to respond in the moment to the conversation. Dan concluded the conversation saying he will be in contact in the future to discuss the research further. I have now read online that education and retaining players in Ireland for longer are focus areas for the new board of the FAI. This would not have been the case for the previous board and could mean that this is a time for the research to make an impact. My next action will be to submit the research to a journal and to send on the finished paper to the High-Performance Director and Dan Horan.

<b>Practice Log of Training</b>						
<b>Key Role</b>	<b>Required Hours</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>Total</b>
Professional Standards	160	129	141	328	152	750
Consultancy	1200	230	669	301	*145	1345
Research	1200	44	450	381	353	1228
Dissemination	80	27	21	226	*15	289
<b>Total</b>	<b>2640</b>	<b>430</b>	<b>1281</b>	<b>1236</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>3612</b>
					*reduced amount due to COVID-19	

